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SECTION: ARTS & LETTERS; Pg. 15**LENGTH:** 881 words**HEADLINE:** Will Someone Please Knock Down This Building?**BYLINE:** By JAMES GARDNER**BODY:**

Twice last week I was filled with an upsurge of hope that passed as quickly as it came. The first time was when it seemed as if spring had finally arrived on Monday, only to be followed by a blizzard on Tuesday. Then on Wednesday I saw in the New York Times a photograph of the Summit Hotel in Midtown, with the headline, "Wrecking Ball Dashes Hopes for a Lapidus Work." My heart lept up! Could it be that this urban eyesore would be removed, had been removed, once and for all?

No it couldn't. The story turned out to be about another work by the egregious Morris Lapidus, the Paterson Silks Retail building, located at 14th Street and University Place. Amusingly, it was being demolished even as the Landmarks Preservation Commission was debating whether to save it. As it happens, the glass-brick tower of the Paterson Silks Building succeeded in being almost interesting, and thus I was somewhat sorry to see it go.

If the truth be told, however, many is the time I walked by it and said to myself, "What the heck is going on! Here is a perfectly good street corner without a bank in it? Every other street corner in the city has a bank, so why not this one?" Well, it seems someone must have heard this plaint for, ere long, a brand new Bank of America branch will be moving in to replace Lapidus's building.

At that point, and not a moment too soon, there will be no remaining corner of Manhattan without a bank branch.

As for the Summit on Lexington, recently renamed the Doubletree Metropolitan, its ugly suburban massing recalls a series of stacked garages that (to mix my metaphor) snake along 51st Street at such bizarre angles that they end up destroying the continuity of Lexington Avenue. For this reason, I was amazed to learn that the hotel is one of 12 modern sites being considered for landmark status from the World Monuments Fund.

It would require a more zealous commitment to retro faddism than I can possibly muster to find anything worth preserving in this tawdry pile, thought up by a man whose greatest contribution to architecture was the Fountainebleau Hotel in Miami. Though I have been sitting on the fence as regards 2 Columbus Circle, I would not hesitate to say that if the Summit is worth preserving, then so too - 100 times over - is that unfairly maligned Venetian palazzo on the southwest corner of Central Park.

How much older architecture is worth preserving, and the point at which the fervor of the preservationists leads to the petrification of a city, have always been vexing questions. There are many reasons to preserve and cherish old buildings, but surely the most foolish ever conceived is the one that the local union has recently put forward to preserve the Plaza as a hotel, rather than allow it to be converted into condominiums, retail space, and a vastly smaller boutique hotel.

Their argument, as bruited across the city in heart-wrenching commercials on the local stations, is that 1,050 union workers, some having been at the Plaza for more than three decades, stand to lose their jobs. I do not dismiss lightly the concerns of a thousand people who might be put out of work. But the overriding point is that the

union's argument amounts to the tail wagging the dog.

The Plaza Hotel does not exist so that it might employ its workers. It exists to make money for its owners who, in pursuit of profit, are forced to engage the services of however many people they need. If the Plaza's conversion takes place, these workers will surely find other jobs with only a minimum of inconvenience.

I also take solace in the thought that different kinds of jobs will be created if the Plaza undergoes the expected transformation. And I expect that, because of the recent wave of grand hotels being converted into residences, many other hotels will spring up in short order, if they have not already done so.

A very commendable instance of historic preservation is the subject of an interesting new show, "The Gatehouse," at the Museum of the City of New York. It concerns the Aaron Davis Gatehouse, located at 135th Street and Convent Avenue.

The architectural firm of Ohlhausen Dubois Architects, together with Wank Adams Slavin Associates, is transforming this sturdy Romanesque Revival fortress, designed in 1890 by Frederick S. Cook, from its original function as "New York City's single most important building within the Croton Aqueduct water system" into a theater that will open in spring 2006.

This is one more instance among many of 19th-century industrial functionalism bowing to the interests of 21st-century post-industrial recreation. As in so many other instance of Victorian functionalism, the architects of the Gatehouse simply could not resist the allure of High Church ornamentalism, expressed in charming if entirely unnecessary stained-glass windows and ogival arches.

The most interesting part of the exhibition is its photographic documentation of the changes that have taken place in that part of the city. In 1880 it looked like some Netherlandish hamlet. But 100, 50, even 10 years later it appears part of the concrete jungle. We all understand that such a transformation occurred here, as in so many other places. But there is a shocking poignancy in the way it is manifested - even if only by the way - in this exhibition.

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