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Landmarks Panel Still Studying Plaza's Interiors

By ANTHONY RAMIREZ

The Grand Ballroom of the Plaza Hotel, in its Gilded Age opulence, seemed already to be fading in the photograph.

Bright lights bleached out the details in the image projected yesterday on the back wall of the public hearing room of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in Lower Manhattan. But impassioned testimony by preservationist groups seemed to say that much of the actual Plaza was in danger of fading.

Under new ownership, most of the hotel is set to become condominiums and retail stores next year, with an abbreviated hotel tucked inside.

A few of the hotel's interior spaces, like the Grand Ballroom and the Palm Court, are under consideration for preservation as landmarks. The Plaza's exterior was one of the first buildings in New York to be designated a landmark, in 1969, before anyone thought of preserving an interior as a landmark.

The commission took no action yesterday, choosing to hold another public hearing on June 28.

Meanwhile, another building's fate caused some witnesses to question the integrity of the commission itself. They criticized what they called the commission's foot dragging in not scheduling a public hearing on 2 Columbus Circle, a building not on yesterday's agenda, or any agenda for the last 10 years, since it has been eligible for preservation.

"If the result is good - the Plaza's interiors undoubtedly merit designation - does it matter if the process stinks?" asked Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, a preservationist group on the Upper West Side. "Unquestionably, yes."

Last month, Landmark West filed a petition in State Supreme Court that Robert B. Tierney, chairman of the commission, be barred from any decision-making on whether a hearing should be held on the future of 2 Columbus Circle, a building known for its "lollipop" motif.

The group cited, in part, e-mail messages it obtained under the Freedom of Information Act that appeared to show Mr. Tierney favoring the new owners of 2 Columbus Circle, who oppose landmark designation.

Bruce Simon, a labor lawyer and a member of the board of Landmark West, addressed the commission in personal terms: "Unless you act - and it must be you, because your chairman for some unknown reason is incapable of acting - 2 Columbus Circle will join Pennsylvania Station in the pantheon of lost treasures, lost without even a hearing."

Mr. Tierney would not comment on the accusations.

During the hearing on the Plaza, specialists detailed its architectural merits.

David Garrard Lowe, president of the Beaux Arts Alliance, noted that the Palm Court was New York's only descendant of the "palm court" that was popularized in European luxury hotels in the 19th century, havens of exotic African plants preserved with artificial heat and light.

Michele Birnbaum, president of the East 85th/86th Street Lex-Park-Mad Block Association, told the commission that the Plaza's interior spaces "could be designated landmarks and still be violated in a profound way."

In a zoning quirk, part of the Plaza is zoned residential, and the other part, divided by a line through the Grand Ballroom, is zoned for commercial use. The landmarks commission is not required to consider the results of a change in use.

In theory, however, Ms. Birnbaum and other preservationists contend, the new owners, Elad Properties, could run escalators through landmarked areas and do other things that could make the areas unrecognizable.