

Cityscape/Roberta Brandes Gratz

SAVE THE HELEN HAYES

1st shot that catalyzed Save the Theaters fight

“...Why should we destroy three good theaters to get the Portman Hotel built? Portman needs New York as much as we want him...”

Destroy three noteworthy Broadway theaters and a flourishing 500-room hotel. Put in their place a 47-story, 2,020-room hotel with a spectacular 35-story atrium and glass-enclosed elevators. Include a flashy new 1,500-seat theater—perfect for the lavish musicals that delight expense-account visitors but dismay serious theater enthusiasts. Include, also, thirteen new bars and restaurants—one of which revolves.

What do you have after all of this? The city's newest revitalization “center-piece”—the Portman Hotel, scheduled to rise on the west side of Broadway between 45th and 46th streets. It is by no means yet a *fait accompli*; there have been expensive land-acquisition delays and problems in securing \$180-million in mortgage financing. Approv-

al is still necessary for a \$21.5-million federal grant to piggyback city and state subsidies.

City officials and real-estate boosters are promoting the project with terrific zeal. It's glamorous, and it *will* create (they say) 2,200 permanent service jobs. But to endorse the hotel as good for New York is to ignore some troubling matters:

□ Three Broadway jewels—the Helen Hayes, the Morosco, and the Bijou—will be demolished. The 500-room Picadilly Hotel, which *Fodor's* calls “one of the best hotels in its area, with warmth, charm, and comfortable, adequate rooms” (for only \$40 a night) will be torn down too.

□ Zoning bonuses in this area were created to *preserve* theaters, not to

replace three of them with one.

□ What has made Broadway “Broadway” is the business of theater, not real estate.

□ Most important of all—the Koch administration has shown that the city can make great strides in restoring the Times Square area *without* demolishing theaters.

Portman hotels (designed and developed by Atlanta architect John Portman) have already made a big splash in the downtowns of Atlanta, Los Angeles, Detroit, and other places. They are wonderful tourist attractions for cities that need tourist attractions. They create a marvelously vital new piece of city, enclosed within the protective four walls of a new hotel. They create *inside* what flourishing cities offer *outside*.

What the Fuss Is All About

“Particularly distinguished architecturally”: That's what a 1978 Landmarks Preservation Commission staff report called the Helen Hayes Theater (below, right). “It is unquestionably of National Register quality,” the report added, “and should also be considered for landmarks designation.” But no action followed that report. State and federal historic-preservation officials considered the Helen Hayes worth saving, but the city persuaded them that Broadway has many better theaters to hold on to. As a compromise, John Portman, whose planned hotel (right) would destroy the theater, is having preservation architect Robert E. Meadows make detailed drawings of the theater to be kept for posterity. One of them is the view of the theater below.

