



A dancing class in the Otto Kahn mansion.

Paul Photo by Terence McCarty

Another Landmark Under the Gun

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

When in 1914, lumber and art patron Otto Kahn commissioned a private residence at 81st and Fifth Av., he ordered that no expense be spared. It was to be located only a block north of Andrew Carnegie's neo-Georgian mansion and on the same street as the turn-of-the-century homes of the socially prominent Burdens and Hammonds.

When completed in 1918, Kahn's supposed copy of a Medici palazzo was considered not only the largest private residence in the country but also the finest.

A month before he died in 1934, the German-born Jewish financier agreed to sell the 80-room mansion to the Convent of the Sacred Heart—one of the oldest and best known teaching orders of the Roman Catholic Church—which had outgrown its educational facilities at 54th St. and Madison Av.

Well Maintained

Now, on occasional fundraising house tours, convent guides like to tell visitors: "Kahn felt the mums would preserve the magnificent home as well as putting it to good use. He would be proud to know it has been preserved admirably and has been known as a New York City Landmark."

Maintained it has been—the preservationist's dream. No wood paneling has been removed, no frescoed ceilings or walls painted over, no gold trimmed carvings removed or sculptured embellishments disturbed. Original chandeliers and fixtures have been retained where possible and where re-

cessed lighting has been necessary, installation has been executed with such care that hardly a decorative element has been disturbed.

Even the elevator, with its pastoral mural painted on the four interior walls to assist Mrs. Kahn in overcoming claustrophobia, is intact.

Bedrooms are now classrooms, the "art room" a library, the ballroom, an auditorium and hallway nooks and crannies seem to be favorite chatting places for groups of the more than 400 girls who attend the elementary and secondary school.

Hearings in 1974

The adjacent Burden mansion at 7 E. 81st, with its circular staircase and muralled dome, is also owned and used by the school and has been maintained in its original splendor.

Now both mansions are in danger, the target of the all-too-familiar pressures of progress. In the Spring of 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held public hearings to consider designation of the entire 81st St. block—undoubtedly one of the finest blocks remaining in the city. No designations has yet been made.

The circumstances parallel those of many landmark structures the city has already lost—a financially pressed institution owning prime real estate, in need of expanded and improved facilities and the owner ready to lose it. A surrounding community fighting off rapid luxury high rise development and desperate not to lose vanishing treasures. A city designations without first

finding a solution, lost designations lead to court suits, the concept of designation," says Schmidt, "but it is a deprivation of our private property rights. If we're going to be designated a landmark that means we're doing something for the city and we must be given something in exchange. Otherwise it is economic penalty for nothing. It's as simple as that."

All potential solutions so far have centered around sale of the school's air development rights. The economic realities are such, however, that there is little demand for air rights now.

No one has yet given up and, in fact, the search for a solution has been moving at an urgent pace in recent weeks. Talk now centers around the possibility of involving the Landmarks Commission, a recently formed group of prominent citizens seeking to raise private funds for the express purpose of saving threatened landmarks.

In this case, the possibility is of raising funds for an interest free loan to the convent. Such a loan would help offset the financial losses the school sustains. It would also provide time for the convent eventually to sell air development rights when the real estate market improves.

"It's a creative solution that we're prepared to accept," says Schmidt. Otherwise, he adds, if nothing comes of this and after four years of trying, the convent is ready to sell the whole property and move.

"I think we have even found a site we could move to," he added.

more and more pressure on the Landmarks Commission and City Hall to rescue what remains of the city's already diminished past.

Yet, on all levels of government — from the City Planning Commission to the Landmarks Commission to the local community board to assorted neighborhood groups — considerable time and energy has been spent searching for a viable solution. A solution, in other words, that would preserve the buildings and not bring undue economic hardship to the educational institution.

"Everyone at the Landmarks and City Planning Commissions have been terribly nice but we just haven't gotten anywhere," says attorney Peter G. Schmidt, spokesman for the school.

Four years and hours of solution-hunting meetings later, there has been no designation and no announced preservation plan.

"How many examples of lost landmarks do we need before an important designation is made," asks Kent Barwick, executive director of the Municipal Art Society. "If you want to preserve a building, the first step is designation," he adds. "That's the basic intent of the law."

The 1965 landmark preservation law provides for a year following designation in which the city must produce a buyer for a threatened landmark property or some other economic solution. If one is not found, the owner then has the right to proceed with demolition. The commission, however, has long shown a reluctance to make difficult designations without first