

Villard Plan Gets First OK

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has given conditional approval to a plan that would convert the historic Villard Mansion into an entranceway for a new 52-story midtown building.

The approval is only of the concepts and final plans must still be approved by the commission.

Despite its conditional nature, the commission's okay gives developer Harry B. Helmsley approval to plan how to incorporate the landmark—one of the city's most important—into a combined luxury hotel and office tower.

The 1880s mansion, an Italian Renaissance palazzo design by McKim, Mead and White, is on Madison Av. between 50th and 51st Sts. and faces the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Until a few years ago, the U-shaped structure embracing a formal courtyard, was the headquarters of the Archdiocese of New York and the Random House publishing firm. The Archdiocese still owns the property and would be leasing it to Helmsley.

The proposal submitted by Helmsley to the commission would involve alteration of

the Madison Av. facade and demolition of rear portions of the landmark and several elaborate interior rooms—including the widely acclaimed "music room" with its gold leaf ceiling and walls, murals and intricate carvings of musical motifs.

Almost a Replica

The facade of the new structure designed by Emory Roth and Sons is columned with arches at the top—almost a replica of the Park Lane hotel on Central Park South, an earlier Helmsley-Roth collaboration.

At a public hearing of the commission in December, the design of the new structure was criticized by architects and reservationists. The commission's approval—in the form of a certificate of appropriateness—reflects that criticism.

The commission disallows the use of travertine as an exterior material which Helmsley has, reportedly, already been reconsidering.

It asks for the elimination of the "arch motif," a less vertical design which "denies the horizontality of the existing Villard houses," and a better solution for the connection of the landmark roof line to the new building.

The commission approved "the overall effect" of the

proposed alteration of the Madison Av. facade.

By law, the designated exterior of a landmark may not be altered without commission approval. The unique interior of the mansion—it is actually five architecturally unified and attached structures—has, however, been of great concern to preservationists.

Since Helmsley has proposed to rent the two wings, concern has focused on the lack of tenants and the possible deterioration of those wings if allowed to remain empty.

The commission includes in its certificate of appropriateness an agreement negotiated with Helmsley providing a three-month period in which "interested parties will make a concerted effort" to find a suitable tenant for the wings.

The Villard proposal comes at a time when the city's landmarks law has suffered two harsh legal setbacks—the overruling in court of designations of the Morgan house at Madison Av. and 37th St. and Grand Central Station.

Economic Burden

Of relevance to the Villard plan is the Morgan house decision in which the state Court of Appeals last July took exception to designation of properties owned by charitable institutions unable to sustain the economic burden of maintaining a landmark. The Morgan Mansion is owned by the Lutheran Church.

Helmsley and his lawyers have made no secret of the legal recourse they say the Morgan case provides.

The Villard houses, designated a landmark in 1968, have been vacant and up for sale for several years. Although the Archdiocese was committed to saving the buildings, they have been an economic burden.

Helmsley's proposed redevelopment of the site is the first to include a modified preservation of the landmark.