

# The Fight to Preserve the Villard Houses

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Six months ago, developer Harry B. Helmsley proposed to build a 52-story combined hotel and office structure that would incorporate the landmark Villard Houses in the base.

For several years, the 1880s mansion at Madison Av. and 50th St.—considered one of the city's most important landmarks — has stood vacant and for sale, an economic drain on its owner, the Archdiocese of New York.

Helmsley's proposed marriage of landmark and skyscraper—designed by Emery Roth & Sons — was immediately hailed as one of the most promising solutions in recent years for reuse of an endangered landmark. But since that time, it has become one of the most controversial proposals because it requires sacrificing some elements of the landmark.

It has fast developed into

a classic case of the politics of landmark preservation — involving planners, community groups, landmark specialists, realtors and cultural organizations and the Helmsley proposal faces a rocky road to final approval.

At a January public hearing, the Landmarks Commission approved that "concept" but asked for revision of the skyscraper's design to be more in keeping with the landmark's architecture. Yesterday, in executive session, the commission considered the revised plans and asked for further revisions.

The original design called for vertical columns that many architects and the commission felt were not in keeping with the horizontal effect of the landmark. Now, the vertical effect has been replaced with a horizontal one but the thornier issues remain unresolved—what to do to preserve the irreplaceable interior rooms and how

to reuse the wings that will not be incorporated in the new structure.

Although, the commission's jurisdiction only covers the exterior of the structure, which was designated a city landmark in 1968, private landmark groups want the commission to use that authority to obtain an overall plan for the historic grouping.

"This is not a program for preservation," says one architect who prefers to avoid public comment in the hope the Landmarks Commission will reject the new plan without pressure. "We're convinced that Helmsley could save the important interiors to the benefit of his hotel and the public and that he could provide better assurance for the future of the north and south wings. To leave them up indifferently is no gift to the city."

The 1880s Villard Houses,

an Italian Renaissance palazzo designed by McKim, Mead & White, were until a few years ago the headquarters of the Archdiocese of New York and the Random House publishing firm. The U-shaped building is actually five brownstone structures around a courtyard. It was constructed for journalist and railroad magnate Henry Villard who occupied the south wing and sold adjacent houses to his friends.

The facade of the landmark's central portion would be altered but retained and would serve as an entrance to the hotel. This is the portion facing Madison Av. and the rear of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Although some of the richly detailed rooms must be sacrificed for the hotel lobby, three of the most unique rooms in the south wing—the "Music" or "Gold" room, the paneled library and part of the dining room with an unusual marble wall and

fireplace — would also be lost.

It is the rescue of these rooms that is currently the focus of preservationist pressures.

Brendan Gill, chairman of the Landmarks Conservancy, notes that the south wing in its day was "the richest and handsomest set of rooms for entertainment then in existence in New York and perhaps the country . . . incomparable specimens of 19th century workmanship."

The walls and ceiling of the Music Room contain finely carved musical motifs, important murals and marble reliefs. So far, Helmsley has rejected as "unworkable" proposals for incorporating that room into the hotel.

Somewhat separate from the preservation issues but equally controversial are those raised by a zoning variance request — filed by the Archdiocese — for increased building bulk for the new

tower. The variance is being sought from the Board of Standards and Appeals on the grounds that the existence of the landmark creates an economic hardship for the developer, entitling him to larger building bulk than the zoning code allows.

If approved, this variance would set a precedent that many preservationists and planners fear would lead to widescale building "overshadowing" landmarks throughout the city. The BSA has not yet scheduled a hearing on the variance.

"When you can only build on half of the building lot" because of the landmark's existence, "it doesn't take Einstein to see that's an economic hardship on the builder," says Kevin B. McGrath of Shea, Gould, Climenko and Kramer, attorneys for the Archdiocese.

The variance application is being considered for approval this week by the real estate committee of Community Board 5 and the full board is scheduled to vote on June 18.