

A Landmark Plot Thickens

By ROBERTA R. GRANT

The issues raised by the proposed incorporation of the landmark Villard Houses into the base of a new hotel-office tower, increased in scope and complexity last week as the conflict shifted from the Landmarks Commission to the local community board.

After asking for additional revisions in the design of developer Harry B. Helmsley's planned 52-story structure, the commission appeared well on its way toward final approval of the landmark-skyscraper packages—designed by Emery Roth & Sons—that was first offered six months ago.

But Community Board 5, which has jurisdiction over the Madison Av. and 50th St. landmark, postponed its appeal to try to resolve a full range of complex issues involving the preservation of the landmark itself.

For several years, the 1880s mansion—actually five brownstone structures 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 development scheme was the first offered that would at least partially preserve the structure, which was designated a city landmark in 1968.

Although it is formally only required to approve a zoning variance request, the planning board's Real Estate committee voted on Thursday to postpone that decision until September. At the same time, it outlined at least five issues needing clarification before a vote could be taken.

Claim Added Expense

Since the bulk of the new building is larger than the maximum allowable under the zoning law—even with bonuses for special amenities—the committee is questioning whether the Board of Standards and Appeals has the power to grant a requested economic hardship variance. Some members argue that such permission can only be granted by special legislation of the City Planning Commission which has not yet formally gotten involved in the Villard case.

This issue takes on particular significance because the claim of economic hardship is based on the alleged increased expense of building around and above a designated landmark. Preservationists and planners fear that approval of a variance on this basis would set a precedent leading to new building overshadowing landmarks all over the city.

Another issue is whether the variance applicant, the Archdiocese, which owns the property and is leasing it to Helmsley, must submit financial data to prove its economic hardship claim. Normally, non-profit organizations are exempt from this requirement, which private developers must meet.

In this case, there is the question of whether the church is still exempt when it is not its own developer but, in fact, lessor to a profit-making builder.

There are also questions on the adequacy of the traffic plan for the 600-room hotel, and on design features that do not comply with the zoning code.

Finally, there is the most heated issue of whether the interior rooms now scheduled for demolition—some of which are unique in the city—can be preserved. Primarily at issue is the music, or gold, room with its gilded musical motifs and murals which preservationists maintain could be incorporated into the new hotel. Helmsley has rejected all proposals along these lines.

The 1880s Villard Houses, an Italian Renaissance Palazzo designed by McKim, Mead & White, were until a few years ago the headquarters of the Archdiocese and the Random House publishing firm. The U-shaped building comprises five brownstone structures around a courtyard. It was constructed for journalist and railroad magnate Henry Villard, who occupied the south wing.