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Tower Plan Approved For Villard Landmark

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After three open hearings and much public controversy, the City Planning Commission today approved by a 5-1 vote special zoning legislation permitting construction of a midtown development project which would leave the bulk of the landmark Villard Houses intact.

The legislation now goes to the Board of Estimate for final approval.

It would enable developer Harry B. Helmsley to incorporate the major portion of the 1880s landmark on Madison Av. at 51st St., owned by the Archdiocese of New York into the base of a 51-story hotel and residential tower, providing him with a development bonus in exchange for preservation.

The \$60 million skyscraper, first proposed two years ago, is one of the city's few impending large construction projects. It sets a precedent in combining preservation of a landmark with construction of a new building.

The Villard Houses—an Italian Renaissance palazzo designed around a courtyard by McKim, Mend & White—were, until a few years ago, headquarters of the New York Archdiocese and Random House. The U-shaped building is actually five brownstone structures with a common facade. It was constructed for journalist and railroad magnate Henry

Villard, who occupied the south wing and sold adjacent houses to friends.

The central portion and part of the south wing will be incorporated in the hotel. The remaining areas will be rented to businesses.

After tough scrutiny by preservationist and architectural groups, the Landmarks and Planning Commissions and community activists, the initial plan has undergone radical modifications in both design of the new building and preservation itself.

Once vehement opponents now view the proposal—even with what they say still are weaknesses—as a major breakthrough in reversing the more customary city pattern of sacrificing architectural treasures to the cause of new construction.

"We've gotten the maximum we can get from the developer," one planning commission member noted. "It may not be ideal but we've come pretty far and it's time to say go ahead."

The revisions include:

¶ Total redesign of the new skyscraper to be more architecturally compatible with the five-story landmark;

¶ Preserving several significant interior rooms originally slated for demolition;

¶ Legislation that establishes preservation of a

landmark as a desirable goal comparable to the inclusion of plazas and other amenities;

¶ Creation of a mechanism in which both the Landmarks and Planning Commissions have clearly defined and equal roles in overseeing the project;

¶ A costly commitment by the developer to an elaborate, legally binding preservation plan which protects the landmark during con-

struction and after, and insures that important architectural elements either be reused in the new structure or offered to museums.

Unsettled issues remain. How much public access to significant interiors of the landmark should the developer provide? Who are the appropriate tenants for the landmark's rentable space?

"These questions have existed from the start of the project," one Planning Commission member indicated, "and will probably continue without full agreement until the end."

But the commission passed the special legislation, despite the recent disapproval of the local planning board.

