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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1988

OF 805

ARCHITECTURE VIEW/Paul Goldberger

## What Does It Take To Make a Landmark

ALL THE CITY AND SUBURBAN Homes a block of tenements and it does not seen like a natural can-didate for lardmark status. Call it utopian housing, however, and it begins to look a lot better. And utopian housing is precisely what this is sprawling series of structures, which runs along the south side of 7th Street from York Avenue to the East River, is one of the most ambitious attempts in the history of New York to create viable housing for the poor. Together with its neighboring complex, the Cherokee Apartments, the City and suburban Homes stands as perhaps our greatest legacy from a critical moment in both the architectural and social history of the city — a monument to the moment when a solution to the city's housing problems actually seemed pessible.

In the first decade of this century, when the 1,300-unit complex was greeted, the city faced a catastrophic hotsing crisis.

Cramped, dark and dirty tenements were the norm for the city's poor, many of whom lived along the south side of 79th Street from York

norm for the city's poor many of whom lived in conditions that can barely be called civiin conditions that can barely be called civilized. Social reformers toke up the cause of better housing, and — often backed by money from philanthropists — commissioned architects to find alternatives to the traditional tenement building. The City and Suburban Homes, the major project of a limited-profit company underwritten by members of the Astor, Lewisohn, Auchincloss, Rockefeller and Iselin families, was the largest of the so-called model tenements built in New York, and one of the best. This group of six-story walk-up buildings, erected around a series of private courtyards, was designed to assure every family light, air, privacy and a sense of space. To an urban environment that had symbolized only harshness to many people, symbolized only harshness to many people, this complex brought dignity and joy.

All of this is significan: today because the City and Suburban Homes, which has gone on housing people well for the better part of a century, is now threatened. An island of century, is now threatened. An island of working-class people in the midst of the very gentrified Upper East Sife, it may well give way to yet another luxury tower containing yet more luxury apartments. The structures were purchased in 1985 for \$43 million by Peter Kalikov, the real-estate developer, who announced plans to evict all of the tenants and replace the old buildings with four 49-story towers: the immensions with four 49-story towers: the immensions ings with four 40-story towers; the immensi-ty of the public outcry against that proposal led Mr. Kalikow to put forth a reduced plan

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An island of working-class people on the East Side may have to make way for yet another luxury

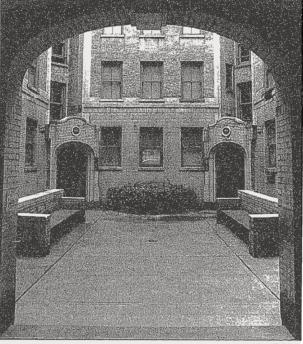
under which only one 65-story tower would be built, at the easternmost end of the site overlooking the East River, and the rest of the complex would be retained. Tenants who would losetheir apartments to make way for the new building would be moved into the sections of the project that were to be kept.

The revised plan, though it does call for saving the majority of the apartments, would still cut the heart out of the complex. The old buildings, alreacy hemmed in on many sides.

ings, already hemmed in on many sides ings, alreacy hemmed in on many sides by new apartment towers, would be over-whelmed by the huge monolith on their own site. The plan satisfied neither the tenants of the City and Suburban Homes nor a coalition of community groupe, who have continued to ob oormunity groups, who have continued to be ject to Mr. Kalikow's project. The opponents have succeeded in convincing the Landmarks Preservation Commission that the City and Suburban Homes is a worthy candidate for landmark status, and the commission plans to hold a hearing on Thursday. If the buildings are so designated, Mr. Kalikow would need the commission's approval to proceed with any version of his plan.

Althougt the City and Suburban Homes'

Although the City and Suburban Homes somewhat similar neighbor, the Cherokee Apartments, has been a landmark for several years, the City and Suburban Homes is not, at first glance, a typical city landmark. The buildings are not beautiful by conventional standards (although there is some decorative detail on them, they are a good bit less ornate than the Cherokee Apartgood bit less ornate than the Cherokee Apart-ments, andtheir beige brick makes them look plain, even banal, from the street). Whether it is a matter of unintentional dis-crimination against the poor or a more inno-cent tendency to think of landmarks in terms of the fantasies and dreams about the city that they can inspire, New York has tend-ed to favor elaborate buildings for landmark status, either public structures or buildings de-signed for the righ. If you think of Jank. signed for the rich. If you think of landmarks only as celebrations of the city's romantic imagery, there is not much that is romantic



The courtyard of the City and Suburban Homes on East 79th Street

about a tenement — even a modeltenement. But no view could be more shortsighted, or more limiting of what landmarkstatus should signify. These structures which were designed by several architectural firms of which the best known are Harde& Short and Percy Griffith, represent the city's best intentions — a commitment on thepart of the

city's upper class, and its architects, to solvng social problems. The City and Suburban Homes are not elegant in the way that so much of the city's urn-of-the-century architecture was elegart. But they are not bad as works of design, either. And no structures re-flect nobler aspirations.

And today, if New York needs anything, it

is some reminders that archefor the public good. For this one way not different which the which the
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The most striking differe years the City and Suburba and today is the extent to w and today is the extent to were the private sector appeted to trying to solve the prilles who organized the City Homes Company — which lects between its founding in of the huge East 79th Street wanted not only to help the would live in their buildings other, more profit-minded I the standards of their house lized that the free market, would do little unless it was would be another generation. would be another generation of public housing, bringing to the humans. into the business of creating ing for the poor; until that t nd Suburban Homes was

and Suburban Homes was to effort in New York or any o decent housing for the poor. ments are monuments to policif that architecture can cent for working people. Today, with only tiny am assisted housing being cons in some ways to have slid al backto the era before City than Bouses was even built, free market do what it wish ten means building housing and letting others struggle a can. And where better to see work than on the site of the 6 work than on the site of the G Houses on the Upper East S deed that the City and Subu a philanthropic testament to conditions created because market on its own could not sary, might well be altered of those very same market for to haunt it nearly a century





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