

# 'Vale' to Villard?

If New York cannot find a better way to preserve the Villard Houses than the current plan for a new hotel that would amputate them in part and ignore the rest, then all that much-touted talent in the fields of art and finance that this city is supposed to have is a myth. A plan of this poverty of imagination and paucity of standards cannot be the only course.

The Procrustean scheme would shove the hotel's entrance and facilities into the central wing of the landmark structure on Madison Avenue with a new tower behind. This would be achieved by demolishing some interiors while leaving others for uncertain uses and an uncertain future. What a bad joke to exchange the superb space and regal decorative arts of the Gold Room's vaulted ceiling and gilded boiserie for the predictable esthetic copout of a modern hotel ballroom. Stanford White is a hard act to follow.

This is no small, offbeat landmark in an offbeat corner for fringe esthetes to worry about. It is one of New York's finest buildings in one of the city's most visible and prestigious locations. That fact, of course, complicates preservation because the site, between 50th and 51st Streets, is potentially one of the most valuable for development in midtown.

The problem of preservation is formidable in New York right now. The trouble lies in a faulty landmarks law that needs strengthening badly, the money crunch, and lack of leadership at City Hall. It seems obvious that some of the city's great minds had better start coming out of the boiserie (if there is any) in its banks, law offices and cultural institutions to find the answers. Square-footage may be the ultimate beauty in real estate, but that is a limited measure of a city's soul.