

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE URBAN SAGA--HOW THREE LOST CAUSES WERE SAVED

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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### Another Chapter in the Urban Saga—How Three Lost Causes Were Saved

**P**ostscripts—for those who complain that I never give the endings to my cliffhangers. One reason, of course, is that there are no endings; urban crises have a way of going on forever. In preservation, however, the wrecker's ball can write *finis*, and in planning, the opportunity can be irrevocably missed. But except for the finality of demolition or completed construction, there is almost always a next chapter or verse.

The latest chapter of the Villard Houses saga—which seemed so hopeless a cause to so many—is something to delight the believers and confound the cynics. Here were an extremely valuable midtown Manhattan site—an elaborate, “obsolete,” empty landmark, very costly to maintain—an owner no longer able to bear the losses, and a developer waiting to exploit the landmark without actually using it—a negative and risky kind of salvation.

In the curious way of New York, which wheels, deals and compromises while managing to sustain some extraordinary standards in the face of impossible odds, a solution is being found.

After going back to the drawing board twice, against steady, mounting public pressure, the developer, Harry Helmsley, the architect, Richard Roth, and the owner, the Archbishopric of New York, working cooperatively with the Landmarks Conservancy, a private group, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, a municipal agency, the American Institute of Architects and other civic and professional organizations, as well as community boards and planners, wrought wondrous changes in the scheme. They huffed and they puffed and came up with substantial improvements in interior and exterior plans. To Mr. Helmsley, for these

extra efforts, we raise a glass. (Considering that the 1886 Villard Houses are mint Age of Elegance McKim, Mead and White, it has to be vintage champagne.)

The Gold Room, the superb, vaulted, carved and gilded, La Farge-decorated music room of the 1890's south wing, was to be sliced off the rear of the landmark to accommodate Mr. Helmsley's new Palace Hotel tower. It has now been found that it is possible to keep and use the Gold Room as one of the hotel's public spaces. The Library of this wing will also be incorporated. Currently, talks are continuing to see if some of the better north wing interiors can be converted to shops, rather than gutting them, as planned, to make new stores.

On the exterior of the new hotel-office tower, which will also contain apartments, the earlier cheesy design gimmicks have been dropped for a more suitable and straightforward approach. The project has gained considerable in distinction and merit, all of which can only accrue to the builder's advantage. There are possible tenants for the remaining, unused Villard interiors that the project abandoned—a still inexplicable waste of a unique resource of quality and style. But that peculiar oversight can be lived with; these rooms will stay intact, and their desirability and rental prospects will increase with the new construction.

The problem that is still to be solved is the disturbing one of the variance needed to build the tower. The developer is asking for an increase in size based on arithmetic that some question, a matter that usually goes before the Board of Standards and Appeals. In this case, however, the impact is so much greater and the issues so much broader than a narrow interpretation of the zoning

rules would allow, and the “tradeoff” for the city involves so many critical and delicately balanced elements, from the economic boost of the new construction to appropriate preservation devices and surrounding traffic patterns, that the Archbishopric has elected to take the appeal to the city Planning Commission instead. Jurisdictionally and philosophically, this seems like the right thing to do.

In any case, it will be up to the city to decide what is proper and acceptable, probably, again, through negotiation. There is now the promise of a solution that all can abide by, that will keep the Villard Houses from demolition and in the mainstream of New York life. And that's not bad—for New York or anywhere.

Next: the Grace Church cliffhanger. We left the church struggling to raise funds to build a new school that would retain the Renwick Gothic Revival facades of its two church houses on Fourth Avenue, after a battle to call off the bulldozer and a plan for a banal new building in their place. Again, protest and pleas, plus an active campaign led by the Landmarks Conservancy, got a series of delays and, eventually, a matching grant for the cost of an appropriate structure. The news is that the matching money has been raised, and construction has begun on a design that will put the new school behind the old facades, keeping a cultural enrichment that the neighborhood cannot spare. That was another lost cause.

In Lower Manhattan, the Fraunces Tavern block, at last writing, stood with windows and doors smashed out of two partly destroyed early 19th-century buildings (later closed up against the elements and vandalism by a donation channeled through the Landmarks Conservancy). Seriously endangered, the block was the subject of a

running fight between urbanists and preservationists who wanted to keep one of the vanishing enclaves of the scale and style of New York's architectural past, and the Uris Buildings Corporation, which wanted a parking lot. Demolition of the two Uris-owned buildings was stopped by a court order (no one had bothered to get a demolition permit). There has been no further damage, and Uris, still in a crisis of finances, leadership and imagination, has done nothing about the properties. The Conservancy is exploring ways of finding a user or taking over the buildings itself.

On the remainder of the block, Sylvan Lawrence, the other commercial owner (Fraunces Tavern and the directly adjoining structures are owned by the Sons of the Revolution), has retented his buildings and stepped up their maintenance, including the replacement of handsome arched windows in a fine vernacular Federal structure.

One is now an OTB parlor, and in a funny little byplay, OTB is in the process of changing its signs, after a surprising amount of local protest, to something more “suitable” for the historic block. The presence of OTB itself is O.K.; the idea of conservation is lively commercial continuity. The block as a whole is not out of the woods, but substantial progress has been made. (A glass raised to Mr. Lawrence.)

So much for the current Pearl White thriller installments. But the scenario relies less on heroes and villains than on increasing awareness of urban quality, a tough, sophisticated faith, and sustained cooperative effort. In the end, all of the participants are the good guys. Who can ask for anything more?

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