

Triage in Tudor City

Tradition in New York includes such rituals as starting demolition on weekends, and foot-dragging by municipal agencies. These venerable practices have now come together in the matter of the Tudor City parks — a decade-old dispute between Harry Helmsley, who owns Tudor City and wants to build on the parks, and the city, which wants to prevent it.

Naturally, building on parks looks bad to those who see them as irreplaceable urban amenities, and looks good to those who calculate the return on prime midtown buildings. The owner's workmen were sent in on Memorial Day weekend, for which there have been many explanations but only one that explains: Action on the city's proposed compromise had come to a halt and Mr. Helmsley was exasperated.

The plan that seemed to be rolling along last year involved giving Mr. Helmsley a city park at the southeast corner of 42d Street and First Avenue in exchange for his making the two private Tudor City parks public. Thus the builder could add a very big new building to his collection, already the largest in New York, without destroying a fine feature of life in Tudor City. It is far

from an ideal solution, since his are "sitting" parks whereas the city's, nearby, is an active games park used by youngsters. But apples for oranges, or asphalt for grass, appears to be the best realistic trade.

The reason a trade must be made at all is that Mr. Helmsley is totally within his rights, no matter how discouraging that may be to those who measure cities by more public values. He did not buy Tudor City for its enlightened design. He bought it for the development potential of the parks. Destroying a park is not admirable policy; it is doing a wrecking job on Mr. Helmsley's image and on his profession's. The loss to the city will be great. But this investment game plan is more important to real estate than civic sensibility.

That is why the city should be moving faster on its exchange offer. Meetings are being held now. But appraisals must still be equalized, with proper reckoning of the great value of the land the city will be yielding. An intense effort should be made to replace the games park elsewhere. And if Mr. Helmsley wants to show concern for the city that has enriched him, he would help create a substitute. Harry Helmsley Park?