

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

They Call This 'Saving' A Landmark?

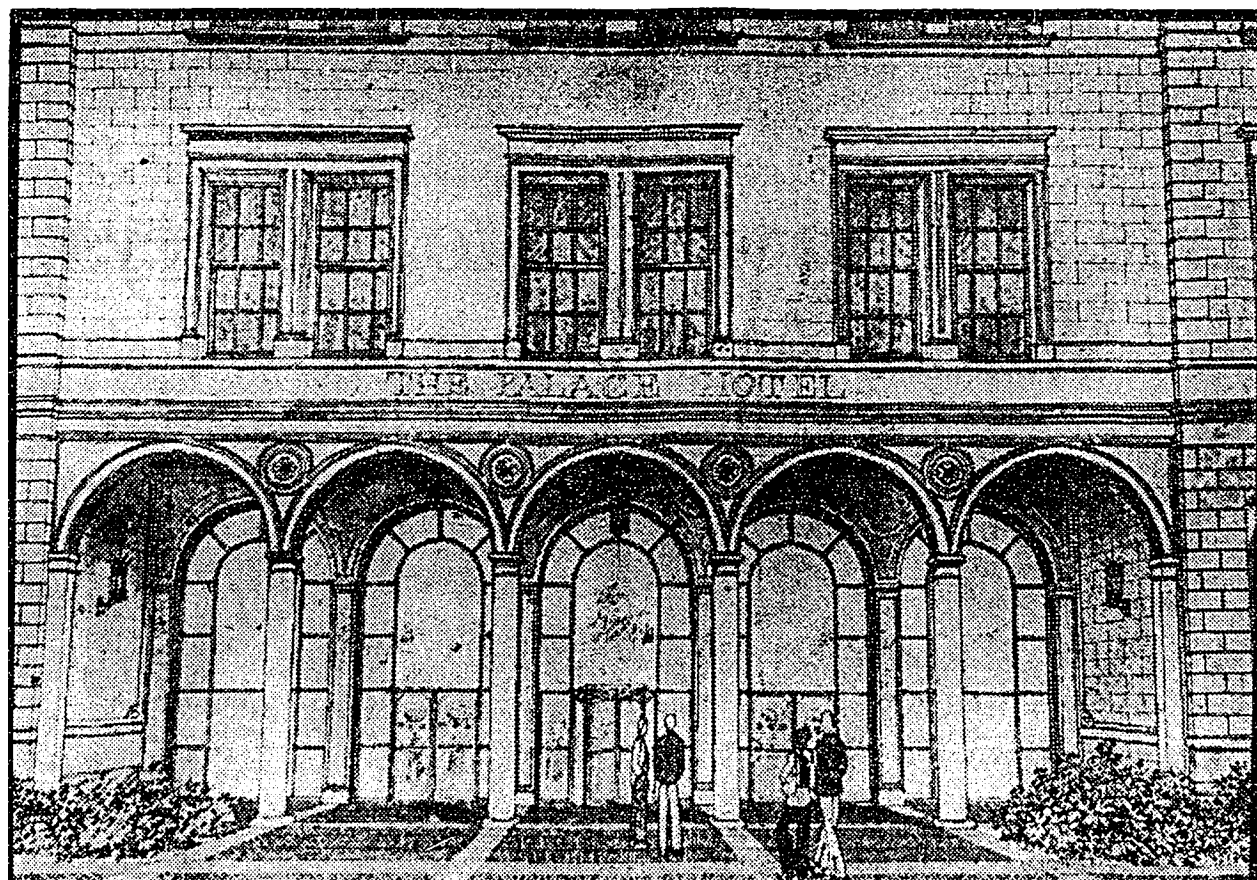
This week, as they used to say in beautiful downtown Burbank, there is good news and bad news. A way has been found to save New York's landmark Villard Houses on Madison Avenue, behind St. Patrick's Cathedral, but the solution is dreadful. That could also be known as the New York paradox: anything worth saving is worth doing wrong.

There is the further paradox that everyone involved seems to want to do what is right. The owner of the beautiful McKim, Mead and White brownstone palazzo of the 1880's is the Archdiocese of New York. Since the Archdiocese ceased to use the major part of the building and Random House moved out of the north wing—the U-shaped Renaissance palace is actually a group of town houses around a court—most of the building has been empty. The Archdiocese is maintaining the structures, which were designated as a landmark in 1968, at considerable expense and sacrifice. Because this must surely be ranked as one of the most elegant and tempting parcels of prime midtown Manhattan real estate, the Church's dilemma is obvious.

The developer, Harry Helmsley, wants to build a new, 52-story hotel and office building behind the Villard Houses, utilizing the full development potential of the zoning of both the tower and the landmark sites. In fact, it appears that he will ask for still more size from the Board of Standards and Appeals. The Archdiocese has executed a lease on all of this property with Mr. Helmsley, as the Palace Hotel Inc., and the lease contains a number of safeguards for the treatment of the landmark buildings. But the actual design of the new building and the use and treatment of the old ones are Mr. Helmsley's baby.

The architect, Richard Roth, Jr., of Emery Roth and Sons, has worked hard to keep the landmark and give the developer what he wants. What he wants is very clearly a standard, money-making commercial formula that works—nothing risky or offbeat. It isn't so much that creative or imaginative or sensitive design is being minimized or downgraded; it is simply that this sort of design is totally outlawed by the formula from the start. Mr. Helmsley apparently also wants a close resemblance to his Park Lane Hotel on Central Park South, one of those (formula) travertine-clad, arcade-topped, easy exercises in spurious elegance.

The project is now before the Landmarks Preservation Commission for a Certificate of Appropriateness, because the landmarks law requires the Commission's approval for any alteration of a designated exterior. The alterations being requested are the demolition of the last 25 feet of a 1909 extension, including a small porch and tower and changes in the roofline in that area. Although there will be serious



Plans for The Palace Hotel (above) call for the preservation of the Villard Houses' court and arcade as a "false front."

changes in parts of the interior—the rooms of the central section, which includes the handsome Gold Room, will be gutted for a hotel entrance—the Commission has no control over this part of the plan because the interiors have never been designated. The interiors of the wings, one of which is particularly fine, would remain intact.

The plan is to "connect" the soaring hotel-office tower to the Villard Houses through the central section so that pedestrians could enter the hotel through the existing Madison Avenue court and arcade. A new hotel lobby directly behind that entrance would take the place of the demolished interiors. The Villard front would thus become a false front, because the rest of the central section would simply have a wall put behind it, making it a kind of stage-drop for the hotel. (Fire requirements make this necessary says the architect, but others dispute it.) The wings, untouched but also unutilized, are to be rented out for whatever suitable tenants or purposes present themselves.

The ultimate paradox is that there is absolutely no attempt or pretense or inclination to use the potential of the beautifully crafted and detailed landmark structure in any way. It is a death-dealing rather than life-giving "solution." The superb Belle Epoque interiors—virtually all that are left in New York of the Vanderbilt-Astor era—are written off as so many square feet of "hard to use" space. The "solution" is total rejection. If the architect and developer had set out to kick the landmark in the pants, they could not have done a better job. (In fairness to the architect, his office is replete with earlier schemes that studied reuse, but evidently period salons are considered incompatible with commercial hotel functions.)



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The net result is that the landmark is left standing, subject to finding tenants to use it. This is exactly the same problem that exists now, without the disfigurements of the new construction. Moreover, the threat still remains that if no tenants materialize and the building continues to be financial burden to owner and lessee, application for demolition can be made under the landmarks law. In spite of the economic benefits that would accrue to owner and developer in this dubious scheme, the Villard Houses aren't home safe yet.

It is particularly hard to accept that continued hazard when the proposed design is so patently unsuitable and insensitive. The travertine-striped tower, with its cliché

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arches, is hokily pretentious. A Certificate of Appropriateness for this proposal would be a travesty.

Has everyone forgotten the lessons of the Racquet and Tennis Club (also McKim, Mead and White), and Lever House and the Seagram Building on Park Avenue? The modern, Miesian esthetic can be handled with basic elegance, to the benefit of both kinds of classicism. New York has a right to a design of skill and sophistication as well as appropriateness; these are the qualities of the city's style.

Add the further paradox of the promise of the interior designer to furnish "in the spirit of" the rejected, original interiors, and travesty becomes a bad joke. These interiors are mint examples of the genuine grandeur that today's hotels imitate so tackily in a pastiche of token vulgarities. It takes no effort to conjure up a vision of the depressing ersatz version that will be substituted for the real thing. It is another "successful" formula.

The reasoning behind this debacle is not mysterious. It is the reasoning of the investment mind, of which Mr. Helmsley has one of the best in the business. The investment mind does things in the guaranteed no-risk investment way. It deals exclusively in how to produce the stock commercial product, no matter what peripheral interferences may intrude. A landmark is an interference. This approach does not accept unconventional challenges, even when they would deliver dividends in beauty and ambience. This could have been an internationally notable hotel of cosmopolitan grace rather than a model stamped out by the investment computer. All the ingenuity expended has been devoted to avoiding capitalizing on the landmark or sully the formula in any way.

Ordinarily, the Landmarks Commission could engage in a little design negotiation for improvement. But the Commission, as reported recently, is having problems. The lawyer for the Archdiocese politely reminded the Commissioners at a public hearing that if they didn't like the proposal, the Archdiocese might just begin to think about the Lutheran Church decision, which permits a non-profit institution to demolish the landmark J. P. Morgan mansion.

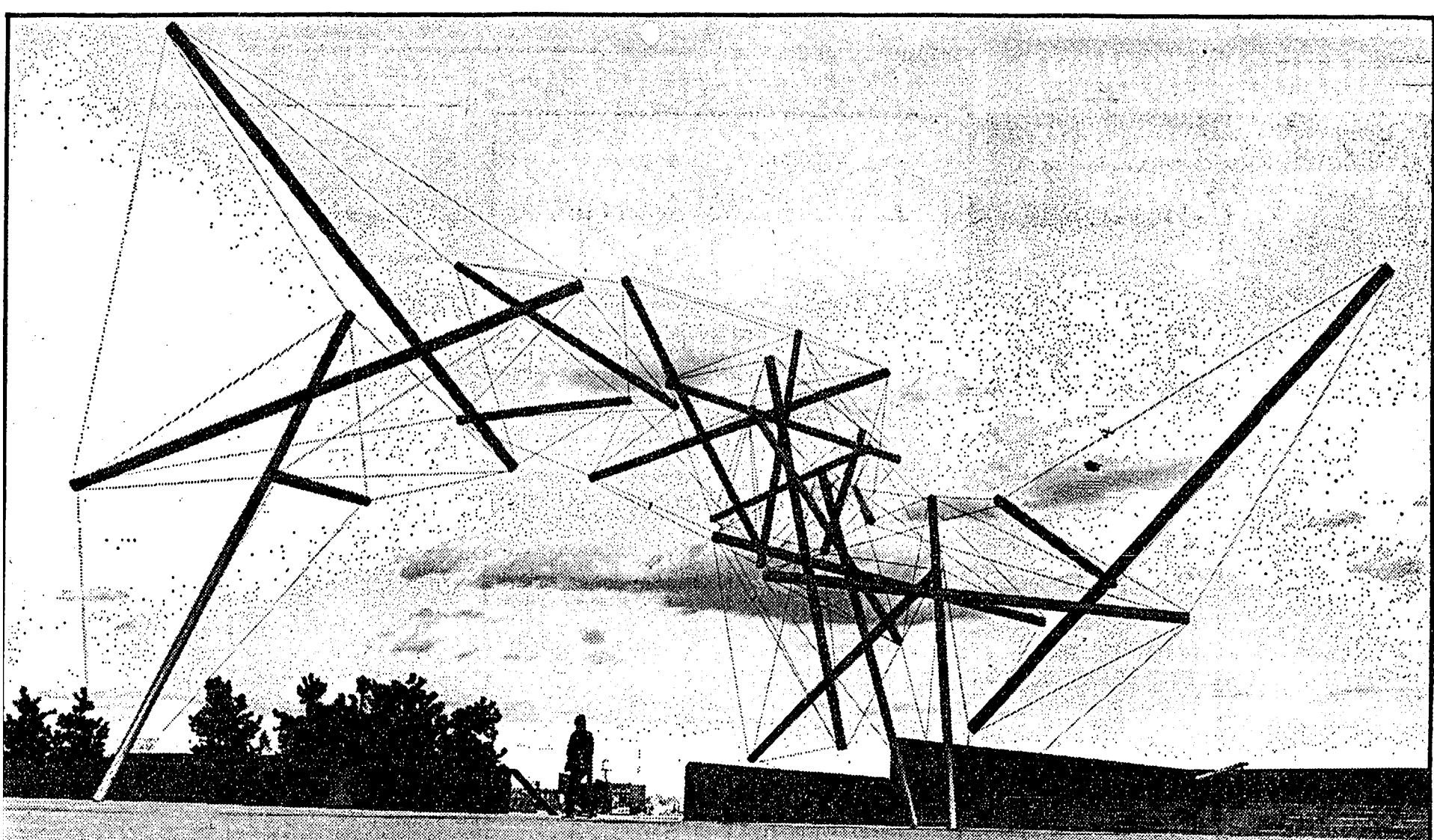
The question might be asked whether an outstandingly successful investor might not, just once, think in terms of the extraordinary instead of the ordinary. It is, after all, Mr. Helmsley's city, too.

Correction: The New York State Court of Appeals decision in which the J. P. Morgan house lost landmark designation ["Landmarks Are in Trouble with the Law," Dec. 22] was based solely on the constitutional question of the statute's failure to take into consideration economic hardship in the case of a building controlled by a charitable institution. The opinion that the building's quality did not merit landmark status was that of a lower court.



Dubuffet's "Milord la Chamarre."

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Snelson's "Free Ride Home," at the new Waterside apartment complex.