

False Front

It is difficult to believe that with the resources of talent and ingenuity in New York it has not been possible to come up with a better solution to the preservation of the stately Villard Houses—the landmark that is to be used as a kind of false front for the new Palace Hotel on Madison Avenue.

The developer, Harry Helmsley, and his architects, Emery Roth & Sons, were sent back to the drawing board once by the Landmarks Preservation Commission to re-study an original design that was monumentally bad. The official directive was to make the towering hotel-office building more compatible in quality with the lovely structure in front of it. An unofficial request was also made to try to find a way to save some superb interiors that the plan would demolish, notably the Gold Room, which is without peer in New York for period art and grandeur.

What has come back after four months is, on balance, no better than before. The tower is less offensive, but the ground floor treatment on the side streets is worse. And either through continued intransigence or hopeless insensitivity, no attempt has been made to spare the Gold Room or to incorporate any Villard interiors into what promises to be a disappointing stock plan and decor for the new hotel.

The city cannot afford to settle for this kind of willful failure and conceptual bankruptcy: the architectural and environmental cost is too great. The "new" solution remains no solution at all. It should go back to the drawing board again.