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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Two Triumphant New Hotels for New York

New York's two new luxury hotels, the Grand Hyatt and the Helmsley Palace, have opened in a shower of superlatives from a battery of public relations specialists. Some of the claims are indisputable — the new hotels are indeed large, at upward of 1,000 rooms each, and costly, at upward of \$100 million, and they are important to both the image and the prosperity of New York. High on the publicists' list is the fact that each represented a unique architectural challenge, triumphantly vanquished.

The Grand Hyatt is a conversion. The job consisted of transforming the substantial but undistinguished old Commodore Hotel into the glittering flagship (flaghotel?) of the Hyatt chain by adapting its trademark lobby atrium to the restriction of an existing steel frame. This has been done with ingenuity and elegance, and the result is not only a vast improvement over the spiritless interior court that has become an overreaching cliché, but also — give or take a few details — one of the handsomest public spaces in New York.

The Palace had a different problem. The job there was to restore and integrate a landmark — the McKim, Mead and White Villard Houses of 1882 — into a new 51-story hotel, functionally and esthetically. This was not originally a program of the developer's choosing; Harry Helmsley, the real estate entrepreneur who is both builder and owner of the

Palace, was carried "kicking and screaming," in his own words, into preservation. It was, without doubt, a difficult and costly undertaking, but Mr. Helmsley is the first to admit that the results justified the money and effort, both as an investment and in the degree of value-added beauty and style obtained for the hotel. "What started as a commercial venture," he says proudly, "ended as a work of art." You might say that he is taking success with grace.

The joy of Donald Trump, the developer responsible for the Grand Hyatt project, is also unconfined. Mr. Trump undertook what was a complex and risky investment at a time when New York, and 42d Street, were in the deepest doldrums. His gamble, helped by a good financial deal when the city was desperate for new construction, has flowered into instant success. Both the Grand Hyatt and the Helmsley Palace are already fully booked, and their handsome bars and restaurants are the latest "in" places, even as work goes on.

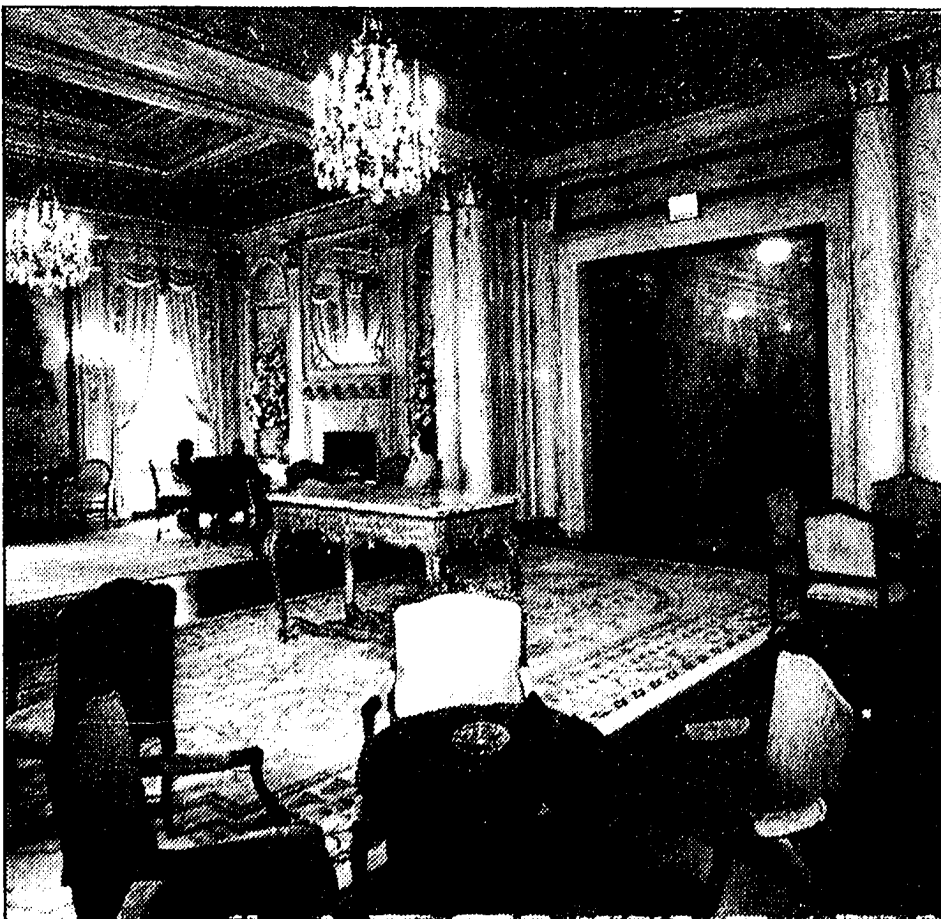
Mr. Trump and Mr. Helmsley have a right to their euphoria. But it certainly wasn't for free. Mr. Trump claims that the costs of the Hyatt were raised at least \$5 million by the use of fine materials and superior details (some of that cost was saved by the preexisting steel). According to Mr. Helmsley, the restoration of the Villard Houses, with the

pursuit of a related design standard for the hotel, added an estimated \$10 million to the Palace's price tag.

It is therefore gratifying to be able to record that the pleasure of the investors is not caused just by the numbers that prove their financial astuteness; both men are positively floating on their architectural triumphs. That is unusual enough in New York's real estate community. This is evidently a new and exhilarating kind of prestige in a business where money has been the measure of all things — and still is; it is just measuring more and different kinds of things. Champagne all around for everyone, in Harry's Bar and the Hyatt Lounge.

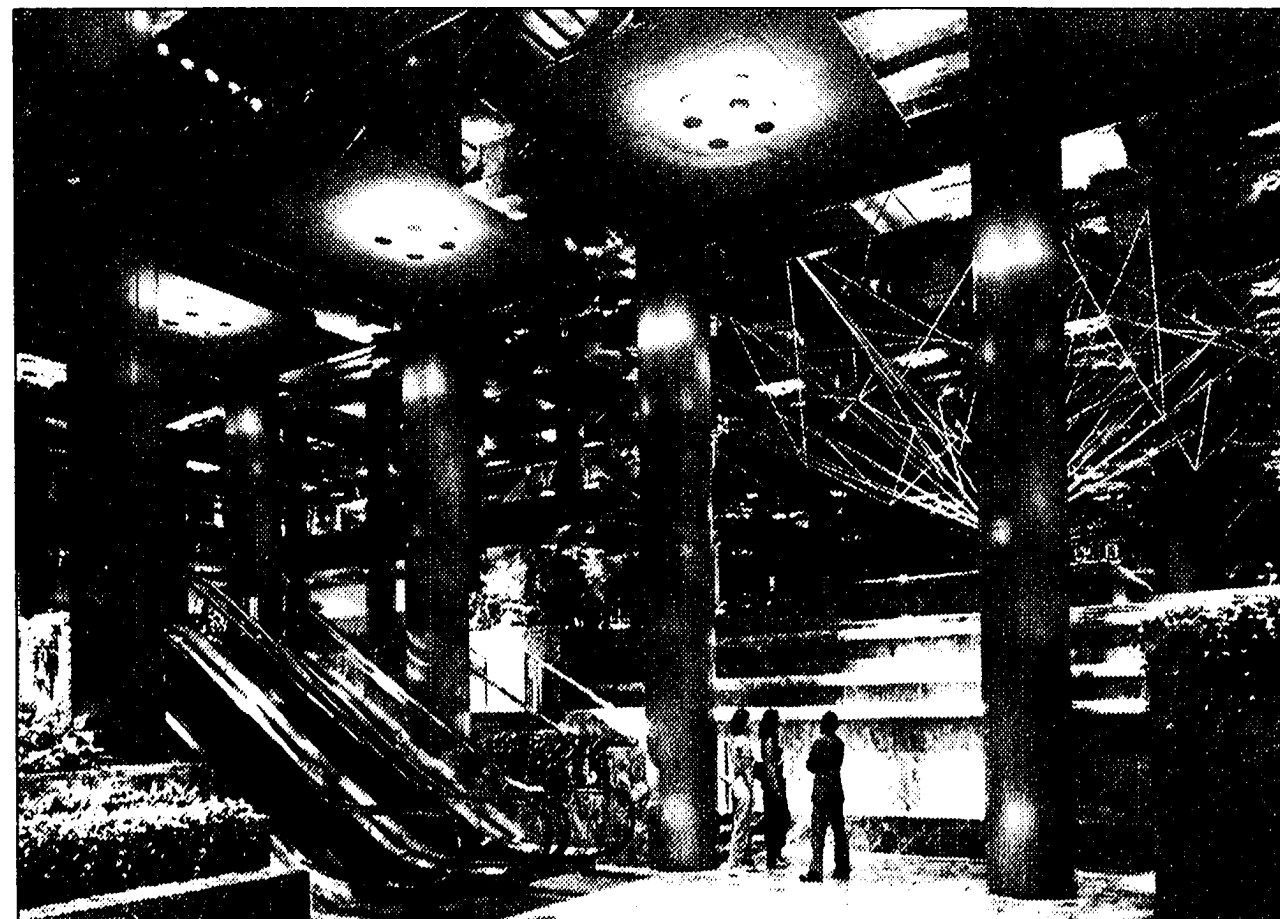
What is even more interesting about these two hotels than the care lavished on their interior design is their totally different character; they are a study in stylistic contrasts. For a not inconsiderable sum — these are, after all, very classy hotels, starting at a "bargain" \$75 for a "standard single" or \$120 for a one-room "suite" and going up to \$1,300 for a "super-suite" at the Hyatt, with a range from \$120 for a single to \$480 for a two-bedroom suite with the price of penthouse suites on request at the Palace — you have a real choice. If you crave completely contemporary grand luxe you will find it at the Hyatt; the Palace offers a lush "peri-

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Wolfgang Hoyt/Esto Photographics

The interior of the Helmsley Palace, at left, which involved the restoration of the landmark Villard Houses of 1882; and the interior of the Grand Hyatt, at right, which is a conversion of the old Commodore Hotel—"What is even more interesting than the care lavished on the interior designs is their totally different character; they are a study in stylistic contrasts."



Two Triumphant New Hotels

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od" adaptation of the Villard Houses's ornate Franco-Italian elegance.

Both solutions are remarkably well done. In each case, they are the work of teams of architects and designers, working with the builder, the owner, the hotel operators and, not least, each other. The architects for the Grand Hyatt were Gruzen and Partners, with Der Scutt as consulting architect; Dale Keller and Associates, and GKR Design Consultants-Barbara Greene, were the interior designers.

The Palace's tower is the work of the architectural firm of Emery Roth and Sons, with James W. Rhodes the restoration architect for the Villard Houses. The Villard interiors have been adapted and furnished for their new uses by Sarah Tomerlin Lee of Tom Lee Ltd., and the guest rooms have been designed by Leona M. Helmsley, Harry Helmsley's wife and president of the firm's Helmsley Hotels division, who has kept a passionately watchful eye on everything.

Not too long ago it would have been heresy, resulting in expulsion from the temple of modernism, to accept both a creative contemporary design and a quasi-historical, reproduction approach to the same functions. Diehard or not, I still find that most run-of-the-mill "traditional" solutions rarely rise above the constipatedly conventional, and usually signal the abdication of design opportunity.

But the Palace is a special situation. The original interiors of the Villard Houses and the remodeling carried out by Stanford White for Whitelaw Reid in 1891 are magnificent, and these rooms have been superlatively restored. (The north and central wings were always separate houses, and the north wing is now occupied by a group of civic art and architecture organizations.) Careful cleaning and painstaking repairs have revealed the dazzling beauty of inland marbles, mosaics, frescoes, elaborately carved woods, art glass and art work by Tiffany, La Farge, St. Gaudens and a galaxy of others.

The quality and detail of this irreplaceable art and craft are so breathtaking, and these rooms are so obviously the high point of the Palace experience, that the new construction's borrowed motifs automatically take on a supporting and subsidiary role. The guest rooms pamper outrageously with apricot velvets and gold-and-silver baroque trim. A ballroom manages to avoid the pedestrian new hotel model by virtue of its oval shape and charming 19th-century paintings mounted between decorative pilasters. The wood-paneled registration lobby is innocuous enough to escape being offensive, although it never rises to distinction, and the chandeliers in the garage entrance are simply foolish, rather than pretentious.

None of this would come off, however, without the real thing that is its *raison d'être*. It is all background for the grand stair that takes one to the Villard interiors — the Gold Room or Music Room, where musicians will play on the gilded balcony below the La Farge lunette for cocktails and tea; the old dining room that is a tour de force of gleaming carved mahogany, now a bar; and the salon, with its array of decorative arts, to be used for special functions.

A masterful St. Gaudens mantel in red Verona marble is the sculptural equal of the more elaborate example in the garden court of the new American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum. Moved for a connection to the new hotel, it is now the centerpiece of the entrance balcony, visible from the re-

stored courtyard that provides pedestrian access to the hotel. A matching red Verona marble has been used for the lobby walls.

The one monumentally unfortunate note is the exterior of the new tower, which rises directly behind the Villard Houses. This soaring facade is a curtain wall of unforgivable, consummate mediocrity; somehow the lesson of quality got lost on the way up those 51 floors.

The idea of quality is also the theme of the Grand Hyatt. But Mr. Trump likes things that glisten extravagantly, and he also believes that a street as grimy as 42d can use a little glitter. The materials at the Hyatt are gray mirror glass for the renovated building's completely new skin (much better than anticipated and infinitely better than the Palace tower) and a combination of highly polished bronze, stainless steel and mirror.

The mix is showy, and it works. But the most impressive part of the design is the way the architects have interpreted the inevitable Hyatt atrium. The framework of existing columns suggested the solution. Because it was not possible, structurally, to create the usual vertical court, the building was opened at ground level for its entire length. Some ceilings were removed and floors lowered for a height of four stories, and the columns and beams that remained were covered with bronze and mirror. The thrust of the space is therefore horizontal. The result is a spectacular multi-level room, approximately a city block of open interi-

'In each case, solutions are the work of teams conferring.'

or, defined by a perimeter glow of natural light on three sides.

Different levels — all open — serve the entrance, the main lobby and restaurants and bars. Highly polished, richly figured beige marble, flowering plants, and a sheet of water flowing down one of the vertical marble slabs at the center, dramatize the space. A cat's cradle sculpture by Peter Lobello hung above it all is unnecessary, but within the theme of glittering complexity it works reasonably well. The aggressive and quite stunning geometry of the marble is actually sculpture enough. An all-glass garden room is suspended over the street by a space frame that is as decorative as it is structural. This is a welcome substitute for Hyatt's redundant revolving bars. (Another tiresome touch, the circusy outdoor elevators, was also eliminated.) All of these sparkling, layered spaces, with people moving through them, become sophisticated urban theater. No gimmicks are necessary.

The Hyatt has the best "modern" ballroom in the city, thanks to the high ceilings of the existing structure that have been kept, and "chandeliers" of crystals architecturally massed in large brilliant rectangles. For contrast, and a bow to the past, the old foyer leading to the function rooms was restored. Guest rooms, suavely and simply done in plain, unpatterned burgundy, brown or green, have a refined "modernistic" glamor.

None of this is standard Hyatt, or any other standard hotel design. It is urbane and elegant New York. ■