

Architecture

Hands Across The Bureaucracy

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

BECAUSE of the peculiar timing of newspaper deadlines, this article will appear two days after a key part of the Washington Market urban renewal plan, 1,335 units of Mitchell-Lama housing, has been presented to the Board of Estimate for approval of the tax abatement that the city must give for these "middle income" projects. The \$57-million plan, consisting of three 39-story towers and two and three story townhouses, is part of a larger scheme for the old Washington Market site in Lower Manhattan.

This is being written ahead, so that it can be "locked up" two days before the hearing, having been set in type at least four days before that. And so, as I write, I know only that the project has been approved, held over, or rejected.

Rejection of 1,335 units of housing seems unlikely right now, even in this masochistic city, although what is euphemistically called middle income has risen from an original \$30 a room to \$50 a room two years ago and is now coming in at (whisper it) \$83 a room. All the citizen tears and skewed rentals in the world can't change that awful cost-of-construction fact.

This is subsidized housing with low interest rates and tax abatement, if you please; unsubsidized, free market housing is touching \$150 a room. Caves, anyone? Forget the political whipping horses. Go talk to the money men, the labor unions, the materials manufacturers and the economic pundits; something has clearly gone wrong with the cockeyed system.

But that's not what I started to tell you about. This is an account of something that has gone right. It is the story of ten landmark buildings, mostly Federal houses of the 1820's, that have been saved on the Washington Market site and incorporated into the redevelopment scheme. In the words of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Nowhere else (in the city) is there a survival of this many houses of this style—all of which retain their original

pitched roofs and dormers." (Nowhere since the Washington Market demolition; it was full of them.)

It is one of those it-can't-happen-here-but-it-has stories. You might call it a miracle. That would be an understatement.

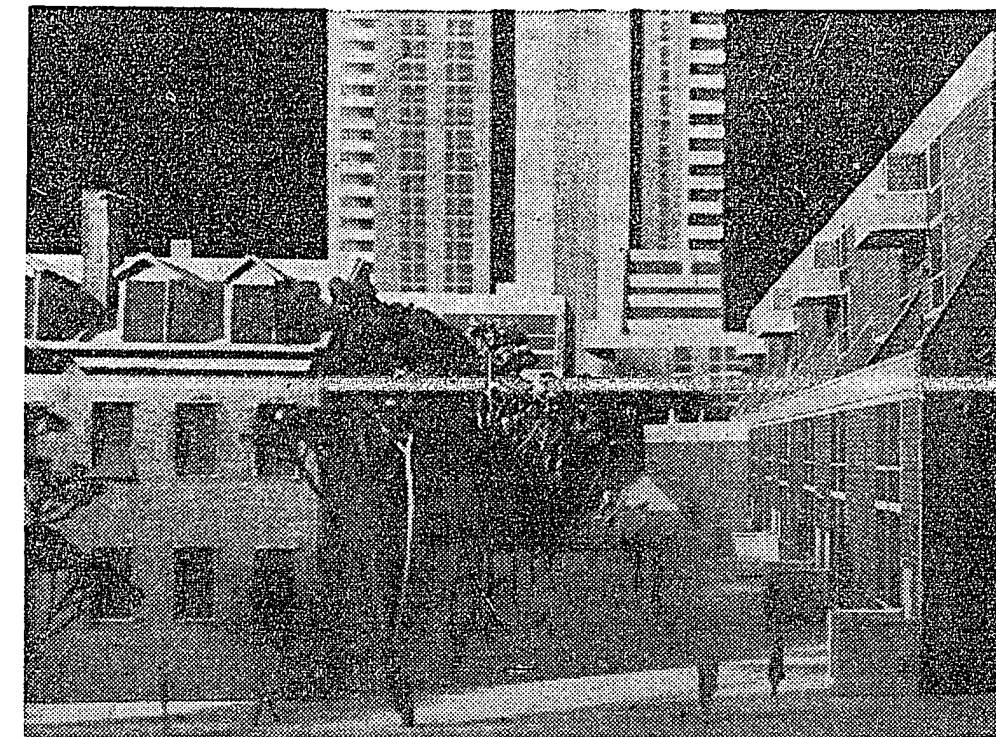
But don't call it one too soon. If the housing project gets the green light, if the other pieces of the plan fall in place, if the old buildings are secured, if contracts are let and work proceeds as scheduled, New York will have one small, bittersweet planning and preservation victory. The South Street Seaport will be another. On one block of one renewal area, the city has elected to give a token demonstration of how the present can live with the past.

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Washington Market is gone. It is now 38 acres of pink (handmade brick) rubble. The inconveniences that doomed it as the food supplier of the city were due in good part to the fact that its "plant" consisted of picturesque, 19th century domestic buildings, the oldest converted from genteel Federal houses. The rest followed a simple, Georgian vernacular until late in the century. The market didn't work, but it was full of history and character. Amen to all that.

Well, not quite all. There are those ten old buildings. In 1968 the city's Housing and Development Administration asked the Landmarks Preservation Commission for reports on what should be saved in the city's 25 urban renewal areas. After 20 years of ruthlessly bulldozing the past, this was a bit of ironic barn-locking. But at least one city agency was talking to another. That, too, was a miracle. Said the Landmarks Commission to HDA, "The report alone is a landmark."

The recommendations for the Washington Market site were that six Federal houses should be kept *in situ*, and three others moved to join them. A later building was subsequently designated to complete the corner block. Although there had been a certain agency coolness to-



Old houses, left, and new, right and rear, Washington Market site
Don't call it a miracle too soon

ward preservation previously, HDA accepted the 1968 report and announced that sponsors would have to save the buildings as part of their redevelopment schemes.

The houses now stand alone, looking frail and vulnerable, like some surrealist vision out of Edward Hopper. They are at the Washington and Harrison Street corner, with those to be moved farther down Washington. In addition, an 1848 cast-iron fronted structure at Washington and Murray Streets by James Bogardus was also recommended for preservation. All of the buildings received landmark designation between 1966 and 1970.

Now to backtrack a bit. The history of the urban renewal area starts in 1962. At that time the market was scheduled for total clearance. The project limped along, as those things do, for four years. In 1968, when HDA and the Landmarks people got together, a new plan for the area was worked out.

The renewal sponsors were the Manhattan Community College, with architects Caudell, Rowlett, Scott, which has gone briskly ahead; Samuel Lefrak for commercial construction, with architects Gruzen and Partners, an arrangement apparently in limbo; and the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers for the Mitchell-Lama housing, with Oppenheimer, Brady as

architects. Gruzen and Partners and Oppenheimer, Brady were coordinating architects for the whole renewal area.

The complex is meant to terminate in a still-undisigned waterfront plaza at Chambers Street just above the World Trade Center, based on the city's Lower Manhattan Plan. Integral to the new scheme was the preservation and incorporation of the landmark buildings, which are on the housing site.

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In 1969, a curious and almost unprecedented dialogue took place between HDA and the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which had to approve the amended urban renewal plan. HUD, in an unusual expression of esthetic conviction, thought the housing towers and small buildings incompatible. HDA replied that the Federal houses would be next to modern buildings of similar scale and character, with open space designed to be sympathetic to the remains of the 19th-century streetscape. The amended plan was then accepted by HUD and approved by the Board of Estimate.

With the union's sanction, Oppenheimer, Brady has taken the old houses under its architectural wing. What followed has been well beyond the call of duty, both at HDA and in the architects' office. Working together, estimates were sought for mov-

ing and rehabilitation. Diligence and patience were rewarded with a \$1,050,000 grant when it was found that HUD funds were available for restoration, moving, construction and architectural and engineering costs for landmark preservation of buildings in public ownership.

So far, it has been an extraordinary act of faith, with hands joined across the bureaucracy and the private sector. It will take more than faith, however, to secure the old houses against weather damage and vandalism this winter. It must be done now. And even faith has failed to get action on the Bogardus building, which HDA wants to dismantle in order to save its early prefabricated cast-iron front. Two years ago the Buildings Department declared it in danger of imminent collapse. Two years later it is still standing and there is no contract for disassembly.

It will take more than faith to repeat the Washington Market story. A first step would be for the city to have one full-time person on the job of searching out those underutilized HUD preservation grants. There is a handsome landmark armory wall on a new school site on upper Madison Avenue languishing now for want of funds. The Federal Government might be a little poorer, but New York would be a lot richer.