

more example of the redundant commercial banality of which Washington is already suffering a sterile surfeit.

But there is also a White Knight in the story. Washington's feisty preservation group called Don't Tear It Down has brought suit to stop demolition, and as a result the District of Columbia has agreed to withhold the demolition permit until Jan. 6. After that, there will be more legal maneuvers.

At the heart of the maneuvering, however, is a far larger issue: the public value of the quality of the environment in terms of the quality of its buildings. That quality can be irrevocably diminished by a private act of sabotage. Surely there is enough public spirit and private ingenuity in Washington to convert a landmark building without destroying it—or is there?

Washington's Willard

When the law aids and abets the destroyers of cities, something is wrong with the law. Or with the courts that interpret it. Either way, corrective measures are required when court decisions are as effective as the wrecker's ball in demolishing the environment.

A Washington court has decreed that the owners of the Willard Hotel, a registered national landmark, are free to gut and deface it. Their intent is to strip the building down to its structural frame for a new facade and interiors. In a Red Queen decision that Lewis Carroll would have envied, the remodeling was called demolition, which was permitted under the law.

The proposed new facade, according to the owners, would transform the rich Beaux Arts design by Henry Hardenbergh into a "nice, normal, modern office building." Translated freely, this means that elegant stonework and lost style and skills will be replaced by one