

ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE NEEDLESS SACRIFICE OF THE VILLARD HOUSES

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The Needless Sacrifice of The Villard Houses

If present plans go ahead, New York will lose one of its finest landmark buildings not through demolition, but disfigurement. McKim, Mead and White's handsome Villard Houses of 1882-86, on Madison Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets, are about to be amputated at the rear, sacrificing part of a period interior unequalled in the city for the splendor of its space and the quality of its decorative arts.

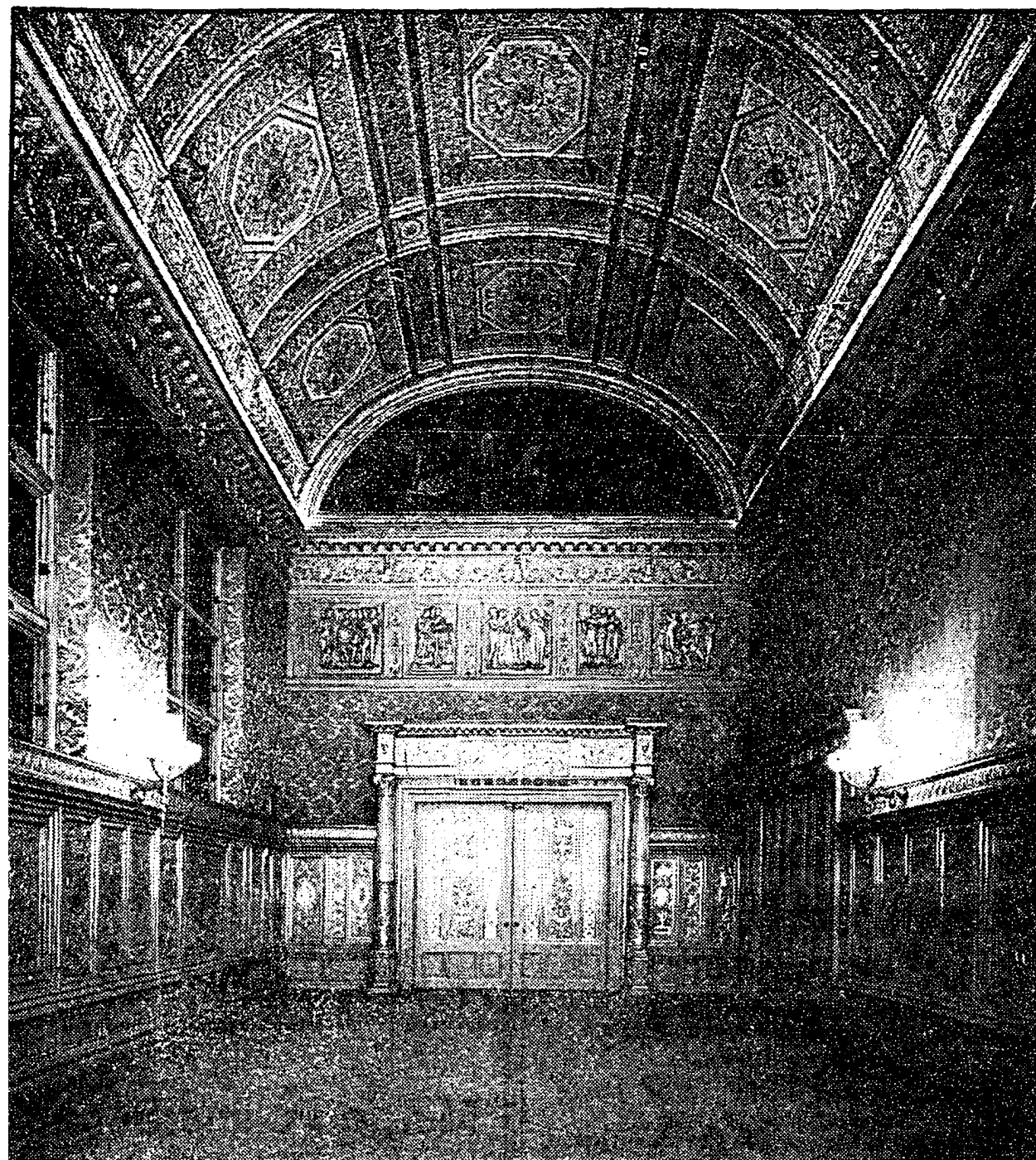
The rest of the historic structure will be connected to a new hotel-office tower. The Madison Avenue front of the Villard Houses will become a blind entrance facade, or non-building. The north and south wings will not be integrated into the new project in any way. They have a less-than-firm commitment and an uncertain future of "appropriate" rentals. All this, including the demolition of the spectacular Gold Room of the south wing, is to be done in the name of the economic efficiency of a hotel plan that offers no indication of anything better than the standardized, overreaching mediocrity that goes under today's "luxury" label.

This dubious scheme, which is currently seeking Landmarks Preservation Commission and Community Planning Board approvals and a Board of Standards and Appeals variance, is the work of developer Harry Helmsley and architect Richard Roth Jr. of Emery Roth and Sons. When the first version appeared last January, the Landmarks Commission sent it back to the developer for revisions. Although the interiors had never been designated, the Commission also made the suggestion that a way be found to save the Gold Room. The restudied design was submitted to the Commission again last week; it has been returned once more for modifications.

The threatened Gold Room is part of the south wing, which was remodeled by McKim, Mead and White for Whitelaw Reid in the 1890's. Brendan Gill, who is engaged in a study of Stanford White, calls this "the richest and handsomest set of rooms then in existence in New York and perhaps in the entire country."

Nobody except Mr. Helmsley and Mr. Roth seems to feel that the Gold Room is expendable. The double-height, barrel-vaulted, balconied room with its La Farge murals, sculptured wall detail and generous gold leaf is unequivocally magnificent; it is also the last of its kind in New York. It is easy to visualize the kind of impoverished design that will replace it. The decorating clichés of the modern American hotel are vacuous, pretentious and immutable.

In fact, it is hard to figure out what anyone has been



Nathaniel Lieberman

The Gold Room—"the last of its kind in New York"

doing in the four months between the first and second versions submitted to the Landmarks Commission. The current proposal has a new and less offensive tower, but it is far worse along the side streets, with corny, overscaled arches in fake brownstone to "match" the Renaissance Villard facades, and the Gold Room is still scheduled for demolition. By any measure except computerized investment design, the results are a wretched failure.

The New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, after a visit to the Roth office for a full

presentation, wrote a letter of protest to the Landmarks Commission. The chapter's representatives were struck by the lack of evidence that the problem of the Gold Room had been studied with anything approaching interest or adequacy. Repeated inquiries to both the architect and the developer's representative brought the curious response that, because the Villard Houses and the hotel plan have different floor levels, there is no way to incorporate any of the historic interiors.

Any architect worth his salt knows that this is not

an insoluble problem unless someone wants it to be insoluble. Nor does the matter of protecting the old while building the new provide insurmountable costs or engineering considerations. After examining plans and elevations, the AIA suggested solutions. "How often," the architects asked, "can a new structure so easily annex so distinguished a space?"

The impression that remains is that the hotel "experts" find it easier to stick relentlessly with stock solutions than to make the different levels work within their economic game plan. There is a brand of hotel gnomes, turned out by hotel schools, supplied with a stock of formulas that is currently defacing the country, and the world. The fact that the hotel might gain immeasurably in beauty, quality and individuality, and that this could ultimately be an economic asset, is apparently beyond the comprehension or concern of anyone involved.

It might be noted in passing that the Plaza found weddings so lucrative it hired a specialist to promote them, and the Gold Room and south wing could make a superb wedding suite. As for business and style, when the Plaza returned its conventionally schlocky Green Tulip restaurant to something resembling its original Edwardian Room authenticity, business shot up.

A proposal worked out by the New York Landmarks Conservancy with the architect to make the Gold Room a bar was disapproved by Mr. Helmsley. The objection quoted was that you can walk down into a bar, but not up going out of it. No one has succeeded in eliciting a better answer. At least one observer of this exercise in Marx Brothers logic has offered an escalator.

In sum, what is being given to New York in return for a hugely profitable investment package is a particularly slick bit of real estate sleight-of-hand. It is fool-the-eye preservation. The owner of the Villard Houses, the Archbishopric of New York, and the developer could, of course, simply tear the buildings down, due to deficiencies in the landmarks law, and that is their not-so-concealed trump card. But they know that this would be an extremely unpopular act that would make public villains of them both. Nor does the church deserve this, after years of conscientious, costly care of a landmark that has become a financial burden.

But this way of "keeping" the landmark, which involves some physical destruction as well as the destruction of its integrity, and no real investment in its continued life, is a spurious tradeoff. The city is being conned. For the Villard Houses are more than immensely superior architecture. Located in the city's functional and fashionable heart, they are pivotal to New York's quality and style.

One comes reluctantly to some inevitable conclusions. The architect, whatever his restrictions, has done an appallingly bad job. The developer, whatever his intentions, is inflexibly wedded to formulas that he evidently will not relinquish or modify for values that he fails to perceive. He will not, in short, invest money or creativity in a superior solution. No calculations are being made in terms of image, quality and civic pride—which can also be a profitable formula. It is, alas, a state of mind. And it determines the state of the city, as well.