

How to Impoverish a City at \$400 a Square Foot: How to Impoverish a City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 29, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D31

Architecture

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THEY are worrying out in Kansas City whether Mammon will claim the Villard houses, but they're not worrying very much in New York. Mammon is accepted, with air pollution and traffic jams, as the shaper of the environment here, and when one of the city's finest buildings stands on land currently reputed to be worth \$400 a square foot, a sad shrug of the shoulders greets the news that the Villard block is up for grabs. No savvy New Yorker would give any odds on the demoli-

tion of this landmark for another Madison Avenue office building.

According to Donald L. Hoffmann, worrying in the Kansas City Star, New York's Villard house group — six brownstone mansions of the 1880's in the form of a single Italian Renaissance palace opposite St. Patrick's Cathedral — is one of the few places in the city that makes sense, visually, architecturally and historically.

Mr. Hoffmann points out that this solidly and beauti-

fully built edifice, once occupied by Mr. Henry Villard and his friends and in recent years the home of the Archdiocese of New York, Random House and the Capital Cities Broadcasting Corporation, ushered in New York's Golden Age. "Precious little of architectural New York can claim that much." It is a qualitative highpoint of the brief and glamorous period from the 1880's through the turn of the century, when America's most notorious overachievers lived grandly (or bankruptly, in Mr. Vil-

lard's case) in Franco-Italianate chateaux of flamboyant magnificence, superb materials, extravagant detail and sumptuous elegance.

The cut rate building had not yet been invented. It would not have been tolerated. The architects who built for the barons of steel and rails were men with names like Stanford White and Richard Morris Hunt who had never heard of plastic. It has taken modern corporate taste to produce the cheap monument.

The Villard house block,

modeled after the Cancelleria in Rome, is one of the best things the celebrated firm of McKim, Mead and White — purveyors of palaces to 19th-century merchant princes—ever did anywhere, and one of the best buildings New York could and can claim, then or now.

No one denies that the quality of the city is eroded and ultimately lost by the destruction of such buildings, of which there are so very few to leaven the ordinary commercial Manhattan mix. Not even Mammon denies it. The bankers and real estate men who have conventionally written off any construction mark as outmoded and uneconomic have learned to say "Too bad." That somehow makes it worse. To destroy out of ignorance is one thing; to destroy with understanding of the meaning and consequences of the act is a sordid commentary on the values and morality of men.

All that is different or unusual about the Villard house story are the expressions of polite regret accompanying the routinely ruthless real estate process. Now Mammon ostensibly has a heart. A few tears are shed. Some poignant comments are made about the past. Then the deal is closed and the wreckers move in.

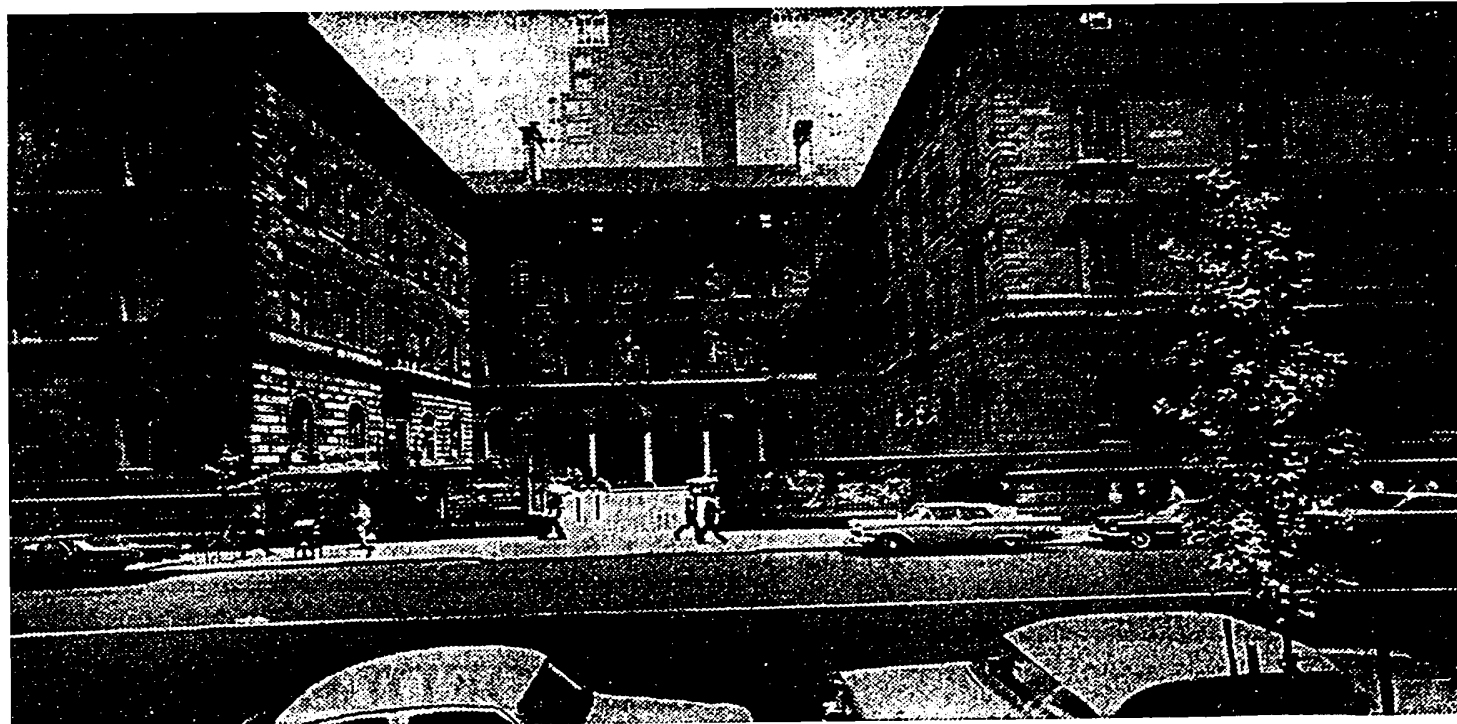
The Villard houses offer a case history of this more sophisticated method of destruction. First, no one comes right out and says that a landmark is for sale to the highest bidder; the Villard houses are on the market by innuendo. But all the signs

of the process from abandonment to sale to demolition are clearly indicated; the movements are as prescribed as a Kabuki dance.

The Archdiocese of New York owns all of the Villard block except the north frontage on Madison Avenue that belongs to Random House. The church rents the 51st Street side to the Capital Cities Broadcasting Corporation.

A year ago, when Bennett Cerf announced that Random House would move its still growing and scattered operations to a new skyscraper on Third Avenue, he made the appropriate remarks of ritual regret. He noted that he and Cardinal Spellman, as co-owners, had preserved the mansions and did not want to see them go. Then he opened the door just a little crack to the cold wind of inevitability — the whole process of destruction depends on the doctrine of inevitability — by saying that the buildings would probably be razed when he and the Cardinal were dead.

At about that time, when, overtly, no one was selling at all but Random House had clearly cast the die, one of the city's better known real estate men approached an equally well-known architect to work on commercial development of the block. Real estate men are not given to throwing their money away. He obviously considered it a realistic investment. The architect, who has built many of the city's blockbusters, but who has a strong professional admiration for



The Villard houses, a New York landmark by McKim, Mead and White, facing sale and demolition. A few tears are shed. Some poignant comments are made about the past. Then the wreckers move in.

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the Villard houses, refused the job.

Now, a year later, Cardinal Spellman is dead and Random House, on its way to conglomerate status after purchase by RCA, is in the process of moving out. In the accepted pattern of "inevitability," Mr. Cerf's protestations have shifted slightly. They take the form of a reluctant admission. "We will probably sell," he says. "It's too valuable to keep." No sane conglomerate is going to maintain a landmark. These poor little companies with their backs against the wall know where to find the butter for their bread.

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The new Archbishop, Terence J. Cooke, has made no direct statement of intent. His secretary, Monsignor James Rigney, has indicated a shift of an equal number of degrees in the way the wind is blowing. He says that it would be a shame to sell, "but with all our schools and responsibilities, at some point we would have to wonder whether we are justified in keeping property as valuable as this." He has opened the door a bit farther; yes, the church might sell if the price is right.

The price is obviously going to be right. There is no more prime piece of property in New York. The ritual of "inevitability" goes on as the land value goes up. Capital Cities, which has an eight-year lease, has been receiving steady calls from real estate brokers offering to buy the lease for substantial sums. "We do not want to move," a Capital spokesman says. "We'll do anything we can to preserve the building."

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But the process continues inexorably. The feelers are out, the offers are being made, the principals are expressing regretful reluctance, and at some point the purchase will be consummated and the announcement made. Things will not be slowed down by the fact that although hearings have been held on official landmark designation for the block, that designation is still pending by the Landmarks Commission.

There are several questions to be raised now before the sellers weep all the way to the bank. They concern

the church position as leader, upholder and protector of community standards and of those values that have traditionally been called spiritual, beyond Mammon. In New York, the temptations of the flesh have long been supplanted by the temptations of money. With its tax exempt status it can even be argued that the church has an obligation to resist Mammon in the interest of the city's irreplaceable public heritage, or public good. Its human commitments are incontrovertible. But that is not

the only kind of community responsibility a religious institution carries.

Still, its real estate people tend to think and operate like real estate people anywhere. The merchants of cities form a watertight society. If land values ever got too high to keep the Sistine Chapel they would, of course, remove the frescoes first.

The sale of the Villard houses is not the inevitability that the real estate fraternity makes it out to be. The church can keep and use them, as it has in the past. A

prestige tenant can be found for the Random House quarters — certainly not impossible for that prime office site — with the help of the parent corporation, the church, the city and its Landmarks Commission and the business community.

It is easier and more profitable, of course, to sell. But it is a serious step to convert the dignity and beauty of the city and its dwindling heritage into cash, even for philanthropic purposes. All New York will be poorer on the profits made.