

Villard Proposal Criticized

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By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Plans to preserve the landmark Villard Houses by building a 52-story commercial structure behind them have come under sharp criticism.

Landmarks Preservation Commission members and witnesses yesterday questioned the appropriateness of the design by Emory Roth & Sons for a combined office and hotel to be developed by realtor Harry B. Helmsley. At the public hearing, they did applaud the concept of preserving the 1880s Italian Renaissance landmark.

"It's more like the creation of a graphic logo for the developer than a design," commented architect Timothy Prentice, president of the Municipal Arts Society. The proposed tower has the same columned expression with arches at the top and bronze tinted glass as is seen in the Park Lane Hotel on Central Park South, an earlier Roth-Helmsley collaboration.

A Neutral Facade

"The new building should have a neutral facade and not compete with the landmark," Prentice added.

Giorgio Cavaleri, one of the country's best known preservation architects who designed the conversion of the Jefferson Market Library, criticized the proposal for not incorporating the south and north wings of the mansion into the hotel. They are to be separately rented as office space although there is no tenant as of now for them.

"The most important goal of this project," Cavaleri said, "is to guarantee the permanence of the landmark. Without doing that, the project won't succeed and the best way to save it is to use it."

"If you isolate those two wings, you'll never rent them," added architect Dennis Kuhn, chairman of the Historic Buildings Committee of the American Institute of Architects-New York Chapter.

The McKim, Mead & White landmark is on Madison Avenue behind St. Patrick's Cathedral and was designated a city landmark in 1968. It has been vacant for some two years. The Archdiocese has resisted selling the property, determined to find a developer who would preserve the landmark.

There was no indication at the hearing when the Landmarks Commission would make a decision on the proposal.