

A Landmark Idea On Preservation

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

The Archdiocese of New York has hired a well-known preservation architect for advice on how best to preserve the landmark Villard Houses.

The move is regarded as a major concession to a wide variety of public pressures that have developed since plans were unveiled by the church and developer Harry E. Helmsley to build a 57-story hotel-office-apartment tower on the Villard site, incorporating the 1880s landmark in its base.

William C. Shopsin, a New York-based architect who has done considerable work in adapting old structures for modern use and lectured on the city's architectural history, will work for the Archdiocese for two years "as its landmarks consultant," according to a church press release.

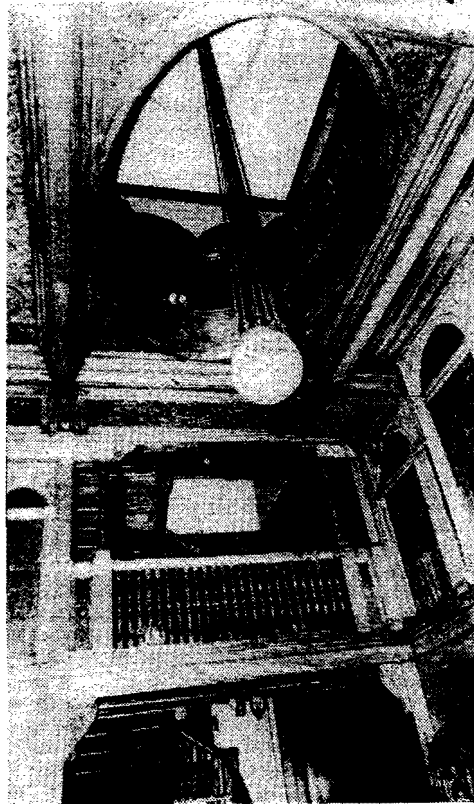
Shopsin's assignment is to research and document the history of the McKim, Mead & White masterpiece, a U-shaped Italian Renaissance palazzo that faces the back of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Madison Av. at 51st St.

He is also assigned to evaluate the significant architectural features of the six separate houses that are joined by a common brownstone facade.

A considerable portion of the landmark is scheduled for demolition to make way for the new skyscraper, and Shopsin has been asked to recommend how notable features can either be preserved in place, reused in the new building or removed and given to appropriate museums.

"This is an unusual side for me to be on," says Shopsin, who has often spoken out strongly against destruction of landmarks and months ago wrote a letter protesting the initial Helmsley proposal that

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Multi-storied hall with oval balcony and elaborately carved woodwork is part of the landmark Villard Houses built in the 1880s. Post Photo by Richard Gummer

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would have sacrificed more of the landmark than is now planned.

"There was resistance by others in my profession to take this job but someone has to get in there and do what we've been demanding all along," he says.

"The fact is," Shopsin adds, "no one around town has come up with a solution for saving landmarks on very valuable land in a way that is economically possible. It's about time that we work with the private sector to achieve that purpose."

The end result of Shopsin's work remains an open question, because there has been no indication that Helmsley will follow recommendations from the Archdiocese and Shopsin.

Helmsley refused comment on Shopsin's appointment. According to a spokesman, "Helmsley wants to see what Shopsin comes up with but it must be understood that this arrangement is strictly between the church and

Shopsin."

Shopsin says, however, that "I would not subject myself to the criticism of fellow professionals if I didn't have assurances from Helmsley that a sincere effort will be made to save as much as possible."

When the proposed marriage of landmark and skyscraper—designed by Emery Roth & Sons—was announced a year ago, it was immediately hailed as one of the most promising solutions in recent years for reuse of an endangered landmark.

Since that time, the Archdiocese—owner of the property and former tenant along with Random House, the publishing firm—and Helmsley have been under considerable public pressure to preserve more of the historic structure than originally intended.

As a result, the skyscraper design has been completely revised, two of the most notable interior spaces will be preserved rather than demolished, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has given its conditional approval and

the Planning Commission is now conducting its own approval process.

Because of the unique nature of this project, a special zoning permit is required and the Planning Commission is expected to hold hearings on the matter sometime next month.

"We salute the church for taking this step," says Brendan Gill, chairman of the Landmarks Conservancy, a non-profit preservation organization that has led the fight to save as much of the Villard Houses as possible.

"This move," Gill added, "is in line with the wonderful condition the Villard Houses have been kept in by the church" and now by "seeking professional assistance, it is pioneering in showing a sensitive awareness of its responsibility to the community."

"Prior to this," says Kevin B. McGrath of Shea, Gould, Climenko and Kramer, lawyers for the Archdiocese, "groups have been arguing for the preservation of the

building as if it were still in its original state.

"Our expert will now tell us what is original and what is valuable, so we can intelligently argue about what should be saved."

"There is a misimpression that the Villard Houses are completely the work of McKim, Mead & White," Shopsin says, "and that its elaborate ornamentation is of equal grandeur."

The famous architectural firm was commissioned, Shopsin points out, to design the 6-house complex by railroad magnate Henry Villard, who occupied the south wing and sold the adjacent houses to friends. The interiors were then left to each occupant to do what they wanted and "reflect their individual tastes and pocketbooks."

"Successive owners made their own modifications," Shopsin adds, "so the houses today represent the full gamut of interior decor from the most ordinary plywood paneled rooms to some of the most extraordinary Edwardian interiors still in existence."