

UPPER WEST SIDE



One More Rescue Attempt For a Battered Landmark

Like a patient on life-support, the old Towers Nursing Home, a chateau-style landmark at 106th Street and Central Park West, has long teetered on the brink. But this time, some preservationists were afraid that death was near.

Built in 1884 as the nation's first cancer hospital, the building had sat dormant for 27 years, despite a parade of developers who took turns trying to resuscitate the ailing landmark. They included Ian Schrager, of Studio 54 fame, who tried but failed to renovate it into apartments.

In early 2001, a Chicago developer actually broke ground on a \$200 million project to transform the hospital into a regal foothold for a 26-story residential tower.

Work proceeded steadily. The interiors were gutted, delicately, so as not to weaken the red-brick and sandstone-trim shell. Ailanthus trees, otherwise known as "tenement palms," that had sprouted from the turrets were surgically removed. Slabs from the roof were peeled off, bringing sunlight where pigeons and crack users once nested.

Then last November, without any word to neighbors, construction stopped.

"The building has been opened to the elements," said Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, an advocacy group. Instead of stabilizing and preserving the building, Ms. Wood said, the devel-

oper was accelerating its deterioration. "It's demolition by neglect," she added.

According to the developer, Daniel E. McLean, the president of MCL Companies in Chicago, the problem was money.

"The financing we had was stopped," he said. "After Sept. 11, there were a lot of people who lost confidence."

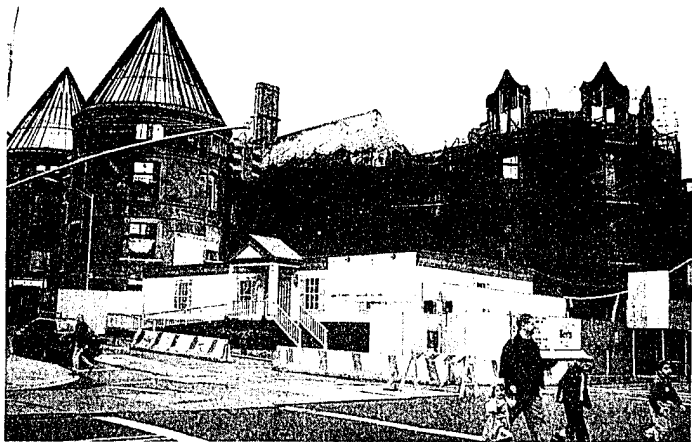
Last month, local preservationists pleaded with the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to intervene before it was too late. The building had been granted landmark status in 1976 as "one of the most distinguished buildings facing Central Park."

Unknown to the letter writers, Columbia University had stepped in a month earlier and bought 50 of the 99 units for its faculty. The condominiums, which were being marketed for \$1.3 million to \$7.2 million, will offer valet parking, a health spa and views of Central Park. Few units had been sold previously, in part because of the neighborhood's untested market for multi-million-dollar apartments.

With half the units now sold, Mr. McLean secured a \$130 million construction loan three weeks ago, and work crews returned to the site almost immediately.

"There's been a lot of rumors floating around," Mr. McLean said. "The building should be complete in 18 months."

DENNY LEE



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

The old Towers Nursing Home has been in ill health itself for some time.