

The Conversion of 'an Incredible Chamber of Horrors'

By ALAN S. OSER

The former West Side Towers, a single-room-occupancy hotel, once described by Attorney General Louis J. Lefkowitz as "an incredible chamber of horrors," is undergoing a conversion to apartments.

In its forthcoming incarnation the property will be known as the Astor apartments, 220 mostly studio and one-bedroom units in three linked structures that occupy the entire west block-front of Broadway from 75th Street to 76th Street.

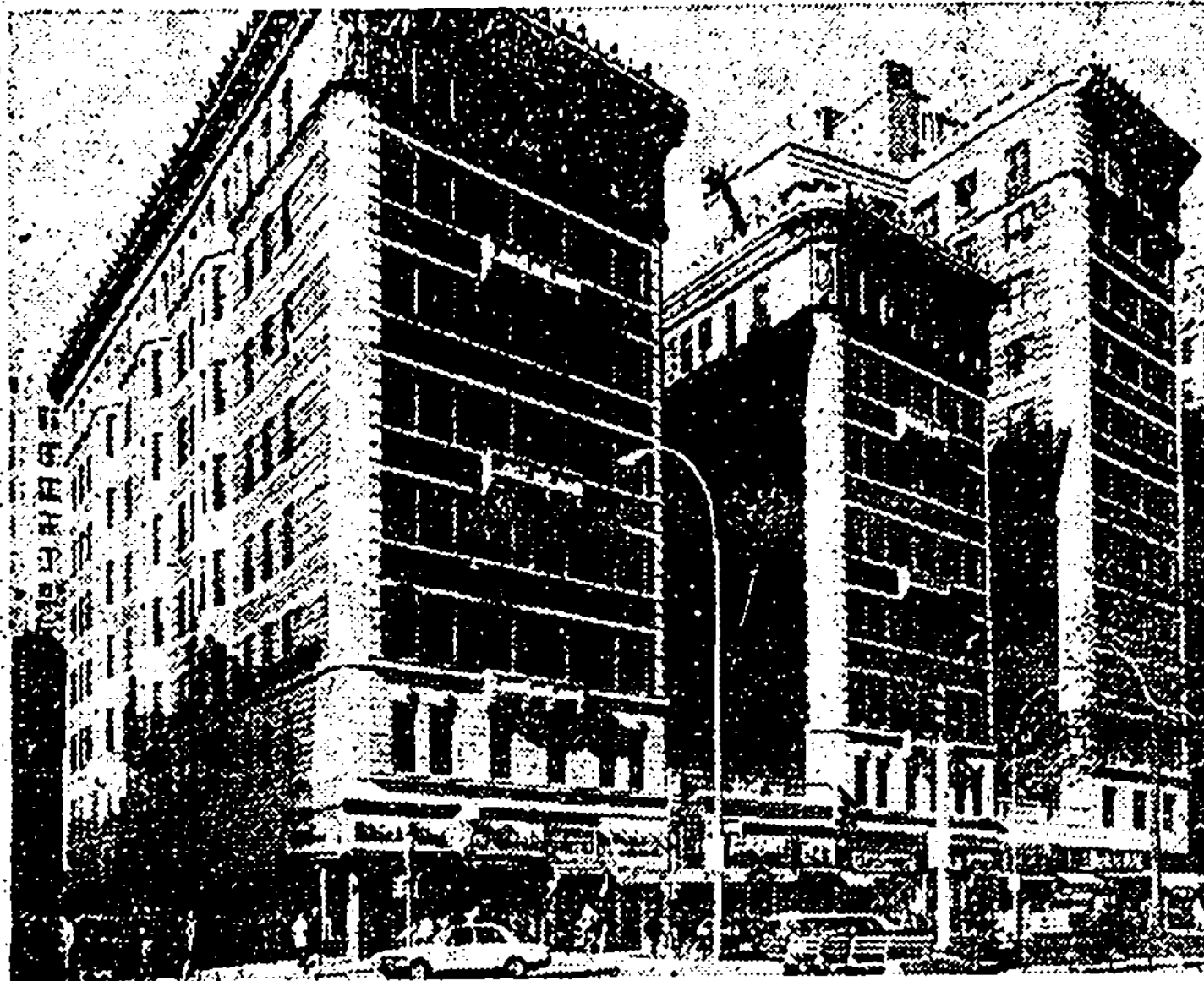
The owner-builder is Herbert Mandel, an active rehabilitator of Manhattan properties since 1964. He has also purchased the 22-story Paris Hotel on the southeast corner of West End Avenue at 97th Street and has begun a conversion into 180 apartments there.

The conversions make use of the city's tax abatement mechanism for housing improvement known as J-51. Two years ago the J-51 program was revised and extended to include large buildings and conversions of old hotels, lofts and commercial buildings to residential use. At present a proposed six-year extension of the law is before the City Council.

In the downtown area, critics of the law are contending that it is creating a hardship for small manufacturing businesses, often the occupants of underutilized or uneconomic manufacturing buildings. One proposal is to make the J-51 benefits discretionary rather than "as of right," which probably would curtail the use of the program sharply.

Under Section J-51 of the Administrative Code, there is a tax exemption for 12 years on the increase in assessed valuation resulting from improvements and alterations, plus an abatement for 9 to 20 years of the taxes that would be due after deduction of the exemption. The Department of Housing Preservation and Development administers the program.

On the West Side it has deteriorated old hotels rather than manufacturing properties that primarily benefited from the J-51 mechanism, which has generated developer interest in purchase and rehabilitation. At the 584-room West Side Towers, the owners put the property up for sale after the hotel management's lease expired. In 1974 the lessee of the hotel said he



The former West Side Towers on the Broadway block between 75th and 76th Streets will be converted to apartments.

would undertake a renovation, but he apparently never came to terms with the ownership group.

Mr. Mandel and two partners bought the property in July for \$2 million. Their plan is to convert it to 220 apartments with 322 rooms. A permanent mortgage commitment has been received from the Prudential Life Insurance Company and the Lincoln Savings Banks. The builders have a \$4.6 million construction loan.

The property that evolved into the 584-room West Side Towers was built as an elegant apartment house in 1901 by William Waldorf Astor, son of John Jacob Astor 2d and the builder of the Waldorf portion of the old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel that long ago stood on the site of the Empire State Building. Actually, Astor built only the two eight-

story towers that year, with the firm of Clinton & Russell as architects.

The 12-story tower, on the 76th Street side, was added in 1913, with Peabody, Wilson & Brown as the architects. A long lobby behind the ground-floor stores that line the avenue links the three buildings, with entrances at 230 West 76th Street and 235 West 75th Street. Marble moldings in the lobby, a curved stairway and other features of turn-of-the-century elegance will be retained and enhanced in the conversion.

It will be a "100 percent gut renovation," said Henry Mandel, the son of the new owner, who will act as rental and managing agent. The work includes a new roof, new boiler, new kitchens and baths, new electrical risers and more. Projected monthly

rents run average about \$130 a room, with rents starting at \$259 a month for studios, \$399 for one-bedrooms and \$539 for two-bedroom apartments.

The floor area of apartments, which Mr. Mandel termed large for renovated buildings, run from 500 to 550 square feet for studios, about 700 square feet for one-bedrooms and 850 square feet for two-bedrooms. More than half the apartments will have fireplaces. Many have bay windows. The work is to be completed in March.

As for the Paris Hotel, Mandel interests acquired it for \$1.5 million from a real-estate entity of the Washington Federal Savings and Loan Association, which had taken it back in a foreclosure action. The conversion plan calls for a 15,000-square-foot health club, which will have the use of the building's 20-foot-by-50-foot pool.

The architect in the conversions is the Architects Design Group, a partnership of Seymour Churgin, Joseph Lestingi and John Klausz.