

Preserving a taste of the past

Push to get automat landmarked

By Sara Stefanini
Special to amNew York

Some of Susan Dessel's favorite childhood memories are of day trips into New York, when, between museum visits, she would hunch with her parents at a Horn & Hardart Automat.

"It was so exciting to put a coin in the slot and get food. It was so different from anything else," said Dessel, an artist who was about 7 years old at the time. "They were absolutely wonderful in every way."

Dessel, 60, was among a procession of people who lined up last week to urge the city Landmarks Preservation Commission to landmark one of New York's last Horn & Hardart buildings on Broadway and 104th Street, two blocks from where Dessel has lived for 30 years. The building's Art Deco design, still undamaged under the Rite Aid Pharmacy sign that now covers it, is a remnant of New York culture in the 1920s and 1930s, advocates said.

"I think it is important to look at this building as a major example of the vernacular popular architecture of this time," said Andrew Dolkart, a Columbia University professor of his-



Preservationists want the Horn & Hardart building on the Upper West Side landmarked. (Lara Johnson)



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toric preservation, at the Landmarks Preservation hearing on Dec. 12.

The automat at 104th Street was built in 1930, at the peak of Horn & Hardart's popularity. Automats were the city's first fast food joints, where customers slipped change into slots to get their meals. Their numbers reached into the 50s in the 1930s and 1940s, and the last one closed in 1991, said Marianno Hardart, co-author of "The Automat" and great-granddaughter of Horn & Hardart co-founder Frank Hardart.

Many of the automats have since been built over or altered beyond recognition, said Kate Wood, executive director of

Landmark West!, which advocates preservation on the Upper West Side. The 104th Street automat's multicolor terracotta decorations and large front windows remain intact, she said. Landmark West! added the structure to its designation wish list in 1985.

Rite Aid now occupies the building's ground level and two nonprofits rent the upstairs floors.

But not everyone who spoke at the hearing did so in favor of landmark status. Norma Teitler, 83, bought the building with her husband about 50

years ago, after the automat had closed and the Teitlers had opened a Foodarama supermarket in it.

"Making it a landmark, it will devalue it, and I don't think it's fair," said Teitler, who worries about bearing the cost of maintaining a historic site. "If you look at that building, you will see it is no longer an automat, nor do you see a supermarket."

Owners of landmark sites must get the commission's approval on any work they plan and are required to keep the structure in good condition.

The commission has not yet voted on whether to make the automat a landmark. With the current development of the Upper West Side and new condominium buildings going up, many at the meeting hope the building is protected.

web talk back

We received a strong response to our story yesterday on Endangered NYC. Many of you expressed concern about St. Saviour's Church in Maspeth, so much so that amNY will profile it soon. Here's what you said:

"This is a very important service you have opened with the Endangered NYC... in SoHo, where I live, we lose convenience stores and other businesses regularly. Losing these things is losing the glue of the community."
— Daniel Cooke

"The Ward Bakery and Long Island Railroad Stables buildings in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. Both historically noteworthy buildings are under imminent threat from developer Bruce Ratner's neighborhood-gobbling Atlantic Yards project."
— Erik M.

"St. Saviour's Church on Maspeth Hill, a wonderful place with a history going back to a time when Maspeth was woodland and DeWitt Clinton had a country house across the street. It could be destroyed very soon."
— Christel Gough

St. Saviour's Church. Mayor