



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Landmarks Preservation Commission Public Hearing
On Proposed Designation of
Former Horn and Hardart Automat
2710-14 Broadway (at West 104th Street)
June 27, 2006**

The Horn and Hardart Automat at 2710 Broadway on the Upper West Side is a remaining vestige of a bygone era of New York, and we speak on behalf of designating this 1930 Art Deco treasure an individual landmark.

The H&H Automat chain became synonymous with the New York experience during the several decades that spanned the Automat's golden age. Both tourists and residents flocked to these modern and convenient eateries, which featured chrome-plated mechanical marvels that took nickels in exchange for slices of pie, plates of roast beef and cups of coffee.

Automats were democratic venues where patrons of assorted backgrounds all converged: dancers, actors, the unemployed, schoolchildren, businessmen and tourists all shared tables. Horn and Hardart Automats provided the growing forces of city workers with an inexpensive and clean lunchtime alternative to the ale houses and oyster parlors. As Pete Hamill stated in his 2002 elegy to the Automat, nickel throwers "who raised cashing to the level of performance art" were an unforgettable fixture at Horn and Hardarts, along with the walls of automatic windows and the wide variety of food items for sale.

Automats have also been immortalized in countless movies and song lyrics, which attest to the eateries' importance in popular culture. In "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," Julie Styne observed, "A kiss may be grand but it won't pay the rental, on your humble flat, or help you at the automat." These temples of eating and modern culture were commemorated by former H&H employees, historians, celebrities and everyday New Yorkers in "The Automat: The History, Recipe and Allure of Horn & Hardart's Masterpiece" by Lorraine B. Diehl and Marianne Hardart, a book which accompanied an exhibition held at the Museum of the City of New York in Spring 2003.

With its elevated status in American pop culture and in the collective memories of New Yorkers and tourists alike, how distressing it is that so few Automat buildings remain in New York. After a more than twenty year advocacy campaign, many were crushed at the recent mutilation and planned demolition of the grand, beloved West 57th Street Automat building.

Saving of an Automat

We are fortunate that the 104th Street Automat--an intact surviving example of Automat architecture at its best--remains. The building's ornate façade was significantly threatened in 1996 when the current first floor tenant, Rite Aid, planned to destroy the Art Deco details in order to meet corporate standards for its storefront. After much convincing, West 104th Street resident, landscape architect and preservationist Michael Gotkin persuaded the project architect to carefully wrap the historic elements,

which include solid bronze columns and ornamental granite and limestone trim, before encasing them inside the storefront, where they await a more sympathetic user.

Still visible is the second floor's remarkably intact polychrome terra cotta Art Deco ornament. The façade features typically Art Deco floral patterns and stylized versions of ancient Mayan motifs in green, blue and tan glazed terra cotta. It is one of only three remaining buildings in New York with details highlighted in gold lustered glaze.

As with many other Automats, its iconic façade centers around a monumental, glass portal that was designed to expose the shiny, mechanized interiors—a classic example of architecture as advertisement. The façade's original solid bronze columns, ornamental granite and limestone trim, and window framing are all remarkably intact and protected behind the existing storefront. Automats were once a ubiquitous feature of New York City neighborhoods, but the 104th Street Automat is one of a small handful in Manhattan that survive. The characteristic streamlined facades of Automats offer variety to the streetscape as well as tell an important part of our city's history, but their low-scale threatens their survival and makes them vulnerable to redevelopment.

Two of New York's remaining Automat buildings are on the Upper West Side. Through our 72nd Street Retail Assistance Program, LANDMARK WEST! worked with Citibank, the tenant of the 72nd Street Automat, to protect the historic façade and complete renovations that were sensitive to the building's landmark status. Should the 104th Street Automat be designated an individual landmark, Rite Aid, the owner and any future tenants must make the same commitment to respect the façade's historic materials and reveal the now-concealed architectural details.

This is a great opportunity for the Commission to landmark this important Automat before we lose any other Automats, preserve a great example of New York's architectural and cultural heritage, and protect another significant building north of West 96th Street, a neighborhood with a rich diversity of buildings and too few landmarked structures.