

Statement of the Historic Districts Council in support of designation as a New York City Landmark of the former Horn & Hardart or Automat Building at 104th Street and Broadway. Manhattan, June 27, 2006

The Historic Districts Council supports the designation of the Art Deco former Horn and Hardart Building at the southeast corner of Broadway and 104th Street. Now that the threatened demolition of the handsome and largely intact former Streamlined Moderne Automat at 104 West 57th Street is all but complete, this building seems to be almost the last to preserve a significant amount of architecture that can be clearly associated with a distinctive Automat style, although there survive elsewhere other buildings that once held Automats but that show styles less clearly indicative of the use and period.

The building is essentially intact above the ground floor, which has been largely replaced with a heavy infill, unsympathetic in all but the color of the stone. We were glad to hear from Michael Gotkin that the projection of this floor reflects the successful effort he led to induce Rite-Aid to enclose rather than to destroy the ground floor elements. The flat-roofed building is clad in the limestone blocks typical of the period and of Automat buildings of this type. At the top terra-cotta Art Deco panels and piers with stylized forms recalling vegetation are still picked out with green, gold, and other colors. At the center of the Broadway façade a major portion of the distinctive stone and copper ornament that historically framed and crowned the still partially visible central display window can be seen above the ground-floor infill and extends a full floor upwards, forming a feature handsome in itself and one recalling the original organization of this façade. It is regrettable that only the upper floors remain intact and visible, but the building in its general type, scale, and material as well as in the distinctive survivals of the original design will at the least serve as a memorial of what was one of the most extraordinarily symbolic businesses of New York, the Automat.

That the Automat was once one of the most striking and symbolic features of New York for city dwellers and tourists is recorded in a multitude of writings and in cinema and theatre. I can testify to this from my own experience in the Thirties and Forties. I can remember on my first real visit to New York for the Worlds Fair of 1939 I was introduced to the Automat, already familiar to me from my reading, and taught to scan the little windows along the wall and pick out a dish, then to put my nickels in the

slot, and to open the glass door and pull out my selection, all without the visible intrusion of human hands. In fact, however, if like most tourists you moved too slowly, you might be startled by the appearance of a hand, often black, inserting a replacement dish as the little turntable revolved onwards. The Automat had more of the appearance than the reality of automation. Modernity, offered as the next step after the cafeteria, was what it played on.

The Automat was, however, an essential part of a visit to New York, and indeed for many of us who eventually came to stay, a distinctive part of the experience of living in New York. (We could not believe the Automat we knew had been developed in Philadelphia.) It was less work for those of us who were young, struggling, and not cooking, and reminds one of the famous Automat slogan “less work for Mother” invented in the Depression. It was saddening and then devastating to see the Automats dwindle and die as a new world of more genuine automation on one side and more leisurely eating on the other prevailed over the old ways. Its social function, where lingering customers could chat, read, or just stay warm has been partially taken over by the coffee house—now the almost equally ubiquitous Starbucks. Now indeed, this once iconic restaurant type is all but forgotten except in the literature and films of the era.

The last reminders of this aspect of the first part of the Twentieth Century, in this as in so much else a transition to a civilization that would be unrecognizable to those who came before and that will soon be equally incomprehensible to the millennium we are entering, must not be lost. This building is now almost the only distinctive monument of one eccentric but symbolic aspect of this mighty change. It must be preserved.