

For the Flagship Automat, The Future Grows Dark

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Of all New York's Automats, a little tooth-white building at 104 West 57th Street was among the best known. Its wide-mouthed, Art Moderne facade, completed in 1938, mimicked the food slots inside, with their steaming plates of mashed potatoes and creamed spinach. Its interior was typically ornate, with a patterned terrazzo floor, a six-foot-wide clock, and dolphin-shaped coffee spigots.

Because of its location just east of Carnegie Hall, this Automat, flagship of the Horn & Hardart chain, was popular with performers, would-be performers and nostalgic has-beens. "There were all these done-up old ladies who thought they were Veronica Lake," recalled Lorraine Diehl, a co-author of the 2002 book "The Automat," who had a summer job on 57th Street in 1958.

While the Automat's guts have been dispersed since the building's sale, in 1977, its shell survives. But preservationists are worried about the future of the storied building, one of only two Automat structures left in the city. (The other is at Broadway and 104th Street.) The building's owner, a real estate investment firm called the Bromley Companies, has bought back the lease of Shelly's, the steak and seafood restaurant that now occupies the space.

The restaurant will be gone by April, and Shelly Fireman, its owner, said he believed that Bromley plans to develop the building. Calls to the Bromley Companies were not returned.

In 2002, the city Landmarks Preservation Commission rejected the idea of designating the building as a landmark. A widely assumed reason for that decision is that the facade has been heavily altered over the years, acquiring black piping and a penthouse.

Preservationist groups, along with Daniel Garodnick, the City Councilman for the area, have asked the commission to reconsider its decision, a request that an agency spokeswoman said was "under review." Behind that request lies a recognition of the site's market value.

"It's a two-story building on a block of skyscrapers," said John Jurayj, cochairman of the Modern Architecture Working Group, a preservationist group. "If it were my building, I'd want to build a tower there." ALEX MINDLIN