

July 5, 2006

Dear Commissioners:

Two large commercial stables now parking garages on the Upper West Side on Amsterdam Avenue between West 75<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Streets have been a point of discussion for preservation designation for many years. I would like to shed new information on these buildings from the perspective of their current use - parking. Now, the Mason Stable (better known as the Dakota Stable and Dakota Garage) is in danger of being demolished. It is important that this notable structure for its participation in the transportation history of our country, for its development of the urban fabric of the city, and as an active participant in the overall development of New York City be preserved as the important structure that it is.

Some of the first parking garages at the turn of the century were located in existing buildings: stables, coach houses, or carriage houses (which is why parking spaces are often still referred to as "stalls") along with other adaptive reuse of buildings such as cycloramas, skating rinks, and other long span structures. The first commercial parking structure was located in New York City in 1897 for The Electric Cab Company in a converted skating rink at 1684 Broadway and the first public garage in New York City in the St. Nicholas Rink building on 66 St near Broadway opened in 1900. The initial appeal of stables was based simply on their availability, however stables had been linked to illnesses (including smallpox), and were under attack by insurance companies as health hazards, particularly when many horses were gathered in one location. The idea of simply replacing the horses with automobiles was an appealing way to make use of these buildings. However, in New York City with the average of 16 horses per stable this made many existing stables not appropriate for automobile parking needs as well, as they were too small. For example, a 1909 article noted that the Imperial Motor Vehicle Company, in New York City, had purchased a stable on 208-212 West Seventy-sixth street and was making extensive alterations to it (which must have been a major undertaking), as the building had six floors and a basement – this was one of the larger existing stables in the city that could have been appropriate for this reuse. But this approach carried several disadvantages: first, stable owners viewed the automobile as a threat to their established businesses, and were reluctant to convert their buildings to public garages. Second, the unique requirements of the automobile required extensive changes to existing buildings. Third, existing stables were not necessarily in the best locations or had the ability to expand. The fact that these stables are still in existence and were converted to automobile use and are functioning today is a testament to their viability with the city.

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These buildings played a crucial role in the expansion of nineteenth-century New York and functioning well now into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a building type, commercial stables and early parking structures have not been recognized. These buildings are often architecturally significant in their own right adding to the urban fabric in an appropriate way as our personal transportation system the car evolved and help define and shape the American landscape in many ways throughout the country. I would be glad to provide further information on the early typology of the parking garage as it is a fascinating part of American history.

Sincerely,

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