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Preservation Easement Saves New York's Last Remaining Horse Auction Mart Building

FEBRUARY 14, 2008, WASHINGTON, DC -- Another piece of New York City's architectural heritage has been preserved. Its lone remaining horse auction mart building, the former Van Tassell & Kearney building located at 126-128 East 13th Street, is now protected by a preservation easement.

The 1903 building designed by Jardine, Kent & Jardine, which has not been designated a New York City landmark, first drew the attention of community and preservation groups as well as local media in 2006 when its new owner, Ultimate Realty LLC, announced plans to demolish the only remaining horse auction barn in the City and build an apartment house in its place. Several local preservation advocacy groups attempted to halt these plans by asking the Landmarks Preservation Commission to grant landmark status to the Beaux-Arts structure, thereby preventing its demolition. Although hearings were held, no decision on landmark designation was made by the Commission. Instead, the owner and the Commission reached a "standstill agreement," preventing demolition or alteration of the auction mart while designation was considered. Despite the failure to protect the building through the use of New York City's ordinances, the Van Tassell & Kearney building is now guaranteed to be preserved in perpetuity because of the actions of its owners and the Trust for Architectural Easements—holder of the preservation easement.

The distinctive red brick and limestone building, with a symmetrical arched façade, was among the city's most prominent horse auction marts, selling horses and carriages to members of New York City's social elite. In 1916, soon after the "horseless carriage" appeared on the scene, Van Tassell & Kearney began auctioning automobiles at the building. In the second quarter of the 20th century, the open interior was divided into classrooms where men were prepared for civil service exams and women studied machine technology. From 1978 to 2005, preeminent artist Frank Stella used the building as his studio, perhaps drawn by the abundant natural light provided by the skylights that had originally showcased horses.

The building owners, moved by the community and preservation groups' interest in preserving the building, sought out more comprehensive protection for the building on their own. They made the case that the building was historically significant and should be listed on the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places. The Park Service agreed and added the building to the National Register on November 20, 2007, finding it a significant example of a rare late 19th- and early 20th-century building type—the horse and carriage auction mart. This listing on the National Register made the building eligible for the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program.

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This government program uses tax incentives to encourage owners of buildings of historical significance, and those contributing to registered historic districts, to make historic preservation easement donations to qualified organizations such as the Trust for Architectural Easements. Owners who participate in the Program are eligible to receive federal income tax deductions in exchange for the contractual assurance that

they will maintain the building's historical character in perpetuity and not make changes to its exterior without authorization from the easement holder. The donation of a preservation easement on the former Van Tassell & Kearney Horse Auction Mart was completed in December.

“This program is the federal government’s way of providing an extra level of protection to a limited and endangered national treasure—America’s historic architecture. In this case the protection offered by the Program was the only type available to this one-of-a-kind historic building. The City tried, but couldn’t save it. Thanks to the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program and the owner’s efforts, we are able to protect it,” explains Trust for Architectural Easements area representative Dan Reardon.

The Trust for Architectural Easements is the nation’s largest preservation easement-holding not-for-profit organization, protecting more than 800 historic buildings across the United States and approximately 550 historic properties in New York. For more information about the Trust’s local preservation efforts, the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program and the donation process, contact the Trust at 1-888-831-2107 or visit www.architecturaltrust.org.