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# Parking Space Becomes Living Space

Early Indoor Garage in SoHo Is Recast as Pricey Apartment Building; Restoring a 1920s Medallion



Left, the building at 55 Thompson St. under construction on former site of the Tunnel Garage; terra cotta medallion, above; a rental unit, below.



By JOSH BARBANEL

The site of the city's first purpose-built indoor parking garage has been transformed into a loft-like rental building that will open in September with some of the highest asking rents in SoHo: One bed-room apartments will start at \$6,500 a month.

The nine-story building of glass and cast concrete curves around the corner of Thompson and Broome streets, a few blocks from the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. The Tunnel Garage was built on the site in 1922 in anticipation of the flood of cars coming out of the tunnel from New Jersey.

After years of wrangling with local preservationists and the city's Bureau of Standards and Appeals, the developer—Manhattan Skyline, founded by Donald Zucker—won permission to tear down the sprawling two-story garage and to put up an apartment building with 38 units and a large ground-floor retail space.

The apartments, many with terraces or balconies, have 10-

foot ceilings and large, open living rooms. Some units come with curved walls of glass, gas fireplaces, white oak floors and wrap around terraces. Even some bathrooms have windows with views of the Empire State Building.

The apartments are unusually large for a rental building, with one-bedroom units measuring about 1,000 square and two-bedroom apartments about 1,500 square feet. Those dimensions are more common in new luxury condominiums.

Asking rents will start at \$12,000 a month for the 17 two-bedroom apartments, and at \$18,000 for the two three-bedroom units.

Richard Cantor, a principal of Cantor Pecorella, which is marketing the apartments, said the new units will carry above-average rents because the nine-story building is unique and in keeping with "the low-rise European character of SoHo" compared with most new rentals found in large "cookie cutter" rental buildings.

Competition for the new building, he said, would come from individual apartments listed as rentals by unit owners in new condominiums.

Some signs of the parking garage remain. The curved glass facade of 55 Thompson echoes the curved facade of the old Tunnel Garage.

A large terra cotta medallion showing a 1920s car emerging from a tunnel, its headlights blazing, was once perched atop the garage. Now it has been installed on the roof of new apartment building. After a restoration is completed, it will be illuminated at night.

Robert Esnard, a former deputy mayor who is working on the 55 Thompson St. project, said an architect for the developer had once appeared at a public meeting and promised to move the medallion to the lobby of the new building.

But when the medallion was taken down from the garage, it turned out to be 13 feet in diameter—too large to fit in the lobby, he said.

Work on the Holland Tunnel began in 1920, and was completed in 1927. A certificate of occupancy was issued for the Tunnel Garage in July 1923. Until then, most indoor car garages had been converted stables rather than purpose-built garages.

Over the years the terra cotta medallion was covered up with a sign reading "24 hr. Parking". Nevertheless, when the building was threatened with demolition, preservationists sought to give the facade landmark projection. But the developers argued that it was too badly damaged to save.

Because the site was zoned for commercial use, Manhattan Skyline was required to go to the Board of Standards and Appeals to get a variance to build apartments instead.

That set off an intricate negotiation. Although Manhattan Skyline said it had the right to put up a 14-story hotel, it agreed to nine stories instead.

It also made other concessions to meet objections from next-door neighbors and community groups.

As part of the deal, the developer agreed to build a three-story townhouse around the corner at Sullivan and Broome streets. The new townhouse, intended to complement nearby townhouses, will have a rear yard and will be available for rent as well. The asking rate hasn't been set yet.

Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society of Historic Preservation, said that he regretted the demolition but was glad the medallion "has not been sent off to the landfill."

Ramin Taheri for The Wall Street Journal (3)