

June 24, 2008

Honorable Robert Tierney, Chair  
New York Landmarks Preservation Commission  
One Centre Street, 9th floor  
New York, NY 10007

**Testimony for the Landmark Designation hearing on:  
University Village (now Silver Towers and 505 LaGuardia Place)**

DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State is a local chapter of a national and international organization that promotes the study, interpretation and protection of architecture, landscape and urban design of the Modern Movement. Committed to the principle that Modern architecture and design merits the attention and preservation accorded earlier periods, DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State's education and advocacy efforts are focused on identifying and protecting New York's most significant sites of the Modern Movement.

Our testimony is specific to the architecture and urban planning of University Village/Silver Towers, located on the three-block site bordered by Mercer, Bleecker, and W. Houston Streets and LaGuardia Place in Greenwich Village. It is our position that University Village/Silver Towers and its superblock site meet the requirements of architectural and historic significance for the reasons detailed below and that the full site should be designated a New York City landmark. The towers are an extraordinary example of I.M. Pei's structural and sculptural sensibilities meshed; Pei's urban plan is testimony to what could be done well on a superblock.

University Village/Silver Towers was designed by I.M. Pei & Associates (James Freed, A. Preston Moore and Theodore Amberg were associates on the project) and completed in 1966. As part of the Washington Square South Urban Renewal project, the complex was born of Robert Moses's superblock principles of the 1950s. However, from the first design scheme in 1961 to the final built scheme of 1964, Pei's design dramatically improved upon these tenets architecturally and in overall sensibilities as an urban renewal intervention. Pei's superblock connects readily to the surrounding neighborhood by the continuation of Wooster and Greene Streets as pedestrian walkways through the site. The integrated public plaza and mews work together to define a central urban space enlivened by a mix of geometric forms and the strikingly appropriate, perfectly scaled site sculpture "Sylvette," based on a work by Pablo Picasso.

As architectural critics have noted, Pei's façade is "sculpturally vigorous" (Stern et al. *New York 1960*). It succeeds in using a bold structural grid and monumental scale to create high-rise housing that is far more interesting and less oppressive in look and feel than its peers around town. Buff colored concrete, deeply recessed windows, sloping sills and tapered piers soften the grid and generate a constantly changing play of shadows. The gridded window areas juxtaposed with the

smooth shear walls avoid the monotony of planar elevations seen on many housing towers, while the pinwheel arrangement of towers on the site further checks the monotony quotient by helping to obscure the fact that the towers are identical in design. The orientation also provides unobstructed city views from each unit. University Village/Silver Towers is a perfect example of Pei's structural expressionism, as the blank walls are true shear walls, their 22-foot width articulating on the exterior or the depth of the spaces within.

The towers are also technically important as examples of cast-in-place concrete residential construction. While Chatham Green (Gruzen & Partners, 1965) is another fine example of this type of construction, it is quite rare in New York. Starting in 1953 I.M. Pei & Associates became deeply involved in the design of urban housing. This focus drove the firm's explorations in precast and cast-in-place concrete technologies and how they could be maximized for cost efficiency and manipulated for good design. The firm refined its use of concrete on several residential projects leading up to University Village/Silver Towers: Town Center Plaza in Washington, DC (1953–1961); Kips Bay Plaza in New York (1957–1963); and Society Hill in Philadelphia (1957–1964). For University Village/Silver Towers Pei used a system of reusable fiberglass forms to achieve 30 stories with the desired architectural complexity under the very strict budget constraints of the Mitchell-Lama housing program (all three buildings had to meet the city's cost-per-square-foot dicta.)

Pei's concrete grid façade incorporating 8' 4" window spans articulates the module of the interior rooms with single bays for bedrooms and double bays for living rooms. The grid also integrated mechanical systems. Air conditioning units are tucked between the sloping and horizontal spandrel elements and are literally invisible. Operable windows are recessed 21" from the face of the concrete grid providing modulation of direct sunlight and a sense of privacy amidst towers of neighbors.

I.M. Pei was already a nationally acclaimed architect in the 1960s and in the years thereafter built his internationally recognized practice. In 1983 he was awarded the Pritzker Prize for Architecture. "University Plaza" —the firm's name for University Village/Silver Towers—won several awards upon its completion, including an AIA National Honor Award in 1967. Pei himself has said that he considers the project one of the firm's most architecturally distinguished housing projects.

University Village/Silver Towers is an excellent example of good university planning and design from the 1960s as well as one of the best designs in publicly supported housing of the same era in New York City. New York University was an enlightened client both for integrating city sponsored Mitchell-Lama housing within its campus development and for hiring an internationally recognized architect.

The 1960s was the decade of the superblock. We are often quick to condemn these urban renewal experiments—some because they rightly warrant censure, others merely because they are big and raised difficult social issues. With University Village/Silver Towers we have an example that rises above the negatives associated with superblock development. Following the preservation principle of 'save the best examples', University Village/Silver Towers is perhaps the most noteworthy example.

While the Pei firm did not design all of the buildings on the superblock, it did plan the entire site, designating a low-rise structure for the easternmost block (later used for the Coles Sports and Recreation Center) and recognizing the existence of the low-rise supermarket at the northwest corner of the site. The relationship between the three high-rise towers, these low-rise structures and the ground-level open spaces is a critical aspect of the superblock site plan.

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State is aware that there are proposals to build new structures on the superblock. We believe that the site is large enough to accommodate increased development consistent with the original site planning principles. In order to assure that such development does not adversely affect the existing site plan and its interrelationship of buildings and open spaces, tall structures and contrasting low volumes, we believe it is essential that the entire superblock be given landmark designation so that any proposed changes and new construction will require review and approval by the Landmarks Commission.

We applaud the Commission for its intention to designate the University Village/Silver Towers complex as a landmark, and strongly encourage expansion of the designation boundaries to include the entire superblock.

Sincerely,

Advocacy Committee  
DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State

*Drafted by K. Johnson and K. Randall*