

April 1, 2008

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

Re: St. Vincent's Hospital Development Plan

DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State is a local chapter of a national and international organization focused on identifying and protecting buildings and sites of Modern movement architecture. Over the past twelve years our chapter has been involved in education and outreach to identify and protect New York's most significant examples of Modern architecture. Our network of local members and individuals who follow these developments has grown to over 700.

Our testimony is specific to the architecture of the Curran/O'Toole Building located on Seventh Avenue between West 12th and West 13th Streets. It is our position that the building meets the requirements of architectural and historic significance for the reasons bulleted below, and that the Curran/O'Toole Building should be considered for re-use, not demolition, in any plan put forward.

- Completed in 1964, the Joseph Curran Building, now the O'Toole Building, was the capstone of a 10-year building campaign by the National Maritime Union (NMU) to change the public face of the modern merchant marine in the US. The 14 buildings of this ambitious program were decidedly modern in function and aesthetics.
- The Curran/O'Toole Building, national headquarters for the union, was designed by Albert C. Ledner. Ledner worked across the country on projects for the NMU while building a highly respected practice in New Orleans. In quick succession Ledner earned his architecture degree from Tulane University, spent time with Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship, landed his first commercial commissions and was published in the architectural press.
- The Curran/O'Toole Building was included in the 1969 Greenwich Village historic district designation report with the description: "a striking contemporary structure." Positive observations on the façade design were also included: "an interesting play of light and shade" produced by the scalloped overhangs, and the "jointing of the stone [sic] veneer lend[ing] a new dimension to the building, making us double [sic] aware of the various wall planes."

- The Curran/O’Toole Building has withstood unsympathetic alterations and deferred maintenance with its primary design integrity intact or easily recovered. Behind the circular volumes at street level are two giant hiring halls, the trademark of NMU’s new facilities, and a dramatic expression of Modern architecture outside the glass box. After the sale to St. Vincent’s Hospital the halls were filled in with offices. The entrance extension mid-block and the unwelcoming, zoo-like fence are also not original. The area around the cylindrical base was originally public space dotted with ship models on bubble-topped pedestals—pop art marketing for the maritime industry.
- The Curran/O’Toole Building was part of a trio of Ledner-designed buildings the NMU erected in Manhattan. The Seamen’s Training School and Dormitory at 9th Avenue and 17th was completed in 1966 and the adjacent Curran Annex—now the Maritime Hotel—followed in 1967. Together the three NMU buildings put a bold face on Modern architecture in Manhattan all with a 1960s exuberance that is relatively scarce in New York when compared with other cities such as Los Angeles and Miami. With the New School Expansion (1958–1962); NYU Student Center (1958); Butterfield House (1963); University Village/Silver Towers (1961–1966) and others, this crop of buildings brought a burst of Modern architecture to the Village.
- The NMU trio also represented the height of union strength and professionalism in the maritime industry, a hard won road. In the words of a *Village Voice* reporter covering the opening of the Curran/O’Toole building in 1964, “The elegance and style of the NMU building is a symbol of the upward mobility of the labor movement since the 1930s.”
- The Curran/O’Toole Building is not glass box modern. Its expressive forms were designed to recall maritime forms and create public visibility for the NMU and the merchant marine. The scalloped overhangs that morph to portholes in a straight on elevation, the stark white exterior (and it once was) and the circular stack forms on the roof are all recognizable nautical elements.
- The Curran/O’Toole Building was not a simple, expedient work of architecture. The NMU was receptive to Modern architecture at its highest level of exploration at the time and gave Ledner the budget and time to study the design through numerous models and revisions. The building is tripartite. Two intersecting circular volumes, each approximately 110-feet across, and enclosed in 12-inch glass block provide a gigantic semi-transparent base for a four-story rectilinear volume, which is topped with a constellation of interconnected circular and tube-like roof volumes housing the executive offices and council chambers.
- The Curran/O’Toole Building stems from a Wrightian aesthetic. Ada Louise Huxtable led her 1964 *New York Times* review with a description of the Curran/O’Toole as a Wrightian building “in a city that boasts only one Frank Lloyd Wright original, the Guggenheim Museum.” Ledner describes his work as striving for a unified organic whole—a fusion of exterior elements and interior spaces, one informing the other in a balance of design and function. A student of Wright and an advocate of organic architecture, Ledner realized these ideas in the Curran/O’Toole Building. The expanding, overhanging volumes suggest the Guggenheim’s inverted pyramid, on occasion eliciting the jest “the box the Guggenheim came in.”
- The Curran/O’Toole Building entered the cityscape at roughly the same time as other notable structures testing Modern architecture’s boundaries and seeking more expressive forms: Lincoln Center (1962–1969); George Washington Bridge Bus Terminal (1963); 2 Columbus Circle (1964); Summit

Hotel (1961) and TWA Terminal (1956–1962). Albert Ledner was part of a cadre of architects who found clients willing to experiment beyond the more reserved forms of the International Style. Whether historical references or free form, the departure points were rarely minimalist or safe. Today they are critical to documenting the architectural response to the cultural shifts that characterized the 1960s and architects' contribution to the artistic production of the era.

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State requests that Commission consider the significance of the Curran/O'Toole Building in representing architecture of the 1960s in the Greenwich Village Historic District and the city at large and determine against a Certificate of Appropriateness for its demolition.

Sincerely,
Advocacy Committee
DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State

Drafted by K. Randall/J. Arbuckle