

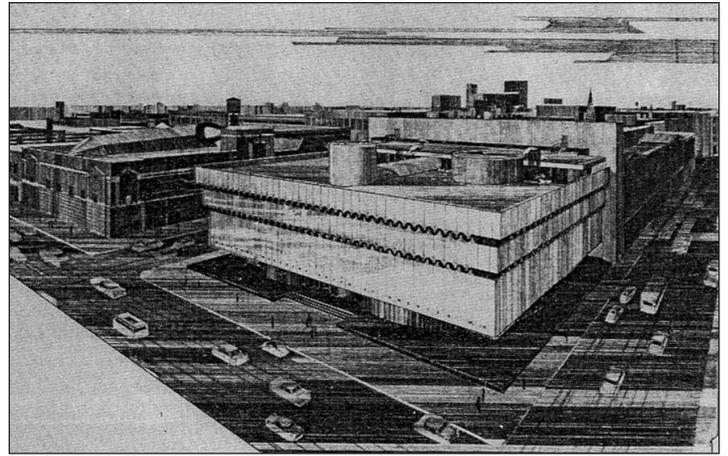
ST. VINCENT'S HOSPITAL WINS HARDSHIP CASE

On October 28, St. Vincent's Hospital won a hardship ruling from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for its new hospital in the West Village. The ruling will allow the hospital to demolish the Curran/O'Toole Building and other buildings in the Greenwich Village Historic District. The vote was six to four, with commissioners Tierney, Bland, Gerner, Condin, Ryan and Moore voting for the hardship; Gratz, Washington, Byrns and Perlmutter voting against. The Commissioners who voted against the hardship voiced substantial concerns that alternative plans had not been adequately explored. Of note is the fact that following the initial round of hearings in May 2008, the commissioners declared the Curran/O'Toole Building "worthy of preservation at every level." A month later the New York SHPO determined the building eligible for State and National Register listing. On October 7 the LPC held a public meeting where it invited hospital experts—all employees of the city or state—to weigh in on the project. The invitees gave cursory dismissals of the alternate sites and went with the hospital's plan rather than bring any new ideas to the table.

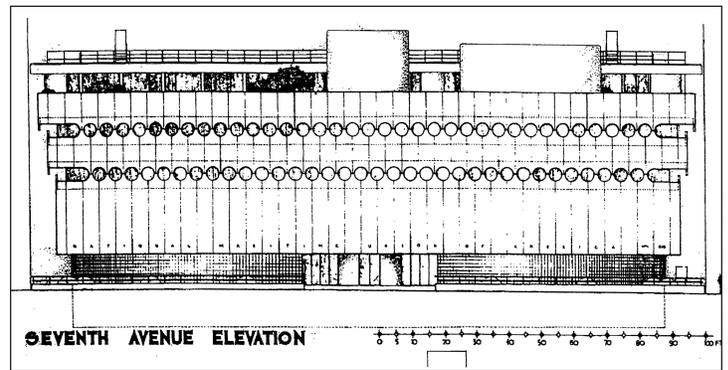
The Curran/O'Toole Building was designed between 1961 and 1963 by Albert C. Ledner, architect for the National Maritime Union, and opened in 1964. It has architectural and cultural significance as a work of Modern architecture from the 1960s

incorporating innovative technologies, historical relevance to the labor movement, and a creative and striking design. The *New York Times*'s Nicolai Ouroussoff wrote in an April 2008 article on the St. Vincent's project that the building is "one of the first buildings in the city to break with the Modernist mainstream as it was congealing into formulaic dogma," and that it was "significant both as a work of architecture and as a repository of cultural memory."

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State has been working on safeguarding the Curran/O'Toole Building for the past year, hosting an educational lecture with the architect, publishing a background document on the building's history and significance and testifying at Community Board 2 and LPC hearings. We strongly believe that there are alternative sites, even sites currently owned by St. Vincent's Hospital, which could be used for a new hospital, and likewise, alternatives for repurposing the Curran/O'Toole Building. In our testimony before the LPC in June we stated that "St. Vincent's Hospital has not made the requisite investigation of alternative sites for the much needed upgrading of its facility. It has not sufficiently demonstrated both the potential for hospital facilities in the mid-block buildings on 11th Street, or in those it owns on other sites such as on Sixth Avenue between 15th and 16th Streets, or the Cabrini Hospital Building, all of which could be used to fulfill its needs permanently or



The National Maritime Union's Joseph Curran Building as it was announced in the April 1962 issue of *Progressive Architecture*.



COURTESY: ALBERT LEDNER

operate as a swing site while it renovates the Coleman and Link Buildings."

To that end we will be continuing to investigate the issue of alternatives for a new hospital that do not require building on the site of the Curran/O'Toole building. The design review process for the proposed hos-

pital and city planning approvals are still ahead. The granting of this hardship exemption sends a troubling message: demolishing a significant work of Modern architecture included in a designated historic district is not that hard to do.

—Nina Rappaport

IN THE PRESS

Sadly, the hospital's application reflects the pernicious but prevalent notion that any single building that is not a major historical landmark—or stands outside the historical mainstream—is unworthy of our protection. Pursue that logic to its conclusion, and you replace genuine urban history with a watered-down substitute. It's historical censorship.

—NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF, "In Village, a Proposal That Erases History," *NY Times*, 4/1/08

...the O'Toole building is part of a complex historical narrative in which competing values are always jostling for attention. This is not simply a question of losing a building; it's about masking those complexities and reducing New York history to a caricature. Ultimately, it's a form of collective amnesia.

—NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF, *NY Times*, 4/1/08

Go and look while you can, because [the O'Toole Building] is again menaced with demolition...Those who don't live in such threatened districts nonetheless have a stake in this quarrel and some skin in the game, because the day when everywhere looks like everywhere else we shall all be very much impoverished, and not only that—more impoverishingly still—we will be unable to express or even understand or depict what we have lost.

—CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, *Vanity Fair*, July 2008

In the contentious world of New York landmark preservation, it is not always hard to be a hardship case. What qualifies as a hardship case—when landlords have taken their alms bowls in hand to the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, claiming poverty as an excuse to demolish old buildings—is now central to the controversy over the plan of St. Vincent's Hospital to build a 329-foot-tall medical tower in the Greenwich Village Historic District.

—GLENN COLLINS, "St. Vincent's Pleads Poverty to Evade Landmark Law," *NY Times*, 5/10/08