



**New York State Office of Parks,
Recreation and Historic Preservation**

Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau • Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189

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David A. Paterson
Governor

Carol Ash
Commissioner

RESOURCE EVALUATION

DATE: June 3, 2008

STAFF: Kathy Howe

PROPERTY: National Maritime Union/Joseph Curran Building) MCD: New York
(current Edward and Theresa O'Toole Medical Services Building)

ADDRESS: 36 Seventh Avenue

COUNTY: New York

USN: 06101.005738

- I. Property is individually listed on SR/NR:
name of listing:
- Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district:
name of district:
- II. Property meets eligibility criteria.
- Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.

Pre SRB: Post SRB: SRB date

Criteria for Inclusion in the National Register:

- A. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B. Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possess high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- D. Have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The National Maritime Union (NMU) headquarters building (also known as the Joseph Curran Building) is located on the west side of Seventh Avenue between West 12th and West 13th streets in Greenwich Village. Though less than 50 years of age – and, thus, outside the period of significance for the National Register-listed Greenwich Village Historic District in which it is located - the National Maritime Union headquarters building is exceptionally significant at the national level by meeting National Register Criterion A in the area of maritime labor history. The National Maritime Union was formed in 1937 and by 1946 had 73,000 members.¹ By the mid-1950s, NMU undertook a major building program of hiring

¹ "Politics and Pork Chops," *Time*, June 17, 1946.

halls as a tangible expression of the union's fight to rid the maritime industry of corruption and discrimination.

"Crime on the Waterfront," a series of Pulitzer prize-winning investigative articles by Malcolm Johnson published in the *New York Sun* in 1949 described corruption and organized crime infiltration on the NYC waterfront. Johnson's articles awakened America to the murders, graft, and extortion that made up everyday life on the waterfront. A series of commissions were formed to further investigate and clean up the corruption. The popular 1954 movie *On the Waterfront* with Marlon Brando was based on Johnson's articles about life among the longshoremen. While NMU represented the seamen working aboard the ships rather than the longshoremen, the union sought to improve and professionalize the maritime industry by instituting fair hiring practices. "The hiring hall was the keystone of fair employment practice. Jobs awarded through a union hiring hall were based on seniority and 'time on the beach' – how long a member had been without work."² The construction of hiring halls in a progressive architectural design projected an image of reform related to the changes forced on the industry in the 1950s.

NMU hired architect Albert C. Ledner, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, to design hiring halls in port cities throughout the U.S. Ledner designed a total of 14 projects for the NMU between 1954 and 1968. In 1961 he began work on the largest of the projects – a national headquarters for the union's 35 port offices combined with a New York hiring hall. It made sense that NMU's headquarters be located in New York which was the country's busiest port in the postwar years. Dedicated in 1964, the headquarters was named after Joseph Curran, the union's founder and long-time president who served from 1937 to 1973.

Affiliated with the AFL-CIO, the establishment of the NMU was part of the growing labor union movement in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. From its inception, NMU membership was racially integrated. Under the leadership of Curran, NMU successfully fought to eliminate racial discrimination in hiring, wages, living accommodations and work assignments. The new hiring halls ensured a steady supply of experienced seamen for the shipping industry, and reduced the corruption which had plagued the industry. "Curran worked to make American merchant seamen the best-paid maritime workers in the world. NMU established a 40-hour work week, overtime, paid vacations, pension and health benefits, tuition reimbursement, and standards for shipboard food and living quarters."³

The main block of the Curran Building cantilevers above the two curving glass-block walls of its base giving it the appearance of floating on its site. The concrete walls - covered with white ceramic tiles since 1966 to eliminate periodic cleaning and painting - progressively cantilever in increments as they ascend. The overhangs are accentuated by scalloped-edge profiles creating an interesting play of light and shadow. Ledner employed a nautical theme in his design. The scalloped edges of the façade panels, for example, resemble the portholes of a ship when seen from straight on. The forms on the rooftop forms are reminiscent of a ship's smokestacks.

The first floor of the building originally housed a large hiring hall which was divided into two spaces - one for deck and engine crews and one for stewards – by a large retractable scheduling board. This space has since been divided into smaller spaces for clinics and offices. The circular and tubular forms of the sixth story once housed the union's executive offices, council chamber, and elevator lobby. While few of the original finishes remain at this floor, the circular spaces and tunnel-like corridor are extant.

The National Maritime Union headquarters meets Criterion C as a locally significant example of postwar Modern architecture employing expressive forms. It is part of a group of postwar buildings in New York

² Kathleen Randall, editor/primary author, "Curran/O'Toole Building," *Backgrounder*, docomomo, New York/Tri-State, September 2007, p. 1.

³ Josh Barbenel, "Joseph Curran, 75, Founder of National Maritime Union," *New York Times*, August 15, 1981; Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time: Some Monuments and Ruins of the Thirties*, New York: Random House, 1998 (1955); "Retired Union Boss Joseph Curran Dies," *Associated Press*, August 14, 1981.

that moved beyond the orthodox Rationalism of the International Style toward a more expressive or organic architecture. As noted by the New York/Tri-State chapter of docomomo, "The Curran/O'Toole Building entered the cityscape at roughly the same time as some notable structures plying Modern architecture's boundaries for more expressive forms: Lincoln Center (Wallace Harrison, et al., 1962-1969), George Washington Bridge Bus Station (Pier Luigi Nervi, 1963); 2 Columbus Circle (Edward Durell Stone, 1964); Summit Hotel (Morris Lapidus, 1961); and TWA Terminal (Eero Saarinen, 1956-1962)."⁴

Ledner's work for NMU between 1954 and 1967 represents a distinct phase of his long career which also includes many residential and small-scale commercial designs. After graduating from the Tulane University School of Architecture in 1948, he received a four-month fellowship to study with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin, Wisconsin. By 1950 he had begun his solo practice based in New Orleans, LA. At 84, Ledner is still designing buildings on a semi-retired basis.

The influence of Wright's late work can be discerned in Ledner's designs for the Curran Building his other NMU hiring halls. "The design approach for each hall is well integrated with its site. In addition, the adjoining volumes, circulation, floor layouts, interior design and furnishings become part of a unified, interrelated composition."⁵ The ambitious program was decidedly modern in function and aesthetics. The circular forms used in elevation and plan for the Curran Building, for example, are reminiscent of Wright's Marin County Civic Center (1957-1962).⁶

In 1973, the NMU sold the headquarters building to Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers. It was renamed the Edward & Theresa O'Toole Medical Services Building and has been used for outpatient clinics and offices since that time.

If you have any questions concerning this Determination of Eligibility, please call Kathy Howe at (518) 237-8643, ext. 3266.

⁴ Randall, "Curran/O'Toole Building," p. 5.

⁵ Hansel Hernandez-Navarro and Kyle Normandin, docomomo fiche on the Curran/O'Toole Building, June 25, 2007.

⁶ Lindsay McCook, Historic Resource Inventory Form on the O'Toole Building, Columbia University Historic Preservation Studio, September 8, 2008.