

Chapter News

by Albert Ledner for the National Maritime Union and formally opened in 1964. Between 1954 and 1968 Ledner designed 14 buildings for the Union, primarily hiring halls in port cities across the country.

Over the summer an informal working group of members contacted Albert Ledner in New Orleans and began archival research to fill out the history behind the structure. The results were a DOCOMOMO fiche, a 10-page background document detailing the history and status of the building, and a fall lecture in New York by Albert Ledner.

The lecture was held September 25th at the New York showroom of Knoll, Inc. Over 80 people attended and were treated to Albert Ledner's slides and sharp recall of his buildings for the union and particularly the design progression of the Curran headquarters building. A half hour of audience questions was followed by a reception and an informal talk with the architect about the building's future.

For more on Albert Ledner and the Maritime Union buildings, plus photos and drawings, the background document can be found on the DOCOMOMO website. In addition, Ledner's lecture at Knoll, Inc. is now available on DVD; please contact the NY/Tri-State chapter to obtain a copy.

Because St. Vincent's redevelopment plan—a joint project with the Rudin Management Company—is located in the Greenwich Village Historic District, it will need to be reviewed by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, who will determine its appropriateness. The hospital filed its application in December 2007, while New York/Tri-State is continuing its outreach and preparing formal testimony for the numerous hearings that will attend the St. Vincent/Rudin plan.

—Kathleen Randall

Parkmerced, a Modern Landscape Masterpiece Under Assault

A 191-acre, 2,500-unit apartment development situated in the southwestern part of San Francisco, adjacent to the campus of San Francisco State University, Parkmerced is close enough to the Pacific Ocean that it is continually under assault from wind and foggy weather. Unfortunately, current plans by the new owner, Parkmerced Investors, LLP, and the University, are creating an assault that threatens to sweep the development off the map. With its Thomas Church landscape, Parkmerced is one of the most significant modern sites in San Francisco and its loss would be a defeat for the city's modern heritage.



Parkmerced, San Francisco, CA.

(Photo courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)

Thomas Church, considered the father of modern landscape architecture in the United States, exerted an especially strong influence over the look of residential landscape architecture in the post-war years. A figure with an international reputation, his ideas for livable, low-maintenance garden design were published in popular magazines and he worked closely with the leading Bay Region architects of his day: William Wurster, Gardner Dailey, John Funk, and others whose regional modern style was characterized by a seamless integration between building and landscape. During the course of his prolific career, Church designed over 1,000 individual landscape projects. Most of these are private gardens and are off-limits to the public, such as the often-photographed Donnell Pool and Garden in Sonoma, California.

Parkmerced, designed by Leonard Schultze Associates, a New York City architect, was developed by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company starting in 1941 as part of a nationwide venture into real estate development. Three similarly scaled developments were built by MetLife at about the same time: Park Labrea in Los Angeles, Parkchester in the Bronx, New York and Parkfairfax in Alexandria, Virginia. All four planned communities are predominantly low-rise apartments situated on significant amounts of landscaped open space. Parkfairfax is listed on the National Register in recognition of its role in the Post-War housing effort as an early planned community.

At Parkmerced, Schultze laid out a "Garden City" style radiating site plan with interconnecting



View of the shared lawn spaces.

Parkmerced, San Francisco, CA. *(photo: Chris Verplanck)*

courtyards, parking courts and service courts, and engaged Church to create designs for the 75 unique internal courtyards and landscape throughout the complex. This was Church's first large-scale commission and allowed him to put into practice his fundamental concepts for residential landscape design. Each courtyard is different, responding to its particular topography and solar conditions, and each provides semi-private terraces adjoining the apartments living rooms, a shared lawn area, sidewalks, and a limited, wind-tolerant plant palette. Curving walks and biomorphic shapes define the central lawns, while raised planters, wide steps, and low-maintenance planting groups give each courtyard its modern feeling. For students of Thomas Church, walking through the interconnected courtyards of Parkmerced provides a primer on the Church residential landscape, offering a rare opportunity to experience firsthand the work of one of the country's founding modernist landscape architects.

In the last few years, San Francisco State University has purchased several blocks of Parkmerced while releasing a plan to replace at least five of these blocks with new student housing. In addition, the current owner of the remainder of Parkmerced has hired the San Francisco office of Skidmore Owings and Merrill to develop a new master plan. Initial concept drawings shown at a recent public meeting indicate that Parkmerced would be demolished in its entirety and replaced with a completely different grid pattern and higher density housing, while commercial uses would be added along its major green spaces. Local preservation organizations, including the Northern California Chapter of DOCOMOMO US and the Western Regional Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation are concerned about both initiatives. A joint site tour was conducted on November 2, 2007, which included representatives of the California Preservation Foundation, San Francisco Heritage, and the San Francisco Planning Department, as well as the Parkmerced tenants' advocacy group.

Understanding the importance of Parkmerced, these organizations are wide awake and looking closely at ways to preserve Parkmerced for the future.

—Chandler McCoy