

November 12, 2015

Honorable Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms
809 United Nations Plaza

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State is a local chapter of an international organization working in 59 countries to identify, document and protect buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the Modern Movement. We respectfully request that the Commission soon "prioritize" the Kaufmann Conference Rooms designed by Alvar and Elissa Aalto, in order for the Commission to work with their owner, the Institute for International Education (IIE), towards their interior landmark designation. This highly significant work with world-wide recognition deserves no other status and the protections a designation will provide.

The IIE has revealed a history of owner dissent for designation on the grounds of security concerns, yet, this is not a valid excuse in a city with a wide array of interior landmarks, many of them open to the public every day of the year. The rooms were carefully designed to accommodate the public in a contained facility with its access separated from the office floors below via an elevator; furthermore, there is an elevator vestibule with a reception desk, a coatroom, male and female toilets and a small kitchen for catering services. These amenities have allowed the IIE to promote the conference center on its website for rent to selected not-for-profit groups. Ongoing public access has been the case, since the center opened in 1964 to much national and international press acclaim. Three generations of New Yorkers and visitors to the city have been grateful to the IIE for this opportunity to use this greatly valued important work of architecture.

The conference center is eligible for interior designation on two counts: their extraordinary significance and a pattern of customary use for public access by appointment, long term and over the past several years. We urge you, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, to work with the IIE, so they can of course continue to allow the rooms to be publicly accessible as conference rooms and as a lecture and party venue. Landmark status for the rooms will bring the IIE enormous gratitude, deserved prestige and most likely offers of assistance towards earning major grants for future restoration.

We must all not forget that the conference center was under certain threat in the summer of 2000, two years after the IIE sold 809 United Nations Plaza, the Harrison, Abramovitz & Harris building, with the conference center on the top floor. The sale of the building in 1998 to a real estate investor group, the Foundation for Support of the United Nations, occurred without the IIE putting any protective covenants in place for the protection of the important conference center. By the summer of 2000 the future of the conference center was in question and New Yorkers became concerned after reading about this in the press. A letter to Consul General Lahteenmaki from July 11, 2000, signed by Gil Robinov, from CB & Richard Ellis, the real estate brokerage representing the owners, states, "I need to either sell it or lease it to an outside party. I again wish to express my interest in assisting your Government in making arrangements for the removal of the interior architectural work on the 12th floor of 809 United Nations Plaza, designed by your country's famous architect, Alvar Aalto."

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Consul General Lahteenmaki soon sent a letter dated August 30, 2000 to various cultural institutions around the city and the country to make them aware of this offer and her concerns for the safety of the rooms. I have attached copies of these historic documents. This crisis brought out world-wide press attention.

In 2001 the IIE purchased back the building and in Landmarks Commission hearings in 2001 and 2002, there was great expectation and hope among New Yorkers and others around the world that the IIE would never again allow the conference center to be unprotected and that it would be designated as an interior landmark. Instead, the conference center was calendared. Today our great concern is with the possibility of again the rooms being owned by egregious owners, who are determined to be rid of them. Also, of concern is the prospect of the entire building being demolished for re-development, with no concern for the conference center.

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State commends the Commission for allowing public access on its website to research files, which include letters to the Commission and other evidence of the historic preservation campaign to save the conference center in 2000. These show great concern about the lack of protection for the rooms from 1999 to 2002, when the Commission held its last hearing and voted to merely calendar them. Letters describe the significance of the rooms and a pattern of their accessibility from a wide circle of concerned New Yorkers and others from around the world, including key figures in architecture, such as including Kenneth Frampton, Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando, Robert Venturi and from Glen Lowry Director of the Museum of Modern Art and many others in leadership positions in the city's cultural institutions.

DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State has since its inception recognized and spoken to the enormous cultural and aesthetic importance of the Alvar and Elissa Aalto-designed rooms and how the nation and New York City are enormously privileged to have this example of Alvar Aalto's career in near to original condition, within what has become a depleted repertoire of great mid 20th century interiors in New York City. The space is one of only four works by Alvar Aalto in the United States. Its significance is further bolstered by it having been commissioned and funded by Edgar Kaufmann Jr., himself a key figure in the history of 20th century architecture and design from his base as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and professor at Columbia University. Alvar Aalto and his wife Elissa designed every detail for the Kaufmann Conference Center from their studio in Helsinki, Finland and from there supervised the fabrication in Finland of various wood elements, brass hardware, lighting fixtures textiles and cobalt blue Arabia tiles and furnishings, a compendium of his signature devices, for installation within the confines of a generic space. The Kaufmann Conference Center is a revered cultural site for New Yorkers and a celebration of nature, a metaphor for the Finnish Forest and a distinct place of respite from the busy city. Please do vote to designate it as an interior landmark.

Respectfully,

Caroline Rob Zaleski
Board Member
DOCOMOMO New York/Tri-State