

BACKGROUND ■ Curran/O'Toole Building

Stats

ORIGINAL NAME/USE:

Joseph Curran Building; National Maritime Union Headquarters

CURRENT NAME/USE:

Edward & Theresa O'Toole Medical Services Building; Saint Vincents Hospital; Outpatient services and administrative offices

LOCATION:

36 Seventh Avenue (W. 12th/13th)
Block: 617; Lot: 55

DATE OF OCCUPANCY:

March 1964

COST:

\$6.4 million (1964; including land)

ARCHITECT:

Albert C. Ledner

STORIES:

Five plus roof top structures

CONSTRUCTION:

Steel frame with precast concrete panels; Full height glass block walls at ground level.

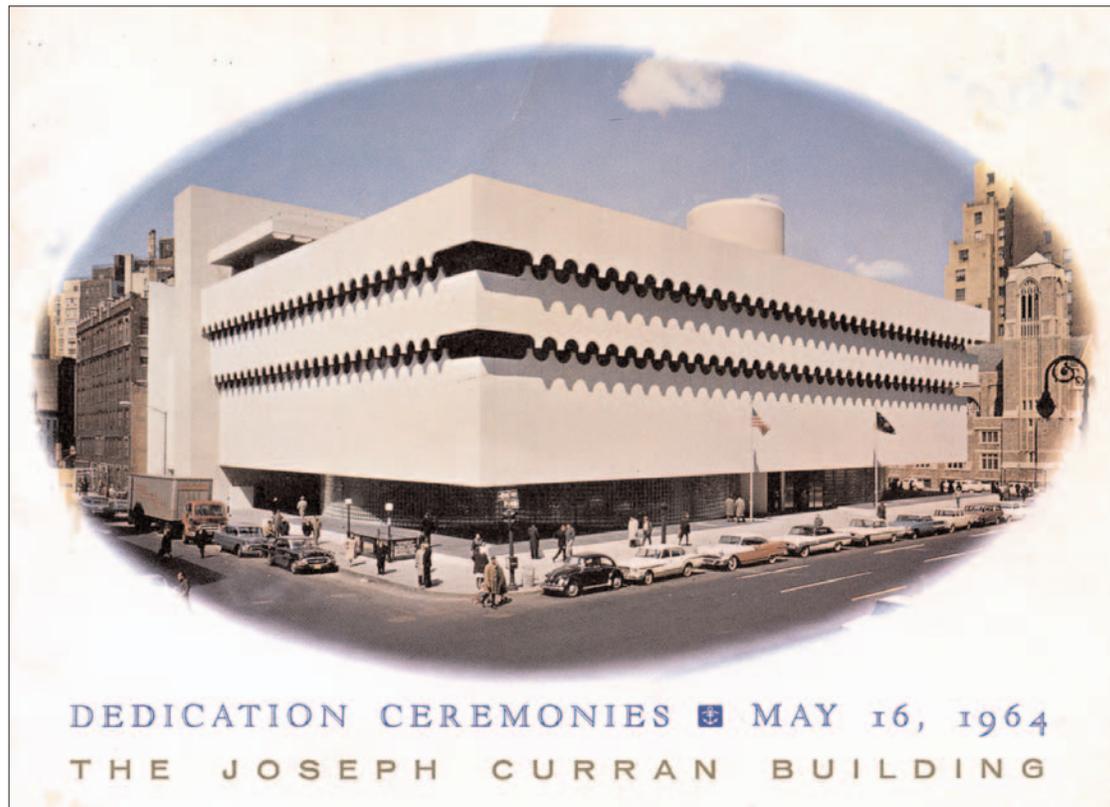
SQUARE FOOTAGE:

approx. 180,000 sf

DEVELOPMENT HISTORY:

- Inclusion in Greenwich Village Historic District, designated 1969
- National Maritime Union sells building to Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers, 1973
- City approves Saint Vincent's Large Scale Development Plan, 1979
- Saint Vincent's begins redevelopment plans for O'Toole Building and primary hospital site, 2006.

SEPTEMBER 2007



MID-CENTURY MODERN DOCKED ON 7TH AVENUE

The formative years of modern maritime commerce in this country were notoriously dangerous and corrupt. Think Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. Kazan's blockbuster was based on "Crime on the Waterfront" a series of Pulitzer prize-winning investigative reports published in the *New York Sun* that described life among the longshoremen in the 1940s—most likely tamed for big screen audiences. When the movie debuted in 1954 it was a public relations wake up call for the National Maritime Union, which represented not the longshoremen, but the seamen working aboard the ships. Having made significant strides in establishing fair hiring practices since its founding in 1938, the Union wanted to improve public opinion of both its operations and the stereotypical "sailor." 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. In 1954 the National Maritime Union (NMU) embarked on a major building campaign to make visible the progress

of the union in its fight for fairness and professionalism in hiring and respect for the seaman. The ambitious program was decidedly modern in function and aesthetics.

The first new hiring hall was in New Orleans, where the NMU tapped a relatively young local architect, Albert Ledner, for the project. Ledner was a graduate of the Tulane University School of Architecture and had studied as a fellow with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin. Ledner went on to design the Mobile, AL hiring hall in 1955, the Baltimore, MD hall in 1956, the Houston, TX hall in 1958 and the Galveston, TX hall in 1959. Ledner was key to creating a modern image for the Union and NMU officials believed it was the right image. Said one NMU spokesperson, "We like [Ledner's] work because he designs in circles. It's functional and expressive. [The hiring halls] are designed to allow for no angles...everybody is equal here, and circles pretty much express that."

In 1961 Ledner and his client embarked on the largest of the projects—a national headquarters for the union's 35 port offices combined with a New York hiring

Status

The O'Toole Building's owner, Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers, is a nonprofit corporation that owns and operates two hospitals in Manhattan, a mental health facility in Westchester and skilled nursing facilities in Brooklyn and Staten Island. Like many urban hospitals, Saint Vincent's has struggled to compete with newer hospitals and changing demographics. After a string of heavy financial losses starting in 2003, the corporation filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2005. Bankruptcy courts approved a reorganization plan in June 2007, with unsecured creditors approving the same in July. The reorganization plan officially went into effect September 3, 2007.

In what hospital officials say is not a prerequisite for the Chapter 11 reorganization, Saint Vincent's plans to build a slightly smaller, more efficient hospital complex to better serve the community. Demographic analysis projects an increase in patient visits in the coming years for a Westside, downtown hospital. The proposed hospital would be designed to accommodate the latest in medical technologies and is also being publicized as the first "green" hospital in the City. In November 2006, a NY state commission on hospital closures ordered the closure of Saint Vincent's Midtown facility, further increasing the anticipated load on the Greenwich Village facility. Saint Vincent's estimates its new hospital project will cost \$600 million.

The O'Toole Building on 7th Avenue between 12th and 13th Streets is not Saint Vincent's primary facility. The building houses mostly medical and physicians' offices. Hospital operations are housed in a collection of roughly 10 buildings dating from the 1930s to 1980s, covering almost a full block diagonally southeast of the O'Toole site. These facilities extend from

continued page 6

hall. In the postwar years, New York was the country's busiest port, with over 100,000 seamen assigned to ships annually. The new facility was sited on the west side of 7th Avenue between W. 12th and 13th streets in Greenwich Village. It was completed in late 1963 at a cost of \$6.4 million, including the land. The success of the project and the growth of the union led to two more New York projects that Ledner designed for the NMU: the Seamen's Training School and Dormitory on 9th Avenue at 17th Street, completed in 1966, and the Curran Annex, a low-rise addition to the school/dormitory tower, completed in 1967. You know the dormitory building. The tower is distinguished by its angled façade—8.5 degrees off vertical to be exact—and the grid of large pop art porthole windows. The combined buildings are now the extremely hip Maritime Hotel. Along with these projects there was a more unusual collaboration. The NMU was the only union to sponsor a site at the 1964 World's Fair—National Maritime Union Park. Ledner designed clusters of umbrella-canopied picnic pavilions abutting a kidney-shaped pond complete with a flotilla of model ships.

THE JOSEPH CURRAN/O'TOOLE BUILDING

The national headquarters building made a dramatic impression when it was officially dedicated in May of 1964. Needless to say, it was a standout among the 19th- and early 20th-century architecture typifying Greenwich Village. According to the *AIA Guide*, 1968 edition, daily tours were offered of the building because it caught the attention of so many New Yorkers. It was also large, occupying the good part of a full city block. By unanimous vote of its members in ports around the world, the headquarters was named the Joseph Curran Building in honor of the union's founder and long-time president. Curran led the strikes in ports across the country in 1936 and 1937 that launched the union. In June of 1946 he was on the cover of *TIME* magazine. By the early 1970s he was under fire from union members for misappropriations of union funds. He retired shortly thereafter to Boca Raton. The union merged with the Marine Engineers Beneficial

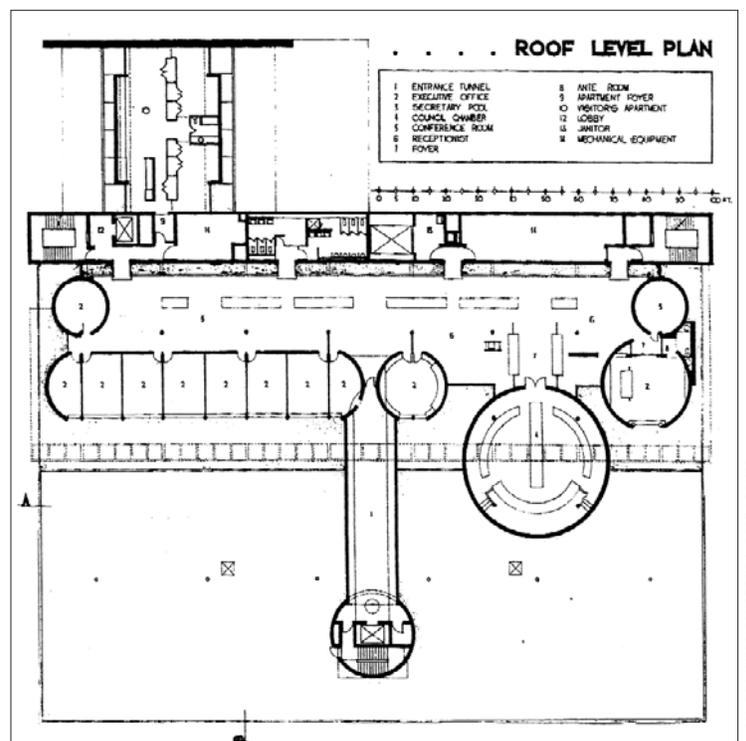
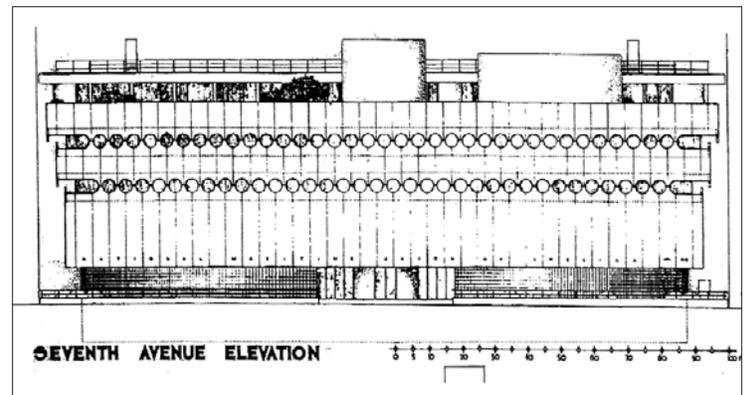
Association in 1988. The merger was short lived with the NMU returning to independence in 1993. In 1999 the NMU became an affiliate of the Seafarers International Union and in 2001 it fully integrated with the SIU. In 1973, during its transition from Curran's leadership the NMU

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.



Albert Ledner, NMU architect, in the 1960s. Left, Joseph Curran on the cover of *TIME* magazine, June 17, 1946.

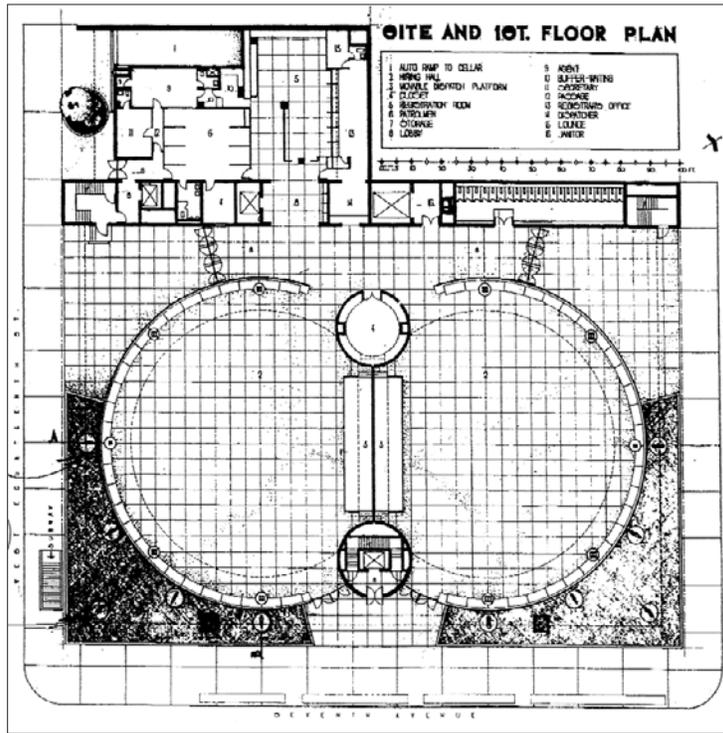
NMU, DEDICATION BROCHURE, 1964



ALL DRAWINGS COURTESY ALBERT LEDNER

THE ARCHITECTURE

The exterior of the Curran/O'Toole building is defined most readily by what are either portholes or scalloped overhangs depending on your physical viewpoint. Straight on, at even elevation, the half-circle scallops of the façade panels create a row of portholes reminiscent of a ship. Ada Louise Huxtable titled her *New York Times* review "Former Wright Student Designs a Battleship for Hiring Halls." From the street, the cut outs appear more abstract, like gears, or as one Greenwich Villager reportedly remarked, like "teeth." The bright white exterior plays into both of these images. In elevation, the building is tripartite. At street level 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. On the roof of this mass is a constellation of connected circular and tube-like structures housing the



The two ground floor hiring halls were encircled in glass block. If needed the "dispatch board" at the center could be raised to create one large meeting space.



The New York hiring hall in action, 1965. By establishing hiring agreements between the union and its contract companies, the sailors benefited from fair hiring and the ship companies from a reliable, steady workforce pool.

executive offices, council chamber, conference room, an apartment and a "tunnel" originally connecting the elevator and the reception desk. A narrow, six-story vertical volume running parallel to 7th Avenue at the far side of the site provides a circulation and mechanical spine.

Although Ledner originally planned to have the concrete exterior be the primary structural system for the building, budget and time restrictions dictated a switch to a more conventional steel structure with attached precast concrete panels finished with a white elastomeric coating. Today, the panels are faced with a 1-inch gloss white mosaic tile. In 1966 this ceramic tile was bonded

to the concrete panels at the behest of union officials who wanted to eliminate the periodic cleaning and painting required to keep the panels white. In an unusual curtain wall treatment—at least for 1961—the panels on the 4th and 5th floors are extended beyond the primary floor plate creating a 30-inch space between the exterior panel and the perimeter wall behind. This interior wall is floor-to-ceiling glass allowing indirect light to fill office spaces. Ledner designed the system with energy efficiency in mind. The shading from the panels reduced cooling load in the summer. In addition, a continuous row of hopper windows at the base of the glass wall provided

natural ventilation when needed. In Winter, a small linear fin tube steam element built into the base of the glass wall on the interior side provided radiant heat at the glass wall, reducing energy requirements of the primary heating system.

FUNCTION AND FINISHES

Ledner's circular hiring hall was a trademark of NMU's new facilities. In New York it was actually two halls—one for deck and engine crew and one for stewards. A large scheduling board at the intersection of the two spaces doubled as a retractable dividing wall. It could be raised into the second floor to provide a space large enough for major union meet-

What they said:

"There is no reason why the NMU could not have followed the line of least resistance and added another cheap, dull, routine box with a shiny facade and a big sign to the New York scene.... Or it could have treated itself to some Miami flash or the vulgar and ponderous marble banality that is the general level of most union national headquarters. It decided, instead, to go for architecture. Whatever reservations may be held, New York needs more of those decisions."

—Ada Louise Huxtable
New York Times, March 31, 1964

"I feel as if those teeth are going to eat me."

—A City & Country School mother who walked by the building every day.
Village Voice, May 7, 1964

"We should make the Village a working class neighborhood so we can get some good taste in architecture."

—Greenwich Village resident unhappy with luxuriousness of new buildings.
Village Voice, May 7, 1964

"The elegance and style of the NMU building is a symbol of the upward mobility of the labor movement since the 1930s."

—reporter Mary Perot Nichols
Village Voice, May 7, 1964

Albert Ledner

Albert Ledner was born in the Bronx, NY, in 1924 and spent his formative years in New Orleans, LA. In 1940, at the age of 16 he entered the Tulane University School of Architecture. His studies were interrupted the following year when he enlisted in the armed services. Following three years of active duty he resumed his studies and received an architectural degree in 1948. Immediately following graduation he worked on projects for several architects, including model building for Dean Buford Pickens. In the Fall of 1949 he completed a four month fellowship with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in Spring Green, WI.

In 1950 Ledner landed his first commission, a residence in Metairie, LA. The house was featured in the June 1953 issue of *House Beautiful*. He was soon working on a steady stream of residences and small commercial buildings, which would define the core of his practice.

Ledner preferred a close working relationship between architect and client and between architects collaborating on a project. He maintained an office for many years, but limited it to four persons to preserve the intimacy he felt important to producing architecture based on an understanding of and empathy for clients' needs and desires. To date, Ledner—who at 83 is still practicing on a semi-retired basis—has completed approximately 100 projects.

In addition to architecture narrowly defined, Ledner pursued his interest in lighting—designing and fabricating numerous fixtures, which he describes as “fanciful/functional,” as well as glass mosaic panels for several of his residential projects. He also has a strong interest in industrial design, obtaining two patents in the 1970s. The first, a thermal gravity pump for converting low-grade waste heat to electrical power; the second, a device for pro-

continued next page

ings. The second and third floors, which were partially given over to open space above the hiring halls, were programmed for archives, committee rooms and offices. The fourth and fifth floors utilized the full footprint for offices. On the roof, things get very interesting. A series of volumes—several circular—are appended to a long narrow conference room to compose the executive level. Set back to near midpoint of the site, this level is almost invisible from the street. This roof top level is one the building's most surprising features. The circular volumes provide a counterpoint to the rectilinear cantilevered midsection and at the same time top off the building in an echo of the cylindrical base story.

Newspaper accounts from the opening attest to the spectacular scene. A single elevator—lined with sea-blue-green mosaic tile—opens onto a 70-foot-long round tunnel. The tunnel is carpeted in sea green with floor mirrors along the edges and plants growing along the blue walls. It is lit by porthole windows overhead. One reviewer said the feeling was like “being in a bathysphere submerged.” After being cleared by a receptionist, a visitor was buzzed through the glass doors at the end of the tunnel and emerged into a large open area with a garden incorporating a brook. The president's office and council chambers were round spaces, also finished in a sea green and blue theme. In a nod to all that was modern and elegant at the time, office accessories were by Georg Jensen. The NMU headquarters were also functionally up to date through the latest in technology. Everything that could be automated was, offices were outfitted with new IBM office machines and closed circuit television provided the union brass with a means of holding meetings with members in distant cities.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

There have been few exterior changes since the 1966 resurfacing of the concrete panels. The north side of the building has experienced an inordinate amount of tile replacement, carried out with poor quality control. At some point Saint Vincent's erected an unfortunate ten-foot high mild steel fence with verti-

cals roughly five inches on center around the entire site, obscuring views of one of the building's most attractive features—the cylindrical glass block volumes that serve as the building's base. Originally there was a concrete curb separating the building property from the sidewalk and later, a low, open fence that was unobtrusive. The first floor has been divided into a warren of standardized spaces for clinics and offices, not an easy task given the circular plan. There are two competing entrances and a security guard booth at the center front of the building creating a gauntlet of options for the visitor and less than attractive streetscape mid-block.

While few of the original finishes at the executive level remain today, the forms do. The round guest elevator lobby, the tunnel-like corridor to the executive suites and the window walls that originally faced a planted roof garden—now just asphalt roofing—are extant, as is the round council chamber, complete with its original curved dais that seems to organically rise from the floor.

NEW YORK'S MODERN ARCHIVE

The Curran/O'Toole building is of its time despite being in a neighborhood rather set on keeping the architecture timeline in check. In the 1960s Greenwich Village was not being dramatically redeveloped with Modern movement architecture in the way other parts of the city were. This was probably dictated by the economics and demographics driving private development, but also by the strength and cohesiveness of the community, a factor that remains strong today. That said, it was not an anomaly. The Curran/O'Toole building was in the company of many outstanding examples of Modern movement architecture, starting with Joseph Urban's New School of 1929, one of the city's first works of architecture in the International Style. Contemporary to Ledner's building the Village gained several other important mid-century Modern buildings: Washington Square Village (1956–1958; S.J. Kessler & P.L. Weiner); the New School expansion (1958–1962; William Conklin/Mayer Whittlessey & Glass);



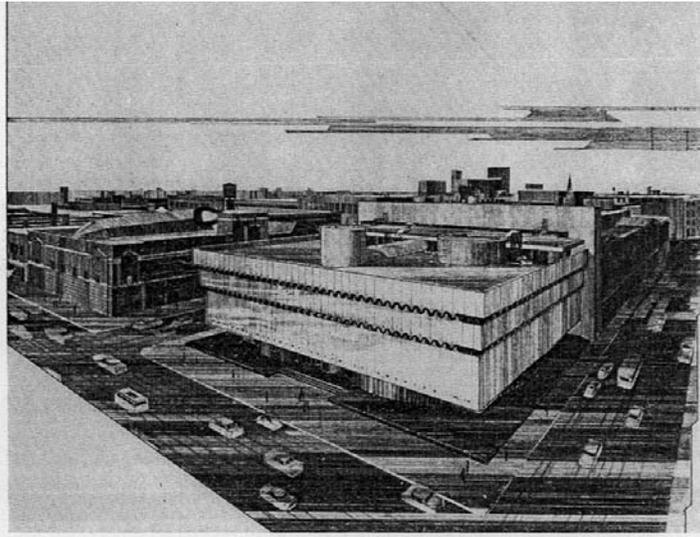
The architect's clerk-of-the-works strikes a pose on the double wall facade shortly after construction.

PHOTO: COURTESY ALBERT LEDNER

Butterfield House (1963; William Conklin/Mayer Whittlessey & Glass); NYU's Washington Square Student Center (1958; Wallace Harrison) and University Village/Silver Towers (1961–1966; I. M. Pei).

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); GWB 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). Albert Ledner designed the Curran Building following a program he had established with the NMU for its building campaign: Modern architecture, circular forms and public visibility—specifically an element of identification that would help the casual sidewalk observer connect the building with the NMU and the merchant marine. But Ledner was also part of a cadre of architects who had found clients, both corporate and institutional, willing to experiment beyond the more reserved forms of the International Style—forms that launched the Modern movement, brought it mainstream and yielded what are now the movement's uncontested icons. Whether historical or free form, the departure points were rarely minimalist or safe.

What may be a lengthy and complicated review process will determine whether the Curran/O'Toole Building will be demolished to make way for a new hospital tower. What the process will ultimately determine is whether the Greenwich Village community, the planning and landmark commissions, Saint Vincent Hospital's development team and the larger public can develop some new found appreciation for the exuberant forms that marked the Modern movement's new directions in the 1960s.

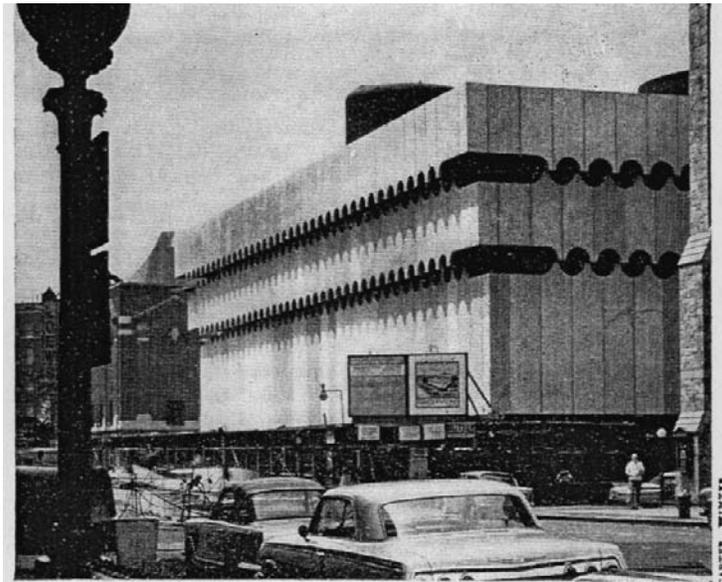


National Maritime Union Building Under Way

A new building in New York for the National Maritime Union is rising on Seventh Avenue between West 12th and West 13th Streets. The building, by Albert Charles Ledner of New Orleans, will have as basic structure reinforced concrete structural elements, precast concrete facing panels, and two large, circular walls on the first floor under the main mass of the building, which will be composed of 12-in.-sq clear glass blocks. The executive

offices will be found in the circular units on the roof, as well as in a long, rectilinear roof area. Service core containing elevators, stairs, and mechanical equipment rooms will be in a poured-in-place concrete unit at the rear of the property. What was originally raised terrazzo base for the building has been enhanced by the addition of planting to provide a pleasing transition from the sidewalk up into the building.

Progressive Architecture, April 1962



NEW YORK UNION. The nearly completed Manhattan headquarters of the National Maritime Union also "breaks up the box" but in quite a different manner. Overhanging floors with scalloped edges add depth and shade; the glass is set back from the precast panels, forming balconies which

will contain greenery. Hiring halls occupy the first floor, with offices above. Architect: Albert C. Ledner. Engineers: R. P. Linfield (structural), Guillot, Sullivan & Vogt (mechanical, electrical). Contractor: J. Alexander Stein, Inc. Estimated cost: \$4 million (\$25 per square foot).

Architectural Forum, October 1963

viding quick emergency descent from high-rise buildings in the event of fire or other emergency.

Ledner's most prolific client was the National Maritime Union. Ledner designed 14 projects for the Union between 1954 and 1968—from San Francisco to San Juan. The association began in the early 1950s when Ledner's close friend Raymond Kierr, the Union's legal counsel in New Orleans, was asked by Union officials to recommend an architect for their new hiring hall. Kierr recommended Ledner. Ledner recalls the Union being an excellent client, completely comfortable with the distinctive, modern forms that the architect proposed.

In February 2007, DOCOMOMO contacted Mr. Ledner and asked him for his thoughts on the Curran/O'Toole building. He replied enthusiastically in a letter. (He does not use email and also prefers to do pencil drafting.)

He wrote: "I was in New York in August of 2004 and stayed at the Maritime Hotel, originally the Curran Plaza Annex, my third New York building for the National Maritime Union. While there I was able to visit the 7th Ave. building—now the O'Toole building—with the approval to roam the entire building. The original design was a fusion of exterior elements and interior working spaces—a unified organic whole. Unfortunately the functional needs of Saint Vincent Hospital are quite different from those of the Union, resulting in the present exterior/interior changes—now the antithesis of the original concept. Obviously I was not in a happy, upbeat mood that afternoon after leaving the building. Concerning my thoughts about the building, if overall concept and design can remain, then I would be in favor of any and all action to secure that position."

More nmu

Between 1954 and 1967 Albert Ledner completed 14 projects for the National Maritime Union, four of which are in New York. A sampling of hiring halls in other cities is included below and at right.



Mobile, AL, hiring hall, 1955



Baltimore, MD, hiring hall, 1956



Houston, TX, hiring hall, 1965

STATUS, continued

12th to 11th streets on the opposite side of 7th Avenue. The composite square footage of the buildings is approximately 800,000 sq ft. According to the hospital, the cobbled together arrangement is inefficient from a programmatic and mechanical standpoint and is extremely costly to heat and cool.

The current proposal made public by the hospital in the press and via Community Board meetings and meetings with other neighborhoods groups over the Spring and Summer of 2007, calls for demolishing the O'Toole building and building a new 600,000 sq. ft. facility on the site. Saint Vincent's hopes to consolidate and relocate all hospital services from the current hospital site to the 36,000 sq. ft. O'Toole site. Saint Vincent's would then vacate the buildings on the block between 6th and 7th Avenues and turn the property over to its development partner, which would commence to clear the site of extant buildings and develop it as primarily residential real estate.

In May 2007, Saint Vincent's Board of Directors, chaired by Alfred E. Smith IV, announced its selection of the Rudin Management Company as development partner for the project. The Rudin family is a major player in New York real estate with holdings estimated at 10 million square feet. In a February 2007 *New York Times* article announcing Saint Vincent's project, a commercial real estate appraiser estimated that the current hospital site between 6th and 7th Avenues could yield \$300 million or more even with the empty hulks of the buildings left for a developer to demolish.

WHAT'S AHEAD

Saint Vincent's initiated a formal community working group in January of 2007 to provide a forum for input from the community, elected officials and physician representatives from the hospital. This group has convened regularly to receive updates from Saint Vincent's development team and public affairs representatives and to offer feedback.

In early August 2007 the Board of Directors announced it had



The Curran/O'Toole Building, as seen in early September 2007.

K. RANDALL

selected Pei Cobb Freed & Partners as architects for its new facility. Pei Cobb Freed will team with Ballinger, a Philadelphia-based architecture and engineering firm, as the health-care architect to program the hospital's interior.

It will be a busy Fall for Saint Vincent's. As the Chapter 11 reorganization plan goes into full swing, the corporation will also welcome a new CEO, Henry J. Amoroso. Amoroso comes to Saint Vincent's with a long track record of overseeing nonprofit hospitals under the umbrella of the Catholic Charities. Late summer statements indicate that the hospital hopes to commence submissions for initial city review processes before the end of 2007.

The redevelopment plans must

pass a complex series of reviews. A new 600,000 sq. ft. facility on the O'Toole Building site would dictate a building exceeding current height limits in the neighborhood. (Rough calculations offered by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation suggest 17 stories.) In addition to securing variances and approval from the City Planning Commission via ULURP, the plans must also be vetted against the Saint Vincent Hospital General Large Scale Development Plan, an agreement the hospital entered into with City in 1979 when it developed the current hospital site. The final plan would also require approval of the City Council. Before these steps, Saint Vincent's will have to go before the NYC Landmarks Preservation

Commission seeking permission to demolish the O'Toole Building, which is included in the Greenwich Village Historic District (designated 1969).

On the whole, the project as proposed will dramatically alter almost two full blocks in the heart of Greenwich Village. A development project of this scale is rare in the Village. Community organization and advocacy will be high; the stakes are high as well. Not only will the project test some of the city's regulatory checks and balances—as-of-right vs. special rights; the durability of historic district designation; environmental concerns vs. massive demolition—it will measure the mindset of the community and perhaps the broader public. Pitting state-of-the-art hospital facilities against the neighborhood's historic and very livable low- to mid-rise streetscape squares off two equally desirable positives. Amenities and livability—hospitals and historic districts—should go hand in hand. With sincere effort by all parties to explore options beyond what is on the table there is a wisp of a chance they might.



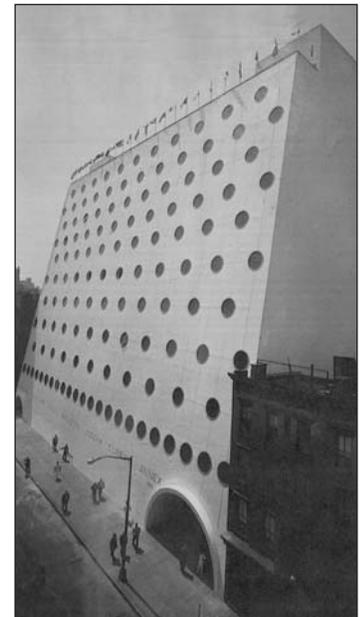
Southeast corner of 7th Avenue and 12th Street: two of Saint Vincent's Hospital's largest structures. Both could be demolished for residential development under the hospital's redevelopment plan.

More nmu



Norfolk, VA, hiring hall, 1965

In New York:



NMU Training Center and Dormitory, NY, 1966 (17th & 9th Avenue; now Maritime Hotel)

What they said:

"The large five-story building of the National Maritime Union of America is a striking contemporary structure....The main portion of this building fronting on the Avenue is a glistening white [sic], built above two curving glass-block walls. It has two overhangs at the top floors which are dramatized by their scalloped edge profiles. These overhangs produce an interesting play of light and shade. The rectangularized pattern of the jointing of the stone veneer lends a new dimension to the building, making us double aware of the various wall planes."

—Greenwich Village Historic District, Designation Report, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, April 1969

"NMU Halls are more than centers of Union activity. They should in themselves be expressions of NMU's strength and responsibility, its continuing dedication to the advancement of its members and of the community. They should express the importance and the dignity of the seaman's work. And they should express the meaning of the Hiring Hall, the keystone of all the progress that seamen have made."

—Joseph Curran, NMU president, at the dedication of New Orleans Hall, February 1956

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Note: A DOCOMOMO fiche is a formal documentation prepared for buildings deemed significant to the record of Modern movement architecture, urban design, landscape architecture and interior design in the US. A fiche is permanently filed with DOCOMOMO US and with DOCOMOMO International, an archive held at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam.

Curran/O'Toole Building

Minimum Documentation Fiche
composed by national/regional working party of:
DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State

0.1 Picture of building/site

depicted item: View from 7th Avenue and West 13th Street, looking west.

source: K. Randall

date: September 2007

1. IDENTITY OF BUILDING/GROUP OF BUILDING/URBAN SCHEME/LANDSCAPE/GARDEN

1.1 current name of building

Edward and Theresa O'Toole Medical Services Building

1.2 variant or former name

National Maritime Union/The Joseph Curran Building

1.3 number & name of street

36 Seventh Avenue Block: 617 Lot: 55
a/k/a 20-40 Seventh Avenue
201-219 West 12th Street
200-206 West 13th Street

1.4 town/city

New York

1.5 province/state

New York

1.6 zip code/postal code

10011

1.7 country

USA

1.8 national grid reference

(TBD)

1.9 classification/typology

Original: COM - Commercial; Current: HTL - hospital

1.10 protection status

Within the boundaries of the Greenwich Village Historic District designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission April 29, 1969

2. HISTORY OF BUILDING

2.1 original brief/purpose

Throughout the first half of the 20th century the National Maritime Union (NMU) was operating out of a few seedy lofts and storefronts. By the mid-1950s, the NMU felt it was in a position to put its building program

on a well-planned long-range track. Then president, Joseph Curran, declared "our buildings cannot just be boxes where the Union's work is done. They are going to stand for the dignity of seamen and their importance to the community. They will express the strength and vision of our Union. They must serve the needs of membership and enhance our community."

Built at a cost of \$6.4 million (including land), the building was to serve as new national headquarters of the National Maritime Union/AFL-CIO to house executive offices; a board meeting room for the president to convene the national officers and officials from the port offices; offices for the pension and welfare plans and the Port of New York; two hiring halls and one private apartment offering sleeping arrangements for union leaders use during strikes. In 1963, the full membership of the union—in port and at sea—voted to name the new national headquarters The Joseph Curran Building in honor of the union president's role in founding the union and his years of leadership.

2.2 dates: commission/completion

1961– late 1963

Occupancy: March, 1964

Dedication: May 16, 1964

2.3 architectural and other designers

Albert C. Ledner – architect

Furman & Furman, Architects – local associate architects

2.4 others associated with building

J. Alexander Stein, Inc. – general construction

S. Gerber & Co. – plumbing

Hyman Electrical – electrical

Billen Air Conditioning Co. – heating and air conditioning

Columbia Office Supply, Inc. – office furniture

2.5 significant alterations with dates

In 1966 1-inch white mosaic ceramic tile was bonded to the surface of the exterior concrete panels. According to A. Ledner, this change was based on a maintenance consideration noted by NMU officials—the elimination of periodic exterior cleaning and painting of the white concrete panels. Original ground floor interiors and the entry have been significantly altered.

2.6 current use

St. Vincent's Hospital acquired the building from the NMU in 1973. The building now houses outpatient clinics, medical offices and a community auditorium.

2.7 current condition

Fairly good

3. DESCRIPTION

3.1 general description

The primary volume is a five-story building with roof structures constituting a sixth. The main portion of the building fronting Seventh Avenue cantilevers above the

Ledner at home

two curving glass-block walls of the first floor. The fourth and fifth floors are also slightly cantilevered over the lower floors, and are dramatized by their scalloped-edge profiles. These overhangs produce an interesting play of light and shadow. The rectangularized pattern of the jointing of the exterior concrete panels and the overhang lends an interesting dimension to the building, accentuating the various wall planes, both visible and partially hidden. To the west of the main mass, parallel to 7th Avenue, a six-story slab-like volume rises the length of the building for circulation, mechanical and restrooms. West of the slab is a small, cubic, six-story volume that fills an adjacent lot and houses additional offices and on the roof level, the apartment.

3.2 construction

The building creates its effect of solid concrete by using hung panels—originally white precast concrete panels. The panels are essentially an exterior curtain wall brought out 2.5 feet from the glass wall behind. The scalloped edges of these panels appear as portholes when seen in straight-on elevation. The exterior wall is not integral with the structure. The contractor's estimates, which came in \$2 million over the budget for the unconventional design and construction, changed the original intent of integration. More common steel framing techniques were substituted. The structural compromise of attached concrete panels is turned to advantage by the use of all glass walls on the fourth and fifth floors behind the panels, which temper sunlight and give a two-layered wall of intriguing effects.

3.3 context

As of this writing—July 2007—St. Vincent's Hospital is working with the Rudin Management Company as developer to build a new \$600 million, 600,000 sq. ft. facility on the site of the O'Toole Building—which would be demolished. After the new facility is completed, St. Vincent's Hospital would vacate its roughly 10 current buildings on the east side of Seventh Ave., between 12th and 11th Sts. through to Sixth Ave., and at the southwest corner of 12th St. and Seventh Ave. Then, in a demolition project of major proportions, these buildings would be razed, after which the sites would be sold to the Rudin Management Company and developed primarily for residential use. The plan allows the hospital to remain fully operational at all times.

Renovating the existing building is not feasible, according to the hospital redevelopment team's public statement. St. Vincent's Hospital says the need for a new "hospital of the future" is made even more pressing by population growth in its West Side "catchment" area: Residential development is booming in West Chelsea, the far West Village and the Hudson Yards, meaning more patient visits.

The Joseph Curran building—its modern architecture and scale—was greeted with mixed reviews by community members when built. According to the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation opinions remain mixed today.

4. EVALUATION

4.1 technical

The initial planning anticipated the need for an environmentally designed concept. The projecting overhanging concrete panels shaded the floor-to-ceiling glass walls on the 4th and 5th floors from direct sunlight. A small, energy efficient linear fin tube steam heating element was built in at the base of the interior side of the glass wall providing radiant heat to reduce load on the interior heating system during winter. In the summer, a continuous row of hopper windows at the base of the glass block walls provided natural ventilation when required.

4.2 social

While the hiring halls the NMU had built in major port cities could handle the day-to-day hiring activities, the union aspired to a national headquarters that would be an expression of the NMU's growing strength and the benefits provided to its membership. The stronger the union the faster it could rid the maritime industry of the rampant corruption and discrimination that existed under the myriad of hiring gauntlets maintained by the individual shipowners. Affiliated with the AFL-CIO, the birth of the NMU in 1938 was part of the intense growth in unionization in the US in the 1930s and 1940s. An article in the *Village Voice* highlighting the opening of the Joseph Curran Building in 1964 reinforced the significance of visible union headquarters to the labor movement "The elegance and style of the NMU building is a symbol of the upward mobility of the labor movement since the 1930s."

continued page 10

The striking modern home Ledner designed for his family in the mid-1950s survived Katrina. (See feature article, "A Modernist Beacon in the Post-Katrina Night," *NY Times*, 12/21/06). Located in the Lakewood South neighborhood, the house had filled with five feet of water and mud. Ledner and his wife Judy returned post-hurricane to assess damage and by January they had moved back to New Orleans and were contemplating restoration options. By November 2006 they had returned to their home after a painstaking clean-up and restoration, much of which they completed themselves. The two-story studio behind the house remains damaged and in limbo due to a Corps of Engineers plan for expanding right of way for a nearby levee.

Note: The NY Times article and a slide show that accompanied the article can be found at on www.nytimes.com. Search term "Albert Ledner."



Albert Ledner's own home in New Orleans, LA. Designed in the mid-1950s, the roof form is a 12-point star supported by harp-shaped trusses resting on concrete bollards. The studio building on the right has a precast concrete first floor with a wood and plate glass second story.

ALBERT LEDNER

Credits & Contact

This document was prepared by volunteer members of the New York/Tri-State chapter of DOCOMOMO US. The information is correct to the best of the authors' knowledge as of mid-September 2007.

DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State is a local chapter of a national and International organization working to identify, document and protect buildings and sites of the Modern movement. Founded in 1988 in The Netherlands, the organization's name is an encapsulation of its mission: **DO**ocumentation and **CO**nservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the **MO**dern **MO**vement.

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DOCOMOMO FICHE, continued

4.3 cultural & aesthetic

From the beginning, the building resembled a ship docked smack at the edge of New York's Greenwich Village. The windowless expanse of white concrete wall panels are punctuated by nearly continuous horizontal openings incorporating scalloped edges in a vaguely nautical motif. The nautical theme was continued on the roof where stand-alone circular elevator lobby and a circular council chamber resemble the stacks of a ship. Inside, rooms were originally decorated with blue walls and sea-green carpet. Porthole interior windows and skylights and a rooftop garden with a circulating brook rounded out the effect.

The journalist Mary Perot Nichols wrote in the *Village Voice* that the building was palatial and highly tasteful, and described the over scaled, floor-high cornices with their scalloped lower edge as giving the impression of either portholes or waves. She added that the whole thing had a Moorish quality recalling the rollicking days of the Barbary pirates.

In her assessment of the building, which derided the structural compromise due to budget constraints, architecture critic Ada Louis Huxtable cited the building's appeal favorably. She placed the building within a Wrightian aesthetic—Ledner had been Wright's student—calling it striking and with many handsome details and high and painstaking design standards. She complimented Ledner by asserting he appeared to be talented and conscientious. She praised the project for opting to do real architecture as opposed to following a trend of adding "another cheap, dull, routine box with a shiny façade and big sign to the New York scene."

4.4 historical

Albert Ledner, the architect who designed the Curran Building, graduated from the Tulane University School of Architecture in 1948. Upon graduation he studied with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin, Wisconsin on a fellowship. By 1950 he had begun his solo practice based in New Orleans, LA.

At the age of 30 Ledner began his long association with the NMU. In 1954 he designed the first union hall, in New Orleans, followed by another hall in Mobile in 1955. In 1956 Ledner designed the Baltimore hall. The Houston hall followed in 1958; Norfolk, VA in 1959. By the mid 1960s he had designed the New York hall, as well as the National Maritime Union Park at the 1964 New York World's Fair—the only union-sponsored project at the fair. In 1965 the Norfolk hall was built. Finally in 1966 Ledner designed the 11-story NMU Training School and dormitory in New York, later adding the Joseph Curran Annex Building, both at 100 9th Avenue (Now the Maritime Hotel). Ledner has maintained an architectural practice since that time, based in New Orleans, and continues a limited practice at age 83.

In these projects for the NMU, Wright's influence and the predominant tenets of organic architecture are palpable. The design approach for each hall is well integrated with its site. In addition, the adjoining volumes, circulation plan, floor layouts, interior design and furnishings become part of a unified, interrelated composition.

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5.2 VISUAL MATERIAL ATTACHED

(List of images omitted from this reprinting)

5.3 RAPPORTEUR/DATE

Hansel Hernandez-Navarro & Kyle Normandin
June 25, 2007