

November 28, 2023

The Honorable Sarah Carroll, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North
New York, NY 10007

Re: Motion to Calendar: The Modulightor Building - 246 East 58th Street

Dear Chair Carroll:

DOCOMOMO US/New York Tri-State is a local chapter of an international organization working in over 70 countries around the world. Our mission is to increase public awareness and appreciation of Modern architecture, landscapes and urban design; to identify and document local examples; and to advocate for the protection of those determined most significant. Since 1996, the chapter has been advancing this mission in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

The Modulightor Building is named for the extant lighting design company begun by modernist architect Paul Rudolph and his personal and business partner Ernst Wagner. Rudolph was among the leading American architects and most influential architectural educators of his generation. For much of its existence the building at 246 East 58th Street stood just four stories tall—but with Rudolph, little is ever quite as it first appears. A split-level showroom and a supporting mezzanine gallery actually top one to two interlocking subterranean floors of manufacturing below. This entire design, fabrication and sales ensemble was then topped by a pair of duplex apartments, which were constructed as rental units for Rudolph in hopes of yielding passive income. This is small-scale mixed-use at its finest and is unlike any other of Rudolph's New York City projects. Although initially designed to be much taller, Rudolph chose to operate within his fiscal means and, by all accounts, was satisfied with a piecemeal approach to alterations and construction, much as he pursued over more than three decades at his own residence, the individually designated 23 Beekman Place.

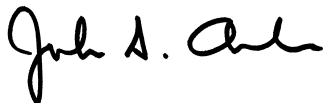
Rudolph's original sketches clearly show a repeating series of framed plate windows, Juliette balconies, blind panels, and recessed niches on the primary facade that would have alternated and repeated as additional duplex apartments further stacked upon the party walls that once supported the modest rowhouse previously on the site. Despite the continuous lineage of ownership, these plans were sadly not followed during a 21st-century expansion, thus altering a Rudolph original. While there is no way of knowing precisely what Rudolph, who died in 1997, would have done, we can only be certain of what he did design and build.

246 is significant for the way Rudolph managed to bring light deep into the core and for his deft manipulation of shadow. The building itself may be read as one experiment in light, not dissimilar from the fabricated efforts being constructed below street level for the Modulightor company. But as we

revere this work and Paul Rudolph himself, we must respect and honor his own legacy as well so that he can be better appreciated and contextualized. To do that, we must be clear about his role at this site, which extends to the front and rear façades, each up to the fourth floor; the utilitarian interior core, the interior stairs and railings, and the overall section. Later interior furnishings, shelving, and cabinetry were completed in a handwriting similar to Rudolph's but were not by his own hand.

With acknowledgement of what are definitively the Rudolph portions of 246 East 58th Street, DOCOMOMO US/New York Tri-State enthusiastically supports individual landmark designation for this property, Rudolph's last built work in New York City.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John S. Arbuckle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John S. Arbuckle
President
DOCOMOMO US/New York Tri-State
info@docomomo-nytri.org