

12 November 2015

Ms. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor, North
New York, NY 10007
backlog95@lpc.nyc.gov

Re: the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Lecture Hall and Elevator Lobby, 809 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan

Dear Ms. Srinivasan,

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses strong support for the designation of the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Lecture Hall, and Elevator Lobby, 809 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan. We strongly urge the Landmarks Preservation Commission to grant designation to the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms.

SAH is the principal scholarly organization for architectural historians in North America. It does not regularly become involved in preservation issues, and speaks only to issues of national and international importance. In 2015 SAH has issued statements on only three threats: the first two were letters to Secretary of State John F. Kerry concerning Nepal and Iraq, addressing damage to architectural treasures in Nepal from the April 25, 2015, earthquake and its aftermath, and damage to historic sites in Iraq by ISIS, looting, and warfare. The third letter was written to Dominion Power about the company's proposal, identifying the significant damage the planned transmission lines and towers would do to the historic resources of Colonial Parkway, Jamestown, Carter's Grove, and this unspoiled section of the James River. We want to underscore the fact that we evaluate threats to nationally and internationally significant architectural resources thoroughly, and do not take positions on them lightly.

Commissioned by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., the conference room suite and lobby are a wonderful and highly significant suite of rooms that represent a rare North American work (one of four extant properties) by an architect who is unquestionably one of the great artists and humanists of the twentieth century. Occupying a double-height penthouse suite in the Institute of International Education, Aalto skillfully shaped a raw volume into an exceptionally evocative procession of spaces. Many of Aalto's signature design tropes are in evidence. These include his virtuosic sculpting of the space—building to the crescendo of the double-height but subtly modulated window wall that enables the view out across the UN and the East River—his skillful use of both natural and artificial light and familiar, sensual material choices such as bent wood bas-reliefs—here evoking the boreal forest—and blue, tubular Arabia tiles, all of which impart a distinctive and unmistakable character to the suite.

We understand that one issue that has surrounded the question of designation is accessibility of the suite to the public. While not strictly speaking a public space, it is often used for public events and we can confirm that many members of SAH have attended a variety of very successful events in these rooms over the years. To the question of significance of the suite, it is fitting that its location sits atop the headquarters of an international institute and frames a wonderful view of the United Nations complex, as these are rooms with a truly global following and importance—their loss or inappropriate alteration would be a tragedy that would be felt around the world.

In encouraging this designation, the Society of Architectural Historians joins with supporting organizations and individuals as the American Institute of Architects, New York Chapter; the Preservation League of New York State; Docomomo US; Docomomo US/New England Chapter; The Municipal Art Society of New York; and individuals including Jukka Leino, Consul General of Finland in New York City; historians and curators including Peter Reed, curator of a retrospective exhibition about Alvar Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," at the Museum of Modern Art in 1998, Glen Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, and Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University; and many accomplished architects, including Tadao Ando, Frank Gehry, Fumihiko Maki, Robert A.M. Stern, and Robert Venturi.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B_C_G" with a horizontal line extending from the end of the "G".

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Heritage Conservation Committee
Society of Architectural Historians