Material, Building Type or Beauty – What Makes Preserving Brutalist Architecture in Buffalo So Hard?

Barbara A. Campagna, FAIA LEED AP BD+C
Sustainable Interior Environments
FIT, State University of New York
27th Street and 7th Avenue
Room E-313
New York, NY 10001
Barbara A. Campagna
Assistant Professor, Acting Chair
Barbara_campagna@fitnyc.edu
212-217-4305

ABSTRACT

Why is Brutalism one of the most difficult eras to preserve? Questions of authenticity, the use of materials such as concrete panels and concrete block, the construction of new building types like public housing that do not have inherent supporters, and maintaining some of the most energy inefficient buildings ever built are some of the aspects that impact its preservation. This paper will look at Brutalist icons in Buffalo, New York, which demonstrate the pros and cons of saving these buildings.

Buffalo Modernism

Buffalo has a rich modernist heritage, which is now under siege. Not surprisingly, it is concrete Brutalist style buildings at the forefront of this battle. As a way to counteract misconceptions about modernism, this author taught a seminar last spring in the University at Buffalo School of Architecture & Planning. The semester long project was to document a Buffalo modern for the DOCOMOMO US Registry. Four buildings represent the Brutalist era and their appreciation or lack thereof seems to be related to ownership, building type, site plan, maintenance of material and perception of beauty. Those buildings remaining in the ownership of the original owners have fared much better than those that have not.

The Buffalo Evening News Building, Edward Durell Stone

The Buffalo Evening News Building was designed in 1973 by Edward Durell Stone using both site-cast and precast concrete. The project melded the influences of Buffalo's heavy Gothic architecture with the purity and minimalism of the International Style. The complex has remained in use as the paper's headquarters and is in fair condition, although its concrete and flat roof require constant maintenance. There is no current threat, but a better level of appreciation of this restrained yet significant structure is desirable.

Temple Beth Zion, Max Abramovitz

The Temple Beth Zion, designed by Max Abramovitz in 1967, is representative of the Brutalist movement with symbolic intent and material use. Monolithic, rough-face concrete walls with exposed aggregate and fastener holes reference a simplistic and unadorned approach. It received both national and local praise for its beauty and progressive aesthetic stature when it opened. The complex remains a beloved symbol of the congregation and is not threatened.

One Seneca Tower (former HSBC Center), SOM

SOM designed this precast concrete building in 1972 as a bank's headquarters. At 40 stories, it remains the tallest privately owned building outside of New York City. It has a conflicted relationship with Main Street, which is articulated through a barren tunnel and windswept plazas at the base of the building. Its most recent primary tenant, HSBC, moved out in 2013, leaving the building 95% vacant with its owners in bankruptcy. It is one of the least liked buildings in Buffalo.

The Shoreline Apartments, Paul Rudolph

The Shoreline Apartments, a public housing development, was commissioned in 1969. What was ultimately completed in 1974 was considerably reduced in scale from Rudolph's original scheme. Featuring corduroy concrete block, projecting balconies and enclosed garden courts, the project's serpentine site plan was meant to create active communal green spaces, but the spaces went unused and the high crime rate over the years has often been attributed to the design rather than poor management.

Still low-income housing, Shoreline is currently threated by the current owners who are proposing demolishing five of the original 32 buildings and replacing them with "Nouveau Victorian fiber cement board suburban rowhouses." Their reason – the buildings are "ugly," energy inefficient and encourage crime.

PAPER

Buffalo Modernism

Figure 1. The Richardson Olmsted Complex, formerly the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane, September 2013. Photo by Barbara Campagna.

Buffalo has some of the best and most groundbreaking architecture in America and indeed in the world. As one of the few cities with masterpieces by Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright, it has long been a destination for students and lovers of architecture. In recent years, a renaissance of sorts is reviving its landmarks and reactivating the neighborhoods and even downtown. Grain elevators and daylight factories that influenced LeCorbusier, Erich Mendelsohn and Reyner Banham are finding new life while Richardson and Olmsted's long vacant Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane becomes a boutique hotel, conference center and architecture center. Wright's Darwin D. Martin House has been restored and reconstructed and Sullivan's Guaranty building, often called the first real skyscraper, has been rehabilitated for a second time in 25 years. Buildings by Richard Upjohn, Daniel Burnham, and the Saarinens fill in the landscape. But what is less recognized is that Buffalo's architectural innovation continued through the modern era and these traditional icons can be found across the street from buildings by Yamasaki, Edward Durell Stone, SOM, I. M. Pei and Paul Rudolph. It has an incredibly rich modernist heritage, and some of that heritage is now under siege. And like much of the rest of the country, Buffalo's preservationists are now finding themselves in the midst of battles to save its modern architecture.

Not surprisingly, it is concrete Brutalist style buildings from the late 1960s and early 1970s at the forefront of this battle. Why is Brutalism one of the most difficult eras to preserve? Questions of authenticity, the use of materials such as concrete panels and concrete block, the construction of new building types like public housing that do not have inherent supporters, subjective opinions of beauty and aesthetics, perceived relationship to urban renewal and maintaining some of the most energy inefficient buildings ever built are some of the aspects that impact its preservation.

Figure 2. Shoreline Apartments, designed by Paul Rudolph, November 2013. Photo by Barbara Campagna.

This paper will look at Brutalist icons in Buffalo, New York, which demonstrate the various aspects of trying to save these buildings. As a way to counteract misconceptions about modernism, this author taught taught a graduate seminar, "Preserving Modern Heritage," last spring in the University at Buffalo School of Architecture & Planning. The students' semester long project was to document a Buffalo modern building for the DOCOMOMO US Registry. Until this year, only two buildings in Buffalo were listed in the Registry, and one of those had been demolished in 1950! (The New York Central Terminal Railroad Station, an Art Deco masterpiece from 1929 and Wright's 1906 Larkin Administration Building, demolished 1950, were the only two Buffalo buildings listed.) Seven modern sites were ultimately listed as part of the class. Four buildings represent the Brutalist era and their appreciation or lack thereof seems to be related to ownership, building type, site plan, maintenance of material and perception of beauty. Those buildings remaining in the ownership of the original owners have fared much better than those that have not.

According to the Department of Energy Study on commercial buildings in 2003, the most energy efficient commercial buildings in the country were built before 1920 and after 1990, which would lead us to surmise that the most inefficient buildings in the country were built in the years in between.[i] And given the fact that 85% of our commercial building portfolio in the United States was built after 1945, the assumption can then easily be made that buildings from the modern era are the biggest problem we have from a climate change standpoint. Many would like you to think they're also the biggest problem we have in terms of aesthetics. Not only culturally, but also physically, the distance between past and present has become ever shorter, making preservation efforts increasingly more urgent while at the same time appearing far more dramatic because they are often experienced within the same generation as a building's construction.[ii] Since the Art Deco era, we have been asking ourselves do we need more time to appreciate buildings of our own recent past?

Despising the 1970s

The Buffalo News published an article on March 5, 2015 entitled "Unloved, Maybe, but Standing Tall" identifying the "most unloved buildings in Buffalo."[iii] According to the News' journalists "we aren't professional architectural critics, so wherever possible we tried to relay the critiques of others rather than impose our own views."[iv] Filled with anecdotes and randomly quoted negative comments, many from as long ago as twenty or thirty years, ten buildings are listed in Buffalo and Niagara Falls, all except one having been built in the early 1970s in the Brutalist style. The article is useful in documenting the overused and ill-informed epithets often applied to Brutalist

architecture. The article exploded online and was filled with dueling comments, from both normal citizens and trained professionals – with some of the most uninformed ones coming from "preservationists" in town sadly. [v]

One of the best examples of their "reporting" was related to the Buffalo City Court, "Built in 1974, and designed by Buffalo architects Pfohl, Roberts & Biggie, the Buffalo City Court building looms like a monolith over Niagara Square with its façade of massive concrete panels. Defenders say the City Court Building is a classic example of Brutalist architecture, and that's certainly a good word for it. The building looks like it would be right at home in a bleak, post-apocalyptic graphic novel."[vi]

Case Studies

Given that so many people find "brutalist" an appropriate description of these buildings and believe it gives them carte blanche to hate them, a variety of case studies in Buffalo have been reviewed. Five buildings in Buffalo are discussed below, 4 were submitted to the DOCOMOMO registry as part of the University at Buffalo class in 2014.

The Buffalo Evening News Building, Registry Fiche documented and prepared by Aaron Salva[vii]

Figure 3. Exterior View of the Buffalo Evening News Building. Source: Robert M. Metz, Buffalo Evening News Photo Collection, January 6, 1973.

The Buffalo Evening News Building was designed in 1973 on the edge of downtown Buffalo by Edward Durell Stone using both site-cast and precast concrete. The complex has remained in use as the paper's headquarters and is in good condition, although its concrete and flat roof require constant maintenance. The News however has adequate facility staff who appreciate and maintain the building appropriately.

The construction of the Buffalo Evening News Building marked a significant move for the News as it brought back together the production and the administrative sides of business at one location, which had been separated for decades. At the time of its completion, it was one of Stone's last works. It was a time for Stone to reflect on his previous work and projects that he was influenced by but there was also the large task to fit it into the context of Buffalo's rich architectural history. The project melded the influences of Buffalo's heavy Gothic architecture tradition with the purity and minimalism of the International Movement. Stone reinterpreted Le Corbusier's five points in one heavy monolithic move. At the time it was an important piece of the Modern Movement in Buffalo but did not receive as much national recognition as his previous work. The complex has remained in use as

the Buffalo News Headquarters and remains in fairly good condition. There is no current threat to this complex, but a better level of appreciation of this restrained yet significant structure is desirable. Even the March Buffalo News article noted, "Some people might put The Buffalo News Headquarters building on the unloved list," although they did not.[viii]

To read Aaron's full Registry fiche, click here
http://docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/buffalo_evening_news_building

Temple Beth Zion, Registry Fiche documented and prepared by Madelyn Mcclellan[ix]

Figure 4. Temple Beth Zion, Delaware Avenue Entrance. Source: Buffalo Historical Museum, 1967.

The Temple Beth Zion, designed by Max Abramovitz in 1967, is representative of the Brutalist movement, although with symbolic intent and softer use of material. Following the destruction of the earlier synagogue from fire, the congregation, which was established in 1863, hired New York City architect Max Abramovitz to design a new temple. Opening in 1967, this building received both national and local praise for its beauty and progressive aesthetic stature. The architectural mindset at that time was focused on the need to find a modern aesthetic to represent traditional forms and cultural values. Locally, the design was not well received, initially. Because the congregation had such presence within Buffalo, the new construction gained quite a bit of local press and attention. Even though the local media attention was relatively unbiased, the public opinion, upon release of the rendering in the newspaper, was quite negative. After the building was constructed however, people were able to experience the simplistic grandeur and the local opinion changed.

Figure 5. Temple Beth Zion, View of Ark, from upper balcony. Source: Buffalo Historical Museum, 1967.

Monolithic concrete walls with exposed aggregate and fastener holes reference typical simplistic, unadorned brutalist material approach, allowing the symbolism to read through the form. The ten scallops along the exterior facade represent the 10 commandments and the slight outward angle represents arms raised in praise. Meanwhile, the rough face of the concrete reminds the congregation of its roots in antiquity. The complex remains a beloved symbol of the congregation and is not threatened.

To read Madelyn's full Registry fiche, click here
http://docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/temple_beth_zion

One Seneca Tower (former HSBC Center), Registry Fiche documented and prepared by Dillon Galvis[x]

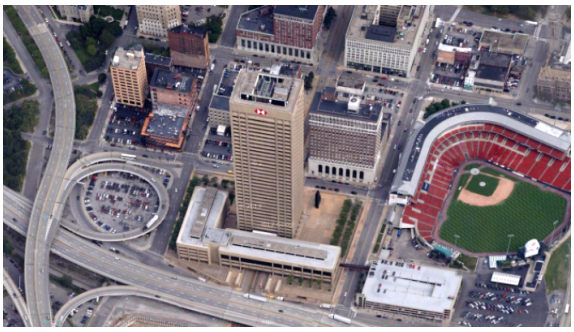

Figure 6. One Seneca Tower, arial view. Source: Gizmodo.com, November 23, 2013.

Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) designed this precast concrete building in 1972 as a bank's headquarters. At 40 stories, it remains the tallest privately owned building outside of New York City. It has a conflicted relationship with Main Street, which is articulated through a barren tunnel and windswept plazas at the base of the building. Its most recent tenant, HSBC, moved out in 2013, leaving the building 95% vacant with its owners in bankruptcy.

The precast concrete building was constructed in 1972 specifically for Marine Midland Savings Bank's Headquarters. The architects (SOM) were commissioned to erect the tallest building in Buffalo, which ultimately topped out at 40 stories. Today, the building's profile defines the downtown Buffalo skyline. Its location and height allow for amazing views of Lake Erie, the Buffalo River, and the entire region. The modern, unornamented Brutalist building was built for the purpose of a bank, and did not take much consideration of the surrounding context of the site. It is placed perpendicular to the other buildings and acts as a barrier to the higher and lower sections of Main Street. The building's entrances are all set back from the surrounding streets, with little protection for poor weather conditions. This building's ongoing vacancy is one of the blights on Buffalo's current renaissance. It is one of the least liked buildings in Buffalo because of its massive, unadorned exterior and its relationship to Buffalo's urban renewal era.

To read Dillon's full Registry fiche, click here
http://docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/one_seneca_tower_former_hsbc_center

Willert Park Courts, Registry Fiche documented and prepared by Nicholas Batson[xi]

Figure 7. Willert Park Courts, outdoor spaces. Source: Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority, Center for Urban Planning, SUNY at Buffalo, date unknown.

Although not Mid-century Modern, Willert Park Courts, was one of the earliest International Style buildings in Western New York and had a huge impact on Buffalo's modern designers. Now officially titled the Alfred D. Price Courts, after the complex's long-time manager, the Courts were part of a housing experiment in 1939. The housing project was designed for African Americans and remained as such throughout its years of occupancy. Frederick C.

Backus, a local architect, designed the project. His design called for ten buildings containing close to 175 residential units, situated mostly parallel around a central courtyard. This was one of the first public housing developments to incorporate such an arrangement and a wide use of green space. To give the design an aesthetic other than the brick façade, Backus worked with Robert Cronbach and Harold Ambellan from the Federal Arts Program to design sculptures with the theme of work and working class life. The tinted concrete panels, situated at the entrances of each building, added a different look to the project and made it one of the first in Buffalo to involve sculpture in housing design. The complex is significant culturally, historically, socially and architecturally as the first housing complex for African-Americans in Buffalo and as an early International Style design. The complex has been vacant and abandoned for a decade and is threatened with demolition. Despite receiving approval for local landmark designation by the Buffalo Preservation Board, the Common Council denied its designation because its neighbors "were opposed to it, although they do want to see the artwork embedded in the walls preserved."

To read Nick's full Registry fiche, click here
http://docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/willert_park_courts_1

Paul Rudolph and Western New York

Figure 8. Shoreline Apartments, corner of Niagara and Carolina Streets, November 2013. Photo by Barbara Campagna.

Perhaps the most hated buildings in Buffalo are those designed by Paul Rudolph. Paul Rudolph's Shoreline Apartments, a 1971-1974 complex of low-income housing which occupies 9.5 acres on the edge of downtown Buffalo, is facing the first of several projected phases of "upgrades" which call for demolition of currently unoccupied Rudolph-designed units and replacement with suburban like townhouses.

Paul Rudolph brought his singular brand of sculptural modernism to Western New York in the early 1970s. In a span of two years, three buildings were built to his designs: the Waterfront School and Community Center (1974-1977) design concept by Rudolph and executed by local architects Hess and Gorey, the Earl W. Brydges Public Library in Niagara Falls (1973-1974) and the Shoreline Apartments in downtown Buffalo (1971-1974). The Waterfront School and Shoreline Apartments face one another across a wide expanse of green which has never been used or landscaped in the way it was intended.

National Recognition

Rudolph's first scheme was featured in the September 1972 edition of Architectural Record. It was also featured in a 1970 Museum of Modern Art exhibition entitled *Work in Progress*. "With few exceptions, Paul Rudolph's buildings can be

recognized by their complexity, their sculptural details, their effects of scale and their texture," wrote Arthur Drexler, the longstanding Director of MoMA's Architecture and Design Department, in 1970. Drexler exhibited Rudolph's original, much more dramatic scheme for Buffalo's Shoreline Apartments alongside pending projects by Philip Johnson and Kevin Roche in the exhibit. The projects on display were compiled to represent a commitment "to the idea that architecture, besides being technology, sociology and moral philosophy, must finally produce works of art." Drexler wrote in the exhibition brief that, despite the project's massive scale, it was "designed to suggest human use, affording both inhabitants and passersby a kaleidoscopic variety." [xii]

Shoreline Apartments

Figure 9. Shoreline Apartments, Photo in Architectural Record, September 1972.

The Shoreline Apartments, a public housing development, was commissioned by the Urban Development Corporation, a State agency, in 1969. The complex was originally part of a very large waterfront development of market rate and low-income housing. The ambitious urban renewal project in the shadow of Buffalo's City Hall originally included a marina which was never built. The Shoreline Apartments that stand today represent a scaled down version of the original plan. Featuring shed roofs, ribbed or corduroy concrete exteriors, projecting balconies and enclosed garden courts, the project combined Rudolph's spatial radicalism with experiments in human-scaled, low-rise, high-density housing developments. The project's weaving site plan was meant to create active communal green spaces, but, like those of most if its contemporaries, the spaces went unused and the high crime rate over the years has often been attributed to the design rather than the poor management.[xiii]

Still low-income housing, Shoreline is currently threated by the current owners who are proposing demolishing five of the original 32 buildings and replacing them with "Nouveau Victorian fiber cement board suburban rowhouses," as a local architect and friend has coined these uninspired replacements.[xiv]

The Demolition Plans

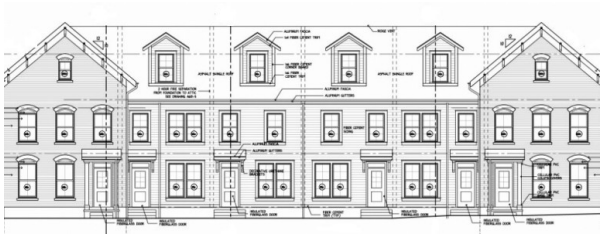

Figure 10. One of the several types of new brick and cement fiber board buildings to replace Rudolph's buildings. Drawing courtesy Buffalo Rising, October 8, 2014.

There are two 40 existing serpentine sections of housing. Phase 1, which opened in 1972, was renovated in 2010, which included the removal of two of the original twelve buildings. Phase 2, which opened in 1974, faces Niagara Street and contains 22 buildings. The five furthest from downtown, at

Carolina and Niagara Streets, are vacant and are the ones proposed for demolition. The buildings both inside and out are actually in remarkably good shape for 40 year-old concrete block buildings. Structurally they are very sound. The current windows are replacements from an earlier renovation and were not good replacements when they were installed. The UDC and subsequent owners have not done well by Mr. Rudolph. There is no valid architectural reason to demolish the buildings other than the owner does not like them, and has not maintained them properly. Their proposal is to completely abandon Rudolph's master planned community and planning approach and replace them with three-story high faux "Victorian" row houses. There has been a lot of discussion about returning this acreage to the 19th century streetscape for which it was torn down. However, the proposed replacements are the worst of pseudo-historicism. Cities evolve. If we removed every building in America that was the result of "urban renewal" our cities would reference only traditional nostalgia.

The Shoreline Apartments Today

Norstar Development has owned the site since 2005. Like many of Shoreline's public housing contemporaries, the inventive, complex forms and admirable social aspirations of the development have been overshadowed by disrepair, crime, and startling vacancy rates (30 percent in 2006 according to *Buffalo Rising*).[xv] Originally built with over 400 units on 9.5 acres, a 2007 renovation merged many of the units to a lesser count, with Norstar reportedly spending $19 million on "sprucing up" the complex with new facades, windows and railings. According to a report in Buffalo's *Business First*, "The Shoreline Apartments have 426 total units although 89 have been "off line" since 2004 because such issues as needed elevator repairs[xvi]. Of the remaining 337 apartments, nearly 75 percent — or 270 in hard numbers, are occupied." Having toured the vacant and abandoned buildings I can attest to the fact that there is nothing wrong with them other than years of no or little maintenance.

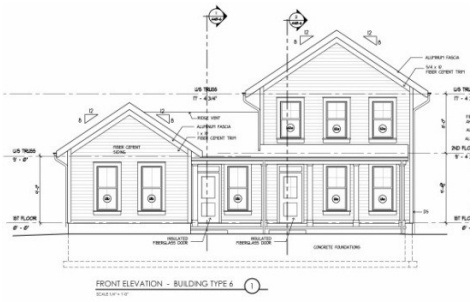

Figure 11. Figure 12. One of the several types of new brick and cement fiber board buildings to replace Rudolph's buildings. Drawing courtesy Buffalo Rising, October 8, 2014.

On November 6, 2013 Norstar presented plans to the City of Buffalo's Planning Board to demolish five of the currently vacant Rudolph buildings on Niagara Street and Carolina Street, replacing them with eight suburban-style affordable residential townhouses with 48 units. Reportedly this is "Phase 1" of their plan with future phases not yet identified, but likely similar. Once five are removed, the rest become even easier to remove. The Planning Board approved the draft SEQR plan and approved the plan as presented. Every attempt is being made to wipe the street and slate clean of Rudolph's innovative designs.

Since Norstar is financing the work with funding from the New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal as well as with an annual allocation of low-income housing tax credits, the project is required to be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office under Section 106 for any impacts to a potentially eligible historic site. While demolition has not yet begun, it does appear that the five buildings will be demolished and replaced with the absolute worst, mediocre suburban-looking buildings and site plan.

Moving Forward

Figure 13. Shoreline Apartments, several of the buildings scheduled for demolition, February 2014. Photo by Barbara Campagna.

It is easy to blame the buildings and grounds for the vacancy rates and crime in modern public housing developments. But a walk around the site today, shows blocks full of buildings in various states of repair with little thought given or planning to the expansive land on which it sits. The private balconies and garden courts are desirable features in high-end condos all over town and the 9.5 acres of mostly ill-used land would be desirable in any city. A good architect and landscape architect, with the ability to respect Rudolph's intent while recommending native and more sustainable land use approaches, could do wonders with this complex. The owner's constant complaint that the buildings are in poor condition and energy inefficient only confirms their lack of care.

It has also not gone unnoticed that another groundbreaking modern public housing complex is also under imminent threat in Buffalo. The Willert Park Courts, now called the A. D. Price Housing, a ten two-and-three story brick multiple dwelling complex designed by Buffalo architect Frederick C. Backus and built in 1939-1940, is owned by the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority who has announced plans to demolish the entire complex. The design was based on the functional, flat-roofed blocks similar to German public housing projects and is ornamented with a series of cast relief sculptures on the theme of labor and family life. The buildings are vacant with windows wide open, missing doors and deteriorating sculpture despite the fact that they have been determined eligible for the National Register.

It seems ironic that both of these Buffalo public housing projects were singled out by the Museum of Modern Art for their architectural significance. Shoreline was included in the 1970 exhibition, *Work in Progress,* while Willert Park Courts was included in MoMA's 1940 guidebook, Guide to Modern Architecture of the Northeast States as one of only eight buildings considered as significant modern architecture in Buffalo. [xvii]

Developing Local Policies for Preserving Modernism

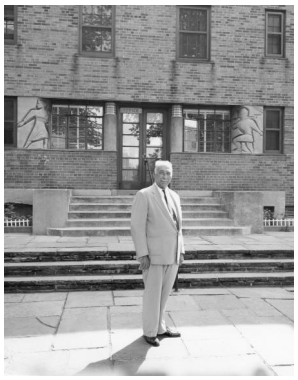

Figure 14. Willert Park Courts, Alfred D. Price standing in front of the entrance to the administration building. Source: Center for Urban Planning, SUNY at Buffalo, date unknown.

Both of these housing complexes have been determined eligible for the National Register but better organized neighbors and owners have managed to defeat the local landmarking of both sites, which would have given them the best protection. Willert Park Courts was actually approved for landmarking by the Buffalo Preservation Board but denied by the Common Council because neighbors "were against the designation." Shoreline received a vote of 4/3 for landmarking but 6 votes were needed to pass. The complex was not landmarked. The State Historic Preservation Office is still reviewing the project, which is using state funds, and there is still a chance that this demolition could be put on hold. We are in dangerous territory in preservation law when neighbors can impact a landmark designation because they do not "like" the buildings and when preservation board members vote for their opinion of aesthetics over criteria.

Buffalo has no dedicated modernism non-profit and indeed there are only a handful of DOCOMOMO members west of Syracuse. I co-administer a Facebook group, Mid Century Modern Buffalo, started by a colleague of mine, Joe Incao, and we have used this avenue to share concerns and wins with our 450 members. In the past year, advocacy efforts to save these two modernist affordable housing complexes from full or partial demolition led to a public forum on modernism (co-sponsored with Preservation Buffalo Niagara, the Preservation League of New York State and DOCOMOMO US) and two local landmark designation submissions, both which ultimately failed. We have a lot of work ahead of us to better inform Western New York residents and even preservationists about the significance and nuances of modernism.

The owner of Shoreline, brought a busload of advocates against the landmarking of the complex with them to the landmarks hearing, including professionals paid to spew the usual misinformation about modernism and Brutalism:

"Urban Renewal is the reason the preservation movement was founded. Do we want to save the very buildings that caused our movement?" From an architect on the Landmarks Board.

"They blew up Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis because the buildings caused the crime. We need to do the same with Shoreline." From a preservationist consulting for the owner.

"The buildings cause the crime and promote deviant activities." From a preservationist consulting for the owner.

“The windows and roof leak.” “There’s not enough light on the grounds at dark.” From residents.

“The architecture invites crime.” From a local police officer.

“It’s so scary, I wouldn’t want to sleep there.” From an architect on the Landmarks Board.

And this was my favorite from a neighbor, “Everyone should be able to live in a Victorian house with a porch like I do.”

With these potential losses, the significance of documenting modern buildings while we still have them, becomes even more important. I am very proud of the efforts of our seven students and the variety of buildings they chose to document for the DOCOMOMO Registry. To our colleagues who like to spew New Urbanism rhetoric, there is room enough in our culture for Victorian porches and modernist planning. Some do admire both the good and bad about the “urban renewal” era and as one of the Landmark board members who voted for Shoreline’s landmarking said, “No one has been sentenced to live at Shoreline. Everyone chose to live there.” And as colleagues at the SHPO like to remind us, the National Register is not a beauty contest, its purpose is to tell the story of America.

Looking to the Future

Figure 15. The Buffalo Evening News Building from Main Street, April 2014. Photo by Barbara Campagna.

It seems that weekly we read of another Rudolph building endangered or another Brutalist building demolished. Would these buildings have fared better if our great critic Reyner Banham had never popularized the Anglicization of “Beton Brut” to Brutalism? These case studies in Buffalo demonstrate that certain buildings with the Brutalist label seem to be managing better than others. Temple Beth Zion and The Buffalo News Headquarters are well maintained and still owned by the original owners who commissioned them. Of the two, Temple Beth Zion is considered by most to be beautiful. Although it is constructed of concrete, its symbolic ornamentation seems to be appreciated and understood. The Buffalo News Headquarters is both loved and hated, its simplistic exterior may not be understood or appreciated by many but its glorious interior, which wraps around brilliant skylights and its exterior walkway which provides views of the waterfront and the grain elevators, provide great interest to occupants and visitors.

The public housing label on both Willert Park Courts and the Shoreline Apartments are definitely the most challenging aspect of these two complexes. One Seneca Center's urban renewal history and site planning is likely its most difficult feature. The unornamented exteriors of all three, however, do not serve them well for the traditionalists in Buffalo. It is interesting to note that the only features at Willert Park Courts that neighbors and politicians care to save are the decorative concrete panels at the entrances.

Local planning of the Shoreline project began in 1963. That October, Buffalo's City Council approved with a vote of 13 to 1 a waterfront urban renewal plan with proposed "high income and middle-income apartments, commercial developments, park areas and a marina."[xviii] This plan was supported by statistical evidence from the 1960 US Census showing a general population decline within the City of Buffalo. Relocation of residents began in 1964 and by 1968 planning for the demolition of the "dilapidated or decaying homes in [the] rapidly deteriorating" neighborhood had begun."[xix] The two blocks that would become the Shoreline Apartments had contained numerous single and multi-family houses, warehouses and Public School up until the demolition. The Rudolph complex was created to replace dilapidated blocks of streetscape in the 1960s and now 40 years later, we have come full circle.

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