

Statement  
on  
The Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Lecture Hall,  
and Elevator Lobby, 809 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan

The Society of Architectural Historians  
Heritage Conservation Committee

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses great concern over the undertaking to dismantle, store, and eventually create travelling exhibitions out of portions of the of the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Lecture Hall, and Elevator Lobby, formerly located at 809 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan. The SAH further understands that these constituent parts have already been removed from their original location on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the building.

SAH is the principal scholarly organization for architectural historians in North America. It does not regularly become involved in local preservation issues and speaks only to issues of national and international importance. We evaluate threats to nationally and internationally significant architectural resources thoroughly, and do not take positions on them lightly.

The Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms contained two conference rooms separated by a folding partition, a 300-person lecture hall, and an elevator lobby. Constructed between 1964 and 1965, the rooms were designed by internationally known Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and his wife, designer Elissa Aalto. Commissioned by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., whose family commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design Fallingwater, the conference room and lobby were a highly significant suite representing a rare North American work. The conference rooms also represent one of only four surviving properties designed by an architect who is unquestionably one of the great artists and humanists of the twentieth century, and whose signature design tropes are evident. These include his virtuosic sculpting of the double-height space to enable the view out across the UN Plaza and the East River, his skillful use of both natural and artificial light and familiar, sensual material choices such bent wood bas reliefs, and a selection of blue, tubular Arabia tiles, all of which impart a distinctive and unmistakable character to the suite. When completed, New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called it the “most beautiful and distinguished interior New York has seen in many years.”

Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) realized only four projects in the United States: The Finland National Pavilion at the World's Fair in 1939; Baker House at MIT in Cambridge, MA, the Mount Angel Abbey Library in St. Benedict, OR, and the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Room. If this project continues as proposed, it will result in an irreparable loss. As proposed, there are significant challenges facing both material treatment and spatial considerations. While it said that the Arabia wall tiles would be removed, they are not simply thin tiles applied to the walls but rather heavy tubular tiles with open backs designed to be set into the wall in a heavy mortar bed, and unlikely to be a simple removal. Even if the wall tiles can be removed safely, they are part of a constellation of materials -- including flooring, partitions, ceiling materials, and lighting -- that work together to create a rich spatial experience. To excise even one element would destroy this carefully planned harmony. While presented as preservation, this project is at best a salvage operation, with significant elements removed and stored, for a traveling exhibit that does not yet exist.

The Kaufmann Conference Rooms are - or to be more accurate, were - located on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of 809 UN Plaza; that building has passed through a series of owners, contributing to this preservation issue. When Aalto began work on the Kaufmann conference rooms, the building was owned by the Institute for International Education (IIE). The building was later sold by IIE to the Foundation for the Support of the United Nations (FSUN), an organization backed by Japanese investors, in 1998. In 2000, FSUN announced plans to redevelop the building as offices, and as a response, in 2001 the Kaufmann Conference Rooms were proposed to the New

York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for interior designation. The Kaufmann Conference Rooms were considered by the LPC on 20 November 2001 and 10 September 2002; the LPC did not take action.

Interior landmarking of the Kaufmann Conference Rooms was again pursued in 2015, as a part of an effort by the LPC to clear backlogged applications dating before 2010. On 12 November 2015, SAH wrote in support of the application before LPC in support of the designation of the Kaufmann Conference Rooms. At that time, SAH joined a broad coalition of architecture, arts, preservation organizations in support of the listing, including 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 many scholars, curators, architects, and other designers. In the resulting hearing, LPC announced that the Kaufmann Conference Rooms could not be landmarked on the grounds that the rooms were not publicly accessible.

In the years that followed, the building changed hands again. In 2019, floors 1-4 and 7 of the building were sold to the State of Qatar and is used as Qatar's permanent mission to the UN. While the government of Qatar does not own the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, in a press release issued by the Alvar Aalto Foundation the State of Qatar was identified as the conference rooms' owner. The State of Qatar has since donated the Kaufmann Conference Rooms to Finland, which is now the steward of its contents.

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses great concern over the undertaking to dismantle, store, and at some point, in the future, create travelling exhibitions out of portions of the of the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Lecture Hall, and Elevator Lobby, 809 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan.

Sincerely,



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

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*Society of Architectural Historians*  
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