



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza • Agency Building 1, Albany, New York 12238
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David A. Paterson
Governor
Carol Ash
Commissioner

June 9, 2008

Ms. Kristen Mucitelli-Heath
Special Advisor to the Commissioner
Empire State Development
NYS Dept. of Economic Development
30 South Pearl St.
Albany, NY 12245

Mr. Steve Golding
Director, Downtown Development
City Hall
Room 005-A
30 Church Street
Rochester, NY 14614

Dear Ms. Mucitelli-Heath and Mr. Golding:

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has concluded that Midtown Plaza is eligible for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places pursuant to Section 14.09 of the Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law. The basis for the agency's determination, which identifies the atrium portion of this site as the most salient feature, is described on the attached letter and fact sheet.

We are aware that redevelopment of the Midtown Plaza site to serve as the future headquarters of the telecommunications firm PAETEC and other commercial uses is a high priority for New York State and the City of Rochester – as evidenced by Governor Paterson's announcement, during a visit to the site in March, that New York State is committing up to \$65 million to the project.

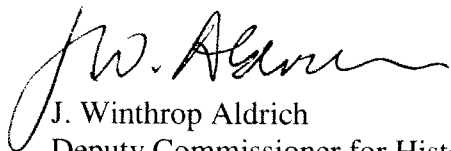
OPRHP's determination does not stop the Midtown Plaza revitalization initiative. Rather, the eligibility finding requires the City and ESDC to consider the historic values of the atrium as the project proceeds. Specifically, the City of Rochester and ESDC should explore whether there are feasible design alternatives – considering economic, engineering, and design factors – that avoid or mitigate adverse impacts on the facility, particularly the atrium portion. OPRHP looks forward to working with ESDC in this review.

The alternatives analysis could identify a project design that incorporates the existing historic resource, or portions thereof, into the overall redevelopment design for the Midtown Plaza site. If no feasible options are identified, other possible mitigation measures, including appropriate recordation prior to any demolition work, would be considered.

This review can be efficiently incorporated into project analysis being undertaken under the State Environmental Quality Review Act – consideration of historic resources can be seamlessly folded into the development of the Environmental Impact Statement required for the Midtown Plaza project. The 14.09 historic preservation review should not delay the City's and ESDC's existing project schedule. In fact, undertaking the 14.09 review at the front end of project design avoids the risk of delay at a future stage of the project (for example, the 14.09 review will expedite federal requirements under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, which would apply if any federal funds are dedicated to the Midtown Plaza project in the future).

Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can provide additional information or guidance to assure the timely analysis of historic preservation issues in the overall Midtown Plaza project. Our agency stands ready to assist in advancing this vitally important economic development initiative.

Very truly yours,



J. Winthrop Aldrich
Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation

Enclosures

cc w/enc: Merideth Andreucci
Director, Business Development-Upstate
Empire State Development Corp.
400 Andrews St.
Rochester, NY 14604

Thomas Richards, Corp. Counsel
Law Dept.
City Hall
30 Church St.
Rochester, NY 14614

Doraine Laudisi, Sr. City Planner
Dept. of Community Dev.
City Hall
30 Church St.
Rochester, NY 14614

RESOURCE EVALUATION

Date: 3/6/2008 Staff: Robert T. Englert
Property: Midtown Plaza MCD: ROCHESTER
Address: East Main St, South Clinton Ave,
Broad St, Chestnut St. Midtown Plaza. County: Monroe
Project Ref. No.: 08PR01197 USN: 05540.008441

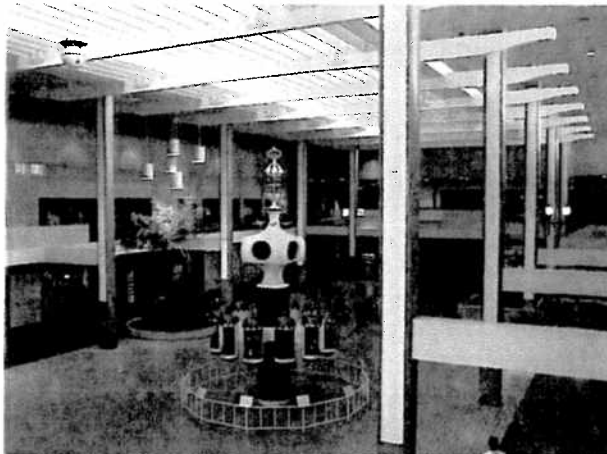
- I. ☐ Property is individually listed on SR/NR :
Name of listing :
☐ Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district:
Name of District:
- II. ☐ Property meets eligibility criteria
☐ Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.
- Pre SRB: ☐ Post SRB: ☐ SRB Date

Criteria for inclusion in the National Register.

- A ☒ **Associated** with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B ☐ **Associated** with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C ☒ Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possess high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose component may lack individual distinction;
- D ☐ **Have** yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Based on the information provided, Midtown Plaza appears to meet the criteria for listing in the State and National Registers of Historic Places as a highly intact early prototype of the enclosed shopping mall developed by nationally renowned architect/planner/theorist Victor Gruen. Using pre-existing urban fabric and new construction, Midtown is arguably Gruen's best expression of his ideal commercial mall as village/community center, combining retail, office, hotel, transportation and restaurant facilities in one coordinated complex. The intact courtyard/mall space is also an excellent example of period design, employing a subtle interplay of color and texture in the hard, i.e. tile and stone, surfaces, fountains, and the distinctive 'village clock' at the center with its animated vignettes of major world cultures, expressing the then-emerging image of the 'global village'.





Victor Gruen was a prominent architect, planner, writer, and urban thinker. Born and educated in Vienna, Gruen was an influential designer of post-war American commercial architecture, and invented and/or popularized several strategies including the first enclosed shopping mall (Southdale Shopping Center, near Minneapolis), the first downtown pedestrian mall (Kalamazoo, Michigan), and store modernization. His career was documented in the recent book *Mall Maker*.

Midtown was a significant and influential example of Gruen's efforts to revitalize urban commercial cores. Rochester was the third city for which Gruen designed a downtown revitalization plan (after Fort Worth, which was not implemented, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, only a small portion of which was implemented); he went on to design dozens more.

Gruen's plan for the revitalization of downtown Rochester followed the same formula as his other downtown plans: separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic; creating a network of ring highways (or, in Rochester's case, integrating with an already planned highway network) and parking garages that would bring suburbanites downtown and provide a place to park; and modernizing storefronts to create a more up-to-date look. The goal was to enhance downtown retail, and specifically to attract middle-class suburbanites to shop downtown, by making downtown attractive, multifunctional and modern to compete with the amenities offered in the suburbs.

Gruen's specific plan for Midtown was innovative in that it incorporated many different functions into a single complex: retail, parking, "public space," hotel, office, public transportation (bus terminal), restaurant, public auditorium, meeting rooms, "children's play and amusement area," private technical schools, bank, post office, art galleries. As Gruen intended, Midtown has functioned as and has been perceived as a town square/public gathering place for Rochester. At the same time, it was private space, an early example of the privatization of "public" space seen in the evolution of shopping malls, theme parks, and other post-World War II environments.

Rochester implemented Gruen's recommendations quite completely, possibly more completely than any other city for which Gruen did a revitalization plan. That original design is quite intact, particularly in the atrium, which is virtually unaltered and includes works of art designed for the space as well as nearly all its original materials and finishes.

Midtown was the first downtown enclosed mall in the country. It is not known how many other such malls were created, but they appear to have been somewhat widespread as neighboring Buffalo and Syracuse both have later examples.

Midtown Plaza opened to tremendous acclaim and national press; Rochester was hailed as having discovered the solution to downtown decay (even the World Book Encyclopedia cited Rochester for this achievement); planners from around the country came to see what Rochester had done; even the U.S. Congress held a hearing in Midtown.

- It was praised in *Architectural Forum*
- *Washington Star* called it "the Nation's most spectacular center-city revival;" many other big-city papers also hailed it
- The Urban Land Institute enthusiastically endorsed it
- The World Book Encyclopedia featured it as the best answer to downtown problems
- The public enthusiastically embraced Midtown at the time it was constructed; Rochesterians who were here in the 1960s and 1970s recall the thrill of going to Midtown. It was an important part of mid- to late-20th century Rochester culture.

The underground garage that was an integral part of the Midtown plan was particularly heralded as innovative and significant.

Midtown is associated with two prominent Rochester families, the Formans and McCurdys. Gilbert McCurdy and Maurice and Fred Forman, owners of two of Rochester's most prominent department stores, observed (and contributed to) the migration of retail business to the suburbs in the mid-1950s and decided to work together to "effect significant and long-lasting improvements in our downtown area." It was their vision for the revitalization of downtown that led them to contact Gruen and to work closely with the city to implement Gruen's plan. The construction of Midtown was an innovative and very successful example of a public-private partnership. The specific financing structure used to create Midtown was never repeated.

-- Background information provided in part by the Landmark Society of Western New York, 133 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester, NY 14608

-- If you have any questions concerning this Determination of Eligibility, please call Robert T. Englert at 518-237-8643. ext 3268
