

CITY

September 10, 2009 9:23 AM

## DOCOMOMO



### STEEL

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The funny title of this story stands for "**[Do](http://www.docomomo-us.org/) (http://www.docomomo-us.org/) [cumentation](http://www.docomomo-us.org/) and (http://www.docomomo-us.org/) [Co](http://www.docomomo-us.org/) (http://www.docomomo-us.org/) [nservation of buildings sites and neighborhoods of the \(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \[Mo\]\(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \[dern\]\(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \[Mo\]\(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \[vement\]\(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\) \(http://www.docomomo-us.org/\)](http://www.docomomo-us.org/)**". The name is self-descriptive of the group's mission. I bring up this group because frequent BRO writer West Coast Perspective recently sent me a picture of the Tishman Building showing on going construction work being done at street level. The first thing that popped into my mind was **DOCOMOMO**.

The Tishman Building is one of a very small number of mid-century works of architecture in the city. Apparently the current owners are remodeling the lobby to make the building more attractive to tenants. The Tishman building was built in the 1950's and was Buffalo's first major downtown building after the long drought of WWII and the depression. With its then fantastically modern skin of glass soaring up from the sidewalk, it was also a radical departure from every other building in Buffalo at the time. It is not an architectural masterpiece, but today remains as a solidly positive contributor to the urban fabric of downtown Buffalo.

([http://www.buffalorising.com/assets\\_c/2009/09/tishman\\_full-thumb-330x487-5711.png](http://www.buffalorising.com/assets_c/2009/09/tishman_full-thumb-330x487-5711.png))

Aside from the fact that it replaced a stunningly beautiful Victorian building on this site, it is hard to find fault with Tishman as a city building. It fills its site and provides a great urban wall for Lafayette Square. Its size and simple form, along with its contrasting glassiness, makes for a great partner for the adjacent Deco styled Rand Building. It has big plate glass storefront windows that



give the building a friendly, open face to pedestrians. Its glass skin was very striking in its day. It was nothing like anything else in Buffalo at the time. I am sure it made a big stir when it opened. At only 20 stories, this is a tiny building as far as skyscrapers go but the architects used a simple trick to give it a much bigger presence. By breaking up the sheer glass walls with smaller window panes, the building appears to be twice as tall--giving it a much more powerful presence on the street.



Alas, Tishman is now well into its most dangerous period of existence as a building. By the time many buildings reach 40 or so years in age, they start to fade. They no longer reside on the "A" list of properties. Their initial tenants have often moved on. They can no longer provide the amenities demanded by society, and often their architectural style is seen as tired and dated.

Imagine yourself back when Tishman first presented its slick modernism to Buffalo. It probably instantly transformed Buffalo's impression of what an office building should be. Buildings of an earlier era would have looked dull in comparison. The mid-century was a time when people yearned for clean modern buildings. It was a time when the rush was on to get rid of all the dark old buildings and replace them with new buildings with new modern materials, materials that matched the new technological age of mid-century. At this same time, the storefront facades of old Main Street were also being covered with extravaganzas of modernism not unlike the architecture of the popular world's fairs of the time. Tishman joined in by replacing the wonderful old and tired German Insurance Building and so on.

Now Tishman has reached that critical building lifetime threshold. Its original tenant is gone. It is too small, has no parking, and its once high-tech skin is no longer the marvel of modernism it used to be. Therefore, when I saw the renovation picture of this building, my first reaction was worry. Will this owner make improvements to this building that are in keeping with its original architecture, or will some ill-conceived "improvement" be made? Only time will tell, but if history is a guide, the "improvements" to this now aged building may be less than stellar.

Mid-century modern architecture is the poor orphan child of the preservation movement. Many don't recognize these buildings as a part of an important heritage worth protecting. They don't have the highly handcrafted, highly detailed forms that older buildings have, and they have only recently fallen on harder times. With so many older buildings in distress, it is often hard to focus on newer structures that are also in need of preservation. Buffalo has never had a large collection of mid century architecture and already a vast majority of what was here is gone.

Virtually all of the modern retail facades on Main Street have been removed, and the old modern AM&A store hangs on by a thread. This is the reason that **DOCOMOMO** (<http://www.docomomo-us.org/>) was started. The preservation of modern architecture is a growing issue throughout the US and the world. Early efforts at calling attention to the plight of modernist works of architecture were tenuous and were not treated seriously by the public and government agencies. The movement has gained a lot of momentum in recent years but, even today, the struggle to impress on people the importance these buildings represent to our heritage is an uphill battle. A Google search results in many articles on the subject. Almost every city in the country has been faced with the issue of loss to its collection of mid-century heritage. Seeing this happen to buildings from my youth gives me new insight into how we decimated our earlier heritage so easily. Here is a small sample.

Interesting side note: There is a slightly larger twin to the **Tishman Building in Cleveland** (<http://www.emporis.com/images/6/2001/12/134494.jpg>) at 1717 East 9th Street. Both buildings were erected in 1959 according to the Emporis database.

A few sample mid-century preservation stories:

Here @ **Illinois** (<http://www.state.il.us/HPA/ps/midcentury.htm>)

Here @ **Ecoabsence** (<http://ecoabsence.blogspot.com/2006/09/mid-century-modern-preservation.html>)

Here @ **Dallas** (<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/latestnews/stories/042008dnmetrecentpast.30302d9.html>)

Here @ **Commercial Appeal** (<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/jul/12/form-function/>)

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