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**Historic Columbus**

**Position Statement for the Government Center**

**June, 2017**

*Historic Columbus holds the position that the Government Center has architectural, cultural, and economic value, and the buildings should not be demolished.*

All options should be explored to find a solution for the Government Center site - whether it’s governmental in whole or in part, or entirely for an adaptive re-use. The existing buildings have the capacity to serve multiple uses, not solely governmental. If the property were sold by the City to a for-profit entity, federal rehabilitation tax credits, state rehab tax credits, and the state property tax freeze would all be available for use in the renovation of the site. Even though the Government Center has not yet hit the 50 year mark, there is a strong case for an early listing on the National Register for its architectural and cultural significance, as well as being a local iconic structure.

**Architectural Value**:

The Government Center was simply described by lead architect, Ed Neal, as “Modern.” Its architectural style is now formally known as New Formalism. This style contains elements of two common mid-century styles (International and Brutalism) and blends them with classical materials (columns) and forms (symmetrical).

Brutalist buildings have a look of weight and massiveness that immediately sets them apart from those of other predominantly rectangular, flat-roofed styles. Concrete is the favorite material; it is always left exposed and often rough-surfaced. This really describes the bottom of the tower and the large planters around the wings and the stairways.

The International Style is characterized by a lack of ornament. Flat roofs, smooth and uniform wall surfaces, windows that look as though they are a continuation of the surface rather than holes in the wall. Skeleton construction of steel or reinforced concrete is typical. The use of cantilevers is also popular both for carrying upper floors outside the supporting columns and for balconies and other projecting features. This element is really evident in the plaza – which was designed to be completely open with the walls of windows connecting you to the outside. This is how the plaza level should feel – very open – not being blocked by curtains on the windows.

It is also important to note that at the time, the tower was designed with the longest cantilever built in the United States.

**Cultural Value**:

Columbus was the last planned city of the 13 original colonies. From the earliest map of Columbus in 1828, the new city’s courthouse is located on the current block. The earliest courthouse was replaced in 1838 for a Greek Revival structure. In the 1890s, it was demolished and replaced by a Neoclassical building. By the 1960s, the city had outgrown that property and was ready to plan for a much larger and more modern complex to house the new consolidated county and city government needs.

Even as the building changed over the years, there were three continuous elements – the city’s original grid pattern, the public use of the block, and the incorporation of public open space.

**Economic Value**:

From the beginning of its planning stages, the Government Center complex was meant to represent a modern and forward thinking city. It achieved that through its architecture and its height. It has become an iconic image for Columbus and that has value.

Symbolism aside, there is practical value that can be further extracted from the site when the building’s preservation and adaptive reuse becomes a focus. Positively, the site is an entire city block in the downtown core. It has sub-surface parking, commanding views of the city, and opportunities for new construction which could better engage the street and provide a transition from the mid-century to the older buildings that surround it. Such new construction would fill the short-term need during the tower renovation, accommodate future growth when needed, and provide income to the city when leased in the interim.

Should the city wish to partner with a third party developer and lease space back, the site would be open to the full raft of historic tax credits and incentives. This would allow the city to adjust its space needs under this type of occupancy as any lease renews and would limit its need for capital repairs and improvements going forward. Most importantly, the private entity would be responsible for funding such a project removing the need for a Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST).

Even if the above was not compelling enough to solicit adaptive reuse planning, the saving of three million dollars associated with the demolition costs and filling space within the landfill to accommodate the materials should make a full evaluation of alternatives a high priority.

**The Case for Mid-Century**:

It’s common to note the failings of the past. It’s less easy for us to imagine how future generations might find us and our style wanting. The question is - are we on the edge of another era of destruction of our architectural and cultural heritage, specifically of our mid-century modern buildings?

Mid-century modern architecture is now in the same danger zone chronologically that late 19th-century buildings were in during the urban renewal period of the 1960s. These buildings are old enough to be considered dated, but not old enough to be considered ‘historic.’ The exact same was true of all those buildings that were torn down in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s and are now are so lamented.

Those buildings weren’t a hundred years old back then. They were considered functionally obsolete and they were in many cases in need of significant investment to upgrade. They were expensive to operate. They were no longer architecturally in fashion and there was a large supply of them, most of them “run of the mill” structures of little to no standalone significance. For every Penn Station that was demolished, there were dozens of unremembered buildings being razed.

It is easy to see how, in almost every individual case, the mid-century building in question will be considered expendable due to its lack of individual significance. And then one day we’ll wake up to find they are largely gone or mauled beyond recognition.

Today, it is difficult for us to appreciate and see the significance of these structures. We’re prisoners of our own age. It is important, vital, for us to be able to step outside ourselves, to see us as people 50 or 100 years from now might. What might they value in buildings? Might they not see the mid-century period as historic in its own right - just as we see Craftsman Bungalows, Colonial Revivals, or Spanish Eclectic. It seems possible.

Preservation is all about people and the places they care about. It was a handful of passionate supporters who started by saving the Springer, founding Historic Columbus, and renovating houses downtown one by one. It will also be the same for mid-century.