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It's only 43, but already it's historic--it's Highfield House

Architecture: Edward Gunts

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Usually, local buildings must be at least 50 years old to be designated as national landmarks. But for only the second time in its history, Baltimore's preservation commission has made an exception.

The panel voted this month to add Highfield House, a 16-story condominium building in Baltimore's Tuscany-Canterbury neighborhood, to the National Register of Historic Places - even though it's just 43 years old.

The only other Baltimore building individually listed before reaching 50 was One Charles Center, a 1962 office tower at 100 N. Charles St. It was added in 2000.

Both were designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, born in Germany and considered one of the giants of 20th-century architecture and the Modern design movement.

Some newer buildings may be found within historic districts on the National Register, but it has been rare for structures less than 50 years old to be listed singly, in part because federal guidelines make it harder. Buildings generally aren't listed, for example, while their principal designers are still living.

When structures are less than 50 years old, they also have to meet federal standards for "exceptional significance" in order to be listed. As a result, the landmark list is dominated by structures and districts that are much older.

Members of Baltimore's preservation panel say the Highfield House nomination, which the Maryland Historical Trust approved in October, could be the first of a wave of requests

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Highfield House (Sun photo by Lloyd Fox) May 10, 2007

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to recognize even more works of Modern architecture - buildings generally completed in the second half of the 20th century.

"This ... may be the start of something big in Baltimore," said commissioner Donald Kann.

Highfield House is one of five buildings or districts that Baltimore's Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) approved last week for listing on the National Register. The others were the 1866 Ruscombe Mansion near the Cylburn Arboretum, the 1892 Hendler Creamery Building in East Baltimore and districts in Upper Fells Point and Park Circle.

The University of Maryland's School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation in College Park recently conducted a survey of Modern buildings in Maryland, and the nomination grew out of that.

Highfield House was nominated because of its association with Mies van der Rohe, who died in 1969, and because it's "an outstanding example" of International Style architecture, according to preservation planner Eddie Leon. With its handsome proportions, large glass windows and lobby, flat roof and well-landscaped front lawn, the building stands out from its traditional, brick-clad neighbors on North Charles Street.

Regarded as one of the masters of modern architecture, the designer is known for mottos such as "less is more" and "God is in the details."

Listing a building on the National Register does not automatically protect it from demolition or restrict an owner's property rights, but it confers a measure of historic status that can be used in marketing, and it triggers a design review process if the owner wants to make changes using federal funds. National Register listing also makes owners eligible for tax credits for historic preservation, if they complete improvements that comply with federal restoration guidelines.

Owners of the 165 Highfield House condominiums were notified about the nomination, and many supported the idea, according to Toni Perkins, property manager for the condominium association.

"It's an action that the board has been pursuing," Perkins said. "People move there for the building and its architecture. The owners are extremely proud of it."

One of the strongest proponents of the landmark designation was Anne Bruder, an architectural historian who lives on the 12th floor.

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Besides the potential tax credits for renovations, the listing "recognizes the importance of Mies van der Rohe's contributions to the city and the state," Bruder said.

The preservation commission recently hired John Milner and Associates to help update its guidelines for nominating landmarks and reviewing and approving changes to them.

Kann said the unpaid citizens panel wants to be more aggressive about identifying buildings that deserve landmark status, on the national and local levels, before they become endangered.

"CHAP by and large is developing a mechanism to be more proactive across the board," he said. "I think we'll be seeing more modern buildings and landscapes" come up for landmark designation.

The preservation commissioners also asked city staffers to look into the possibility of nominating to the National Register a 1967 building in Charles Center, the dormant Morris A.

Mechanic Theatre.

Other structures that could come up for nomination include a house by Frank Lloyd Wright and a synagogue associated with Walter Gropius.

According to Peter Kurtze, National Register administrator for the Maryland Historical Trust, the only other Modern buildings or neighborhoods in Maryland on the federal list are a 1957-1958 house in Bethesda by Wright; a house outside Westminster by Henry Hebbeln; and three Montgomery County subdivisions planned by Charles M. Goodman Associates between 1949 and 1961.

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