

March 27, 1994

An Appraisal; Columbus Circle's Changing Face: More Than Geometry

By **HERBERT MUSCHAMP**

There are just three weeks left before the clock runs out on Mortimer Zuckerman's deal to develop the Coliseum site at Columbus Circle. And last week, Donald Trump jumped into this less-than-charmed circle with a proposal to reclad the bleak exterior of the former Gulf and Western Building and convert the interior from offices to condominiums. Meanwhile, one block to the north, the owners of the Mayflower Hotel are studying a plan to build an office tower.

Like the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, these three projects could well transport Columbus, or at least his towering, century-old statue, into a whole new world.

It is a troubled site, and its civic prominence only magnifies its architectural incoherence. Stylistically chaotic, unable even to control the flow of traffic that bumps and scrapes around its corroded perimeter, Columbus Circle is a monument to New York's inability to bring distinction or even sanity to its most eminent locations.

Still, it is no wonder that Columbus Circle is a mess, for it is a meeting point of extraordinary urban pressures: a subway hub; a portal not only to Central Park, but to the Upper West Side; one of Broadway's periodic interruptions of the Manhattan street grid; a transition between the staid residential boulevard of Central Park West and the commercial corridor that extends down Broadway to Times Square.

It will take more than three big real estate developments to balance these pressures with poise. Indeed, the trio could end up fragmenting the cityscape still further. But this new cycle of building at least offers an occasion to look at the historical context their architects must reckon with. A Century of Styles

The ticking sound of Mr. Zuckerman's countdown could well be coming from the ground itself, for it is possible to view Columbus Circle as a gigantic clock, an erratic urban timepiece that has been fitfully keeping time for just over a century. Styles mark the hours, starting with the turn-of-the-century City Beautiful Movement, represented here by the Columbus Monument at the hub, built in 1892, and by the 1913 Maine Monument, the ship of statues that comes sailing in from the park corner.

The ups and downs of modern architecture are registered here, including a good example of modern design at 240 Central Park South, an apartment and retail complex designed by Mayer & Whittlesey in 1941. With its strongly massed residential blocks rising from a gracefully scalloped retail arcade, this building demonstrates that modern architecture could be highly sympathetic to its surroundings. Even Robert A. M. Stern, an architect not usually enthusiastic about modern buildings, hails the design, in his book "New York 1930," as "an exemplar of humane values applied to the problem of high-density city living and as a finely tuned instrument of urbanism."

Does anyone have anything nice to say about the Coliseum? With its facade of dull tan brick, studded with state insignia like a row of grotesquely enlarged souvenir cufflinks, the 1956 building, designed by Leon and Lionel Levy, has long epitomized the fatal proximity of modern minimalism to timeless cheapness. Still, as one approaches the building along Central Park South, the stodgy apparition can nonetheless give rise to a sense of wonder: Someone thought this was a good idea.

Two Columbus Circle, now occupied by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, represented the initial stirrings of dissatisfaction with modernist orthodoxy. The building's architect, Edward Durell Stone, was one of the first to break ranks with his modern contemporaries, and this white marble bauble, originally designed in 1965 for Huntington Hartford's contentiously anti-modern Gallery of Modern Art, threw many architects into an uproar. With its vaguely Venetian loggia and ground-floor colonnade, this cultural campanile violated the modernist taboo against historically derived decoration.

Alas, the taboo was still in place five years later, when Thomas E. Stanley designed the Gulf and Western tower. Urbanistically the weakest building in the circle, the building neither holds the circle's perimeter edge nor respects the lower scale of the Central Park West buildings beyond. Instead of molding itself to Columbus Circle, Gulf and Western simply added new circles of its own: a sunken entrance to the subway station, a raised kiosk for the cinema buried beneath its forlorn plaza. By 1970, however, the modern movement's ideological foundations had been irremediably weakened: a fact metaphorically confirmed by the Gulf and Western building's legendary sway in high winds.

But Columbus Circle is more than a collection of architectural styles. Its individual buildings represent different urban visions. City Beautiful architects envisioned a city of stately marble vistas, lined with classical colonnades, statues and fountains. Modern architects imagined a vertical city of soaring towers, rapid movement and abstract geometric forms.

The context of Columbus Circle, in other words, is not harmony and wholeness, it is conflict and irresolution. It expresses the whim of a city impatient to get on with the next thing. Before we're even halfway around the circle, we have dropped the idea we started out with and begun to look for something else. Shrinking Towers

Indeed, Mortimer Zuckerman, developer of the Coliseum site, has changed course several times without budging from the same spot. His original design, by Moshe Safdie, called for a pair of towers, one of them 72 stories tall, clad in granite and glass. Stodgy the design was not. Perhaps not since the Guggenheim Museum had an architect offered to let loose on the city such an exuberant display of structural acrobatics.

But this was a time when even advocates of modern architecture had conceded that the movement's impact on the urban fabric had been destructive. With its assertive geometric abstraction, its pride in novel forms, its aloof detachment from its surroundings, Safdie's design waved the world's biggest red flag in the face of changing taste.

In 1988, Mr. Zuckerman returned with a new proposal, designed by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Reduced 20 percent in size, the scheme was radically different in style. Its slim, asymmetrically composed towers were designed to evoke the Art Deco apartment buildings of Central Park West, though by now the term "modern classicism" had been resurrected to describe the style, presumably to purge it of campy associations with white telephones and chrome cocktail shakers.

Unabashedly romantic in its evocation of an earlier New York, the design clothed the profiteering of the 1980's with the glamour of the 1920's, another era of rampant development but one to which distance had lent undeniable enchantment. And this, too, was an urban vision, the product of a time when many post-modern architects believed that history could heal the ugly gashes of modernity. The circular arcade at the building's base, in particular, expressed the post-modern infatuation with the unified urban ensembles of European cities. It was time to turn back the clock. Scaled Down Again

In the waning days of the Dinkins administration, Mr. Zuckerman announced a new plan, this time sharply reduced in scale. Instead of two mixed-use towers, the plan envisions a single, 600-foot-tall office tower rising on the northern half of the two-block site. It would contain 1.1 million square feet of office and retail space, a reduction of 53 percent from the previous design. The residential portion of the project has been eliminated, and the existing office tower at 10 Columbus Circle would be retained. As in the previous plan, a curving retail arcade would extend along Columbus Circle between 58th and 60th Streets, though this feature would be redesigned.

The change would not only reduce the bulk of this project, but could also lead to a more thoughtful architectural resolution. Columbus Circle is never going to have the stylistic unity of the Place des Victoires in Paris or the Circus at Bath. Yet for all its stylistic incoherence, the place does possess a latent continuity, an order not of space but of time. And though Columbus Circle is an abysmal example of it, this is nonetheless the order at which New York excels: the layering of visions over time to produce a texture unforeseen by the designers of individual buildings.

Yet as contemporary architects like Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry have shown, the development of this urban texture need not be left to chance. There is a poetry in heterogeneity that can be heightened by architects who are sensitive to its expressive possibilities. Those who design for an urban space like Columbus Circle confront what Mr. Venturi calls the "difficult whole": messy, but also vital; irregular, but not dull.

At the moment, Columbus Circle is far from this pleasing democratic condition. It is both irregular and dull, a hodge-podge of the bland. But the new projects in the works could liven things up. Columbus would be at home in a place as vibrant and diverse as the land he sighted.