

October 4, 1996

Mr. David Farmer  
Daresh Museum  
601 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

bert A.M. Stern Architects

Dear David:

I am writing to lend a strong voice of support in favor of preserving the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Building at Two Columbus Circle. As designed by Edward Durell Stone and completed in 1965, the building originally housed the Gallery of Modern Art, a museum founded by Huntington Hartford. While the museum, for which Hartford's own collection of representational twentieth-century art served as the core, failed to find a secure niche in New York's high-powered art world, the building is without question a landmark, qualifying for such status on several accounts.

It is an important, thoughtful and carefully articulated design by Edward Durell Stone, a significant and prolific American architect, who in his lifetime was highly regarded--in fact considered by some influential observers as the heir to Frank Lloyd Wright. Stone's United States Embassy in New Delhi and his United States Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair were breakthrough buildings of postwar American architecture. Stone's townhouse (1958) on East Sixty-fourth Street, hopelessly compromised though in a landmark district, was an icon of its time.

Two Columbus Circle was commissioned by an important client; Hartford was a high-profile grocery-store heir, theatrical angel and art patron. It occupies a critical and highly visible location in the city, facing Columbus Circle and Central Park beyond. Stone also had plans for the redesign of Columbus Circle itself which would have added to its beauty.

The problem today, it seems to me, is not that the building lacks significance, but that it is widely seen as old hat. Of course it was controversial when it was built, with the esteemed New York Times critic Ada Louis Huxtable writing during the building's construction that it was a "die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops."<sup>1</sup> Yet the building constituted a bold attempt to synthesize a Modernist esthetic with lessons learned from the past. It participated in the dialogue across time that I believe is the essence of architecture, and it did so at a time when this was largely looked down on by architectural theorists and practitioners alike. Directly repudiating the then still-dominant International Style, with its fetishization of functionalism and minimalism, Stone mined architectural history to create an unabashedly decorative building. He rendered a Venetian-inspired palazzo slender (the trapezoidal site was only ninety-seven feet at its widest) and ten stories tall. Grey veined, white Vermont marble walls were perforated with portholelike openings at the building's corners, base and crown to suggest rustication inspired, according to Stone, by the Romanesque church Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Adopting a Classical tripartite composition, the building was carried on columns forming a ground-level arcade, while its top two floors housed a restaurant located behind a loggia opened to views of Central Park.

Stone's design, with its distinct evocation of traditional form, provided a perfect complement to Hartford's collection. Both the building and the collection it housed were intended to squarely counter the Museum of Modern Art's ardently polemical bias towards a reductivist Modernism. Ironically, twenty-six years before the completion of the museum on Columbus Circle, Stone, working with Philip L. Goodwin, had designed MOMA's Fifty-third Street building, an essay in International Style Modernism.

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<sup>1</sup>Ada Louise Huxtable, "Architecture: Huntington Hartford's Palatial Midtown Museum," New York Times (February 25, 1964): 33.

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The winds of art and architectural fashion continue to change, just as they did in Stone's time. Now we must take the long view regarding his Gallery of Modern Art, as indeed we must towards our city's entire architectural heritage, especially that of the post-World War II era currently eligible, or soon to be, for landmark designation. We must not succumb to the ever-present tendency to dismiss, or even revile, the recent past. Surely we do not want to repeat the mistakes of the early Modernists who tore down so much of the decorative Victorian architecture we now highly value and rigorously preserve. Once again it is a decorative, whimsical, one might even say zany work of architecture, that is at risk. But as the architectural critic Olga Gueft so aptly stated in 1964, Stone's design is one that "only a Bauhaus ogre with hardened arteries could fail to smile at."<sup>2</sup> From the first, Stone's building has been alternately praised, criticized and argued about; let's make sure Two Columbus Circle is preserved for future generations of New Yorkers to enjoy, consider, debate and learn from.

Sincerely,



Robert A.M. Stern

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<sup>2</sup>Olga Gueft, "Non-Conformity on Columbus Circle," *Interiors* 123 (June 1964): 92-96.