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The Short, Scorned Life Of an Esthetic Heresy;Designed in Defiance of Modernist Tenets, 2 Columbus Circle Awaits Its Fate

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Those "Independence Day" aliens have nothing to teach New Yorkers about the joys of blowing up buildings. We're old pros at this sport. Nobody takes greater pleasure in watching architecture smashed to smithereens.

The newest candidate for this real-life special effect is 2 Columbus Circle, a small marble white elephant of a building on the south side of the circle between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Occupied by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, the 10-story building is being sold as part of the city's plan to redevelop the site of the Coliseum.

Along with Donald J. Trump's hotel and condominium tower, on the northern rim of the circle, the redevelopment of both sites announced last week will completely transform this notoriously chaotic civic space. Though it is not certain that 2 Columbus Circle will be demolished, there is little likelihood it will survive. Impractical for commercial use, the building is also unlikely to arouse a campaign to have it designated a landmark.

In fact, from the moment of its opening in 1964, 2 Columbus Circle has always been something of an orphan in the midtown cityscape. "A die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops" was the reaction of Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic for The New York Times. Others compared the structure to a "perfume bottle," "a shoe emporium on Main Street," "a marble christening robe."

Why this pile-up of critical disfavor? The building's esthetic merit (or lack of it) was only part of the story. What was also going on here was a crisis in the way esthetic merit is judged. Who sets standards of taste? Artists or patrons? Critics or the public? Two Columbus Circle opened at a moment when critical judgment was itself being judged.

Originally called the Gallery of Modern Art, the building was designed by Edward Durell Stone, a noted architect whose other works include the General Motors Building on Fifth Avenue, Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington and the Pepsico headquarters in Purchase, N.Y. The Gallery was commissioned by Huntington Hartford, heir to the A. & P. supermarket chain, a patronage that alone sufficed to prejudice people against the project. Mr. Hartford was a creature of the gossip columns who aspired to be a cultural player.

A sometime backer of Broadway shows, Mr. Hartford was also the publisher of Show magazine, one of liveliest glossies of the 1960's. He founded the Gallery of Modern Art with the inflammatory purpose of

challenging the canonical view of modernism promoted by established institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and by the era's leading critics.

In 1955, he took out full-page newspaper advertisements attacking Abstract Expressionism. Turning his back on Cubism and other modern movements, Mr. Hartford dedicated his museum to the work of figurative artists like Dali, Burne-Jones and Vuillard.

Stone was an ideal architect to design this gallery. Formerly a committed modernist, Stone had co-designed the Museum of Modern Art in 1939. Stone's proscenium arch at Radio City Music Hall and his Mandel House, in Mount Kisco, N.Y., were also strongly modernist.

But in the mid-1950's, Stone broke with modern orthodoxy and began designing buildings decorated with perforated screens, gold columns and other ornate touches. Projects like the United States Embassy in New Delhi and the United States Pavilion at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels earned Stone contempt from many architects.

At the Gallery of Modern Art on Columbus Circle, Stone reduced the perforated-screen motif to lacelike borders around the marble facades. The whole design was a flagrant violation of the modernist taboo against historical reference. An arched loggia crowned the top of the building. At the base, colonnades evoked the Doge's Palace in Venice. In effect, the edifice was a remade Venetian bell tower. Ding-dong!

As a challenge to the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Hartford's enterprise was ludicrous. Still, the gallery was a remarkable example of the cultural and material abundance that New York enjoyed in the mid-1960's. And it was a pleasant place to visit. The interior circulation recalled that of the Guggenheim -- visitors took an elevator to the top and walked down -- though in this case the spiral was square. Main galleries alternated with broad landings where art was also displayed.

One gallery offered a sumptuous group of Vuillards. Another was devoted to Burne-Jones. It was refreshing to see works that like pre-Raphaelite paintings, lay outside the mainstream. Whether or not they were "modern," they afforded an experience of discovery that was ebbing from the Museum of Modern Art's concentration on the canon.

One of the building's best features was the Gauguin Room, a top floor restaurant that featured tapestry versions of Gauguin paintings. A kind of tasteful Trader Vic's, the place served cheap and tasty Polynesian cuisine. The columns of the loggia framed extraordinary views of the circle, Broadway and Central Park, a stunning vista that made one feel privileged to be in New York.

But none of the gallery's good features could redeem it from one overarching flaw to critics: Mr. Hartford and Stone had dragged art and architecture back to the bad old days when wealthy patrons were the arbiters of culture. Patrons of modern art were supposed to be like the Rockefellers. They should put up the money and let professionals decide what modern art is supposed to be. This social shift was part of modern art's appeal. In theory, the artist's independence from the patron insured the integrity of art.

Modern architecture stood for a similar idea. The modern movement had liberated design from the whims of rich clients and empowered architects to dictate terms. These issues were very real in 1964. The city's first glass skyscrapers were not yet 10 years old. Modernism was still something to be defended against philistine assaults. In that climate, Stone's esthetic heresies could scarcely be seen as anything else.

The Gallery of Modern Art had a short life. In 1969, no longer willing to support an expensive venture

that had never caught on with the public, Mr. Hartford donated the building to Fairleigh Dickinson University. He sold off his collection two years later. Renamed the New York Cultural Center, and dedicated to temporary shows, the place limped along until 1975, when Gulf and Western Industries bought the building and turned it over to the city. Stone died in 1978. After a series of unsuccessful investments and three seven-figure divorce settlements, Mr. Hartford, now 85, filed for bankruptcy protection in 1992.

Looking back now, one is struck that the negative critical reaction to this building belongs to another era. Today, there are few buildings that could arouse such a clear consensus of educated opinion. Indeed, the very concept of informed consensus has fallen into disrepute.

Even before Mr. Hartford quit the museum business, the consensus supporting modernism had begun to crumble. In 1966, Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" was published. This book suddenly made it respectable for architects to borrow from historical styles. Scholarly books on Victorian art and architecture sparked a reappraisal of an era that the modernists had tried to bury. The belief in a cultural mainstream gave way to the ideal of pluralism.

To an extent, this erosion of consensus has made for a livelier cultural scene. Art movements no longer depend on monolithic support from artists, critics and museums. There is room for different currents of art to flow simultaneously through the culture.

At the same time, the breakdown of consensus has left art vulnerable to corruption by market pressures. If everything is a matter of opinion, and one person's opinion is as valuable as another's, then the most reliable criterion of value is how much something costs.

In a more enlightened time, a city administration might well commit itself to finding a cultural use for 2 Columbus Circle. But under the circumstances, it seems cruelly apt that the building should end up demolished by the highest bidder.