

February 15, 1997

An Old Dream For the Arts, A New Chance For the City

By **MICHAEL KIMMELMAN**

Is any site in Manhattan more vexed than 2 Columbus Circle, Huntington Hartford's pseudo-Venetian palazzo, which in 33 years has never become the cultural center it was once called? In May the Department of Cultural Affairs, which has occupied it since 1979, will make way for whoever the city decides may buy the building.

It ought to be given to an art museum or an arts organization. Or at least the city should guarantee a place for art somewhere at the redeveloped Columbus Circle, as part of the future Coliseum site if not at 2 Columbus Circle itself.

Why? Recall the history of 2 Columbus Circle, which dates from 1964, when Mr. Hartford, the A.&P. supermarket heir, opened the Gallery of Modern Art at a cost of \$7.4 million to challenge the authority of the Museum of Modern Art, which he despised as an archfiend for its embrace of abstraction.

His architect was Edward Durell Stone, a co-designer of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939. Stone's subsequent rejection of purist modernism made him an ideal partner. Mr. Hartford installed his own collection of academic and figurative paintings in Stone's decorated marble building.

As everyone knows, the result was a catastrophe. Critics lambasted the building's design, the art collection and Mr. Hartford, whose gallery became a money pit. Within a year he was nosing around for a partner or buyer.

In 1969 he gave the building to Fairleigh Dickinson University, which optimistically renamed it the New York Cultural Center. It organized some poorly received shows but also some unusual ones that other New York museums wouldn't take on (a Tissot show, for example). After seven years, it left the building in a state of acute fiscal anemia.

Gulf & Western then bought 2 Columbus Circle for the city, the gift specifically restricting the site's use to cultural purposes, and the city installed the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The point here is not to argue for the building itself, though the scorn heaped upon it and on Mr. Hartford's gallery certainly derived, in part, from the stranglehold that orthodox modernism had on critical opinion at the time.

Today we live in a more pluralist era. Mr. Hartford's collection, though eccentric, included works by pre-Raphaelites and the Venetian painter Bellotto that New York museums would now be glad to own. Hard up for cash, Mr. Hartford sold the works for a song when the art market was weak; that no museum here bought them was a failure of foresight that cost the city.

What matters now is the use of the site. This is soon to be decided by the city's Economic Development Corporation, which is keeping the process secret. The Dahesh Museum, occupying a small space on Fifth Avenue for its collection of 19th-century academic art, has made public its interest. It has been bruited about that Donald Trump is one of the other bidders.

When asked, a spokesman for the E.D.C. turned vague about why the city was now free to sell 2 Columbus Circle to whomever it wants. The facts are that a few years ago Viacom Inc., which had acquired the company that had been Gulf & Western, waived its restriction on the use of the building in return for tax breaks, a Viacom spokesman

said.

The real question isn't legal, anyway, it's about cultural stewardship: will the city do the right thing and seize the opportunity of Columbus Circle's redevelopment to create what might be called an avenue of culture on the West Side, with Lincoln Center at one end and Columbus Circle at the other? This was the prospect 30 odd years ago, and it never came about.

A strong visual arts presence has always been missing from the area. Only the Museum of American Folk Art, a fine but small institution in a kind of storefront space on Columbus Avenue, facing Lincoln Center, is there now. But it has long talked of returning to 53d Street, and already has raised money to build on the site it owns at 45-47 West 53d Street, with the idea that it would keep a branch where it is now.

One of the proposals for redeveloping the Coliseum site, by Murphy/ Jahn Architects, includes a new home for the Folk Art museum around the corner from Columbus Circle, on 60th Street. But startlingly, neither the developer, Tishman Speyer, nor the architects consulted the museum, whose incredulous director, Gerard Wertkin, says it has no intention of moving there.

Even if it did, moving Folk Art several blocks south would not increase the overall visual arts presence on the West Side, the issue at hand. The Murphy/Jahn proposal includes space for Sotheby's, which figures in other proposals as well. But whether or not Sotheby's moves from the East Side, a commercial auction house is a business, not a museum.

And that, after all, was what 2 Columbus Circle was intended to be. True, its inherent problems as an art venue went beyond even the idiosyncrasies of Stone's design or of Mr. Hartford's vision, and they must still be taken into account. The site is a narrow traffic island with a height restriction, so that no building there can include the wide-open interiors that many exhibitions, especially of contemporary art, demand.

Only a small museum might fit comfortably into it, like the Dahesh, which proposes to renovate the decrepit building rather than tear it down and start anew. There would be a symmetry to its tenancy: Dr. Dahesh, who died in 1984, was the adopted name of Salim Moussa Achi, a rich Lebanese writer and charismatic religious leader with a cultish following and a taste for academic and anti-modernist art. On art, at least, he and Mr. Hartford might have seen eye to eye.

But Dahesh or not, it's fair to ask whether, if an appropriate art institution cannot be found for 2 Columbus Circle, the city doesn't have an obligation to acknowledge the spirit in which it accepted Gulf & Western's gift and to donate a place in the enormous Coliseum redevelopment to a cultural organization that puts on art exhibitions.

At the least, some of the millions of dollars the city will no doubt receive for 2 Columbus Circle should go toward enhancing art there. That would also be faithful to the urban renewal law that permitted the Coliseum to be built in the first place.

Several public agencies share responsibilities for the circle. The Metropolitan Transit Authority oversees the Coliseum redevelopment, the Department of City Planning oversees the renovation of pedestrian and traffic areas around it, and the Parks Department, of course, is landlord to the northeast quadrant of the circle. The good news is that the Economic Development Corporation has lately decided to delay its decision on the disposition of 2 Columbus Circle for a few months, until the M.T.A.'s plans for the Coliseum are clearer.

After decades of urban planning failures at this crucial Manhattan crossroads, a couple of months of careful coordination seems like the least that ought to be done. Perhaps in this interim the agencies can mutually find a way to turn Huntington Hartford's original misbegotten idea for a museum on Columbus Circle into a cultural boon for the city.

