

## LANDMARK KITSCH

*A new generation of architects tries to save the city's ugly ducklings.*

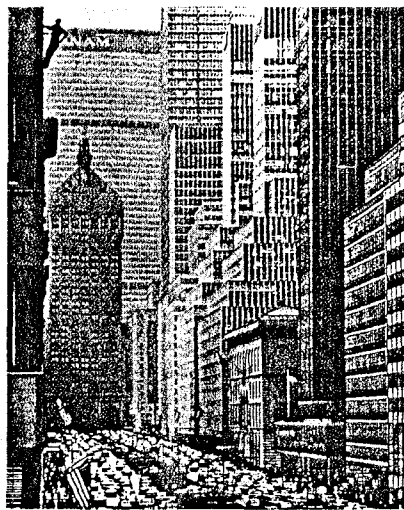
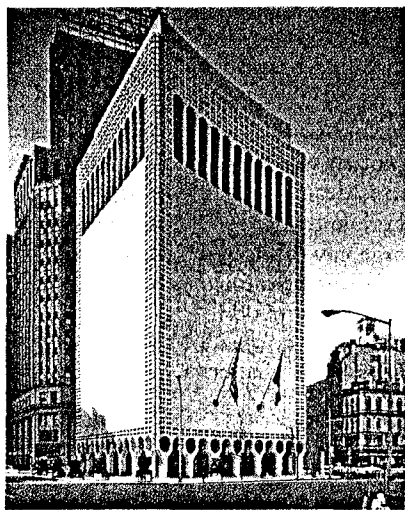
BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

JOHN KRAWCHUK'S view of New York City was formed by the television shows that he watched growing up in California in the early nineteen-seventies: "The Courtship of Eddie's Father," "Family Affair," and the PBS documentary "An American Family," in which Lance Loud, the gay son, resettles in Manhattan. Krawchuk's idea of architecture was shaped by "The Jetsons" and "The Brady Bunch." So it is not altogether surprising that his favorite building is the old Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, on Columbus Circle—the confection of white marble designed by Edward Durell Stone, which less generous souls have likened to a Hollywood version of a Persian warehouse.

Krawchuk, a thirty-one-year-old landscape architect with a degree in historic preservation from Columbia, is one of the leaders of a movement to save the building. He also likes Stone's General Motors Building, on Fifth Avenue—a white marble skyscraper with forty-eight stories of bay windows—which is despised by most architects who were around when it was built, in 1968. Krawchuk was three years old then. He doesn't know a New York without the GM Building—or without the glass boxes of Sixth Avenue, or the Pan Am Building, or Lincoln Center, or the white brick apartment blocks on Second Avenue. To him, those buildings define the city, just as the Art Deco skyscrapers epitomized New York for a previous generation, and the Beaux-Arts monuments and brownstones for earlier generations still.

But is the former Gallery of Modern Art, now known as 2 Columbus Circle,

the equivalent of the Frick Collection in the greater scheme of architectural history? If so, Kennedy Airport belongs on the list that begins with Grand Central Terminal. That is precisely what Krawchuk and plenty of other young architects and historic preservationists are saying. And they have been increasingly



*Modernist chic or schlock? 2 Columbus Circle (left) and the glass boxes of Park Avenue.*

successful in persuading their elders, the people who grew up hating the buildings of the postwar era, to go along with them.

That tastes change, and have always changed, is the premise on which landmarks laws are based: they are intended to protect worthy architecture from the whims of fashion. In the fifties and sixties, there were few things lower on the scale of aesthetic values than Victorian and Edwardian architecture, and all kinds of buildings that would be cherished today were summarily demolished, often to make room for the very buildings that are now the subject of anguished debate. That paradox has not gone unnoticed. "A lot of the buildings that have to be preserved are the ones the preservationists came of age attacking, the ones they thought were the horrible buildings of the fifties and sixties," says Nina Rappaport, an architectural historian affiliated with DOCO-MOMO,

an organization formed in the Netherlands in 1988 to preserve modernist architecture.

Still, even among those who believe that there is postwar architecture worth saving, 2 Columbus Circle has become the subject of controversy. "It's a flashy, vulgar building built by an architect who wanted to be elegant and original and failed miserably," Donald Oresman, the chairman of the Landmarks Conservancy, said the other day. "The thing looks like a stork whose legs were cut off at the knees."

"People talk about that building the way they once talked about the Jefferson Market Courthouse, in Greenwich Village," Krawchuk says, speaking of

the once reviled 1887 brick-and-stone castle, by Vaux & Withers, whose rescue was one of the preservation movement's first triumphs, in the nineteen-sixties. "They say it's gawky and awkward. Well, so is the Jefferson Market Courthouse, and that's now an icon."

"If it weren't where it is, nobody would think twice about it," Oresman claims. So far, he has succeeded in preventing his col-

leagues on the Landmarks Conservancy board from adding the building to the list of structures they are recommending for official designation as landmarks.

The debate over the fate of 2 Columbus Circle began last year, when the city put the place up for sale. Given to the city by Gulf & Western seventeen years ago, it had been used as offices for the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Convention and Visitors Bureau. A private art collection, called the Dahesh Museum, expressed interest in buying it recently, but the Giuliani administration, considering the forthcoming redevelopment of the Coliseum, next door, decided that more money could be made by selling the building to a developer. It would be a preservation scandal—"CITY SELLS OFF MUSEUM TO DEVELOPER!"—if the preservation community weren't so deeply ambivalent about Stone's handiwork.

Unfortunately for advocates of 2 Columbus Circle, no one has yet made a persuasive case that the building is much more than kitsch. And it's harder still to make a case for it as a historic artifact: It was put up in 1965 by a supermarket heir in a bizarre bid to overthrow the Museum of Modern Art's cultural power. The paintings in Hartford's collection, long gone, were undistinguished, and the building's vertically organized galleries, bereft of windows, would have doomed it even with better pictures. About the only thing that this miserably dumb building has ever done successfully is stand as a kind of amiable monumental presence at the foot of Central Park West. Its curved façade, stumpy pillars, and porthole windows create a strangely innocent, fanciful quality, and perhaps the only argument for giving it landmark status is that it has become familiar, and hence a source of comfort. It's less like a building than like a Claes Oldenburg sculpture.

"I grew up thinking that everything modern was tacky-tacky and all the same," Peg Breen, who is the president of the Landmarks Conservancy, said recently. "Well, to me these buildings are a lot less huggable than older ones, but I'm learning that there is architecture there, too, and we need to include them in our definition of landmarks." To that end, the conservancy sponsored a lecture by the architect Robert A. M. Stern last October, in which Stern, best known as a designer of traditional houses for the rich, listed thirty-five modern buildings in New York that he deemed worthy of designation as landmarks, and proclaimed that the time had come to treat modern architecture as reverentially as the architecture of the distant past, for, after all, modernism now is the past. The Gallery of Modern Art is No. 26 on Stern's list. "People of a certain age think I'm out of my mind," he said. "But it's the only building on Columbus Circle that actually honors the idea of a circle: it was built to be a monument."

There is a real difference between modern buildings that are lovably eccentric, like 2 Columbus Circle, or Morris Lapidus's curving blue brick Summit Hotel, now Loews New York, on Lexington Avenue (the one that everyone said was nice but a little far from the beach); those that are dreary and banal, like the office towers of Park Avenue;

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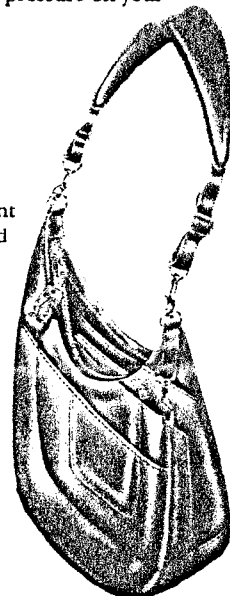


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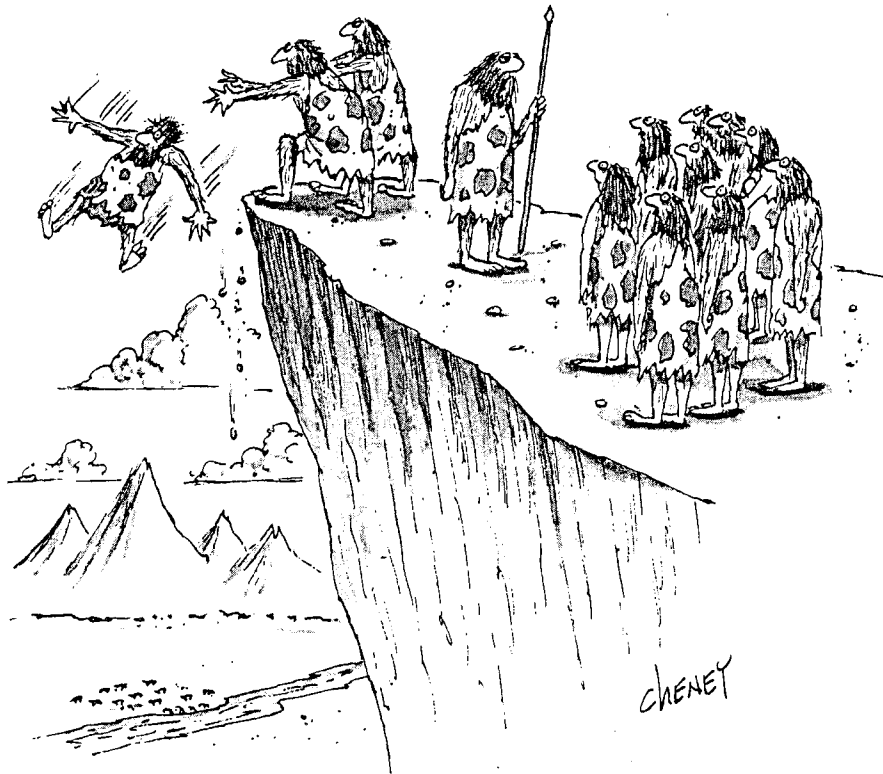
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and those that achieve a more profound degree of architectural experience, like the sumptuously elegant Seagram Building, on Park Avenue, or the Ford Foundation headquarters, built around a glassed-in garden on East Forty-second Street. The Landmarks Preservation Commission is as conscious of these distinctions as anyone. And it has remained, so far, solidly on the side of the modernist icons, declining even to hold a hearing on 2 Columbus Circle but enthusiastically designating Lever House, the green glass slab on Park Avenue that was among the city's first glass buildings, the Seagram Building, and the old Pepsi-Cola headquarters, at 500 Park Avenue. This fall, it will consider three more: the Ford Foundation, the black granite CBS Building, and the Chase Manhattan Bank on Fifth Avenue at Forty-third Street, the glass box built in 1954 for the Manufacturers Bank. These buildings were all acclaimed when they were new and have never gone entirely out of fashion. To have a problem with them, you would have to believe that architecture stopped with Stanford White. As for the eccentric modern buildings and the banal ones—

the architecture that the critics never liked but that a younger generation clings to as part of the texture of the city it has inherited—Jennifer Raab, the chairman of the commission, says only, "I'm very open to learning, but I do not think we have to rush."

Every generation enjoys embracing what the previous one disdained, of course, but in architecture the tension may be more acute. If modernism failed at anything, it was at creating a workable, comfortable vernacular—a design vocabulary out of which appealing everyday buildings could be made. Ordinary modern architecture was about making things quick and cheap, not about making civilized cities. Robert Stern recalls hearing an executive of one of New York's biggest builders of office towers in the fifties and sixties say that the glass-and-metal boxes his company erected were intended to last for the life of their mortgages, and no longer.

So why preserve buildings that even their creators thought so little of? You sometimes hear high-flown talk about the importance of postwar modernism to the "narrative" of New York, but the real reason a lot of these buildings are

going to be saved is that people have got used to them. Like John Krawchuk, architects under forty view them as having always been there. No thirty-year-old remembers McKim, Mead & White's Savoy-Plaza, which once stood on the site of the GM Building, or the vista that existed on Park Avenue before the Pan Am Building blocked it, or the lower Manhattan skyline before the World Trade Center tipped it toward New Jersey. You don't regret the loss of what you never had.

As for the rest of us—people like me, who remember staring down into the hole that was to become the Time-Life Building in 1959, when I was nine—well, you get used to anything. Architecture, because its presence is constant, has a strangely benign effect over time: even the ugliest buildings become tolerable—and actually comforting. We expect to see them, and thus in some small way we come to value them. It is an odd irony that modernism, an architectural style that was anything but sentimental, has come to be the object of considerable sentiment.

Modern architecture was invented to obliterate history, not to make it. When the modern style evolved—in Europe, in the early decades of this century—its goal was to sweep away the clutter of the past, including classical columns and Gothic arches. Modernists were going to invent the world anew and, through the clean simplicity of their buildings, create a better life for all. It worked for a few years—the modernist buildings of the twenties and thirties almost always seem to wear a halo of utopian idealism—but by the end of the Second World War the dream had disintegrated into a kind of corporate dullness. Modern architecture meant the new American corporation, not a new way of living. Treating quick, cheap modern buildings as permanent presences requires a lot of rethinking on the part of preservationists. "We know what to recommend for a limestone building with a deteriorating façade," Jennifer Raab says, "but what do you do with a glass-curtain wall? We're not yet experts in how to preserve modern buildings."

The commission faced its first such situation earlier this year, when the owners of Lever House decided to replace the green glass façade that gives the building its character. The glass had de-

teriorated badly after more than forty winters, and had always been problematic in terms of energy conservation. Engineers first proposed putting a new glass skin over the existing one, for added insulation. The Landmarks Commission was less than enthusiastic about the proposal, arguing that it would change the building's appearance, and urged the company to consult with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the original architects. Gordon Bunshaft, who designed the building, died in 1990, but David Childs, one of the firm's chief design partners, and a man who had made his reputation designing postmodern skyscrapers with classical details, came up with a new glass skin that will look, he says, exactly like the original. The glass is scheduled to be replaced later this year.

Lever House's face-lift brings up another paradox of modern landmarks: in the case of older buildings, authenticity is usually a matter of retaining genuine and original pieces that bear the patina of age, but modern buildings can often be made *more* authentic by having their

parts replaced. Like the Bionic Man, they are truest to form when they are forever new.

Modern buildings need to be protected by a different set of standards. Most landmark designations cover only the exterior of a building. But what if a building is made of glass, and the exterior is transparent? Change the inside, and you have changed the outside, too. The former Manufacturers Bank at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-third Street once had a pristine, simple interior that was entirely visible from the street. Now Chase has put colored signs with its logo everywhere on the second floor, and has rented out part of the ground floor as a showroom for office machines. From the outside, the bank is a different building altogether, even though not an inch of its original structure has been changed.

When there isn't much ornament, windows and surface mean everything. In the Look Building, the "wedding cake-like" pile of alternating horizontal ribbons of brick and glass at 488 Madison Avenue, the rhythm of stripes wrap-

ping around curved corners makes a definite architectural statement—enough, at least, so that the building is on most modern preservationists' priority lists. All those setbacks and curves do confer a certain presence—a somewhat endearing combination of the flamboyant and the boring, sort of like a 1955 DeSoto.

I know that I once thought nothing of this building, and now I like it, and could even begin to make a case for it as a serious work of architecture. But do I like it because I am used to seeing it at the corner of Fifty-first Street—because it has become the architectural equivalent of comfort food? Isn't that the kind of criterion John Krawchuk would use?

Not a chance. He is actually quite tough. "I don't like everything," he said. "Sure, I like old things like the Pan Am Building and Lincoln Center. But some of this new architecture—I don't know about it. Take the Millennium, that apartment building on the West Side that just went up. I look at it, and I wonder how it could ever be a landmark. I just see a lot of glass and brick." ♦

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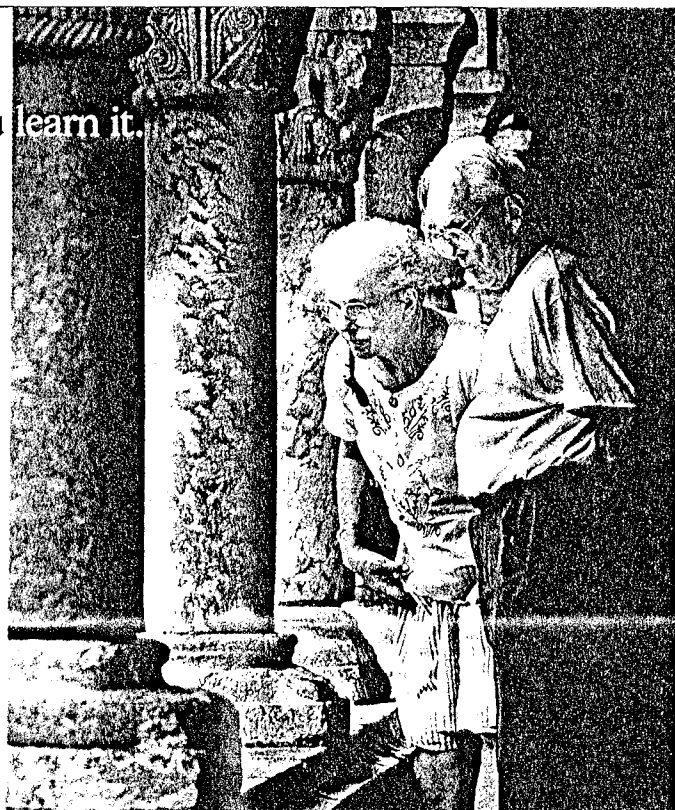
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