

On Columbus Circle, Hints of an End to an Enigma

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

What secrets lie behind those blank, gray-veined marble walls?

New Yorkers have often wondered about Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle. When it opened in 1964, they wondered why Mr. Hartford had built such a folly, with columns like lollipops and almost no windows. More recently, as the redevelopment of Columbus Circle took shape, they wondered what would become of the little building.

Yesterday, the Giuliani administration laid out its cards. The New York City Economic Development Corporation said 2 Columbus Circle was a "prime location for residential apartments, as well as hotel and other commercial uses," and it invited proposals from developers to take over the site.

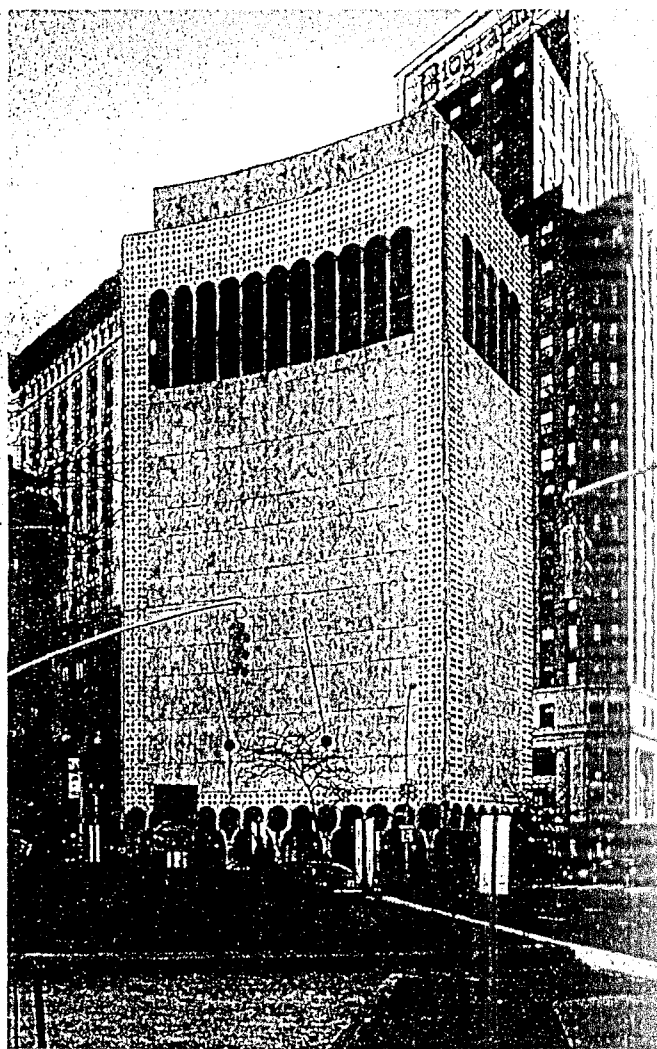
Michael G. Carey, the president of the corporation, said the redevelopment offered a "terrific opportunity" to fill in the last big piece of the revitalization of Columbus Circle, where demolition workers are taking apart the New York Coliseum, traffic is rolling around a landscaped Columbus Monument and parkgoers are promenading through a restored Merchants' Gate.

Almost any redevelopment plan would probably doom the gallery. Designed by Edward Durell Stone to house Mr. Hartford's idiosyncratic art collection, it served as the New York Cultural Center in the 1970's and then as headquarters for the City Department of Cultural Affairs, which moved out two years ago.

While the city would entertain proposals for reusing the structure, economics practically dictate its replacement, since zoning rules allow a building as much as two-thirds larger. The gallery is nine stories tall.

And it is unlikely that apartment dwellers, hotel guests or office tenants would settle for space overlooking Central Park that has only 12-inch portholes at the corners.

After an earlier request for proposals, in 1997, Donald J. Trump said he would like to replace the building with a 12-story hotel. But the Dahesh Museum at Fifth Avenue and 48th Street, which specializes in European academic painting, said it wanted to renovate the



Jack Manning/The New York Times

Developers have been asked to submit proposals for the vacant Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art on Columbus Circle.

building as a gallery.

Neither Mr. Trump nor the Dahesh Museum's director, J. David Farmer, returned calls yesterday seeking information about their proposals in light of the city's announcement.

Mr. Carey said the earlier search had been abandoned because it had been overtaken by the selection of developers for the Coliseum site, where the \$1.6 billion Columbus Center is to rise, which includes the

headquarters of AOL Time Warner, an auditorium for Jazz at Lincoln Center and a Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

"There was a collective sense among people in the city, including the mayor, that we'd be best served by taking a fresh look," Mr. Carey said. "Now, prospective bidders have more to work with in terms of looking at what is going to be built around the circle."

As for the possibility of a cultural

tenant at 2 Columbus Circle, Mr. Carey said: "I don't think we've ruled anything out. That's up to the developers. Let the market decide."

Proposals are due May 2. They will be judged on economic impact, on the track record of the developers and their ability to obtain financing, on the relationship of the project to its surroundings and on design.

An apartment building at 2 Columbus Circle could have more than 46,000 square feet of space — about 50 apartments — and a commercial building could have more than 69,000 square feet, under zoning rules. The gallery has about 40,000 square feet.

Even from a porthole, the future looks unmistakable.

Design criteria require that the building have at least as much masonry in its facade as glass (which cannot be reflective), that the masonry be compatible with other buildings around Central Park and that the main facade "reflect the geometry" of Columbus Circle.

That almost describes the gallery, which was widely lampooned in its day as a bit of World's Fair-era kitsch but has since gained admirers, particularly for the way its concave facade and street-level arcades reinforce the sense of a great traffic circle.

Although the Landmarks Preservation Commission has already decided to designate the gallery as something worth saving, at least one neighborhood group, the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development, will lead a preservation charge.

"We're telling everybody that it's an endangered species, to start writing letters to save the building," Olive Freud, vice president of the committee, said yesterday. "We still want a museum there."