

An Effort To Preserve A Monolith

Derided Building Has Big-Name Help

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

In a city where putting up buildings, tearing them down and protesting in the streets are part of daily life, this demonstration was somewhat different.

There was the writer Tom Wolfe in a pale checked suit, the architect Robert M. Stern and a corps of New York City's preservationist elite. And behind them yesterday was a building with no windows other than footwide portholes, tenets rocket-shaped columns and arches evoking Venetian palaces.

The building is 2 Columbus Circle, the white marble monolith on the southern end of the circle that has looked down Central Park West and Broadway since 1964. Vacant for two years, the property has been put up for development by the city, drawing fears from preservationists that it will be torn down for an office or apartment building.

Once the home of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, 2 Columbus Circle was designed by the architect Edward Durell Stone for Huntington Hartford, the heir to the A&P supermarket fortune. It was built to house Mr. Hartford's art collection, and his name is still inscribed in front.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has declined to give it landmark status, and the city's Economic Development Corporation is soliciting bids from developers, calling it "prime location for residential apartments, as well as hotel and other commercial uses." The deadline is May 2.

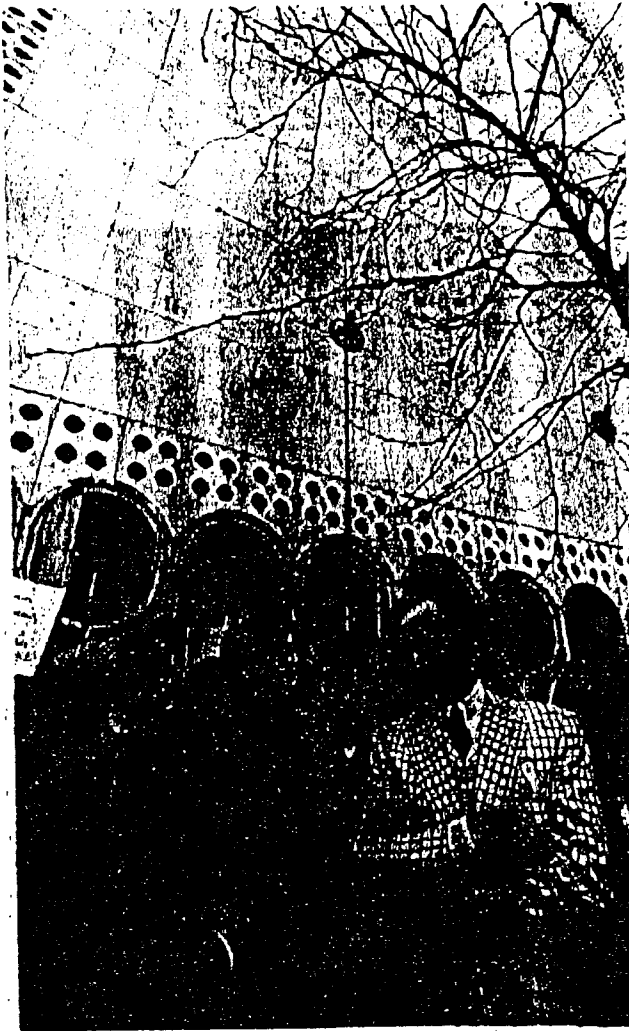
The city's proffer, plus a previous bid by Donald J. Trump to build a 12-story hotel, translated into the fears that Stone's building would fall.

Now, support for the building is growing. Its circle of public champions has widened to include Mr. Wolfe and some local politicians.

"I think this is one of the few candles lit in the dark ages of New York architecture, which ran from the 1850's almost to the present day," said Mr. Wolfe, who said he held his first book party in the Gauguin Room, a two-story restaurant that was then atop the building.

Preservationists may take heart from Mr. Trump, who owns a complex across the circle and suggested yesterday that he might not go forward with his plans for 2 Columbus Circle. "It's so small, it's very possible that I won't be bidding," Mr. Trump said. "It's very tough to make any money there."

Whether he bids or not, Mr. Trump gave the building an aesthetic demolition. "I think it belongs in the middle of Biddah, not in the middle of New York City," he said of Stone's work. "It's a very important archi-



Tom Wolfe with City Councilwoman Ronnie Eldridge, left, and Peg Breen of the New York Landmarks Conservancy at 2 Columbus Circle.

Tom Wolfe with City Councilwoman Ronnie Eldridge, left, and Peg Breen of the New York Landmarks Conservancy at 2 Columbus Circle.

tect. It is a very unimportant building."

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani is also said to be no great admirer of 2 Columbus Circle. Former Mayor Edward I. Koch has called the building downright ugly.

Even some preservationists are not convinced of its merits. Peg

Tom Wolfe is among those who are trying to save 2 Columbus Circle.

Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, said that the organization's board was deeply divided about whether the building deserved landmark status. She and others at yesterday's protest said they were merely calling for an open hearing by the Landmarks Commission.

After the earlier request for proposals on the site, in 1997, the city also received a bid from the Dabosh Museum, which wants to leave its cramped quarters on Fifth Avenue and 48th Street. The museum is based on the collection of a Lebanese-

pendent after developers were chosen for the nearby Coliseum site, where the \$1.6 billion Columbus Center is rising, city development officials have said. City officials said the construction would change the area, and they wanted to give prospective bidders a chance to reassess it.

But a person familiar with the negotiations at the time said that the bidding was suspended because there were only two entrants — the Dabosh, with a \$10 million proposal, and Mr. Trump, for less — and because the bids were too low.

The Landmarks Conservancy has complained that the city's new offering encourages a commercial use at the site, since a commercial property would bring in more tax revenue to the city.

To architects like Mr. Stern, the building is worth preserving regardless of what would be put up in its stead.

"To tear it down to build another apartment house or condo is preposterous," Mr. Stern said.

Other defenders include State Representative Richard N. Gottfried, State Senator Eric T. Schneiderman, City Councilwoman Ronnie Eldridge and leaders of the local Democratic Party club.

The man who was responsible for it all, Mr. Hartford, is 90 and in a nursing home, his daughter Juliet Hartford said.

"He never could believe it would

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