

East Side Local

Well-Heeled Demonstrators Protest Sale of 2 Columbus Circle

Prominent New Yorkers take up cause

By Alex Ulam

New York's preservation community and luminaries such as author Tom Wolfe and the architect Robert Stern were demonstrating in the street last week. They were protesting the city's decision to sell a quirky building without first giving it consideration as a landmark.

The building, at 2 Columbus Circle, occupies one of the prime pieces of real estate in the city, the entire south side of Columbus Circle.

With a gentle curve accenting the circle, port-hole windows, and arches that for some evoke Venice,

the building's aesthetic merits have been fiercely debated ever since it was built in 1964. Many regard it as an eye sore.

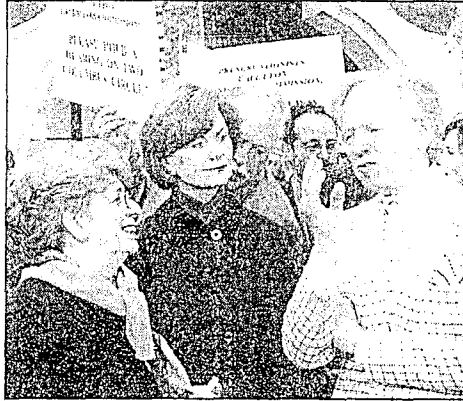
Even among the demonstrators, there was no consensus on whether the building deserved landmark status. But what united them was a sense of outrage that the building was not getting its day in court. "The city is attempting to circumvent any public review," said City Councilwoman Ronnie Eldridge, one of about 50 well-heeled demonstrators who stood in front of the building.

"We shouldn't be having this discussion in the street. We should be having it at the place that has been designated by the city of New York to have this discussion - the Landmark Preservation Commission," said Frank Sanchis, executive director of the Municipal Arts Society. Sanchis' organization has not yet decided whether the building merits landmark status, but he said the building's defenders have rights.

"You have the most hotly-debated building in the city, and there's no public hearing," he said, noting that 2 Columbus Circle has been put up for sale by the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC). Bids on the building are due on May 2.

The public outcry is not swaying the Landmarks Preservation Commission's Designation Committee. "The Committee determined that 2 Columbus Circle did not meet the threshold required for the full commission to hold a public hearing to consider it as an individual landmark," said Rhonda West, the Commission's executive director, in a prepared statement last Friday.

The building's aesthetic qualities do not appear to interest EDC officials who would allow potential buyers to demolish it and build a substantially larger and more commercially viable structure. "Basically we look at the economic impact it will have on the city of New York," said Janel Patterson



From left, City Councilwoman Ronnie Eldridge, Peg Breen and author Tom Wolfe were among those at a protest at 2 Columbus Circle last week.

an EDC spokesperson, in a telephone interview.

Tearing down 2 Columbus would remove one of the signature buildings of the renowned architect, Edward Durrell Stone who designed it to house the art collection of A&P heir Huntington Hartford. For many 2 Columbus Circle is not just another landmark.

"Look around here. It's the dark ages," said Tom Wolfe. "I think that it's one of the few candles lit in New York since the 50's," he added. "It's comparable to Penn Station in its elegance and grace."

But despite its disputed elegance, the practical uses of the nearly windowless 36-year-old building are limited, which makes the chance that the building will be torn down all that more possible, according to the preservationists.

"There's too great a population density in the city and we don't want to see this building replaced by a mega-structure," said Olive Freud, vice president of the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development, an Upper West Side community group.

Freud and others said that one way to protect the building would be to return it to its original intended use as a museum. The city will be receiving a bid from the Dahesh Museum currently located on Fifth Avenue and 48th Street, which would use the building to house its collection of 19th century European academic art, said the museum's director David Farmer. But with a booming real estate market it is not clear whether the museum's bid will be a competitive one.

Whatever comes of the debate about its qualifications as a landmark, 2 Columbus Circle is one of the showpieces of the Upper West Side, according to Freud. "When the big tourist buses come in here," she said, "they all go around the building to show it off."