

HERBERT MUSCHAMP

Huntington Hartford's Generous Folly

LAST month the city reopened the process of choosing a buyer for 2 Columbus Circle, the white marble campanile that faces Columbus Circle's southern arc. Completed in 1964, the building has stood vacant since the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs left the premises two years ago. It's an important site, partly because of the architecture and partly because of the layers of historical meaning that have settled over it. The building became eligible for landmark status in 1990. Should it be landmarked? Probably not. Which isn't to say the building isn't worthy of landmark designation. In my view, it should be the other way around. Why not spare the building and tear down our landmarks laws? Landmarking today has become a matter of some people wanting to force others to live with their childhood memories. The city is rapidly becoming one big boohoo corner, a place to lament lost Rosebuds and madeleines.

These memories are priceless, but we don't have to keep the building to preserve them. Web sites and chat rooms could be set up for that purpose, along with photos of the vanished edifice. Here's my posting for memorylane.twocolumbuscircle.com.

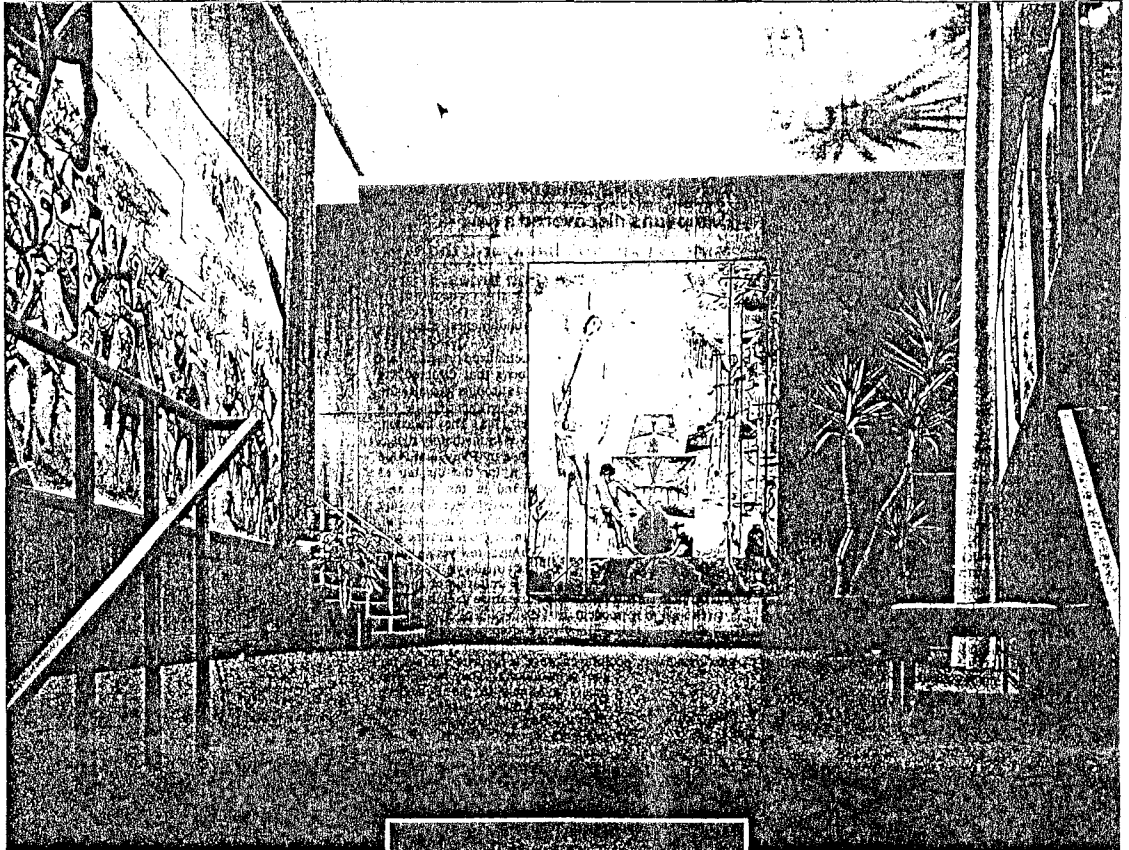
The building, designed by Edward Durrell Stone, is often described as an architectural curiosity, a term that holds little meaning. Any building worth writing about is a curiosity. Lincoln Center, designed in the same period, is straight out of *Weird Tales*. I've also heard the building described as "classical." Actually, Stone's design is a fairly legible abstraction of Venetian Gothic. It is a latter-day tribute to John Ruskin and the road not taken by modern architects after the collapse of the Gothic Revival in the late 19th century.

No style was more suitable for the building's client, Huntington Hartford, and his aesthetic intentions. Ruskin, the leading advocate of Venetian Gothic in the Victorian era, made himself an enemy of modern art in a libelous review of James Whistler's work and in the lawsuit that followed. Mr. Hartford himself made waves with a newspaper ad that attacked the formalist aesthetic of the Museum of Modern Art. With the Gallery of Modern Art, at 2 Columbus Circle was originally called, Mr. Hartford put his money where his mouth was. His collection included Impressionists, pre-Raphaelites, Surrealists and other fine examples of representational painting.

Edward Durrell Stone, too, was a contrarian. A co-architect of the Museum of Modern Art's building on West 57th Street, Stone was among the country's first devotees of the International Style. After World War II, he came to feel that the style lacked the human dimension. In later projects, like the United States Embassy in New Delhi and his own Manhattan townhouse, Stone challenged modernist orthodoxy by adorning facades with ornamental screens that evoked Oriental design.

At 2 Columbus Circle, the screen motif is found on the edges of the building, which are bordered with small round windows punched through the marble facade. In this context, the screen evokes the Byzantine roots of the Venetian Gothic style. The rounded arches at the top of the building's loggia belong to what Ruskin called Venetian Gothic's First Order. The loggia's penthouse placement at the top of building is standard for the campanile. To extend the conceit further, one can imagine the building's base as a waterfront entrance, with Columbus Circle serving as its grand canal.

It is accurate to call the building a folly. Mr. Hartford, heir to the A. & P. fortune (he still lives in Manhat-



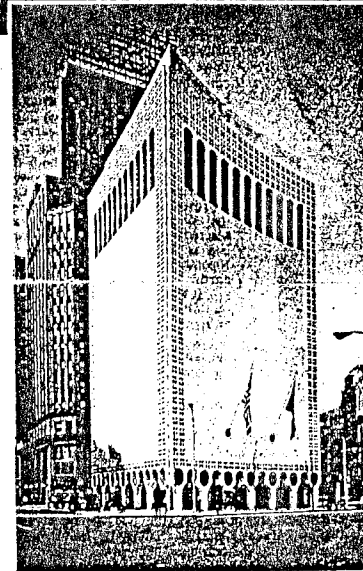
Photographs by Ezra Sogier/Esto

tan), had the means to indulge his personal taste on a grand scale. But his folly was generous. Generosity was the note struck when the Gallery of Modern Art opened its doors. For visitors of my generation, there was nothing ludicrous about the paintings on display. Nowhere else in New York could you see such a sumptuous collection of Vuillards. An entire gallery was devoted to a series of eight panels by the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones retelling the myth of Perseus, the son of Zeus and Danae, who slew Medusa. The immense Dali painting "Discovery of America by Christopher Colum-

**Donald Trump and the Daheh
Museum would make a perfect
pair at 2 Columbus Circle; both
understand pleasure.**

bus" was a candidly homoerotic confession of the artist's royalist sympathies. If these works were laughable, we love to laugh.

Spatially, too, the museum was rich. It was much criticized for the amount of space given over to elevators, stairs and fire stairs and for the small size of the galleries in relation to these systems of vertical circulation. In fact, as at the Frick, the intimacy of the galleries was a plus. The rooms were lined with expensive woods that remained intact until Mary Schmidt Campbell, a former cultural affairs commissioner, attacked them



Dali's "Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus," at rear above, and "Battle of Tetuan" on display at the Gallery of Modern Art when it opened on Columbus Circle in 1964.

with hammer and nail in a befuddled attempt to create offices.

This was a vertical museum. Visitors took an elevator to the top and descended through galleries arranged as a squared-off spiral. Rem Koolhaas, in projects like the Jussieu Library in Paris and the Rotterdam Kunsthal, has pursued the goal of reconciling spirals with cubes. Stone's work, like Wallace K. Harrison's, is a precedent for Koolhaas's explorations.

Perhaps the most striking display of generosity occurred in the penthouse, where Mr. Hartford lodged a two-story restaurant called the Gauguin Room. Tapestry versions of Gauguin paintings were displayed against wood paneling. The menu was Polynesian, the service and décor discreet, the prices low. And the views! Diners were right up there with Columbus himself. The broad expanse of Central Park fanned out to the east with the Maine Memorial anchoring the park's southwest corner.

The loggia's arcade framed this great vista, and taught a valuable urban lesson besides. The City Beautiful did not rely only on objects placed in the cityscape. It also depended on devices for framing the cityscape. Much of the allure of the City Beautiful image came from renderings that carefully framed a bird's-eye view. In the modern city, that function is performed not

Continued on Page 45

The Past and Future of Huntington Hartford's Generous Folly

Continued From Page 43

only by controlled open space but by windows in tall glass buildings.

Architecture is closer in spirit to the City Beautiful movement today than in the years when Stone's building went up. Time has obliterated the line that once divided the Beaux Arts from the modern movement. The Beaux Arts ideal of homogeneous urban unity is as appalling today as it was a century ago, but

most architects now treat individual buildings as pieces of the city, not discrete objects floating in space. In urban as well as stylistic terms, in other words, Stone's design was a pivot in the reconciliation of opposed points of view.

The larger pivot, however, originated outside architecture. It emerged from Andy Warhol's studio at 231 East 47th Street, the famous silver-lined Factory where Warhol was turning out his silk-screened images of Marilyn, Liz, Jackie and El-

vis. The sensibility behind those paintings had begun to ripple through the culture, and when Warhol remarked that "Pop Art is about liking things," he touched one of modernism's most sensitive nerves. In the United States, at any rate, modernism was not about liking things. It stood on a platform of serious refusals.

So many likable things had been refused. Troy Donahue. Woolworth's candy department. Academic painting. Victorian architecture. Ada Lou-

ise Huxtable, who was then the architecture critic of The New York Times, was entirely correct to describe 2 Columbus Circle as "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops." The surprise was that a lollypop palazzo was just what Pop art fans were dying for.

With institutions like the Museum of Modern Art now catering to the market for popular entertainment, it is hard to project backward into the days when culture guards patrolled the borders between art and kitsch.

But 2 Columbus Circle is once again a contested site. Who will buy? Or, to raise a more significant question, why did the city reopen the bidding process? The initial round produced solid offers from two potential buyers: Donald Trump and the Dahesh Museum. Either of them could revive the era when academic and Surrealist painting were considered guilty pleasures. The bright thing would be to broker a venture between them.

Trump proposes to tear down 2

Columbus Circle and put up a new building, a super-luxurious annex to his hotel across the circle. Since a new building can't exceed the present one in size, it's unlikely that the project would make money. Rather, Trump wants to make an architectural statement. Though he is now the proud owner of Stone's General Motors Building on the far side of Central Park South, the developer has declared that he dislikes the Hartford building. He would like Frank Gehry to design a replacement. So far, Gehry hasn't taken the bait. But if Trump is prepared to give his own folly some architectural distinction, he has every right to give Mr. Hartford's the old heave-ho.

The Dahesh Museum, meanwhile, is better poised than any other arts institution to recreate Mr. Hartford's ambitions 40 years after the fact. It is based on a collection assembled by Salim Moussa Achi, a Lebanese Christian mystic and physician known as le docteur Dahesh Dr. Wonder. The collection focuses on French 19th-century academic painting. It is one of the major sources of information on the era dominated by the revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. The Dahesh, now housed on Fifth Avenue, proposes to preserve 2 Columbus Circle, and has approached Hugh Hardy to supervise its restoration.

SINCE cultural institutions don't pay taxes, the city may be reluctant to pick Dahesh. This is like exiling the golden goose. Tourism and culture make up an increasing share of the city's tax base. People come to New York and other urban centers to gain cultural experience. Many of them need places to stay. The Dahesh and the Donald would make a perfect pair across the circle.

Better yet, somebody smart ought to broker a deal between these two colorful bidders. Trump should take over the Gauguin Room's two-story penthouse and create his own kind of generosity: restaurant by day, supper club at night. For many of us, Trump is a Surrealist phenomenon, the pure projection of New York's unconscious desires. The Dahesh specializes in French Orientalist paintings. Trump's adoration of sparkle evokes the Arabian Nights. Now why can't these folks create a cultural fusion in a place dedicated to the idea of venturing into the unknown? □