

COLUMBUS CIRCLE SAGA GOES ON, AS MUSEUM COVETS MONSTROSITY

Dr. Daresh's Followers
Want Beautiful Eyesore
To House 19th-Century Art

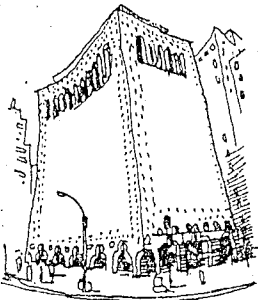
"THE MAYOR HATES THE BUILDING"

Developers Circle Hartford Folly,
Carrying Plans, Proposing Dynamite

BY ANDREW RICE

If buildings had psyches, the strange little structure at 2 Columbus Circle would probably be in need of some serious counseling. At its birth, as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art, it was derided, in the famous phrasing of architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, as "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops." Hard times, however, soon forced Mr. Hartford to give up his child. For years it was a ward of the state, home to city bureaucrats.

Recently, in a column entitled "Buildings Worth 'Kingdome'-ing," *Slate* columnist Timothy Noah suggested the building, like Seattle's Kingdome, be blown to bits.



2 COLUMBUS CIRCLE

Mr. Noah would have a supporter in Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who has been known to call his advisers as his official car passed through Columbus Circle, asking how close the city was to a sale.

"The Mayor hates the building," a former official said.

Yet lately the nine-story white concrete building has been basking in some unlikely public esteem. Preservationists are fighting to keep Mr. Giuliani from unloading the building to a developer who will knock it down. The city, which could hardly give it away a few years ago, is now entertaining bids from 13 suitors for the site, among

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Who Wants 2 Columbus Circle?

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them the Max Capital Management Corporation and residential developer Carey Tamarkin. Some of the bidders, it seems, actually have preservation in mind.

Joe Moinian, already developing 1.5 million square feet of New York office space, said he wants to buy the building and renovate it from the inside, for purposes he would not disclose.

"It's the most expeditious plan, [because] it assuages the concerns of the city, the neighborhood and the preservationists about new development on the site," Mr. Moinian said through a spokeswoman. And, he added, it preserves the views of the park for his office tenants at 1775 Broadway, across the street.

But Mr. Moinian's most likely supporters, the building's defenders, have already committed their allegiance to another bidder. For several years, they've doggedly advocated for the building to be sold to the Dahesh Museum, which plans to reuse the building as Mr. Hartford, and his architect, Edward Durrell Stone, originally intended it, to hold an art collection. The museum possesses a world-renowned collection of 19th-century academic art.

Less well known to the preservationists is that the museum maintains extensive ties to followers of the messianic Lebanese mystic Salim Moussa Achi, also known as Dr. Dahesh.

"They're still the most viable people for it," said Olive Freud of the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development. "They have a good collection. They're world famous."

Mrs. Freud is probably best remembered as the woman who, for years, kept Mortimer Zuckerman from building on the site of the New York Coliseum, and she is not a force to be trifled with. But in her efforts to swing the award of the building to the Dahesh, she has met a formidable opponent in Mayor Giuliani, who wants the building gone and new development on the site.

That, however, has been more difficult to achieve than would seem for such a well-located offering in such a hot real estate market. Several people involved in the bidding process said demolishing architect Stone's triangular concrete building would be difficult. And its "footprint"—the piece of land it's on—is hardly larger than a traffic island, making development challenging. As for its location—in the midst of Columbus Circle traffic, any loading and unloading would be problematic.

"This building is a tricky building," said Avinash Malhotra, an architect who explored, but decided against, making a bid on behalf of Betina Equities.

And then there's the sentimentality factor. "I'm not particularly fond of this building, but I think there's enough sentiment out there that we could not really alter this building from the exterior, and it doesn't lend itself to conversion to another use because there are no windows," Mr. Malhotra said.

Small wonder the city's Economic Development Corporation has had to throw out a first round of bids on the property—including the high bid of \$10 million made by the Dahesh in 1997—and ask developers to go back to the drawing board.

Bids were due May 2. With the long-stalled demolition of the Coliseum begun and a mega-complex being developed by the Related Companies and AOL Time Warner going up in its place, city officials figured to get more than the measly \$10 million bid by the Dahesh.

If they did, E.D.C. officials aren't saying. They refused to identify bidders or comment on the pending sale. But *The Observer* has learned several of the names.

Richard Kalikow and Adam Hochfelder of the Max Capital Management Corp., said they submitted a plan to tear down the building and replace it with an 11-story luxury condominium building overlooking the circle and the park, each of which would market for \$2.5 to \$6 million.

Mr. Tamarkin, the Harvard-trained architect best known for his battles with Woody Allen over his plans to build a high-rise apartment building in Carnegie Hill, also confirmed he submitted a bid, but declined to

give details.

Donald Trump, who two years ago offered the city about \$5 million for 2 Columbus Circle, planning to tear it down and put a Frank Gehry-designed luxury hotel in its place, has previously said he was no longer interested in the site. But since the deadline for bidding May 2, the normally loquacious Mr. Trump declined to say whether he bid or not.

And then there's the Dahesh, which has submitted an even sweeter bid this time around, said museum executive director J. David Farmer.

"We've pretty much staked out our turf as the people who are going to renovate and preserve the building," Mr. Farmer said, expecting the support of the preservationists.

And that support, which starts with Mrs. Freud, is mounting. An April 14 rally amid the building's lollipop columns attracted local notables like novelist Tom Wolfe and architect Robert M. Stern. Editorial writers have called for the building's preservation. Herbert Muschamp, *The New York Times*' architecture critic, has even praised it, somewhat faintly, as Mr. Hartford's "generous folly."

RAISED MIDDLE FINGER

The building was the product of Mr. Hartford's rebellion. Angered by the Museum of Modern Art's embrace of abstraction, Mr. Hartford, the A&P supermarket mogul, opened the Gallery of Modern Art in 1964 to display his collection of Impressionists, Pre-Raphaelites and Surrealists. What better place to show it than Stone's building which, as architect Joel Sanders has written, was



Lebanese mystic Salim Moussa Achi, also known as Dr. Dahesh.

seen "as a raised middle finger to the prevailing International Style."

But the gallery was a flop and, within five years, Mr. Hartford set about selling off the art collection and gave away the building. It ended up in the city's hands, and became home to its Cultural Affairs Department, which vacated the building in April 1998.

Enter the Dahesh Museum, which is now located in a converted nail salon at 601 Fifth Avenue. On a recent midday visit, old women stepped around about a dozen children, third graders from P.S. 199 in Long Island City, sitting on the floor of the museum's narrow gallery.

"This is not a building that would be anyone's first choice for a museum," Mr. Farmer pointed out.

Yet there's a certain beleaguered affinity between the histories of 2 Columbus Circle and the Dahesh. Academic art has been out of favor since, at the end of the 19th century, the Impressionists revolted against the art academies' constraining realism. "These salon paintings," *Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote in a review of the Dahesh's premiere show, in 1995, "have the very special awfulness of expensive kitsch."

There are some signs that view is changing. The museum's current show, featuring women painters of Paris' Academic Julian,

has been well received. Works by oft-derided painters like Alexandre Cabanel and Adolphe-William Bouguereau, whose works are part of the museum's collection, are selling for millions at auctions. Madonna is rumored to be a fan of the art. And an article in the April *Atlantic Monthly* about the museum, entitled "The Baddest of Bad Art," was actually quite positive.

But few know the roots of the museum and the devotees of its namesake, Dr. Dahesh. Dr. Dahesh is referred to in its publicity materials as "a renowned Lebanese writer, philosopher and art collector" who originally assembled the collection for display in his West Beirut villa. But a 1996 article in the magazine *ArtNews* drew connections be-

tween a secretive Saudi family, the Zahids, who started and endowed the museum and still serve as its board of directors, and a spiritual movement that believes Dr. Dahesh was an emissary of God capable of performing miracles. Dr. Dahesh clearly implied, and some of his followers believe, he was a second coming of Christ.

"They are a curious organization," said Alexander S.C. Rower, director of the Calder Foundation, which tried, unsuccessfully, last year to buy 2 Columbus Circle as a home for its collection of Alexander Calder sculptures. The museum has since found other digs, but Mr. Rower said he still favors selling 2 Columbus Circle to a museum. As for the Dahesh, "it doesn't affect the presentation of the paintings, but there are curious issues there."

If so, former city officials and building supporters are largely unaware of them.

"I've never heard anything about it," said Ms. Freud. "What kind of religious group?" "You can compare it to a new Platonism with more spirituality," said Dr. Ghazi Brax, who heads a company, owned by the Zahids, devoted to publishing works by and about Dr. Dahesh.

"There's no organization. ... Maybe in the future it will be more organized, but right now it's spreading throughout the world. There are thousands of adepts of Dr. Dahesh."

Daheshists, he explained, believe all religions reveal cosmic truths, if imperfectly; that all matter—plants, animals, rocks, human beings—is made up of "sayals" (spiritual fluids) and have consciousness; in reincarnation on earth and life on other planets.

WALKED ON WATER

According to Daheshist teachings, Dr. Dahesh was born in Jerusalem in 1909. His family came to Beirut soon afterward. He began writing as a young man and soon acquired followers among Lebanon's political elite. Perhaps because of his increasing power—perhaps, some say, because of his Rasputin-like relationships with some important wives—he was driven underground. In 1942, at the age of 33 (Jesus, Dr. Brax noted, was 33 when he was crucified), he declared a new religion. Eventually, the political situation calmed, and he settled into his Beirut villa, which, by the time Dr. Brax met him, had become something of a salon for the devout and the curious.

Daheshist literature is full of stories of the doctor's prophecies and miracles. He walked on water. Executed by a firing squad, he came back from the dead. One follower writes of converting after Dr. Dahesh beseeched God to ripen an avocado: "Instantly it became ripe, turning from a light green fruit into a deep green one speckled with dark brown spots."

Yet even Dr. Dahesh was not immune to the ravages of the civil war that raged in Beirut in the mid-1970's. In 1976, he arranged for his art collection to be shipped to the United States.

"In a special personal arrangement," a Dahesh Museum newsletter says, "the whole collection was entrusted into the hands of people who decided to give it a new home in New York, the art capital of the world."

Those people, though the newsletter never mentions their names, were the Zahids. According to documents filed with the state agency that charters museums, five Zahids—Mervat, Amr, Amira, Hoda, and Mahmoud—make up the museum's board of trustees. The family now resides in Greenwich, Conn., and maintains a low profile. The museum boasts an endowment of \$28 million in investments, most of it from the Zahids.

Members of the family also finance Mr. Brax's Daheshist Publishing Company Ltd., at 1775 Broadway, and a Dahesh Heritage Bookstore on 58th Street which is slated to close soon. Both are less than a block away

'They're still the most viable people for it. They have a good collection. They're world famous.'

Olive Freud, in support of the Dahesh Museum's bid for 2 Columbus Circle.

from the 2 Columbus Circle site.

Yet state records show that when the family established the museum's foundation which, in the late 80's, listed an address on Lexington Avenue that was the same as the publishing company's.

Mounir Murad, a Daheshist who lives in Virginia and runs a Web site devoted to the doctor (www.imagingzone.com/dahesh/default.htm), said many followers believe that when he entrusted his belongings and the publishing rights to his books to the Zahids, Dr. Dahesh also willed them leadership of the spiritual movement. Mr. Murad feels the family has betrayed that mission by downplaying Dr. Dahesh, who followed his art collection into exile and died in a suburban New York hospital in 1984.

"They're a bit timid, a bit weary of people calling them cult members or something, and I guess they don't want any negative connotations associated with the museum in any way," he said.

But Ms. Zahid, who prefers to refer to Dr. Dahesh as a "humanist," said the museum clearly promotes his teachings, in the most benign way. "Through the museum's unique Arabian perspective of Western art, the museum hopes to convey a sense of brotherhood, religious tolerance and divine justice which formed the perspective of Dr. Dahesh," say documents the museum filed as part of an application for a state charter.

"I guess we wanted, as well, to give it as a gift to the city," Ms. Zahid said.

"I think that for a lot of people, it's very hard to believe that there's not some very cynical reason, nefarious reason, who knows what reason, when someone does something," said Dr. Flora Kaplan, a New York University professor who has served as a paid consultant to the family as it's built the museum. "I think partially they have been, shall we say, a victim of that."

Ms. Zahid said her family has long had its eye on 2 Columbus Circle as a home for its museum. Long before the building went on the market, the museum approached the city about buying it.

"It's almost like we may have triggered the [bidding] process," Ms. Zahid said.

Economic Development Corporation officials will not disclose their time frame to choose a winning bidder from the 13 redevelopment proposals now before them, other than to say they will move as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, the building's partisans are girding for yet another effort to keep it from being torn down.

Among the admirers is Dr. Brax, the Dahesh publisher. Glancing to his left out his window during an interview at his company's office, he regarded his infamous neighbor across 58th Street. Up close, its porthole windows looked like red eyes set in blank gray concrete.

"I think that if it were polished, and decorated with some statues, it would be great—as a museum," he said.

Special correspondent Paul Wichter reported from Beirut.