

JAMES GARDNER

Hartford's Folly, At Last Exposed, Displays Strengths in Its Defects

After years of indecision and delay, the New York Coliseum must finally answer to the severest of all architectural critics, the wrecker's ball. The bulk of its main building has been reduced to rubble, while the adjoining office tower, shrouded in black canvas, is slated for imminent annihilation. The place hasn't looked this good in years.

ARCHITECTURE

When it was still intact, however, everything in its vicinity, from the adjacent buildings to the pedestrians themselves, seemed to be sucked into the orbit of its ugliness. And 2 Columbus Circle, that Venetian caprice of a building, which never had many friends in the architectural community, came to seem ugly by association.

For architecturally conscious New Yorkers, few things should weigh as heavily on the heart these days as whether this building, known in happier times as the Gallery of Modern Art, is to live or die. The forces are now arrayed, not quite equally, between the preservationists who insist that this deserted palazzo is a significant landmark and those who would put up a high-rise or a hotel in its place.

To visit the building—not that anyone goes there anymore—is a sobering experience. The sleaze of the place is palpable, the sense of entropic drag almost overwhelming. Once a classical vision, it has now become a classical ruin, as wretched as the temples of Petra and Palmyra.

Rather than sinking into the desert sands, however, 2 Columbus Circle rots away at one of the busiest intersections in the industrialized world. It is, in fact, the last festering outpost of the old Times Square. Some visitors will even find a perverse charm in the shattered marble of its windowless facade, the discolored concrete of its pillars, the unrelieved desolation of the abandoned balconies far above the street. Like the homeless huddling under its arches with their bags and carts, this abandoned building seems a little bit crazy, like some gussied up lunatic shouting profanities at anyone who comes nears it.

But back in 1965, when it was new, it did indeed have a beauty of sorts. It aspired to revive, in a modern idiom, the language of the Doge's Palace in Venice, together with elements of the Ca d'Oro and the Ca Dario. Few critics have appreciated the brilliance of this conceit. Because it is perched on one of the smallest and most oddly shaped blocks in Manhattan, 2 Columbus Circle, more than any other building in the city, seems to stand on an island, even if it is surrounded by the incessant flow of traffic rather than by the waters of a lagoon.

Constructed as it was at the height of the International style, the building was immediately assailed as reactionary kitsch. The fact that it was put up by Huntington Hartford, the somewhat eccentric heir to the A&P fortune, who wanted to fill it with

19th-century academic art, only fueled the ire of the Modernists.

The building never recovered from that initial assault. People now hate it by reflex. This is odd since contemporary architectural fashion has come to embrace so much of what 2

years later, by the likes of Louis Kahn and especially Philip Johnson, through whom it became one of the dominant architectural styles of the last 10 years.

In considering whether 2 Columbus Circle should be torn down, one must admit that the building is by no means perfect. There is a fussiness to the filigree of roundels coursing along the edges of the building, and the pillars at the base, though admittedly only ornamental, are too small to give visual support to the monolithic structure that rises above them. And yet, for this critic at least, the overall effect is surprisingly harmonious. Furthermore, if the imputation of ugliness

City, stretching back to the earliest days, is just how unadventurous most of us, compared with Chicago or Paris or Madrid, are. A few of our buildings achieve distinction through conformity to a canon, and Grand Central and the Seagrams Building, and the pair that pairing may sound. But the tower here is genuinely audacious. And if the Guggenheim and the new Rose Center and both buildings can be called audacious, then so can 2 Columbus Circle.

There are practical reasons, as well, for its preservation. Any massive construction on its site would greatly impact the flow of traffic around Columbus Circle. Hartford never



Lollipop, lollipop: Its columns are strange, but at least 2 Columbus Circle isn't yet another glass-and-steel tower.

Columbus Circle stood for. At a time when New York architects scarcely had the freedom to decide what kind of glass to place in their steel grids, Hartford's architect, Edward Durell Stone, reintroduced curves and ornament and, most heretical of all, vernacular allusions to an architectural past.

Significantly, he accomplished this not by reviving the Beaux-Arts tradition but by reducing ornamentation and meeting Modernism halfway. If architecture is frozen music, as Goethe said, this building is closer to Shostakovich than to Schonberg or to Schubert. From this compromise would emerge much of the architectural fashion of the past two decades. This is not to say that 2 Columbus Circle led the way for architects—no one took it seriously enough for that. But without question it deserves credit for being the first to arrive. The reintroduction of vernacular motifs would become respectable only when taken up, several

were sufficient reason to tear a building down, little of midtown would survive the wrecker's ball, and surely the Trump International, just across Columbus Circle, would be the first thing to go.

Of course, there are more substantive claims to be made against the building: If it ultimately survives, whether for commercial or cultural use, its capriciously impractical interior will have to be remodeled. And one has yet to hear a compelling reason why this or any other building should be essentially windowless. But then, the same could be said for the uptown Guggenheim and for Frank Gehry's project for a new Guggenheim near the Brooklyn Bridge.

Two Columbus Circle has the strengths of its defects. Even if it were little more than a stunt, that would still be better than yet another glass-and-steel box with some nice detailing. For if there is anything striking about the architectural complex of New York

structure would necessarily admit the singular shape of the island on which 2 Columbus Circle now stands, an island whose distinctive size, by the way, would probably preclude construction of anything very tall.

As it is, many aspirants are eyeing forward wanting to purchase and renovate the building, and for good reason. With the construction of the Coliseum and the imminent arrival of Skidmore Owings & Merrill's far more promising replacement, 2 Columbus Circle seems for the first time to be on the verge of realizing the Harvard plan that was of its planners a century ago. And if Huntington Hartford's folly were to be demolished, perhaps its charms will finally be evident to the average New Yorker now that it starts to keep better company with the massive energy generated by the new Columbus Circle will suit the needs of the building as well, integrating it at last into the life of the city.