

2 COLUMBUS CIRCLE IS GIVEN HARD LOOK BY SCHRAGER'S TEAM

Ian Says Hotel Partners Like the Superb Site But Not "That Building"

NEAR AOL, HEARST, RANDOM HOUSE

'No Decision Made' Says City, But Competitors Are Waiting

By Andrew Rice

New York's flashiest hotelier has fixed his sights on the city skyline's ugliest duckling.

Ian Schrager, the man behind the Hudson Hotel, said he's been approached by two developers looking to form a joint venture to buy and demolish 2 Columbus Circle, the windowless onetime art gallery that the city has been trying to sell for years.

"I've expressed some interest in the location," he said. Mr. Schrager recently toured the site, and came away impressed enough to consider building a hotel there.

"I like the location," he said. "I like what's going on in Columbus Circle."

What's going on is that Columbus Circle,



IAN SCHRAGER

once an inexplicably dead spot in the city's geography, is becoming a mecca for high-concept development. Anchoring it all is the AOL Time Warner Center, which is going up on the site of the old New York Coliseum. Down at 58th Street and Eighth Avenue, the Hearst Corporation has hired Lord Norman Foster, the eminent British architect, to build a glass tower atop its landmarked six-story headquarters. A bit further down Broadway, between West 55th and West 56th streets, Random House is building a new corporate headquarters.

Meanwhile, the city's efforts to capitalize on all the development by selling 2

about a joint venture to redevelop the property. He characterized his discussions with the developers, whom he would not identify, as "cocktail-party talk" at the moment. But he added: "Columbus Circle has undergone a renaissance. With the AOL Time Warner building... I think that area is going to be a new, changed area."

Mr. Schrager knows a trend when he sees one. His rise, fall and rise—from Studio 54 impresario to convicted felon to boutique-hotel magnate—has been the subject of hours of VH1 programming and a recent *New York Times Magazine* profile.

"I can't see tremendous expansion plans," said Instigina-ESG real-estate broker Thomas McConnell. Among them is the proposed \$120 million Astor Place Hotel designed by architect Renzo Piano, which, with its twisted, asymmetrical windows, looks a bit like a milk carton poked full of pencil holes.

But when it comes to 2 Columbus Circle's design, Mr. Schrager doesn't see what all the fuss is about. "I don't think that that building adds anything to the New York City skyline," he said. "I know it was done by a great architect, but it's not one of my favorites."

That's sure to dismay the building's advocates. Most of them would rather see the city sell it to another bidder, the Dahesh Museum. The private museum has long said that it wants to preserve the building and use it to exhibit a collection of 19th-century art once owned by a Lebanese mystic who called himself Dr. Dahesh.

"It seems to me that it's a very difficult site to first note, because the exposure is very difficult," said Steven Steinin, a lawyer for the museum. "It's a very, very small [building] and it doesn't have much in the way of service, and I think it would be difficult to make

Modern Art. Architecture critic Adin Louise Huxtable famously derided architect Edward Durrell Stone's design as a "dis-out Venetian palazzo on stilts."

Mr. Hartford lost the building, and the art collection, after a series of business reversals. Since then it's been passed around like the queen of spades in a real-estate

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game of hearts. The city ended up with it some years ago, and for a time it served as an office for the Department of Cultural Affairs. The agency moved out more than a year ago, in advance of the anticipated sale. Since then, the building has been vacant.

Lately, a small but influential cadre of defenders, including *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, have been lobbying for the building to be landmarked. Last year, they held a rally underneath the building's eaves, calling for its preservation.

Not Mr. Schrager: "The only threshold decision I've been able to make," he said, "is that if I did get involved, I wouldn't be interested in staying with that building."

He said that two different developers, both of whom had submitted bids to the

2 Columbus Circle at this point," said E.D.C. spokeswoman Janet Patterson. "We don't put a time frame on these things [and] we don't discuss proposals while we evaluate them."

In March, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani re-convened a Columbus Circle advisory panel, originally formed to evaluate the architectural design of the AOL Time Warner Center, now being built next door. One of the panel's jobs will be to evaluate the proposals for 2 Columbus Circle, Ms. Patterson said.

Mr. Schrager knows how he evaluates the current structure: "It's the building that pretty much been the consensus since it opened in 1964, as the home of superman-king King Hamington Hartford's Gallery of

Columbus Circle, an idiosyncratic nine-story building that stands on a plot of land roughly the size of a middle-sized apartment building. Last year, 13 prospective buyers responded to a request for proposals put out by the New York City Economic Development Corporation, which is coordinating the city-owned building's redevelopment.

At the time, city officials talked of a quick sale. But bidders said they've heard little from the city since the bids were submitted. "We're waiting to hear what the story is," said developer Adam Helfelder of Max Capital Management Corporation, who proposed building a 11-story luxury condominium building on the site.

"There has been no decision made about