



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189

518-237-8643

RESOURCE EVALUATION

DATE: 10/10/02

STAFF: Kathy Howe

PROPERTY: Gallery of Modern Art

MCD: Manhattan

ADDRESS: 2 Columbus Circle

COUNTY: New York

USN: 06101.011545

- I. Property is individually listed on SR/NR:
name of listing:
- Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district:
name of district:
- II. Property meets eligibility criteria.
- Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.

Pre SRB: Post SRB: SRB date

Criteria for Inclusion in the National Register:

- A. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B. Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possess high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- D. Have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Located on a small, wedge-shaped block bounded by Columbus Circle, West 58th Street, Eighth Avenue, and Broadway, stands the former Gallery of Modern Art erected in 1965 to house the art collection of A & P heir Huntington Hartford. The white marble-clad building with trapezoidal plan was designed by Edward Durell Stone (1902-1978), one of America's most prominent architects of the twentieth century. Although less than 50 years of age, the building meets the National Register of Historic Places criteria for exceptional significance (NR Criterion consideration G) in the area of architecture for its daring proto-postmodern design and as an outstanding example of Stone's postwar period. The significance of this resource is being evaluated at the local level, although additional research and investigation may yield significance at the national level. Stone's design, which has been referred to as an abstraction of a Venetian palazzo, challenged the modernist orthodoxy of the International style of the postwar period.

The nine-story, poured concrete building is clad in white Vermont marble with a curved façade that responds to the south arc of the traffic circle. A shallow loggia with distinctive trefoil-arched openings and columns with red granite discs wraps around the building on all four sides. Circular perforations define the corners of the building and form a wide "frieze" at the top. The circular motif can also be found in the repeating brass rings in the sidewalk and in the terrazzo floor of the lobby into which is set the white marble discs that were cut out from the exterior cladding. A two-story arcaded balcony defines the top two floors, where a cocktail-espresso lounge (eighth floor) and restaurant (ninth floor) were once located.

The interior design and materials are largely intact, though some later partitions have been inserted into the gallery spaces to form small offices. An auditorium is located in the basement and retains the original brass doors with repeating circular motif, theater seats, and stage. Four floors were used for exhibit space with each floor divided into three small gallery spaces and a large gallery on the Columbus Circle side. The museum's galleries were arranged like landings on a great staircase; and the interiors were finished with rich materials including wood paneled walls and parquet floors. The architect designed the building as a vertical museum where visitors took an elevator to the top and descended the staircase through the galleries.

The Gallery of Modern Art lasted only a few years before Hartford transferred the building to Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1969. The university changed the name of the museum to the New York Cultural Center. In 1971 Hartford, who had retained ownership of most of his art, sold the collection. In 1975 the museum was closed and the building put up for sale by the university. The city acquired the building in 1980 and it served as the headquarters of the NYC Convention & Visitors Bureau and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. The building is presently vacant. In June 2002, the NYC Economic Development Corporation selected the American Craft Museum to redevelop the building as a museum. Plans are currently underway for the proposed renovations.

Stone was one of America's premier architects of the twentieth century. His New York-based firm, established in 1936, became one of the largest in the country, with branch offices in Chicago and Los Angeles. He became a leading architect of the International Style and received many prominent commissions, including the Museum of Modern Art (1939). During World War II he served as the chief of planning and design for the U.S. Army.

After World War II, Stone's career was marked by a dramatic reversal of direction. He gave up his position as one of America's leading advocates of the International Style just as the style was gaining wide public acceptance, and he began instead to evolve a personal style that was lush and highly decorative. His new style, which became more romantic and highly embellished as time passed, made its debut in New Delhi in 1954-58 with the U.S. Embassy, a formal, white-columned box enclosed by an ornate grille and surrounded by fountains. It became one of the best known pieces of American architecture of the decade and led to other major commissions including the Gallery of Modern Art, the John G. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (1964-1969) in Washington, D.C., the 50-story General Motors Building in NYC (1968), the 80-story Standard Oil (Indiana) Tower in Chicago (1974), and the State University of New York at Albany

(1970).

The decorative screen façade of the Gallery of Modern Art has been interpreted as an abstraction of a Venetian palazzo. Stone's design revealed him as a post-modernist some twenty years ahead of his time. Certainly, his more decorative approach to design represented a rejection of the tenets of the International style. It was a reaction against the austere steel and glass curtain wall aesthetic of the International style in the postwar period.

Stone's design complemented the client's art collection. Both the building and the art ran counter to the tastes of New York's cultural elite at the time. The Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, in both its architectural design and art collection, was an attack on the formalist aesthetics of Stone's earlier design for the Museum of Modern Art. Hartford's collection featured representational art including the works of Impressionists, Pre-Raphaelites, and Surrealists.

The building strongly reflects Stone's interest in humanism and the philosophical shift in his work following the war. This interest in providing a more comfortable, human scale is especially apparent at the interior where the galleries were designed and furnished to give the feeling of a private living room in a domestic setting. His interior design purposely avoided the white, sterile setting of the modernist museum of the period. To create a warm and intimate setting, Stone used sumptuous materials including parquet floors, walnut and other hardwood paneled walls, and carpeting of red and gold. The oculus windows at the corners of the galleries admitted light and glimpses of Central Park. Custom designed tables, upholstered seating, tapestries, and a decorative wood ceiling grill were used in the restaurant.

The building is important in the context of urban design in the postwar period. Stone successfully integrated the building into its setting on Columbus Circle. Its concave façade elegantly responds to its location on the circle.

If you have any questions concerning this Determination of Eligibility, please call Kathy Howe at (518) 237-8643, ext. 3266.