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Streetscapes/Edward Durell Stone and the Gallery of Modern Art, at 2 Columbus Circle

# An Architect Who Looked Both Forward and Back

Museum plans to use the space, but not to preserve the building.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

**I**N 1956 he unabashedly plunked down a large concrete grille in the middle of a row of East Side brownstones. His 1964 Gallery of Modern Art, at 2 Columbus Circle, was, in the words of a critic for *Art News*, "a turkey." And critics said that his 1968 marble tower, the General Motors Building at 58th Street and Fifth Avenue, seriously compromised the character of Grand Army Plaza across the street.

But the complex, big-talking and romantic architect Edward Durell Stone was far ahead of his time in his views on the environment, city planning and historic preservation. Now Stone himself is becoming a cause, as preservation groups gird for a final battle over the Columbus Circle building, which has been vacant in recent years and seems headed for the dustbin.

Stone was born in 1902 into a well-to-do family in Fayetteville, Ark. He went to both Harvard and M.I.T., studied architecture in Europe for two years, joined an architectural firm in New York and got his big break in 1936 when he received the commission to design the new Museum of Modern Art building at 11 West 53rd Street. Working with a museum trustee, Philip Goodwin, Stone developed a crisp glass and marble facade, at that time the most advanced architectural statement of European modernism in New York.

Although Stone had traveled extensively in Europe sketching old monuments, it was a 1940 trip across America that awakened doubts in his mind about the doctrinaire modernism and urban policies that were changing the country. In his 1962 memoir, "The Evolution of an Architect," he wrote that he "was appalled by the devastation" caused by suburbanization, road blight and the demolition of historic buildings.

Another change came in 1953, when he met Maria Elena Torchio on a flight to Paris — and proposed to her before the plane landed. A fashion writer, she was the daughter of a Florentine father and a Barcelonese mother, and she alerted her husband to a richer sense of architectural beauty and the idea that pleasurable materials, forms and decoration were acceptable.

Stone's United States Embassy in New Delhi, completed the next year, had fountains, a screen of gold-leafed columns, principal walls of perforated concrete grilles for



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shade and a surrounding pavement of marble and of river stones smoothed by the Ganges. Compared to the minimalist designs of the period, the new embassy was swathed in Edwardian luxury.

In 1956 Stone reused the grille idea to remodel his old brownstone at 130 East 64th Street, using the grille this time for privacy. It was in that year that Huntington Hartford, heir to the A.&P. supermarket fortune, announced plans for a new Gallery of Modern Art on a trapezoidal site at Columbus Circle bounded by Broadway, 58th Street and Eighth Avenue.

Hartford hired Stone, who developed a facade in soft white marble, supported on a Venetian-style arcade, with cutout porthole shapes at the corners to allow visitors to see out. Stone's rendering also shows the building festooned with long, hanging vines or plants and surrounded by thick trees — but none of those additions were in the final plan.

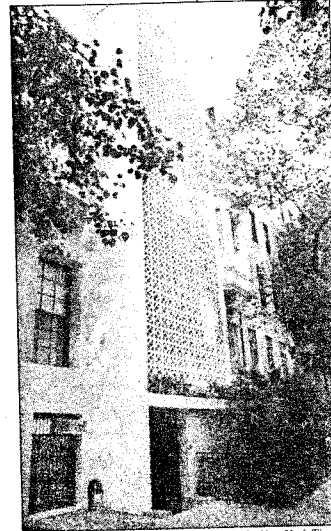
The combination of Hartford's tastes for traditional art and Stone's unusual design made the building seem erratic to contemporary critics. But although Alfred Frank-

furt, writing in *Art News* in 1964, the year the gallery opened, called it "a turkey" with the "cheap glamour of a shoe emporium on Main Street," many critics were fairly amiable. Olga Gueft, writing in *Interiors*, called it an interesting exception "to the glittering ice-cage architecture" of contemporary New York. The building's principal sin was that it stood out from the sameness that had taken over New York architecture.

Stone used his increasing success to espouse a series of ideas that would not become mainstream for years. In 1958 he was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying that suburban sprawl was desecrating the American landscape, and he called for the creation of a federal cabinet position, the secretary of the environment.

In an article in *The Times* the following year he advised Americans to "beware of progress" because older things were almost always better than new ones. "The world of plate glass and aluminum that is upon us leaves the average mortal deeply unsatisfied," he said. In a speech to the Women's City Club in 1960 he criticized New York streets for having no place to sit. He sug-

Edward Durell Stone in front of Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art at Columbus Circle in the 1960's, and Stone's old brownstone at 130 East 64th Street, which he remodeled in 1956 to add a large concrete grille.



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

gested that cars be banned from Lexington and Madison Avenues and that they be replaced with vast flower gardens.

Two years later he called for what *The Times* termed a "dictator of arts" and said, "We need someone who can say 'no' when people want to build a modernistic hot dog stand in a street of Colonial houses."

Such an idea was visionary at a time when even Penn Station could not be saved from demolition. Indeed, Stone later sought to salvage the columns from Penn Station and place them around Columbus Circle.

**I**N 1966 *Business Week* said that Stone had a billion dollars of construction projects in his office, including the 50-story General Motors Building. Both this and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, completed in 1971, were long on rich finishes, including red carpets and marble, but short on the slightly eccentric quality of his earlier work. Stone died in 1978.

Hartford had pulled out of the Gallery of Modern Art in 1969. Renamed the New York Cultural Center, it was operated by Fairleigh Dickinson University from 1969 to 1975. A year later, Gulf & Western Industries, with headquarters across Columbus Circle, bought the building as a gift to the city, intending that it be a visitors center and headquarters for the Cultural Affairs Department, which left in 1998.

In the last several years, leading preser-

vation organizations, including the Municipal Art Society, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council and *Landmark West*, have tried to get the Landmarks Preservation Commission to hold a hearing on the old gallery.

They have called in supporters, among them the architect and historian Robert A. M. Stern, who called the building "arresting and delightful" and added that "although it may seem out of fashion, that does not mean that it is trivial."

But the commission's chairwoman, Sherida Paulsen, said that it had considered the issue in 1996 and declined to hold a hearing. She declined to comment on whether the commission might change its mind.

Many preservationists are hesitant. Frank Sanchis, executive director of the Municipal Art Society, said that the organization's board is "severely divided in its opinion" even though it is lobbying for a public hearing.

Mr. Sanchis said he strongly favors designation and considers the disagreement "an indication of the building's significance."

This summer the city agreed to sell the building to the American Craft Museum, which is now at 40 West 53rd Street and was recently renamed the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design. The cost of buying and renovating the Columbus Circle building, officials at the museum say, will exceed \$30 million.

The museum is now selecting architects. Holly Hotchner, its director, said that the marble exterior is in poor condition and that the new museum will have to have windows. Meanwhile, the preservation organizations are developing other venues for discussion and continue to try to persuade the landmarks commission to reverse itself.

Arlene Simon, the president of *Landmark West*, said she is working on setting up a conference on Stone for early next year in cooperation with the American Institute of Architects. Simeon Bankoff, the executive director of the Historic Districts Council, said, "We'll raise as big a fuss as possible to save the building."

Hicks Stone, an architect in New York and one of Stone's sons, said that although his father was never part of the preservation establishment, "he would have been very grateful for the renewed interest in architectural history." In contrast with his father, he said, he is not keen on historic styles. "I love modern work," he said. "I prefer looking forward to looking back."

But he said he suspects that whatever replaces his father's building will be a lesser work. "I wish them luck," he said, "but once you get through with the tight budgets and the design by committee, everything is homogenized. You end up with pablum."