



MEMORANDUM

TO : Holly Hotchner
FROM : Roger Lang
DATE : April 1, 2002
SUBJECT : **Significance of 2 Columbus Circle**

Per your request, this memo and its enclosures will give you some background on the historical and architectural significance of 2 Columbus Circle.

Enclosures

On June 7, 2000, Alex Herrera and I sent a memo with numerous enclosures to Kathy Howe at the New York State Historic Preservation Office (NY SHPO). Its purpose was to furnish information for a determination of whether the building is eligible for listing in the State and National Registers of Historic Places. To the best of my knowledge, that decision has not yet been made by the SHPO.

However, this is the most extensive research available on the subject and I am enclosing a full copy for your files.

Significance

Now, briefly, here are a few thoughts about the significance of the place and people associated with it

A Cultural Battleground

2 Columbus Circle marks an important skirmish in the cultural history of mid-twentieth century American art. Here, A&P heir Huntington Hartford mounted a brief and futile challenge to the hegemony of abstract art. He not only chose a prominent site nearby to the renowned Museum of Modern Art, but also a sound-alike name, the Gallery of Modern Art. But his collection heavily favored representational art.

He got clobbered. John Canaday called his collection "without focus or unity." Hilton Kramer termed the museum "something of a joke, a comic irrelevance to the city's busy art life." And its downfall happened very swiftly. Five years after its opening in 1964, Hartford threw in the towel and donated the building to Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1969. The following year, he sold his collection.

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Just because Hartford lost is no reason to disparage the event from a cultural history standpoint. In fact, all battlefield monuments memorialize both victors and vanquished.

Edward Durell Stone

Hartford chose architect Edward Durell Stone to design his Gallery. Stone, in turn, recalled his patron as "a modern-day Medici with a consuming interest in the arts...an imaginative and sympathetic client." The two men clearly shared a bond of trust and esteem, as well as what Herbert Muschamp has called "contrarian" tendencies.

Stone gained fame as a proponent of the International Style with such notable works as Radio City Music Hall (1932), the A. Conger Goodyear House in Old Westbury, Long Island (1938), and the Museum of Modern Art (1939). However, in his later years, Stone "challenged modernist orthodoxy by adorning facades with ornamental screens that evoked Oriental design" (quoting Muschamp). He used this screen motif at 2 Columbus Circle, at his townhouse in the Upper East Side Historic District, and at his highly-regarded design for the U. S. Embassy in New Delhi (1959).

Since his death in 1978, Stone's renown has waned. While he was regarded as a top-tier talent when in practice, most of today's critics place him a few notches down in retrospect. Nevertheless, he still stands as an important twentieth century modern architect.

The Building

As you well know, 2 Columbus Circle seems to be one of those love-it-or-hate-it structures that does not draw many moderate or indifferent opinions. Our own Board is riven on the subject; for example, John Belle despises it and Paul Byard loves it. It is not helpful to approach questions of its significance or preservation from this standpoint.

There are a few objective factors to consider. They are:

- First, despite some facade deterioration, the structure is still intact and as such retains its inherent significance; it is fundamentally sound and capable of being appropriately restored.
- Second, the NY SHPO staff's off-the-record professional opinion is that the building meets the criteria for eligibility for listing in the State and National Registers. A formal determination has been stalled repeatedly by EDC.
- Third, while the City's Landmarks Preservation Commission has been similarly pressured and has thus far declined to get involved, its last substantive decision on the subject was made in 1996 and no hearing has yet been held where the merits of preservation could be fully explored. The significance question remains open.

Holly, I hope this has been helpful. Good luck in your meeting on April 3rd. Call me if you need anything else.

Enclosures as Noted
Via Messenger

cc: Peg Breen, Alex Herrera
rpl:j:\Roger\2CC-Holly.wpd