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Monday, October 13, 2003

2 Columbus Circle

Sunday is clearly the day for long-windedness in the New York Times. The paper leads with a 9,500-word [investigation](#) of the Lackawanna terror case (don't ask me), complete with a 1,300-word [kicker](#). And on the op-ed page, we're subjected to [2,300 barely-coherent words](#) by Tom Wolfe on the subject of 2 Columbus Circle, complete with a note mentioning that this screed is only "the first of two installments". (*Update*: [The other shoe dropped](#) today, Monday.)

Tom Wolfe, of course, is the author of *From Bauhaus to Our House*, the favourite architecture book of the kind of people who have only ever read one architecture book, or of people who don't know much about art but know what they like. Still, the book is deservedly popular: while Wolfe can be wrong-headed a lot of the time, he's also a great writer, and lots of fun to read.

He *was* a great writer, anyway. Back in the day, he could construct 265-word sentences which were masterpieces of virtuoso journalism. Nowadays, as his op-ed shows, he seems to be of the opinion that *any* 265-word sentence of his must, perforce, be a masterpiece of virtuoso journalism, with the result that he rapidly degenerates into into little more than "coherently challenged" babble, to use his own favourite term of abuse.

Wolfe is also much better when attacking architects than when defending them. The point of the op-ed, one assumes, is for Wolfe to throw his weight behind the preservationists seeking to restore Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle and keep it more or less as is, albeit both occupied and safe – neither of which it is at the moment. The alternative, against which Wolfe spends much time wailing, is a plan by Brad Cloepfil to basically rebuild the structure as a new home for the Museum of Arts and Design, completely revamping it inside and out.

Here's the building, as it looked when it was first built, as it looks today, and as it is proposed to look after the refit.

Clearly, Stone's gleaming white marble isn't gleaming any longer. But the fact is that the building was never all that good, and the arguments for its preservation are generally pretty weak. [Here's](#) Robert A M Stern, of the Yale architecture school:

New York is where orthodoxies are challenged by new ideas. Two Columbus Circle was just such a challenge, and it clearly challenges us to this day. Its provocations are as important now as ever. It was and is a pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment. For this reason, if no other, Two Columbus Circle must be preserved intact for future generations to enjoy, consider, debate, and learn from.

The building must be preserved, if only because it's provocative? This is the height of silliness. Preserving great buildings, and even merely good buildings, is one thing. But preserving provocative buildings is another thing entirely.

The fact is, the kind of people who love *From Bauhaus to Our House* are exactly the sort of people who look at 2 Columbus Circle and consider it a hideous eyesore. This building is one of the few things on which both die-hard Modernists and most anti-Modernist laymen can agree: very, very few people actually like it.

What's not obvious from the photographs is the way that 2 Columbus Circle makes you feel when you look at it in real life. It's a tall building, even if it's not as tall as the skyscrapers which surround it, and the vast majority of its height is simply a vast expanse of crumbling blank stone, with no features at all, redeeming or otherwise. The lack of windows gives it the feel of a prison: you imagine yourself stuck inside, unable to look out. It is an exercise in claustrophobia, and the new design constitutes a vast improvement.

Wolfe's op-ed appeared on the weekend of [Open House New York](#), the annual and incredibly popular event where interesting buildings around the city are opened up to the public. I went to a few, and would loved to have gone to more,

except a lot of them were booked out very early and in any case I was busy on Saturday with a wedding to go to.

But what is clear from the popularity of OHNY is that New Yorkers have a genuine enthusiasm for new architecture, and that there's lots of very cool and interesting stuff going on at the moment. Now New Yorkers love old architecture as well: some of the best bits of OHNY are where they open up an old lighthouse in Fort Washington Park, or the Tweed Courthouse, or the Washington Square arch.

Still, I'm pretty sure that the mood in the city these days is that brand-new buildings are usually pretty good. Places like the Hayden Planetarium are instant classics, and although there are certainly some dull office buildings under construction, the knee-jerk public reaction against nearly all new architecture is a thing of the past. Think to yourself: if you heard that your local train station or airport was being rebuilt, would you be happy or sad? Happy, I think: such projects are nearly always improvements, these days, in contrast to the days when the old Penn Station could be razed to make way for Madison Square Garden.

It takes a particular type of pessimist to look at something like 2 Columbus Circle and decide that although it has many failings, it must surely be better to preserve it than attempt to create something better. To have that mindset you basically have to work from the assumption that nearly all new architecture is crap, and that as a rule the past is going to be better than the future, architecturally speaking. That kind of defeatist attitude is not the kind of thing which built the Chrysler Building, and it's frankly unNew Yorkish. Wolfe should retreat to his wood-panelled study on the Upper East Side, and leave the rest of the city to the people who will inherit it with enthusiasm.

Posted by Felix at 2:07 EST

Comments

Well, I like it. I have a fondness for it. It was THE landmark on the way to my stamp shows at the exhibition hall next door, when I was 7, and when the GW building across the circle still had marble accents before Trump bought it and changed it to the gold and bronze tinted monstrosity that it is now.

Your calls for the removal of a building with such a distinctive design would sound a lot less craven if you had simultaneously called for the swift demolition of Trump's architectural crime.

The AOL Time Warner building is not much better, mind you. It's corporate ostentatiousness at its best. In fact, 2 Columbus Circle is probably the best thing going for Columbus Circle.

Posted by: [Stefan Geens](#) at 14:27 EST, October 13, 2003

Look, I'm not saying that 2 Columbus Circle ought to be removed on purely aesthetic grounds. I'm saying that there's no reason to go out on a limb to preserve it, is all. You're right that the Trump tower and the new AOL Time Warner center (or is it just going to be Time Warner center now?) are pretty gruesome as well. But that's no reason to stop the revamp of Number 2.

Posted by: [Felix](#) at 14:39 EST, October 13, 2003

It's nice to see that Mr. Wolfe calmed down slightly for his part 2. Your description of his part 1 as 'barely coherent' does a disservice to those of us who spend most of our time teetering on coherence.

Part 1 of Mr. Wolfe's commentary (opinion? essay? history lesson?) reads like the drunken ramblings of a bitter old intellectual who has been sitting at the end of the bar all day.

A large part of the problem with the decision to remove or not remove the building, is based on the exterior and it's oddity. If the interior is some genius masterpiece- what of it? Who has seen it? Not I, nor (per Mr. Wolfe) any 'living soul under the age of 60'. Who's ready to preserve that?

For the most part, buildings in NYC that gain landmark status only gain it for the exterior. One is free to do whatever to the

interior. Would that dilute the genius of this project? According to Mr. Wolfe- it would.

So then are we to preserve the exterior as well as the interior? If so, we are doing more than preserving the building... we are locking in it's function to that of a 30+ year old museum that has not been in operation almost as long.

This building has been designed so tightly to it's function that any preservation will only serve to preserve a now anachronistic function and deployment of space.

Preservation out.

I agree with Felix that NYC does not subscribe to an architecturally defeatist view of the future... but given some of the recent projects we should probably all rethink that a while.

The large Columbus Circle Project, the Westin Times Square by Architectonica, other assorted Times Sq new skyscrapers, even the LVMH building suffer from the economics of replaceable curtain walls. They all have the same cheap, disposable feel of suburban office towers or a western stageset. This is clearly not the answer either.

I am fully in favor of the rebuild utilizing the bones of 2 Columbus Circle. If done well, it could riff on some of the 'genius' elements of the original to develop something truly contemporarily functional without the need for the tabula rasa situation that NYC suffered through with Penn Station. I am not sure if the Cloepfil scheme goes far enough in this direction yet.

Cloepfil is faced with a specific opportunity here to do something uniquely NYC- take an existing condition, throw in some more spice, life, energy, idea and attitude into it to make something even better that doesn't let you forget where it came from.

Can he do it? We'll see, he has the chance to make architectural jazz... let's hope he doesn't produce the architectural equivalent of that other unfortunately NYC creative endeavor- the showtune.

Posted by: geoff at 16:13 EST, October 13, 2003

I can't tell from the picture, but if the marble is anywhere near as worn down as the marble at Lincoln Center, putting up a new glass facade would be a great idea.

I visited NYC recently, and was anything but impressed at how poorly Lincoln Center's marble has aged - it was so pitted, stained, and corroded that I couldn't even tell it was marble, and it didn't feel right to the touch when I sat down on one of the low "fences" surrounding the fountains, etc., in the plaza.

Memo to architects - it is probably NOT a good idea to slather your facades in marble in a cold, corrosive atmosphere like NYC's!

Posted by: [Liz L](#) at 10:15 EST, October 17, 2003

Great article, Felix. I agree that to preserve a building only because it's provocative is silly. But I would add that to tear down a 38-year-old building just to make something better (what is happening to Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, and elsewhere) is a project for a world that has far more disposable resources than the one we're living in. People can argue whether this is a great building, but in the end, they ought to carefully consider the true cost of the proposed makeover. Could we leave it alone?

Posted by: gregsfamous at 12:04 EST, October 17, 2003

As a student of architecture, I see the roccoco structure as sort of an ironic deconstruction of the modernist nomenclature. What I mean by that is that the curvature of the facade is triumverated by the density of the art deco spire that rise from it's belly.

Yikes! that sounds ugly!

...uh ok, tear it down.

Posted by: D. Liebskien at 6:12 EST, October 20, 2003

The impending destruction of 2 Columbus Circle is indeed a tragedy of immense proportions. I remember looking goggle eyed at what critics have deemed a "white elephant" that loomed over the circle like a towering abandoned wedding cake that had been left out a couple of decades too long.

We all know it's ugly. There's no doubt about it, the question is, is it ugly enough that we might dare I say it, feel a sort of treacly nostalgia for the damn thing after it's gone. It's not like we get rid of Donald Trump or Liz Smith just because they're not attractive to us, or never were in the first place.

We changed as a city after they destroyed Penn Station, we're kinder and gentler. We respect the past, we buy and rent former tenement building apartments for sums that would make the former slumlord's jaw drop. We have learned to cherish each and every piece of old crap in this city because it is old and has a history.

While we're at it could we raze Williamsburg too?

Posted by: gherimiah at 20:05 EST, October 21, 2003

I, personally, have always been facinated by 2 Columbus Circle... I can think of countless structures that would beat the building in a beauty pageant. However, to me, saving it isn't 'going out on a limb', its simply a natural tendency to preserve the city's history and culture.

Posted by: Nick at 17:14 EST, November 24, 2003

To argue against this building is to argue against the value of preservation. Why does preservation matter anyway? Shouldn't (as George Bush's handlers would ask) the market dictate everything? The millionaires and morons would say yes.

This building should be saved because it would cost less to clean, point, and otherwise spruce up the building, when compared to the proposed plan. It's a question of resource use; why add technically unnecessary materials while subtracting materials whose life is far from spent?

This is not a McDonald's or a Gap; it's a well made, 'designed' building of a style that happens to be out of fashion. And I admit, it may never have been IN fashion, but to destroy it would be an emotional not intellectual decision.

Some styles are meant to be acceptable no matter what happens; these are the various adaptations of the academic. The countless Beaux Arts public buildings, for example, are a real bore, and in fact they prove to us now that the era which produced them was actively trying to be boring; it was the point. Now, of course there are great Beaux Arts buildings, and I do believe that every last one of them should be saved; not because they are beautiful, but because they are there, they're well made, and they were built at great material cost (in an environmental sense).

The point of preservation should be to save good buildings no matter when they are made. The question here should be: Is this a good building, not, does this building fit in.

Posted by: jennifer at 9:38 EST, December 02, 2003

Williamsburg is hardly a comparison for New York, especially this hideous structure. And as for me, I would much support redeveloping or destroying buildings that have special value like the GW building. Now of course, being from Dallas, one might say that I am naive, but I have been fascinated with architecture since I was a child, and I can make very clear conclusions regarding what I like and dislike. Here in the Sunbelt, specifically in my hometown, we've learned some harsh lessons about preservation and destruction. However, there is no argument that I can think of that would change my mind. I've despised Two Columbus Circle since I was eight years old on a family trip to New York. While Penn Station's destruction was foolish and pointless, this real estate is not only worth more monetarily, but is deserving of a worthy structure, as was done with Time Warner Center. Even a developer only modifying the exterior and updating the building all around would be a tremendous improvement. As for the style being out of fashion, well, like we Dallasites say about old Reunion Arena, it was out of style when it was finished. The fact that critics and the publike alike did not find the building attractive from the very completion of it should say something. What really bothers me personally is the blank wall. Blank

walls are the worst thing that can happen to a city; just look at the average suburb or a sunbelt city. A building in this way has the charm of a parking garage. Even cities like LA, Dallas, Miami, and more have found better uses than a blank wall. I know that locally, the blank walls of parking garages are usually painted with a huge mural, or even sometimes feature advertisements. But this is no parking garage, and something must be done. I also don't think that this type of building "just disappearing" is any concern, either. There are trash heaps like this all over the world.

By the way, I'm just a seventeen-year-old guy from Richardson, Texas, so keep that in mind as this debate now extends into newer generations.

Posted by: [centerpoint](#) at 14:59 EST, December 02, 2003

I happened upon this discussion after seeing the article on 2 Columbus Circle in the New York Times online today (1/7/04). I visited New York last week and my sister-in-law and I were arguing over what the building might be that we saw across Columbus Circle. I thought that it looked like an air vent for the subway or a tunnel. Funny to find out that it is the subject of so much discussion and has such a history.

On one hand, it seems that the building in it's current state is not very useful and will be expensive to repair and maintain. On the other hand, if a building can evoke so much discussion and an out-of-state traveler researching it online, there must be value inherent.

Horribly ugly and foreboding, yes, but unique and worthy of preservation.

Posted by: schnugger at 11:19 EST, January 07, 2004

i'm from the UK, have been over in NYC back in November and again last week, when I was staying at the MO in the TimeWarner building. Like the person above, I looked at the building and wanted to know what it was, which is how I found this.

for what it's worth (and of course i don't live there so i don't have to look at it) i think it lends an air of the exotic to the area, and suggests an "authenticity" that's all too lacking in NYC today - the TW Center being a case in point.

Posted by: greg cheasman at 10:17 EST, March 04, 2004

I think 2 Columbus Circle is a attractive building in its own right and a very urbane addition to Columbus Circle. I visited the building when it was first built as the Gallery of Modern Art and also was delighted by its interiors. (The handsome wood-paneled galleries were pleasantly lighted by the bands of porthole windows in the corners, and the galleries themselves were arranged so that they created a downward spiral that wound around the service core. In a way, it was like a squared-off version of the Guggenheim, with steps instead of ramps.)

While everyone is, of course, entitled to their own taste, I find passionate negative reactions to this building to be puzzling -- and interesting. One of the very first buildings to be designated a NYC landmark was the old Victorian gothic Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village -- which at the time was a soot-encrusted hulk bedecked in pigeon droppings. Ada Louise Huxtable said about this building, something like, "If you can landmark this building, you can landmark anything." While I love old Jeff, I have to admit that for me THIS was an acquired taste (abetted by a thorough cleaning and sympathetic remodeling). I find 2 Columbus Circle, in contrast, to be very easy to like -- especially in comparison to many, many, many other buildings in quirky styles that have been landmarked in addition to old Jeff. So, it seems to me that this building is, for some reason, being held to a much higher standard.

I also think it would be great for NYC to be able to showcase three different "small" intact private museums, each of which illustrates a different approach to 20th Century museum design by a distinguished 20th Century architect: the Guggenheim, the Whitney and 2 Columbus Circle.

Posted by: Benjamin at 0:36 EST, July 04, 2004

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