

LANDMARK WEST!

From: "LANDMARK WEST!" <landmarkwest@landmarkwest.org>
Sent: Tuesday, October 14, 2003 3:14 PM
Subject: Wolfe at the Door: Landmark Commission, Open Up!

Tom Wolfe Speaks Out on 2 Columbus Circle in Two Consecutive *New York Times* Op-Ed Pieces (see below)

What more will it take?

Whatever you think about historic preservation and the merits of Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle for landmark designation, the following two articles by Tom Wolfe (award-winning author of *A Man in Full* and *Bonfire of the Vanities*) are not to be missed. Rarely does the *New York Times* provide such powerful coverage of the real politics of architecture, preservation, planning, and real estate development in our city. You've heard us ask the question, what more will it take for the Landmarks Preservation Commission to at least hold a public hearing to let New Yorkers have their say on the future of this important 20th-century icon? If these Op-Ed pieces don't motivate you to act - and act **NOW** - nothing will.

We strongly recommend reading both Op-Ed columns (*NY Times*, 10/12/03 and 10/13/03, pasted below), if you haven't already. Here are a few especially cogent quotes. Then, **keep reading** for instructions on what **you** can do to help preserve 2 CC. As the "civic organization" cited by Wolfe for our sponsorship of a February 2003 panel discussion on this building's significance, we're here to tell you that it's not over! In fact, it's just getting interesting...More info. to follow on upcoming public hearings.

On architect Edward Durell Stone's original 1964 design for 2 CC: *"The whole damned building was marble! White marble - up and down and all the way around! 'A pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment,' as Robert A. M. Stern would put it later when he became dean of Yale's School of Architecture....Stern is not only a noted architect but also the definitive historian of 20th-century New York City architecture....Mr. Stern went on to characterize the museum as one of Stone's 'masterworks,' along with the embassy in New Delhi and Stone's own town house on East 64th Street in New York, whose entire facade was grillwork."*

On architect Brad Cloepfil's plan to re-design 2 CC to "merge" with the rest of Columbus Circle: *"There are many who cry out that Stone's white marble building should be preserved as a historic landmark and many who would just as soon see it go. But both sides agree on one thing: 'its urban environment' is gross. 'Its surroundings,' the buildings beside, behind and across from Stone's museum, make Columbus Circle, minus the museum, look like the Downtown Renaissance of some decaying midsize Rust Belt city from which the factories have decamped to Mexico and the retailers have fled to the malls....So if that is what Architect Cloepfil and the Museum of Arts and Design want their brainchild to 'merge' with and have a 'dialogue' with...they might want to brace themselves for an earful and a half."*

On the Landmarks Preservation Commission's failure to hear 2 CC: ***The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission** preserved Stone's own town house, by landmarking it years ago, but **refuses, despite constant appeals, to so much as hold a hearing on the museum....**The landmarks commission seemed to be getting a clear message from City Hall: lay off 2 Columbus Circle....From that day on, every time the question of a hearing on 2 Columbus Circle came up, **the landmarks commissioners, as I see it, dove under their desks, clapped their hands over their ears, cried out to their secretaries to shove history and the concept of landmarks preservation itself through the shredder, and hid....** Soon, during the next few days, weeks, months at the most, an appalling smack will be heard throughout New York....It will be the sound of the landmarks commissioners hitting the deck once more . . . while **one of the most important buildings in the history of 20th-century architecture** is vaporized."*

In conclusion, Wolfe draws a poignant parallel between 2 CC and Penn Station, "a masterpiece of New York architecture by the great architects McKim, Mead & White, that had been sold to the highest bidder and destroyed, columns and all, and fed to the Jersey marshes in **a senseless but innocent-by-reason-of-uncontrollable-cupidity act of vandalism**. The what-have-we-done shock that followed led directly to the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. As the French say: 'Après la mort le médecin.' After death, the doctor shows up."

SO, NOW WHAT? Let Mr. Wolfe's passion for 2 Columbus Circle and historic preservation be your muse. Help turn up the volume and make sure the City hears our message **LOUD** and **CLEAR!** Even if you've written or testified before, it's time to do it again!

>>> Tell Landmarks Chair Robert Tierney, "**It's your watch.** Do you want the **destruction of this 20th-century 'masterwork'** to be your commission's legacy?" Write to him at rtierney@lpc.nyc.gov, 212-669-7955 (fax), NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1 Centre Street, 9th Fl., NYC 10007.

>>> Ask your elected officials, "**Where are you on 2 CC?**" Mayor Bloomberg is especially important - will he and other elected officials **listen to New Yorkers and do the right thing**, or will they perpetuate the (deliberate?) short-sightedness of previous administrations? Write to the following representatives (and please send copies to landmarkwest@landmarkwest.org):

Hon. Michael R. Bloomberg, <http://nyc.gov/html/mail/html/mayor.html>, 212-788-2460 (fax), City Hall, NYC 10007

Hon. C. Virginia Fields, Manh. Boro. President, bp@manhattanbp.org, 212-669-7862 (fax), 1 Centre Street, 19th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. A. Gifford Miller, City Council Speaker, miller@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-788-7207 (fax), City Hall, NYC 10007

Hon. Gale A. Brewer, City Council, gale.brewer@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-513-7717 (fax), 250 Broadway, 17th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Alan Gerson, City Council, gerson@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-788-7727 (fax), 250 Broadway, 18th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Robert Jackson, City Council, jackson@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-788-9190 (fax), 250 Broadway, 17th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Marguerita Lopez, City Council, (no e-mail), 212-614-8813 (fax), 250 Broadway, 17th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Miguel Martinez, City Council, martinez@council.nyc.ny.us, 917-521-1293 (fax), 250 Broadway, 17th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Eva Moskowitz, City Council, moskowitz@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-442-1457 (fax), 250 Broadway, 15th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. William Perkins, City Council, perkins@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-442-2732 (fax), 250 Broadway, 18th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Christine Quinn, Cit Council, quinn@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-227-1236, 250 Broadway, 18th Fl., NYC 10007

Hon. Philip Reed, City Council, reed@council.nyc.ny.us, 212-722-6378 (fax), 250 Broadway, 17th Fl., NYC 10007

Kyle Merker, Chair, Community Bd. 5, cb5manhattan@netzero.net, 212-465-1628 (fax), 450 7th Ave., Ste. 2109, NYC 10123

Walter Mankoff, Chair, Community Bd. 4, info@manhattancb4.org, 212-947-9512 (fax), 330 W. 42nd St., 26th Fl., NYC 10034

Hope Cohen, Chair, Community Bd. 7, office@cb7.org, 212-595-9317 (fax), 250 W. 87th St., NYC 10024

Ethel Sheffer, Chair, Tri-Board Task Force, c/o CB 7, office@cb7.org, 212-595-9317 (fax), 250 W. 87th St., NYC 10024

October 12, 2003

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Building That Isn't There

By TOM WOLFE

Does the municipal log duly show that Brad Cloepfil, the architect about to transform Edward Durell Stone's historic white marble Huntington Hartford museum on Columbus Circle, means to render it "more ephemeral?"

"Ephemeral" is Architect Cloepfil's own word, I hasten to add, as in here today and gone tomorrow, and the nouveau-named Museum of Arts and Design, originally the homely old dosey-doe American Craft Museum, now on West 53rd Street, is busy raising more than \$50 million to have him do it.

The average savant might assume Architect Cloepfil (rhymes with "hopeful") was trying to say "ethereal" or perhaps "inimitable" when his tongue slipped to "ephemeral"; but the average savant avoids the coherently challenged theoryspeak of contemporary architecture like a brain-invading computer virus - and is therefore unlikely to know that Ephemeralism was once (1994) This Year's Architectural Style of the Century. There were

countless This Year's Styles of the Century from 1950 to 2000: the New Brutalism, the New Minimalism, Deconstructivism, Conceptualism, Contextualism, Rationalism, three kinds of Postmodernism (White, Gray and Silver) and on and on. But I will mention only a couple that had succeeded Ephemeralism before the century was even over: Blobism and Infrastructuralism.

Ephemeralism's big moment arrived in 1994 with Jean Nouvel's Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris. Well outside the real glass walls, Mr. Nouvel, a French architect, put other glass walls that extended beyond the building and were meant to create disorienting reflections and general confusion as to where the museum itself really was, thereby "dematerializing" it (Mr. Nouvel's favorite word at the time) and making it difficult for what theorists call "the dominant regime" to find. I could try to tell you why this is an important goal, but it would make your head hurt as much as mine.

In due course, Ephemeralism embraced 1) transparency - using plain glass walls or, preferably, confusing layers of glass like Mr. Nouvel's; 2) voyeurism - people outside on the street observing what people are doing inside and vice versa; and 3) branding - making the exterior design remind you of the enterprise within. All this was supposed to return architecture to a certain messianic moment, to the original vision of Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier - the White Gods!

Our story of Brad Cloepfil and Edward Durell Stone and Stone's museum at 2 Columbus Circle is a modern-day, Oct. 12, 2003, parable of a curious religion - literally that, a religion - that has determined the look of major public buildings throughout the United States for the past 60-odd years. It is a story of believers and an infidel . . . and of where the faithful will go from here.

How the two Germans, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, arrived as refugees in the early 1930's . . . how they found both faculty and students at all the major architecture schools in the United States prostrate before them in awe and homage (Harvard immediately made Gropius head of its architecture school) like Bruce Cabot and Myrna Loy crash-landing in the jungle in a 1930's movie and emerging dizzily from the wreckage in their white jodhpurs and black Vogel riding boots . . . to find the natives down on their knees worshipping them - White Gods! Come from sky! - and how the faith known as the International Style entered young architects' very bones, not metaphorically but precisely the way another faith enters the very bones of upland foot-washing Baptists at age 4 . . . and how by 1945 the architects, literally, not metaphorically, were converts, one and all, veritable zealots, who spoke with such evangelical fervor in theoryspeak that even the chief executives of the mightiest corporations gave up, caved in and signed off on towering glass boxes they personally hated . . . is a well-known story . . . as well known as the White Gods' First Commandment, namely, that all buildings, great and small, must be made bourgeois-proof in the name of the Working Class . . . meaning no precious materials, such as marble - and white marble was the worst - only glass, steel, concrete and plaster . . . no applied decorations, such as crown (monarchy!) moldings . . . and no "pretty" colors, only white, black and gray.

Less well known is the story of how by 1960 this business of turning out correct glass box after correct glass box began to bore even the most profoundly religious architects . . . and how there ensued a frenzied attempt to come up with a style that looked different but broke none of the holy trinity's commandments . . . resulting in the Tower of Babelish babble-gaggle of isms I've mentioned.

Ephemeralism in this country was in no small part the result of a pronouncement by one of the Three Gods' latter-day saints, Prof. Colin Rowe of Cornell. In a coherently challenged tour de force in the 1990's, he went up a steep slope at the Greek Peak Ski Resort, east of Ithaca, and came down with a tablet titled "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal." It revealed that the gods had foreseen a future in which the Second Commandment, concerning transparency, would embrace far more than the simple transparency of glass.

Now we can understand the deeply faith-based orthodoxy of Architect Cloepfil's plans for dematerializing Stone's white marble museum. The marble will be removed and carted off somewhere, very likely New Jersey, to be fed as landfill to the mucky maw of the Jersey marshes, at a cost of millions. The marble walls will be replaced by, one scarcely need add, glass walls. In place in front of the glass walls, explained Holly Hotchner, director of the Museum Formerly Known as Craft, at a press conference on April 2, with a beaming Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg standing by, will be curtain walls, top to bottom and all around. The curtains walls, known as "scrim," "veils" or "layers" in theoryspeak, will be made of panels of perforated glazed terra cotta, probably 18-or-so inches from the glass walls. The perforations in the terra cotta will offer peekaboo voyeurism. At intervals will be wide glass "columns," so-called, but rectangular, flush with the plane of the curtain walls. They will offer the voyeurs outside the full Monty, a direct look at what's going on inside.

In 2006, when it is completed, we will see the Platonic ideal of plain transparency, confusing transparency,

peekaboo voyeurism, I-see-you voyeurism and hide-and-peek deception of the dominant regime. Not only that, the clay terra cotta and the perforations in it will create a woven, textured effect, according to Director Hotchner. The clay and the more-or-less woven look will brand the Museum Formerly Known as Craft as the City Mouse heir to the Country Mouse's trove of hand-thrown, hand-painted, hand-glazed, home-baked clay pots and purposely wooly loosely loopy home-loomed fabrics.

Architect Cloepfil himself says that "it is essential that 2 Columbus Circle engage its surroundings . . . therefore the building is permeable, fostering a dialogue between the interior of the museum and its urban environment." He says it will "merge" with the rest of Columbus Circle.

Here we are faced with another coherently challenged goal. There are many who cry out that Stone's white marble building should be preserved as a historic landmark and many who would just as soon see it go. But both sides agree on one thing: "its urban environment" is gross. "Its surroundings," the buildings beside, behind and across from Stone's museum, make Columbus Circle, minus the museum, look like the Downtown Renaissance of some decaying midsize Rust Belt city from which the factories have decamped to Mexico and the retailers have fled to the malls.

In a Downtown Renaissance the terminally weary buildings left stranded downtown get "revitalized" by a couple of new, ludicrously colossal glass-box towers done in the 1950's Modern mode . . . such as Columbus Circle's Trump International Hotel and Tower, originally the Gulf & Western tower, and the soon-to-be-completed Time Warner complex.

So many roadways cut into and right through the Circle itself, the marble statue of Christopher Columbus out in the middle looks like a stranded pedestrian who has shimmed up a 77-foot pole to keep from getting killed and is waiting for the marble people lounging about the base of the Maine Memorial at the southwest entrance to Central Park - Courage, Peace, Fortitude and Justice, by name - to come rescue him.

So if that is what Architect Cloepfil and the Museum of Arts and Design want their brainchild to "merge" with and have a "dialogue" with (a favorite coherently challenged theoryspeak term - nobody ever reports what the "environment" said), they might want to brace themselves for an earful and a half. Our average savant would shake his head and say to himself: they plan to spend more than \$50 million to create a "permeable" now-you-see-it, now-you-don't building so one can at last observe, without distraction, a miserable Gehenna no dominant regime, if such existed outside of theoryspeak, would put up with for 10 minutes.

As soon as the museum was on the market in 1975 (we will see why in the next installment), the people at Gulf & Western, whose office tower was across the Circle from it, snapped it up. It was useless to them as a commercial property, because the block it fills up is a tiny island the shape of a fingernail clipping, with prohibitive height restrictions. It seems they bought it, according to the American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City, solely because its sleek, radiant, monumental white marble facade "shows off well when seen from the north, on Broadway, gleaming among larger, darker structures" - and made the office space G & W was leasing out with views of the otherwise Low Rent, Room to Let Circle far more valuable. G & W then granted the city use of Stone's building as a visitors center, rent free, with the strict proviso that it not be altered in any way.

Huntington Hartford was a man in his late 40's who had inherited \$70 million, much of it directly from his father, a shock-absorber inventor. Mr. Hartford despised the Museum of Modern Art and its championing of abstract art, especially Abstract Expressionism. His passion was literally religious, too, but his religion was the church kind. Mr. Hartford believed abstract art mocked God. So he decided to thrust a gleaming Cross into the very face of the Devil in the form of a Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle, a museum showing the world modernists who worked in the representational mode, from the Pre-Raphaelites to Gauguin to the dazzling and, in his view, spiritually uplifting Salvador Dali.

Mr. Hartford chose Stone as architect . . . and smacked his lips over the poetic justice of it. This was the very same Edward Durell Stone who had been the architect, along with Philip Goodwin, of the Museum of Modern Art 25 years earlier!

At the time, back in the 1930's, Stone had been among the handful of prominent American International Style architects. He had designed one of the first International Style houses on the East Coast, the Mandel House (1933) in Mount Kisco, N.Y. His International Style house for the Museum of Modern Art's president, A. Conger Goodyear of the Goodyear Goodyears, would later be designated a World Monument by the World Monuments Fund.

Then, in the 1950's - bango! - Stone defected without warning from the International Style in a big way: he created the sinfully luxurious American Embassy in New Delhi, with its gold-leafed steel columns, its facade of concrete and marble terrazzo grillwork to temper the equatorial sunlight, and a picturesque water garden to provide a cooling view. To International Style Modernists, the use of luxurious materials like marble and gold and Taj Mahal-style grilles symbolized the dominant regime, the accursed bourgeois capitalists, lording it over the masses; and the less said about picturesque water gardens the better.

But the dismay over Stone's embassy was nothing compared to the furor over his museum for the "reactionary" Huntington Hartford. The whole damned building was marble! White marble - up and down and all the way around! "A pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment," as Robert A. M. Stern would put it later when he became dean of Yale's School of Architecture.

More of Stone's damnable Taj Mahal grillwork, it seemed, ran up the corners of the building and across the top of the facade. And the arches! - whole rows of them framed loggias near the top of the building and made orthodox Modernists grind their teeth and think of Venetian palaces . . . owned by the merchant kings. And the columns! - white marble columns of a bizarre (i.e., new) shape inset with dark marble discs . . . must be Moorish or something.

Above all, there was the facade, which scrupulously followed the curve of the Circle. Stone had rejected steel construction in favor of poured reinforced concrete and its plastic, sculptural qualities in order to do it. The gods of the International Style, Corbusier, Mies and Gropius, shuddered. They countenanced only steel-beam construction with simple, honest Working Class right angles.

Inside the museum was 10 stories worth of heresy. Instead of the International Style's mandatory plain white gallery walls, Mr. Hartford's galleries were veneered in two notoriously expensive dark woods, macassar ebony and walnut, with bronze trim. Instead of bare, Worker Gray factory-style floors, Mr. Hartford's had expensive marble inlays, hardwood parquet de Versailles, gold area rugs and red carpet.

Stone and Mr. Hartford knew they were in for howls of outrage and wouldn't have been happy if they heard none. But as for the thermomedia blast about to flatten them - they hadn't a clue.

The Building That Isn't There, Cont'd
By TOM WOLFE

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Oh, they had thrown a regular fit before, hadn't they, they being the critics and the architecture scholars and the rest of the International Style crowd, over his American Embassy building in New Delhi. But once they got through their yawping and muttering over the marble, the gold, the water garden, the maharajah grillwork, etc., the name Edward Durell Stone was bigger than ever. It stood for imagination, daring, aloofness from the whole cult-programmed bunch of them.

They might - in fact, they surely would - throw another fit over his new museum for Huntington Hartford . . . the tons of white marble, the precious wood veneers, the gold rugs, the red carpets, etc. At the same time, they would also surely have to deprogram themselves long enough to give credit for genius where genius deserved it. They weren't crazy, after all . . .

Take the red carpets, for example. They played an integral role in one of the most ingenious pieces of engineering ever attempted in a building that tall, 10 stories. Stone had divided the galleries into split levels connected by short, luxuriously wide flights of red-carpeted stairs, creating a grand central staircase with the galleries themselves serving as the landings. Any ambulatory person could walk from the ground floor to the topmost gallery, looking at pictures the whole way, without even realizing he'd done it. Not even Frank Lloyd Wright's spectacular spiral ramp in the Guggenheim Museum could compare in originality or function.

Today there is scarcely a living soul under the age of 60 who ever set foot in the Gallery of Modern Art during the time Mr. Hartford owned it . . . or has any idea of what it was once like . . . other than from the radioactive contamination remaining from the attacks upon the museum launched even before it opened in March of 1964. If there was a single major critic that year who was not a messenger girl for International Style orthodoxy, I never read her.

The critic who inflicted the cut that keeps on bleeding was Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic for The New York Times, with the never-to-this-day-forgotten comment that Mr. Hartford's museum reminded her of "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops." The "lollipops" referred specifically to the columns and their inset dark-marble discs, but the quip had le tout New York sniggering over the entire building.

The truth is, the columns constitute a highly sophisticated repetition of the arches of the loggias up above in the form of both solids (the black marble discs) and voids (the arched spaces between columns) down below. The student of architecture might wish to go over to Columbus Circle and take a look at the virtuosity of this extraordinary interplay of positive and negative space before it is destroyed.

The museum's often-derided "Islamic grillwork" is not grillwork at all but rows of portholes letting in light at the corners. The building contained no applied decoration . . . not even Stone, the avowed apostate, could get the old-time religion completely out of his bones in launching this, the first revolt by any established Modernist, against the icy grip of the French and German International Style orthodoxy.

But none of that mattered. The damnable lollipops gibe just wouldn't get tired and go away. In fact, while researching this article, I went into a library, and the first librarian I spoke to said, "Oh yes, the lollipop building."

As a going enterprise, Mr. Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art lasted only five years. The storm of derision in the press was a killer. Worse, no big donors were going to come forth to help him keep it going. Mr. Hartford was a good-looking, well-brought-up rich boy who had a reputation for big woolly projects that never panned out. He didn't fit anywhere in the New York network of corporate moguls who underwrite and climb such approved social ladders as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art or even the Whitney Museum of American Art, which is, hmmm, a bit sketchy. Without big donors, those institutions couldn't stay open 30 minutes - and the Gallery of Modern Art, thanks to the press, was beyond sketchy. Carrying the museum all by himself quickly became too much for Huntington Hartford. In 1969, he gave this historic masterpiece to Fairleigh Dickinson University, just to get out from under the load.

"Historic masterpiece." Here I take as my text Dean Stern. On this point, too, both sides will agree: Robert A. M. Stern is not only a noted architect but also the definitive historian of 20th-century New York City architecture. His Gibbon-scale trilogy, "New York 1900," "New York 1930" and "New York 1960," is a sweeping but rigorously scholarly 2,684-page study of the city's architecture from 1890 to 1976.

In a letter in February to a civic organization's panel on whether 2 Columbus Circle should be declared a landmark, he wrote: "No one will disagree that Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum is a masterpiece, though a highly idiosyncratic one, to say the least . . . I bring up the Guggenheim because there was a strong, mutually acknowledged kinship between Frank Lloyd Wright and Edward Durell Stone, whom many thought was the master's leading disciple."

Mr. Stern went on to characterize the museum as one of Stone's "masterworks," along with the embassy in New Delhi and Stone's own town house on East 64th Street in New York, whose entire facade was grillwork.

Lever House and the Seagram Building "represent the epitome of the correct, the orthodox in postwar Modernism," said Mr. Stern, while Stone's Huntington Hartford museum "pushed the envelope very far toward what would become Postmodernism. This building is a landmark in the history of architectural taste." He closed with an appeal: "Preserve this landmark whole. Preserve this public provocation, this embodiment of artistic risk-taking."

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission preserved Stone's own town house, by landmarking it years ago, but refuses, despite constant appeals, to so much as hold a hearing on the museum. From the day the museum became eligible for landmark status in 1994, the commission's behavior puzzled me and many others. Naïvely, as it turned out, I had been thinking of landmark status in aesthetic and historical terms. The game proved to be about something else entirely.

In the hog-eat-hog economy of the 1990's, big porkers kept getting eaten up by bigger ones, and Gulf & Western, the first commercial buyer of the museum after Mr. Hartford's financial troubles, disappeared down the gullet of Viacom, and Viacom gave the building to the city in 1994 in return for tax breaks.

The landmarks commission seemed to be getting a clear message from City Hall: lay off 2 Columbus Circle.

The city envisioned a bidding war. It would sell the property for hundreds of millions to a developer and on top of

that wind up with a big corporate taxpayer or two on the Department of Finance hard drive. From that day on, every time the question of a hearing on 2 Columbus Circle came up, the landmarks commissioners, as I see it, dove under their desks, clapped their hands over their ears, cried out to their secretaries to shove history and the concept of landmarks preservation itself through the shredder, and hid.

The fantastic bidding war, however, never occurred. By November of 1998 there were only two interested parties, Donald Trump, who wanted to demolish the museum and build something new, and the Dahesh Museum, which wanted a home for its collection of 19th-century academic art. Then Mr. Trump pulled out. The city's dreams of a tax-paying bonanza were over.

At this point the American Craft Museum moved in to challenge the Dahesh. Being far better connected politically, with a former chairwoman of the landmarks commission, Laurie Beckelman, on the payroll, the craft museum renamed itself the Museum of Arts and Design and flicked the Dahesh aside like a dead Taiwanese watch battery. In came Architect Brad Cloepfil and Ephemeralism - which brings us to where we are today, awaiting, unless the plans change drastically, the first example of the old peekaboo, I-see-you-game ever built on Columbus Circle.

Soon, during the next few days, weeks, months at the most, an appalling smack will be heard throughout New York. It will not be hostile fire. It will be the sound of the landmarks commissioners hitting the deck once more . . . while one of the most important buildings in the history of 20th-century architecture is vaporized and small urban creatures sniff the stench that's left in the air.

Well . . . one can always hope the Museum of Arts and Design's retro trek back to Ephemeralism will be "fun" at least:

In yesterday's polluted air
I saw a museum that wasn't there.
It wasn't there again today.
O how I wish it would go away.

Postscript: It so happens Stone had a vision for the Circle itself that was never realized. He wanted to eliminate the traffic lanes that ran through it, make it whole again and ring the outer edge with three-story-high Doric columns salvaged from the Seventh Avenue facade of Pennsylvania Station, whose demolition had begun barely four months before the Gallery of Modern Art was completed. He had two things in mind: creating a proper stage for the towering monument to Christopher Columbus at the center - and a proper memorial for Penn Station, a masterpiece of New York architecture by the great architects McKim, Mead & White, that had been sold to the highest bidder and destroyed, columns and all, and fed to the Jersey marshes in a senseless but innocent-by-reason-of-uncontrollable-cupidity act of vandalism.

The what-have-we-done shock that followed led directly to the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. As the French say: "Après la mort le médecin." After death, the doctor shows up.