
November 24, 2003

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; A Building's Bold Spirit, Clad in Marble and Controversy

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Let us now celebrate the aristocratic satisfaction of not pleasing. Huntington Hartford gave himself that pleasure when he commissioned Edward Durell Stone to design the Gallery of Modern Art (1964), the legendarily exotic building at 2 Columbus Circle.

A campaign is under way to have the building declared a city landmark before it undergoes a major renovation. I would regret the loss of the building. Whether the campaign succeeds, I hope that New Yorkers will take the opportunity to renew the independent spirit the building embodies.

The Preservation League of New York State has put 2 Columbus Circle on its Seven to Save list, an annual selection of the state's most endangered landmarks. Along with Landmark West! and other civic groups, the Preservation League is seeking a hearing before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The groups want to prevent the building from being remodeled by its present owner, the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum. (More information is available on the Preservation League's Web site, www.preservenys.org.)

Designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture in Portland, Ore., the remodeling plans propose to reclad the building with terra cotta and glass, creating a scrimlike effect. The building's marble skin, porthole windows and Venetian-Gothic-inspired details would be eliminated. The proposed facades appear intentionally underwhelming. The small, invited competition organized by the museum included more impressive efforts. Perhaps the museum hoped to forestall opposition by choosing the least aggressive design.

If so, the strategy backfired. The problem is not Mr. Cloepfil's plan. It is his client's choice of a design that stood little chance of rallying supporters. You can forgive the museum for making what it probably took to be a highly civic gesture. But what's so civic about fearfulness? Or so historically minded? The distinction of 2 Columbus Circle is that Stone was out of step. You do not necessarily improve on such a building by replacing it with something recessive. If anything, you punch up the idea of difference, as Zaha Hadid did in her proposal for the project. You go with a design that stands a chance of kicking up a storm.

I support the league's position. But I regret that its interpretation of the building is so badly skewed; 2 Columbus Circle is hardly the "icon of the Modern movement" described by the group's literature. Modern architects and critics reviled Stone for what they called aesthetic apostasy. Those who esteem the building as a precursor of Postmodernism are on historically firmer ground, but is this anything to be proud of?

That depends on which Postmodernism you have in mind. If by that we mean explicit references to historical styles, 2 Columbus Circle can be blamed for pointing the way toward the decline of New York architecture. If we mean drawing inspiration from the past, then there was no need to have a Postmodernism at all. Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn are just a few of the modern architects who acknowledged their indebtedness to historical precedent.

The truth is that Stone's use of a style like Venetian Gothic is barely incidental to the importance of 2 Columbus Circle. The style was merely the means by which Stone broke ranks. Breaking ranks is what mattered, and I suspect that the attachment many of us feel for the building is due in large part to nostalgia for the period when New York was more hospitable than it is now to the kind of controversy breaking ranks can create.

The ideal of "not pleasing" is fundamental to modern art and modern criticism. The primary job of the critic who takes after Baudelaire is to cast off fear, the fear of saying the wrong thing, forming the wrong judgment, thinking the wrong thought. Criticism, like research science, is based on the absolute right to be wrong.

Like the museum it was designed for, Stone's building was intended as critique. Up to a point it was autocritique. A designer, with Philip Goodwin, of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, Stone was initially a disciple of the International Style. In the 1950's he had some kind of conversion experience, which I believe involved being seated on a plane next to Aline Saarinen, an art critic for The New York Times. Thereafter he began designing ornamental screens.

The late 50's and early 60's, then, became the great era of ornamental screens. They were to that period what fritted and translucent glass facades like that designed by Allied Works are to ours: veils. The reference was not to the past but to the East, and to a sanitized version of the erotic energies associated with it. Rita Hayworth as Salome. The Forbidden. In this sense Stone was part of America's great libidinous awakening in the postwar decades, architecture's Peppermint Lounge.

Hartford was part of it, too. His crusade against the formalist orthodoxies of the Museum of Modern Art was largely a liberation of the repressed, with Salvador Dalí standing in for Freud. At the top of Stone's building, behind the screen of the loggia, was the two-story Gauguin Room (the museum's restaurant), and also its crowning impulse: the escape from civilization and its constraints on the senses.

Ms. Hadid's design picked up on the confidence of Stone's design and the era that produced it. Taking the porthole windows as her point of departure, she enlarged their size by several orders of magnitude, producing facades that evoked classic Pucci fabric designs. Now these were some scary veils. And I think the city was ready for it. At least the audience for contemporary architecture would have had something worth fighting for.

The fight itself is worth fighting for. Only a decade after Hartford's museum opened, New York architecture began to be overtaken by a tyranny of politeness, a fear of breaking ranks that has yet to loosen its grip. The battle cry for architectural consensus that followed the attacks on Sept. 11 shows how deeply entrenched is the city's resistance to facing the unknown.

Historically, preservationists have been part of this resistance, not just, or even mainly, because some of them may oppose change, but because their criteria for conferring value are obsolete. This is becoming increasingly clear as more postwar buildings come eligible for landmark status. "Typical of its period," "an important example of its style": criteria like these betray a 19th-century historicist approach to the past. They do not account for the dynamic, dialectic role that buildings play over time.

Peter Eisenman is right to suggest that buildings create problems: this is what 2 Columbus Circle has in common with Lever House, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Met Life (originally Pan Am) Building, the T.W.A. Flight Center at Kennedy Airport and other works of the period. All of them were great problems. All of them deserve to be valued as such, if their history is not to be falsified, and if we are to regain a healthy appetite for more of the same.