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# Groups Sue to Prevent Sale Of Columbus Circle Building

By JAMES BARRON  
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Three preservation groups filed suit yesterday to stop the city from selling the vacant city-owned building at 2 Columbus Circle to a museum that wants to strip off the building's modernist facade.

Taking issue with an environmental review that cleared the way for the building to be transferred to a quasi-public agency that would handle the sale, the preservationists demanded a new environmental impact statement on the proposed alterations. They also accused the city of moving to dispose of a building worthy of landmark status "without adequately considering the consequences of its loss."

The lawsuit alleged that because the city wanted to sell the building, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission was reluctant to hold a public hearing on designating it a landmark. "The city's economic objectives infected the process for considering the potential landmark status of the building and subsequently tainted the environmental analysis that it performed in order to gain legal authorization for the sale," the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit named a number of municipal officials and agencies as respondents, along with the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly known as the American Craft Museum, which hopes to renovate the Columbus Circle building as a new home for its collection. Susan Kath, a lawyer with the city's Law Department, which will represent the city officials and departments in the case, said, "We support the project wholeheartedly, and we feel it received the proper environmental review." A spokeswoman for the landmarks commission, which was not among the respondents, had no comment.

Holly Hotchner, the director of the museum, noted that the museum's plans had been approved by every city agency to which they were submitted. "I guess it is fair to say this suit is not unexpected because there is a small, vocal minority -- and I would emphasize small -- that continues, I guess, to feel that the building should be a landmark, and that is not in the museum's purview," she said.



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The lawsuit was filed in State Supreme Court in Manhattan by officials of Landmark West, a preservation group on the Upper West Side; the Historic Districts Council, which helps neighborhoods pursue landmark designation; and the New York-area chapter of an international preservation group known as Docomomo. Among the five people who joined in filing the lawsuit was Julie Hartford, whose father, the supermarket heir Huntington Hartford, commissioned the building to house his art collection. Fairleigh Dickinson University later operated a gallery there until 1975, when Gulf and Western Industries bought the building as a gift to the city.

The building, completed in 1964, was the work of the architect Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53rd Street and the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, among many other buildings.