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ARCHITECTURE

## How 2 Columbus Circle Saved the World

By LAURIE KERR  
December 2, 2003*New York*

When it comes to designating architectural landmarks, there should be a special criterion, quite apart from artistic merit, for buildings that express the political zeitgeist. We may not especially like these buildings, but they stand as remnants of the ideas that shaped their age.

In New York, one such structure was the World Trade Center. Another is 2 Columbus Circle, originally the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art. The first, of course, was destroyed violently more than two years ago. The second, which may soon house the new galleries of the Museum of Arts and Design (formerly the American Craft Museum), is about to be changed beyond recognition in a face-lift by architect Brad Cloepfil. Despite the stylistic range of New York's built environment, neither building ever fit into any of the architectural narratives of the city the way that, say, the Plaza Hotel expresses turn-of-the-century Romanticism or Lever House expresses midcentury heroic modernism. But then, neither building was really about New York. They were souvenirs from the front -- fragments of America's Cold War architecture abroad and of a fascination with Islamic design that came home to roost.

It's hard now to remember how rapidly a previously isolationist America assumed the role of world power after World War II. Before then, America had had only a handful of embassies abroad, and their design, based on iconic American structures like Monticello or the White House, was largely self-referential. Galvanized by the global threat of communism, postwar America mobilized to establish a world-wide military and diplomatic presence, constructing, between 1946 and 1953 alone, no fewer than 200 State Department projects in 72 countries, not including buildings by other agencies like the Army Corps of Engineers or the Department of Commerce.

Most of the Truman-era embassies were designed in the modern International Style. With its emphasis on openness, clarity and technological finesse, this seemed the appropriate architectural language with which to represent America's values. However, in the atmosphere created by the McCarthy hearings during the Eisenhower administration, modern architecture lost support in Congress and was attacked by the new officials in charge of foreign buildings in the State Department. This new team of architects and officials worried that the modern embassies stood out too much and that we were being too culturally assertive in the face of local traditions.

Consequently, the State Department issued a directive in 1953 offering guidance to would-be embassy architects. "To the sensitive and imaginative designer it [embassy design] will be an invitation to give serious study to local conditions of

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climate and site, to understand and sympathize with local customs and people . . . yet he will not fear using new techniques or new materials should these constitute real advances in architectural thinking." Thus a new hybrid architectural style was born, with one foot in the technological, modern world and the other in traditional local design.

The directive had an enormous impact. Almost every major American architect of the time received foreign commissions and their designs were widely published. Richard Neutra, Hugh Stubbins, Edward Larrabee Barnes, Jose Luis Sert and Paul Rudolph all used barrel vaults on their projects in Muslim countries; John Carl Warnecke based his design for an embassy in Bangkok on a pagoda; Harry Weese received inspiration for his embassy in Accra from African spears, anthills and the form of a chieftain's hut. Even archmodernist Walter Gropius claimed that the Parthenon had inspired his embassy in Athens.

Of them all, Minoru Yamasaki and Edward Durell Stone, the architects respectively of the World Trade Center and 2 Columbus Circle, went most spectacularly native. Both became entranced by Islamic architecture, particularly the Mughal architecture of India (which flourished in the mid-16th to mid-17th centuries), finding in its intricate geometries a way to reconcile their interest in decoration with modernism's prohibition against ornament.

Stone first encountered Islamic architecture in 1953, when he received the commission for the American embassy in New Delhi. His design was a tour de force, and it became one of the most glamorous and widely admired of all the Cold War embassies. Stone stated that it was based on the Taj Mahal, and it's not hard to see the Mughal pedigree of his design: the whiteness, the ornate punctured screens wrapping austere prismatic forms, the deeply overhanging roofs, the rectangular courtyards, the reflecting pools with fountains.

But the project wasn't really Islamic; it was simply conventional modernist architecture draped in Islam's useful raiment. Fundamentally these buildings were exercises in propaganda: They projected an image of American glamour, cosmopolitanism and joie de vivre in contrast to the gray gloom of the Soviet threat, and both the architects and the clients concurred with this mission. Stone swathed his American pavilion for the 1959 Brussels Exposition in a lacy metal and plastic lattice, writing later that, "The exterior, I believe, had the feeling of gaiety befitting an exposition and a dignity appropriate to a government building."

Indian architecture seemed to transform Stone, and he recycled the tropes of Mughal architecture for the remainder of his prolific career (he died in 1978). He applied them to churches, synagogues, mosques, abbeys, college dormitories, skyscrapers and his townhouse in New York, even importing his trademark screens and other architectural strategies of the desert to Albany and Chicago. In light of our currently troubled relationships with factions in the Islamic world, the projects seem both refreshingly open and remarkably naïve -- some shockingly so, like Stone's design for the Pakistan Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology in Islamabad. This is in the shape of a mosque, with the reactor replacing the quibla qubba (the traditional focus of worship) and an office tower in the shape of a minaret.

This rosy naivete didn't last very long. Years before the World Trade Center was completed in 1976, the American embassies, consulates and cultural centers of the late 1950s and early 1960s became the targets of anti-American sentiment. Over 25 of them were attacked during a five-month period between October 1964 and March 1965, and critics have ascribed some of the antipathy to the cultural chauvinism they embodied. As this paper's architectural critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, observed in the New York Times Magazine in 1960: "In the popular mind, the new embassies have two strikes against them; they are big and they are different. In some countries these massive structures symbolize what we have in power and plenty as opposed to what they have not."

This is the historical context for New York's strange monuments, 2 Columbus Circle, commissioned in 1958, and the World Trade Center, commissioned in 1962. Often seen as the idiosyncratic productions of architects with uncertain taste, they were anything but. They expressed, in a very clear way, Cold War ideology through architecture.

Two Columbus Circle has all the necessary ingredients of the mature Cold War style -- a base of glamorized exoticism mixed with festivity and capped with a dash of technology. As Stone described it: "This building may be considered romantic. . . . We live in an age of architectural transition and the more exuberant forms are finding favor in a new generation also enamored of the plastic possibilities of concrete." Here Stone's Islamicizing impulses were presumably restrained by the gallery's need for solid walls, and so he replaced the pierced screens of Islam, his signature, with the related but more solid walls of Venice, Europe's longtime portal to the East.

With the Twin Towers gone, 2 Columbus Circle is one of the last places where New Yorkers can glimpse a symbol of those early years of global American power -- the moment when greatness was thrust upon us and our architects attempted to embrace new cultures. It's hardly surprising that the result was more shallow and patronizing than was thought at the time; after all, this was a crash course in "the world."

Nobody considers 2 Columbus Circle an aesthetic success, but at least it didn't commit any urbanistic crimes that would necessitate its removal, like Yamasaki's infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. Stone's building was quite well scaled in relation to the surrounding architecture at the time it was built, and it conforms gracefully to its difficult site, its broad, gently concave facade echoing and thus giving a measure of coherence to the endlessly problematical Columbus Circle. Many people -- including the architect and architectural historian Robert A.M. Stern -- have called for it to be saved as the work of an important American architect who had begun to free himself from the proscriptions of modernism, laying

the groundwork for postmodernism by reintroducing architectural quotation and decoration.

While this is true, this structure broadcasts a geopolitical message far broader than the local aesthetic struggle. Two Columbus Circle is one of New York's few tangible reminders of America's response to the Cold War. It stands as an emblem of an earlier, perhaps more innocent, time, when we thought that an architecture that projected our inclusive good will by incorporating the outside world would help to save that world from communism.

*Ms. Kerr last wrote for the Journal on Swiss bridge design.*

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