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The Rape of 2 Columbus Circle

Edward Durell Stone's marble museum gets chintzed



Rendering of Allied Works Architecture's planned redesign of Edward Durell Stone's marble museum at 2 Columbus Circle

By Carter B. Horsley

Does New York City need a marble-clad small building with Venetian motifs and a curved façade fronting on one of its few major important intersections and Central Park, an edifice designed by a major architect whose work is not much in evidence in the city?

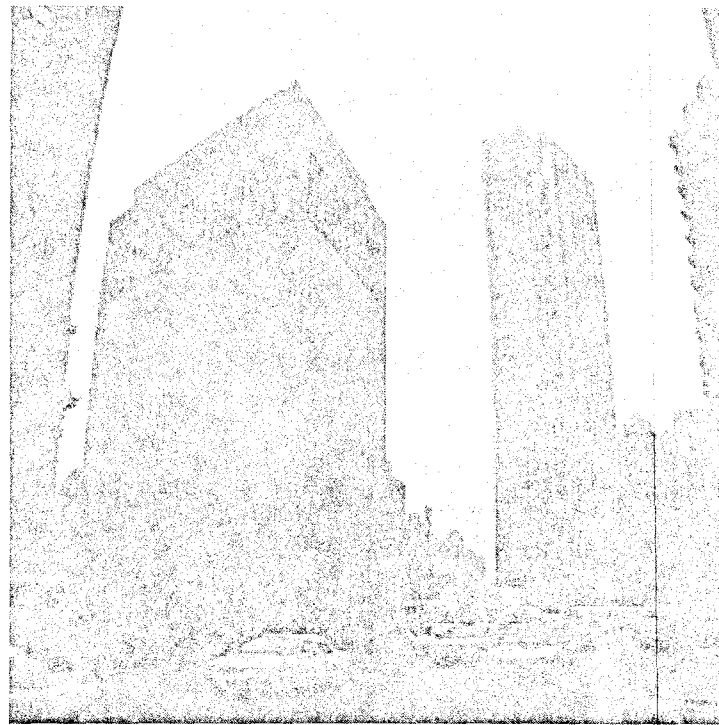
The city's Landmarks Preservation Commission has not thought so and has incredibly and

wrongly not designated it an official landmark despite the fact that it is more distinctive and highly visible than probably 90 percent of the buildings it has made "official" landmarks, either individually or within "historic districts."



View from north of Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle, center, with One Central Park Plaza tower, right

The city's role in this sorry tale is significant for one of its agencies occupied the building for many years until recently and through malignant neglect permitted it to deteriorate.



View up Broadway, showing rear of 2 Columbus Circle, left, and Trump International Hotel and condominium tower, right

The building is in the lee of the Columbus Center, twin-towered, mixed-use project nearing completion just to the west on Columbus Circle. This building is also directly across Columbus Circle from the Trump International Hotel and condominium tower and, not surprisingly, Donald Trump, offered to buy this site for development of another "Trump" "luxury" project.

On April 1, David W. Dunlap wrote an article on the front page of "The Arts" section of *The New York Times* entitled "A New Look for a 10-story Oddity," in which a rendering of a redesign of the building, shown above, appeared. Describing the existing Stone-designed structure as "an abandoned work of romantic modernism that has irritated and amused New Yorkers for 30 years," Mr. Dunlap reported that the Museum of Arts and Design, which was formerly known as the American Craft Museum, had acquired the building and commissioned a redesign that would create facades that would be scrims of bright terra cotta.

The new design by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture of Portland, Oregon, Mr. Dunlap continued, "would for the first time fill the inside of what is now a nearly windowless building. Slits and openings between the four-inch terra-cotta panels would give museumgoers views of Central Park and allow pedestrians to glimpse the galleries through a diaphanous veil. Vertical glass channels, filled with artwork, would penetrate the 10-story structure." The design was submitted March 31, 2003 to the City Planning Commission, which must approve the sale of the building. The museum plans to move from 40 West 53rd Street.

The building was erected in 1964 as the Gallery of Modern Art by Huntington Hartford, an heir to the A. & P. supermarket fortune. Mr. Hartford's museum lasted only five years, however, and in 1969 Mr. Hartford turned the building over to Fairleigh Dickinson University, which in 1970 used it to house the New York Cultural Center.

In their brilliant book, "New York 1960, Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial," (The Monacelli Press, 1995), Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fischman devote a few pages to discussing this property, and noted that "The New York Cultural Center had a short, brilliant life under the directorship of Donald Karshan, and then Mario Amaya, who was appointed director in 1972 and turned it into a Kunsthalle, mounting 150 different shows and attracting large crowds but also running up big, unrecoverable costs," adding that the museum was closed in 1975 and put up for sale.

In describing the building, the authors provided the following commentary:

"...The walls of the Venetian-inspired vertical palazzo were perforated with portholelike openings at the corners, base and crown to suggest rustication inspired, according to Stone, by Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a Romanesque church in Paris. At the ground floor, the building was carried on columns to form an arcade. The top two floors, where the restaurant was located behind a loggia, opened to a view of Central Park. Ada Louise Huxtable likened the overall effect to a 'die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops,' while Olga Gueft said that the building's 'red-granite-trimmed, green-marble-lined colonnades, these rows of portholes like borders of eyelet hand-embroidered on a marble christening robe are too winsome for heavyweight criticism.'...The arrangement of a stair gallery wrapped around a core was similar to that of Howe & Lescaze's Scheme Six, proposed for the Museum of Modern Art in 1931. Filtered natural light was introduced through the glazed perforations at the corners, a technique that worked well with Abe Feder's artificial lighting, while also producing tantalizing glimpses of Central Park without distracting the viewer from the art. The lobby floor was paved in terrazzo, into which were set the discs that had been cut out of the marble when the exterior arches were formed in contrast to the white-painted anonymity of the Museum of Modern Art's galleries. Hartfords' were paneled with walnut and other hardwoods and thickly carpeted or elaborately finished in *parquet de Versailles* and marble. A pipe organ was included in one of the double-height galleries. Though Hartford's collection did not include any paintings by Gauguin, the ninth-floor Polynesian restaurant, the Gauguin Room, included a tapestry based on one of the French master's paintings."

Mr. Hartford was one of the more colorful figures in New York City during the 1960's and 1970's, a regular on the nightclub scene and an irregular in the art world, who was not enamoured of much of "modern" art and favored representational art. His museum was quite lush and the Gauguin Room was one of the handsomest restaurants in the city and had spectacular views of Central Park.

Eventually, the city took it over for use as a visitors' center and headquarters for the city's Cultural Affairs Department. The city agency, however, moved out in 1998 and the building

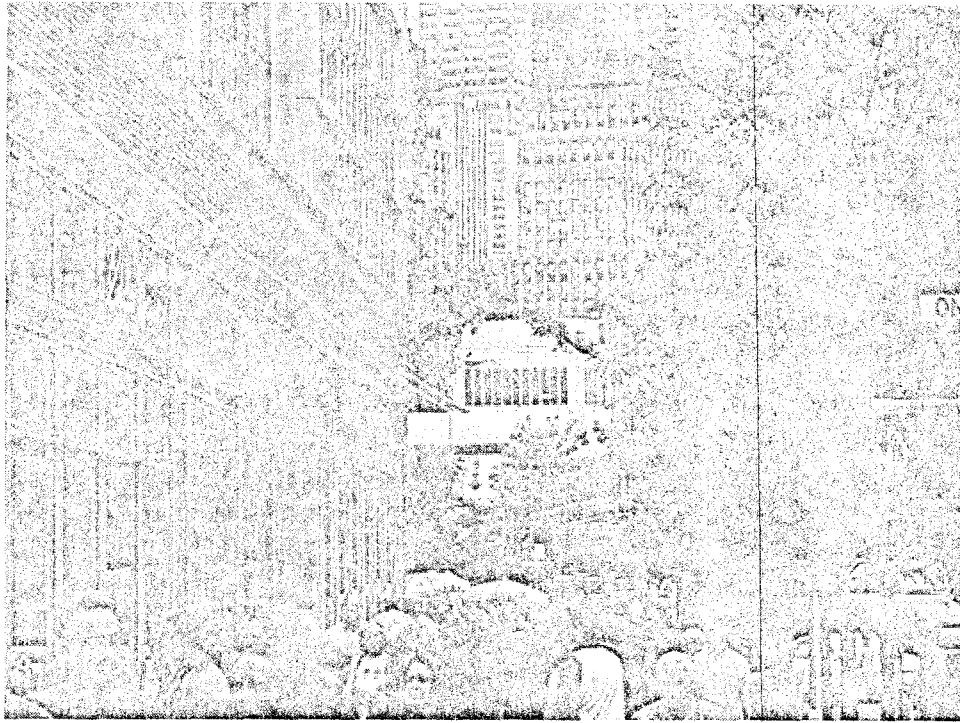
has since been vacant. The city's Economic Development Corporation awarded the building to the craft museum last year and Mr. Dunlap noted that the museum estimates it will cost \$50 million to acquire and renovate the building.



View from the northeast of curved facade of Stone's building

The redesign would do away with the existing building's white marble façade, its famed "lollypop" columns and filigree porthole and arched loggia.

In his article in *The Times*, Mr. Dunlap quoted Holly Hotchner, the director of the Museum of Arts and Design, as stating that the choice of a terra cotta façade with a warp-and-weft pattern 'speaks to who we are.' Of course, one could argue, Olga Gueft's comment about Stone's "embroidery" might be used to counter that justification for a redesign. Mr. Dunlap also quoted Mr. Cloepfil, the architect of the proposed redevelopment, as maintaining that "we are trying to maintain its monumentality, but at the same time make it a more ephemeral body, so it begins to merge with Columbus Circle," a comment that is a little strange given the "monumentality" of the building's new and not yet finished monumental new neighbor to the west, the twin-towered Columbus Center.



View from several blocks to the northwest on Broadway

Mr. Cloepfil has designed the new Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis and an expansion of the Seattle Art Museum. Allied Works Architecture was one of four firms on a short list for the project including Smith-Miller +Hawkinson Architects, Zaha Hadid, and Toshiko Mori. The museum had initially considered a list of 11 architects, including William P. Bruder Architect, Kennedy Violich Architects, Koning Eizenberg Architecture, Lake/Flato Architects, Peter Marino & Associates Architects, Office dA, and Wendy Evans Joseph.

Ironically, the Allied Works Architecture design probably would have been a grand way to complement Stone's building if it had been used on the site of the Trump International Hotel and condominium tower as the two "white" small buildings would have nicely framed the gigantic twin-towered mixed use building now nearing completion between the two sites. Of course, such a proposal is ridiculous since Donald Trump reclad the existing Gulf + Western building for his shiny tower.

The new design is not without interest and some grace, but it is not called for in this circumstance. Some have described the Stone building as a folly. Follies are whimsical and goodness knows cities need a sense of humor. This was not just a folly, of course, but an attempt to create a new and important cultural asset for the city and certainly it was infinitely more attractive than the former New York Coliseum that dominated Columbus Circle until its recent demolition to make way for the much larger Columbus Center project. Stone's oeuvre was marked by Classical inspiration mixed with Middle Eastern accents and sought to create an aesthetic that was bright and graceful. While his "white" buildings did not have the sculptural qualities of those of Le Corbusier and his many disciples, they were

light and airy and pretty.

Clearly, the building has suffered over the years and a new institution needs to accommodate its interiors to its needs and a lively, active museum is preferable to a closed structure. One solution perhaps would be to preserve Stone's north, curved façade. To rape this building to justify the egregious failure of the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate it a landmark would be to compound the insult.

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