

Former Critics now "protective" of 2 Columbus Circle, soon-to-be dismantled future home of art museum

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By ELAINE MISONZHNIK

The fate of 2 Columbus Circle, the building slated to become the home of the Museum of Arts and Design, became the subject of a public forum at collectorsworld.com last week.

The building, which will be considered for landmark status by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission in the coming months, possesses a dubious kind of fame. Since its opening in 1965, it has been viewed with loathing by some architects and considered an amusing architectural curiosity by others. Now that the Economic Development Corporation has issued a request for proposals that would allow a complete deconstruction of the property, New York's architectural community has to come to terms with its feelings about 2 Columbus Circle.

Conceived by the philanthropist Huntington Hartford as the home of the Gallery of Modern Art (an antithesis to the Museum of Modern Art), 2 Columbus Circle was built by the noted architect Edward Durell Stone. Its features include a white marble façade, tiny windows, and a set of

support columns derisively referred to as "lollipops."

The collectorsworld.com forum included such noted figures as Paul Goldberger, an architecture critic with The New Yorker magazine, Terence Riley, chief curator with the department of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, and Witold Rybczynski, professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania.

It must be noted that none of the participants thought 2 Columbus Circle a great work of art. Many, however, felt the building should be preserved as a remnant of the city's past.

"The building feels to me like a valued but slightly dimwitted friend who you feel a desire to protect," Goldberger wrote in one entry.

"The question (we are discussing) is whether its virtues outweigh the value of a potentially very good contemporary building on Columbus Circle."

"The building is a specific work with a text directed at the architectural and institutional memory of New York," wrote Diane Lewis, principal of Diane Lewis Architects and a professor at Cooper Union.

"It is the work of an individual philanthropist in conception and an individual work in the oeuvre of a recognizable auteur architect. This gives it a definitive place within the legacy of the city."

Some participants, however, felt that confer-

ring landmark status on a building with a value that is strictly sentimental might be an abuse of the system.

"It has been possible for a long time to landmark a building with no aesthetic value — thus the ironic realization that the more we talk about this building, the more likely it becomes a candidate for preservation, regardless of its design merit," wrote John Kaliski, principal of Urban Studio architects.

"I sense that there is an underlying frustration with the state of affairs that this building represents."

Terence Riley echoed this view, noting that simply being an oddity should not qualify the building for immortality.

"(It's) quirkiness is not enough to pull it into some protected status," he wrote.

"The previous Grand Central Terminal and the old basilica of St. Peter's were both quirky, but I like the replacements better. I believe that our best architecture is ahead of us. Whatever progress is going to be made architecturally is going to be realized on existing building sites."

In the end, the participants could not come to a collective decision on 2 Columbus Circle, principally because of the lack of criteria for what kind of architecture is worthy of preservation. The forum will continue, however, for the next several weeks. Those wishing to participate can access the discussion at www.collectorsworld.com.