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On Columbus Circle, Fighting a Face-Lift

By JULIE V. IOVINE

THIS much will always be true: The view from the top floor of 2 Columbus Circle is stunning.

You can see the mighty vectors of Broadway and Central Park West radiating north and Central Park carpeting the landscape to the east. Hard to the west, the new Time Warner Center rises skyward.

The prospect from the top floor of 2 Columbus Circle may be clear as far as the eye can see, but the building's future is still murky. Last month, the Museum of Arts and Design approved a design by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture for a complete overhaul of the 40-year-old building, designed by Edward Durell Stone. The museum, formerly the American Craft Museum, is in the process of buying the building, vacant since 1998, from the city.

That transaction, and the subsequent renovation, is threatened by a lawsuit filed in November by a consortium of three preservation groups, arguing that the building's historic value was inadequately analyzed by the city before it agreed to turn the building over for private development. The case will go before a judge of the New York County Supreme Court on Feb. 20.

The controversy has made for some unlikely bunkmates, with critics known for championing more new avant-garde architecture joining neighborhood groups known for opposing new development.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission is not going to protect the building, having declined to submit it for consideration in 1996, two years after it became eligible for landmark status.

Theodore Prudon, the president of Docomomo, a preservation group dedicated to saving modern structures and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said: "The building has very many detractors and supporters. With that much interest, clearly it is a building of significance that should be considered a New York landmark. Independent of whether the current design is good or bad, these prior issues need to be settled."

Others feel that the building, not considered one of Stone's most significant, has had its day in court. "It's a building of no consequence whatsoever," said Terence Riley, chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art. "To deserve landmark status, something either has to have happened there or it has to be a place of great architectural distinction. It's not enough to say it's quirky and interesting."

On Tuesday, the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development, a neighborhood group, published an open letter to Robert B. Tierney, chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, in AM New York, a free daily newspaper. The letter asks the commission to reconsider awarding the building landmark status for its "novel and daring style" and radical departure from the established corporate architecture of its day. In a phone interview, Mr. Tierney said that the commission was mindful of the "robust debate" about 2 Columbus Circle, but would not reconsider. "In the past year, we've seen it talked about, we've seen a lot in print and we've thought about it and the decision made in 1996 is the decision that stands," he said.

The museum was a critical lightning rod from the very start. Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art, as it was originally known, was built in 1964 to house his personal art collection. Its perforated ornamental flourishes invoked either Venice or acoustical tiles, depending on your viewpoint. The interiors were widely acknowledged to be too small, dark and claustrophobic, and Mr. Hartford closed his museum after just five years. Over the next 30 years, it was a temporary home to the New York Cultural Center and after the city acquired it in 1975, it housed the Cultural Affairs Department, but failed to find a permanent resident. By 1998, it was empty.

In 2002 the city agreed to sell the building to the Museum of Arts and Design, which is squeezed into three and a half levels at 40 West 53rd Street. "It's ridiculously small," said Holly Hotchner, the director. "There's no room for showing the collection, no room for public programs, no visitors' services. There's not even room to sit down." After the city agreed to the sale, the museum held a competition to choose an architect for the building's conversion. The contest, which included submissions by Zaha Hadid, Toshiko Mori, and Smith-Miller & Hawkinson Architects, led to the selection of Mr. Cloepfil, a 47-year-old architect from Portland, Ore., who recently completed the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis.

Renderings released to the public last week by the museum show the building, with its small-bore windows and elongated loggia at the top, now etched with a channel of glass tracking up a terra-cotta facade. "I want it to maintain a sense of silence and singularity," Mr. Cloepfil said, "to emphasize its role as a marker on Columbus Circle in juxtaposition to all the noise around it."

Some elements of the old building will be preserved in its new form. Its original 10-story height, the concave curve of the facade and the arcade of "Venetian lollipop" columns, as the critic Ada Louise Huxtable dismissively called them when it opened, will all remain.

The exterior cladding, however, will be entirely removed, replaced by glazed terra-cotta tiles with an iridescent sheen. "I want the facade to have a character and a texture so that it shows its materiality more, the closer you get to it, like an object you go to pick up on a shelf," Mr. Cloepfil said.

The distinguishing feature of the lobby will be switchback stairs that wrap around a glass display. Both stairwell and staircase will rise to the fifth floor, taking natural light from the lobby with them. The lack of windows in a prime city location has always dismayed the building's critics, but because the original structure is a concrete box, instead of a steel frame, the walls themselves hold up the building, and only about 30 percent of the concrete could be incised. Bringing in light without endangering the structure was Mr. Cloepfil's chief challenge. His solution is a 30-inch-wide channel of glass that runs up the facade and continues inside, cutting across floors, ceilings and walls. The most glass, both transparent and fritted, will be found on the upper floors, where offices and a cafe are to be located. The channel motif, Mr. Cloepfil said, "had to fill the galleries with light, connect people to the views and render the entire building more transparent to the city."

The design more than doubles the building's original gallery space on the four floors above the lobby by relocating the fire stair and restrooms, and by modernizing the mechanical systems. The sixth and seventh floors will be dedicated to artists' studios, classrooms and event spaces.

The dilapidated building still has some ornate interior finishes, including parquet floors, walnut paneling and bronze balustrades decorated with a whimsical bubble motif. Mr. Cloepfil said that it would be too costly to preserve most of the interior detailing, except for a basement auditorium with oversize bronze doors, which will be completely restored. The construction budget, Ms. Hotchner said, is under \$30 million.

Construction was to begin in April, Ms. Hotchner said, but plans are on hold, pending the outcome of the lawsuit.

Meanwhile, architects continue to take sides. Unimpressed by the building's long and checkered past, Lindy Roy, a young architect from South Africa who set up a design office in Manhattan in 2000, said she's an admirer of the building just as it is: "I love it for all its craziness. It's so unapologetic. Any windowless structure in the city is compelling." But compelling toward what remains the question.