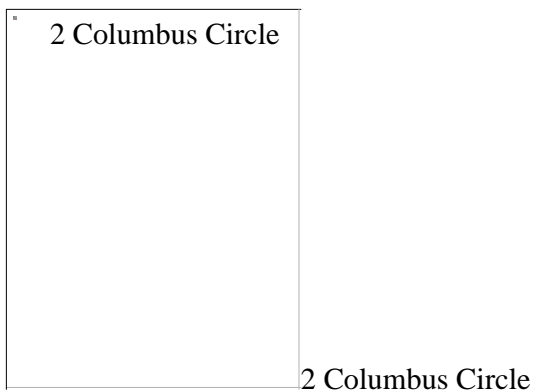


A.L. Huxtable vs. Tom Wolfe 2 Columbus Circle's best-known detractor weighs in on its preservation.

By Timothy Noah

Posted Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2004, at 7:05 PM ET



Three months ago, Chatterbox [challenged](#) Tom Wolfe to back up his preservationist argument for

Manhattan's 2 Columbus Circle, the hideous Moorish tomb built by Edward Durrell Stone in 1964, by arguing that it was beautiful. Chatterbox's point was that Wolfe admired the building—which he was trying to rescue from a planned [radical remodeling](#) by its new owner, the [Museum of Arts & Design](#)—purely on theoretical grounds. This was a great irony since Wolfe famously had attacked modernist architecture in his book [From Bauhaus to Our House](#) for being driven by theory, rather than by any understanding of what ordinary people considered pleasing to the eye. Wolfe didn't seem to mind a theory-driven aesthetic if it championed postmodernism. (To read the two *New York Times* op-eds in which Wolfe pleaded to preserve Stone's original design, published on Oct. 12 and Oct. 13, click [here](#) and [here](#).)

Wolfe never responded. Chatterbox did receive interesting replies from former CBS News Executive Political Director Martin Plissner (who [argued](#) that when the building housed Huntington Hartford's [Gallery of Modern Art](#), the lounge on the top floor was a great place to take a date) and *Newsweek International* Editor Fareed Zakaria (who [argued](#) that "it's a lot nicer than most of the buildings we are preserving"). But neither of them could bring himself to say the building was beautiful, either. At a [panel discussion](#) sponsored by preservationist groups last February, the only person who used the word "beautiful" to describe any part of 2 Columbus Circle was architect [Billie Tsien](#), who *opposes* its preservation.

Now Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic who famously described the building back in 1964 as a "die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops," has [weighed in](#) on the arts page of the *Wall Street Journal*:

This small oddity of dubious architectural distinction, designed by Edward Durell Stone, has been elevated to masterpiece status and cosmic significance by a campaign to save its marginally important, mildly eccentric, and badly deteriorated façade. ...

Huxtable argues that preserving Stone's original design is not only undesirable from an aesthetic point of view, but would also cost a fortune:

Inspection has found the façade so badly deteriorated that it can't be saved; it would have to be rebuilt—a copy or reproduction would have to replace it.

The metal shims—pieces of metal attached behind each piece of marble to level the stones—have rusted as water got into the joints, and the damage has spread to the marble, which has cracked and spalled. Because the entire façade is affected, all of the rusted shims would have to be replaced and new marble cut and installed. There is no way it can be repaired. ...

Because the building's interior is so narrow, preserving Stone's design, Huxtable says, would be an engineering nightmare:

The necessity of constructing a vapor barrier for humidity control around the building—all museums require them—complicates things further. This is done on the exterior, although landmark buildings have been retrofitted inside at great cost and with extreme difficulty. We begin to get into a Catch-22 when a vapor barrier cannot be installed under a damaged facade, the preservation of which is debatable in the first place, and cost and space restrictions foreclose doing it inside.

Chatterbox lacks the expertise to assess Huxtable's claims, but she certainly makes preservation seem like a lot of trouble to go through on behalf of a building that, even its defenders concede, is no beauty.

[back to top](#)

[PRINT](#) [DISCUSS](#) [E-MAIL](#) [RECOMMEND](#)

[Digg](#) [Reddit](#) [del.icio.us](#) [Furl](#) [Ma.gnolia.com](#) [Sphere](#) [CLOSE](#)

*Timothy Noah is a senior writer at **Slate**.*

Photograph of 2 Columbus Circle by Ezra Stoller © Esto.

E-mail Timothy Noah at chatterbox@slate.com.

Join the Fray: our reader discussion forum

What did you think of this article?

[POST A MESSAGE](#) | [READ MESSAGES](#)

The Executive Director of Landmark West Responds:

I'll say it! I think 2 Columbus Circle is beautiful. But, while beauty is important, I also want to point out that it is not the only criterion for landmark designation. Some would argue that the Harlem River Houses (a 1936 public housing project) is not "beautiful". Still, it has incontrovertible historic and cultural significance and is a designated NYC landmark. Why shouldn't the same consideration (a hearing, at least!) be given to a building that was built in 1964 in a radical style to house a controversial art museum? And, frankly, a lot of people just plain like 2 Columbus Circle. I'll say it! I think 2 Columbus Circle is beautiful. But, while beauty is important, I also want to point out that it is not the only criterion for landmark designation. Some would argue that the Harlem River Houses (a 1936 public housing project) is not "beautiful". Still, it has incontrovertible historic and cultural significance and is a designated NYC landmark. Why shouldn't the same consideration (a hearing, at least!) be given to a building that was built in 1964 in a radical style to house a controversial art museum? And, frankly, a lot of people just plain like 2 Columbus Circle.

Kate Wood

Executive Director, Landmark West