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Whatever you think of 2 Columbus Circle, that odd marble curiosity designed by Edward Durell Stone to house a supermarket heir's art collection, it certainly incites passion. The building, which is expected to undergo a drastic recladding and renovation and become the new home of the Museum of Arts and Design, has been the focus of one of the most volatile preservation battles in recent memory.

Now, in an effort to drum up support for its plans, the museum has invited a handpicked audience of civic leaders and news media organizations to view some minor revisions to its architectural design. Clearly it hopes that the event will turn attention to the future, sweeping preservationists' objections aside.

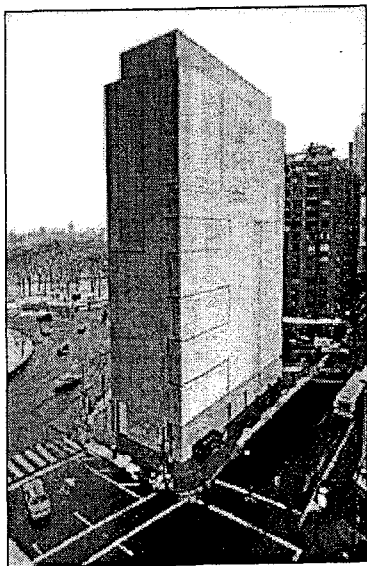
The design, by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, has been altered to improve circulation and create more space for the galleries. The architect has also contrived to play up the contrast between past and present: the new design would give passers-by a

chance to glimpse the building's famous old lollipop-shaped columns through sections of translucent glass on the ground floor.

But these are minor changes. The building's original white marble cladding and porthole windows would be eliminated — and its essential character would be lost.

You can make a convincing argument that there is not much worth saving here. By any standard, Stone's building is awkward. Its facade is a garish interpretation of Venetian palazzos; its interiors, which include a warren of staircases, are cramped and confused.

But the building's importance has less to do with its design than with the role it has played in New York's architectural landscape. Stone was a major figure in American architecture, and his Columbus Circle



building, completed in 1965, is among a handful of works that represent a turning point in his career, when he rejected some of the tenets of late Modernism in favor of a more overt historicism. For us, it is a reminder that Modernism did not always follow a straight, unbroken path.

More critically, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission continues to refuse to hold a public hearing to determine the building's historic importance. Could that be because the Bloomberg administration, which has offered the museum a \$2 million incentive if it completes the project by 2007, sees it as a major feature of its plans for redeveloping Columbus Circle?

It seems that private interests are once again being favored above the broader public realm. Stone's design, and the people of this city, deserve more respect than this.

The strength of Stone's building, in fact, stems from its spirit of aggression. The building's concave facade essentially turns its back on Columbus Circle. Its galleries, clad in a dark walnut veneer and pierced by small portholes at the corners, conjure the musty atmosphere of a private men's club. That aggression was not by accident. Conceived a few years after the completion of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, the design was meant as a counterattack against the stripped-down functionalism of much postwar American architecture.

Rather than play up these tensions, Cloepfil's design glosses over them. The only major concession to the building's history occurs on the ground floor. (In the earlier version of the design, the lollipop-shaped columns were hidden behind opaque glass on both sides, so that they were virtually invisible.) In the new version, the upper section of the glass facade is translucent, so that the silhouettes of the columns' circular tops would be visible from the street.

Inside the lobby, the glass barrier has been removed so that the columns are completely exposed. But the result seems more like an effort to appease the project's opponents than a sincere attempt to come to terms with the building's history.

The rest of the facade is wrapped inside a new skin of terra-cotta panels. A series of narrow slots cut up and across the building's facade as they rise, creating a geometric pattern of incisions that allow light to flow into the building.

The incisions evoke the rough openings that the artist Gordon Matta-Clark carved through abandoned buildings in New York in the 1970's. But Cloepfil's design is far more polite than Matta-Clark's work. The incisions are covered in translucent glass that is flush with the building's facade, so that the violence of the cuts is completely lost.

The result looks timid. Seen from across Columbus Circle, it would fit nicely with the sanitized vision of the Time Warner Center next door.

Cloepfil's design is far more persuasive when you reach the galleries. Visitors would enter them from an elegant steel staircase that rises from a corner of the lobby. They would then continue up through the galleries along a series of switch-back stairs tucked behind the elevator core. By creating a more compact circulation system, Cloepfil is able to squeeze in roughly 3,000 square feet of additional gallery space.

A chance to hide a building's history, or to embrace it?

The cuts, too, seem more effective inside. On one of the gallery floors, for example, a single two-foot-wide incision cuts across the ceiling to create a narrow clerestory window just below the ceiling. From here the incision turns vertically downward to offer a narrow view of the city outside before turning once again and cutting across the floor so that visitors would get a fragmented view of others passing underneath.

But the same effect could probably have been achieved without stripping away so much of the building's identity. And the stronger contrast between new and old may have enlivened the design.

The point, in any case, is that these issues have not been fully explored by the city or the architect. The entire debate has been reduced to a question of simple tastes.

The real aim of this design is to cleanse the site of uncomfortable historical memories and thereby make it more palatable for powerful real estate interests. And this is a dangerous sign for the future.