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WORK ZONE IS COLUM-BUST FOR VIEW FROM TW CENTER

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February 24, 2004 -- **RELATED** Cos. chief **Stephen M. Ross** wants to know why, after his company spent \$1.7 billion to build Time Warner Center and open it on time, dug-up Columbus Circle outside its front door is such a mess.

"We've asked for a task force meeting with the city," Ross said yesterday. "We need a meeting to see why it's having to take so long. Right now, it's beyond me."

The city's Department of Design and Construction says the \$20 million reconstruction of the traffic circle and its center island is on schedule, due to be finished by year's end. Only the planting of perennials must wait until spring.

When the job is done, the island that's home to the Christopher Columbus statue will be graced by pretty landscaping and three graceful fountains. But for now, it's a ground zero-like pit full of machinery and ringed by concrete barriers.

It isn't what shops like Joseph Abboud and J. Crew, which broke with custom by agreeing to have giant windows give shoppers a view of the outdoors, were expecting.

And it's hard not to sympathize with Ross' annoyance. The city, under two different mayors, knew that Time Warner Center was to be completed this winter ever since Related bought the land from the MTA in the summer of 2000.

What sort of welcome did the long-awaited edifice, with a Mandarin Oriental Hotel, luxury condos and Time Warner's new world headquarters, enjoy? Besides the circle's reconstruction, it's ringed by treacherous pedestrian crossings, street excavations on Broadway and Central Park West, and the crumbling eyesore at 2 Columbus Circle.

Pedestrians trying to reach Time Warner Center from various approaches must make their way through one of Manhattan's most daunting traffic zones.

The most dangerous approach is from the point where Broadway meets Central Park South. There is no traffic signal at the corner. Unless they walk to West 58th Street, pedestrians must traverse an unguarded crosswalk vulnerable to southbound auto and bus traffic that doesn't always slow down.

The crosswalk takes strollers to the little spit of land that is home to 2 Columbus Circle, which announces the start of Midtown at Time Warner Center's feet. The Museum of Arts & Design hopes to take title to the long-empty hulk by summer and make its new home there after a sensitive redesign by architect **Brad Cloepfil**.

But the eagerly-awaited transfer is tied up in court by preservationist zealots who don't want its severe, windowless front wall replaced. Meanwhile, the wretched Edward Durrell Stone structure appears to deteriorate with every passing week. Derelicts lurk under a sidewalk bridge that rings the building's base like a noose.

After the city failed time and again to sell it - rejecting offers from **Donald Trump** and the Dahesh Museum among others - the Bloomberg administration last year touted its planned sale to the design museum.

Officials at the Economic Development Corp. say they're still working with museum execs to finalize terms. EDC spokesperson **Janel Patterson** said, "If all goes well with the suit, we hope to close by summer."

Museum director **Holly Hotchner** said through a spokesman, "The museum has raised the funds to purchase the building from the city and renovate it. Construction will begin once the museum has taken title, which will be after the lawsuit is settled. A hearing before a judge is scheduled for this Friday."

Meanwhile, if you're walking to Time Warner Center, be sure to look both ways.

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