



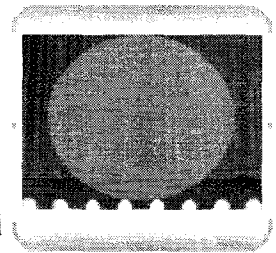
Facing a Turning Point

Columbus Circle's odd building sits in a storm over its renovation

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Once just an address, 2 Columbus Circle has become a cause. The quirky, white-clad building, designed by Edward Durell Stone in 1964 as the Huntington Hartford Museum, sits on an odd-shaped island surrounded by traffic and towers like a plucky character from a children's book. Its past is checkered, its future in doubt, its present downright derelict.



The Museum of Arts & Design wants to buy it and shine it up with a radical renovation. A loud and resourceful contingent of preservationists is demanding that its marble coat be rehabilitated or replaced, and that Stone's Italianate accents - an arcade on the ground floor, a loggia up top - be protected from changes.

Meanwhile, the place is falling apart quickly. Several days ago, after weeks of frigid weather capped by a snowstorm, a heating pipe froze, then burst, and water was pooling on the sixth floor, flowing down a stairway and cascading down a wall two stories below. One of the small porthole windows had blown out and a little pile of snow had built up in one of the scimitar-shaped galleries.

The distinctively slatted parquet floors looked healthy in some areas but were buckled, warped or gone in others. The mahogany wall panels still evoked former luxury, except where they sported a scattering of drill holes. Painted walls puckered with moisture.

Only the ninth floor, built as a clubby social room, its ceiling decorated with Stone's trademark pattern of interlocked wood circles, had some glamour still clinging to it. In the basement, a minuscule auditorium looked relatively unharmed.

The building could be authentically restored. It would be a laborious and expensive process. In the worst-case scenario, the marble facade would have to be peeled off and reapplied. Milder interventions would involve reconstructive surgery that could leave a patchwork of old and new stone. The mechanical systems would have to be rehabilitated and the interior, with its mezzanine between elevator landings, would have to be made wheelchair-accessible.

The question is: Who would want to do all this - or even part of it - for the sake of a small, awkward

building punctured with miserly windows at the corners of each floor?

The preservation advocacy group Landmark West contends that rescuers are out there, if only the city would look for them, rather than trudging blindly toward a deal with the Museum of Arts & Design and thereby, a total overhaul.

The debate has deteriorated almost as quickly as the plumbing. The Landmarks Preservation Commission has repeatedly refused to consider protecting a building that few people think is a masterpiece. The Bloomberg administration has rebuffed the preservationists' pleas. Landmark West has sued the city to postpone the sale until the historical and cultural implications can be fully explored.

Critics have lined up on opposite sides of the trenches, hurling petards of rhetoric at each other, and the conflict has divided enthusiasts and professionals of modern architecture in New York City - people whose values might be expected to coincide.

Paul Spencer Byard, the eminent architect and preservationist, sees the case as evidence that historical preservation has been hijacked by "fundamentalists" who would rather embalm a mediocre building than let another architect attempt to bring out its inherent ideas.

"Architects have been dealing with the issue of how to reuse old buildings for thousands of years, and they've done it pretty successfully," he said. "Now we have a culture that is using old buildings as a way to express a terror of change."

Amid the fog of words is a striking, elegant new design by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture that would transform the carcass of 2 Columbus Circle into an urban adornment. It represents a vast improvement over the version released last year.

Cloepfil proposes to sheathe Stone's concrete box in stippled white terra-cotta - a glazed, durable surface that would sparkle slightly in sunlight. He would replace its vertical rows of portholes with a winding channel cut into the concrete shell and covered with clear glass and perforated terra-cotta. The continuous, see-through ribbon would run upward the height of a single story, turn to follow the ceiling of each gallery, then climb again like a steep switchback trail. The result is a beguilingly irregular expression of the interior on each of the four facades.

On the upper floors, which would house the museum's administrative offices, vertical strips of fritted glass would open up views in four directions, exploding the bunker ambience that made the building so unpopular among city employees when it housed the Department of Cultural Affairs.

Cloepfil's design contains a memory of Stone's. The height does not change, nor does the color, and the ground-floor arcade remains, enclosed in glass like an artifact in a vitrine. That coy gesture - teasing the public with glimpses of the building's musculature - enrages some preservationists.

"This is not an archaeological dig, where you expose some of the building," said the landscape architect Michael Gotkin, one of the original's more impassioned defenders. "It's there, it's intact and it should be preserved."

That's one way of seeing Cloepfil's operation. Another take is that he has found a way to honor the building's principal virtue - eccentricity - while making it something it has never been: useful.

Stone's funny duckling has taken on a symbolic value out of proportion with its inherent values. Perhaps what really matters to its self-appointed protectors is its incongruity in a plaza otherwise characterized

by dark-tinted, brand-name glass megaliths: the Trump Hotel and Tower and the Time Warner Center. Stone's folly is a relic, if not of Old New York, then of Medium-Old New York. Columbus Circle was not a particularly inviting place before its recent round of imperial refurbishments, but then, nostalgia applies to seedy yesterdays, too.

At bottom, this is a fight over how we tell the story of our recent past. Laurie Beckelman, a former chairwoman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission who directs the renovation project for the Museum of Arts & Design, belongs to the masterworks school of thought. She believes that 2 Columbus Circle is not a fine enough example of Stone's oeuvre to merit preservationist reverence - particularly when compared to the Conger-Goodyear House in Old Westbury or the facade of the Museum of Modern Art.

Beckelman is facing preservationists such as Gotkin, who believe that the narratives of Stone's career and of the city itself are more complicated, composed of intriguing digressions and parenthetical episodes. By that logic, the fact that 2 Columbus Circle is able to stir up such passion gives evidence of its continued importance.

The irony is that Cloepfil's design also represents an antidote to the depersonalized, deluxe Columbus Circle that preservationists deplore. It's easy to imagine another chapter of this saga, 40 years from now, when the quirky Cloepfil & Stone creation comes under a developer's beady eyes, and a coalition of New Yorkers mobilizes to defend it. By that time, the turn-of-the-century struggles we are witnessing could be marshaled as proof that the building tells a crucial New York tale and that it should therefore be preserved.

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