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At Columbus Circle, Going Round & Round Over a Building's Fate

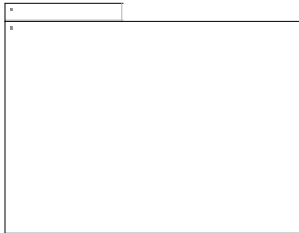
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NEW YORK -- In the annals of preservation, few buildings have generated as quirky a battle as the one raging over 2 Columbus Circle, a beleaguered piece of New York architecture whose intended new owner -- the Museum of Arts & Design -- plans to erase the legacy of a rare American modernist to bolster its own image.

At risk is a decrepit 1964 building by Edward Durell Stone, the controversial architect who also gave Washington its John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The Manhattan building isn't great, and maybe the architect wasn't either. Nonetheless, this week, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared the structure one of the "most endangered" places in America.



Brad Cloepfil's plan would introduce more light by carving channels into the 10-story building.



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The designation raises an impassioned local preservation debate to national stature. The issues -- cultural stewardship and the determination of merit in a building too new to be truly historic -- are played out in many other cities.

The Columbus Circle building, which is owned by the city, was designed in the architect's late flamboyant phase. It has a curved facade of white marble adorned with a Venetian-style balcony, portholes and an arcade of abstract arches known from Day One as "lollipops," thanks to architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, then at the New York Times. Though the 10-story building overlooks Central Park, it is all but windowless.

The list of supporters and detractors would make a dinner party worthy of "Bonfire of the Vanities," with writer Tom Wolfe at the head table. (He penned a 4,000-word screed on behalf of preservation last fall in the Times.) Robert A.M. Stern, dean of Yale's School of Architecture, warned that "a world-class landmark is threatened with defilement." National Trust Director Richard L. Moe calls the building "a wonderful work of a great American."

Opposition comes from a series of mayors interested in ridding the city of the property for a price and a coterie of progressives who think the building's time has passed. Holly Hotchner, director of the museum formerly known as American Craft (and now saddled with the acronym MAD), describes Stone's work as a "mausoleum." Huxtable, the doyenne of architecture critics, revisited her views earlier this year in the Wall Street Journal. She declared that the building was not Stone's best and figured the structure was probably too far gone to be preserved.

The Museum of Modern Art's architecture curator, Terence Riley, believes the newly revived Columbus Circle deserves better. He also opposes invoking the public's goodwill on behalf of mediocrity. In his view, Stone's building has failed on every count.

"You're talking about a patient that has been on life support for so long that none of the doctors are still alive," Riley says.

Stone designed the building for A&P supermarket heir Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art, which was to be an alternative to MoMA. The building was savaged by critics, and the museum failed after five years. Ownership passed eventually to the city, which filled it with office workers.

Vacant since the late 1990s, the structure now languishes, an eyesore in full view of the gleaming new Time Warner Center. Scaffolding protects pedestrians from the risk of

falling marble. Chain-link fencing prevents the homeless from camping between the "lollipops." But for the actions of local preservationists, including what Hotchner calls a "nuisance" lawsuit now being appealed, the museum would have started remaking the building last month.

The Museum of Arts & Design is crammed into three small floors of a building opposite MoMA on 53rd Street, with no space to display its permanent collection of more than 2,000 objects. The Stone building offered four times the gallery space, plus room for offices, educational facilities, expanded shop and more -- presuming changes. The museum has raised half the \$50 million it needs for the work. Hotchner won't reveal the price it will pay the city. A key point is the freedom to remake the site.

The museum has already held an architectural competition, passing up Zaha Hadid, this year's Pritzker Prize winner, in favor of an emerging talent, Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works in Portland, Ore. Cloepfil would preserve Stone's curve and mass but also infuse the dark box with light by carving 30-inch channels into the structural concrete. He says he wants to "extend the memory of that building as an iconic object." The marble facade would be replaced with a layering of custom-made terra cotta. Digital images show a building that is still white, but more ethereal. It's Stone, but it's not.

How does it feel to alter a notable American modernist? Cloepfil, who has been called a neo-modernist, responds carefully: "I don't believe it's one of his best buildings. I think Columbus Circle deserves a better piece of architecture."

The Trust and its allies disagree passionately.

"The board of this new museum should reflect on whether or not a work of architecture is a work of art also and deserves to be protected," says Moe. "I am just astonished frankly that art museum people can take that view."

Hotchner is unmoved.

The museum, she says, is proceeding apace to "create a great public space."

That's what Tom Wolfe remembers. In a conversation this week, he pointed out that, at age 74, he is one of the few voices in the drama old enough to have experienced the white marble elephant in its glorious prime. It was a temple of luxury from a courageous architect revolting against the orthodoxies of his time.

Stone's anti-modern decorative streak is best preserved in a celebrated design for the American Embassy in New Delhi. But 2 Columbus Circle is seen by more Americans daily. Wolfe, who excoriated strict modernism in his 1981 book "From Bauhaus to Our House," waxes gleeful about Stone's use of forbidden veneers, ornate railings and regal gold and red carpets on gallery floors. There was also a restaurant and a lounge, which afforded New Yorkers access to views over Central Park.

"You felt like you were on top of the world, like all was well in the world," he says. "You were in a white marble building."

Little of the glory that Wolfe remembers survives. On a tour two weeks ago with Laurie Beckelman, director of MAD's New Building Program and a former chair of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, I took in the postcard view of Central Park framed by Venetian kitsch. The rest of the building exuded the charm of a bunker.

Long galleries bounded by a solid curved wall reflected the front facade. From each of seven levels, steps led a half-story down to small, oddly shaped landings, which led to more stairs. By flashlight, paneled walls looked grim rather than deluxe. Pipes had burst, and Beckelman said she had seen water cascading down the stairs. Glimmers of natural light passed through grimy portholes. Only a basement theater, entered through original brass doors, suggested bygone glamour. Beckelman said the museum planned to restore it.

Hyperbole is part of the debate as long as Stone's place in history is unresolved. Wolfe calls him "probably the most distinguished American modernist." Hotchner sees him as "relatively significant." Either way, MoMA's Riley cautions, "No architect is so famous that you would say all his buildings are worth saving in perpetuity. Everybody's work is uneven."

Stone's son Hicks, who followed his father into the field of architecture, favors preservation, but even his views are conflicted.

"Dad was out of fashion for a while," he acknowledges. "Even I at times have been made uncomfortable by the aesthetic of 2 Columbus Circle."

Right now, two issues give him pause. Like Moe, he is appalled that "an institution whose central mission is to preserve cultural artifacts is in fact determined to demolish what is probably its most valuable artifact." He also worries that cutting into the structure to add light could destroy the structural integrity of the building.

Stone, who died in 1978, is quoted in Paul Heyer's "Architects on Architecture: New Directions in America" as saying: "If our flights of fancy found receptive audiences and each of us were encouraged to be an individual our lives would be enriched. . . . Americans need more than ever to cultivate the open mind."

The building is an oddity and the issues are complex. But in the current impasse, open minds would be a better legacy for all.