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Metro Matters; Lollipops And Circles Of Influence

By **JOYCE PURNICK**

THERE has to be another phrase for it. "It's a small world" won't do, and "six degrees of separation" is way overexposed. Circular, maybe?

Yes, circular. And no pun is intended, though this is about the reclamation of Columbus Circle, where the Time Warner Center, that sparkling vertical mall, opened its doors in February. With road work and landscaping under way, there's just one shabby remnant left to mar the circle -- the former Huntington Hartford Museum at 2 Columbus Circle, long ago dubbed the lollipop building by Ada Louise Huxtable for its eccentric design.

The Museum of Arts and Design wants to renovate the building and move in, but has been slowed by a lawsuit and a public relations campaign to preserve the facade.

A lawsuit failed in State Supreme Court, but the plaintiffs have just filed a notice to appeal, and were buoyed by new support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The trust, a private organization that is widely respected but has no power, announced last month that 2 Columbus Circle had made its 2004 list of the country's "most endangered places" -- a diverse list of endangered historic sites that includes the entire state of Vermont (under attack by prospective Wal-Mart encroachment, says the trust).

The lollipop building, designed by Edward Durell Stone, was nominated to the trust by three groups. Two are plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the renovation -- Landmark West and the Historic Districts Council. The third is the Preservation League of New York State, an umbrella group that represents many organizations around the state -- among them the Historic Districts Council and Landmark West.

As noted, circular.

There is nothing inappropriate about the interconnections. They simply illustrate the way things work. In a city where most people are busy and distracted, just a small number of New Yorkers who feel very strongly on one subject can sometimes get their way. Or at the least get in the way of others.

In the case of 2 Columbus Circle, supporters of the building feel passionately about its value as an example of postmodernism, while those who dislike it feel just as passionately that it is eccentric on the outside, narrow and dark on the inside and can only be improved by plans of the museum's architect, Brad Cloepfil.

The president of the National Trust, Richard Moe, said that assessments of the building are judgment calls. "We're trying simply to bring attention to the structure, which we think is a significant work of a

significant architect," said Mr. Moe, who explained he has seen the exterior of the building but not its interior. "Ideally, there ought to be a hearing by the Landmarks Commission. Let the process work its will."

Then again, there was a process. In 1996, a subcommittee of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission decided against recommending a full commission hearing on designating 2 Columbus Circle a landmark. There were charges of political interference, but the current commission chairman, Robert B. Tierney, said he stands by the decision.

Critics sued on other grounds, contending that the city conducted a flawed environmental review. Justice Walter B. Tolub of State Supreme Court rejected their arguments in April, in a strongly worded opinion that is heading for an appeal that could under the rules take until next spring.

SO far, the consequences of the lollipop campaign are short-term. The museum, which had hoped to begin construction in April, has yet to get all city approvals or to conclude its purchase of the building. Fund-raising has also slowed, said Jerome A. Chasen, chairman of the museum's capital campaign and building committee.

"As a matter of fact, to be very honest with you, it's just stopped," he said yesterday. "People say, 'Do you own the building yet?' We don't. We're very excited about moving there, we think it's going to happen and are doing everything we can to move the process along as quickly as possible. But it is not entirely in our hands."

With the building's facade so deteriorated that it might need rebuilding rather than renovation, would another developer materialize if the deal with the Museum of Arts and Design collapses? A welcome argument, said Mr. Moe of the Historic Trust. "You're almost always better off, even if requires waiting a little longer, for the right reuse of structure like this."

Optimism from Washington. But in New York, 2 Columbus Circle radiates nothing so much as frustration as it sits vacant behind an ugly chain-link fence, bordered by grandeur and encircled by politics.