

# And Still the Fight Goes On

## Debate Still Rages Over Redoing 2 Columbus Circle

Should city rule on  
2 Columbus Circle?

By Christopher Moore

In 1964, when 2 Columbus Circle was completed, Upper West Siders were fighting over the building.

They still are.

Preservationists, insisting that a silent majority is becoming increasingly vocal in defense of the building, say they want the city's Landmarks Commission to hold a hearing on the fate of the building. On the other side of the

debate, some New Yorkers contend that worthy plans to bring a museum to Columbus Circle are being unwisely stalled by preservation efforts.

"That building has always gotten people talking," said Peg Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

The structure at the center of the storm was created by architect Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Advocates for 2 Columbus

Circle describe it as an icon of architecture's Modernist movement. Last October, novelist Tom Wolfe called the location "one of the most important buildings in the history of 20th-century architecture."

Sitting at the southwest corner of Central Park, the building was first used as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art. It may be returning to something like its original use if the Museum of Arts & Design, currently headquartered on West 53rd Street, is able to complete its plan to take it over. The museum wants to buy the

building from the city, alter it under a design plan by Brad Cloepfil, and move in.

The museum won a key victory in April when the State Supreme Court dismissed a challenge to the museum's project. Petitioners had argued the city's review

of the potential economic impact of the building's sale had been inadequate.

Landmark West, a preservation group

headquartered on the Upper West Side, was the key plaintiff in the legal proceeding. The group, according to Kate Wood, its executive director, is optimistic in the long run about saving the structure.

**The Landmarks Conservancy's board is divided on the issue of the building's future.**

Wood pointed to a June 29 fundraising event at the Liz O'Brien Gallery on Fifth Avenue, where \$50,000 was raised to continue the struggle.

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"All we're asking for is a public hearing," she said.

In May, the National Trust for Historic Preservation weighed in, listing 2 Columbus Circle on its annual list of endangered historic places. The trust urged the city to "develop a restoration plan for the building that respects its integrity as a Modernist masterpiece and celebrates its unique form and design."

In its spring 2004 newsletter, Landmark West appealed directly to the mayor, asking on the front page: "Mayor Bloomberg, what more will it take to save 2 Columbus Circle?"

"It's just not something that he has taken up as one of his priorities," Wood said.

"The Landmarks Commission is the agency that has the power to make the difference here," she said. "They could schedule a meeting tomorrow if they wanted to. They don't want to."

Diane Jackier, director of communications and government affairs at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said the commission reviewed the building in 1996 and decided against holding a hearing. "We stand by that decision," she said.

Upper West Side Councilwoman Gale Brewer said she's heard that argument from

the commission's chairman, Robert Tierney.

"It would be very helpful to all of us if there would be a hearing," Brewer said. But she positioned herself between preservationists and the museum, saying she was pleased with the design team behind plans for the site.

"In the best of all possible worlds, I would like to keep it as it is, but it appears that the museum has needs for the light and air," she said, gently approving of plans to alter the structure.

Some community leaders go further, such as Monica Blum, president of the Lincoln Square Improvement District. She likes the museum's plan and said, "It's too bad that it's not moving forward."

"Our view is that this is good for business and will be an asset to the community," Blum said.

At the Landmarks Conservancy, Breen said: "My board has always been split on this, but everyone has agreed that the building should have its day in court."

Personally, she added, she hopes that museum plans printed in a recent New York Times column do not come to pass.

One reason Breen favors a commission hearing: to bring finality to a long-simmering debate. "I think that would kind of help settle things once and for all," she said. "Any building that has generated this much debate about architecture deserves the full process."