

July 28, 2004

Bonnie Burnham, President
World Monuments Fund
Request for Assistance
95 Madison Avenue, 9th Floor
New York, New York 10016

Robert A.M. Stern Architects

Dear Ms. Burnham,

I am writing to strongly urge the World Monuments Fund to lend assistance to Edward Durell Stone's Two Columbus Circle (1964), the former Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, recently placed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2004 list of America's eleven most endangered historic places. Two Columbus Circle is without question a landmark that is immediately threatened by a proposal from the Museum of Arts & Design that would destroy the building completely.

Even though many greeted Stone's museum initially as kitsch or a bad joke, just as they greeted Robert Venturi's and Frank Gehry's early buildings, or heaven only knows how many other genuinely and meaningfully provocative, iconoclastic works, Two Columbus Circle was and is now a serious piece of work with an important point to make; and it is also a fine complement to its important and challenging site. Like so many bold inventions that fly in the face of prevailing norms, Stone's building is rarely examined on its own merits, never allowed to escape the endless style wars that so waste the profession's time and try the public's patience and thereby reduce architecture's importance to the margins of fashion.

Stone's building is sheathed in a beautiful material – marble – that takes the light superbly. It is shaped to reflect and reinforce the space of the Circle. It defines the Columbus Circle. Inside it has some quite nice galleries and a glorious penthouse restaurant. In short, it was, and is, a very good building, one well worth keeping, which would be obvious to many if real estate considerations and personal egos were put aside for civic values. With lessons learned from the past, Two Columbus Circle challenges the architectural culture of our time. Stone's building is equally important and equally valid as Eero Saarinen's contemporaneous TWA Terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Saarinen's building is saved for the future. Stone's deserves no less.

Stone's pioneering work in International Style Modernism in the 1930s included the Museum of Modern Art, designed with Philip Goodwin. In the 1940s, he designed a series of houses in the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright, but by the mid-1950s he saw clearly that Modernism was virtually bankrupt, with a vocabulary of forms so small that, as a critic remarked about the early work of the actress Katherine Hepburn, it ran the gamut of emotions from A to B. To Stone, as to Philip Johnson and many others at that time, post-war Corporate Modernism had become a straightjacket. Aesthetic freedom was in the air. Or, to use the phrase that Stone himself then employed in describing his break from Modernism's grip, "I'm going to bat for beauty."

Aside from politics, the main stumbling block to the building's preservation is not the fact of its landmark quality; it's the issue of taste. Where would our High Victorian buildings be today if they were preserved on the basis of prevailing taste or even so-called good taste? Victoriana is kitsch, but is kitsch really bad? And is there bad kitsch and good kitsch, and fabulous kitsch? In other words, is taste absolute? Can we not be mature enough to acknowledge the varieties and vagaries

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of good and bad taste? Is beauty an absolute?

Some argue that Two Columbus Circle is too idiosyncratic a building to deserve to be preserved. But I think that's just why it needs to be preserved. Think of today's most admired buildings: so many of them are also idiosyncratic, to say the least, leaning, swooping, and blobbing about as they challenge our preconceived notions of beauty. Are they also doomed to destruction as tastes change? Will today's bold protests against yesterday's aesthetic last only a generation and be pulled down because they no longer conform to the prevailing ideology?

We must take the long view and not give in to the changing winds of architectural fashion and the tendency to eliminate what is no longer fashionable. Aesthetic cleansing is no more defensible than ethnic cleansing or any other kind of simple-minded exclusionary behavior. Two Columbus Circle must be preserved for future generations to consider, debate, learn from, and, heaven help us, actually enjoy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert A.M. Stern". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Robert A.M. Stern, FAIA

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