

Intelligencer

Pity the Architect

If no one loves 2 Columbus Circle, why stop him from redesigning it?

- By Alex French

Stone's building, and Cloepfil's proposed one. (Photo credit: From left, Richard B. Levine; North Elevation Rendering/Courtesy of Allied Works Architecture)

It isn't every architect who has to contend with an elite aesthetic revolt against his commission, much less a two-part *New York Times* op-ed by Tom Wolfe. But such is the situation Brad Cloepfil, 48, finds himself in while redesigning 2 Columbus Circle for its new tenant, the Museum of Arts & Design. Defending the eccentric older structure, designed in 1965 by Edward Durrell Stone, has become a sort of cause célèbre for the city's cognoscenti, including Chuck Close, Lindy Roy, and Frank Stella.

Nobody is arguing that the building is attractive—one defender, Robert A.M. Stern, calls it a “public provocation”—just significant. With its concave façade, Taj Mahal grillwork, and loggias, 2 Columbus is a piece of modern architecture that breaks all the rules of modernism. As Wolfe wrote in his op-ed, “The gods of the International Style, Corbusier, Mies and Gropius, shuddered.” He meant it in a good way. “The thing is that Tom Wolfe isn't an architecture critic,” says Cloepfil, who thought 2 Columbus “was a telephone transformer building” when he first saw it in 1978. “He's an architectural populist. The building was being used as a symbol of his lifelong crusade against modern architecture.”

As soon as the end of January, the State Supreme Court will hand down a decision that could halt the sale of 2 Columbus. Preservationists argued before the court that the city, in its move to sell the building, failed to consider the environmental impact of “obliterat[ing] the existing architecture.”

If allowed to proceed, Cloepfil plans to replace the marble façade with a skin of glazed terra-cotta panels, incised to let light in—a makeover that the *Times*' Herbert Muschamp called “an unwelcome exercise in caution.” Which also flummoxes Cloepfil, who's built a much-praised light-filled museum in St. Louis. “To try to make this little building more than it is doesn't make sense,” he says. “It would look absurd next to the Time Warner Center.” But he did keep the derided “Venetian lollipop” columns as a sop to the neo-sentimentalists.