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Streetscapes | Madison Square Garden

Is Old Penn Station's Killer Significant? Or Unforgivable?

By [CHRISTOPHER GRAY](#)

ARE you exhausted by the drawn-out battle to preserve the architect Edward Durell Stone's 1965 art museum at Columbus Circle? Well, if you couldn't get your head around landmark protection for that Venetian-marble fantasy, you may gulp at the next threatened work of mid-20th-century architecture to be considered important.

Included in a list of significant modern buildings in [Manhattan](#) by three leading preservation organizations, including the local chapter of the modern architecture group Docomomo U.S., is one that may make you wince: the 1968 Madison Square Garden, which infamously wiped out the original Pennsylvania Station.

By the late 1950's, the old Penn Station, designed by McKim, Mead & White at Seventh Avenue south of 34th Street, was dying. It was a half-century-old monument to rail travel gasping for breath in a new atmosphere of airplane fuel and automobile gasoline.

A development group led by Irving Felt floated plans for a vast, futuristic arena with a swooping, saddle-shaped roof and two Guggenheim Museum-like swirls on one end. It had the goofy grandeur of a Martian spaceport from *Popular Science* magazine. The project was designed by Charles Luckman, who had trained as an architect but became president of Lever Brothers and was in large part responsible for commissioning the firm's sleek 1952 headquarters, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, at 52nd Street and Park Avenue.

The arena project found a landing place on the site of Penn Station. The possible demise of the station's brooding grandeur for what was to become the new Madison Square Garden provoked a storm of controversy. But the preservationist Harmon Goldstone, later the chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, wrote optimistically: "Is the proposed new building, for its own purpose in its own idiom, going to be as inspiring a design as McKim, Mead & White's? There is no reason why it cannot be."

Luckman, who had returned to architecture, reduced his design to a drum-shaped 20,000-seat arena, with a facade of precast concrete panels. To avoid interior columns, the structural engineers Severud-Perrone-Fischer-Sturm-Conlin-Bandel designed a 400-foot-wide roof supported by cables, in the manner of the Roman Colosseum, which had a fabric roof.

Perhaps not expecting much, contemporary critics said little about the resulting Madison Square Garden. In 1967, Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, briefly called it "neither avant-garde nor high architectural art." The magazine *Progressive Architecture* noted that, based on the rate of replacement of prior Madison Square Gardens - this was its fourth incarnation, taking over for one at 49th Street and Eighth Avenue - "the present one should come down about the year 2000."

But later writers did not hesitate to weigh in. Among them was Paul Goldberger, the successor to Ms. Huxtable as architecture critic for *The Times*. In his book "The City Observed: New York" (Random House, 1979) he called it "a graceless, sloppy, cheap entertainment and office complex that would be an insult to an empty site in the middle of nowhere."

"For this," he said, "there is no excuse."

And Richard David Story, in *New York* magazine in 1987, listed it in the top 10 of "The Buildings New Yorkers

Love to Hate," along with the World Trade Center and the Edward Durell Stone building.

The site of Luckman's Madison Square Garden has been considered for redevelopment since the 1990's. Now its owner, Madison Square Garden Inc., is negotiating to build a new Garden nearby and to replace its 1968 building with a mixed-use complex. The new Garden would be just west of the current one, on Eighth Avenue, at the west end of the General Post Office building.

But architectural history is catching up with many iconic demons of 1960's architecture. Preservation organizations like Landmark West! are still fighting for landmark status for the Columbus Circle structure. Last year, the old Pan Am Building (now the MetLife Building), north of Grand Central Terminal, was the subject of a monograph, "The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream" (MIT Press, 2004), by Meredith Clausen, a professor of architectural history at the University of Washington, Seattle.

It was also last year that the "Manhattan Modern Map" was co-published by three groups: the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, at Columbia University; the World Monuments Fund; and the New York/Tristate chapter of Docomomo U.S., which is devoted to preserving modern architecture. A stimulating, provocative document, the map is available for \$7 at <http://www.urbancenterbooks.org/>.

The map includes more than 150 modern buildings built before 1980, noting that "the majority, recognized by local and national preservation organizations as significant, have not yet been singled out for protection in a formal designation process."

The list includes official landmarks, like the Guggenheim Museum, Lever House and the Whitney Museum. But it also lists lesser-known structures, like the Spartan-seeming Stuyvesant Town housing complex, from 14th to 20th Street between First Avenue and Avenue C, and the funky, pink brick United Parcel Service building at 43rd Street from 11th to 12th Avenue. It also lists Madison Square Garden.

The times in historic preservation have been a-changing since the landmarks law was passed in 1965, but to single out the successor to Penn Station plucks a sacrilegious chord.

"This building remains unforgivable by any standard," Mr. Goldberger, now dean of the Parsons School of Design, wrote in an e-mail message. Diana Goldstein, who was among those who sparked the original protests and picket lines around Penn Station in 1962, wrote in an e-mail, "Who on earth thinks that building is worth preserving?"

Nina Rappaport, co-chairwoman of Docomomo's local chapter, qualified the map's language. She wrote in an e-mail that "the reasoning was more for the building's urban-planning changes and how that affected the city, not for its architectural beauty."

But a decade or two ago, the idea of landmark designation for the Edward Durell Stone building would have been greeted by many with hoots - and now it is a preservation cause célèbre in New York, with another round of lawsuits under way.

Diane Jackier, a spokeswoman for the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said by e-mail that the commission has "not made any determination" about the Garden, a statement that may cause old-line preservationists to cringe. But the case for landmark designation is, on the face of it, rather strong: it is a unique building, designed by an important architect, with unusual engineering and a complex history.

Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West!, said in an e-mail that the group has to mull the building's significance but that "I'm all for a public hearing for Madison Square Garden."

"It would tell us a lot about where we are in our ability to evaluate the architectural and historical significance of the recent past," she said. "The Landmarks Preservation Commission needs to embrace, not shy away from, this kind of discussion."

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