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COLUMBUS CIRCLE EYESORE SOLD OFF

By **STEVE CUOZZO**

Columbus Circle's "Lollipop" has sucked its last.

The Museum of Arts & Design bought the empty, Moorish-ornamented folly from the city yesterday, allowing the museum to start work immediately on a long-awaited but controversial redesign.

The purchase climaxed a two-year struggle against preservationists who had sued to prevent the city from selling the building.

The museum, now scrunched into a small gallery in Midtown, is paying \$17 million for the 10-story, white marble structure designed by Edward Durell Stone in the 1960s. It is nicknamed the "Lollipop" for its quirky, Venetian-style pillars.

The museum plans to move its collection of American crafts into the building with three times more floor space by 2007. It will spend \$65 million more on construction and on expanding its holdings and community outreach programs.

An ebullient Jerry Chazen, chairman of the museum's capital campaign, said, "We are moving forward immediately" with reconstruction.

The building — bounded by 58th Street, Columbus Circle, Broadway and Eighth Avenue — will remain the same size and shape.

But Stone's mostly windowless facade facing Central Park will be replaced with a new exterior of terra cotta and glass designed by Brad Clopefil.

The building was last occupied by the city's Cultural Affairs Department and has been empty since 1998.

After years of city indecision, Mayor Bloomberg turned down offers by Donald Trump and others, and designated the museum to buy the former Huntington Hartford Gallery of Art in 2003.

The sale became a flashpoint issue between those who regarded it as a useless eyesore of no value to the public and those who felt it should be preserved as-is at all costs.

Although the sale was overwhelmingly approved by community board members and the City Council, preservationist groups argued that the building marked an important turning point in Stone's career and should not be altered.

They sued the city's Economic Development Corp. for "fraud," the Landmarks Preservation Commission for not granting 2 Columbus Circle protected status, and museum officials for alleged "collusion."

All the suits and subsequent appeals were thrown out of court.

EDC President Andrew Alper said the museum's move to Columbus Circle will "complete the transformation" of the circle, now home to the Time Warner Center and a redesigned public park.