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 ARCHITECTURE

DECEMBER 07, 2005 -- Last month when the scaffolding began to rise, it became clear that Manhattan's iconic 2 Columbus Circle was doomed. After years of protest and legal maneuvers by groups like Landmark West! to protect the Edward Durell Stone-designed building, the impending remodel of the structure and its famous façade is a stake in the heart of preservationists, and even more troubling, public advocacy.

Since 2002, activists have urged New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission—first with postcards, then with lawsuits—to request, at the very least, a public hearing on the fate of the building, which supporters argue marks an important turning point in modernism's evolution. The commission has refused, stating flatly that 2 Columbus Circle does not qualify for landmark status. "That is the professional judgment of the 19 people, myself included, who have served on the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission since 1996," wrote former chairwoman and architect Sherida Paulsen in a July 30 New York Times article. According to Paulsen, the 1964 building, while meeting the minimum 30-year age requirement for landmark consideration, does not in the eyes of the commission satisfy the other criteria: "It must have contributed to the city's development in the fields of architecture, history, or culture. Two Columbus Circle fails all but the age test."

So, it was decided. No landmarking. No public hearing. No doubt, this is a tricky case. The review process for 2 Columbus Circle occurred under the leadership of three different chairs, in two mayoral administrations over a period of nearly 10 years; if there were bias, one would hope it has been accounted for. The alternatives to the building's new owner, the Museum of Arts & Design (MAD), could have been much worse: Donald Trump reportedly made an offer. And, frankly, I find renderings of the remodeled building by Allied Works Architecture appealing. It could also be argued that rules are rules. The commission has a process; 2 Columbus Circle was subjected to that process, and the building did not make the mark. Noted Paulsen, "If we were to hold such hearings simply upon request, rather than reserving them for buildings that meet the criteria, they would become exercises in theater." Presumably, the commissioners are appointed because they know enough to make these decisions for the public.

But they should also know when to listen. Architectural critics, academics, preservation groups, and past landmarks commissioners have called for a public hearing. There have been editorials, demonstrations, and rallies. The Preservation League of New York State put 2 Columbus Circle on its "Seven to Save" list in 2003. The National Trust added the building to its list of the 11 most endangered historic places in 2004. And if the commission does not know when to listen, it should at least know when it looks bad not to. Uncovered by the Freedom of Information Act last spring, a series of emails suggested a less-than-impartial relationship between MAD representative Laurie Beckelman and current commission chair Robert Tierney, who offered his help "on the trouble ahead" in one note dated May 9, 2003.

When evidence like this and thoughtful calls for something as equitable as a public hearing are so bluntly dismissed, it makes one wonder what the real agenda is—and how many other buildings and neighborhoods could be lost to it.

It also makes one realize that the urgent need for remodeling lies not with 2 Columbus Circle, but rather with the commission's own structure and procedures. Toward that end, the "Landmarks Hearing Bill," introduced by council member Bill Perkins last August, will enable the City Council to vote in favor of a public hearing, as well as require the commission to "calendar buildings that have been determined eligible for the State Register of Historic Places." Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West!, expects the bill to be voted on by the end of the year; the City Council's final meeting is December 22. While probably too late to save 2 Columbus Circle, the bill promises to give communities more sway in landmark designations and to establish a clearly needed balance of power in the decision-making process. A