

June 30, 2005

## Permit Issued for Long-Disputed Work at 2 Columbus Circle

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

A work permit for the reconstruction of 2 Columbus Circle was issued yesterday, effectively defeating the decade-long effort by preservationists to have the building, designed by Edward Durell Stone, designated as a landmark.

The permit, issued by the New York City Buildings Department, allows the museum to remove the entire facade. That facade, known for its "lollipop" motif, is considered by some architects and preservationists to be an important example of widely threatened Modernist design.

Last week, 2 Columbus Circle was added to the World Monuments Fund's list of endangered sites.

Construction on the building to create a new home for the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum, is to begin in the fall. The design, by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture in collaboration with Gary Edward Handel & Associates, would eliminate the marble surface and porthole windows. Three additional permits issued yesterday allow for demolition of the interior.

"It's pretty shocking, pretty horrible" said the architect Robert A.M. Stern, who has championed the building.

"This building is a landmark," Mr. Stern added. "We do have good modern buildings, and we don't care for them. They are difficult and they are eccentric, but that's what makes them memorable. They challenge our way of thinking, our standards of beauty and propriety, and speak to us from another generation."

In a statement, the museum said: "The museum applied for these permits when the contract was signed, in anticipation of moving forward."

Not all architects said the building's design was worth saving. "I don't think it measures up to an icon," said Rolf Ohlhausen, a longtime New York City architect.

"To me, it's like a mausoleum," Mr. Ohlhausen added. "It has no life."

Another architect, James S. Polshek, argued that the transformation of Columbus Circle made efforts to preserve the building obsolete. "If you look at Trump's building to the north and the Time Warner Center to the west, it really is irrelevant what you do to that building, whether you restore it in all its Edward Durell Stone glory, or whether you reclad it," Mr. Polshek said. "It is not going to make any difference

to the quality of life in that area because Columbus Circle has been compromised so severely."

The building, which opened in 1964, was designed to house the modern art collection of the businessman Huntington Hartford. The city acquired 2 Columbus Circle in 1975 and used it for the Cultural Affairs Department. The nine-story building has been vacant since 1998.

In June 2002, the city agreed to sell it to the museum for \$17 million. The city has committed \$4.5 million in capital funds to the project. The museum -- now at 40 West 53rd Street -- plans to reconstruct it for about \$30 million. Construction is expected to be completed in mid-2007.

Landmark West, a neighborhood advocacy group, has recently led the effort to preserve 2 Columbus Circle, filing several unsuccessful lawsuits in an effort to pressure the Landmarks Preservation Commission to hold a hearing on the building.

Yesterday, Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, said of the permits, "We're just looking at what our options are."

The commission has consistently upheld a 1996 decision by its designation committee not to hold a hearing on the building. Robert B. Tierney, the chairman of the commission, has stood by that decision, despite considerable pressure from advocates, including some former landmarks chairmen. A recent lawsuit filed by Landmark West seeks Mr. Tierney's removal from all matters related to the building on the ground that he is partial to the renovation plans.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has stood steadfastly, if quietly, behind the chairman. In response to recent questions about the building, Mr. Bloomberg's spokesman, Edward Skyler, said: "Three different landmark chairs under two mayoral administrations have carefully considered this issue, and each determined not to proceed with the designation process. In terms of revisiting that decision, the mayor isn't going to micromanage the landmarking process."

While the preservation advocates could try to seek a work stoppage or temporary restraining order, such efforts seemed like a long shot, and yesterday the fight seemed to have gone out of the effort. "It's incredibly deflating," said Michael Gotkin, a founder of the Modern Architecture Working Group, an advocacy organization involved in the preservation effort.

"In preservation, you lose 75 percent of your battles," he added. "So we try not to give up until the very last second."