

# The Black Hole of Columbus Circle

By Sherida E. Paulsen

**F**OR the last two years, ever since it was announced that 2 Columbus Circle would be extensively renovated and turned into the new Museum of Arts and Design, preservationists have pressed with new urgency to have the building designated a landmark. But 2 Columbus Circle simply doesn't qualify. That is the professional judgment of the 19 people, myself included, who have served on the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission since 1996.

In order to be considered a landmark in New York City, a building must meet certain criteria. It must be at least 30 years old, and it must have contributed to the city's development

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in the fields of architecture, history or culture. 2 Columbus Circle fails all but the age test.

To be sure, a significant architect, Edward Durell Stone, designed 2 Columbus Circle. But the building is not one of Stone's notable works. It does not compare to his original Museum of Modern Art building, his United States Embassy in New Delhi or his fanciful Pepsico campus in Purchase, N.Y.

What's more, the Columbus Circle building is of little consequence historically or culturally. It was built to house the Huntington Hartford Museum, which existed for just five years, from 1964 to 1969. No occupant since has developed a lasting attachment to the space, and as a result the structure has become known as the black hole of Columbus Circle.

Moreover, the museum's design did not influence the work of other architects or the look of other institutions. The building's defenders claim that Stone's work on this building was a milestone in architectural design, intended as a critique of orthodox modernism. They contend that his use of

marble and decorative details was an innovative response to the more straitlaced modern designs of the 1950's.

But this is preposterous. Luxurious materials were used in modern buildings throughout the 20th century. The Barcelona Pavilion, the Seagram's Building, and the later Rockefeller Center buildings of Wallace Harrison and Max Abramowitz are just a few that come to mind. Decorative geometric forms were relatively common in the West Coast office buildings designed by Charles Luckman and John Carl Warnecke — to say nothing of Frank Lloyd Wright's works of the 1950's. In fact, the 2 Columbus Circle building has no one-of-a-kind architectural qualities.

On the historical, cultural, and architectural merits, then, 2 Columbus Circle doesn't make the cut for landmark status. But rather than accept this judgment, preservationists have accused the Landmarks Preservation Commission of ignoring their requests and concerns. But we've done no such thing. When we receive a request to evaluate a site, every one of our com-

missioners is required to consider the building's importance, determine its probable status and recommend the review process that should follow. The review of 2 Columbus Circle has been conducted under the stewardship of

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Edward Durell Stone  
built No. 2, but it's  
nothing special.

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three different chairmen and reflects the opinions of 19 commissioners, including six architects, four historians, two planners and three realtors.

Critics have suggested that the landmarks commission in general ignores postwar architecture. On the contrary, the commission has led the way in protecting the later 20th-century landmarks, beginning in the early 1980's with the designation of Lever House, the Seagram's Building and

the TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport. Since 1996, the same commissioners who have repeatedly declined to designate 2 Columbus Circle a landmark have happily designated many other postwar buildings, including Marcel Breuer's Begrish Hall in the Bronx, Eero Saarinen's CBS headquarters, Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo's Ford Foundation Building, and 240 Central Park South.

The building at 2 Columbus Circle was so unlikely to qualify for landmark status, however, that after careful consideration, the commission determined that it did not merit a public hearing. 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 that would not fulfill the intention of the New York City landmarks law.

In the last four decades, New York has protected 23,000 structures and landscapes that meet the law's standards for landmark designation. Two Columbus Circle is just not qualified to be one of them. □