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## The Case of 2 Columbus Circle

So far, Edward Durell Stone is not having a good century. Two years ago, the extraordinary house he built for A. Conger Goodyear in Old Westbury, N.Y., was nearly torn down. Early this month, the board of trustees at the University of Arkansas approved the razing of an apartment complex designed by Stone, an Arkansas native who died in 1978. But the real insult has come from New York City, and specifically from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which has refused to hold hearings to discuss the fate of Stone's controversial building at 2 Columbus Circle.

The Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum, has purchased the building and plans to strip away its marble facade, replacing it with a neutral, not to say impersonal, sheath designed by Brad Cloepfil. The redesign enjoys the support of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who was a member of the museum's board of trustees and who appointed the head of the landmarks commission, Robert Tierney.

It's one thing to doom this building — for that is what this redesign means — after a hearing by the landmarks commission. No one expects that a proper hearing would automatically lead to a vote for preserving Stone's original design. This, after all, is the building that famously evoked from *The Times's* great architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable the word "lollipop," a word that has stuck to this building like a wet sucker to a flannel blanket.

Stone's design — its Islamic overtones, its gleaming white marble in a dark setting — has been controversial from the start, and the controversy has been amplified by the checkered history of the building, which was built as a museum but has served as the headquarters of the city's Cultural Affairs Department and now stands vacant.

Yet dooming this building without a hearing is an enormous mistake, one that seriously erodes the Landmarks Preservation Commission's purpose and whatever political independence it has managed to attain since it was first created. It's hard to say, in fact, whether the commission has refused to hear this case as a matter of taste or a matter of politics. If it is a matter of politics, then the commission is headed down the wrong road entirely. But if it is a matter of taste — a sense that this building is too ugly to live and has somehow never fit its setting — then the commission is still headed down the wrong road. Its purpose is to weigh openly questions of taste against questions of historical merit, not to impose, by a fiat of neglect, its own unexpressed will.

The building at 2 Columbus Circle is already an architectural monument, the work of a major architect, whether the commission likes it or not. The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the World Monuments Fund have declared this building one of the nation's most endangered structures, but the city has done nothing to protect it.

The real question here is, of course, the character of the New York we live in. Some buildings, some neighborhoods, have a completeness, a consistency, about them that is easy to justify, historically and aesthetically. They help confirm our notion of urban coherence. But this is not an entirely coherent city, certainly not architecturally. Stone created at least two grand irruptions in the familiar pattern: 2 Columbus Circle and his house at 130 East 64th Street, which was protected by the landmarks commission when Stone's widow tried to tear down its facade — a striking white concrete grille in a row of conventional town houses. The point of preservation, as the landmark's commission once understood, is to protect the complexity of the past, not to iron it out.