

**Panel Discussion: At the Crossroads: 2 Columbus Circle
February 12, 2003**

Panelists:

Kurt Anderson (**KB**)

Reed Kroloff (**RK**)

Theodore Prudon (**TP**)

Billie Tsien (**BT**)

Moderator: Thomas Mellins (**TM**)

Mellins presented a historical overview of Edward Durell Stone's career with slides.

Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West!, read prepared statement by Robert A.M. Stern

PANEL DISCUSSION:

TM: Given that Edward Durell Stone was so famous at one point in his career and has largely slipped through the cracks of history, how would you evaluate the significance of his body of work? What would you describe as his contribution and what are the central lessons to be learned from his career?

RK: Stone is clearly one of those people who is at war internally with modernism. One has to wonder how much that is conscious, and how much he is just someone of surprisingly slippery taste. There is this little school of drag modernism that he represents...and maybe epitomizes, that I would throw Morris Lapidus and certainly early Philip Johnson into, at the same period. It's not a queer sensibility, but it is certainly a drag sensibility. I'm not sure exactly what it represents other than taste flailing. And the restrictions (or strictures) of modernism.

It's hard because when you see it within the body of his lifetime work, you see it against stuff like the Kennedy Center, which is an atrocious piece of garbage. It has absolutely no sense of its site ever. Stone was not generally site-sensitive. But in this case, he's pretty remarkable, actually. That curve is damn good.

KA: [2 Columbus Circle was designed to house] Huntington Hartford's museum, which represents this kind of retrograde quirky kind of anti-conservative conservatism. Well, Hartford got the right guy to do it. Bob Stern celebrates this for being a 'pot of paint' in the face of good taste and impeccable high Modernism. Well, one's feeling about this building comes down to the degree to which one likes to see a little bit of that splattered paint in the world or not.

TP: In his presentation, Tom talked about the way the galleries in 2 Columbus Circle stack on top of each other, exhibiting the same concept as the Guggenheim Museum. Then there's the circle. Those are pretty farsighted, interesting things. And you look at the wood paneling on the walls inside. If you go to Kahn's British Art Center in New Haven, you find the same concept. So, maybe he wasn't so bad? Maybe he was doing things that were not uncommon in that particular period.

TM: And how will the new AOL/Time Warner Center affect the way we read Columbus Circle? Will the fact that the new building will hold the circle radicalize how we see this building or not?

KA: I think to the degree that AOL does hold the circle and reinforces the circle, 2 Columbus Circle will look better, will seem less freakish.

TP: That makes Stone farsighted. (some laughs from panel)

KA: Either farsighted or accidentally ahead of his time. (audience laughs) I think we should and can all celebrate risk-taking as an idea, and god knows 2 Columbus Circle is an incarnation of risk-taking. But we can do that and at the same recognize that the products of risk-taking are not necessarily great works of art or architecture. In my mind Stone designed one great building, the Museum of Modern Art. 2 Columbus Circle is not a great building. It is all that Bob Stern suggested it is [in his statement], and in a yea or nay vote of whether it should be preserved, I'm with the yeas. But I don't think that should blind us to the kind of extremism of its quirkiness. That said, I think the anti-modernist way in which it used the site so carefully is to be applauded. And as we attempt to rebuild some version of Columbus Circle here, that is something to be grateful for and give at least two cheers for.

BT: I don't know if any of you have been into this building recently... Tod Williams, my husband and partner, gave 2 Columbus Circle as a project to his class at the University of Michigan. About two months ago we walked through top to bottom. It has gone through some extremely hard times. Though it was the Department of Cultural Affairs that was in there, they weren't very culturally careful about what they did to the building. It's a wreck. But this is a building that has very good bones. I respect the architecture of the building. But it is a very, very problematic building to be a gallery space. So I believe that this building has interesting possibilities for change that will not destroy the integrity of the building. It's important to recognize that it is a thoughtful and very, very interesting building but that it can't work and be a living building in the state that it is in now.

TP: I'll take the risk—I like the building. But I think we are confusing preservation with architectural criticism. This building like many of these buildings is in a gray zone. It's sort of not quite bad, not quite good yet. We are facing the same issues with Welton Becket, E.D. Stone, Paul Rudolph, all of that whole generation of architects who have a series of buildings that we are now just beginning to face up to as to what are we going to do with them. From a preservation point of view, it's no question. It is a very significant building by a very significant architect. The very fact that we are sitting here with 300 people talking about it makes it a significant building. Then, if you are talking about what is it that architecturally you like about it and what will its future be, then we are getting into the architectural criticism realm, when you begin to ask yourself 'what can we take out; what can we not take out.'

TM: Let's move it into a slightly more emotional realm and talk about our personal responses to the building. In direct response to Ada Louise Huxtable's comment in the New York Times at the time of the building's completion in 1964 that it looked like a 'die-cut Venetian palace on lollipops,' architectural critic Olga Geuft wrote, "Only a Bauhaus ogre with hardened arteries

could fail to smile at the [ground-level] arcades.” So the question is, ‘Do you think the building has a sense of humor? And does it make you smile?’

RK: It makes me wince. (audience laughing) But I’m not sure if I’m wincing like this (frown wince) or like this (smile wince) ...I’m not sure there is much difference between those two. Ed Stone had one idea that he recycled for 20 years at 50 scales. Once he got on the “crack” of screens, he could never wean himself. And this building is just another one of those. But, on the other hand, it’s really cute. (audience laughing) And it’s nice to have a little piece of jewelry like that. I mean, let’s face it. It’s a bauble. It’s not a building. It isn’t even big enough to be a building. But it does have a kind of precious quality.

There is no way you could look at it a consider it to be really good architecture. But, even if it is not a piece of good architecture, does that mean you have to tear it down or does that mean you have to drastically alter it in some fashion? That raises so many interesting questions about disposable societies and what’s permanent. These questions transcend whether Stone is an interesting, or good, or preservable architect. It has to do with the very essence of American culture.

BT: Let’s have a little reality check in here. Last I heard, there was about a \$20 million budget for the renovation of this building. That means that this building is not going to be torn down with a new building put up. That means that this building will be worked on. The whole mechanical system is not up to today’s museum standards so that’s a big chunk of money. The marble façade is starting to buckle, so that’s a problem. This building may experience a series of perhaps insertions and adjustments. It’s not going to become a totally different building. It’s impossible.

RK: I agree with you. And I think what happens often in these conversations is people see it only in these huge extremes. That to modify it is to rip it down. And it doesn’t have to be destroyed, or even changed, to be corrected. Many wonderful monuments of architecture—I’m thinking of the British Museum and the enclosure of the central courtyard—had huge architectural changes that didn’t destroy the character of the building and might have even saved it. Even here in New York, many pieces of architecture have been touched without being destroyed.

It’s not ‘do I want to get rid of it,’ but it’s more of a...well yeah, let’s keep this one, but let’s hope to god we never get another one. (audience laughing) And so it delivers an important lesson to us. I would not want to see...I don’t think I would want to see it disappear. I just will walk around it.

TM: What does 2 Columbus Circle teach us about modernism? Do we learn that it ran into a dead end at a certain point? Do we learn that it went a particularly idiosyncratic direction in the hands of a particular architect and that, in fact, 2 Columbus Circle doesn’t tell us a lot about modernism in America or world wide?

KA: It showed the death throes of high modernism. As I thought about Bob Stern saying 2 Columbus Circle was 'zany,' I remembered an equation: Tragedy + Time = Comedy. Well, in this case I think it is Comedy + Time = Fondness. It’s like a kind of a kooky uncle. But he’s your

uncle, so you know...But, I think the size of it, the small scale, even for those who think like Reed that it is terrible and it makes them cringe, it's like you say, 'It's a bauble.' It's 12-stories. How bad can it be? Indeed, and when you see the use of space, this being the conventional [reference to the AOL/Time Warner Center] use of space, it is charming and kind of quixotically noble to have this little building over here in the middle of Manhattan in 2003.

TM: Would we all be here having this discussion if this building was on a more anonymous site downtown? Would we care about it if it were not in such a prominent spot, literally at a crossroads of New York City?

RK: Not as much.

BT: I don't think so either.

KA: Not as much at all.

TP: It would be less known; therefore less mentionable.

RK: Maybe we could ask a different question though? What if it were 80 stories high with that same skin and treatment at the top and bottom? Would we be discussing it now if someone wanted to reskin it because the marble was falling off? Would you put it back the same way?

BT: Well, perhaps...because things that are very big and things that are very tiny stand out. Everybody hated the World Trade Center, for example, were buildings that everybody hated but, over time, became fond of. And here 2 Columbus Circle is a very tiny thing. They are at opposite ends of the size spectrum so you can find them and focus on them. And then of course, 2 Columbus Circle is about the only building I can think of that sits free on all four sides.

TP: If size is an issue, no matter what comes in its stead, it's always going to have the same problem, which is size. So we're going to replace one bauble with another bauble. The interesting part about 2 Columbus Circle is that it is practically the only "old building" left on the circle.

TM: Regardless of what happens to the building, will this conversation be the same in five years? Or will Stone have entered a different realm? How much have attitudes changed even in the last few years? In 1997, writing his first piece for the New Yorker, Paul Goldberger stated: "unfortunately for the advocates of 2 Columbus Circle know one has yet made a persuasive case that the building is much more than kitsch." Now we are here four years later. Has that case been made more persuasively?

TP: I would even go further. I think it is a generational issue. If you go back to *Wallpaper* magazine, I think about a year and a half ago, they called it one of the coolest buildings in New York. I think that it is a matter of time, that five, ten years from now we wouldn't be having this discussion; it wouldn't be an issue.

KA: The point that, after increasingly short periods of time, the recent past goes from seeming vulgar and purely kitschy to cool and desirable, is true. But I think to the degree there is a kind of general fondness for this thing, you have to predict that that will only increase over the next five years.

RK: I think, actually, Lapidus is an instructive case. Because there is no question that he is kitsch—and I'm tremendously fond of Lapidus. But beneath the kitsch are incredible bones of serious thoughtful architecture. You can see that sometimes with Stone, sometimes not. You can see it enough times to know that the man is thinking and working through problems. I don't know that you see it here in 2 Columbus Circle. But that question of kitsch, and when does kitsch switch over to our penchant for nostalgia? And when does kitsch jump over the nostalgia hurdle and is suddenly considered OK again?

KA: It takes about five years right now. Twenty years ago when I went to work in the Time-Life Building I hated it. I realized about ten years later that I had grown fond of it through no conscious reevaluation of my critical paradigm about that building or its style or its era.

TP: And the Time-Life Building has of course just been designated a New York City landmark. So you can see how that timeframe then got calendarized into formal recognition of its significance.

RK: So are we saying that eventually everything comes around, and that we'll be worshipping Fox & Fowle in 20 years? (panel members laughing/mumbling.)

BT: On a certain level, one talks about the work of E.D. Stone as if he sat there with a pencil and drew every building. He had a big firm. But I assume that he actually worked quite hard on this building. So this is a much more personal expression, and therefore more carefully considered, and that's why I think we won't be admiring the GM building, but there are still admirers at 2 Columbus Circle. It's a different scale and it's a different level of commitment from the architect.

TM: I think one of the geniuses of the NYC Landmarks law is that a building has to be 30 years old to qualify as a landmark. I think they hit the nail on the head because it is those buildings that are neither very old nor brand new that tend to slip through the cracks. Most things look better with the passage of time. But in reference to this building, I do wonder what's at work besides just the passage of time and nostalgia, the fact that 40 years later it still is such a debated building. Bob mentioned in his statement something about it being a precursor of postmodernism. Well, I wonder specifically, what can we learn about the use of history? Stone was very conscious about that. I'll read a very brief statement that he made in reference to his own work. He said "This obsession with monuments of the past may seem sentimental and pedantic, but I believe the inspiration for a building should be in the accumulation of history." So does 2 Columbus Circle seem sentimental and pedantic or does it seem to infuse modernism with a strength or with an interest or with a different character than it might have otherwise? Does it foreshadow postmodernism?

RK: It's tough, you know, when architects, when modernists, whether they are painters or sculptors or architects start to deal with the tricky, sensitive issue of figuralism. Lincoln Center is a perfect example of that struggle. I don't know many pieces of modern architecture—correct me if I'm wrong—high or low or somewhere in the middle, that engage literal, figural recreation

very successfully. I think Stone is one of the whole crowd of people making early steps, and I'm not sure that any of those steps led to anything later.

KA: Well, they softened the ground for what became postmodernism. I think you're right, it's kind of a dead end. Personally I think it is an interesting, mutant dead end that did not result in and of itself in the next "something else". Although again, I think the residue of the postmodern period that is most worthy and durable is the contextualism and urbanistic ideas that it enabled. In that sense I think 2 Columbus Circle is to be welcomed. We should be grateful for it.

BT: I think that is true about postmodernism as a kind of attitude that enables a sort of freedom to tap into other times and other places. The issue of purity wasn't so important. So, I think it's a positive building in that it is, saying that, 'I'm not looking to be pure right here.' And for me that's an interesting part of this building.

RK: And that is the part that survived into modernism today—the ability to step away from puritanism...

BT: An enriched modernism. A more complex, subtle modernism.

TM: To concentrate the conversation more locally, does the building fit into a kind of collection of stylistically adventurous museum buildings that are built in New York in the late 1950s and 1960s? The Guggenheim, the Whitney...these are idiosyncratic buildings, and here is another one. Is it saying something about the cultural life of New York at that time, in the postwar era, that is interesting to preserve, not so much from an architectural point of view, but from a larger historical view? Can we learn something about the evolution of the city by seeing how we expressed our cultural identity at that time?

KA: That's a very interesting point. And to think of it in the same brain space as the Guggenheim and the Whitney and indeed the same era, is interesting because it shows that even at that ostensibly late high modernist moment there was nothing like a doctrinaire candidate. But it is also interesting to think of those three buildings together because, I'm sorry, two of them are serious buildings and one of them isn't...I think.

RK: I would never put those three buildings together because two of them match. It's like one of those 'what's wrong with this picture.' They don't match in terms of quality. But if you throw your building in [referring to Williams and Tsien's new American Folk Art Museum on 53rd Street], these little museums all together make the city a museum of museums that is kind of wonderful. You want your collection to be representational and not every piece is going to be the best.

TM: In recent years, many architects and preservationists have talked about the importance of what has come to be known as "everyday masterpieces"--competent background buildings that are important to the fabric of the city. And among other things, their contribution is that they serve as a setting for the more gem-like buildings. Here it seems like, regardless of whether you think it is a good building or a bad building, we have almost the reverse. This is like an

architectural folly, and in some sense maybe it makes sense that it is at the edge of a park...that it has an almost rural like setting. Is there a need for that in a city as well, almost apart from an evaluation of its quality per se? Do we need quirky folly to have the overall texture be rich and vital in the city? Or can we live without it?

KA: Yes, we can live without it. Yes, of course we need it. And especially at this time when very strict bottom line marketplace criteria, among other things, reduce the possibility of there being quirky follies in life. And so I think that indeed even an unconscious understanding of that need is a reason for the affection for this building.

RK: But it is such a perverse question: 'do we need a weird little trinket to actually salvage us from the wave of mediocrity that is most of New York architecture?' Can't we just have a lot of really good stuff?

TM: I would ask, 'is it an important ingredient'? not so much 'does it save us.' Do we now see the value of this kind of idiosyncratic statement?

RK: I think your first example of it being a folly and its placement on the edge of a park, that's brilliant. It is a perfect folly—built by a rich guy to play in his back yard and keep his little art collection, right? And fig for the queen if she doesn't like it. So, and why not do that in a park? And then you don't have to look at it. And that's what follies are. And 2 Columbus Circle is kind of wonderful that way. I think it is actually...very nice.

TP: Particularly in the context of Columbus Circle.

TM: What strikes me about this building is that it is confounding. That it is not necessarily convincing. Neither are we ready to, at least, unanimously, dismiss it. What makes it confounding without being completely convincing?

BT: I am fond of this building. It's so peculiar that you can't put it in any category. Part of the reason we keep on talking about it is that it is so easy to look at. Often you are walking along a New York city street and you don't ever lift your eyes up above the first floor. So you just see store window, store window, coffee shop. And you don't realize you can walk by the Empire State building and not realize you walked by it, because you don't see it in its entirety, but this is a building that you see in its entirety. There is an ambivalence on the outside that is brought up to a high level because I see it from all sides. But when I go inside that ambivalence changes because I quite admire it on the inside.

KA: But didn't you say it is a difficult space.

BT: It's a mess. It's a mess from neglect. And it's a difficult space. I think architecture is a living art. And it needs to be a living building. We now have this beautiful arcade filled in with chain link fencing to prevent people from peeing in there. So, unless we give this building a life and allow the museum to have a life inside this building we're going to have chain link fencing, or huge *pissoirs*. Brad Cloepfil, who is the principal of Allied Architects, is a very thoughtful architect, with an interesting attitude toward existing spaces. I think the choice was a very good

choice. And I think that he should be able to make a proposal. And then we can decide if this feels like the right thing or not. It's very hard for me to pre-judge something that I don't know and say that this building must remain as it is because if it remains as it is, it's a dead building.

TM: I think it is particularly interesting that you focus on the interior. Ada Louise Huxtable's comment at the time of the building's completion about it looking like it's standing on lollipops is very well known and people assume that the entire review was negative. In fact, that really isn't the case. In fact she praised the interior very strongly. She wrote, "The interior planning is the building's conspicuous success and an achievement to command considerable admiration."

The idea of ambivalence has come up over and over. We love it; we hate it. Is it fair to say that in some way this building is about reconciliation?

KA: I think the building has always been about not reconciliation so much as ambivalence itself. And it's that discomfort with 'what is it?.' It's not a modernist building. And certainly in 1964 you didn't have the architecture word postmodernist. And so, what is it? And the fact that it wasn't a museum for very long, and it has not been one thing for very long. For most of its life, the question has been 'what do we do with it now?' It doesn't fit into a pigeon hole. And one can celebrate its lack of pigeon hole-ness.

TP: I think the ambivalence starts with the very collection for which it was designed. It was a very ambivalent, personal statement about what art should be. So I think in some ways the building very nicely reflects that. And you're right, then it goes into a very ambivalent history as to what is it used for and how is it perceived. It's always been in that "neverland" of buildings.

TM: Is it in that way quintessentially New York? That in a certain way it celebrates ambivalence and says this isn't a problem, and I'll flaunt it.

KA: It's an interesting idea, that New York celebrates ambivalence. I'd like to think it does.

RK: Actually I don't think it celebrates ambivalence, I think it celebrates a whole mixture of lack of ambivalence...all these different competing hubrises. This building maybe needs to be on the couch for awhile.

TM: With that comment I would like you all to join the couch and I like to open up the audience to questions.