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A Museum Clad in Billboards? The Critics Are Not Pleased

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)

When the Museum of Arts and Design bought 2 Columbus Circle last year, its director, Holly Hotchner, defended the decision to reconstruct it, saying, "I think nearly everyone would agree 2 Columbus Circle is a tremendous eyesore."

Now it is a tremendous ad.

Billboards for "The Da Vinci Code," the film version, cover construction scaffolding at the 10-story building, the former Gallery of Modern Art, which has been stripped of most of its original marble facade.

"There are advertisements like this throughout the city and in other countries," said Alan Yamahata, the vice president for development of the museum, at West 53rd Street. He cited the landmark Apple Bank for Savings at Broadway and 73rd Street for one. "We're a not-for-profit, and this was a creative way to generate capital."

Construction costs are estimated at \$40 million. Mr. Yamahata said he did not know how long advertising would cover the scaffolding or how much revenue it would generate.

There is some question whether the billboards are legal. A sign is allowed on scaffolding, said Ilyse Fink, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Buildings. "But it must comply with zoning, and a permit should be obtained. There's no sign permit in our database that I could find for 2 Columbus Circle."

Those who fought unsuccessfully for landmark status for the 42-year-old gallery, built by Huntington Hartford, were not happy yesterday.

"This institution supposedly dedicated to culture and stewardship destroyed the

most important work of art in its collection," said Kate Wood, the executive director of the Landmark West group. "Then they went and replaced it with a gigantic billboard, which they didn't even bother getting legal permits for."

At the Municipal Art Society, Vanessa Gruen, the director of special projects, said of the sign: "It's too high. It's too big. It's not allowed in that zone. It's totally illegal."

She added: "They've had so much bad press about this building. It's such a sore point to do this."

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