

Columbus Circle Museum Loss Is No Tragedy for Architecture

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(Review. James S. Russell is an architecture critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By James S. Russell

Feb. 28 (Bloomberg) – A hardy band of activists has lost its court battle to block the renovation of architect Edward Durrell Stone’s controversial 1965 creation, the one time Gallery of Modern Art, at Columbus Circle in New York.

For more than a year, advocates for the preservation of modern architecture were able to raise a stink about a building that architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable famously derided as a “die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops.”

Last week, a state appellate court dismissed the group’s lawsuit. Barring any more appeals, the Museum of Art and Design can proceed with renovating the vacant building for its new home. The plans by its Portland, Oregon-based architectural firm, Allied Works, call for replacing the crumbling marble façade with a veil of bleached terra-cotta slats, incised by zigzag slits.

The battle over 2 Columbus Circle mirrors the conflicts that are fast developing as the historic-preservation movement goes populist. The “landmarking” of significant buildings has been one of the great urban success stories of recent decades, restoring grace and vitality to neighborhoods across the U.S.

It has been so successful, in fact, that its constituency has steadily broadened its mission beyond the protection of “great buildings.” As an unexpected consequence, they’ve challenged the very orthodoxies on which their cause was founded.

Jackie’s Protest

Today’s activists care far less for those marble palaces of Carrere and Hastings or McKim, Mead & White that motivated a social elite to found the historic-preservation movement. In the 1960s, a nattily suited Philip Johnson and a pillbox-hatted Jackie Kennedy carried picket signs to protest the destruction of the doomed Pennsylvania Station.

The work of the prolific Stone would seem an unlikely conduit for today’s preservation passion. His Kennedy Center in Washington is as dreary as any Soviet culture palace. The gallery at 2 Columbus Circle enjoyed only a brief life as a representational-art riposte to the Museum of Modern Art.

Since 1969, it has served variously as a cultural center for Fairleigh Dickinson University, and as the city’s visitors’ center and cultural-affairs headquarters. The city moved out in 1998, and it has been vacant ever since. The ugly chain-link fencing protecting the building has failed to keep out heaps of garbage and homeless people.

New Formalism?

Preservationists portrayed Stone’s building, commissioned by supermarket heir Huntington Hartford, as an emblem of the 1960s and a key example of an alleged style called New Formalism.

In a 2003 forum held to debate the building's merits, Witold Rybczynski, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's architecture school, stated, "We need this dopey friend...if only to remind us of who we were, of a certain sort of Modernism manqué. Not necessarily because it's a good building, or a great building."

This is about the best its defenders have been able to come up with. Several of Stone's other buildings have also attracted a preservation following, even ones in the sterile, generic style that has long given Modern architecture a bad name.

Many of today's true believers go in for this kind of nostalgic preservation – holding onto bits of the past simply because they represent the past.

At a conference, I met someone who has been developing a preservation case for supermarkets of the arched-beam 1950s. Someone else had lovingly documented 1960s suburban banks, from Jetsons Futuristic to precast concrete, neo-neo-Gothic. There are partisans even for the very elements that once roused the ire of the preservation elite: the punched-metal grills that building owners draped over old buildings to "modernize" them.

Too Respectful?

If Allied Works's design doesn't make the heart race faster, it's partly because the firm's principal Brad Cloepfil was too respectful – maintain Stone's profile and even exposing a bit of the lollipop columns at the bottom.

He failed to mollify critics, and created an ambivalent presence rather than a gutsy one. It's a less-than-ideal outcome of a battle between two well meaning factions.

Can we do better? The degree of preservation obsession today threatens to smother the very dynamism that not only nurtures New York, yet is at the heart of its identity. As things stand, it's foolish for owners to engage architects of stature and talent for fear that any attempt to alter an existing building will result in a protracted public and legal battle.

Preserving Planters

Is it so tragic to lose two brownstones to accommodate a sensitive plan by Renzo Piano to expand the Whitney Museum? Can Lincoln Center proceed with badly needed alterations without raising the ire of preservationists? A battle is already under way over about a dozen absolutely ordinary Lincoln Center planters because they were installed by the eminent landscape architect Dan Kiley.

Stone's 2 Columbus Circle only appears to possess some life because so much enervating new construction gets built without stirring controversy. I would love to see the enormous energy now devoted to conserving too many examples of "who we were" harnessed in the cause of creating new construction that speaks to what our cities can become. Then we could afford to worry much less about losing a building here or there that might some day be deemed great.

■ Editors: Scatz, Hoeltherhoff, Ruane