

BLOCKS/David W. Dunlap

## For 2 Columbus Circle, a Growing Fan Club

**THE Landmarks Preservation Commission seems to have painted itself into a corner over 2 Columbus Circle.**

Its refusal to hold a public hearing on whether 2 Columbus Circle merits landmark status — to receive testimony pro and con, to debate the matter openly, to reach a decision with a vote recorded next to each of the 11 commissioners' names — is based on a consensus reached nine years ago by its designation committee that the building did not possess enough historical or architectural significance to warrant a hearing.

But as the date nears for the building's transformation into the new Museum of Arts and Design, a growing number of landmarks commissioners past and present are joining preservationists in urging the commission at least to hear the case for saving it.

Nine years ago, the committee's decision was unexceptionable. Two Columbus Circle, which opened in 1964 as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art, was designed by Edward Durrell Stone in a style most

### The Landmarks Commission is urged to reconsider an ugly duckling of a building.

memorably characterized by Ada Louise Huxtable, then the architecture critic of The New York Times, as resembling "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops." It was a building New Yorkers loved to hate.

Hearts began to soften, however, as plans formed to demolish or alter the building, which has been owned by the city since 1980 and has been vacant since 1998.

"Something rather wonderful has occurred, by which the building, rarely anyone's favorite in the past, is looking better every day," said Vincent Scully, the Sterling professor emeritus of art history at Yale University, in an Aug. 14 letter asking Robert B. Tierney, the commission chairman, to hold a hearing.

"Its own integrity, its uniqueness, the indomitable determination to make a point that produced it, are coming to the fore and are powerfully affecting the way we see it," Mr. Scully wrote. "It is in fact becoming the icon it never was, one about which the city now cares a great

deal."

The commission itself has acknowledged the redemptive power that the passage of time holds for once-ugly ducklings. In May, it designated the former Summit Hotel at Lexington Avenue and 51st Street, designed by Morris Lapidus and completed in 1961, using language that could be applied almost word for word to 2 Columbus Circle.

"Some writers greeted the new hotel with disappointment or amusement, while others viewed it as a disharmonious addition to the streetscape," the commission said. "In subsequent years, however, the hotel attracted an increasing number of admirers."

The transformation of sentiment about 2 Columbus Circle has not registered at the commission, where Mr. Tierney continues to rely on the decision made in June 1996 by a four-member committee: the Rev. Thomas F. Pike, Prof. Sarah Bradford Landau, Charles Sachs and Vicki Match Suna.

Significantly, Professor Landau, of New York University, has now joined three other former commissioners — William E. Davis, Stephen M. Raphael and Mildred F. Schmertz — in calling for a hearing.

"Had there been such a large and broad demand for a public hearing about the building in 1996, I'm not at all sure I would have voted the way I did," Professor Landau said yesterday in an e-mail message. "It is in the long-term interest of the commission to maintain good rapport with the preservation community. Whether the building merits designation is another issue, and should be decided by the current commission."

Mr. Raphael said the former commissioners were responding to a July 30 Op-Ed article in The Times by Sherida E. Paulsen, a former chairwoman. She wrote that the decision not to consider 2 Columbus Circle reflected "the professional judgment of the 19 people" who had been on the commission since 1996.

**B**UT Mr. Raphael said, "Some of us neither participated in this decision nor were we asked to acquiesce in it." He and the others wrote that the 1996 decision "does not set a binding precedent" and that strong public interest "may be a valid policy reason" to hold a hearing, which is "not tantamount to granting a building landmark status."

Gene A. Norman, a former chairman, and Beverly Moss Spatt, a former chairwoman, have publicly called for a hearing. David F. M.

Todd said about his term as chairman in 1989 and 1990. "The spirit — at least then — was, if the public wants a hearing, let's have a hearing."

"I'm primarily interested in the law being strengthened, not weakened, by this situation," Mr. Todd said yesterday.

Laurie Beckelman, a former chairwoman, directs the new building program at the Museum of Arts and Design, which plans to re clad 2

Columbus Circle with a new facade designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture.

Councilman Bill Perkins, who convened a "people's hearing" on 2 Columbus Circle last month, introduced a bill yesterday to give the Council power to direct the landmarks commission to hold hearings. "People can differ on whether something should be a landmark," he said, "but they can find common ground on the need to have a hearing."

At least, they could try.



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