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The Lollipop Building

The best way to preserve 2 Columbus Circle? A makeover.

BY ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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NEW YORK--I have been watching, with wonder and disbelief, the beatification of 2 Columbus Circle, né the Huntington Hartford Museum, a.k.a. the lollipop building (so-named, for better or worse, by me). This small oddity of dubious architectural distinction, designed by Edward Durell Stone, has been elevated to masterpiece status and cosmic significance by a campaign to save its marginally important, mildly eccentric, and badly deteriorated facade--a campaign that has escalated into a win-at-any-cost-and-by-any-means vendetta in the name of "preservation."

Never has that term been so taken in vain. The opposition to the renovation of this derelict little building with an uncertain future as the new home of the Museum of Arts and Design (formerly the American Crafts Museum) seems to be operating by tunnel vision and a blind resistance to change. What is conspicuously missing from the orchestrated hysteria that has replaced rational debate about 2 Columbus Circle is any desire to see or understand the plans for the building's conversion before going into attack mode. For those fixated on saving the existing facade, that is simply not an option.

The architect of the conversion, Brad Cloepfil, of Allied Works Architecture, reports that he has not received a single call or inquiry from anyone writing the impassioned pieces that have flooded the press, which appears to have abandoned the idea of fact checking or a balanced point of view. There is enough irresponsibility to go around. Few have seen the version of the evolving design now receiving city review. Any civic or architectural virtues it may possess are irrelevant. The facts would only spoil a good fight.

The most basic preservation question is not being asked at all. What will be lost, and what will be gained? The proposal being rejected out of hand is a promising solution by a talented young American practitioner that will reclaim an abandoned building of debatable merit for a desirable cultural facility. We do not lose the building; everything that is good about it will be retained--its size, its scale, and its intimate relationship to the street. Although three stories could be added legally, the decision was made to change nothing about its iconic form and presence.

What is bad about the building--the dark, cramped and virtually useless interior and those faux harem walls that close off spectacular views--will be changed. Yes, we will lose the facade, and the new one will not offer the instant appeal of exotic kitsch; it is a restrained, expressive reflection of an unusual way of using the concrete frame to open the building visually, inside and out. It is hard not to see this as a trade-off worth making.

I have studied the design carefully, and I have also visited Columbus Circle, which is in the

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process of a long-delayed rebuilding and revitalization. The city's most notorious traffic circle, a survival challenge of Jersey barriers, is coming into focus, and the surprise is that it is going to be wonderful. The immense, nearly complete AOL Time Warner Center on its west side, by David Childs, of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, totally eclipses Donald Trump's hotel and residential tower on the north, an alienated Central Park has been refurbished and re-embraced to the east, and a landscaped surround for the traffic-impacted Columbus statue in the middle is under way. Columbus finally stands tall, and even the Maine Memorial looks grand. Think--sort of--Trafalgar Square.

The AOL Time Warner Center is exactly what a New York skyscraper should be--a soaring, shining, glamorous affirmation of the city's reach and power, and its best real architecture in a long time. Its two tall towers rise from symmetrical lower sections rotated in a bow to the Circle, where the huge building morphs into pedestrian shops and restaurants at ground level. But the wonder is the delicacy, the elegance, of these perfectly calibrated, glittering glass facades, the suave, sharp-edged precision that is amazingly subtle and refined for a structure of this enormous size.

Seen against AOL Time Warner's astonishing and unexpected beauty, the shabby little punchboard facade of 2 Columbus Circle sticks out like a small, sore thumb. It didn't seem so bad before, but the sophisticated finesse of Mr. Childs's first-rate building makes it look like the second-rate building that it really is. Its retro mannerisms are suddenly crude caricatures.

Because Brad Cloepfil is also an architect who designs with a precise delicacy, the new look for 2 Columbus Circle works in this setting. The building's enrichment will be its facade of terra-cotta panels, the texture and tone of the tiles to be developed in collaboration with an artist, in keeping with the museum's crafts tradition. But the exterior is only part of the story; it is integral to a far more radical, three-dimensional concept that is virtually impossible to understand from pictures--a system of cuts into the concrete structure starting on the outside walls and carried inside on the floors and ceilings to the building's core that create a continuous sense of space.

Exterior vertical and horizontal bands in a linear pattern provide daylight for the galleries and outside views. They connect to interior slits that open ceilings and floors to slotted glimpses of other spaces and galleries above and below. As one approaches, the building's solidity will give way to layered transparencies, from terra-cotta screens to large areas of fritted, or patterned, glass at the top, with glimpses of galleries near street level.

But let us assume for argument's sake that none of this matters; that the facade should be saved even if everything else about the building remains unresolved. Structural studies made in the heat of battle are suspect; I've been through too many cooked reports to believe them. However, some facts, although unwelcome, are incontrovertible. Inspection has found the facade so badly deteriorated that it can't be saved; it would have to be rebuilt--a copy or reproduction would have to replace it.

The metal shims--pieces of metal attached behind each piece of marble to level the stones--have rusted as water got into the joints, and the damage has spread to the marble, which has cracked and spalled. Because the entire facade is affected, all of the rusted shims would have to be replaced and new marble cut and installed. There is no way it can be repaired. Nothing less than a Sansovino survival would justify an expensive replica, and only as a last resort for a rare artifact of the Venetian Renaissance, but a Sansovino facade this is not.

The necessity of constructing a vapor barrier for humidity control around the building--all museums require them--complicates things further. This is done on the exterior, although landmark buildings have been retrofitted inside at great cost and with extreme difficulty. We begin to get into a Catch-22 when a vapor barrier cannot be installed under a damaged facade, the preservation of which is debatable in the first place, and cost and space restrictions foreclose doing it inside.

What I find most personally disturbing, however, is the manipulated and manufactured

history that has accompanied the demand for landmark status for a building already denied designation--and let's forget those paranoid ideas about political plots and underhanded deals that always surface when things get hot. I marvel at the spin that is being put on both the building and its architect, Ed Stone, to reposition them in a mythical past. I don't have to invent history; I was there.

Actually, there were two Ed Stones, the good one and the bad one, architecturally speaking. The first was Edward D. Stone, a talented practitioner of the International Style, and the architect, with Philip Goodwin, of the landmark building for the Museum of Modern Art, a charming man who frequented the better clubs and watering holes to the eventual disruption of his career. For a while, his life fell apart. Then it came together again with the help of a new wife and helpmeet, who informed me that he was to be referred to, henceforth, in anything I wrote, as Edward Durell Stone. Thus began the new persona and second career of Edward Durell Stone.

This second phase was his better-known seraglio period, which coincided with the start of a State Department program for new U.S. embassies abroad. The program stressed the hiring of architects for reasons other than their political connections and specified that these buildings should not be brash interlopers, but that each should be designed to reflect or respect the particular country's culture. This well-meant, but somewhat shallow and patronizing idea led to curious architectural acrobatics; the buildings strained to incorporate something "native" in their forms, and the strain shows. The significance of the program in Mr. Stone's work has been explained by Laurie Kerr on this page--it is the only real history we have been given.

There was one outstanding success--Edward Durell Stone's American Embassy in New Delhi, an enchanted place of fountains, arcades and screens that achieved immediate fame. He was besieged with commissions and he obliged--with screens. His clients couldn't get enough of them, and they conveniently covered everything he built. What they covered was often not very good, but it was very popular, culminating in Washington's most vacuous marble monument, the Kennedy Center. Mr. Stone's pierced and arcaded facades became his signature gimmick, a crowd pleaser that never rose much above mediocrity; to those who knew his earlier work, this was all downhill. Along the way he built 2 Columbus Circle, which had a certain toylike charm.

Some profess to see its palazzo pretensions as a forerunner of postmodernism. I find that a stretch. You could say that anything like the State Department's Foreign Buildings program was a step on the way to the liberation of architecture from the shackles of the functionalism and antihistoricism of the modern movement. But the overseas embassy program soon succumbed to the government's pendulum swing between patronage and periodic attempts to upgrade, and significant change occurred only after the silly season of postmodernism had passed. At best, 2 Columbus Circle is memorably idiosyncratic.

One wonders at what point New York's civic groups lost their vision, just when they decided nostalgia and trendy revisionism overrode a positive contribution to the city's cultural and architectural quality. In St. Louis, Brad Cloepfil has just completed a fine small museum that successfully shares a plaza with Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in the revitalization of an older area. The news does not seem to have traveled as far as New York.

There is a great deal more at stake than this one building. When preservation distorts history and reality in a campaign of surprising savagery, it signals an absence of standards and an abdication of judgment and responsibility. It has lost its meaning when we prefer a stagnant status quo.

Ms. Huxtable is The Wall Street Journal's architecture critic.

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