

Welcome to the online forum on the future of 2 Columbus Circle. I am delighted to welcome the official participants – Witold Rybczynski, Michael Sorkin, Terence Riley, Diane Lewis, Karrie Jacobs, John Kaliski, and Thomas Mellins – as well as the online audience, which I hope will contribute comments and questions as the forum proceeds over the next three weeks.

Let me begin by saying what this forum is not. It has not been initiated to review, or to pass judgment on, the proposal to renovate 2 Columbus Circle as a new home for the Museum of Arts and Design that is now before the City Planning Commission. I know that participants in the forum will want to discuss the museum's proposal, since there is as much reason in architecture as in any other realm to pay attention to the news. But the real goal of this forum is broader – to step back, and to try to get to the underlying issues that have made the future of this building such a troubling and difficult issue not only since the museum made its plans public a few months ago, but for the last decade or more. The problem of 2 Columbus Circle raises important questions about postwar landmarks and their increasing role in the area of historic preservation; about cultural facilities and their expansion; about public property and appropriate means of maintaining it or disposing of it; and about neighborhoods and their relationship to iconic structures – and, indeed, about what a fair definition of an iconic structure even is.

All of these issues preceded the current proposal, and they will not disappear whether or not the current design proposal for the building is accepted. I think it is important to say at the outset that 2 Columbus Circle has had an atypical, even bizarre, history. It was created as something of a private indulgence by Huntington Hartford, the A&P heir who disliked most abstract art and wanted to build a museum to counteract what he believed to be the excessive role the Museum of Modern Art played in the culture of New York. Hartford purchased a tiny plot on Columbus Circle and hired his favorite architect, Edward Durell Stone, a modernist who had shifted toward a more decorative, frilly style in the nineteen-fifties, to build a new museum that he called The Gallery of Modern Art, where Hartford intended to display his own collection of mainly representational paintings. Stone's white marble building opened in 1965, and it was viewed skeptically, to say the least, by most of the city's architectural establishment. Ada Louise Huxtable called it "a provocatively misplaced pleasure pavilion transplanted from some Shalimar garden to a Manhattan traffic island," and compared the columns around the base to lollipops.

Hartford's museum was no more a financial success than a critical one, and after a few years he turned it over to Fairleigh Dickinson University, which renamed the building the New York Cultural Center and operated it as a kind of kunsthall. That, too, did not succeed, and in the late nineteen-seventies the university sold the building to the Gulf + Western Corporation, which was based in a tower across Columbus Circle. The company donated the building to the City of New York, which rather than operate it as a museum used it as an office for the Cultural Affairs Commission and the city's convention bureau, as well as a visitors' center. It was not particularly well suited to any

of these functions, given its small floor plate – but then again, it had not been functional as a museum, either, since all of the galleries were small and awkwardly laid out.

Actually, the building functioned best, over the years, as a kind of pure landmark. It seemed less like a building than an object, especially when viewed from the north, along Central Park West. Its bright white marble facade in an unusual concave shape, which gently reflected the curve of Columbus Circle (until the new AOL Time Warner Center it was the only building on Columbus Circle to do so) was one factor making it seem more object-like; the myriad of tiny round windows and high arched windows at the top, which gave the building the image of being vaguely Islamic, and the spindly columns at the base, made it seem even less like a conventional building and more like some kind of curious, accidental monument. It was hardly Islamic in any true sense, or even in Stone's intent – but it was nonetheless a high point in Stone's quest, which continued to the end of his life in 1978, to find ways in which to make the tradition of European modernism more sensual, more emotional, and more connected to the broadest aspects of human culture.

For years, the building was viewed with bemusement more than admiration. New York has few enough architectural curiosities, and fewer still that were created in our own time; to some people, this alone might be thought to justify its preservation. When the city decided in the late nineteen-eighties to dispose of the building as part of the larger redevelopment of Columbus Circle, it chose to put no restraints on possible redevelopment, which meant that the building's continued existence was uncertain for the first time. The Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to consider the building for landmark designation, despite the fact that it was increasingly reviewing and often designating buildings from the nineteen-sixties as official city landmarks. To some, the sheer oddness of the building overrides any connection it might have to buildings like the Ford Foundation, the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport and the CBS Building and other structures commonly believed to represent the highest architectural achievements of New York in the nineteen-sixties. To others, 2 Columbus Circle's role as an iconic structure on one of the most prominent intersections anywhere in the city, not to mention its role in the history of the city's cultural life, are sufficient grounds for keeping it just as it is. And no one can deny that architectural historians and critics have been viewing almost all of Stone's late work, including this building, with a great deal more sympathy than they did a decade ago.

After several years of entertaining proposals for the site, including one from Donald Trump that would have rebuilt 2 Columbus Circle completely as a hotel and several from cultural institutions eager to retain the building in some form that more closely resembles Stone's original, the city selected the Museum of Arts and Design (formerly the Museum of Contemporary Crafts) to take over the building. After a conscientious search to engage an architect of international reputation, the museum hired Brad Cloepfil of Allied Architecture to renovate the building. Cloepfil's plans, which attempt to pay a certain homage to Stone's original design (essentially keeping Stone's massing while making significant changes in façade material) were made public earlier this year. As I said at the beginning of this introduction, I'd prefer not to focus on the

Brad Cloepfil plan at the outset, but to begin by talking about 2 Columbus Circle itself. This building seems to inspire passionate feelings pro and con out of all proportion to its size. I hope the participants in the forum can begin by saying something about what they believe the building stands for, and what they think of it now.