

Statement for Landmark West! Panel Discussion
"At the Crossroads: The Future of Two Columbus Circle"

February 12, 2003
Robert A.M. Stern
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I regret very much that a professional obligation prevents me from joining this discussion. Please know I still believe that Two Columbus Circle is a landmark and deserves to be treated with utmost respect. Please know that I have not given up the fight for its preservation.

Two Columbus Circle was designed by Edward Durell Stone, a significant and prolific American architect. Two Columbus Circle is an important piece of architecture but it is also a confounding one. Stone was a leader of the profession, and Two Columbus Circle came at a crucial time in the architect's career when he, like Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, and others, was actively challenging the prevailing Modernism.

Two Columbus Circle doesn't fit neatly into any stylistic category. It's not coolly minimalist, but neither is it authoritatively traditional. It's unabashedly decorative, whimsical – one might even say zany. Nonetheless it is very important and it is important that we save it.

We are told by some critics that New York has not built many, if any, challenging world-class buildings by world-class architects. Well, here is one that we do have – one that is unique, full of ideas about site and image, about history and about the freedom that comes with modernity – yet our world-class landmark is threatened with defilement. One hopes that the Museum of Arts and Design will realize that the obligations to preserve its collections also extends to the building that will soon house them.

Recent history teaches us that good, strong buildings often threaten rather than inspire museum curators and trustees. No one will disagree that Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum is a masterpiece, though a highly idiosyncratic one to say the least. Yet for the first thirty years of its existence, it was subjected to the most ill-advised renovations made in the name of functional expediency. Just a tuck here, a nip there, and Wright's building lost the swoop of space of its ground level drop-off, the impact of its small rotunda, and many other bits and pieces. Only after a very vocal public fight were Gwathmey Siegel able to restore most of the building and resolve its need for additional space with a respectful addition.

I bring up the Guggenheim because there was a strong, mutually acknowledged kinship between Frank Lloyd Wright and Edward Durell Stone, whom many thought was the master's leading disciple. I don't want to take your time up with a history lesson B but I do want to make it clear that Ed Stone was a very important architect and that the Gallery of Modern Art is one of his masterworks. The value of Stone's work is only now coming to be re-appreciated. A case in point: at the eleventh hour, after it was deliberately neglected by a developer, Stone's superb house for A. Conger Goodyear in Nassau County has been saved by the World Monuments Fund with a loan from the Barnet Newman Foundation. Another case in point: the Museum of Modern Art is at last redressing its callous disregard for their

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1939 building, which Ed Stone designed, and is restoring some of it on West 53rd Street. But these are Stone's work as a mainstream International-style Modernist B in the case of Two Columbus Circle we have Stone swimming against the mainstream, experimenting, trying something new.

Stone's museum is part of an important group of buildings he designed in the 1950s, all of them triumphantly counterintuitive. These include the United States Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958 and the United States Embassy in New Delhi. Here in New York, this fertile period in Stone's work is represented by a townhouse facade on East 64th Street and here at Two Columbus Circle, where Stone pushed the envelope very far toward what would become Post-Modernism. This building is a landmark in the history of architectural taste. It needs to be treasured alongside Paul Rudolph's Jewett Art Center at Wellesley College which was faithfully restored when Rafael Moneo added onto it, and alongside the buildings of Lincoln Center, whose fate hangs in the balance as the various artistic managements publicly and privately squabble over turf.

I'm well aware that some people think I'm out of my mind to want to preserve a building they think is so idiosyncratic B and because they find it idiosyncratic, they think it ugly. But I see it differently. I think we must take the long view and not give in to the ever-present tendency to dismiss, or even revile, the recent past. Nor must we preserve only a partial view of the past. Lever House and the Seagram Building represent the epitome of the correct, the orthodox in Post-War Modernism; but New York is not a place of orthodoxies, much less single orthodoxies. New York is cosmopolitan. New York is where orthodoxies are challenged by new ideas. Two Columbus Circle was just such a challenge, and it clearly challenges us to this day. Its provocations are as important now as ever. It was and is a pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment. For this reason, if no other, Two Columbus Circle must be preserved intact for future generations to enjoy, consider, debate, and learn from. Preserve this landmark whole. Preserve this public provocation, this embodiment of artistic risk-taking.