

Of landmarks and memorials: Getting mad (and MAD) about all the wrong things

Critique

By Michael Sorkin

DEPARTMENTS

In 1989, after a protracted struggle, the federal government removed Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the plaza in front of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in Lower Manhattan. The brief against the sculpture had been its alleged disruption of the public space in which it sat. Although I had no particular love for *Tilted Arc*, I argued at the time that the rage against it was in large measure a displacement of anger that should have been directed at the awful architecture that formed its backdrop—serenely ugly, and in its hugeness, Minimalist to the point of idiocy.

Two similar cases of displacement are being enacted in Manhattan today—one at the southwest corner of Central Park and the other all the way downtown. The first centers on Columbus Circle, where an ongoing controversy rages over plans by the Museum of Arts & Design (MAD), formerly the American Craft Museum, to reskin its new home in the former Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, designed with confectionary panache by Edward Durell Stone in 1964. This odd building has become a cause célèbre for preservationists, who argue for its historic and formal consequence. I have always held this quirky, bright little folly in affection, and strongly agree it should be saved. Articulating the argument is

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problematic, however.

Although I love the building, defending it on the narrow grounds of its aesthetic importance requires a grain of salt: This is not a “great” work in the sense that the Guggenheim is or Penn Station was. Defending this building requires a somewhat more expansive—if equally compelling—interpretation of the idea of preservation. It should be saved because many hold it in deep affection for various private reasons, because it is a very good building, and—perhaps especially—because it contributes so strongly to defining its site. The gleaming white marble punctuation visible down Broadway, the polka-dot frou-frou of its corner apertures, the legendary lollipop columns at its base, all vitalize Columbus Circle indelibly, represent the place in mind and memory.

Neutron-bomb approach

This is a gray area in landmarking, one which must recognize that artistic and historic arguments engage only a limited range of meanings. Where, in this construct, do we fit singularity, familiarity, identity, difference? Landmarking is a form of consent, a compact about what is collectively valued in the city. In its focus on the physical and the artistic, landmarking always risks the neutron-bomb approach, preserving the object but killing the cultural setting in which it acquires its meaning. A more expansive view of landmarking is like rent control, a subsidy (or a “taking,” as lawyers say) that would enable neighborhoods to continue the process of



Edward Durell Stone's building at Columbus Circle is still causing controversy.

diversifying. This approach, though, would require a different style of consensus, one that goes beyond form to embrace lived life.

The importance of 2 Columbus Circle exceeds the categories through which its future is being argued: We simply do not have a legal basis for saving nice old friends. As with *Tilted Arc*, however, the displacement at Columbus Circle comes in the poignant absurdity of the intensity of the debate when far larger battles have already been lost

and when issues so crucial to the future of the place are on nobody's agenda. It becomes even more imperative to save this building because of the monstrosities that surround it and loom over it, including the just-completed Time Warner Center, which sets new lows in original design moves per unit volume.

The result of a developer competition in which the Metropolitan Transit Authority auctioned off the site to the highest bidder, the Time Warner Center is far too large, a

problem dramatically exacerbated by the scalelessness of its smooth, unperforated, black skin. Looming over Central Park and holding down a crucial corner of its architectural envelope, the building is whimsically dark, in contrast to the generally pale color of the structures around the park. From a million angles it appears to be a rude lump on the cityscape, faceless after the manner of the corporation that rents it and the corporation that designed it.

Ignoring what's below

The major experience of Columbus Circle for most people, however, is in their encounter with the subway station beneath it, the busiest in the system and one of the most unspeakably filthy and labyrinthine, totally degrading to travelers. And here is the main displacement: The complete failure to deal meaning-

But the most grotesque displacement in town has been recently revealed in the results of the competition for a memorial at Ground Zero. This is surely the most managed displacement ever, a virtual Ponzi scheme, revealing—like Columbus Circle—a set of priorities that are realized precisely backwards. From the start, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) has made craven use of architecture—a classic instance of what magicians call misdirection. We are distracted by the ridiculous travails of David Childs and Danny Libeskind trying to agree on the shape of the world's tallest office building in order to avoid the question of precisely why the world's tallest office building (as well as its shrimpier kith) must be built on this hallowed ground.

And now we are vilely dis-

THE COMPETITORS FOR THE WTC MEMORIAL HAVE DONE NOBLY TO STRUGGLE THROUGH A PIOUS FOG OF CONSTRAINT.

fully with the most profound urban question on the site. Patting themselves on the back for the building's curved base, twin towers, and door at the end of 59th Street, the project's boosters tout its civic presence and formulaic "urbanity." And a good time will doubtless be had by the media executives and hyper-rich who sport in its boardrooms, condos, and upmarket hotel and restaurants. Meanwhile, like the slaves in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the masses will continue to sweat and toil below in a zone visited by no nicety whatsoever and with no meaningful influence on the architecture above. This is the income gap literalized in steel and glass. And this is the context in which the haste to destroy the last winning and familiar thing on the circle becomes especially ludicrous, as the place is sucked dry by the vacancy of the cultural forces behind it.

tracted by the act of hallowing. The finalists in the memorial competition have been almost universally criticized for the generic character of their submissions and the abstracted quality of their iconography. Again, the heat is being misdirected away from a problem that—at the gargantuan scale of real estate development—is simply glanced over. Look at what has been decided for the memorial designers in advance: adjacent 1,776 foot-high office building, abstracted representation of Lady Liberty's arm, wedge of light, lines of access, site below grade (but not to bedrock!), glazed slurry wall, giant waterfall. The competitors have done nobly to struggle through this pious fog of representation and constraint with any form of integrity, knowing that whatever they proposed will have chamfered buildings flying over it and will sit in a hole at the foot of the humongous building



The interiors of Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle (above and below) were destroyed when they were turned into offices.



that will—in its preening supesize and banal iconography—usurp memorial duties in the service of the egotistic ambitions of our governor, the lease-holder, the LMDC, and the architects.

Eloquence of the void

I say, let us keep one of the eight memorial finalists—how shameful the cries to set aside the competition process when we finally have an open one!—and forget about the clutch of needless buildings that will engorge the coffers of Larry Silverstein, the Port Authority,

and the architects. The astonishing eloquence of the void—which has the potential to become a matchless urban space—will never be equalled by slick styling and enormity. It is our last chance to save this place for everyone, to create a site for conversation and contemplation, a terrain for additional memorials and expressions from the diversity of voices—so movingly expressed in the aftermath of the tragedy—but now subsumed in the uniformity of form and intent that threatens to destroy this place once more. ■