

HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

Testimony before Manhattan Community Board 5

Thursday, May 8, 2003

Regarding the ULURP concerning the disposition of 2 Columbus Circle

The Historic Districts Council is the citywide advocate for New York's historic properties. As such, we have long been concerned about the fate of the Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle. Since 1995, when the City of New York privately decided to disinvest itself of this cultural gift for we understand was \$270 million worth of corporate incentives, the fate of this important building has been at risk. Since that time, its future has been hotly debated in the media. Rarely, in HDC's institutional memory of 18 years, has a building so captured the public's eye and mind. With this testimony, we are submitting 7 years' worth of press articles on this building. But still, there are loud voices that fall for its demise based entirely on individualistic, subjective points of view. Let it be noted that HDC believes firmly in every individual New Yorker's right to their own opinion, the grassroots historic preservation movement is based on this inalienable right. However, simple observation of the facts and a sense of inherent democratic parity should convince any objective observer that a dedicated majority of the interested public, working over the course of seven years, should prevail over the indifferent forces of "I never liked that building". This building's architectural significance in the streetscape of Columbus Circle is undisputed – at least among those who do not hold some irrational distaste of it. Furthermore, it is the work of an acknowledged master of Modern architecture for an important client, and the building itself played an important role in the cultural life of our city during an incredibly exciting time for the arts and New York.

That the building, so thoughtlessly abandoned by the City five years ago, should find new life as a cultural institution is an incredibly exciting thing that should be applauded – make no mistake. However, in the City's rush to do the right thing and bring an appropriate use to this building, we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. For political reasons, the Landmarks Preservation Commission's Designation Committee has refused to recommend the property to the full Commission for consideration as a potential individual landmark. These deliberations were made outside the public purview, and with no mandated avenue for public input on a property that was gifted to the people of New York. In the public's attempt to have some say in this building's fate, an oversight hearing by the City Council was convened two years ago in March 2001 by former CM Ronnie Eldridge and Jerome O'Donovan to allow the public a forum. Several people spoke in favor of retaining the building, and questioned the actual mechanism through which the ownership of the building was being transferred from the City to EDC.

The Historic Districts Council believes that hearing led to the establishment of this current ULURP process, in order to avoid any inference of mis-doing or negligence on the City's part with regard to the transference of ownership from the public to the Museum of Art & Design. Would it not make sense then for this hearing to spark a public hearing at the Landmarks Preservation Commission where the significance of this building can be discussed in its appropriate forum?

Our primary concern today is that any renovations to this architectural masterpiece examined and judged to be appropriate by the acknowledged municipal experts in appropriate modifications to architectural masterpieces, the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Any other route of action appears to us to a misguided negligence of already-possessioned municipal resources. This rush to renovate leads HDC to question other aspects of this program.

Are the façade conditions really so dire that to attempt to repair them would institute an economic hardship? Wasn't the City responsible for the appropriate upkeep of this gift in the first place? Who was the highest bidder on this incredibly valuable property? In these dire economic times, where the City is looking for every possible revenue stream, shouldn't we get the highest bid? Furthermore, what about the other aspects of the program? What other elements of this new use are not being given the appropriate oversight? What about the traffic impact on the already over-burdened area? What about the parking requirements?

These and other issues lead HDC to oppose this transference of property as it now stands. We are not opposed to the Museum of Art & Design, nor are we opposed to the reuse of this building. Instead, we ask that Community Board 5 deny this application until full municipal disclosure and oversight by the appropriate agencies such as LPC is established.

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Before Community Board 5 – Full Board
Regarding 2 Columbus Circle
May 8, 2003**

LANDMARK WEST! is a non-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

We wish to comment on the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure application to transfer 2 Columbus Circle from the City of New York to the Museum of Arts and Design.

In response to the demolition of Penn Station, that great *de facto* “landmark”, in October 1963, the *New York Times* wrote, “We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.”

We are grateful for the opportunity to speak tonight about the future of 2 Columbus Circle, a pivotal work in the career of architect and pioneer modernist Edward Durell Stone.

It's been a long road to get here. Many of you are aware of LANDMARK WEST's efforts, supported by the Municipal Art Society, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, DOCOMOMO, the Coalition for Environmentally Sound Development and a host of other concerned citizens, to ensure that 2 Columbus Circle received "its day in court." Well, now it's getting its six months in court, despite the City's long-held (and only recently withdrawn) position that ULURP was not necessary to transfer this City-owned property - a *gift* to the citizens of New York - to a private developer. As I said, it's been a long road. We are committed, as we trust everyone in this room is, to making these six months in the life of this remarkable building count.

The decision before this Board tonight is critical. There are many people here who passionately want to see 2 Columbus Circle brought back to life. A museum is the perfect re-use for a building that was designed specifically and innovatively for that purpose in 1964. We support the idea of a museum on this site with all of our hearts.

But, quite frankly, we should not be willing to do *anything* to make that happen. And that's precisely why this review process is so important. The purpose of ULURP is not to throw up roadblocks and prevent progress, but to promote rational, environmentally sound development that serves not just the immediate needs of the present, but also does honor to the past and contributes to the legacy we pass down to the future.

One of the crucial criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of transferring 2 Columbus Circle from the City of New York to the Museum of Arts and Design is the impact of the Museum's proposed design on visual and historic resources. In fact, since we do not have a fully detailed business plan describing how the Museum's operations will affect the site, the visual and historic impacts are essentially the *only* basis for the Board's decision.

But, let's not allow this process to degenerate into a "beauty contest" between E.D. Stone's 1964 design and the re-design by Allied Works Architecture. Instead, let's focus on the value of the existing resource, which would be utterly destroyed (let's not mince words) by the proposed changes. This is not a commentary on the quality of the Allied Works design; it is not necessary to criticize this design in order to stress the significance of Stone's original work, which architect and historian Robert A.M. Stern called "a world-class landmark," "one that is unique, full of ideas about site and image, about history and about the freedom that comes with modernity."

And I urge you not to dodge the question of historical significance with the circular argument that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has not designated the building, therefore it has no architectural or cultural value. If that were the case, one could also argue that, because Community District 5 is one of the most under-represented districts in Manhattan in terms of designated landmarks, there is nothing here worth preserving.

Can E.D. Stone's design for 2 Columbus Circle truly not be saved? Is there any evidence to suggest that preservation of the existing façade would *prevent* the Museum from reusing this site? Are the building's code issues and worn physical condition - aggravated by years of inexcusable neglect by the City, whose legal mandate it was to maintain the building as New York's primary cultural center - are these issues really insurmountable? Or does 2 Columbus Circle simply cry out for exactly the kind of attentive, curatorial care that a museum devoted to stewardship, materials and creative processes, by its very mission, might provide?

Or will we - the community, the "citizens of New York" - allow 2 Columbus Circle to become yet another regrettable example of our up-to-the-minute, "throw-away" culture, a culture so fascinated by the "new" that we sacrifice unthinkingly the legacy of previous generations? Will we relive our parents' and grandparents' mistake of undervaluing the recent past - the brownstone blocks that were leveled for urban renewal projects, the traditional Main Streets abandoned for suburban shopping malls, Penn Station. "We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed."

In February 2003, LANDMARK WEST! and the AIA New York Chapter / Center for Architecture sponsored a forum attended by over 200 people concerned about the future of 2 Columbus Circle. I say this to remind the Board that we - along with our colleagues and neighbors who are here tonight, plus the hundreds who could not be here tonight but have written letters and sent postcards calling for a public hearing to consider 2 Columbus Circle for landmark status - we represent an entire constituency of people who care passionately about preserving not just the scale, the monumentality, the simplicity, the "memory" of this building, but the *building* itself.

Architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, who was actually quite fond of 2 Columbus Circle despite her often misused quote about a "die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops," is, like us, a proponent of the idea that the energy and vitality of buildings are in the thing itself. She wrote, "The built record, which holds most of the lessons of art and history, is there for anyone to see; but, increasingly we have not wanted to see it. Or we have preferred to pretty it up, to reconfigure it for other purposes."

2 Columbus Circle belongs to all of us. This is *our* decision to make. And it is *our* responsibility as New Yorkers to make sure that today's short-sightedness does not deprive our children of the opportunity to experience a rare and courageous part of our 20th-century heritage. I urge you to recommend that the Museum of Arts and Design rethink its use of the site so that the existing building can be preserved.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE WORKING GROUP

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Preservation and Advocacy of New York City's Modern Architectural Heritage

Testimony before Community Board 5 regarding Two Columbus Circle

“Perhaps we should learn to value not only architectural sermons and high-wire acts, but also the inspired flash of wit and irony that brightens the skies of our architectural landscape”

– Marvin Trachtenberg / Isabelle Hyman,
ARCHITECTURE; From Prehistory to Post-Modernism 1986

A great deal as been said and written about Two Columbus Circle both recently and over the years. Its’ design, as well as the legal and ethical history of its’ transfer over time have been called into question. I’d like to step back a moment and illuminate the reasons for the building’s preservation.

Taking the criteria used to determine if a building is worthy of preservation, Two Columbus Circle is a natural. It is an important building, by an important architect. It is a unique design, which represents an important period in New York’s history.

Two Columbus Circle is a building that elicits strong emotions. This is as true today as it was at its completion thirty-nine years ago. Emotion is an element that critics had often sited as missing from many of the buildings erected in the building boom following the two decades after the Second World War. Yet it is this very quality that made many of its original critics uneasy. The International Style, the architecture of the masters; Mies, Gropius, LeCorbusier, THE Modern Style of the Post –War decades was cool and intellectual. Those that strayed from the path set down by the masters during this period, prolific architects such as Wallace Harrison, Morris Lapidus, Minoru Yamasaki and Edward Durrell Stone, were dammed for the “emotional” quality evident in of their work.

The debate continues. The world has changed a great deal in the intervening years...in ways no one could predict in 1964. There is no one style that dominates today, as there was then. This is as true in popular culture as in high culture. In architecture or music or shoe design. The whole concept of high culture/low culture, good taste/bad taste as been over turned as ideas percolate through society in ways unimagined in the early sixties. It is this healthy pluralism of thought that Two Columbus Circle represents.

Edward Durrell Stone was an architect with impeccable Modernist credentials. He was co-designer of the Museum of Modern art in 1939 as well as one of the architects involved in the design and planning of Rockefeller Center. In the 1950's, Stone was chosen by the United States government to be the architect of two projects that would represent our country to the world. In 1957 he designed the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, and in 1958 the U.S. Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair. Both were critically acclaimed buildings that the general public also found winning. Both responded to local conditions and both managed to be new and modern while being warm and human. Stone paid careful attention to texture and scale and the buildings' context. These same qualities are evident in his designs for Two Columbus Circle.

Responding to a restrictively sized plot, Stone produced a successful design that incorporated half levels rendered in lavish materials that resulted in intimately scaled spaces more reminiscent of a European salon than the standard neutral "white box" for art. The windowless walls were designed to maximize the wall space for art, while "port holes" cut into the corners provided indirect day lighting and tantalizing glimpses of the Circle and Central Park. Internal problems of management and programming lead to the original museum's demise, not the design of the venue.

Two Columbus Circle exhibits qualities of good urbanism rare in its, contemporaries. It holds the line of the street as well as reflecting the curve of Columbus Circle. (This respect for the circle was incorporated in the 1990's into the design program of the AOL Time-Warner complex to the west.) It acts as a gentle transition between the high-rise structures to the south and the open space of the Circle. At a time when modern architects thumbed their nose at traditional architecture, Stone employs a tripartite, column like (base, shaft, top) organization to the façade. This relates to the Beaux-Arts style skyscraper (U.S. Rubber Building) behind as well as to the Columbus Column in front. Its' white marble cladding is in handsome contrasts to the dark toned masonry structures to the south. Consequently, Two Columbus Circle handsomely commands the vista down Broadway from the north. Marble clad Two Columbus Circle and travertine clad Lincoln Center bracket what the city had hoped, and what may still develop, as an important district for the arts.

This carefully thought out contextualism will be shattered if the façade of the building is destroyed.

Preservation is not a beauty contest. Perception changes with time. The Jefferson Court House Library, The Chrysler Building, The Unisphere were all panned by critics in their day. Imagine the city if they were removed or altered to conform to prevailing or changing taste. Happily they survived until a time when they could be appreciated. Today they are beloved and protected as designated landmarks. Two Columbus Circle deserves the same break.

Two Columbus Circle would make a perfect home for a museum, if restored, with sensitive modifications. The current proposal would obliterate both interior as well as exterior, leaving only the original structural frame. Such extensive and costly renovation makes one wonder if perhaps it is the wrong building for the proposed buyer.

The Modern Architecture Working Group urges you to protect the building with its' façade intact, because it is an important building historically, a good building urbanisticly, designed by an important 20th century architect. Allow future generations to ponder its' merits.