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The Building That Isn't There, Cont'd

By TOM WOLFE

Oh, they had thrown a regular fit before, hadn't they, they being the critics and the architecture scholars and the rest of the International Style crowd, over his American Embassy building in New Delhi. But once they got through their yawping and muttering over the marble, the gold, the water garden, the maharajah grillwork, etc., the name Edward Durell Stone was bigger than ever. It stood for imagination, daring, aloofness from the whole cult-programmed bunch of them.

They might -- in fact, they surely would -- throw another fit over his new museum for Huntington Hartford . . . the tons of white marble, the precious wood veneers, the gold rugs, the red carpets, etc. At the same time, they would also surely have to deprogram themselves long enough to give credit for genius where genius deserved it. They weren't crazy, after all . . .

Take the red carpets, for example. They played an integral role in one of the most ingenious pieces of engineering ever attempted in a building that tall, 10 stories. Stone had divided the galleries into split levels connected by short, luxuriously wide flights of red-carpeted stairs, creating a grand central staircase with the galleries themselves serving as the landings. Any ambulatory person could walk from the ground floor to the topmost gallery, looking at pictures the whole way, without even realizing he'd done it. Not even Frank Lloyd Wright's spectacular spiral ramp in the Guggenheim Museum could compare in originality or function.

Today there is scarcely a living soul under the age of 60 who ever set foot in the Gallery of Modern Art during the time Mr. Hartford owned it . . . or has any idea of what it was once like . . . other than from the radioactive contamination remaining from the attacks upon the museum launched even before it opened in March of 1964. If there was a single major critic that year who was not a messenger girl for International Style orthodoxy, I never read her.

The critic who inflicted the cut that keeps on bleeding was Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic for The New York Times, with the never-to-this-day-forgotten comment that Mr. Hartford's museum reminded her of "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops." The "lollipops" referred specifically to the columns and their inset dark-marble discs, but the quip had let tout New York sniggering over the entire building.

The truth is, the columns constitute a highly sophisticated repetition of the arches of the loggias up above in the form of both solids (the black marble discs) and voids (the arched spaces between columns) down below. The student of architecture might wish to go over to Columbus Circle and take a look at the virtuosity of this extraordinary interplay of positive and negative space before it is destroyed.

The museum's often-derided "Islamic grillwork" is not grillwork at all but rows of portholes letting in light at the corners. The building contained no applied decoration . . . not even Stone, the avowed apostate, could get the old-time religion completely out of his bones in launching this, the first revolt by any established Modernist, against the icy grip of the French and German International Style orthodoxy.

But none of that mattered. The damnable lollipops gibe just wouldn't get tired and go away. In fact, while researching this article, I went into a library, and the first librarian I spoke to said, "Oh yes, the lollipop building."

As a going enterprise, Mr. Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art lasted only five years. The storm of derision in the press was a killer. Worse, no big donors were going to come forth to help him keep it going. Mr. Hartford was a good-looking, well-brought-up rich boy who had a reputation for big woolly projects that never panned out. He didn't fit anywhere in the New York network of corporate moguls who underwrite and climb such approved social ladders as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art or even the Whitney Museum of American Art, which is, hmmm, a bit sketchy. Without big donors, those institutions couldn't stay open 30 minutes -- and the Gallery of Modern Art, thanks to the press, was beyond sketchy. Carrying the museum all by himself quickly became too much for Huntington Hartford. In 1969, he gave this historic masterpiece to Fairleigh Dickinson University, just to get out from under the load.

"Historic masterpiece." Here I take as my text Dean Stern. On this point, too, both sides will agree: Robert A. M. Stern is not only a noted architect but also the definitive historian of 20th-century New York City architecture. His Gibbon-scale trilogy, "New York 1900," "New York 1930" and "New York 1960," is a sweeping but rigorously scholarly 2,684-page study of the city's architecture from 1890 to 1976.

In a letter in February to a civic organization's panel on whether 2 Columbus Circle should be declared a landmark, he wrote: "No one will disagree that Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum is a masterpiece, though a highly idiosyncratic one, to say the least . . . 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."

Mr. Stern went on to characterize the museum as one of Stone's "masterworks," along with the embassy in New Delhi and Stone's own town house on East 64th Street in New York, whose entire facade was grillwork.

Lever House and the Seagram Building "represent the epitome of the correct, the orthodox in postwar Modernism," said Mr. Stern, while Stone's Huntington Hartford museum "pushed the envelope very far toward what would become Postmodernism. This building is a landmark in the history of architectural taste." He closed with an appeal: "Preserve this landmark whole. Preserve this public provocation, this embodiment of artistic risk-taking."

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission preserved Stone's own town house, by landmarking it years ago, but refuses, despite constant appeals, to so much as hold a hearing on the museum. From the day the museum became eligible for landmark status in 1994, the commission's behavior puzzled me and many others. Naïvely, as it turned out, I had been thinking of landmark status in aesthetic and historical terms. The game proved to be about something else entirely.

In the hog-eat-hog economy of the 1990's, big porkers kept getting eaten up by bigger ones, and Gulf & Western, the first commercial buyer of the museum after Mr. Hartford's financial troubles, disappeared down the gullet of Viacom, and Viacom gave the building to the city in 1994 in return for tax breaks.

The landmarks commission seemed to be getting a clear message from City Hall: lay off 2 Columbus Circle.

The city envisioned a bidding war. It would sell the property for hundreds of millions to a developer and on top of that wind up with a big corporate taxpayer or two on the Department of Finance hard drive. From that day on, every time the question of a hearing on 2 Columbus Circle came up, the landmarks commissioners, as I see it, dove under their desks, clapped their hands over their ears, cried out to their secretaries to shove history and the concept of landmarks preservation itself through the shredder, and hid.

The fantastic bidding war, however, never occurred. By November of 1998 there were only two interested parties, Donald Trump, who wanted to demolish the museum and build something new, and the Dahesh Museum, which wanted a home for its collection of 19th-century academic art. Then Mr. Trump pulled out. The city's dreams of a tax-paying bonanza were over.

At this point the American Craft Museum moved in to challenge the Dahesh. Being far better connected politically, with a former chairwoman of the landmarks commission, Laurie Beckelman, on the payroll, the craft museum renamed itself the Museum of Arts and Design and flicked the Dahesh aside like a dead Taiwanese watch battery. In came Architect Brad Cloepfil and Ephemeralism -- which brings us to where we are today, awaiting, unless the plans change drastically, the first example of the old peekaboo, I-see-you-game ever built on Columbus Circle.

Soon, during the next few days, weeks, months at the most, an appalling smack will be heard throughout New York. It will not be hostile fire. It will be the sound of the landmarks commissioners hitting the deck once more . . . while one of the most important buildings in the history of 20th-century architecture is vaporized and small urban creatures sniff the stench that's left in the air.

Well . . . one can always hope the Museum of Arts and Design's retro trek back to Ephemeralism will be "fun" at least:

In yesterday's polluted air

I saw a museum that wasn't there.

It wasn't there again today.

O how I wish it would go away.

Postscript: It so happens Stone had a vision for the Circle itself that was never realized. He wanted to eliminate the traffic lanes that ran through it, make it whole again and ring the outer edge with three-story-high Doric columns salvaged from the Seventh Avenue facade of Pennsylvania Station, whose demolition had begun barely four months before the Gallery of Modern Art was completed. He had two things in mind: creating a proper stage for the towering monument to Christopher Columbus at the center -- and a proper memorial for Penn Station, a masterpiece of New York architecture by the great architects McKim, Mead & White, that had been sold to the highest bidder and destroyed, columns and all, and fed to the Jersey marshes in a senseless but innocent-by-reason-of-uncontrollable-cupidity act of vandalism.

The what-have-we-done shock that followed led directly to the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. As the French say: "Après la mort le médecin." After death, the doctor shows up.

Correction:

November 12, 2003, Wednesday An Op-Ed article on Oct. 13 about the fate of a building designed by Edward Durell Stone at Columbus Circle incorrectly described the circumstances under which the Museum of Arts and Design changed its name and hired a former landmarks commissioner. The museum changed its name from the American Craft Museum after it was awarded the 2 Columbus Circle site in June 2002, not before. It also put the former commissioner, Laurie Beckelman, on its payroll after winning the site, not before. The article incorrectly described the status of Donald J. Trump's bid to develop the site. Mr. Trump never removed himself from consideration.

Tom Wolfe is author of "A Man in Full." The first portion of this article appeared on Sunday and can be found online at nytimes.com/opinion.