

January 8, 2006

# The Secret History of 2 Columbus Circle

By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

"FOURTH floor! Men's lingerie!"

So Henry Geldzahler, the great art curator, was heard to exclaim on emerging from the elevator at the opening of the Gallery of Modern Art in 1964. What a caution! There was a time when people thought better than to say such things in art museums. Talking of Michelangelo was more the rule. But the gallery was not regarded as a serious museum.

Created by Huntington Hartford, the publisher, show-business impresario and heir to the A.&P. supermarket fortune, the Gallery looked like the adventure in vanity that it actually was. It was conceived to house Mr. Hartford's personal collection of figurative art, and its design bore the personal imprint of his taste. His taste was swanky. From the sleek wood paneling to the dark brass fixtures, the building at 2 Columbus Circle could have passed for the East Coast outpost of a private casino from the land of Mr. Lucky.

Mr. Hartford probably never wore a tie tack, but you sensed he would have traded all his money to be reborn as [Bobby Darin](#). His museum even had a penthouse lounge. Attached to the museum's restaurant, the Gauguin Room, it featured leather banquettes, paneled walls adorned with tapestry versions of Gauguin paintings, and a spectacular view of Central Park. The restaurant downstairs served Polynesian delicacies in a white tablecloth atmosphere that suggested a finishing-school graduate of Trader Vic's. Satay chicken came garnished with a ring of spiced apple. The bar poured the swingin'est Singapore sling in town. Waiter!

**HENRY GELDZAHLER, LACY UNDERWEAR, SWANKY TASTE**, Singapore slings. These are a few of the memories that didn't get to be recollected at the public hearings that weren't held to debate the value of 2 Columbus Circle, the white marble bonbon of a building that was not designated an official New York City landmark.

And even if the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission had consented to hold hearings on the matter, many of the memories that might have weighed in favor of designation would still have gone unspoken. They were stored up by a generation of gay men who arrived in New York in the 1960's and contributed substantially to those shifts in taste. And that generation, lost to AIDS, is no longer here to talk about them.

Two Columbus Circle has been called a queer building many times over the years. Odd and weird, too. These terms have not been misplaced. But their meaning need not be wholly pejorative. No other building more fully embodied the emerging value of queerness in the New York of its day. If the Landmarks Commission could miss this significance, then it is reasonable to conclude that many dots in that chapter of the city's social history have yet to be connected. The task will grow no easier with the passing of time.

**MORE THAN 80,000 NEW YORKERS** have died of AIDS so far, according to city figures. That number represents more memory than a city can afford to lose. It stands for the collective memory of an audience - the seasoned gay audience, perhaps the most culturally receptive group any city has ever seen.

Early on in the AIDS crisis, the city registered the cultural impact caused by the loss of gay artists. The effect produced by the loss of the gay audience is more insidious, however. An audience retains the memory of a performance. What happens to that memory when the audience is gone?

Imagine the World Series without veteran sports fans. You could still fill the stadium. The crowd would still roar. But a certain resonance would have vanished, the vibrations of a social instrument devised for the precise purpose of detecting a historically outstanding performance. How could this instrument function without a data base of past scores?

Now imagine that the game is a great city. What happens to a city when it loses reliable points of comparison with exceptional moments in its past? A void occurs, and before long, the vacuum starts to fill up with myths of dubious worth. The fantasy that [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) "saved" New York becomes conventional wisdom. The corollary fable that the 1960's and 70's were the nadir of New York's existence. Yeah, wasn't it awful! The worst!

The public hearings that weren't held might have offered a forum for sorting out that era's facts from fiction. Indeed, the landmarks agency can't conduct its business until it has properly reckoned with the period. And because the agency is itself a product of that era (it was founded a year after 2 Columbus Circle opened its doors), that would naturally have to include a reconsideration of its purpose.

You might even say that the building and the agency have had this date with destiny from the beginning: Edward Durell Stone's design for 2 Columbus Circle, a stylized version of Venetian Gothic architecture, was among the first to break the modernist taboo against explicit reference to period styles. The Landmarks Commission was established to resist modernity's brutal assault on New York's architectural history. Clearly, these two artifacts of the 60's had a lot to talk about.

Of course, the public doesn't need official permission to hear itself talk. We ought to take the microphone more often. We could start a new round of unofficial hearings by thinking back to the time before there was a Landmarks Commission. What was it that made some people believe that such an agency was worth having? What can we learn from those beliefs today, now that they are part of urban history themselves?

**I HATE TO BE THE ONE TO TELL YOU THIS**, but the old, relentlessly mourned Pennsylvania Station was a dismal piece of architecture. A late arrival in the City Beautiful movement, the building tried to augment meager conviction with extreme colonnades. Walking into its cold, cavernous spaces was like arriving in Philadelphia two hours before you had to.

But so what if Penn Station wasn't Grand Central? It was a crime to tear down a building that had become so deeply impregnated with New York's emotional life. The yawning interiors had a distinctive atmosphere. Like a vast sponge for intense expectations, the station soaked up the psychic energy of arrival, departure, separation, reunion and waiting that had accumulated over the years along with the soot, water damage and flimsy commercial intrusions. The station met the new arrival with a dare: can you make the big city know that you're alive? There's nothing like debased Beaux-Arts design for throwing out a frigid welcome.

A building does not have to be an important work of architecture to become a first-rate landmark. Landmarks are not created by architects. They are fashioned by those who encounter them after they are built. The essential feature of a landmark is not its design, but the place it holds in a city's memory. Compared to the place it occupies in social history, a landmark's artistic qualities are incidental.

**AN AUDIENCE** is more than a group of passive consumers. It can be a productive unit as well. It produces atmospheres, memories, arguments, textures of thought, a climate of receptivity and the stage on which performances occur. In the 60's, when freeways, shopping centers and expanding suburbs were leaving the future of the urban center open to serious doubt, an audience produced an extraordinary burst of energy about the idea of New York. Architectural preservation was part of that energy, and so was 2 Columbus Circle. Both were expressions of protest, and both were aimed at the same target: the exclusivity of High Modern taste in postwar New York.

In an era substantially defined by protests, these two - along with Pop Art, underground movies, the Belgium Pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, Huntington Hartford's short-lived Show magazine and others - ran counter to the prevailing standards of High Modern taste with which the city asserted its postwar hegemony in the arts.

What these phenomena had in common was audience appeal - an appeal to the varieties of desire and conflict, to show biz, to memory, and above all to the open-ended heterogeneity of city life. You didn't see that in the perpetual reiteration of abstract

paintings and glass towers.

These counter-positions to modernism's restrictive codes needed a stage, and a stage requires an audience attuned to the creative logic behind seemingly wanton events and who seizes the opportunity to help shape its own moment in time. That is where gay men came in.

**WE WERE THE CHILDREN** of white flight, the first generation to grow up in postwar American suburbs. By the time the 60's rolled around, many of us, the gay ones especially, were eager to make a U-turn and fly back the other way. Whether or not the city was obsolete, we couldn't imagine our personal futures in any other form. The street and the skyline signified to us what the lawn and the highway signified to our parents: a place to breathe free.

We must have resembled those scary blond children from "Village of the Damned." The moment [Audrey Hepburn](#) stepped out of the cab in the opening scene of "Breakfast at Tiffany's," our eyes started to glow. With the Hepburn character, Holly Golightly, we saw our defenses against the pain of isolation transformed into a glamorous style of independence.

The Glow was often provoked by gay-themed books. Sartre's "Saint Genet," John Rechy's "City of Night," James Baldwin's "Another Country," William S. Burroughs's "Naked Lunch": as each of these titles appeared, a dollop of queerness splashed down into the cultural mainstream. Each was a stage in the formation of what Herbert Gans calls a "taste culture," a social group bound together by the aesthetic preferences of its individual members. But the gay children of suburbia had yet to meet one another. We hadn't yet converged.

There was another side to the gay taste culture, a set of preferences formed long before these splashes occurred. Ronald Firbank novels, Aubrey Beardsley engravings, Victorian bric-a-brac, Art Nouveau and Art Deco ornaments, Fortuny fabrics, faded Hollywood stars: these artifacts were signs in a code, adopted before openness about homosexuality was possible. The love that dared not speak its name had learned to scream through décor.

This set of preferences also swirled into the mainstream: by 1967 every campus had a store that sold peacock feathers, Art Nouveau posters and paper versions of Tiffany lamps. "Notes on Camp," [Susan Sontag's](#) 1964 essay, was a turning point in this development. When the essay first appeared, it anatomized the code of a few. But the notice it attracted in magazines like Time expanded the audience to the many.

This shift represented something more than mainstream curiosity about recherché taste. It also signified that those who shared that taste were overcoming their isolation and discovering their identity as a social group. By 1969, when the Stonewall uprising

sparked the emergence of a political movement for gay rights, the cultural revolution had already occurred. We were already out as an audience, and after that, there was never any possibility that we would go quietly back to a closet we had come here to get out of.

By the standards of Eisenhower's America, gay taste was perverse. In hindsight, it seems more like a corrective to the far greater perversity of postwar "progress." What kind of normality was it to imagine that abandoning American cities was a good thing to do?

Goodbye, cities! Adiós, civilization! Good riddance to the repository of cultural memory, the incubator of ideas, the heartbeat of humankind.

Quel norm.

**MEMBERS OF MINORITY** groups have always had to shift between alternate realities, that of the mainstream and that of the particular cultures to which they belong. This ability generates a kind of reality in its own right, a perceptual environment of fluctuating contour. Almost involuntarily, we shift the lens this way and that and examine things from multiple angles. We learn to live with the doubts, uncertainties and incentives to curiosity that result from playing more than one part in the script.

This is the reality that unfolded for a visitor like myself, a member of the gay audience, as I made my way through the Gallery of Modern Art in 1966. Of course I could see the features that displeased the critics. But to me, the matter wasn't so simple.

The swanky motif of the Gauguin Room continued in the galleries below. Mellow lighting came from artificial sources overhead, and from the vertical strips of small round windows that bordered the rooms. As at the Guggenheim, the galleries were arranged in a vertical spiral, though of square rather than curving geometry, and in place of an atrium, the building's core was given over to elevators and stairs. The galleries unfolded gracefully in an alternating sequence of larger and smaller areas with varied ceiling heights. In the basement was a small auditorium where daily pipe organ recitals were held: shades of the eccentric Dr. Albert C. Barnes and the music he insisted on playing for visitors at his museum outside Philadelphia.

**MR. HARTFORD'S TASTE IN ART** struck some as a demonstration of style rather than substance. An amalgamation of Pre-Raphaelite, Post-Impressionist and Surrealist painting, the collection denied the existence of abstract art and the qualities then associated with it: sincerity, difficulty and historical inevitability. Hence it invited association with the qualities abstract painters had defined themselves against: illustration, decoration, aristocratic caprice. Mr. Hartford's collection was a poodle, in short.

And the aura of poodleness extended to Stone's design for the building's exterior. The homage to Venetian Gothic inevitably recalled Fenway Court, the Boston palazzo of

Isabella Stewart Gardner. It rolled back time to the world of the Victorians, to the ethos of John Ruskin, Walter Pater and the Aesthetic Movement, to a time before the Modern Movement's anxious energies came crashing through modern minds.

This was not acceptable. New York had staked its postwar claim to be the capital of the 20th century on its capacity to translate those energies into buildings, paintings, literature, dance. Even the decorative arts had a part to play in sustaining this image. The modernist dictates of Good Design meant that chairs, graphics and table settings tended toward formal abstraction. So who did this swanky playboy think he was, anyhow, coming in here with his Pre-Raphaelites and his Surrealists - those window dressers, fairy-tale illustrators, perfume bottle designers - and his building that looked like a gift spray flacon of My Sin blown up to the scale of a Macy's Thanksgiving Day float? How dare he call this poodle Modern Art!

**IF YOU WERE PART OF THE GAY AUDIENCE**, however, the criticisms aimed at Mr. Hartford's museum might have sounded oddly familiar. If you had sharp ears, you would have recognized the whirring of wheels, the creaking of old gears. The mechanisms for producing stigma were at work, an apparatus designed to give prejudices the appearance of ideas. And if you had been a target of this prejudice, you were less likely to discount the Gallery of Modern Art for any number of the aesthetic transgressions of which it stood accused.

Sexual ambiguity was integral to swank, for example. A prelude to the recent phenomenon of the metrosexual, the swanky guy adorned himself to a degree more commonly associated with feminine fashion. The taste culture of swank was socially ambiguous, too. Swank came out of the ghettos - Italian, Jewish, African-American and Hispanic. It was a pop vernacular for those seeking to transcend their exclusion from the WASP establishment. (Sammy Davis Jr. once affirmed that he never wore the same undershirt twice.) There was even room in it for gay WASP's, though by the mid-60's they were more likely to prefer the Rolling Stones to the Everly Brothers for fashion inspiration. Pop, in every form, had emerged by then as a paradoxical code for difference, a sign of independence from establishments of all kinds.

Mr. Hartford's collection, too, held a different set of meanings for the gay audience. An entire gallery was devoted to the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. No stranger to us, Burne-Jones was part of the Victorian repertory. Still, I doubt it occurred to anybody since Ruskin's time to think of his work as "modern art." Rather, it illustrated some generalized idea of 19th-century decadence. Vuillard, another artist represented in depth, spoke for Mr. Hartford's support for work that was often belittled at the time as "merely" decorative.

It was the Surrealist work, however, that aroused the greatest discrepancy between gay and straight perspectives. By 1950, conventional wisdom had consigned Surrealism to the dustbin. Abstract Expressionism was the flower of New York's pre-eminence as the

world's artistic center. As a home-grown movement, it was also suitable to represent American prestige after World War II. Surrealism, by contrast, stood for a Europe in decline, for empty theatrics, adolescent stunts and commercial corruption.

The gay audience didn't quite see it that way; or, if we did, we were not put off. Decadence was our family tree, weirdness our ancestral home, pathology our stock in trade. Theatrics went with the territory. And the dominance of Abstract Expressionism over Surrealism looked a lot like the dynamic between high school jocks and the fairies they'd tortured.

And, as some of us would later learn, if we didn't know already, sexual preference did play a part in the politics of the New York art world. New York Surrealists like Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugène Berman belonged to a gay subculture that had found greater acceptance in the uptown worlds of ballet and fashion than in the downtown Cedar Tavern scene populated by Pollock, Rothko and company. Ballet queens were not an ideal choice to carry the artistic standard for American supremacy in the 50's.

In any case, Modernism had become integral to our identity even before we'd left the suburbs. High Modern New York represented the antithesis of the nostalgic village appearance dictated by suburban developers. But the homogeneity of the International Style buildings revealed that city architecture, too, had become subject to a strict aesthetic code. Formalist functionalism.

The code wasn't the problem. The problem was that there weren't more of them. Why couldn't you revere Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building and yet wish that the architects Oscar Niemeyer and Luis Barragán had been given the opportunity to add a splash of Surrealism to the skyline? And why should American painting be governed by a winner-takes-all mentality? Why did we have to go on demanding that all comers be measured by a single yardstick? Isn't that the defining tactic of a closed mind? Why leave so much out, especially the unknown?

**EDWARD DURELL STONE HAD ONCE ABIDED** by the code. In fact, he'd helped to set it. In 1939, with Philip L. Goodwin, he had built the Museum of Modern Art, the temple where the codes were kept. In the postwar years, however, Stone abandoned modern orthodoxy for a more frankly decorative approach that featured the use of perforated ornamental screens. In his United States Embassy building for India, he perfected what you might call First Lady architecture, a lacy, soft power look to screen the harsh realities of the Cold War. By the mid-60's, the screen motif had been adopted by architects of institutional buildings nationwide.

For the Huntington Hartford Gallery, established to expand and reconsider the history of modern art, Venetian Gothic was a logical inspiration. The style had long been associated with Ruskin, the first British critic to pay serious attention to the work of living artists such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was a natural source for a building where

Burne-Jones would be restored to public view.

Modern architects in the 20th century had no use for Ruskin. A critic who contended that ornament was the principal part of architecture held little appeal for designers whose aesthetic was based on engineering and the manipulation of abstract geometric form. But for Stone, who had broken with that aesthetic, Ruskin offered the welcome authority of historical precedent.

Venetian Gothic provided a similar authority for Stone's screens. A composite of Oriental and European influences, a Venetian Gothic building deploys screens in abundance. Talk about lingerie: with rows of delicate, filigreed arches, rosettes and quatrefoils arranged in colonnades and window banks, even the lowliest Grand Canal palazzo could set a young man's heart a-flutter.

It helped to have an aptitude for Victoriana to appreciate the design's references. No special knowledge was required, however, to see that the building departed from the modern norm. What the building exposed was how philosophically hollow that norm had become.

**"ARCHITECTURE IS THE WILL OF AN EPOCH** translated into space," Mies declared. And who dares to disobey the will of an epoch? As Karl Popper recognized, such prescriptive formulas are relics of historicism, the 19th-century's linear view of the past as a sequence of distinct epochs, each with its own distinctive style of art. Since the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Florentines each had produced a great style, we would be a lesser people if we did not do likewise.

Historicism had fallen out of favor some time before the International Style skyscrapers started marching up Park Avenue, however, and the ideology of the Modern Movement's universal progress could not be sustained indefinitely without it.

As the philosopher Allan Megill has argued, historicism was a secular religion to the Victorians, a source of authority for stable meanings and values at a time of disorienting change. The founding academy of Modernism was supposed to refute this. Instead, it simply made the present yet another historical period. In place of tradition, the Bauhaus preached the idea of progress. But the premise was exactly the same.

An International Style steel-and-glass tower might look all shiny and new, in other words, but its heart belonged to Queen Victoria. On what basis, then, could we exclude Ruskin, or Stone's homage to him, at 2 Columbus Circle? Its heart belongs to Victoria's Secret.

The quarrel in the 60's was not with modern art but with the politics that came attached to it, the politics that mistook artistic preferences and dogmas for universal standards, that devoted itself to enforcing taboos and stigmatizing those who challenged them. But the

gay audience knew from personal experience that one way to resist is to inventory those taboos and put them in a new frame of reference.

The pioneer modernists had done just that in getting their movement off the ground. As we saw it, we were closer to them in spirit than were those who inherited the movement, who failed to see how unyielding it had become. We were constructing a new framework from the stuff left behind by the mainstream even as we were entering the mainstream ourselves.

Not the least of Mr. Hartford's gifts to us were the negative responses his museum aroused. They revealed how much had been left outside the modern framework. Especially delicious was Alfred Frankfurter's observation that the Gauguin Room "looks all too much as if strip-teasers, already conveniently reduced to grass skirts, were about to do a Polynesian floor show."

Let the hula begin.

**THE GAY AUDIENCE IS A STEREOTYPE:** all those silly boys clapping their hands to a pulp whenever Judy hit a high note or Marlene got both sides of her mouth working at more or less the same time. We love you, Maria! Any Maria. But our enthusiasm was not confined to broken-down divas. We also had a thing for broken-down buildings. We can give ourselves a lot of credit for the emergence of architectural preservation as a major force in contemporary urban life.

Will Fellows does. His book "A Passion to Preserve," published in 2004 by the University of Wisconsin Press, explores the history of the preservation movement. Subtitled "Gay Men as Keepers of Culture," the book asserts that a cater-cornered coalition between gay men and straight women has been the movement's spine. It also unpacks the psychological motivation that has driven some of these good folks to reclaim artifacts from modernity's trash. Paraphrasing no less an authority than Liberace, Mr. Fellows calls it "the thrill of redemption." Now there's a crowd-pleaser.

The gay audience, excluded by society, has an organic relationship to artifacts that have been rejected by society's taste-makers. Pluck a discarded ornament out of the town dump, take it home, polish it up and put it on a pedestal: it's a way of refusing to abide by rules designed to shut you out. Somebody once loved that old lamp, that old building, that old street, that old neighborhood, that city that progress left behind.

It's now intellectually fashionable to place the 60's and 70's in the Dumpster. Like that old lamp. Oh, the horror. Ah, the humanity! Remember "planned shrinkage"? That was the concept of managed belt-tightening devised in the 70's for a New York of diminished expectations, a city buffeted by crime rates, abandoned buildings, the departure of corporate headquarters, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and the fiscal crisis that exposed our woes to the world's sarcastic gaze.

But some people just loved that dirty old lamp. And if we were to give those years the once-over with a damp cloth, we might better appreciate that the love we felt for the city then is still feeding into the city of today.

**MR. HARTFORD SHUT DOWN THE GALLERY** of Modern Art in 1969. The collection was dispersed, the property transferred to Fairleigh Dickinson University. Renamed the New York Cultural Center, the venue presented temporary shows of distinction: it was the city's first bona-fide kunsthalle. A nightclub, Cabaret in the Sky, was installed in the penthouse restaurant. Presenting night life as a kind of performance art, it featured acts by Jackie Curtis, Holly Woodlawn, Cherry Vanilla and other downtown superstars, habitués of Mickey Ruskin's legendary restaurant Max's Kansas City. Showtime!

By then, alternative histories of modernism were becoming common. Writings by Francis Haskell, Robert Rosenblum and other art historians were exploring the critical role played by rediscovery and revision in times of cultural change. These writings became part of the new framework that was emerging out of the formerly excluded. So did the re-examination of pop culture conducted by scholars as well as by popular authors like [Tom Wolfe](#).

Female impersonators like Jackie Curtis, Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling, Wayne County and the Hot Peaches were also part of it. They were an alternative modernism, too. Just as the Bauhaus designers dealt with the conventions of industrial production, the transvestites of those years were exploring the conventions of gender production by the image-making industries that were then coming into their own. Goodbye, Henry Ford. Hello, Estée Lauder.

Performers like Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn mattered for a more important reason: they were a phenomenon of the audience, of the city's new frame of cultural reference. There's no such thing as a bad drag act. There are only bad drag-act audiences. A female impersonator functions chiefly as a stand-in for the deranged mosaic of theatrical stereotypes that spectators have stored up in their heads. As mistresses of ceremony for this synthetic work in progress, these two personified the shift that concluded the final days of High Modern New York. They signaled the erosion of trust in top-down cultural pronouncements and the commencement of a period when the relationship between High and Low would be extensively reconsidered.

The audience was the critical factor in this process. But audience didn't mean popularity. It stood for a quality, not merely the quantity, of people in attendance. It represented the trait of receptivity, of paying attention to events occurring within the mind as well as those outside it. This trait is fundamental to the construction of memories and to the uses we make of them.

**CHANGE PARTNERS, ONE MORE TIME.** In 1980, 2 Columbus Circle acquired a

third tenant when Gulf and Western, which had purchased the property in the mid-70's, donated it to the city for use by the new Department of Cultural Affairs. Geldzahler, the curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum, was back, this time as host: in 1977, Mayor [Edward I. Koch](#) had appointed him the department's commissioner after it was separated from the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs. Geldzahler held the position until 1982.

Some people I knew who worked for him complained bitterly about 2 Columbus Circle. The early 80's were a golden age of complaining. But I can remember thinking that the building had finally come into its own. With its white marble exterior, its curving facade, its flagpoles jutting out at a jaunty angle and its associations with Stone's government work, the building had always projected a quasi-official image. Now you could drop the quasi.

When he got the job, Geldzahler quipped that he felt as if he'd been made wheat commissioner of Kansas. But the larger gain was the city's. It felt like a wish fulfillment to gaze at the building from Central Park West - the contrast of the white exterior against the dingy Midtown backdrop was always one of its best features - and know that New York had conferred this symbolic recognition on its cultural workers. Knowing that Geldzahler was the city's first openly gay commissioner added to the sense of pride some of us felt. It wasn't a big deal, and yet it was.

The audience was Geldzahler's wheat. His department did not produce plays, paintings, books or ballets. It supported the museums, dance companies, libraries and other institutions that enabled larger audiences to gain access to these experiences. In the process, the city gained access to itself in a new way. The idea of the audience began to displace the idea of the public as a measure of civic reality.

Because the audience supplied the meaning. [Andy Warhol's](#) multimedia show "The Exploding Plastic Inevitable"; Robert Rauschenberg's ventures into performance with Billy Kluver's Experiments in Art and Technology; the art opening without pictures; Cheetah (a nightclub without performers); the new girl in town; lights, cameras, reaction: the events of the 60's helped to catalyze the emergence of the active audience, the productive audience, the spontaneous organization of individuals around the act of paying attention.

Today the audience is largely identified with consumerism. That was far less the case 40 years ago. For us, the audience was a medium of discovery. It allowed the emotions of individuals to flow into a public setting. When emotions have been bottled up, as they were with us, the effect of releasing them is overwhelming. In the 60's, the space of the audience expanded from the theater to the city at large. The energy that flowed into that setting was driven by adolescent hormones. We were eager to attach ourselves not only to one another but to the streets.

Geldzahler's coming-out moment occurred when he was presenting an award to [Allen Ginsberg](#) at the National Arts Club. He had planned to thank the poet for making it possible for gay men to live with pride. At the last moment, he inserted the words "like me." The disclosure earned a small notice in the newspaper the following day. (Ginsberg's reply was and is not for your ears.)

But what would Mayor Koch say? Randall Bourscheidt, Geldzahler's deputy, recalls that his boss was at home when the phone rang at 8 the next morning: "Henry? It's Ed. Have you called your mother?"

**CHAPTER 4 IN THE BUILDING'S HISTORY** was the date that never materialized. It got under way in 1996, when the Landmarks Commission first turned down an application to hold a public hearing on 2 Columbus Circle. Despite protests from preservationists, the commission refused to reconsider that position. It has refused to expand the definition of history to include the lives and times of living people, especially still-suspect ones. This action showed that the commission could deflate cultural artifacts as well as inflate them when it was convenient to do so. An agency established to enlarge our awareness of history was now in the business of condoning its erasure.

A vibrant city is perpetually recreated from the emotional depths, and from our socialized capacity to empathize with the memories of others. A landmarks commission embodies this capacity in administrative form. It should be the agency's business to know when somebody's memory is being stepped on.

Today, 2 Columbus Circle is being transformed into the new home of the Museum of Arts and Design. (The city sold the building to the museum in October.) Brad Cloepfil's design for the remodeling of Stone's exterior, now under way, isn't bad enough to get worked up about. It should bring cheer to those who don't mind seeing New York recast in the image of an office park for Swiss pharmaceutical companies.

I have fond memories of modern architecture, too. Didn't the Seagram Building look fantastic in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"? What a smart background for Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard, with [Henry Mancini's](#) music playing. It looked terrific in "The Best of Everything," too. Diane Baker, [Joan Crawford](#). Contrary to the propaganda later put out by the postmodernists, there was a time when people really loved those big glass boxes. Many of us still do.

But times change. Though it's often overlooked, artists like Piero della Francesca, Botticelli and Vermeer were lost and forgotten before they were rediscovered as the immortals they are usually taken for today. Their example gives me hope that one day New Yorkers will rediscover the Landmarks Preservation Commission and bring it back from the inconsequence to which the politicians have consigned it. Somebody loved that old lamp. Perhaps it was you.

---

[Copyright 2006The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#)