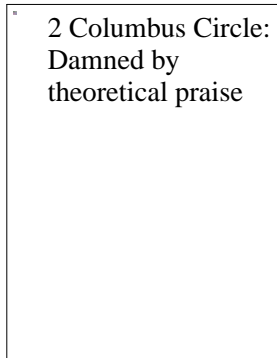


Tom Wolfe's Favorite Ugly Building He'll say it's valuable, but he won't say it's beautiful.

By Timothy Noah

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2 Columbus Circle: Damned by theoretical praise

Chatterbox first clapped his eyes on Edward Durrell Stone's Gallery of Modern Art in November 1976. The building was no longer functioning as an art gallery. In 12 short years, it had passed from Fairleigh Dickinson University to Gulf & Western to New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs. "Man, what an ugly building," Chatterbox thought as he took in Stone's Moorish tomb on the southern extremity of Columbus Circle. "I'd sure hate to go inside."

Twenty-seven years later, the architectural pendulum has swung from modernism to postmodernism and back again. Culturally, we live in a radically different age. Chatterbox has acquired a college education, 22 years' experience in journalism, a wife, two children, and the ripening wisdom of middle age. Yet today, whenever circumstances bring Chatterbox back to 2 Columbus Circle, he is 18 again, having the same unoriginal thought and re-experiencing the same phobia about suffocating inside its (mostly) windowless marble. (Three years ago, Chatterbox included the Stone slab in a survey of "[Buildings Worth King Dome-ing](#),")

Tom Wolfe feels differently. In a two-part op-ed published in the *New York Times* on [Oct. 12](#) and [Oct. 13](#), Wolfe argues that 2 Columbus Circle must be spared a planned radical [remodeling](#) because it represents an early, bold rebellion against the austere strictures of the International Style that had dominated American architecture since World War II. In his book [From Bauhaus to Our House](#), Wolfe attributes Stone's rebellion to his marrying the "explosively Latin" Maria Elena Torchio, who complained that her husband's earlier buildings were cold and lifeless. Whether that's true or not, 2 Columbus Circle was certainly a departure for Stone, whose previous buildings included New York's rigorously modernist Museum of Modern Art.

To Wolfe, 2 Columbus Circle is a work of genius:

[T]he 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.

What's striking about Wolfe's defense of 2 Columbus Circle is that it's based not so much on the building as it is on the *idea* of the

building. Its columns are a "highly sophisticated repetition." There is an "extraordinary interplay of positive and negative space." The portholes are misconstrued as "Islamic grillwork." Stone bucked "the icy grip of the French and German International Style orthodoxy." That's all well and good. But is the building beautiful? Is it pleasurable to look at or inhabit? Wolfe seems unable to spit out that pronouncement. Like the ugliest girl in high school, forever told she has beautiful hair and nicely manicured fingernails, 2 Columbus Circle receives praise for its best features but is never, ever called attractive.

There's considerable irony here because *From Bauhaus to Our House* (like Wolfe's [The Painted Word](#) before it) argued forcefully that contemporary architecture had displaced the quest for beauty with an ever-more-complex aesthetic based entirely on theory. Anything decorative was bourgeois and conventional. Worthy architecture had to be bare, streamlined, "functional" because the working class, whom the International Style was originally meant to serve, couldn't afford to pay for architectural flourishes. Unfortunately, Wolfe pointed out, the working class avoided modernist urban architecture

as if it had a smell. The workers—if by workers we mean people who have jobs—headed out instead to the suburbs. ... [T]hey bought houses with pitched roofs and shingles and clapboard siding, with no structure expressed if there was any way around it, with gaslight-style front-porch lamps and mailboxes set up on lengths of stiffened chain that seemed to defy gravity—the more cute and antiequy touches, the better—and they loaded these houses with "drapes" such as baffled all description and wall-to-wall carpet you could lose a shoe in, and they put barbecue pits and fishponds with concrete cherubs urinating into them on the lawn out back. ...

Wolfe is master of the rollicking cultural manifesto, and *From Bauhaus to Our House* is dead-on about modernism's excesses. But because the book is argued in absolutes—good guys here, bad guys there—Wolfe can't clear a path to admitting that the International Style produced many beautiful buildings. And now, because he's too admiring of its purpose, Wolfe can't admit that 2 Columbus Circle is hideous.

Wolfe's preferences are very consistent. He's defended 2 Columbus Circle—and the defiantly non-abstract art that Huntington Hartford, heir to the A&P fortune, stocked inside it—since the building went up in 1964. (Wolfe dubbed Hartford "the Luther of Columbus Circle" in a piece for the *New York Herald-Tribune* that was later reprinted in Wolfe's first anthology, [The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby](#).) But Wolfe's argument is not consistent. He *bashes* a theory-driven aesthetic when it's spouted by modernists. Then he turns around and uses a different theory—his own—to defend a palpably hideous building. Wolfe's belief that modernism needed to be overthrown is persuasive, but his use of 2 Columbus Circle to illustrate that is not.

Chatterbox lays down the gauntlet. Mr. Wolfe, is 2 Columbus Circle beautiful?

Not *cozily familiar*. (Even architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, who famously mocked it as "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops," told the *New York Times* three decades later that she gets "a little lift, a sense of pleasure" when she walks past it, though "I'll never elevate it to a work of art.")

Not *historically significant*. (Architectural historian Robert A.M. Stern [says](#) that it "pushed the envelope very far toward what would become Post-Modernism" but can't deny that it's "zany.")

And not *doctrinally sound* (as you've argued for nearly 40 years).

Mr. Wolfe: Is Edward Durrell Stone's Moorish tomb beautiful? Is it even pretty? Chatterbox dares you to say it.

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Martin Plissner Responds:

You should have gone inside the Moorish Tower. There was nothing to hate. When I lived around the corner in the sixties, it was my private, really private club. Once you got inside you were surrounded by the kind of marble and mahogany you find at the Winter Palace -- floor after floor of it, with a lot of art you wouldn't find at MOMA, but that's true of the Winter Palace as well.

At the top (my hangout) was a lounge dominated by one of Gaugin's more compelling ladies, a marvelous bar and a balcony with a great view of the park and snacks to remember. And it was ALL YOURS! Ada Louise et al had made it a place where nobody with any self-respect (to this day, apparently) would want to be found dead. It was usually open evenings and a great place to take a date - once you overcame her self respect. I miss it.

Martin Plissner is the former executive political director of CBS News.

(To reply, click [here](#))

(10/20)

Fareed Zakaria Responds:

Tim-

Since Tom Wolfe won't respond, may I?

The point of preservation is not simply to keep what we currently think of as "pretty." It is to preserve what is architecturally significant. After all, it's on that basis that thousands of absolutely hideous modernist buildings have not been felled by wrecking balls (that and the cost involved.) Can anyone look at Government Center in Boston and not weep? Does anyone believe that Mather House is more beautiful than the river houses at Harvard? Is the Javits Center worth preserving? Yet they will all live on forever - damnit.

By this standard, the Lollipop building does fine. It is visually striking, represents an strong reaction to modernism (one shared by most ordinary people, as Wolfe points out), and uses an interesting set of features -Moorish design - that are rarely found in America, outside of synagogues. Plus it has the enormous virtue of being short. Every time anything is destroyed in New York, its replacement is at least 80 stories tall. The resulting damage to the street life, the sightlines, the shadows, the congestion, the strain on transport, is all largely ignored because we have one more boring modernist box to thrill over. (And new real estate taxes to collect, which is the real reason that it happens.) Forgive me, but I'd rather be able to peek out at the ever-diminishing blue sky.

So the answer to your question is, no it's not beautiful. But it's a lot nicer than most of the buildings we are preserving and is almost certainly more beautiful than what would replace it.

-Fareed

Fareed Zakaria is editor of *Newsweek International*.