

NUMBER 2 COLUMBUS CIRCLE

By Tom Wolfe

(for June 29, 2004, cocktail party and auction
to benefit the Save 2 Columbus Circle Fund)

I'm out of town, regrettably, but I have been on the telephone with friends who have told me about the mysterious thump that was heard throughout New York City a few hours ago. It was no mystery to you who have gathered at the Liz O'Brien Gallery, of course. It was merely the usual sound of the Landmark Preservation Commissioners diving under their desks when confronted with the matter of Edward Durell Stone's historic masterpiece at No. 2 Columbus Circle.

The Commission has been ducking this issue for ten years now, ever since the building became eligible for landmark designation in 1994. But with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's recent listing of the building as one of the eleven most endangered buildings in America, the matter now reaches a critical point. Not even the commission's messy descent into the bowels of municipal politicking can exempt it from its avowed mission, which is to preserve historic architectural landmarks such as this masterpiece by America's greatest Modernist.

Those who want to see the building destroyed use the Quirky Oddball strategy. They invariably depict Stone, the building, and those who want to save it as quirky oddballs. During a break in a hearing before the Planning Commission earlier this year, I asked representative of the Museum of Arts and Design, which wants to tear down Stone's building and replace it with a reactionary design by the ultra-conservative Modernist Brad Cloepfil, how her employers could scoff at Stone's design when Robert Stern regards it as of major importance in the history of Modernism. She rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, well, you know Bob." There you have the Quirky Oddball strategy. In point of fact, Robert Stern, in addition to being a major American architect himself and Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, is the foremost historian of New York architecture in the 20th century. No one in the field would contest that point. Likewise, Edward Durell Stone becomes a stubborn, cranky, crotchety old contrarian who did a quirky building for the quirky Huntington Hartford. In fact, Stone was the outstanding American Modernist throughout the Early Modern or orthodox phase. Try to think of another. Not for nothing did the Museum of Modern Art, Modernism's greatest American promoters, choose him as co-architect of the museum's building on West 53rd Street in 1930. Only recently Stone's house for one of the Museum's co-founders, A. Conger Goodyear, was cited by the World Monuments Fund and granted an endowment for its upkeep in perpetuity.

In the 1950s Stone became the first Modernist to recognize that the original premise of Modern architecture had by now withered away. The movement began against a backdrop of the hecatomb, the rubble of the first World War. The Bauhaus rallying cry---"Start from zero!"---had a clear logic. The upper orders had brought on the war and ruined a civilization. It was time to make a fresh start, this time in the name of the working class. The idea was to remove all the pretentious extravagance of the upper classes and the bourgeoisie and strip architecture down, in the name of the working class, to glass, steel, concrete, plaster, black, white, and beige paint, flat roofs, and right angles. Stone saw that to hang onto this notion in a post-World War II age of unparalleled prosperity and freedom for all was to be hopelessly reactionary. At 2 Columbus Circle, as in the case of his earlier American Embassy in New Delhi, Stone used unabashedly rich materials, a white marble exterior, interior walls, veneered in ebony and walnut, a central staircase even more ingenious than his friend Frank Lloyd Wright's famous spiral ramp in the Guggenheim, floors covered in lush red and gold carpeting, and a restaurant and cocktail lounge on the top two floors that offered the public its first view ever of the entire sweep of Central Park from Central Park South to 110th Street.

Stone's genius brought Modernism into the new age and up to an avant-garde eminence. To this day it remains the great marker to Modernism's destiny, if the movement is not to wind up as a reactionary ultra-conservative, backward-facing corpse.

I wish you a gloriously successful evening. At this very moment I hold a glass aloft in the direction of Fifth Avenue and 61st Street.