

**Statement at People's Hearing for Two Columbus Circle
at the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Library
New York, New York**

July 14, 2005

Robert A.M. Stern

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Robert A.M. Stern Architects

We're here today not only to save an important building but also to save the Landmarks Preservation Commission from itself. While reasonable people may disagree over the merits of landmark designation for Two Columbus Circle, the refusal of the Commission to calendar a hearing in the face of sustained, vocal, widespread, and indeed unprecedented demand, including the recommendations of two former Chairs of the Commission, is, frankly, inexplicable. I have carefully followed the Commission since its founding in 1965 as a practicing architect, as a chronicler of the city's history, and as a concerned citizen, and this decision to stifle public debate and squash legitimate inquiry will be remembered as one of the low points in its history. The stonewalling has gone on for so long that I believe that the Commission fears that it will appear weak if it "gives in." But it is not the job of the Commission to engage in silly gamesmanship. Too much is at stake. Will the Commission take up its responsibility to our past and to our future, so that our city's great buildings will not be vulnerable to the politics of the moment? Isn't this the very ideal the Commission was established to uphold? All we are asking for is a free and spirited, officially sanctioned hearing. Who could argue with that?

In my opinion, Two Columbus Circle is without question a landmark that must be saved. The building is confounding because its design is so iconoclastic, not fitting neatly into any stylistic category. Two Columbus Circle stands outside the canon, neither purely Modernist nor fully Post-Modern. Where Lever House and the Seagram Building are rightly preserved as epitomes of the orthodox in Post-War Modernism, Two Columbus Circle is more equivocal; it's not coolly minimalist, but neither is it authoritatively traditional. It questions, rather than answers. I think we must take the long view and not give in to the ever-present tendency to preserve only a partial view of the past, telling only the simplest story.

Edward Durell Stone was a leader of the profession, and Two Columbus Circle came at a crucial time in his career when he, like Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, and others, was actively challenging the prevailing Modernism. Stone's museum is part of an important group of buildings he designed in the 1950s, many of them triumphantly counterintuitive. These include the United States Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958 and the United States Embassy in New Delhi. Here in New York, this fertile period in Stone's work is represented by a townhouse facade on East 64th Street and by Two Columbus Circle, where Stone pushed the envelope very far toward what would become Post-Modernism. This building is a landmark in the history of architectural taste. If it is not the missing link between Modernism and Post-Modernism, it is at least a close cousin.

Two Columbus Circle may be stylistically ambiguous but it is urbanistically forthright, filling its oddly-shaped block in a convincing way – an object building that at the same time does its part to define Columbus Circle with a glorious concave marble north-facing facade that scoops up the light and throws it back to the great public space.

We are told by some critics that New York is short on challenging world-class buildings by world-class architects. Well, here is one that we do have – one that is

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unique, full of ideas about site and image, about history, and about the freedom that comes with modernity.

Philip Johnson famously said, "You cannot not know history." Our job is to preserve the best – the most provocative bits – of our recent history, in which Two Columbus Circle plays such an important part. Provocative when it was built, its provocations are as important now as ever. Each of us in the architectural community has the obligation to respect the work of our predecessors, especially ones of such distinction as Ed Stone, whose building on Columbus Circle represented in the 1960s just the kind of provocative world-class architecture that so many hunger for in our city today. It is precisely because Stone provoked with such skill that he rattled the establishment in 1964 and clearly seems to rattle some of that same establishment, who seem to prefer bland conformity, today.

I would like to point out that the following organizations and important voices protest the potential destruction of Stone's facades: The Preservation League of New York State, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the World Monuments Fund, as well as every major preservation organization in the city and the current and the previous architectural critics of the *New York Times*.

This is not a time to sweep debate under the rug. I very much appreciate the invitation to address this gathering today. But we all know that the proper forum for this debate is a public hearing before the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I urge all who care about open democratic process and all who seek a city that embodies that process in its governance to join me in calling on the Commission to hear the case for Two Columbus Circle on its merits.

– Robert A.M. Stern