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A New Look for a 10-Story Oddity

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Evoking both loom and kiln, the Museum of Arts and Design plans to reclaim 2 Columbus Circle — an abandoned work of romantic modernism that has irritated and amused New Yorkers for 39 years — in a scrim of bright terra cotta.

The plan will almost surely set off a contentious public review. Admirers of the original filigreed design by Edward Durell Stone may make one last effort to save the facade, even though the designation committee of the Landmarks Preservation Commission has already declined to nominate the structure.

Under the redesign, daylight would

A museum's plan at Columbus Circle has detractors.

for the first time fill the inside of what is now a nearly windowless building. Slits and openings between the four-inch terra-cotta panels would give museumgoers views of Central Park and allow pedestrians to glimpse the galleries through a diaphanous veil. Vertical glass channels, filled with artwork, would penetrate the 10-story structure.

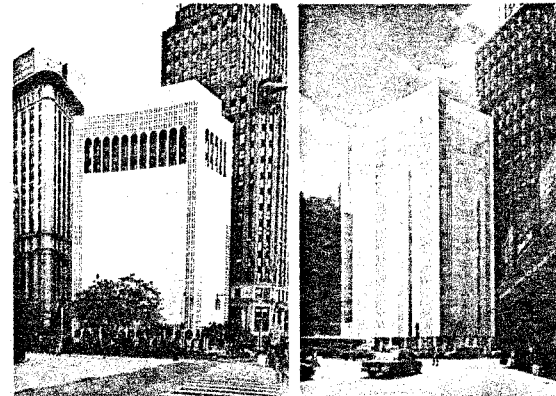
The redesign, by Brad Cloepfil of

Allied Works Architecture, was presented yesterday to the City Planning Commission, whose approval is required for the sale of 2 Columbus Circle, a city-owned building. The museum, formerly the American Craft Museum, would move there in 2006 from 40 West 53rd Street.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said yesterday that Mr. Cloepfil had "come up with a brilliant design that will bring this iconic building back to life and integrate it into the urban fabric of the neighborhood while preserving its unique personality."

Unlike preservation battles in which venerable landmarks are defended from replacement by mediocrities, this debate will concern func-

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Left, David W. Dunlap/The New York Times; right, Allied Works Architecture

Two Columbus Circle as it is, left, and as it might be.

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tional improvements to a structure about which even admirers confess ambivalence, reaching for words like zany, whimsical, kitschy, kooky and quirky to describe it.

"The way this building will be successful is as a new work of architecture," said Laurie Beckelman, a former chairwoman of the landmarks commission who directs the building program for the museum.

Holly Hotchner, the museum director, said the choice of a facade made of clay, fired into a warp-and-weft pattern in terra cotta, "speaks to who we are" — an institution concerned with material and craft.

A spectral memory of Stone's building, though not its specific imagery of circles and arches, will be embodied in the redesign. "At one level," Mr. Cloepfil said, "we are trying to maintain its monumentality, but at the same time make it a more ephemeral body, so it begins to merge with Columbus Circle."

Though the size and shape of 2 Columbus Circle would not change — most notably the concave north wall, which follows the circle's arc — it would lose its filigree-like portholes, sidewalk arcade lined in lollipop-shaped columns, two-story upper loggia and white marble cladding, which is in such a sorry state of repair that a protective sidewalk bridge has had to be erected.

Unloved (by some) since 1964, vacant since 1998.

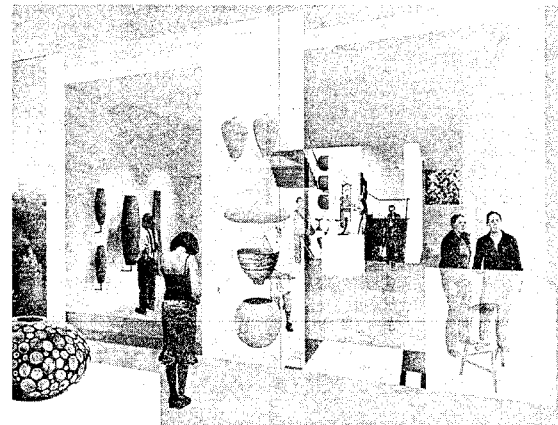
Behind the terra-cotta panels would be glass-enclosed openings of varied dimensions, some as high as 70 feet. Holes would be opened through the floors to create uninterrupted interior glass columns, three or four feet square, that would be filled with artworks.

In another gesture to unify the building vertically, a processional staircase would be built on the Broadway side of the building, linking the six public floors.

Stone's unusual interior design, in which galleries are stepped around the elevator core at half-story intervals, would be eliminated. Each of the 3,650-square-foot floors would then be on a single level. Above the galleries would be classrooms, studios, offices and a restaurant.

The 155-seat Mark Goodson Theater in the basement would be left largely intact.

Two Columbus Circle opened in 1964 as the Gallery of Modern Art. It was built by Huntington Hartford, heir to the A.&P. supermarket fortune, to house his own collection and serve as a bulwark in his passionate fight against abstract art.



Allied Works Architecture

A rendering showing the vertical glass channels that would be featured in galleries in the proposed Museum of Arts and Design.

"It will last for generations to come," Stone predicted when he unveiled his design. As it happened, the gallery lasted five years.

Fairleigh Dickinson University took over in 1969 and ran the building until 1975 as the New York Cultural Center, where art exhibitions were held. The city then used it as a visitors center and headquarters for the Cultural Affairs Department. The agency moved out in 1998; the space

has since been vacant.

Last year the building was awarded to the museum by the city Economic Development Corporation. The museum estimates that it will cost \$50 million to acquire the property and renovate the building. Though Ms. Hotchner would not break down the costs, she said the city would allow the museum to defer much of the acquisition payment until 2008 and thereafter.

The preservation fight would probably be led by the Landmark West group on the West Side. "While we look forward to the building's reuse, we believe it is incumbent on the city to exercise caution and treat Stone's design with the respect it deserves," the group said last week.

Landmark West and the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects sponsored a panel discussion in February on the building.

"This is almost like an architectural folly," said Thomas Mellins, an architectural historian who moderated the panel. "Do we need quirky folly to have the overall texture be rich and vital in the city? Or can we live without it?"

Folly or not, Theodore H. M. Prudon, president of the Docomomo U.S. preservation group, said it was a "very significant building by a very significant architect."

Billie Tsien, who designed the new American Folk Art Museum at 45 West 53rd Street with Tod Williams, allowed that 2 Columbus Circle had "good bones" but said it was a "very, very problematic building to be a gallery space."

She praised the choice of Mr. Cloepfil to redesign the building, though she had yet to see his proposal. "It's very hard for me to sort of prejudge something that I don't know and say that this building must remain as it is," Ms. Tsien said. "Because if it remains as it is, it's a dead building."