

A Building Still Looking For Respect

Joyce Purnick. New York Times. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Dec 15, 2003. pg. B.1

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MOST New Yorkers are familiar with 2 Columbus Circle, the infamously eccentric building on the southern border of Columbus Circle. It's the one with the blank, white-marble walls, the corner portholes, and the columns that the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable famously likened to lollipops.

The building, closed nearly six years ago and surrounded by a chain-link fence for safety, still has diehard fans. But the Museum of Arts and Design is poised to buy it from the city, renovate it and move in -- and in the process save the one last blighted corner of Columbus Circle.

This being New York, nothing happens easily. The inevitable lawsuit, filed by three preservation groups and five individuals, aims to stop the sale. It seeks ultimately to thwart or at least limit the renovation by getting the building designated a landmark, which at least will slow things down. It is not that the groups love Edward Durell Stone's design, though some do, but that they object to the process that led to selling and ultimately changing it.

"The process has been so disconcerting," said Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, one of the plaintiffs. "It's one of the major issues."

There are other major issues, among them completing the reclamation of Columbus Circle, and saving a building from itself. Since its debut in 1964 as the Gallery of Modern Art, 2 Columbus Circle has been the building that couldn't, never quite settling in as a successful or even comfortable destination. A tour of the building this weekend amply demonstrated why.

Standing on the inside looking out (or not), the thought occurred that the architect, Mr. Stone, might have been playing a whimsical joke on New York, placing, as he did, a solid wall on the front of the building, blocking one of the greatest urban views anywhere.

The building faces north, looking out on Central Park and the nexus of Broadway and Central Park West. But that wondrous view is obscured by a wall throughout most of the building, visible only in bits and pieces through corner portholes, and on two upper floors, which feature real windows and a terrace.

Mr. Stone, remember, designed an art gallery, so the views were supposed to be of works of art. The portholes are like a footnote -- afterthoughts, hidden in those corners, on stairwells and back mezzanines.

Inside, all is dark, gloomy and cramped. Small wonder that the building has moved from job to job, as it were, from art gallery to cultural center to city offices, emptying out in 1998 when the administration of Rudolph W. Giuliani decided it wanted to sell.

Defenders say the building is a work of architectural importance; detractors say it is, well, ugly. Nobody can say with any conviction that it is a building that ever found itself.

"It doesn't work, and it never worked," said **Holly Hotchner**, director of the Museum of Arts and Design, walking through the building on Saturday. The museum's design, by the architect Brad Cloepfil, would add windows and reface the exterior with terra cotta.

The museum wanted to get started next April, but that timing is overly optimistic now, because of the lawsuit. The history of similar lawsuits suggests this one will not ultimately succeed, but it will eat up time, and until it is resolved, the building cannot be touched.

The plaintiffs want a public hearing on designating the building a landmark, but since the Landmarks Preservation Commission already said no to that years ago, the plaintiffs are instead trying for a more extensive environmental review. Environmental impact statements consider not only matters of air and water, but whether the proposed renovation could affect "historic resources."

A SUBCOMMITTEE of the commission decided in 1996 against recommending a hearing on 2 Columbus Circle. Critics blame City Hall, to denials all around. Today, there is no sentiment among commission members to revisit the matter. "Every time I have raised it, I get an, 'Omigod, that thing!'" said the chairman of the landmarks commission, Robert B. Tierney.

Why not answer critics by holding a hearing anyway? "We designate buildings for lots of really good reasons," said Sherida E. Paulsen, a commission member and former chairwoman. "But in terms of history, architecture, cultural significance, it does not rise to any of those levels."

And because this has become so controversial, a landmarks hearing could lead to lengthy delays.

So the shabby old building sits there, ever the stepchild of its polished neighbors.

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