

Building Plan Draws Preservationists' Fire

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It was built to house an art collection, and now another museum wants to buy the empty building and redesign it for its new home.

But building preservationists opposed to the sale of the city-owned structure at 2 Columbus Circle say a planned redesign of its distinctive Modernist facade by the proposed new owners -- the Museum of Arts and Design -- would destroy a work of art in its own right.

"The plan that is on the table now would basically destroy the building," said Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council.

Officials at the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum, point out that the plans have met with city approval and were announced with fanfare by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in April.

Bankoff's group, along with the Landmark West preservation group and others, filed suit earlier this month against various city agencies and the museum to stop the sale of the building, located on the south side of Columbus Circle next to Central Park and blocks from Lincoln Center.

Designed in 1964 by Edward Durell Stone, who also conceived the Museum of Modern Art, the 10-story marble building features a concave facade and engraved porthole edges, and except for a row of elongated windows along the top, the structure is windowless.

The new design calls for dismantling the porthole-lined facade and replacing it with a series of large terra cotta panels and windows. Inside, the original layout of half floors that skirt a central elevator core would be replaced with full floors.

Originally, the building housed the 19th and 20th century art collection of wealthy businessman Huntington Hartford, but in 1976 was purchased by Gulf & Western Industries and given to the city, which has used it for its Department of Cultural Affairs and as a visitors' center. It has been vacant since 1998.

Those against the sale say the building's design is distinctive and unique, and should be kept as is.

"The architectural importance of this building is undebatable," Bankoff said. "I think it's important in the sense of what New York was about in that time." The new facility is slated to open in 2006 and would greatly increase the museum's exhibition space. The museum collects and exhibits contemporary objects created in such media as clay, glass, wood, metal and fiber.

According to the suit, the environmental review that was done as part of the process for the sale to the museum was inadequate because it didn't address the impact the changed design would have on the city's cultural and architectural history.

The suit also claims that the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission has foregone a public hearing on the building's potential landmark status because city officials wanted to sell it.

Buildings become eligible for designation as city landmarks after 30 years.

"It's an important building by an important architect that really deserves to be landmarked," said Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West.

In a statement, museum director Holly Hotchner responded to the lawsuit saying it was "nothing but an abuse of the legal system by a few people who are seeking to impose their views at the expense of the hundreds of thousands of visitors, families and schoolchildren who come to the museum each year." The city's corporation counsel was reviewing the suit, but attorney Susan Kath said at the time the suit was filed, "We support the project wholeheartedly, and we feel it received the proper environmental review."

Bankoff stressed that the plaintiffs are not against an adaptive new use for the building but feel that it can be done without changing its facade drastically.

"The new design isn't a bad design; it just shouldn't be on that building," he said. "They bought a signature building. I don't understand why they're wanting to gild the lily."

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