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Love It and Leave It, or Demolish the Thing?

Merits of 2 Columbus Circle discussed

BY NATE SCHWEBER

Jeff Miles traveled uptown last week from his home in Gramercy Park to attend a panel discussion about the past and future of one of New York's most mysterious buildings, 2 Columbus Circle.

"I remember when Donald Trump was saying that the building was a waste of space. I disagree," Miles said. "It's a quirky building and it deserves to survive. Everybody on the panel seemed to get it."

More than 200 people attended the Feb. 12 presentation, which was held in the showroom of the neighboring Steelcase Building, Landmark West! and the Center for Architecture/AIA New York Chapter sponsored the session.

"There is very little consensus about this building," moderator Thomas Mellins told the crowd. "Some people love this building and don't want anyone to touch it.

Other people can't wait for the wrecking ball."

Currently, 2 Columbus Circle, which has been owned by the city since 1980, is going through a city review process because the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design, which has been selected to buy the property, wants to revamp it. The museum chose Oregon-based Allier Works Architecture for the refurbishing. The company must submit its plans for the building's renovation by March.

The property has fallen into disrepair since being given to the city and cannot be occupied in its current state. According to panel speaker Billie Tsien, a principal at Tod Williams Billie

Tsien Architects, however, it is in a prime location to attract museum visitors, because the Trump Towers going up on Broadway will draw so many people to the area.

The large turnout at the presentation about the opaque, windowless, gilded edifice testifies to the interest people take in it.

"I'm surprised to see so many people here," said Anne-Sophie Restoux, who works at nearby Carnegie Hall, "but when I first moved to New York 10 years ago and took the bus downtown from Columbia, that building just captivated me. It did it to a lot of other people too."

The 10-story, nearly windowless structure was built in 1964. Huntington Hartford, heir to the A&P Supermarket fortune, wanted the structure built on a trapezoidal piece of land at 58th

Street and Eighth Avenue, as a home for his personal collection of modern art. Mellins said Hartford was so enamored with modern art, as represented by the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd Street, that he wanted his gallery to be a building that rebuked it.

Ironically, the architect he hired to build 2 Columbus Circle was the same one who helped design MoMA.

That man was Edward Durrell Stone.

Stone's other famous buildings include the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, the El Panama Hotel in Panama City, the GM Building (his first skyscraper) and the U.S. Pavilion in Brussels for the World's Fair. The Fayetteville, Ark., native, who dropped out of both Harvard and MIT, got many of

his architectural inspirations from two years spent in Europe in the late 1920s. He also got much inspiration from his third wife, whom he met on a transcontinental flight and proposed to before it touched down in Paris.

Stone built 2 Columbus Circle with soft, white marble with cut-out porthole shapes at the corners so that visitors could see out.

Hartford dropped his association with the building five years after it opened. From 1969 through 1975 it was operated by Fairleigh Dickinson University. In 1976 Gulf & Western Industries bought the property as a gift to the city, intending that it serve for 30 years as headquarters for the

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Cultural Affairs Department.

The agency pulled out, and since 1998 only film crews have inhabited the space, temporarily.

The Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design plans to devote \$30 million to the purchase and renovation of 2 Columbus Circle. The property might well have been demolished if another one of the suitors, Trump, had been designated to buy it. Still, the debate remains as to whether the building is an eyesore or a testament to architectural genius.

"Two Columbus Circle must be preserved intact for future generations to enjoy, consider, debate and learn from," said Landmark West! representative Robert Stern, the noted architect and commentator. "Preserve this landmark whole. Preserve this public provocation, this embodiment of risk-taking

Hannah Marks, who lives on East 90th Street, said that like many of the people

who spoke at the presentation, she vacillates in her opinion of 2 Columbus Circle.

"I go back and forth on it," she said. "I don't know whether it should be preserved as an example of what was going on at the time, but I do know that New York has a tendency to tear things down too soon."

West Sider Ben Jannarone said he came to the presentation out of curiosity about the building.

"I was surprised that it has been vacant for so long," he said.

Kathleen Randal, who lives on West 129th Street, said the building is an important part of Columbus Circle.

"It makes me smile every time I see it," she said.

Park Slope, Brooklyn, resident David V. Griffin said he thinks the building is the pinnacle of "high classic modernism" and has an "oblique, opaque quality and a surreal, quiet sensibility."

"There aren't many buildings that puzzling in New York City," Griffin said. "Most other buildings, you look at them, and if you don't know what they are, it's a banality. Not this one." ☞

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