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The Good, the Bad, and the Folly: "At the Crossroads: The Future of 2 Columbus Circle"

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The good: Edward Durrell Stone intelligently shaped the northern façade of the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art to follow Columbus Circle. His original design also had recommended salvaging the columns of Pennsylvania Station to create a promenade around the circle, further integrating the building into the Circle and Central Park, and ingratiating it with the historic urban fabric. The bad: By combining modernist monumentalism with ornamentation both frilly and cartoonish, such as its legendary "lollipop" columns, Stone created something neither somber nor crowd-pleasing, neither mid-century nor postmodern. The exterior is confounding. Ada Louise Huxtable called it "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops" that "borders on poetic grotesquerie."

The building in question served as an appropriate backdrop for "At the Crossroads: The Future of 2 Columbus Circle," a spirited panel discussion hosted by Steelcase – at its headquarters on Columbus Circle. With the exception of one audience member's call to demolish the building in lieu of a merry-go-round, the program tread the delicate line between sentimental nostalgia, wince-but-embrace-it kitsch, and outright disgust. Moderated by architectural historian Thomas Mellins, panelists Reed Kroloff, Kurt Anderson, Theo Prudon, and Billie Tsien tallied the pros and cons of Stone's accidental poster child with equal parts thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. The event was co-sponsored by LANDMARK WEST! and the Center for Architecture/AIA New York Chapter.

After providing a brief historical background, Mellins posed the lead question: "What are we to make of this visually arresting building?" Immediately, it was obvious that the Huntington Hartford is the kind of building that tears at different heartstrings simultaneously. Tempering Kroloff's assessment that the Huntington Hartford's indefinable exterior aesthetic qualified as "drag modernism," Anderson said, "the products of risk taking are not necessarily good works of art."

But Kroloff later questioned whether or not the Huntington Hartford demonstrates risky design: "Stone had one idea that he recycled for 20 years on 50 scales. On the other hand," he continued, "it's really cute. Let's face it – it's a bauble. Even if it's not a good piece of architecture, does that mean it shouldn't be preserved? This brings up the issue of disposable societies, which transcends whether Stone is an interesting or good architect."

Indeed, by the evening's end, the panelists all seemed to agree that the Huntington Hartford should be preserved. Robert A.M. Stern was unable to attend the panel, as originally planned. But, always one to provide a good quote, he relayed a statement that summed up everyone's feelings about keeping the building intact. "New York is where orthodoxies are challenged by new ideas," Stern wrote. "Its provocations are important now as ever."

In agreement with Stern's declaration could be Columbus Circle's newest addition: Columbus Centre, the new headquarters of AOL Time Warner designed by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, frames the Huntington Hartford. As Anderson put it, "The way this holds the circle, others [the Huntington Hartford] will seem less freakish." Columbus Centre also contrasts the Huntington Hartford's delicate size, and the luxury towers' glazing underscores the former museum's idiosyncratic neither-here-nor-there play of solid and void. This new neighbor seems to respectfully solidify the Huntington Hartford's role as a folly on the edge of a park, a metaphor that materialized over the course of discussion.

So what of the future of 2 Columbus Circle as decided by the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum? Tsien may have provided the best evaluation. Our ambivalence toward the Huntington Hartford "always has to do with looking at it from outside," she said. "When you move through the inside, I can say that I really like the planning of the spaces. It has a whole interior life. Unless you give this building a life, and let the museum have a life, then we'll have a pissoir," referring to its "fragrant" condition when the building's arcade served as an unofficial homeless shelter. "Brad Cloepfil [whose firm, Allied Works Architecture, won the design competition for the new Museum of Arts and Design] is very thoughtful, and has an interesting attitude about existing spaces. It is very difficult for us to pre-judge. If it remains as it is, it's a dead building, and it has been for many years."

-David Sokol