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The New York Post Opinion Page: Elitists for Eyesores

By Steve Cuzzo

September 14, 2004 -- With Time Warner Center open and lush landscaping soon to be completed on the traffic island that faces it, Columbus Circle is almost fully reclaimed for enjoyable, productive public use after decades of neglect.

But "almost" is not enough. The vacant eyesore at 2 Columbus Circle continues to blight all around it - thanks to a campaign of civic vandalism masquerading as enlightened preservationism.

"Civic vandalism" once described the atrocity that spawned the city's imperfect but indispensable landmarks law: the demolition of the original Penn Station. It meant the economically-motivated destruction of great old buildings to put up hideous new ones.

At Columbus Circle today, civic vandalism takes the opposite form: a mendacious lawsuit aimed at preserving an awful building in order to thwart its inspired replacement, a redesign by the Museum of Arts & Design enabling the proper display of its collection of contemporary American crafts.

The museum has a contract to buy Edward Durrell Stone's marble-faced, lollipop-columned monstrosity from the city. But the preservationist group Landmark West and a handful of neighborhood zealots went to court to block the sale.

They were apoplectic that the window-less facade facing Central Park is to be replaced with terra cotta and glass. They preposterously claimed the city broke the law by not concurring in their peculiar view that 2 Columbus Circle, however "zany" (as even its most vocal defender, prominent New York architect Robert A.M. Stern, calls it), should be preserved in its current worthless form.

Despite a persistent nagging campaign by knee-jerk preservationists, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission has never seen the need to "calendar" Stone's abomination for consideration. The prospective sale to the museum prompted the lawsuit, which basically asked the court to delegitimize the LPC by forcing it to give 2 Columbus Circle a hearing.

Last spring, state Supreme Court Justice Walter B. Tolub threw out their case. But it isn't over: The obstructionists plan to appeal. They have little chance of winning, but hope to drag things out long enough to kill the deal.

Last week the city won a round when the Appellate Division agreed to an expedited hearing, meaning the appeal must be filed by December.

Judge Tolub wrote that the court could not "impermissibly" substitute its own judgement for that of public agencies set up to consider preservation issues. He did not say, but he might have, that for judges to overrule the Landmarks Commission and override the protocols established to ensure a fair review process would open the door to chaos.

If a few activists could get their way in court by waving a petition and a few affidavits, why couldn't the reverse happen, too? Why couldn't property owners block the landmarks panel from putting their buildings up for consideration merely by rounding up opinions saying they weren't worth a hearing?

While the lawyers ring up fees, the ridiculous structure at one of the city's crucial gateway sites stands empty and derelict, unusable for any reasonable purpose even if its facade could be restored.

Louis Buffalino, a real-estate broker with CB Richard Ellis who represents the Museum of Arts & Design, says the load-bearing marble is partly what makes it "virtually impossible" to control the interior climate - and climate control is utterly crucial for an art collection.

It is hard to imagine a better solution than the museum's. Architect Brad Cloepfil's design would maintain the building's original size and shape - tender treatment for a structure most any other purchaser would prefer to demolish (as Donald Trump proposed a few years ago).

Not even architect-historian Stern, the building's staunchest defender, claims that 2 Columbus Circle is beautiful. Instead, he argues that it matters in the arcane contexts of Stone's career and 1960s architectural currents - as "a pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment." Such issues may interest scholars, but they're immaterial to the real-world task of recognizing an obvious lemon.

Preservationists say 2 Columbus Circle was a jewel before its physical decay set in. They're wrong: It was a stinker from the start. Around 1971, I dropped in at what was then the impeccably-maintained Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art for a Giorgio DiChirico exhibition. His "metaphysical" paintings were no more eerie than the building's claustrophobic, window-less upper floors.

Why would a handful of cranks want to inflict the dysfunctional relic on the city for all time? Sophia deBoer, a petitioner who lives at 25 Central Park West, says it's "a vital presence in her daily life, and its loss would have a severe and negative impact on her sense of place and neighborhood identity."

Such airy claims of personal impact are necessary to establish legal "standing" to sue, but the suit's substance was no less hollow. It claimed the city's environmental assessment did not adequately consider whether the building was an "important" historic resource.

But Judge Tolub wrote: "The state and city, by its agencies, and the people through their Community Board and elected officials have concluded that 2 Columbus Circle is not worthy of preservation in its present form."

In fact, a few weeks ago, the matter went before the Manhattan Borough Board, whose blessing was needed for the sale under the city's land-use review procedure. The panel - hardly a bulldozer cabal, comprised of Borough President C. Virginia Fields, City Council members and community-board chairpersons - voted for it 9-1.

Yet the executive director of Landmark West, Kate Wood, insists that Mayor Bloomberg "is not responding to the democratic will by refusing to hold hearings."

No, Ms. Wood: What's undemocratic is when a few elitists try to subvert the decision-making process because it has produced a result they happen not to like.

Landmark West board member Bruce Simon said he hoped the Appellate Division "will take into consideration the vast public outpouring" of support to preserve 2 Columbus Circle as it is. But the "vast public outpouring" is bogus. Writing in The New York Times on June 3, Joyce Purnick illuminated the cozy relationship between Landmark West and the Historic Districts Council, signatories to the lawsuit and other groups supporting their cause.

This is some New Yorkers' idea of democracy in action: like-minded obstructionists banding together to thwart an obvious stroke for the public good, and the city be damned.

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