

Overline:  
Community News

Photo credit: Andrew Schwartz

Caption: Edward Durell Stone's building at Two Columbus Circle is likely to serve as the home to a city museum.

Pq: "It's not about taste, it's about what's important in our 20th century heritage."

Hed:  
Museum Wins in Court  
Subhed:  
Two Columbus Circle's New Look

By Liz Todd

Preservationists trying to conserve an unusual building at Columbus Circle have vowed to fight on, despite seeing two of their court cases dismissed last month.

The Historic Districts Council, Landmarks West and Docomomo filed suit against the city, challenging the environmental review process and questioning whether proper public notice had been given before

the Manhattan Borough Board held a meeting on the Two Columbus Circle proposal.

The Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court dismissed the environmental case Feb. 24. On the same day, the Borough Board case was dismissed in the New York State Supreme Court. Preservation groups are opposed to plans to alter the iconic Edward Durell Stone building, which will become the new home for the Museum of Arts and Design.

“We filed both lawsuits on behalf of the general public, who have been completely shut out of this,” said Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West. “It’s not even at the end of the day about Two Columbus Circle, but about how many more buildings will be lost because of this kind of covert governance.”

Wood and others have been fighting to get the Landmarks Preservation Commission to consider landmarking the stark building. A spokesperson for the Commission has said in the past that the commissioner reviewed the building in 1996 and decided against a hearing, so they are sticking to that. Repeated phone calls to the Landmarks Commission were not returned before deadline.

Wood said the preservationists wanted to see evidence that there had at least been internal discussion on the merits or otherwise of landmarking

Two Columbus Circle. Landmarks West is still in court with a Freedom of Information Act suit against the Commission for failing to provide access to public documents about their internal consideration of the building.

“We wanted to try to understand whether there had been any reasonable consideration for this building, just to put our minds at rest on this issue,” she said. Letters supporting a hearing and praising Durell Stone’s brutalist architecture have been sent to the commission from around the world, she added.

Wood said the court decisions had been demoralizing, but that the public outpouring of support for preserving Two Columbus Circle had been great.

“Really the response was amazing,” she said. “People are really concerned that these great resources are going to be lost before their time. Two Columbus Circle has become the poster child.” She added, “It’s not about taste, it’s about what’s important in our 20th century heritage.”

Laurie Beckelman, director of the new building project at the museum, said they hoped work might be completed by mid-2007. “Now the city is out of the courts we can move ahead to buy the building,” she said.

The Museum of Arts and Design, currently housed at 40 West 53rd Street, expects to buy the building from

the city for around \$17 million, and spend \$25 million on renovation. Plans include putting in windows overlooking Central Park, and replacing the marble facade with terra cotta.

“We are very excited,” said Beckelman, who said waiting to start work had been difficult. “I am not very good at treading water,” she said.

The Museum of Arts and Design’s current site will be sold off to raise funds, but will remain a cultural institution due to zoning regulations, Beckelman said. She admitted the project had been dogged by controversy for some time.

“Some people in the preservation community have just been very upset that the Landmarks Commission did not hold a hearing,” she said. “Let’s hope we have left it behind.”

Wood said the preservationists would request leave to appeal, and continue in their Freedom of Information Act suit.

“People just feel like they used to have faith in the Landmarks Commission,” she said, “like they were this expert body that would be reasonable and rational, and that’s been broken down.”

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