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Taking a Chisel to 2 Columbus Circle, With No Regrets

By [ROBIN FINN](#)

HOLLY HOTCHNER bops into her subterranean office at the Museum of Arts and Design on West 53rd Street with one crimson-manicured hand at full extension and her startling nimbus of auburn hair rippling like a flag in a stiff wind. Her copious freckles, invigorated by a week of hard hiking in the [Utah](#) sunshine, resemble dappled body armor. Even her jewelry - a wire cuff, a hefty diamond engagement band and an oversized beaded floral necklace that rates jaw-dropping reactions on the street - packs a tacit punch.

Without being asked, she rips into an infomercial for "Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2," the museum's "boundary-breaking" display of modern artifacts by Native American artists; it opens on Sept. 22 and is, she vows, one-of-a-kind. Political. A must-see.

She looks and sounds, in short, like a woman capable of mowing down any obstacle in her path, including the derelict nine-story white elephant at 2 Columbus Circle that the museum agreed to buy from the city for \$17 million in 2002 and intends to use as its flagship, after a sophisticated \$30 million face-lift that has provoked four lawsuits from preservationists. She is psyched at the prospect of reinventing the museum she runs: "It's sort of a real dream to be able to build a museum in New York City." A legacy for a would-be sculptor who never saw herself in "a desk job."

She promises that the sculptural elements of 2 Columbus Circle, which she describes as "a designated mausoleum" in its current incarnation, will be retained, but stands by the Landmarks Preservation Commission's decision not to award the building landmark status: "It's not like we're going in there at midnight with a wrecking ball. This building has more than had its day in court."

Buoyed by a Sept. 1 court ruling in favor of the museum, Ms. Hotchner, its director since 1996, when it was fumbling along in obscurity and insolvency as the American Craft Museum, hopes to start ripping into concrete next month. Appeals? Not a deterrent. The two-year litigation delay has already cost the museum \$5 million in overruns, equal to its yearly operating budget.

Clarification: She doesn't actually want to gut "the lollipop" building, the oddball marble-clad structure Edward Durell Stone designed in the kitschy 60's to house the modern art collection of Huntington Hartford. Rather, she wants to liberate it from hibernation and, courtesy of an external infusion of light-hued terra cotta and glassy fenestration, throw it a lifeline.

"I've never heard of anyone who likes the building aesthetically," she says, seated at a black glass desk trimmed in masculine black leather (don't ask; it's a freebie hand-me-down). Sure, the desk is ugly, she adds, but at least it functions. Unlike 2 Columbus Circle, which is arguably ugly, but doesn't. "The word 'ugly' comes up again and again," she complains. "I think nearly everyone would agree 2 Columbus Circle is a tremendous eyesore; some of us call it the world's greatest urinal at this point."

Ms. Hotchner, who turned 54 on Sept. 11, is not intimidated by Landmark West, the Upper West Side preservation group, or the World Monuments Fund, which placed 2 Columbus Circle on its list of 100 endangered landmarks this summer. Quite the opposite. Back when she, in her own conservationist heyday (she's still on the board of the New York Landmarks Conservancy), was hired by the New-York Historical Society to preserve its museum collection, she was told that she ought to rethink her "very intimidating" hairdo. Opt for a librarian-ish bun. She balked. By 1988, she was museum director.

So maybe it's O.K., even in rarefied museum circles, to be a little intimidating?

"It's worked for me," says Ms. Hotchner, whose father, A. E. Hotchner, was Hemingway's biographer. She recalls Papa Hemingway as a bear of a guy, and not a teddy bear. "To a little girl of 4, he was frightening."

MS. HOTCHNER grew up in Manhattan, lived mostly at the Beresford, and attended the Dalton School. Her parents separated when she was young, and at 15, she lost her mother, a journalist for Look magazine and a publicist for David O. Selznick, to cancer. She attended Trinity College, and after graduating snagged a coveted spot at the Museum of Modern Art as a cataloger, for \$6,500 a year. Her sculpture career went nowhere - "I didn't want to be a Sunday artist" - but she became focused on art conservation and pursued a master's in fine arts and a certificate of conservation at New York University.

Jobs at the Met and the Tate segued into what remains a favorite project, the restoration of a John La Farge mural at the Church of the Ascension. Ms. Hotchner, who lives on the Upper East Side with her husband, Franklin Silverstone, a curator and software entrepreneur, left the historical society in a state of burnout and started an art consulting business when a headhunter recruited her for her present job.

"On my first day, I walked in and the first thing I saw was a mouse, the second thing was an eviction notice on my desk, and the third was that the bookkeeper came in and said, 'We can't make the payroll this week,' " she recalls. "It really was like a Monty Python kind of thing." Ms. Hotchner suggested that perhaps the wisest business course for the craft museum would be to go out of business. Or change drastically. The board chose the second option. She dug in. Still is.