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HEADLINE: Unanimity On a Building Is a Facade, Insiders Say

BYLINE: By DAVID W. DUNLAP

BODY:

The debate over whether 2 Columbus Circle merits consideration as an official landmark is playing out on the Landmarks Preservation Commission itself, despite City Hall's insistence that the case against the building was closed nine years ago.

The administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg favors a major alteration that would transform 2 Columbus Circle into the Museum of Arts and Design. It has relied on a 1996 decision by the landmarks commission's designation committee that the marble-clad, porthole-edged, concave building -- designed by Edward Durell Stone as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art -- did not warrant a public hearing.

But on Saturday, Roberta Brandes Gratz, one of seven members who have joined the commission since the 1996 decision, said in a letter to The New York Times, "Neither I as an individual commissioner nor the current commission as a whole has rendered a 'professional judgment' on whether there should be a hearing or a designation."

Her letter suggested that at least some of the 11 commissioners favor a public hearing, as did telephone interviews yesterday with several members.

"It's very encouraging from our perspective -- a sign of life," said Kate Wood, the executive director of Landmark West, a preservation group that has been battling to save 2 Columbus Circle. The letter, she said, "gives us some hope that it's not a closed case."

However, the current chairman, Robert B. Tierney, has already said he will not seek to change the 1996 decision. And yesterday, the executive director, Ronda Wist, said Mr. Tierney "is not inclined to revisit this question."

On July 30, in an Op-Ed article in The Times, Sherida E. Paulsen, a former commission chairwoman, said 2 Columbus Circle "is of little consequence historically or culturally" and "so unlikely to qualify for landmark status" that the "commission determined that it did not merit a

public hearing." This, she wrote, was "the professional judgment of the 19 people" who have served on the commission since 1996.

Ms. Gratz's letter came in response to Ms. Paulsen's assertion, as did a letter in The Times from Beverly Moss Spatt, another former commission chairwoman, who asked, "If such overwhelming consensus is indeed the case, where is the public record of this decision?"

A Buildings Department permit was issued in June to allow removal of the existing facade for the Museum of Arts and Design project. However, in a court case in which the sale of the building by New York City to the museum has been challenged by Landmark West, the city's Law Department said last month that it would not close on the sale of 2 Columbus Circle or authorize work under the existing permits until Sept. 7.

Though the 41-year-old building was once widely derided, preservationists argue that Mr. Stone was a major architect and that evolving tastes permit a better appreciation of his romantic style of Modernism. In any case, they say, the building's fate should not be decided by a committee but by the full commission in a formal vote, after public testimony.

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

GRAPHIC: Photo: The building at 2 Columbus Circle, where a renovation is planned that would change its distinctive look. It has been denied landmark status. (Photo by Librado Romero/The New York Times)

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