



STATEMENT FOR:

PEOPLE'S PUBLIC HEARING FOR 2 COLUMBUS CIRCLE

General Society for Mechanics and Tradesmen Library

20 West 44th Street

New York, New York

July 14, 2005

My name is Stanley Bulbach. I am a fiber artist who lives and works down on West 15th Street here in Manhattan. Although we have very active community groups in that neighborhood, including the West 15th Street 200 Block Association and the Chelsea Village Partnership, Inc., on both whose boards I serve, it is difficult for us to weigh in as organizations in this important issue because we are told it is too far from our neighborhood.

However as an individual taxpayer and citizen, I can certainly weigh in independently and would like to express my grave concerns about the proposed plans of the Museum of Arts & Design to destroy the exterior design of 2 Columbus Circle.

Much of the current debate about 2 Columbus Circle is taking place in terms of the importance of the building's architectural design. But the issue is far more than just competing aesthetic opinions about design. A lot of this debate also regards the public's right to participate in decisions about the property it owns and the cultural heritage that that property constitutes. The Museum of Arts & Design has privately pressed to disenfranchise the public by thwarting a public hearing at the Landmarks and Preservation Commission. This pressure to disenfranchise the public is particularly alarming because the Museum of Arts & Design simultaneously pursues many financial benefits from the public's seriously drained coffers.

A third aspect of this debate regards what principles museums claim to uphold. According to my *Webster's Dictionary*, a museum is "a building, or part of one, in which are

preserved and exhibited objects of permanent interest in one or more of the arts and sciences.”

Note the priority of “preserved”. Steven Miller, former Senior Curator of the Museum of the City of New York summed it up succinctly when he wrote in the *New York Times* (11/29/03), “I am especially shocked that a museum devoted to design would choose to deliberately destroy its largest and most obvious design artifact.”

Not only does the Museum of Arts & Design fail to preserve the exterior design, it then featured an attack against preservationism in general on its official website. The museum posted only one article to support its efforts. It was “Elitists for Eyesores” by Steve Cuzzo in the *New York Post* of September 14, 2004 (pg. 29). The article excoriated preservation as “Civic vandalism” referring to “knee-jerk preservationists,” “elitists,” and “like-minded obstructionists.” And did the museum also identify the sole supporting authority’s qualifications? No, the museum did not disclose Mr. Cuzzo’s credentials. The current *Who’s Who in Journalism* reports that he has no degree in architecture, history, etc. It claims he only has a BA. In English. More interesting is that elsewhere the *New York Post* identifies Mr. Cuzzo as its real estate editor. What a coincidence that is!

Perhaps the primary ethical responsibilities of museums have been somewhat blurred in New York, especially after the Whitney Museum of Art recently tried to destroy buildings that were already landmarked. But we shouldn’t grow callous to this assault on ethical principles. If museums now have other priorities that now trump their primary ones — such as priorities of the tourism, entertainment, and real estate development industries — then we should bring those changes of ethical priorities into the broad light of public examination and discussion as well.

In 1999 there was a major controversy at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that many claimed was solely an issue regarding censorship. But it was largely a controversy over false

research claims by the museum and major undisclosed conflicts of financial interest and loss of curatorial control. Many books have been published recently about the growing ethical conflicts of our art museums. So much so that in 2000 the American Association of Museums publicized New Ethical Guidelines in the *New York Times* calling for “increased transparency and accountability” in how their members operate.

Above and beyond the aesthetic opinions being debated in this issue, as an artist concerned about the ethical directions our art museums are now going in, I urge everyone to also consider the American Association of Museum’s call for “increased transparency and accountability.” Lets talk more openly about the policies of the Museum of Arts & Design regarding design destruction instead of preservation. Let’s talk more probingly about the museum’s policies regarding privately thwarting public review. And let’s talk more with our communities about whether the Museum of Arts & Design’s policies merit the public’s continuing help when the museum applies for financial supports from the public taxpayers.

Thank you.

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