

Perception and the Problem with Preserving Modernist Architecture: 2 Columbus Circle

Lauren Vollono

*“The greatest glory of a building is not its stones, nor its gold...it is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the **transitional** character of all things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties...it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour and preciousness of architecture.”¹*

-John Ruskin [author’s emphasis]

Transition is at the forefront of re-envisioning 2 Columbus Circle. In 2008, it was the Museum of Arts and Design, and in 1998, the abandoned marble Lollipop Building. In 1964, it was the controversial backlash against abstract modernism known as the Gallery of Modern Art, and in 1960, the demolished site of the 1874 Pabst Grand Circle Hotel. The driving force behind its transition is perception. The 2008 “reconfiguration” of 2 Columbus Circle by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works presents a series of new and old perceptions of the site, displaying a confused amalgamation of its historical references and a revelation of truth and light. While its re-design presents both a series of problems and solutions for the preservation of modernist architecture, the politics surrounding the building’s failed designation as a historic landmark indicate a set of problems in the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). Critics have often confused the discussion of the re-design of the building with the errors of the LPC, allowing the perception of the building’s design to be a critique on the LPC. By separately analyzing the two critiques, the 2 Columbus Circle redesign exposes many problems inherent in contemporary practices of modernist preservation and the role of adaptive re-use in providing “the golden stain of time” that provides real truth in the politics of a building’s history.

Site History

Just a few years after the construction of Robert Moses’ New York Coliseum in 1956, Huntington Hartford commissioned Edward Durrell

Stone to design his Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle. The two structures were built as part of the urban renewal project to revitalize what was considered a socially and economically debilitated part of Manhattan. Ironically, writer David Dunlap has noted the project may have “paved the way to its own extinction by launching a wave of redevelopment,” ultimately making low-rise buildings in the 3.4 acre site unsustainable.² The plot on which the building was erected is an irregular, trapezoidal shape bounded by Columbus Circle, Broadway, West Fifty-Eighth Street, and Eighth Avenue. Huntington Hartford, owner of the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company and an eccentric in the New York social scene, bought the land to construct his gallery of modern figural paintings, which would serve to protest abstract expressionism displayed in the paintings of the Museum of Modern Art.³ As a comment on the ineffectiveness of abstraction, Hartford hired the famed former-modernist architect Edward Durrell Stone to design his Gallery.⁴ Stone, a former Bauhaus-style architect and co-designer of the original Museum of Modern Art, found modernism to be dominated by conformity and unable to “cultivate the open mind.”⁵ His approach integrating historical motifs into modernist structures, while unpopular with critics at the time, was an antecedent to later postmodernist works.

Stone’s building [Fig. 1] included luxurious walnut-paneled galleries with thickly carpeted floors, or elaborately finished in *parquet de Versailles* and marble. The three and a half galleries surrounded a grand central circular staircase at half levels, with a 154-seat auditorium in its basement. There was an ostentatious cocktail bar and Polynesian restaurant on the gallery’s highest level, and curatorial and storage spaces on the upper floors of the ten-story building.⁶ While the façade was largely windowless, Stone envisioned a “Venetian-inspired vertical palazzo” with grey-veined Vermont marble walls perforated with porthole like openings at the corners, base and crown.⁷ An early review of the structure in *Interior Design* states the gallery was “well on its way to becoming a landmark in a city meagerly blessed with outstanding architecture, featuring luxurious and gracious materials that create an effect of natural settings.”⁸

While Stone’s contemporaries noted the building’s sumptuous materiality, architectural critics condemned the design of 2 Columbus Circle in the press. Ada Louis Huxtable, architecture critic for *The New York Times*, pinned Stone’s design as, “simply prefer[ing] a less controversial idiom, avoid[ing] the more provoking and stimulating experiments, smooth[ing] off the rugged edges and pads well with wall-to-wall luxury.”⁹ She famously remarked of its column-supported façade, “the museum re-



Fig. 1. Kate Wood, *2 Columbus Circle Prior to Renovation*, 2002. Digital photograph. © Landmark West!.

sembles a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops.”¹⁰ Olga Gueft, editor of *Interiors* magazine, dismissed the rows of portholes as “borders of eyelet hand-embroidered on a marble christening robe...too winsome for heavyweight criticism.”¹¹ Emphasizing the banality of Stone’s historical references, modernist Alfred Frankfurter claimed, “to attribute a ‘Venetian’ source to the design is to be libel on the grandeur of the Adriatic.” Of the interior, Frankfurter also commented, “It has something of the cheap glamour of a shoe emporium on Main Street,” with too little emphasis on art and too much “awe for the jewel case that advertises the wealth and status of the owner.” To many, Stone’s design was as lavish, self-centered and vacuous as its client, offering nothing as a “potential gap-filler for the 50 years of invention that he wanted us to forget.”¹²

As Theodore H. M. Prudon writes, “In the United States, support for preservation has always been tied to perception: the perceived value of a building or place (whether visual, historic, cultural or otherwise) in the present and as it is directly related to both the past and the future.”¹³ Appreciation of an aesthetic takes time to mature, and modern buildings present a particular challenge as they differ from country to country, by

typology and time. The initial reception of Edward Durrell Stone's Gallery of Modern Art was one of disgust in New York, both for its ideological stance against abstraction and its architectural historicism against dominant modernist trends. While the building continued to take on many different meanings and symbols in New York after 1964, the initial perception of The Gallery of Modern Art condemned 2 Columbus Circle before preservationists were able to defend it.

Due to a rapid succession of owners, the original social context of 2 Columbus Circle became less tied to the building, and its design was perceived with a less disdainful eye. In just 5 years of the museum's opening, Hartford closed the Gallery and donated the property to Fairleigh Dickinson University. In the 1970s, the building had a brief life as a Manhattan *kunsthalle* called the New York Cultural Center, and was eventually sold to Gulf and Western as office space.¹⁴ Proving inefficient for those needs, the building was gifted to the City of New York in 1980 and became the Department of Cultural Affairs headquarters. In 1998, the City vacated the building, leaving it abandoned for four years before the Museum of Arts and Design bid for the property.¹⁵

The Political Critique - The LPC's Failure

In 1994, 2 Columbus Circle became eligible for landmark status in New York City. The LPC conducted a site survey under then Chairman Jennifer Raabi, and decided against landmark designation under the premise that, "the building had no architectural merit and it was unusable as it was and would simply languish otherwise."¹⁶ This decision was contested by locally-based preservation organizations like Landmark West!, but as there was little threat of alteration to the building, indifference proved pervasive among preservationists.

Critics have proposed that the LPC decision had nothing to do with aesthetics or architectural merit, but instead with the economic opportunity to capitalize on a potential real-estate bidding war over 2 Columbus Circle. American writer Tom Wolfe noted that each time the question of a public hearing on the building arose, "the landmarks commissioners...dove under their desks, clapped their hands over their ears, cried out to their secretaries to shove history and the concept of landmarks preservation itself through the shredder, and hid."¹⁷ The bidding war never actually occurred, but Wolfe suggested that Laurie Beckelman, former LPC chairwoman and Director of the New Building Program for the Museum of Arts & Design, inserted herself into the purchase of the property through political connections.

In 2005, the preservation advocacy group Landmark West! filed a Freedom of Information Act request that exposed corruption in the private emails between Beckelman and Robert Tierney, appointed Chairman of the LPC by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.¹⁸ After news of the collusion, the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation was formed to improve the landmark designation process in New York City, beginning with a lawsuit against Chairman Tierney. New York Supreme Court Judge Marilyn Shafer ruled that the LPC had habitually acted in a manner that was "arbitrary and capricious," by delaying responses to landmark designation requests and in its refusal to hold public hearings.¹⁹ While the LPC requires drastic reform to accommodate a preservation plan for New York's recent architectural past, if the response continues to lag, the LPC's role in modern preservation risks becoming void.

The LPC has a sordid relationship with modernist architecture, as in many ways the organization was established to delay its development to protect the earlier historic fabric of New York City. Park Commissioner Robert Moses ordered the mass destruction of historic buildings across the city in the 1950s and 1960s to provide land for development projects. One example of Moses' "urban renewal" campaign includes the destruction of William Cauvet's 1874 Pabst Grand Circle Hotel in 1960 for the creation of Hartford's Gallery at 2 Columbus Circle.²⁰ The LPC was formed in 1965, just one year after 2 Columbus Circle was built, and the controversy and poor handling of the building suggests that lingering issues remain that to be addressed concerning the Commission's role in preserving 1960s architecture. Herbert Muschamp of *The New York Times* astutely observed, "the public hearings that weren't held might have offered a forum for sorting out that era's fact from fictions...the landmarks agency can't conduct it business properly until it has properly reckoned with the period."²¹ With its refusal, the Commission ignored its mission statement to "safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage,"²² and revealed that "an agency established to enlarge our awareness of history was now in the business of condoning its erasure."²³

Preservation activists have shown the true might behind their union, but a conscious plan is still needed to safeguard modern architecture in highly-priced urban estate markets. While there is an extensive advocacy archive of Landmark West!'s efforts, New York Preservation Archive Project, and an extensive body of articles published in *The New York Times*, the force behind these efforts arrived too late and was unable to protect 2 Columbus Circle. As Fred Bernstein judges, the problem with post-war architecture is that "build-



Fig. 2. Hélène Binet, *Museum of Arts and Design*, 2008. Digital photograph. © Museum of Arts and Design, New York.

ings, unlike wide ties and Jefferson airplane albums, can't be put in storage for decades while they hope they become fashionable again."²⁴ While not every example can be saved, preservationists need to identify the key remnants of modernity's young architecture to give depth and substance to its identity.

The Design Critique - Grappling with the Recent "Inefficient" Past

While the intentionality of Brad Cloepfil's 2008 inclusion of historic fabric is debatable, the redesigned 2 Columbus Circle makes the re-use of a modernist structure economically and aesthetically valuable. There is much to learn from Cloepfil's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), as it is one of the first publicized examples of adaptive re-use with a post-war modernist building in America. [Fig. 2]

The building's façade required complete re-cladding due to years of neglect, in which the original marble façade had badly deteriorated from ferrous metal shims that had caused the marble panels to chip and potentially fall off of the building.²⁵ Preserving the memory of the old building, Cloepfil surfaced the structure with white, iridescent, four-foot terracotta tiles, which MAD director Holly Hotchner felt was fitting for a museum concerned with material and craft.²⁶ Though Allied Works pursued removing the lollipop columns, the columns remain as structural load-bearing elements that are enclosed in glass within the lobby and ground floor gift shop. To make the "solid, monolithic structure more ephemeral," Cloepfil designed continuous vertical and horizontal cuts on the building's façade and interior. As a result, light travels through each floor of the building, uniting the architectural composition and serving the museum's needs. Because of the building lot's awkward, trapezoidal plot, the building's existing shape was preserved with its concave façade conforming to Columbus Circle's curvature. The auditorium and building foundations were also kept, enabling Cloepfil to design with more lenient building codes and with greater flexibility.²⁷ While the building kept the distinctive columns, general floor plan, scale and shape of Durrell's design, the old Huntington Hartford gallery was ultimately destroyed; the Museum of Arts and Design similarly re-inhabited the niche of the former American Crafts Museum, assuming a transformed identity through historic reference.

Beginning with the Olin Studio park renovation of Columbus Circle and the destruction of Moses' New York Coliseum in 2000, continuing with construction on the AOL Time Warner complex in 2004, the environment surrounding 2 Columbus Circle had not seen so much change since the 1960s urban renewal project in which the Gallery was constructed. In many ways, reconfiguring 2 Columbus Circle in 2008 was a broader extension of preservation, making the building sustainable in its new context. Paul Goldberger of *The New Yorker* critiqued: "Cloepfil has been trapped between paying homage to a legendary building and making something of his own...if you knew the old building, it is nearly impossible to get it

out of your mind when you look at the new one.”²⁸ In many ways, this entrapment, or confusion, in Cloepfil’s design reveals the pressures and tensions concerning the restructuring of a post-war modernist structure. The details of the auditorium and columns reveal the politics of development and zoning advantages to keeping the old, while the continuous slits into the building’s face exhibit the need to re-define and imagine the building within its setting. The Museum of Arts and Design’s ability to reference Durrell’s Gallery of Modern Art is perhaps a greater tribute than a complete restoration of a building that, although quirky, did not meet its function as a museum and could not sustain itself.

Critique of Cloepfil’s design is often muddled with criticism of the LPC, and is thus generally negative, lacking insight about the context of the renovation. Nicolai Ouroussoff of *The New York Times* sums up this side of the criticism:

This is not the bold architectural statement that might have justified the destruction of an important piece of New York history. Poorly detailed and lacking in confidence, the project is a victory only for people who favor the safe and inoffensive and have always been squeamish about frictions that give this city its vitality.²⁹

Interestingly, Ouroussoff’s criticism sounds surprisingly similar to Ada Louis Huxtable’s critique of Stone’s 1964 design as “preferring a less controversial idiom.”³⁰ The building is the same difficult, awkwardly sized space it has always been, and critics will continue to love hating it. Robert Campbell of *The Boston Globe* explains Cloepfil’s cuts into the façade to look as if “someone has taken a box cutter and made slashes in the carton...That’s about it for expressive architecture in the new MAD.”³¹

While aesthetics can be debated, there are intrinsic components to Cloepfil’s redesign of 2 Columbus Circle that are instructive for the future adaptive re-use of post-war modernist architecture. While not every building can be saved, maintaining the footprint and scale of a structure can preserve its context within its surroundings and can instruct future generations to the challenges and triumphs within that environment. Whenever possible, preserving interiors like Huntington’s auditorium, not only provide economic benefits, but also aesthetically and socially preserve the space in its fullest conception within the context and citing of the building. One questionable feature in the re-design is the display of the lollipop

columns. Cut out from their original exterior colonnade, the columns are entombed within the structure’s frosted glass, lifeless and lacking the importance of their load-bearing and aesthetic functions. While it is important that they exist within the fabric of the renovated building, it is obvious that the columns were an afterthought. Due to their memorable importance in Stone’s building, the columns should have been a conscious part of Cloepfil’s design and been interpreted within the context of the Museum of Art and Design.

Cloepfil creates a confused amalgam of a building, trapped structurally by its load-bearing concrete walls and lollipop columns. Even as the preservation of the auditorium and lollipops were somewhat haphazard, the building re-evaluates the perception of re-using the fabric of the recent past. Though despised at its inception, Stone’s 2 Columbus Circle had become part of the historic fabric of Manhattan that New Yorkers fought for in the quick demolition and re-structuring of New York Coliseum and Columbus Circle in the late 1990s. The redesign reflects Cloepfil’s attempts to appease the public’s perception of 2 Columbus Circle, while meeting the artistic and practical needs of the Museum of Arts and Design.

Conclusion

Tackling some of the major issues of modernist preservation, Brad Cloepfil was challenged with the task of taking an iconic, almost fully unusable building and transforming it into a highly functional, aesthetically appealing building appropriate for its Columbus Circle surroundings. The design shows a reference to its past, while giving it a sustainable hope for the future. The Museum of Arts and Design distills the central components to Stone’s 1964 building, by preserving its structural system, the basement auditorium intact with its 1964 interior decoration, its scale, its columns (though slightly entombed) and its number and spacing of floor levels. As an illustrative example for adaptive re-use, Cloepfil manages to make the use of an earlier poorly functioning modernist building into a highly efficient adaptation aiming at the same central motive. In this sense, his choice to preserve the existing structure, while transforming its aesthetic, is an economically efficient alternative to the destruction of a non-protected site.

What should be learned from 2 Columbus Circle is that post-war modernist architecture is in danger of demolition as it is stuck between the perceptions of being “old” and “historic”. While not every example should remain, preservationists need to value selection and demolition based on

criteria beyond subjection including dislike and negative association.³² By the same token, the re-design of recent past structures should be valued as economically and culturally beneficial. Cloepfil's re-design considers these values and sets a precedent for the future re-use of modernist structures.

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