

“Protests Against MAD Renovation Plans Continue”

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

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HISTORIC-PRESERVATION GROUPS led by Landmark West! protested outside the Museum of Arts & Design (MAD) in New York on May 31. Inside the museum, a reception for SOFA New York was celebrating the opening of an exhibition of contemporary craft art from the collection of Simona and Jerome Chazen. Mr. Chazen is the co-chair of the museum's capital campaign and, according to the New York Post, has donated \$12 million toward the renovation of a new home for the museum.

The museum has contracted to buy the former Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art with plans to replace the building's unusual exterior — despite the building's inclusion in several major local, national, and international preservation groups' endangered-historic places lists. The museum believes that the facade is so damaged that it would be prohibitively expensive to preserve and restore it.

The mid-Manhattan building, 2 Columbus Circle, was created in the 1960s by architect Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the

Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Robert A. M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, commented about the alteration plans in *Preservation* magazine (November/December 2004): “Some critics say that New York is short on world-class buildings by world-class architects. Well,



here is one that is full of ideas about site, image, history, and the freedom that comes with modernity. Transforming the building into the new home of the Museum of Arts & Design need not be done at the expense of Stone's design.”

MAD seeks a new design for its new home as part of its controversial 2003 plan to repackage itself. Claiming contemporary craft to have a plunging market status, the museum has expanded its scope to include design, a move reflected in its changing its name from “American Craft Museum.”

At the noisy May demonstration, LandmarkWest! announced a lawsuit alleging illegal conspiracy between MAD’s building project director, Laurie Beckelman, a former chair of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, and the current commission chair, Robert B. Tierney, to block a public hearing to consider protecting the building’s design. Landmark West!’s attorney, Whitney North Seymour, Jr., former prosecutor for the Southern District of New York, obtained e-mails between the two with a Freedom of Information Act request.

MAD’s actions raise serious questions. The Ethical Guidelines of 2000 of the American Association of Museums call for increased accountability and transparency by its members in their operations. And what is a museum’s primary purpose, if not to

preserve? In a letter to *The New York Times* (November 29, 2003), Steven Miller, executive director of the Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey, wrote, “I am especially shocked that a museum devoted to design would choose to deliberately destroy its largest and most obvious design artifact.”

In mid-July, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation announced that 2 Columbus Circle “does appear to meet the eligibility criteria for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.” Meanwhile, there are three still-pending lawsuits brought by LandmarkWest! and other citizens to prevent the building’s changes from beginning without due process.*

*After this article appeared in publication, the lawsuits were not successful, the building was then defaced, and today looks like an aluminum siding clad discount retail outlet.

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