

## Femalien

### Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle

My father can identify exactly one piece of post-war Modern architecture in Manhattan: that bizarre production on the south side of Columbus Circle he remembers as “the Persian Whorehouse.” In the nature of such things, Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle has earned widespread infamy for its combination of loosely interpreted ornament, inscrutable façade, and prominent location. Now that the adjacent Coliseum is being replaced by an enormous development of “quality architecture”, the same end is quite possible for Stone's building. Is it worth saving?

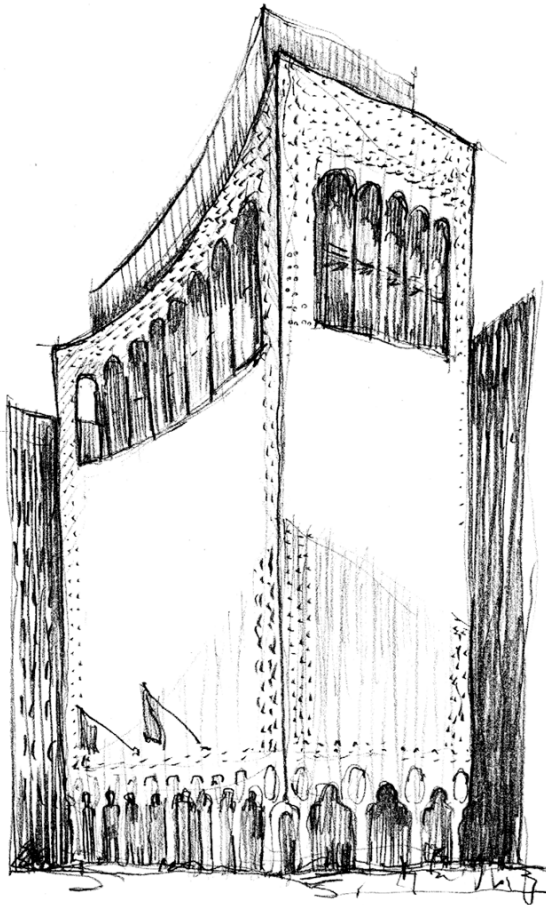


2 Columbus Circle (1958-65) at least has the virtue of getting more interesting the more you know about it. Originally built as a gallery for Huntington Hartford's art collection, the almost windowless midsection contains a series of galleries, some double-height, that step down at half-levels. The perforations running up the edges of the building turn out to be miniature portholes giving the galleries glimpses of the city. Stone felt that artificial lighting made windows superfluous, except to frame views; accordingly, only the restaurant and lounge at the top floors open to the panorama of Central Park. As a type — the museum/block/tower — 2 Columbus Circle is unique, and its execution, especially the combination of innovative and *retardataire* spatial arrangements, is almost as rarified.



Of course, this points at the difficulty with Stone: no longer convinced of Modernism's stand-alone capabilities, he introduced highly-edited transcriptions of Beaux Arts planning and exoticized ornament into his work. The thinness of this strategy and the equivocation of its products tend to disgust those who value integrity and only mildly excite those who are looking for kitsch. Many people simply can't process the

transformation from his early International Style work (including the original MoMA) to his later confections, although, frankly, both phases seem to have sprung from an easy relationship to novelty fostered by a life of privilege – so much for Modernism’s social content.





The slipperiness of Stone's oeuvre makes the value of 2 Columbus Circle difficult to judge, but I think there's another issue here. Not to drag out gender theory, but this building is so *girly*. Worse, it flaunts pink stone and frilly details at the same time as it strikes a macho heroic pose. My father's "whorehouse" is, of course, a hotbed of both male and female identity, but minus an explicit sexual program those identities blur here into a design that can seriously be described as transgendered. Think I'm just sex-obsessed? Stone himself credits his second wife, Italo-Iberian fashion plate Maria Torchia, for awakening his interest in luxe ornament and materiality. As you'd expect, Modernists of a certain age tend to see her as the bad actor who led Stone astray; by extension, Stone's post-1950 work has been painted as a series of scarlet women. If you can be less stern, though, it helps to look at 2 Columbus Circle as a bulwark of manly hubris (the original interiors were more Hefner than High Art) making overtures to femininity. A 150-foot tall love poem gone wrong? Yes, in the sense that we're left looking at a building which superimposes male and female in way that obviously turns a lot of people off.



Do we advocate a building because it broadcasts muddled gender issues at high volume? Not specifically, but recognizing this aspect helps us to see 2 Columbus Circle's value — and the content of its idiosyncrasy — more clearly. Trying to defend the building on its formal merits alone always runs up against the dissonance of speaking simultaneously about its two big selling points: the massing's terrific support of the arc of Columbus Circle (acceptable as Urbanism), and the peculiar attraction of all the "I Dream of Jeanie" decoration (entirely surreptitious). Stone's building is certainly *historical* in the sense that it's only possible to get it as a synthetic whole by considering the circumstances of its design, both macro (Modern purity / ornamental exploration) and micro (husband / wife). That's where it stops being an oddity and ties into substantial issues that are perhaps less architectural than cultural, and center on the admission of feminine sensibilities into a monumental posture. Further, 2 Columbus Circle doesn't just

introduce these issues; the building shamelessly acts out their consequences in front of all of us, in one of the city's most visible locations.



I argue that 2 Columbus Circle is worth defending — whatever its other virtues or vices — because it is so publicly strange, and demands historical knowledge to be understood. Even the most casual observer (including my father) must realize this is a building with a past, and it's not every Midtown high rise that reminds us that, once, something else was going on with design, and with our culture, and we're not quite connected with those past sensibilities any more. It's unlikely that anything replacing 2 Columbus Circle would make that point as emphatically, no matter how long it lasted there.

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