

TRI-BOARD TASKFORCE ON COLUMBUS CIRCLE

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October 3, 2002

Jean Parker Phifer, AIA
President
Art Commission
City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Re: Columbus Circle Reconstruction, Application 21188

Dear Ms. Phifer:

Thank you for delaying action on this matter to allow time for the proposed re-design of Columbus Circle to be presented to the public. Through the good offices of City Planning Commission Chairperson Amanda Burden, the Tri-Board Task Force on Columbus Circle held a public meeting on September 24, 2002, which was very well attended by the public as well as by representatives of the various agencies involved.

In general, the proposed design was well received. It is obviously the result of a complex collaboration among a variety of city agencies, and we applaud the fact that this collaboration has at last resulted in such an elegant and subtle design, and concrete plans for carrying it out without further delay.

The questions and comments that came from the public, including individual task force members, are as follows:

1. Pedestrian Access. With the large flow of traffic around the Circle and the looming buildings surrounding it, the Circle's central plaza risks becoming an island in a traffic circle. Pedestrian access to the Circle should be emphasized, primarily for safety reasons but also for design reasons. The location of the three crosswalks appears to be about as good as could be hoped for, given the limitations of the various traffic crossings, but the Department of Transportation's refusal to permit the crosswalks to be distinctively paved is disappointing. DoT's claim that such paving is difficult to install or maintain seems shortsighted, since a great, well-designed public space should and must include safe and excellent accommodation for the pedestrian. Distinctive paving would also emphasize the presence of the crosswalks for approaching motorists, who now often miss the crosswalks because they are not differentiated from all the other complicated roadway striping. Other great cities are able to install and maintain such paving; New York should be able to as well.

2. Lighting. The proposed lighting design for the Circle itself was enthusiastically received. Several members of the public voiced their disappointment, however, with the compromise choice of the Grand Central fixtures for streetlighting. It is again shortsighted not to design and fund the best and most aesthetically consistent streetlights for the public and for the Circle. The Grand Central alternative is inappropriate in style and inadequate even as a placeholder, because placeholders tend to become permanent. The minimalist elegance of the Circle's design calls out for a similarly distinctive and elegant streetlight.
3. Trees. The large trees to be planted on the circular berm should be selected and placed with a view toward maintaining views of the entire monument – the column as well as the sculptures on its base - from outside the Circle. Tree crowns should be open enough to permit a partial view through from all angles, and gaps between trees should leave unobstructed views of the entire monument from the major approaches from Eighth Avenue, Central Park South, Central Park West and the southbound lane of Broadway. At their full height, the trees should enhance the figure of Columbus on his column and not swallow him up. Some would prefer a height of no more than half the height of the monument.
4. Other Landscaping. Similarly, other plantings on the berm should not be so high or dense as to obscure views of the monument by passing pedestrians or cars or create the potential for security problems within the central plaza.
5. Signage. DoT's traffic directional signs were not part of the public design presentation. They should be consistent with or complementary to the overall aesthetic of the Circle design.
6. Perimeter Sidewalk. The shades and striping of the proposed perimeter sidewalk were difficult for some to imagine from the drawings and samples shown at the meeting. Though the sidewalk was described as a treatment for the entire perimeter except for the portion adjacent to Central Park's Merchant's Gate, the only substantial portion of the perimeter is in front of the AOL Time Warner Center. The remaining sidewalks at 2 Columbus Circle, 240 Central Park South and One Central Park West are all relatively short. Questions were raised about whether the shades and striping of the proposed perimeter sidewalk would cause the entire Circle to tilt toward the already overwhelmingly dominant AOL Time Warner Center. Some suggested that a more neutral treatment might be more appropriate with, perhaps, a single stripe on all the corners (except, of course, the Merchant's Gate corner) to suggest the unity of the Circle.
7. The Fountain. The fountain design was also enthusiastically received, though some would like to see it enhanced vertically. In the past, the Task Force has been assured that technology exists to permit the fountain to operate even in freezing winter temperatures. We hope that such continuous operation can be part of the final design.
8. Other AOL Time Warner Sidewalks. The proposed design for the sidewalks on the 58th and 60th Street sides of the AOL Time Warner Center was not presented at the public meeting, which is unfortunate as we understand that it is part of the application to the Art Commission. The only information we have on the proposal is the verbal description that

was provided at the Art Commission's public meeting on September 9: absolute black granite pavement with Himalayan white "carpets" extending from the various building entrances to the curbs. This arouses concern that a complicated design may detract from the Circle's design and further confuse the pedestrian environment. We hope that the design remains simple, and that it can be presented to the public before it is finalized.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide these questions and comment, and hope that they can be taken into account in the final design.

Sincerely,



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Chair
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Kyle Merker
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This letter was approved by Manhattan Community Board No. 4 at its full board meeting on October 2, 2002 and by Manhattan Community Board No. 7 at its full board meeting on October 1, 2002. This letter will be considered by the Executive Committee of Manhattan Community Board No. 5 at its meeting on October 7, 2002.

cc: Hon. Michael Bloomberg, Mayor
Hon. C. Virginia Fields, MBP
Local Elected Officials
A. Burden, DCP
R. Barth, DCP
D. Woodward, DCP
R. Okun, DDC
A. Benepe, DPR
A. Freitag, DPR
J. Laird, DPR
I. Weinshall, DOT
M. Forgione, DOT
D. Bershad, Art Commission
E. Benson, Central Park Conservancy