ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

POINTS OF VIEW

Museum of Arts and Design

> History haunts a non-landmark

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ROMAN THEATER OF CARTAGENA
Allied Works Architecture's Brad Cloepfil bravely tackles the redo for New York City's Museum of Arts and Design

By Fred A. Bernstein

Lighten up. That's my advice to the critics of New York City's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD). The renovation by Allied Works Architecture turned what had been a dreary, haunted house (Edward Durell Stone's 1964 Gallery of Modern Art) into a lively amenity for the city. And—at risk of darning with faint praise—the best of the buildings fronting Columbus Circle.

On one of my visits, I was accompanied by my sons, who were delighted to see that the museum's entrance facade seems to spell "HL." I explained to them that the oversize letters were accidental—the principal of Allied Works, Brad Cloepfil, AIA, had called for three vertical bands of glass on the north and west facades. But after construction had begun, the museum insisted on the addition of a horizontal band on the north (entrance) facade, to improve the views from the planned ninth-floor restaurant. That addition turned two of the verticals into an "H," leaving the third an "L," and angered Cloepfil, who took the unusual step of telling journalists of his complaint about the client's intervention.

But my sons didn't understand why Cloepfil was upset. "Every building should say 'HL,'" they announced, as if professing a manifesto. Metaphorically speaking, they're right: Every building, unless it's a biomorphic laboratory or a prison, ought to be inviting. Stone's original building for Huntington Hartford was about as welcoming as a mausoleum.

By contrast, Cloepfil's scheme—which required removing one of the building's famous lollipop columns—features an inviting entrance facing Columbus Circle. Inside, a handsome staircase draws visitors up to the second floor. From there, it is possible to continue on narrower, but still pleasant, flights, to each of the gallery levels. In creating such an effective circulation system in a confined space (the footprint of a tetragon with a penth roof, measuring 4,774 square feet), Cloepfil scored a major success. And the galleries those stairways lead to are surprisingly bright and open. Who knew that the building, which was shrouded behind Stone's fussy faux-Venetian facade, contained some 54,000 square feet over 12 levels? It seemed, at most, half that big.

For Cloepfil, previously known for Welden + Kennedy's ad agency headquarters in Portland, Oregon (where he is based), and the Contemporary Art Museum (2003) in St. Louis, MAD was a chance at the big time. Cloepfil was chosen in 2002 over Tsukiko Imani, FAIA, Zahid Hashmi, and Smith-Miller Hawkins. But preservationists were outraged by

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plans to alter Stone’s exterior, and the project was delayed by lawsuits (including one in 2005 against MAD and its director, Holly Hotchner, for “conspiracy to obstruct and subvert the lawful functioning of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission”). Cloepfil says he knew there would be controversy, but “I didn’t think it would be as vicious as it was.”

Still, he never considered keeping the Stone facade. Cloepfil had found the building “frightening” since his days at Pratt in the 1970s and later at Columbia’s GSAPP. And it was an urbanistic wasteland—a block that had been taken away from the city for so long,” he says. Then, too, the cladding, according to engineers retained by MAD, was beyond repair. Cloepfil replaced Stone’s white Vermont marble with glazed terra-cotta tile. “Its inescapable brings the body of the building alive,” he says, though some observers see a strong resemblance to a 1960s white brick apartment building.

But recladding is one thing; the architect faced a bigger challenge working with the building’s structure, consisting of concrete core and perimeter bearing walls (raised on those “bollard” columns), and concrete slabs. Cloepfil decided to create a 2-foot-wide cut through the north facade facing Columbus Circle to bring light into the galleries. But that simple gesture devolved into a series of deep, dark horizontal gashes and shallow glass-fritted vertical stripes that seem to draw on different architectural vocabularies. Cloepfil describes the cut as “a relatively minor intervention,” yet it reads as a complex, and confounding, set of moves.

During construction, Cloepfil had said the cut through the facade would turn the bearing wall structure into a series of cantilevers. In reality, metal pins are needed to reduce deflection and they quite noticeably traverse the horizontal gashes; Cloepfil concedes the pins are bigger than he had expected. Inside, the dramatic way the glazed vertical slits meet their horizontal extensions near the gallery ceilings (which Cloepfil says is explained by the need to hide blackout shades in overhead soffits) has come in for heavy criticism. But Cloepfil is undeterred. “I have to say, it’s an exquisitely detailed building,” he says. “If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s detail.”

He was less gallant when it came to the new horizontal window, which he blamed on a museum donor who “suddenly became a designer.” Cloepfil called the result “disconcerting and disruptive.”

Cloepfil will have other chances to show what he can do as a museum designer at the University of Michigan, where his 100,000-square-foot art museum will open this spring, and in Denver, where his Clyfford Still Museum is expected to break ground this summer. In those projects, where he is not treading on hallowed ground, his architecture will get a chance to succeed or fail on its own merits. As for the new MAD: Perhaps it’s not a great building—but it is a building to be grateful for.

Project: Museum of Arts and Design
Architects: Lourdes and Simona Church Building, New York City
Architect: Attila Udvardi
Architect: Brad Cloepfil, principals
Consultants: Robert Silman (structural); Arup (mechanical)

Sources:
Masonry: HBE Concrete (Torrant)
Metal/glass curtain wall: Seele
Glass: Oldcastle Glass
Paint: Benjamin Moore
Wall covering (auditorium): Exotil Textile
Office furniture: Steelcase

Cloepfil introduced daylight into the four 4,100-square-foot gallery levels through clerestory bands of clear glass connecting to fritted vertical glass slits. They are 24 inches wide and extend across the floor and ceiling (above). The typical galleries (opposite) are loftlike, with oak wood floors. Curved vitrines subdivide the jewelry gallery (left).
History haunts a (non)landmark

By Suzanne Stephens

When I was a kid (though not a mere child), I defended Edward Durrell Stone's much-maligned Gallery of Modern Art at Columbus Circle when it opened in 1964. It had four recheked white marble panels with an arcade and loggia outside, and rich walnut and macassar ebony paneling within. Thick, jungly-red-carpeted stairs took you up to intimate galleries at half-levels, where a sired and surreal art collection, including Gauguin's Salon Dancer Before Mirror (1906-70), awaited. At the top of the museum was the Gauguin Room, with tapestries by La Gauguin, where you could dine on (then) rare Pollyesian cuisine in a grasscloth-lined Mediterranean setting overlooking Central Park. You would hardly notice the dreary Coliseum to the west, where the Time Warner Center looms today.

At the time, an elder wiser architect tried to explain the errors of my judgment: The monument to Huntington Hartford's houseboat nonabstract art collection just didn't "work." My point about the gallery being designed by the same architect as the venerable Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) didn't fly. In the years between MoMA (1939) and the Gallery of Modern Art, Ed Stone had gone over to the dark side. Proving I was ultra-maverick was Ada Louise Huxtable's pronouncement in The New York Times that it was a "die-cut Venetian palace on lollipops."

With a sparse prescience, I, in turn, pronounced: "Mark my words, in 50 years it will be revered as historic." Even though Stone's opus was not given the time of day by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) when the Museum of Arts and Design decided to totally overhaul it some 40 years later, I must say the kid in me felt somewhat vindicated by the latest renovation. And I can hardly wait to see how it turns out.

Critics took uncharacteristic stance: Ada Louise Huxtable, a longtime advocate of preservation, came out for Allied Works' radical renovation, extolling preservationists for "nostalgia" and "trendy eclecticism." The late Herbert Muschamp of The New York Times, who often poked pothole preservation causes, wanted to save this symbol of the "emerging value of quirkiness" in the New York of its day.

Clearly, this is a win-win case: The new scheme would have to be beyond fabulous to make opponents forget the bloodshed. Though Brad Cloepfil's concept of cutting through concrete bearing walls to dematerialize the opaque structure was ingenious, the facade still looks draft. Cloepfil hoped the ivy, glazed, terra-cotta rain screen would make it luminous. But while the new facade has shone, it lacks glitter and glamor, since it receives no direct rays of light. And on grey days, forget it. This is all the more poignant because the museum plays a significant urbanistic role due to its prominent if eccentrically shaped site, seen from four sides. Moreover, with the concave entrance facade terminating the sweeping arc of the new Time Warner Center, it needs to provide proper punctation. To do so it needs more ... well, pizzazz. Like the old days.

Keeping the lollipop columns intact was arguable structurally, but by Cloepfil's partially masking them with glass on the outside, they look like half-forbidden remnants of a tear-down. Inside, their Moorish profiles add a jarring note. To be sure, the gallery space benefits from the new loftlike, open plan, and makes a strong case for gutting the old inards. Now you can really see the works on display (which may or may not be a good thing, depending). But the memorable spaces are Stone's below-ground auditorium and its lobby, on which Cloepfil performed a sensitive interpretive restoration. He brilliantly reconstituted the billowing curves of the metal disk ceiling, kept the walnut walls, and restored the bronze doors to recreate the once-chic and shimering ambiance. On the ninth floor, where the restaurant is planned, Cloepfil filled in the leggins so that the restaurant gains about 4 feet in depth. And now, with the controversial encroachment of clear glass, a knock-out view of the park view can be taken in. I'm on the side of the crockstar: In New York, any view is far too rare for restaurants to block out even a portion of the panoramic vista of Central Park framed by skyscrapers is loomy—and bad business.

So now the crockstar forms a giant "L." It does indeed ruin the architect's composition. But it is meant to be, no? The "L" acts as a ghostly reminder of the museum's first client, Huntington Hartford, and while we're at it, the clients of this incarnation, Holly Hotchner, MAD's indomitable director, and just wait: In 50 years, it will be declared a landmark.