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ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Neo-Modernist Is Having His Moment

By BRIAN LIBBY

ON a recent Tuesday morning in this city's booming Pearl District, the Allied Works Architecture office was in flux. The firm had moved to a historic two-story brick building over the weekend, and renovations were not yet complete. While young architects conversed over drawings and computer screens, a construction worker fastened a final swatch of carpeting to the floor. Scaffolding clogged the exterior. And Brad Cloepfil, the founder of Allied Works and a rising star of American architecture, was running late -- he had driven to the old office by mistake.

But Mr. Cloepfil (pronounced CLOPE-fill) hardly noticed the chaos. Strolling into the office in an immaculate auburn suit, his curly red hair belying his 46 years, he did not show the wear of 16-hour days and countless cross-country flights that often take him away from his wife and three daughters. It's the price of Allied Works' sudden national prominence, coming just six years after the firm's first major commission.

In October Allied Works won prestigious competitions to select the architects for two projects: an expansion of the Seattle Art Museum and the plan for the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design (formerly the American Craft Museum) at 2 Columbus Circle in New York.

Plans for both the Seattle and New York projects must be completed by March, a short time considering their scale. And in New York the client is changing its location, its name and its focus, which all affect Mr. Cloepfil's design. "It has to be bold," he said.

Then there is the prickly issue of Columbus Circle, which hasn't worked well as an urban space in decades. In addition, the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design's new home, the existing 1964 Edward Durell Stone building popularly known as the Huntington Hartford museum, is called a monolithic eyesore by some and an architectural treasure in need of preservation by others.

"He's walking into a minefield," said Aaron Betsky, director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute and a consultant for the \$30 million project. "The museum needed someone who would, on the one hand, respect the traditions of modernism that the building represented, and on the other hand, could have a no-nonsense attitude toward how to establish something new. I have every faith he can do it."

The 2 Columbus Circle competition, in which Allied Works prevailed over Zaha Hadid, Toshiko Mori and Smith-Miller & Hawkinson, was conducted without requiring the architects to produce a design. Instead, the selection process was more conceptual.

"We needed an architect who was a very good communicator, because there is a great deal of public

interest in this building," said Holly Hotchner, director of the Contemporary, "and Brad is a very good communicator. It was also evident that he could involve himself in both the minutiae of the program and a big-picture concept for how to project that we are a museum about transformation of materials. It is very hard to find all of those qualities in one person."

Next fall Mr. Cloepfil will complete the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, which shares a courtyard with Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts. With gently arching contours of cement and glass, the St. Louis Contemporary seems poised to match the success of its acclaimed next-door neighbor.

"I remember during his presentation, Brad just drew a couple of very simple curved lines," Terry Good, president of the museum's board of directors, recalled, "with one representing Ando's building that was rooted and directed down, because it's contemplative and chapel-like, and another line for ours that was curved upward, to reflect our desire for openness. Brad got a very good handle on what our essence was, and that the two buildings could have a conversation."

Keeping all these balls in the air has kept Mr. Cloepfil in the air a lot, too. "Last week I was in Seattle two days, New York two days and then St. Louis two days," Mr. Cloepfil said while sipping coffee. "It was a sort of barnstorm. But it's fun, because this is a dream, a gift." Indeed, just a few months ago, Mr. Cloepfil faced downsizing his 20-person firm after a project in Dallas was put on hold. Now he is hiring.

Born and reared in a Portland suburb, Mr. Cloepfil was educated at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where he fell under the spell of the legendary architect Louis Kahn while studying under a professor who had worked with Kahn. Mr. Cloepfil himself worked for the Swiss architect Mario Botta, whose designs Allied Works' projects also recall. But Mr. Cloepfil said his greatest influence was the picturesque Oregon landscape. "It's a very romantic perception of space," he explained. "I think it frees you up, and allows you to think of architecture as something more than objects."

At the same time, Mr. Cloepfil is part of a classic modernist revival in Europe and the United States that generally upholds the stylistic legacy of Kahn, Mies van der Rohe and le Corbusier instead of advancing contemporary architecture to undiscovered frontiers. Today's neo-modernism follows an all-but-concluded age of postmodernism, which Mr. Cloepfil calls "an aberration."

If Mr. Cloepfil's career is in the process of transformation, it resembles the situations of his new clients: both the Seattle and New York museums are looking for radical alterations of both their physical and symbolic faces.

The Seattle Art Museum is not only tripling its space but has also selected an avowed modernist to erect a building adjoining the museum's original structure, designed by the renowned postmodernist Robert Venturi.

"It's funny to call it historic, because it's only 11 years old," Mr. Cloepfil said. "But we're considering the Venturi building an artifact, respecting it as its own thing and doing our thing next to it. There are things about that building, however, that don't work for the museum, and that's a tougher issue."

But Mimi Gardner Gates, director of the Seattle Art Museum (and stepmother of Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft), is not worried. "His enthusiasm and engagement in the work is contagious," she said. "Brad knows how to create a building that will let the works of art speak."

To Mr. Cloepfil's advantage, the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design also wanted to hire an

emerging architect, but one familiar with restorations and museums. (Allied Works has done both.) When the museum's jury traveled around the United States to look at the finalists' work, they visited the St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum as well as two Allied Works projects in Portland: the 2281 N.W. Glisan Street building, an award-winning glass-skin structure just off fashionable 23rd Avenue, and the Pearl District headquarters for the advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy. The agency's building, the winner of several design awards, is a restored circa-1914 warehouse that, despite its imposing facade, now brims with natural light. A large central atrium of smooth concrete and rugged timber provides a gathering place of both remarkable warmth and clean lines.

Mr. Cloepfil said his client, Dan Wieden, the agency's founder, gave him his first career opportunity. "We were a three-person firm that hadn't really built anything, and he gave us a \$32 million contract," he said. "He basically said to me, 'Can you do this?' But he knew I could."

Mr. Wieden recalled that "there was a bit of faith involved."

"I'd never worked with an architect before," he said. "