
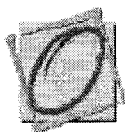


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Allied Works: Portland's Architect of the Arts

Posted by [Randy Gragg](#) April 27, 2007 11:15AM

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Bruce Ely
Brad Cloepfil

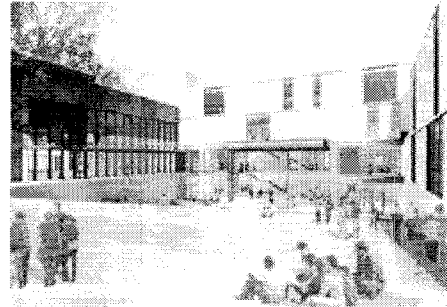
Some architects get the biggest, highest-profile projects. Some go after any project. A handful choose to aim at -- and succeed in getting -- only truly choice projects, the building commissions that push the art of architecture.

Brad Cloepfil and his 40-person Portland/New York firm, [Allied Works](#), are at work on a dozen projects any architect would envy.

Most famously, Allied is radically transforming the iconic 2 Columbus Circle in Manhattan, designed by Edward Durell Stone in 1964, into the new Museum of Arts & Design -- a project that has earned Cloepfil the bile of preservationists such as writer Tom Wolfe and applause from esteemed critic Ada Louis Huxtable.

Under construction are an art museum for the University of Michigan and the Booker T. Washington Performing Arts High School in downtown Dallas, the latter located between a new opera house by Sir Norman Foster and a performing arts center by Rem Koolhaas.

In Denver, next door to Daniel Libeskind's freshly minted Denver Art Museum, Allied is beginning work on a museum devoted to the work of midcentury painter Clyfford Still. The firm is designing three buildings -- a museum, theater and art school -- for Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., a campus of mostly jewel-like 18th- and 19th-century buildings.



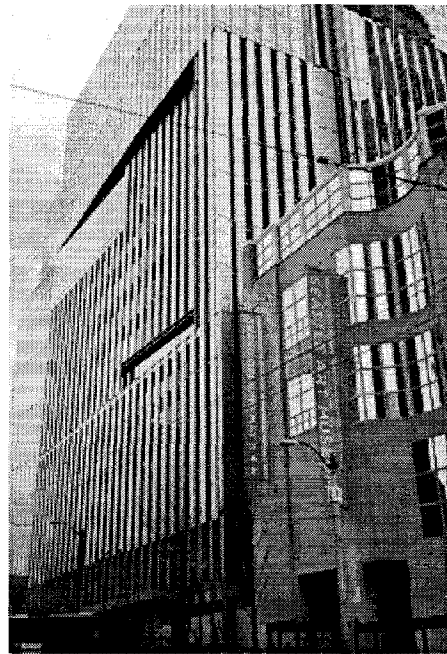
Allied Works

Booker T. Washington High School, Dallas

Several houses are in the works: one on a spectacular view lot in Portland Heights, one in the global street of dreams of New York's Duchess County and a three-story loft in Manhattan's TriBeCa district.

This just in: Allied is designing the new Disney Studios in Glendale, Calif. And next weekend, Cloepfil's largest and by far most complicated building opens -- the new Seattle Art Museum.

In a sense, the new SAM is an addition to the 1990 building by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown -- 330,000 square feet of new space to the existing 150,000. But "addition" hardly sums up the dramatic new form of museum -- and real estate deal -- that SAM conjured. The new museum space is part of a 42-story, 1.3-million-square-foot headquarters for Washington Mutual Bank. If that pairing weren't complicated enough, the museum is occupying only the first four floors for now, temporarily leasing back floors 5 through 12 to the bank. That meant Allied had to design a space that would serve office workers first and, later, art.



Bruce Ely

Seattle Art Museum old and new

Then there was the issue of melding new museum and old. Cloepfil is a quintessential neo-modernist. Venturi and Scott Brown are stylistic eclectics who borrow freely in a manner often called postmodernist.

Allied is more than just Cloepfil. From the start Doug Skidmore and John Weil (who both worked extensively on SAM), Chris Bixby and Kyle Lommen, and more recently Thomas Robinson, among others, have provided the necessary talent and machinery to keep the firm on its upward trajectory.

But Cloepfil remains Allied's vision, and its salesman. I caught up with him on a sunny April afternoon, as he smoked a cigar on the deck of his Pearl District office, and again two days later, walking through Seattle's new museum. This interview is a compilation of those conversations.

Question: What an architect turns down often says a lot about his or her goals. What commissions have you let go by?

Answer: It takes four or five years of your life of unrelenting pursuit to make sure something gets executed the best it can be. That's six or eight people's energy. So you just want to be really focused.

We still need work when we need work. But there was a time when we were just so excited about anything. God, it'd be fun to do a library or this or that. But you dive in, and the client, turns out, really doesn't want architecture. Or the client needs a lot of support from the board or the university president. You start to realize the cultural context has to support architecture somehow.

As much as we'd like to believe that our good will could make anything happen, there really has to be that context. That's what we learned. So when an invitation comes, we try to be more diligent. Will it be possible to do something without it being a complete struggle? Someone told me Renzo Piano turns down every project four times before he takes it. Whether or not it's true, it's a good metaphor for the kind of filter you need.

Given all its complications -- being paired with an office building, your firm being paired with a much larger firm, NBBJ -- the Seattle Art Museum must have had its share of struggles and complexity.

The complexity wasn't so much the association with the other architects as much as it was the conception of the whole thing: the relationship between the museum, the bank and the developer. It was conceived in a way that was so innovative economically. Our job was to dive in and make architecture out of it. To tell you the truth, it was amazing. To me the story of SAM is the whole story. It's the relationship of those three. It's the relationship with the city. It's the fact they're doing it at the same time as the Olympic Sculpture Park. It's unbelievable: a 16-story building the museum built for itself to grow into over time -- vertically.

Did that work against designing the space of a museum?

Actually, remarkably not. We were really concerned initially and rather hypersensitive because a lot of the parameters were set. But actually the structural bays worked out. The 30-foot proportion is what we try to do in new museum buildings. The only real constraint was the volume. It was like working within an existing building.

So what was the key architectural challenge?

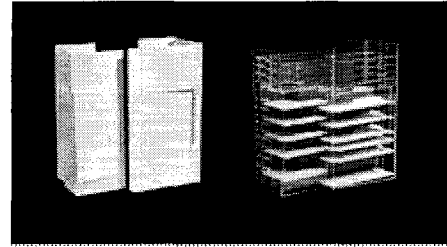
How does one bring a sense of space to that volume? It really is about the section. It's six floors of double-height space with a sense of continuous volume and continuous points of reference. It's a clear vertical labyrinth. You're led with a

continual sense of what's there next. That's the spirit, that and the landscape and the light.

It's a powerful diagram for a building. The light and the views of the landscape are really the only opportunity to break from the rationality.

I wouldn't use the word rationality. It's just order. If you don't have those points of reference and connections, you're just in a labyrinth of rooms.

You've been in those museums -- like the Whitney Museum (in New York). As small as it is, if not for the wonderful little windows looking out, you'd be lost.



Allied Works

SAM concept model

There's an interesting, maybe critical, line between order and rationality. I think of the long corridors of rooms in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, designed by an early mentor of yours, Mario Botta. That's rationality.

Well, yes. But here at SAM there's still a sense of unknown as you ascend. Now add that there are different parts of the collection. Think about the disorientation of a collection. You're at 17th century Europe in one room and, four rooms later, you're in Africa. Some museums are really extreme that way. So giving some kind of order to that is what keeps you in the world. Without that, you're getting lost and the whole museum fatigue sets in.

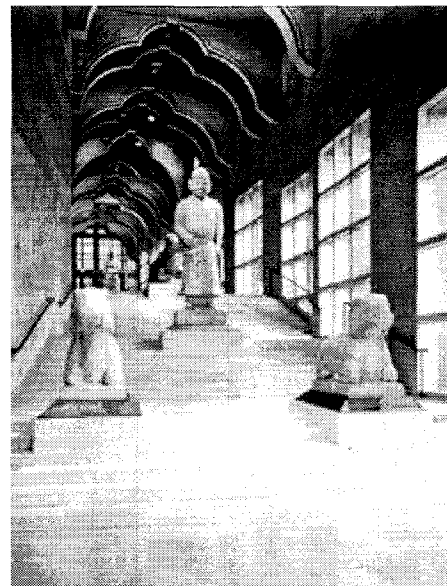
Robert Venturi, who designed SAM's original downtown building, battled that by creating discreet rooms.

So does the new building. They are discreet volumes. They just intersect.

But your architectural concerns are way different than Venturi's ...

My *language* is way different ...

What of Venturi's and Scott Brown's building informed yours besides the need to make a connection?



Paul Macapia

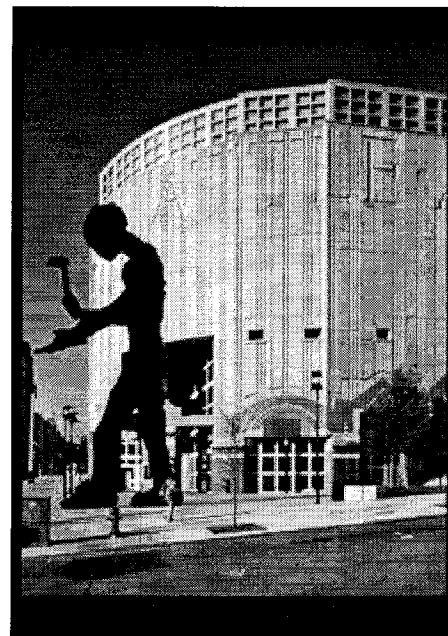
Venturi Scott Brown's original Seattle Art Museum

That's it. Being a whole generation and a half away from Venturi, my language is very different -- my goals, the scale.

They're two different building types, in the end. Venturi's museum is a palazzo -- a kind of grand residence. That's the way it's scaled. It's the artifact, so leave it as it is and make this what it needs to be, can be.

What drew you to compete for the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver: Still's art, or the opportunity to build in a major downtown next to the Denver Art Museum by Daniel Libeskind?

Both: Still's work, literally in the context of the Denver Art Museum. There's an otherness, the serenity and sublime power in Still's work. We're getting to do a building that is intimate and singular, and we're conceiving it against this (waves his hands) ambition of the Denver Art Museum. It's a great contrast. It's fabulous.



Paul Macapia

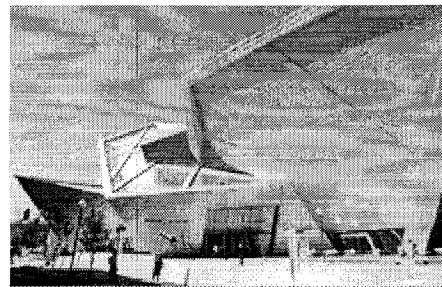
Venturi Scott Brown's "palazzo"

Seems like an opportunity to make an architectural argument ...

It's two completely different languages of architecture and two completely different ways of thinking about galleries and ways to look at art. What's exciting is to see those two together.

How would you describe the difference between you and Libeskind?

I can only tell you my outlook. All of my buildings really start with the art. They're certainly about landscape and light and structure and all the other things, but to make really beautiful art spaces is the priority. In the purest sense to make a provocative and, ideally, profound vessel for the arts should be the aspiration of the art museum, right? I don't think that's a commonly held attitude, frankly. In museum culture, there's been a cycle where that purpose, that aspiration has been secondary at best. Why is Renzo Piano getting so much work? He's a very good architect, no question. But there is a cultural reason, too. You look at that generation of architects and if you don't want to do a spectacle building, who do you choose? It's Renzo Piano, left and right.



AP Photo/Ed Andrieski
Denver Art Museum

Is there anything about Denver you find successful?

The other thing I've learned is to judge a building, you have to accept its premise, and the premise with Denver is radically different than my work. But it's beautiful from the outside. The cantilever is enormous and, as it sits on that public square, there is a quality of space that is really powerful. The sculptural gesture is what it's about.

Are there recent museums you find to be successful?

The new deYoung Museum (in San Francisco) is beautiful. It's one of the rare buildings that does it all: the siting, the conception, materiality, execution, the galleries -- really beautiful.

Do you find it problematic to have so little local work?

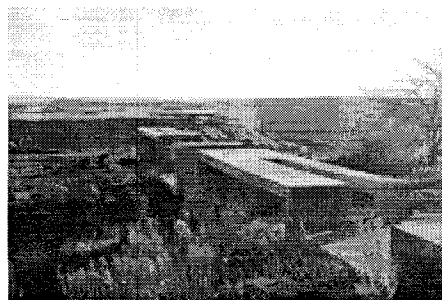
Problematic? It would be nice to have local work, but to have that you have to have clients interested in what we do.

The Maryhill Overlook (a kind of architectural sculpture at the Maryhill Museum on the Columbia River) is your most published work, yet the concrete is sagging due to poor workmanship. How do you feel about it now?

I was just out there and I'm really happy with it. It was powerful.

Even though it's sagging?

I was really animated about that in the beginning because we had this preconception of perfection. I think it still communicates really powerfully. Maryhill received money to fix it and chose not to. You let all that energy go about trying to will it to be and just let it exist and go back later and see if it still communicates.



Sally Schoolmaster
Maryhill Overlook

You've spoken admiringly of the new

Museum of Modern Art by Yoshi Tanaguchi, but you felt scale was too big.

I don't know how you design a museum that big. When you get to a certain size, it's a different animal that no one has mastered. You're putting so many people through it. It was fascinating to me to understand it as a new building type, so big and vertical, too.

Which is some of the same problem you're facing. Where is the line between a scale you can tame into being a museum and something that remains more akin to a big-box store or a convention center?

It doesn't have to be derogatory. These enormous museums are just new in our generation. Just to use MOMA as an example: Once you leave the atrium you lose your reference point. Other examples are the Metropolitan Museum (in New York) or the Louvre (in Paris) which go on horizontally forever. Once you're in there, you literally find yourself wondering, how do I get back out.

Yet at MOMA, I find the atrium's scale so large as to be discomfiting. It makes Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk" seem table-top sized.

There were so many restrictions on that project that set the proportions: the existing building and the tower. It wasn't ideal.

But you faced some of the same challenges here. Does SAM cross the line on bigness?

At the full expansion? Yes. It's dealing with some of the same issues. It's what generated the double-height and the lobby space -- to give you a reference point. But we also had a little more freedom. The general dimensions allowed us to set the proportions of galleries that I think are really elegant. We discovered more opportunities than we ever expected. But there were a lot of forces. I'm sure there will be more of these vertical museums in the future.



AP Photo/Gregory Bull
Museum of Modern Art

Yes, like the Tate Modern (in London). It will be dwarf MOMA. But that institution has a completely different attitude about the future of the museum. It's going way beyond art into something more akin to a community center for the 21st century megalopolis -- a different role for art in the society.

So was there anything in SAM's collections that drove the design?

The transparency of seeing into the galleries, of being able to look all the way down to the contemporary collection and seeing up to the African collection. From the beginning, that sense of continuity and juxtaposition was important. Having cross-connections within the sequence of collections.

A \$76 million budget divided by 330,000 square feet puts your budget, including your fees, at about \$230/square foot -- not much these days for a museum.

It's not luxurious. It took a lot of work -- a heckuva lot of work. It's the evolution you go through as a younger architect. Where's my High Museum budget? (By Renzo Piano, the Atlanta museum's addition cost \$615/square foot.) Someday. Someday. But we made no substantial compromises. Honestly. We stuck with a stainless steel exterior. One-third of the facade is operable shutters. The conception was not affected by the price.

Well, once you've bought into a concept like that, there are no discounts.

Right. You can't cheat, especially with the time frame we had. That was truly one of the benefits of the project. Left on their own, museums and architects ... (laughs and rolls eyes).

The movable walls featured in some of SAM's galleries are a recurring motif in your buildings, like both spaces you designed for PDX Gallery and for PICA's former headquarters.

At SAM, they dealt with wanting the expansive view of the Puget Sound and having natural light but also having a way to close it off. These spaces can be as closed as any. The openings were set by the structure. But otherwise there's flexibility. That's what I've learned by looking at galleries: that 30-foot dimension - - down to 24 feet -- feels like a pretty nice room.

Is there an ideal ceiling height?

Yes: 16 to 18 feet, depends on the art. You go to the Phillips Collection (in Washington, D.C.) and you see this amazing work in bedrooms. We're talking about the same things with Clyfford Still, like making a room for one painting and how big should the room be, rather than just assuming 18-foot ceilings with six paintings, whatever, we're thinking about different ways to hang in different spaces. It's really exciting. In the future of SAM's building -- the uppermost floors -- you have 11-foot ceilings. That was predetermined by the connection to the bank.

That seems low.

I've looked a lot and there's many lower ceilings than you think, once you start looking at various collections. SAM has a general art collection. Many things are small. I think we have a lot of assumptions left over from the '70s of the big white rooms. Go into the National Gallery -- the old National Gallery -- and look how low the mouldings are set. They set the proportions of the rooms. After that it's up to the curators. There are really two occupations of a museum building: the art and the people. They're related. The people are really about the spatial experience, the sequence and the art. But when the curators hang, they're setting the narrative in those volumes.

What have been your seminal museum experiences?

The original National Gallery (in Washington, D.C.) is gorgeous: the way you move one or two rooms off the central circulation is very interesting. It's the same at the Menil Collection (designed by Renzo Piano in Houston). When I looked at the Kimball Art Museum (designed by Louis Kahn in Ft. Worth, Texas) for the first time 8 years ago, I realize those incredible vaults spring from 11 feet. They're

surprisingly low -- very intimately scaled. Houston is a trip because you can new see Piano, Kahn and Tado Ando -- masters of proportion.

With SAM, we had a lot of givens, but you can use what you can. But understanding how the making of elegantly proportioned space that works for various collections is fascinating. Those guys do it better than anyone.

With this museum, as it fills, it will be interesting to see how it is filled: Will the vertical museum turn into a hierarchy of some sort? What will the rooms with the lower ceilings be filled with?

Will that segregate parts of the collection?

The curators have to engage it.

2 Columbus Circle originally was a vertical museum as well.

Yes. It was, originally, a series of landings.

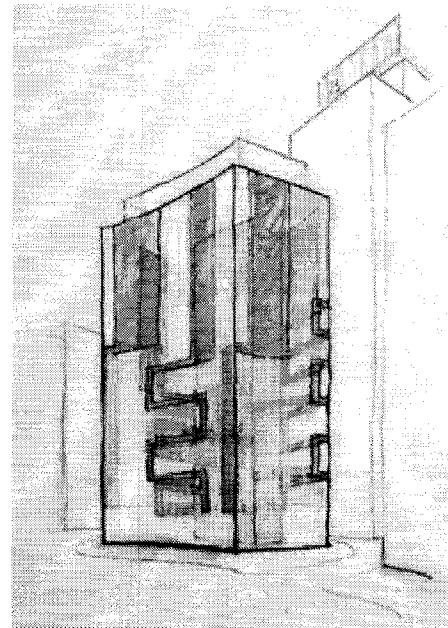
Which isn't that different than what you've done here.

It's related in that the volumes are interlocked.

And with the cuts to the facade you made, you've similarly created a relationship to the outdoors. I've read a lot of critics, pro and con, about 2 Columbus Circle and they fall into two camps: those who see the building physically and those who see it as a cultural memory.

That's a really exciting dialogue.

I was unconvinced by any of Tom Wolfe 's hyperventilating about the building's stylistic importance. But Herbert Muschamp's New York Times piece arguing for its significance as an important New York gay cultural icon was novel -- and pretty convincing.



Allied Works
Museum of Arts and Design

There was truth in that. He tends to exaggerate, but he raised way more important issues than anybody... establish the building as an important architectural... needs to be tall

a whole realm of preservation that

Was there a informed you

Absolutely. Not talked about culture because it was so

To me, you're into fine line

of that building that

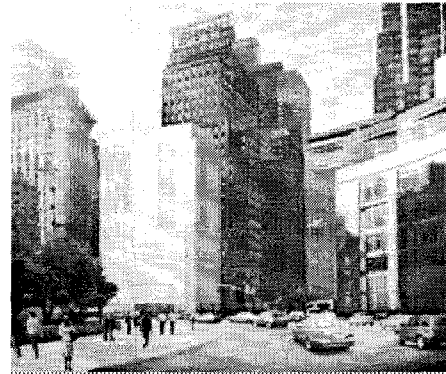
gh we'll see. It may still. I e the building more silent it: the otherness of this white

box in the middle of Columbus Circle, especially now against the backdrop of the Time Warner Center. It was this idiosyncratic thing. It still will be. When you cross Broadway and look down and you see a neutral object, it will have the same flash of the civic memory, whatever that is.

Memory in preservation isn't just stylistic or iconographic. You can go from the social life of a building to the memory level of it in the city -- like the scale of it -- which doesn't have to be specific. Those are really interesting preservation issues. In that way we preserved a lot. I mean that seriously.

You've talked a lot about '70s earth art and mid-century Modernism having a big influence on you ...

I've never said mid-century Modernism had a huge effect. Au contraire. Not at all, in fact. Maybe in art, not architecture.



Allied Works
Museum of Arts and Design

I was talking about art.

Oh. I have a little flash point there.

Are there deeper historic influences from art that influence your ideas about space or about American culture?

Well, to reach deeper back, I go to architectural influences. That period of art is really when my awareness of art happened. In 1978, when I was going to New York for the first time, that work was coming into the major museums. Architecture in the U.S. was extremely conservative at that time, so I rejected a lot of it and went to the arts because it seemed to be more about architecture than the buildings of that time.

There's an interesting romanticism underlying your work, especially the way you talk about the influence of the landscape and growing up in the relatively architecture-free Northwest.

The power of that sublime landscape, it's true, has been an influence. But I think it's a uniquely American thing: The West. It's literally the distinction between when you're in Europe walking into a cathedral for the first time seeing those incredible spaces and when you grow up in the West. Where do you find those spaces that move you? It's a pragmatic thing as much as anything.

You've had the opportunity to do a number of projects that allowed you to explore that romantic dimension. But what influences do you draw from to create architecture here, in downtown Seattle, with little natural landscape in sight?

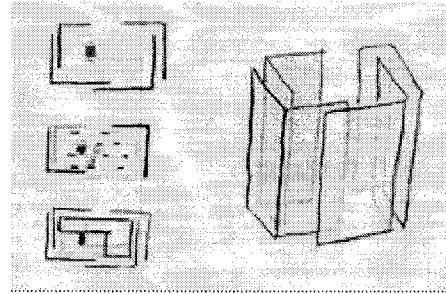
There's two things: the sense of wonder in the vertical progression -- seeing almost a sense of affinity -- and always the connection to the outside. It's always right there: You get glimpses of the Puget Sound, the mountains and the street. But I think as my work is evolving; there are moments of sensing the actual space as a thing. We have few opportunities in buildings to actually do that.

That's not a critique of any particular building or architecture, but those moments are rare when you say, God, this is really euphoric. It's emotional. We all have those moments in our lives: That's the place that feels like that.

Is this what you imagined success would look like?

I never would have imagined it. So I don't know. It's hard, that's for sure, to keep pursuing ideas. You try to get smarter in assessing what projects can get there rather than when you're young and you keep getting bounced off the walls -- which every architect gets plenty of. The biggest realization is that it's just so hard to get good things built. Even when you think you're compromising, it's unbelievably hard.

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Allied Works

SAM concept sketch

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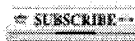
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