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Northwest architect Brad Cloepfil feels the heat in NYC

Portland architect Brad Cloepfil is getting scrutiny from both coasts for his remodel of the Museum of Arts and Design building in New York. The premier exhibitions, including many Northwest artists, are among the attractions drawing travelers to Manhattan this season.

By **Sheila Farr**
 Seattle Times art critic

NEW YORK CITY — Blasting reviews in The New York Times greeted the opening of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

Northwest audiences have a personal stake in the museum's success, because architect Brad Cloepfil, principal of the Portland firm Allied Works, got his commission to remodel MAD (surely one of the world's worst museum acronyms) about the same time he was hired to design the Seattle Art Museum expansion.

At that point, with his design for the University of Michigan Museum of Art also in the works, Cloepfil was riding the crest as a new architect *du jour*. Would his work hold up in the pressure-cooker of the Manhattan architecture world?

Ever since MAD, formerly the American Craft Museum, bought the unoccupied 1960s Edward Durrell Stone building at the edge of Central Park and announced plans to remodel it, the project has been a lightning rod for debate. Architectural preservationists in New York, led by high-profile advocates such as novelist Tom Wolfe, stridently opposed changing the building. They didn't seem to mind that it had proved nonfunctional as an art space (its first incarnation) or even as a visitors' bureau (its last). Despite its acclaimed architect, the building was considered frivolous, if not ugly, by some in the city, where it was nicknamed the "lollipop building" for its ornate facade.

Cloepfil's Seattle commission involved another controversial structure. SAM's decorative Venturi building at First Avenue and University Street — of "grand stairway to nowhere" fame — had to be incorporated into the expansion, which also shares a wall with the former WaMu tower.

SAM's expansion opened last May to mixed reviews, and eyes turned to the high-profile MAD as an indicator of where Cloepfil's reputation was headed. At the preview, Cloepfil took the podium with what



The Museum of Arts and Design's Chazen Building, designed by Allied Works Architecture. Photo by Hélène Binet.

HELENE BINET
 The remodel of New York City's Museum of Arts and Design building has been a lightning rod for debate. Northwest architect Brad Cloepfil took on the job.

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seemed like reluctance, calling the completion of the six-year project "an incredible moment, kind of overwhelming," and adding: "I was a young architect then. And now — it speaks for itself."

Mixed reviews for MAD

That was a week before New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff pummeled Cloepfil's design, saying: "This is not the bold architectural statement that might have justified the destruction of an important piece of New York history. Poorly detailed and lacking in confidence, the project is a victory only for people who favor the safe and inoffensive and have always been squeamish about the frictions that give this city its vitality."

In a follow-up story, Ouroussoff delivered another brutal punch, saying it would have been better to tear the building down, so that "a talented architect might have had the opportunity to create a new masterpiece on one of the choicest sites in the city."

Yikes. I'll leave it to the New Yorkers to duke it out over the merits of the architectural statement (although I do have a few thoughts I'll come back to). My interest in the building is primarily how well it serves as a museum. Never having set foot in it before, and knowing its history of dark, awkward gallery spaces, I was glad to see how open and functional Cloepfil's interior is.

He said his plan was to "edit the building for light," by removing concrete, cutting light strips in walls and ceilings, placing windows toward "orienting views." He clustered the stairwells and elevator banks against the back of the building, so even though each floor is rather confined, the gallery space is maximized with an open, semicircular plan that's easy to navigate. You can hop on the elevator between the four floors of galleries, or better yet, take the stairs from whichever side you end up on.

Cloepfil's aesthetic is generally cool and conservative, and this museum is no exception with its gray, pinstripe motif. The striped stone lobby floor and stairway enclosure of vertical steel cables make a handsome pairing. My favorite detailing, though, is in the basement. At the foot of the stairway, an opulent, shimmery floor of tiny bronze-hued tiles intersects with the steel pinstripes of the stairway. It's yummy. Overall the lower floor is warmer in tone, where Cloepfil retained the mahogany-walled theater with its wavy polka-dot ceiling screen from the original 1960s design.

In March, a restaurant is slated to open on the ninth floor, boasting a wall of glass with sweeping views of Central Park and surrounding street life. Those windows were reportedly a bone of contention between the architect and museum leaders. Cloepfil held that adding them would mar the vertical patterns of his exterior design; the museum board said it couldn't sacrifice the appeal of such a drop-dead view. The client prevailed — and, for anybody who will dine in the restaurant, it's lucky they did. At the same time, Cloepfil is right: The compromise of having a shiny horizontal band creating an "H" rather than the chic vertical stripes he intended does disrupt the visual appeal of the exterior.

I can't help wondering, though, how it came to such a showdown. Didn't Cloepfil choose form over function when he committed to that vertical pattern on the exterior? Seems like he didn't fully consider the building's use and extraordinary location on Columbus Circle with its unobstructed views.

As for the art ...

Then there's the content of the galleries to consider — which brings up other issues close to home. MAD, much like the Bellevue Arts Museum, is attempting to carve a niche for itself with an updated approach to design and craft-based media that erases old boundaries between fine art. What defines the work is an emphasis on "materiality" and accessibility, MAD chief curator David McFadden told me. It's about work that is made by hand from recognizable materials.

"Craft" used to refer to functional objects made with a high degree of skill and aesthetic consideration. At this new breed of museum, function doesn't matter anymore: In this context, quilts are made to hang on walls, not to keep people warm, and conceptual teapots never touch hot water. That means the work overlaps considerably with what you see in contemporary art museums. For instance, I doubt many people visiting Seattle Art Museum would classify Do-Ho Suh's knockout "Some/One" — a gorgeous, sweeping chain-mail robe constructed from thousands of military dogtags — as "craft," despite its intricate construction. It's an artwork deeply rooted in concept and metaphor. Yet at MAD, a different incarnation of the idea, Suh's "Metal Jacket," is included in the opening exhibition "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary," sculptures made from everyday objects, from eyeglasses to high-heel shoes to rubber gloves.

"Second Lives" fills two floors, and another two go to the permanent collection, which includes an appealing gallery devoted to jewelry art, with open storage pullouts for additional displays. The Northwest is known for its strong craft tradition, and work by many local artists can be found throughout the museum, including Kiff Slemmons, Sherry Markovitz, Susan Point, Preston Singletary, Akio Takamori, Dale Chihuly, Dante Marioni and Lino Tagliapietra.



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The installations tend toward the boisterous and jampacked — an old-fashioned craft-museum-style aesthetic that might offend the eyes of some white-box contemporary art aficionados. That includes New York Times critic Roberta Smith, who compared the opening shows to "an art seminar-cum-food-fight" calling it "an amazing cacophony that is by turns dismaying, enervating, infuriating and invigorating." Still, she recommends going. [Site map](#)

I think she overreacted. I liked the liveliness of the galleries and anything about them that will help set the museum apart from run-of-the-mill contemporary art museums, which are beginning to seem like franchises of the Gap. Most are distinguished from each other only by the acrobatics of their architecture. To that end, the graceful jewelry gallery (sponsored by Tiffany, wouldn't you know) is the smartest addition to MAD. How many other museums have that kind of dedication to contemporary ornamentation?

The point of all this is a question: Has the identity of museums like MAD and BAM become too vague and encompassing to set them apart from the hordes of museums already devoted to contemporary art? With the economy down and institutions bracing for tough times, will they be able to rally the audience and patronage to keep them afloat? There'll be plenty of us watching, on both coasts.

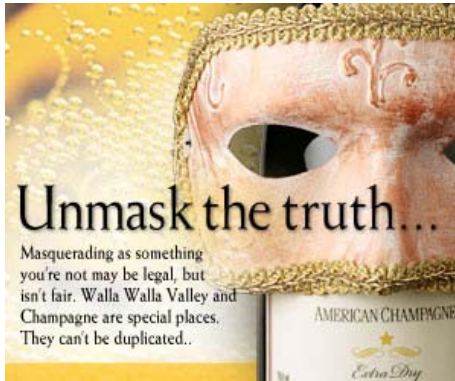
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