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THE SKY LINE

HELLO, COLUMBUS

A building that can't break free of its predecessor.

by Paul Goldberger

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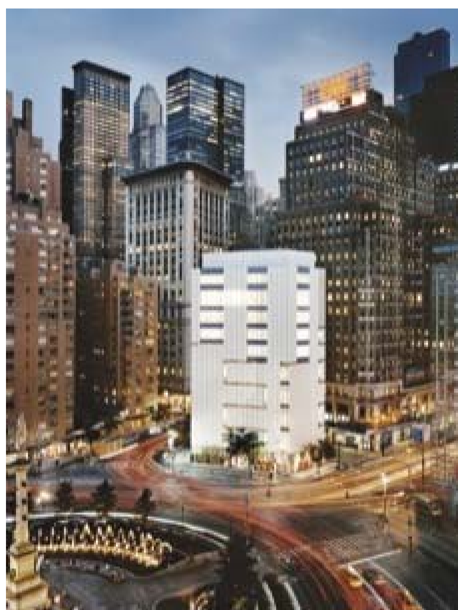

Brad Cloepfil's overhaul keeps the proportions of the old building.

Huntington Hartford's old Gallery of Modern Art—the white marble bonbon that stood at 2 Columbus Circle from 1964 until a couple of years ago—was a hard building to love but became an even harder one to hate. Excoriated by critics when it went up, then championed by preservationists when it was threatened with destruction, the building provides an object lesson in the inexorable march of architectural fashion and may point to an even more basic truth about people and buildings: we get used to things we don't like and then come to like things we've got used to. The eventual decision to refurbish the building entirely has also provided a young Oregon architect named Brad Cloepfil with a dauntingly controversial commission.

The Gallery of Modern Art, one of several quixotic cultural projects launched by Hartford, an heir to the A. & P. fortune, who died earlier this year at the age of ninety-seven, was originally intended to house his collection of figurative works and to stand as a riposte to what Hartford saw as the reign of abstraction at the Museum of Modern Art. The architect was Edward Durell Stone. Stone had been a leading American exponent of the International Style, but, in the fifties, his new wife, a fashion writer he met on an airplane, encouraged him toward elegance and decoration, and he began to fill his buildings with glitter and marble and screens and gold columns.

As a museum, the Columbus Circle building was a disaster. The galleries, tricked out with expensive wood panelling and brass fixtures, were cramped, and the institution closed after five financially ruinous years. And yet somehow the structure's dainty columns, tiny portholes, huge arches, and vast windowless expanses of flat, unadorned white marble embedded themselves more deeply into the consciousness of New Yorkers than many better buildings. So what if it looked like a Bauhaus version of the Alhambra—or, as Ada Louise Huxtable, then the architecture critic at the *Times*, put it, "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops"? Amid the austere glass boxes of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, it seemed to strike a blow for quirky individualism. Huxtable's harsh judgment gave rise to a

nickname—the Lollipop Building—that was as much affectionate as mocking.

The building eventually wound up in the hands of the city, which, in 1998, decided to sell it to the highest bidder. The city repeatedly refused to have its own Landmarks Preservation Commission consider giving 2 Columbus Circle landmark status, a move that provoked outrage but kept the building salable and more or less sealed its fate. Whether or not the building deserved landmark status depends on what you think a landmark should be: it wasn't great architecture, but it had unique qualities and some historical importance. In 2002, the city agreed to sell it to the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Crafts Museum. The museum was eager for an architect who had never built in New York before, and hired Cloepfil, whose firm, Allied Works Architecture, in Portland, was just completing its first major project, the sharp and serene Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis. Cloepfil started work on his design while the legal struggle to preserve the building was in progress, but in 2005 the preservationists lost in court, and construction began. The building will open next month.

"Perhaps your performance anxiety wouldn't be so bad if you performed better."

Cloepfil ended up all but demolishing the original building and creating a new one of exactly the same shape and size, and almost the same color. He kept the gentle curve reflecting the shape of Columbus Circle but changed just about everything else. To let light into the interior, he made long linear incisions, two feet wide, in the façade. These glass channels—Cloepfil has called them "ribbons of light"—make a number of right-angle turns across the façade. In place of Stone's marble are twenty-two thousand terra-cotta tiles specially made with a slightly iridescent glaze. Depending on the light, they look white or off-white or sparkle with tiny hints of color. Cloepfil told me that the use of ceramic and glass tied the new building to its role as a museum of craft, while its echo of the original marble's color would suggest continuity with the earlier building. Fair enough. But that dual goal encapsulates the building's main problem. Cloepfil is trying as hard as he can to be different while trying also to be the same. Rarely has an architect been pulled so completely in opposite directions.

In some respects, he probably didn't have much choice. He couldn't make the building taller, because of zoning laws, and he couldn't make it bigger, because it already filled every inch of its site. And, since museums require mostly solid, windowless walls, he was stuck with those, too. Cloepfil is a sophisticated architect who, at his best, can endow simple geometries with a powerful dignity. His style couldn't be more different from that of Edward Durell Stone's late period, which dances on the edge of kitsch, and he has tried to transform Stone's fussy marble froufrou into something serious and tasteful. Sometimes, as in the long, turning lines of glass, he manages to assert himself firmly enough to keep the old building at bay. At other times, like at the base of the building, where he has kept all but one of Stone's lollipop-shaped columns and put them behind glass, he seems to have given up altogether and settled for a curatorial role. Ultimately, Cloepfil has been trapped between paying homage to a legendary building and making something of his own. As a result, if you knew the old building, it is nearly impossible to get it out of your mind when you look at the new one. And, if you've never seen Columbus Circle before, you probably won't be satisfied, either: the building's proportions and composition seem just as odd and awkward as they ever did.

But if you go inside, entering through the glass-enclosed lobby, from which an elegantly detailed staircase of wood and steel leads up to four floors of galleries, it turns out that Cloepfil has done the impossible—making the building's interior at long last functional, logical, and pleasant to be in. He figured out early on that Stone had made a huge mistake putting the building's core—its elevators, stairs, and rest rooms—in the center, because that left just a tiny doughnut of usable space around the perimeter. Cloepfil

moved two staircases behind the elevators, opening up space on every floor and making decent-sized exhibition galleries possible.

This move also enabled the building to address Columbus Circle more effectively than before. Galleries now have windows looking out over Central Park and, on the ninth floor, there will be a restaurant featuring an entire wall of glass, something the museum insisted on despite Cloepfil's objections that it would damage the composition of his façade. This might seem a little precious—why shouldn't the restaurant have a nice, big window?—but Cloepfil was right. The window, running between two vertical glass ribbons, creates a huge "H" on the façade, a pity, because the ribbons are the heart of his design and its most brilliant feature. Once you are inside, you discover that they run not only up and down the façade but also horizontally, into the museum itself: from each vertical window notched into a gallery's wall, a glass ribbon stretches across the floor and you seem to be walking on thin air. Looking down can be vertiginous at first, but the glass channels allow light to permeate up and down the building, and tie the entire building, inside and out, together in a way that underscores what is new about it. It's not just that they look different from anything in Stone's original museum; requiring a completely different structure and engineering, they remind you that this is in almost every way a new building, albeit trapped in the body of an old one, screaming to get out. ♦

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID ALLEE