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Helene Binet

GREETINGS: Bands of windows on the museum's facade spell out "Hi." It's not how Brad Cloepfil's design had envisioned things.

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

N.Y. facade spells trouble

The once romantic Museum of Arts and Design building is re-cloaked in austerity.

By Christopher Hawthorne, Times Architecture Critic
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NEW YORK -- At 2 Columbus Circle, has Brad Cloepfil been foiled by the ghost of Edward Durell Stone?

Surprisingly and entertainingly enough, it sure looks that way. As a result, Saturday's opening of the new home for the [Museum of Arts and Design](#) -- Cloepfil's attempt to mummify Stone's 1964 building at the same site -- hardly looks poised to succeed as an act of architectural closure. Instead, it may only remind many New Yorkers that idiosyncratic, romantic architecture like Stone's is increasingly rare and valuable these days in Manhattan, an island being slowly overtaken by a phalanx of straight-backed glass towers.

For nearly a decade, controversy has shrouded the former home of the Gallery of

Modern Art, a 10-story structure on the southern edge of Columbus Circle, overlooking a major entrance to Central Park. In 1964, the eccentric collector Huntington Hartford, heir to the A&P supermarket fortune, opened a museum at that location. Its contents were crammed inside a marble-draped box by Stone, an American architect born in 1902 who would go on to design the Kennedy Center in Washington, the late Busch Stadium in St. Louis and a clutch of [buildings](#) at the center of the USC campus.

Stone's museum was barely taken seriously as a piece of architecture, at least at first. New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable famously dismissed it as a kitschy, frilly bit of nothingness; referring to the way the facade, a filigreed, windowless marble slab, sat heavily atop a row of dainty ground-floor columns, she labeled it a "Venetian palazzo on lollipops."

But in recent decades many New Yorkers developed a real fondness for it -- some in spite of their otherwise sophisticated taste. It may not have been an easy building to like in 1964. But in the last years of its life, the very traits that had turned a generation of critics against it -- its punched decoration and breezy, lighthearted historicism, in particular -- led many of us younger ones to admire it.

Hartford closed his museum in 1969, and eventually the property passed into the hands of the city of New York. In

recent years, the city rejected a rising chorus of demands that it hold a hearing on the building's worthiness as a landmark and in 2002 sold it to the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum. MAD, in turn, hired Cloepfil, who runs an increasingly prominent firm based in Portland, Ore., called [Allied Works Architecture](#).

Cloepfil is in many ways the anti-Edward Durell Stone. His work is precise, cerebral and humorless where Stone's was sugary and rather undisciplined. If Stone hoped in the latter decades of his long career to loosen architecture from the strictures of pure Modernism, Cloepfil wants to tie the restraints back on. And then double-knot them.

On Columbus Circle, plenty of restraints were already built in for Cloepfil, including limits on the height and width of any new piece of architecture. As a result, he embarked on a process that he says was more like "editing" an existing building than creating a new one. (If so, he is a rather aggressive editor -- an architectural version, perhaps, of Knopf's Gordon Lish, who ruthlessly pared Raymond Carver's short fiction to the bone.) He decided to keep Stone's concrete skeleton intact and drape a new skin, made of iridescent terra-cotta tiles, over it. He then proposed carving a series of narrow bands into the concrete.

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The bands, which Cloepfil has called "continuous ribbons of light," travel in right-angled patterns up the front and sides of the building. They slice its concrete shell into a series of interlocking cantilevered sections, giving the museum's four facades a blunt geometric power.

And here's where the story takes a beautifully strange twist. At the very end of the design process, MAD's director, Holly Hotchner, and the museum's board demanded that a band of windows be added to the ninth-floor restaurant. This is not an uncommon request from one of Cloepfil's clients, since the architect is as often more interested in restricting views than indulging them. As a designer, he has a punitive streak, and takes a perverse pleasure in keeping his buildings closed off and mute.

This is true in his recent addition to the [Seattle Art Museum](#), where he opens up views of Elliott Bay only to screen, block or otherwise frustrate them. It is even more true in his design for MAD, which makes a point of pretending that it doesn't face one of the great urban vistas in the world, right where the Manhattan grid meets the leafy spread of Central Park.

Cloepfil fought the idea of a new ninth-floor window band strenuously, to no avail. Added as a horizontal strip near the top of the main facade, the windows wound up connecting a pair of vertical bands already in place to form the shape of the letter H. Another vertical band at the same level, on the western facade of the building, reads quite clearly as an I.

That's right: On its two most prominent facades, the building now spells out the word "Hi," as peppy as Kathie Lee Gifford at 9 in the morning. And the message is not hidden or cryptic. It's delivered in letters *five stories high* facing Columbus Circle -- a massive architectural text message.

Actually, a message from a Ouija board may be closer to the truth. It's as if Stone, his architecture muffled and disregarded by Cloepfil, MAD and the city of New York, managed to have the last word on the preservation controversy, popping up from beyond the grave to say hello. The fact that the word in question is unpretentious and loosely informal makes it deliciously Stone-like, and allows it to undermine the severity and cold perfectionism of Cloepfil's exterior all the more.

Inside, of course, the museum's talking facade ceases to be an issue. The Gallery of Modern Art's lavish interiors have been replaced with handsome polished wood floors, white walls and an aggressively utilitarian, unadorned series of concrete staircases. Inside the small galleries, which fill the second through fifth floors, Cloepfil's ribbons act as unifying elements, traveling across the floor, then running up the wall before turning again just below the ceiling and operating as clerestory windows. These are extremely well-crafted spaces, if a little dark. In the lobby, Cloepfil has left the lollipop columns intact -- though from the sidewalk they are obscured by frosted glass -- and created a cool, handsome entry space. From there, a broad stair leads down to Stone's basement auditorium, with its buttery bronze accents, which Cloepfil and Allied Works have restored and updated.

To be sure, Cloepfil's reimagining of the Stone building has a clean-lined, clear-headed appeal. The terra-cotta tiles on the exterior have an enigmatic charisma -- their color seems to shift throughout the day -- though it's too bad Cloepfil didn't bring them down below the second story, so visitors could run their fingers over them and see them up close.

But as was the case at the Seattle Art Museum, where Cloepfil was hired to extend a 1991 confection by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, trying to update an impish older building doesn't cast his own approach in the best light. Allowed to stand on their own feet, Cloepfil's designs look crisp and impressively sure of themselves. But when they're laid next to -- or, in this case, pulled tightly over -- an older building with a gregarious sense of humor or history, they begin to seem clinical and rigid, even schoolmarmish.

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