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Bring Back the Venetian Lollipops

By [JAMES GARDNER](#) | September 25, 2008

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THE RECLAD, RECONFIGURED, AND RECONCEIVED 2 Columbus Circle, formerly the Huntington Hartford Museum and now the Museum of Arts and Design, fully bears out the suspicions of its many detractors.

Click Image to Enlarge



Hélène Binet

The Museum of Arts and Design.

The problem is not so much that the new design is bad, as that it is emphatically not good. Its entrenched mediocrity represents so thorough a depletion of the imaginative faculty that one wonders how it won the trustees' approval in the first place. The New Museum's new home on the Bowery, which opened last fall, is hardly better architecturally, but at least it is trying. At least it has the courage to be bold.

Such is not the case on the Upper West Side, where Edward Durell Stone's noble and much maligned white Venetian palazzo has now been reclad in two-tone tiles, mostly of a tawny yellowish hue with traces of gray and white. From the irregular patterning of the façade, which at times resembles inchoate letters, it would appear that the architect, Brad Cloepfil, was straining toward the sort of meaning and significance that contemporary artists claim to desire. But it is quite evident that he had nothing that he really wanted to say. Whatever you might think of the earlier Edward Durell Stone incarnation, it was emphatically, eloquently, even polemically expressive of its worldview, of its upstart resistance to the denuded Modernism of postwar Manhattan. Confronted with Mr. Cloepfil's newer version, the eye wanders disconsolately across the surface in search of some message or meaning, only to come back with nothing at all.

Just to give you an idea of how misbegotten the whole thing is, consider that, although the initial façade was often criticized for being largely windowless, the new version has scarcely more windows than the old one. And though the dominant design element of the new façade is a kind of abstract, noncontextual patterning, the glazed base of the building shows off the Byzantine-style columns of the original structure, the very ones that Ada Louise Huxtable so famously and so fatally mocked as Venetian lollipops.

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The interior, though it has no real visual connection to the façade, bears out that sense of depletion that dominates the exterior. The spare lobby looks for all the world as though it has not yet been moved into, with its terrazzo floors and a small ticket counter to the left as you enter. I have only a primordial sense of how the original interior felt — at 4 years old and 14 years old, one's discernment in matters of architectural design is not fully developed, after all — but the room given over to the galleries on floors 2 through 6 seems more legible than it did before, though not appreciably more spacious. The galleries, which curve rough the circulation core on the south side of the building, are good enough for the display of the museum's wares, and the unexpected windows at the corners and in the stairwell afford welcome glimpses of the new Columbus Circle and of Midtown.

Fortunately, the diminutive auditorium in the basement, though it has been tweaked and spruced up, preserves something of the charm of the original. But in that trace of the building's earlier incarnation, one becomes acutely aware of what has been lost. Whatever one might think of its overriding aesthetic, Stone's 2 Columbus Circle was a unified and self-consistent work of art. The wood and stone accents of the interior fully bore out the nascent contextualism of the mod aesthetic that dominated the façade. No such coherence will be found in the newer version.

It is quite likely that Mr. Cloepfil's ministrations have made the interior more functional than it was before. As for the exterior, which is only a matter of cladding, I look forward to the time when, after a decent interval, the museum's trustees acknowledge their misjudgment, and restore the façade to something very similar to what it was before. The Venetian lollipops are still there, waiting for their redeemer.

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