



ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

New Face, Renewed Mission



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Museum of Arts and Design This institution opens on Saturday at 2 Columbus Circle in a building redesigned by Brad Cloepfil. The terra-cotta facade is new, but those familiar old lollipops can still be seen peeking out.

By **NICOLAI OIROUSSOFF**
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It was fun while it lasted.

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A New Face at Columbus Circle, but the Lollipops Remain

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The passionate battle fought recently over the redesign of 2 Columbus Circle, the curious white marble structure built by Huntington Hartford to house his art collection, was reminiscent of the preservation wars of the 1960s.

When was the last time you saw preservationists marching in the streets? Or best-selling writers like [Tom Wolfe](#) venting about a building project on the editorial pages? At least we were reminded that architecture is not just about exquisite baubles for the superrich. It can still feel threatening.

Now, with the opening this weekend of the newly renovated building as the [Museum of Arts and Design](#), the public will finally be able to judge for itself whether it

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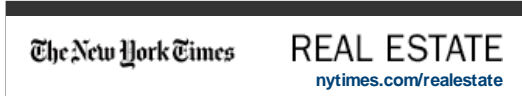


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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times
Lollipop forms from the original 2 Columbus Circle remain in the lobby of the new Museum of Arts and Design.

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Jack Manning/The New York Times
The building in its previous incarnation, in 1964, with Huntington Hartford, left, and Robert Moses.

Already a few things are diazingly clear. Designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, the renovation remedies the annoying functional defects that had plagued the building for decades. But 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.

Granted, [Edward Durell Stone's](#) original building was not without its flaws. The art galleries, which stepped up around an elevator core, were dark and cramped. The blank marble facade senselessly blocked out stunning views of Columbus Circle and Central Park.

Yet as many observers have pointed out, Stone's building occupied a crucial niche in the city's architectural memory. Its vague evocation of opulent Venetian motifs was a brazen attack on the prevailing Modernist orthodoxy. That the challenge came from one of the Modern movement's foremost practitioners in New York only sharpened the sting.

By contrast, Mr. Cloepfil's redesign is part of a long-term effort to clean up Columbus Circle's once-gritty image, with mixed results. The chiseled towers of the Time Warner Center, completed in 2003 just to the west along the circle, look great in the skyline, but they are planted atop a dimly generic urban shopping mall. The renovation of Columbus Circle, on the other hand, was a nice surprise: a deadening traffic island has been transformed into a grand public space encircled by fountains and benches.

Sadly, the Museum of Arts and Design will only reinforce the suspicion that city officials are more intent on sanitizing the city for jittery tourists and business interests than safeguarding the public realm.

Mr. Cloepfil retained the form of the building, with its gently concave facade, but wrapped it in a new skin of glazed terra-cotta tiles. A single incision cuts up and across the facade as if it were unzipped.

The architectural challenge was to reshape the building's identity without ripping out its soul. But seen from across Columbus Circle by daylight, the new exterior looks sterile. The scale and site of the building, a modest structure on a tiny piece of land surrounded by gargantuan towers, demanded something bold; Mr. Cloepfil's tendency is toward the precious.

At ground level, for example, he decided to keep all of Stone's original so-called lollipop columns except one and wrapped the entire base in glass. As a result, the columns look meek and lifeless, as if they had been embalmed.

Above, the thousands of terra-cotta tiles have an attractive candy-coated gloss, especially at dusk, when they glitter in the reflected light. But their diminutive size makes them seem slightly fussy and out of place.

The cut is a more confident gesture — until it reaches the top, where it dissolves into a



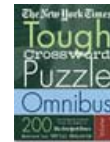
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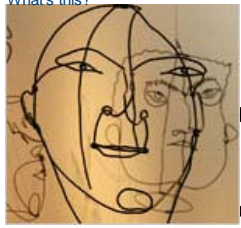
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instance, which allows him to create more generous spaces within a limited floor plate. He removed two emergency staircases that had been tucked into the building's back corners, replacing them with a single stairway behind the elevator core. He also carved windows into the northeast and northwest corners of the gallery floors. The windows allow light into the galleries without sacrificing wall space, provide gorgeous views up Broadway and out over Central Park and allow the galleries to breathe, an effect that is a bit like loosening a corset.

But the critical strategy here is the incision, which runs across the gallery floors and ceilings as well as up the exterior facade. The power of this idea arises from its violence. If its relentless logic holds, it will have a destabilizing effect on the viewer, as if the very structure that holds the building together is being cut away.

Yet Mr. Cloepfil undermines this gesture through the carelessness of his detailing. At the point where the incision turns from the wall and cuts across the ceiling, for example, a section of drywall is left at the corner; the result reads as two separate slots of glass instead of a continuous cut through the building.

Similarly, narrow strips of wood separate the glass channels that run across the gallery floors from the window frames, which makes the incisions feel decorative rather than like a clean surgical cut.

These are not minor details. They are critical to how ideas are conveyed; when used effectively, the impact is visceral and immediate. The mind doesn't take time to interpret, step by step, the architect's intention. This is what separates pedestrian work from serious architecture.

You can't help but think of Gordon Matta-Clark, who famously carved up abandoned New York buildings with a power saw in the 1970s. His works, though considered art, were often a harsh commentary on his era, a reflection on the disintegration of the fragile social fabric that bound the city together. Yet by cutting structures apart and allowing the light to flow in, he was also illuminating dark, forbidden corners, exposing their beauty and fragility.

In Mr. Cloepfil's hands, the same gesture is mild and timid. Harsh edges have been smoothed over. We're left with an image of a New York that has been scrubbed of any real meaning.

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