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THE SKYLINE

Assessing the highs and lows of Chicago architecture

By Blair Kamin

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Originally posted: September 26, 2008

'Lollipop building' at New York's Columbus Circle sweetly, but imperfectly, transformed into Museum of Arts and Design



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

NEW YORK—"There are no second acts in American lives," novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, a truism that no longer seems so true, either in the lives of people or of buildings.

A case in point: 2 Columbus Circle, which began its life as the much-ridiculed "lollipop building" and which reopens to the public Saturday, skillfully if not always winningly reinvented as the Museum of Arts and Design. Right along Broadway, this is a second act worth seeing—and worth pondering for the lessons it teaches, both pro and con, about breathing new life into oddball architecture.



In the first act, back in 1964, the 10-story building, designed

by Edward Durrell Stone, made its debut as a Venetian Gothic bauble that defied the steel-and-glass hegemony of High Modernism. The patron, A&P supermarket chain heir Huntington Hartford, called his exotic little palace the Gallery of Modern Art. Upon its opening, New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable famously zinged it as "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops." Hartford shut it down in 1969.

Flash forward to this century: With plans advancing to reshape the vacant, derelict building, author Tom Wolfe in 2003 led a high-wattage campaign to preserve it. Others including Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, joined the cause, arguing that Stone's design represented an early, bold attempt to loosen the strictures of the International Style.

Building's second act

Now, those polemics can be set aside for the finished \$90 million building, which, while no masterpiece, turns out to be a better example of architectural recycling than its critics predicted. What it reveals, other than the questionable judgment of those who insisted upon inflating Stone's kitsch to masterwork status, is that second-rate buildings can have successful, albeit controversial, second acts.

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The architect, 52-year-old Brad Cloepfil of the Portland, Ore., firm Allied Works Architecture, has been through the New York media ringer since he began the project six years ago. "I was a young architect then. And now ..." he said to laughter at a Sept. 18 press preview. Despite the pounding he's taken, the integrity and ingenuity of his design—the final piece in the revitalization of Columbus Circle, the once-dysfunctional traffic round-about at the southwest corner of Central Park—remain largely intact.

Stone's frilly white marble facade is gone, replaced with a taut skin of iridescent terra cotta and narrow ribbons of glass that take a right-angled pathway up the building's facades. The slits draw a surprising amount of natural light into intimate galleries, whose domestic scale is perfectly suited to the museum's intriguing collection of fine art, craft, decorative art and design.

To carry out this transformation, 300 tons of concrete were removed from the original structure, including 2-foot-wide openings sliced into the building's poured-in-place concrete walls. Steel pins brace the remaining concrete against the wind, keeping the structure from collapsing like a house of cards.

The outcome is worth applauding, though hardly show-stopping, because Cloepfil was stuck with the profile and proportions of Stone's building and could not shape an iconic image all his own.

Like its predecessor, the building is a human-scaled, off beat antidote to the Time Warner Center and other sleek glass towers around Columbus Circle. Its distinctive concave facade still shapes the public space of the circle. Though the exterior walls verge on hospital hygienic, they echo the light palette and screened sense of mystery from Stone's original. As you walk by, you see tinges of pink and purple in the facade's 22,000 custom-made terra cotta tiles.

Window compromise

The exterior's major flaw results from the insertion of a horizontal band of windows to serve the museum's still-to-open ninth-floor restaurant. Cloepfil calls it a violation of his original design. Museum director Holly Hotchner counters that those plans didn't provide enough panoramic views. What is indisputable is that the detail forms the equivalent of a crossbar in the letter "H," making it look as though the word "HE" is stamped in giant letters on the facade.

Cloepfil recoils at the notion that he's turned the "lollipop building" into the "HE building" The last thing he had in mind was to make the building an enormous postmodern sign, like a supersize child's building block. His intent was characteristically modern—to dramatically reconfigure the inside and express that outside. Despite the big blemish, his design by and large fulfills that goal.

The building's lollipop-shaped columns remain at ground level, set within a light-filled, glass-sheathed lobby rather than forming an exterior arcade, as they did previously. While only their "stems" are visible from outside, their playfulness remains evident from within and tells the building's story. The same goes for a 150-seat auditorium in the basement, where Stone's mahogany walls have been restored and the gold and red palette recalls Hartford's decision to outfit the interior with the colors of A&P.

Cloepfil's best strokes come in the building's galleries, where the outside slits continue through floors and ceilings and are covered in translucent glass. Less visibly, he opens up the once-claustrophobic galleries by shifting fire escape stairs and mechanical equipment to the building's back.

Through the translucent glass, you see the floors above you, even the bottoms of people's shoes. The effect is to tease you through the levels and make them feel connected, unlike typical, separated floors. The vertical window slits are just wide enough for a single person to take in views of Columbus Circle and the surrounding cityscape. These features enliven the galleries without proving distracting to the art.



True, there are minor faults, such as the too-dark cases showcasing the museum's permanent collection, but these can be fixed. The overall confluence of lively spaces and a lively collection is felicitous, nowhere more so than in the exhibition "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary," which shows how artists transform mass-produced objects—telephone books, quarters, eyeglasses—into art. Even accounting for that silly-looking "HE," much the

same has been accomplished with the building itself.

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For years I always had a soft spot for the Stone's building. I can't say I was a fan (in fact the claustrophobic aspect is something I really didn't care for) but I admired that he was trying something new and bold. I'm glad to see it revitalized in this way and very happy that the New York continues to grow culturally. For those interested, I found some more photos and info about today's opening at:

nycartsandentertainment.com/museum_of_arts__design

Let's hope the museum strikes a note with visitors, even despite the potential room for improvement Kamin points out.

Posted by: Peter Sullivan | Sep 26, 2008 9:26:56 AM

The new building is a travesty. What in the world were they thinking? It's almost boring and generic enough to ignore, but then you see those stupid letters all over it. You mention the "HE" on the front but why not the HI up on its top? Ridiculous.

Tis a pity the original wasn't landmarked.

Posted by: Al | Sep 27, 2008 4:24:43 PM

In some respects, the building is an object-lesson in why clients should listen to architects. It sounds like the horizontal window that forms the "H" was strongly resisted by the architect—who was steamrolled by his client. And in fact, that has become the main criticism of the building. Without that horizontal window, it would be neither the "HE" building nor the "HI" building. It would be much more graceful.

I like the cleanness and purity of the design. New York is filled with dull brown buildings. I'm pleased that we now have one pure white almost Platonic form.

Posted by: John | Sep 29, 2008 11:24:01 AM

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