

A surprising package

At NY museum, it's what's on the inside that counts

By Robert Campbell, Globe Correspondent | September 28, 2008

NEW YORK - The building looks like an upended carton, the kind you might get in a delivery from a mod store like IKEA.

It looks, too, as if someone has taken a box cutter and made slashes in the carton. Some slashes are horizontal, some vertical.

That's about it for expressive architecture in the new Museum of Arts and Design - MAD for short - which opened yesterday on a prominent site facing Columbus Circle, at the southwest corner of Central Park here.

There's a lot to like about MAD once you penetrate the carton and - as if opening a Christmas package - you encounter all the bright goodies inside. But at the urban scale, as a presence on a key site in the streetscape of New York, MAD is a huge disappointment.

The history is complicated. MAD is the renamed former American Craft Museum, which used to be located on 53rd Street across from the Museum of Modern Art. The space there was too small, "crafts" were going out of fashion after a boom in the '60s, and attendance was dwindling. In a gutsy move, led by museum director Holly Hotchner, MAD remade itself with a new name and a new building.

The building has a history too. It first opened in 1964 as the Huntington Hartford Museum, a place to show off the art collection of an A&P heir. The architect was Edward Durell Stone, one of a few designers of that modernist era - Minoru Yamasaki of the World Trade Center was another - trying to find ways to make modernism look prettier. The Hartford, swathed in marble, looked like a candy box; it stood atop a cluster of ornamental piers and was memorably dubbed, by the New York Times critic Ada Louise Huxtable, a "die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops."

Critics laughed at the Hartford. It was windowless and dark inside and galleries were tiny. Still worse, it was designed with three levels on every floor, making the whole building into a kind of grim stair tower. I remember visiting it just once, and disliking it. The Hartford soon failed, and for the next 40 years the building mostly stood empty. By the time MAD bought it from the City of New York in 2002, it was in a state of serious deterioration.

MAD hired a rising young architect, Brad Cloepfil of Portland, Ore., to reinvent the building. It was no easy task: the marble walls, which were nothing but frosting over solid concrete beneath, were too far gone to be saved. And Cloepfil wasn't allowed to change the size or shape of the building: it already filled its allowable zoning envelope.

Cloepfil gutted the interior, removing the awkward stepped floors. He refaced the exterior with an iridescent ceramic tile, which subtly changes color in different weathers. And he made those deep box-cutter slashes to let light into the interior.

The architect preserved the gentle curve of the main facade, which echoes the curve of Columbus Circle on which it fronts. The Circle recently reopened with a superb redesign by noted landscape architect Laurie Olin, and it's now a pedestrian favorite among New York's public spaces. But because MAD's slashes are too randomly placed - some vertical, some horizontal - the facade fails to give you the kind of disciplined horizontal sweep of curve that would have sung with the Circle.

All that said, I loved the interiors. It's amazing how much natural light comes in through those few windows. The windows are of clear UV-rated glass, so as not to allow sunlight to damage the art, and they're further dimmed with vertical stripes of ceramic fritwork. The interiors take a back seat to the exhibits, as they should. What you mostly see is white wall and white ceiling, simple but effective track lighting from white cans, aluminum elevator doors, and windows that always seem well placed to give you a view but don't compete with the art. Thus simply designed, the gallery spaces feel bigger than you would think possible in this skinny tower.

There are 10 floors, plus a basement that holds a handsome mahogany-paneled theater, the one part of MAD that was restored from the original by Stone. Everything else is new. There are delightful surprises: On the sixth floor, for instance, two or three resident artists work in different disciplines - maybe a ceramicist, a woodworker, a glass blower - out in the open,

where they can chat with visitors.

There's also a shop at street level. Here Cloepfil has saved all but one of the lollipop columns, which now form a tree-like arcade as seen from inside. A restaurant is planned for the top floors. Shop and restaurant are the only two parts of the building with expansive glass windows.

As for the art, that's a field for another critic. But I loved the current show, "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary." Fifty-four contemporary artists create works by amassing many examples of the same element - by, for example, taking a zillion quarters or dog tags and piling or gluing them into a single vast sculpture. Like most of the art at MAD, "Second Lives" flirts with kitsch. But that tension, that push-pull between fine art and pop fun, is what gives this kind of art its special energy.

There are four floors of galleries in all. Two are devoted to the permanent collection. About 25 percent of MAD's holdings are on view here, and the plan is to rotate until everything has been seen by the end of 2009.

A sidelight to the MAD story is the preservation battle. Architectural preservationists are powerful in New York. Many believed that - good or bad - the old Huntington Hartford building should be declared an architectural and historic landmark, and restored to its original appearance. Proponents like Robert A.M. Stern, a historian and architect who is dean of the School of Architecture at Yale, said it was a significant example of the architecture of a moment in history and should be preserved as part of a built record of the history of architecture.

But the New York Landmarks Commission refused even to hold a hearing and let the building go. The Commission should probably have let the preservationists have their say in public. But I agree with the verdict. The idea that you should restore a totally dysfunctional building simply because it's a "text" in the history of architecture seems inane to me.

At more than \$90 million in total cost, in an era of steep inflation in the building industry, MAD paid a lot but gained a lot in return. The 54,000-square-foot building triples the museum's exhibit space and gives it a killer location in the city. And because the building retains its shape, it is now a pleasing ghost memory of the old Hartford Museum. If only it weren't for that faceless exterior. . .

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