



# Museum Date

**A pair of critics size up the new Museum of Arts and Design.**

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Top left: The "lollipop" columns on the ground floor remain, under glass; Bottom left: The old exterior, late in its life.

(Photo: Clockwise from top left: Hannah Whitaker (2); Ed Bailey/AP)

**E**dward Durrell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle, opened as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art in 1964 and later housing the city's Cultural Affairs Department and several generations of pigeons, reopens September 27 as the [Museum of Arts and Design](#). Art critic Jerry Saltz and architecture critic Justin Davidson toured the galleries, remade by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, then sat down to discuss the building, the institution, and their reactions.

**JERRY SALTZ:** So, Mr. Architecture Critic, do you miss the boxy old Venetian folly on Columbus Circle?

**JUSTIN DAVIDSON:** Nope. I didn't have such strong affections for the old building that I resent the new one. Besides, it's almost impossible to look at Brad Cloepfil's makeover without seeing Stone's original.

**J.S.:** The old Huntington Hartford has been placed in the witness-protection program and given a new identity. It's like they've done sexual-reassignment surgery on it and outfitted it in urbane jewelry.

**J.D.:** The operation's pretty radical, too. Cloepfil ripped off the façade, sliced away large sections of the concrete shell, and got rid of the arcade. But he did leave the "lollipop" columns on the ground floor, and treated them in a way that encapsulates the whole project's ambivalence. The glass in front of the column capitals is frosted so that, seen from the street, they look recognizable but blurred, like ghostly memories of an earlier incarnation. If you're looking for those lollipops, then lo and behold, there they are, just not quite the way you remember. But then I wonder: Is it fair to judge a new architectural creation by its relationship to what it obliterated?

**J.S.:** Well, this particular obliteration is unique. The new building is handsome, but I do miss the old one—its eccentric adornment, its weird cooling-tower presence. It was so specific. It's like a great dodo becoming extinct.

**J.D.:** Maybe that extinction was inevitable. Its habitat had transformed since the mid-sixties. By the

time the museum wanted it, the building stuck out, partly because it had been unused for so long. That's one reason preservationists had so much affection for it. In New York, even an empty lot can acquire character when people start paying attention and cultivating a little patch of roses or something. This was a 3-D empty lot.

**J.S.:** And now it's part of the shiny happy circle.

**J.D.:** So do you think that this move will push the museum to redefine itself?

**J.S.:** Let's hope so. The place has had a super-conflicted relationship to its mission. In 1956, it opened as the Museum of Contemporary Crafts. Then in 1986 it had a midlife crisis and changed its name to the American Craft Museum. Then in 2002 the name changed again, this time to the Museum of Arts and Design. Maybe in 2025 the place will be called the Designatorium. The big problem with a museum of craft and design is that *all* art has craft and design. Craft is not a category; it's a means. The folks running the museum are sharp, and they know this, but they are in a bind. The debut show, "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary," is supposed to be about how artists reuse humble or unusual materials. There's good work here, but much of what's on view is actually more about obsession and repetition: a couch made out of 3,500 quarters, a necklace composed of 100 handgun triggers. The building, too, seems caught between wanting to be an object of decorative delectation and making an architectural statement.

**J.D.:** It always engendered a lot of ambivalence. Stone was a rather austere minimalist until he adopted a more fanciful and decorative style, and 2 Columbus Circle fused both sensibilities. Even its champions had mixed feelings: They defended it for its eccentricity, not its beauty. Cloepfil seems to have been torn between renovating and expressing a fresh idea. So you have the original shape, those haunting columns, and a lovingly reconstructed auditorium using Stone's vocabulary of mahogany and gold. But other changes are quite pragmatic and brutal. When Cloepfil eliminated the dead zone between the structure and the marble screen, he created some bizarre rooms, with windows behind columns. I sense that the design carries the burden of the controversy, saying, "See? This was a good idea!"

**J.S.:** To me, the building now looks like a lovely jewel box, and the tiled façade reminds me of a heat shield.

**J.D.:** I like that effect. The ceramic tiles have an iridescence in certain light, and the snaking strip of glass gives all four façades a welcome unpredictability. But what do you think about seeing art there?

**J.S.:** Well, the exhibition spaces are smallish but still feel roomy, elegant, and thoughtful. They don't obnoxiously say, "Look at me." They're about looking at art, and they're filled with light. A couple of quirks: Every time I look at the façade I see the windows forming the letters *H* and *E*, so it seems like the building is spelling out the word *he*. Maybe shades of that sexual reassignment. Also, when I was inside, I got frustrated by the skinny windows, because they are covered with all those little gray stripes. What's up with those?

**J.D.:** Those are ceramic frits baked into the glass. They're very popular with architects just now, because they diffuse daylight, cut cooling costs, and can make the windows look almost white from the outside. But they're not supposed to be frustrating.

**J.S.:** So? Does the building justify dismantling the old?

**J.D.:** Almost, but I wish Cloepfil had pushed the concept three or four steps further. This version won't satisfy those who thought it should never have been touched, and it's not bold enough to overpower their arguments—or, I suspect, to turn the Museum of Arts and Design into an essential destination.

**J.S.:** Maybe the museum needs to follow the advice of its acronym and not be afraid to go a little M.A.D.

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it's commendable that rather than throwing away the old and reconstructing brand new, that the essential elements of the original are kept. by essential elements, [...](#)

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