

Zigzag Glass Ribbon Lights Up Lollipop Museum of Art and Design

Review by James S. Russell

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Sept. 9 (Bloomberg) -- It's easy to dismiss Manhattan's new [Museum of Arts and Design](#) as a white tombstone scribbled with zigzag slits: a willful graphic posing as architecture. A closer look reveals a work of subtlety and substance.

MAD's 54,000-square-foot, \$90 million new home on Columbus Circle began life in 1964 as the much maligned Huntington

Hartford Museum, designed by Edward Durrell Stone.

Architect [Brad Cloepfil](#), the principal of [Allied Works](#) in Portland, Oregon, gutted Stone's building and reclad it in custom-made, vertically striated terra-cotta tiles that iridesce just a bit. Gray bands of glass and dark slits divide the walls into elegantly proportioned planes held in an abstract-expressionist tension. With clear glass at the bottom, the weighty block visually hovers above the street.

There's something intriguingly elusive about this design. Its gnomic bands and zigzags face Columbus Circle, among the most prominent sites in Manhattan. Do they form a mask? A pictographic character from a lost language? You want to know what it means.

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At the same time, it deflects attention because it doesn't terminate a dozen-block vista down Broadway with a chest-thumping statement. Happily, it lets Columbus Circle read as a forecourt to the cliff of masonry skyscrapers that leap up to form the Midtown skyline.

The lack of an instantly comprehensible image became a liability in a controversy that almost sunk the project.

Venetian Palazzo

The Huntington Hartford had been designed as a traditionalist response to the [Museum of Modern Art](#). Though Stone had built a career as a skilled modernist, he concocted a white-marble Venetian palazzo heavily diluted with 1960s tics like a spindly arched porch on top and a street-level arcade supported on columns that critic [Ada Louis Huxtable](#) famously likened to lollipops.

The museum quickly failed, and the arcade sheltered homeless people while decades passed and no deserving new use materialized. Only when the museum came along with its plan to rip off the dissolving marble did preservation activists mount a two-year effort to retain the Stone design.

The building's many prominent defenders said it deserved to be saved because it was representative of its time or challenged prevailing tastes. Unfortunately, the passage of time did nothing to make its parched aesthetic more compelling.

New Identity

Cloepfil's job was not made any easier as the museum's identity evolved. The 52-year-old museum was rooted in the arts and crafts movements that flourished in the early 20th century as a response to soulless industrial

production. The 1960s counterculture pumped new energy into ceramics, fiber art and folk furniture. (For the first time the museum can display its craft roots. Jewelry gets pride of place in the second-floor gallery; the third floor is devoted to the permanent collection.)

As craft has become chiefly the province of street fairs, Director [Holly Hotchner](#) shepherded a name change in 2002. (It had been the American Craft Museum.) The move signaled a new focus on materials and the process of making works of art and design. The sixth floor of the museum houses studios so that visitors can meet working artists.

Art predominates in the inaugural exhibition, "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary." Most of the works obsessively repurpose everyday fabricated objects, from clothing labels to plastic spoons. It places the museum squarely on turf occupied by numerous others.

Beautiful Daylight

However that plays out, Cloepfil has made some of the city's best display spaces. The exterior's zigzag bands are revealed inside as a way to diffuse daylight beautifully into four gallery floors. Horizontal slots run just below the ceiling, spraying daylight deep into the rooms through recessed glass.

The slots run down the walls as vertical ribbon windows, enlivening the space with bands of sunlight. Wider bands of glass open to gorgeous park and skyline views. This glass doesn't glare and the views don't upstage the art because hairline translucent stripes fused onto the glass (called ceramic frit) filter the light and reveal views only when seen straight on. Since the museum minimizes vitrines, groups of free-standing objects bask in a swirl of daylight and art lighting.

The zigzag bands extend across the floors so that shadows cast by footfalls are visible to visitors below. Artist [Cornelia Parker](#) silhouettes silver serving pieces she's bulldozed flat by hanging them over the floor glass.

Some Stone touches remain, including the lollipop columns. His restored red mahogany auditorium in the basement, its ceiling draped with bronze disks, has all the style of a Soviet-era nightclub.

By contrast, the treads of an adjacent Cloepfil stair look as if they are held within veils of sheer fabric rather than suspended from cables. That sums up this museum's quietly compelling power.

The Museum of Arts and Design at 2 Columbus Circle opens to the public on Sept. 27. The museum's old home on West 53rd Street has closed.

([James S. Russell](#) is Bloomberg's U.S. architecture critic. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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