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The Building That Isn't There

By TOM WOLFE

Does the municipal log duly show that Brad Cloepfil, the architect about to transform Edward Durell Stone's historic white marble Huntington Hartford museum on Columbus Circle, means to render it "more ephemeral?"

"Ephemeral" is Architect Cloepfil's own word, I hasten to add, as in here today and gone tomorrow, and the nouveau-named Museum of Arts and Design, originally the homely old dosey-doe American Craft Museum, now on West 53rd Street, is busy raising more than \$50 million to have him do it.

The average savant might assume Architect Cloepfil (rhymes with "hopeful") was trying to say "ethereal" or perhaps "inimitable" when his tongue slipped to "ephemeral"; but the average savant avoids the coherently challenged theoryspeak of contemporary architecture like a brain-invading computer virus -- and is therefore unlikely to know that Ephemeralism was once (1994) This Year's Architectural Style of the Century. There were countless This Year's Styles of the Century from 1950 to 2000: the New Brutalism, the New Minimalism, Deconstructivism, Conceptualism, Contextualism, Rationalism, three kinds of Postmodernism (White, Gray and Silver) and on and on. But I will mention only a couple that had succeeded Ephemeralism before the century was even over: Blobism and Infrastructuralism.

Ephemeralism's big moment arrived in 1994 with Jean Nouvel's Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris. Well outside the real glass walls, Mr. Nouvel, a French architect, put other glass walls that extended beyond the building and were meant to create disorienting reflections and general confusion as to where the museum itself really was, thereby "dematerializing" it (Mr. Nouvel's favorite word at the time) and making it difficult for what theoryspeakers call "the dominant regime" to find. I could try to tell you why this is an important goal, but it would make your head hurt as much as mine.

In due course, Ephemeralism embraced 1) transparency -- using plain glass walls or, preferably, confusing layers of glass like Mr. Nouvel's; 2) voyeurism -- people outside on the street observing what people are doing inside and vice versa; and 3) branding -- making the exterior design remind you of the enterprise within. All this was supposed to return architecture to a certain messianic moment, to the original vision of Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier -- the White Gods!

Our story of Brad Cloepfil and Edward Durell Stone and Stone's museum at 2 Columbus Circle is a modern-day, Oct. 12, 2003, parable of a curious religion -- literally that, a religion -- that has determined the look of major public buildings throughout the United States for the past 60-odd years. It is a story of believers and an infidel . . . and of where the faithful will go from here.

How the two Germans, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, arrived as refugees in the early 1930's . . . how they found both faculty and students at all the major architecture schools in the United States prostrate before them in awe and homage (Harvard immediately made Gropius head of its architecture school) like Bruce Cabot and Myrna Loy crash-landing in the jungle in a 1930's movie and emerging dizzily from the wreckage in their white jodhpurs and black Vogel riding boots . . . to find the natives down on their knees worshipping them -- White Gods! Come from sky! -- and how the faith known as the International Style entered young architects' very bones, not metaphorically but precisely the way another faith enters the very bones of upland foot-washing Baptists at age 4 . . . and how by 1945 the architects, literally, not metaphorically, were converts, one and all, veritable zealots, who spoke with such

evangelical fervor in theory speak that even the chief executives of the mightiest corporations gave up, caved in and signed off on towering glass boxes they personally hated . . . is a well-known story . . . as well known as the White Gods' First Commandment, namely, that all buildings, great and small, must be made bourgeois-proof in the name of the Working Class . . . meaning no precious materials, such as marble -- and white marble was the worst -- only glass, steel, concrete and plaster . . . no applied decorations, such as crown (monarchy!) moldings . . . and no "pretty" colors, only white, black and gray.

Less well known is the story of how by 1960 this business of turning out correct glass box after correct glass box began to bore even the most profoundly religious architects . . . and how there ensued a frenzied attempt to come up with a style that looked different but broke none of the holy trinity's commandments . . . resulting in the Tower of Babelish babble-gaggle of isms I've mentioned.

Ephemerality in this country was in no small part the result of a pronouncement by one of the Three Gods' latter-day saints, Prof. Colin Rowe of Cornell. In a coherently challenged tour de force in the 1990's, he went up a steep slope at the Greek Peak Ski Resort, east of Ithaca, and came down with a tablet titled "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal." It revealed that the gods had foreseen a future in which the Second Commandment, concerning transparency, would embrace far more than the simple transparency of glass.

Now we can understand the deeply faith-based orthodoxy of Architect Cloepfil's plans for dematerializing Stone's white marble museum. The marble will be removed and carted off somewhere, very likely New Jersey, to be fed as landfill to the mucky maw of the Jersey marshes, at a cost of millions. The marble walls will be replaced by, one scarcely need add, glass walls. In place in front of the glass walls, explained Holly Hotchner, director of the Museum Formerly Known as Craft, at a press conference on April 2, with a beaming Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg standing by, will be curtain walls, top to bottom and all around. The curtain walls, known as "scrim," "veils" or "layers" in theory speak, will be made of panels of perforated glazed terra cotta, probably 18-or-so inches from the glass walls. The perforations in the terra cotta will offer peekaboo voyeurism. At intervals will be wide glass "columns," so-called, but rectangular, flush with the plane of the curtain walls. They will offer the voyeurs outside the full Monty, a direct look at what's going on inside.

In 2006, when it is completed, we will see the Platonic ideal of plain transparency, confusing transparency, peekaboo voyeurism, I-see-you voyeurism and hide-and-seek deception of the dominant regime. Not only that, the clay terra cotta and the perforations in it will create a woven, textured effect, according to Director Hotchner. The clay and the more-or-less woven look will brand the Museum Formerly Known as Craft as the City Mouse heir to the Country Mouse's trove of hand-thrown, hand-painted, hand-glazed, home-baked clay pots and purposely woozy loosely loopy home-loomed fabrics.

Architect Cloepfil himself says that "it is essential that 2 Columbus Circle engage its surroundings . . . therefore the building is permeable, fostering a dialogue between the interior of the museum and its urban environment." He says it will "merge" with the rest of Columbus Circle.

Here we are faced with another coherently challenged goal. There are many who cry out that Stone's white marble building should be preserved as a historic landmark and many who would just as soon see it go. But both sides agree on one thing: "its urban environment" is gross. "Its surroundings," the buildings beside, behind and across from Stone's museum, make Columbus Circle, minus the museum, look like the Downtown Renaissance of some decaying midsize Rust Belt city from which the factories have decamped to Mexico and the retailers have fled to the malls.

In a Downtown Renaissance the terminally weary buildings left stranded downtown get "revitalized" by a couple of new, ludicrously colossal glass-box towers done in the 1950's Modern mode . . . such as Columbus Circle's Trump International Hotel and Tower, originally the Gulf & Western tower, and the soon-to-be-completed Time Warner complex.

So many roadways cut into and right through the Circle itself, the marble statue of Christopher Columbus out in the middle looks like a stranded pedestrian who has shimmied up a 77-foot pole to keep from getting killed and is waiting for the marble people lounging about the base of the Maine Memorial at the southwest entrance to Central Park -- Courage, Peace, Fortitude and Justice, by name -- to come rescue him.

So if that is what Architect Cloepfil and the Museum of Arts and Design want their brainchild to "merge" with and have a "dialogue" with (a favorite coherently challenged theoristspeak term -- nobody ever reports what the "environment" said), they might want to brace themselves for an earful and a half. Our average savant would shake his head and say to himself: they plan to spend more than \$50 million to create a "permeable" now-you-see-it, now-you-don't building so one can at last observe, without distraction, a miserable Gehenna no dominant regime, if such existed outside of theoristspeak, would put up with for 10 minutes.

As soon as the museum was on the market in 1975 (we will see why in the next installment), the people at Gulf & Western, whose office tower was across the Circle from it, snapped it up. It was useless to them as a commercial property, because the block it fills up is a tiny island the shape of a fingernail clipping, with prohibitive height restrictions. It seems they bought it, according to the American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City, solely because its sleek, radiant, monumental white marble facade "shows off well when seen from the north, on Broadway, gleaming among larger, darker structures" -- and made the office space G & W was leasing out with views of the otherwise Low Rent, Room to Let Circle far more valuable. G & W then granted the city use of Stone's building as a visitors center, rent free, with the strict proviso that it not be altered in any way.

Huntington Hartford was a man in his late 40's who had inherited \$70 million, much of it directly from his father, a shock-absorber inventor. Mr. Hartford despised the Museum of Modern Art and its championing of abstract art, especially Abstract Expressionism. His passion was literally religious, too, but his religion was the church kind. Mr. Hartford believed abstract art mocked God. So he decided to thrust a gleaming Cross into the very face of the Devil in the form of a Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle, a museum showing the world modernists who worked in the representational mode, from the Pre-Raphaelites to Gauguin to the dazzling and, in his view, spiritually uplifting Salvador Dali.

Mr. Hartford chose Stone as architect . . . and smacked his lips over the poetic justice of it. This was the very same Edward Durell Stone who had been the architect, along with Philip Goodwin, of the Museum of Modern Art 25 years earlier!

At the time, back in the 1930's, Stone had been among the handful of prominent American International Style architects. He had designed one of the first International Style houses on the East Coast, the Mandel House (1933) in Mount Kisco, N.Y. His International Style house for the Museum of Modern Art's president, A. Conger Goodyear of the Goodyear Goodyears, would later be designated a World Monument by the World Monuments Fund.

Then, in the 1950's -- bango! -- Stone defected without warning from the International Style in a big way: he created the sinfully luxurious American Embassy in New Delhi, with its gold-leafed steel columns, its facade of concrete and marble terrazzo grillwork to temper the equatorial sunlight, and a picturesque water garden to provide a cooling view. To International Style Modernists, the use of luxurious materials like marble and gold and Taj Mahal-style grilles symbolized the dominant regime, the accursed bourgeois capitalists, lording it over the masses; and the less said about picturesque water gardens the better.

But the dismay over Stone's embassy was nothing compared to the furor over his museum for the "reactionary" Huntington Hartford. The whole damned building was marble! White marble -- up and down and all the way around! "A pot of paint flung in the face of the high Modernist establishment," as Robert A. M. Stern would put it later when he became dean of Yale's School of Architecture.

More of Stone's damnable Taj Mahal grillwork, it seemed, ran up the corners of the building and across the top of

the facade. And the arches! -- whole rows of them framed loggias near the top of the building and made orthodox Modernists grind their teeth and think of Venetian palaces . . . owned by the merchant kings. And the columns! -- white marble columns of a bizarre (i.e., new) shape inset with dark marble discs . . . must be Moorish or something.

Above all, there was the facade, which scrupulously followed the curve of the Circle. Stone had rejected steel construction in favor of poured reinforced concrete and its plastic, sculptural qualities in order to do it. The gods of the International Style, Corbusier, Mies and Gropius, shuddered. They countenanced only steel-beam construction with simple, honest Working Class right angles.

Inside the museum was 10 stories worth of heresy. Instead of the International Style's mandatory plain white gallery walls, Mr. Hartford's galleries were veneered in two notoriously expensive dark woods, macassar ebony and walnut, with bronze trim. Instead of bare, Worker Gray factory-style floors, Mr. Hartford's had expensive marble inlays, hardwood parquet de Versailles, gold area rugs and red carpet.

Stone and Mr. Hartford knew they were in for howls of outrage and wouldn't have been happy if they heard none. But as for the thermomedia blast about to flatten them -- they hadn't a clue.

This article is the first of two installments.

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