

# Love the New Skin You're In

**The quirky 'lollipop' building is finally reborn.**

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When the Museum of Arts and Design opened in a newly refurbished building in New York last week, it was a Cinderella ending to a big-fisted civic brawl. A battalion of preservationists had fought—and filed lawsuits, later dismissed—the idea of changing the original 1964 structure by Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the Kennedy Center in Washington and the U.S. embassies in London and New Delhi. Everyone on both sides of the dispute agreed that the place was quirky. Built as an art museum for the A&P heir Huntington Hartford, the building curved around Columbus Circle on a cramped site; it had no windows except for little portholes cut into the corners of its 10-story white marble façade; it sat on slender columns, each topped with a disc of dark marble, which earned it the name the "lollipop" building. One ardent defender was the author Tom Wolfe, who loved the way Stone had betrayed his strict Bauhaus beginnings to design something a little go-go—a vaguely Venetian-Moorish palazzo that foreshadowed the postmodern style of the 1980s. In an op-ed in *The New York Times*, Wolfe called the building a "historic masterpiece."

Most critics—even most fans—would not have gone that far, but the debate helped spotlight the complex issues involved in saving modern buildings. In the past few years, we've begun to value our midcentury architectural heritage in the same way we've snapped up Eames chairs or George Nelson bubble lamps. It's not just buildings by such textbook giants as Frank Lloyd Wright that seem precious—there are movements to save old neon-lit motels and those over-the-top "googly"-style fast-food joints from the '50s. Many great modern designs have now been landmarked by authorities, and some undisputed masterpieces, such as Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Plano, Ill., have been restored and opened to the public. But a vast number of fine examples of modern architecture are unprotected—particularly houses, which can seem outmoded for 21st-century living—and aging commercial or public buildings that don't necessarily fit the vibrancy of contemporary cities. Purists might argue that the only way to save a modern structure is to restore it exactly to its original design. But for many modern buildings, isn't there a middle ground—somewhere between pristine preservation and the bulldozer?

The Museum of Arts and Design—or MAD, as its new logo reads—is a lesson in mediation, in the kind of architectural give-and-take that retains the ghost of the original while giving the building a second life. Everyone talked about the Stone structure's unique style, but architecture is more than style. The old building wasn't well designed as an art museum for then or now: it didn't have temperature or humidity controls to protect artwork; the small interiors were laid out as a series of half floors and mezzanines that broke up the limited gallery space; it was as dark as a tomb. By the time MAD bought the building, then owned by New York City, it was a vacant ruin. The portholes had popped open and water had leaked in; the once elegant walnut veneer was peeling like wallpaper; the metal shims behind the exterior marble panels were dangerously corroded. The whole thing had to be stripped to the concrete skeleton that stood on those lollipop columns—and then what? To restore it exactly as it was—at huge expense—seemed an almost impossible choice.

MAD's architect, Brad Cloepfil, carefully considered what to keep of the original: the basic structure, shape and scale. You can still see those lollipop columns, which are structural supports, now in the shadows behind the all-glass walls of the ground floor. Inside, the architect maximized the gallery spaces by getting rid of the half floors and cleverly moving the stairs to the back of the building. He brought in daylight by cutting narrow bands—horizontally and vertically—into the outer walls so ribbons of natural light ring the tops of the galleries, and there are views through the vertical slots toward Columbus Circle and Central Park. The bands continue inside as glass tracks embedded in the floors. The interior redo is a big success, but the exterior is sure to remain controversial—gone is that Venetian vibe and the tacky white marble,

replaced by cream terra-cotta tiles that give off an iridescent glow in twilight, smooth and crisp as a perfectly pressed silk shirt. Though not flawless, the project manages to both echo the past and breathe new life into a long-derelict little block of the city.

One reason the MAD design succeeds is that the building now has a real purpose. But finding an essential reuse for a great modern building can be daunting. Look at the fabulous TWA terminal at JFK airport: that winged symbol of optimism by Eero Saarinen was designed for the glamour of '50s plane travel—tune up the Sinatra—but soon after it opened in 1962, it had to be altered to accommodate the jet age. Still, until American Airlines swallowed up TWA in 2001, passengers streamed into that soaring ticket lobby, with its curved roof and stairways that seemed to float. JetBlue is about to open a new terminal behind the Saarinen building—a sensitive design by the Gensler firm that surrounds the aged classic like a protective arm. The TWA building is closed (workers are busily carting out asbestos), but there are plans, eventually, to install a few e-ticket kiosks to make it an entry option for JetBlue passengers who may long for a tug of nostalgia as they drag their wheeled luggage and fret about how long the security lines will be. Some other ideas for reusing Saarinen's landmark have included a restaurant, a conference center and an aviation museum, but none of them has taken flight. That this masterpiece—and it is one—won't be torn down is great news; but that it remains, so far, a mausoleum to modernism seems a terrible shame.

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