

photograph courtesy of Pei Partnership Architects

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## A Century of I. M. Pei

Bradley Wheeler

**Happy centennial birthday to Chinese-American Architect Ieoh Ming Pei, one of the twentieth century's most illustrious architects and the recipient of numerous awards including the Pritzker Prize in 1983**

Born in Guangzhou, China, on April 26th, 1917, Mr. **Pei** later moved with his family to Hong Kong and then to Shanghai when his father, a senior employee of the Bank of China, was transferred. In 1935, the future architect left for the United States and received his Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1940, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Over the next few years, he taught as an assistant professor of design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design where he would receive his Masters of Architecture in 1946. Two years later, he started a seven-year stint with New York City real-estate developer William Zeckendorf, for whom the young architect would work on a variety of buildings around the country. The quintessential modernist form-giver launched his own firm in 1955, which is known today as Pei Cobb Freed & Partners (of New York City.) Upon phasing out of full-time practice in 1990, Mr. Pei has consulted primarily with his sons, Chien Chung (Didi) and Li Chung (Sandi) for their firm Pei Partnership Architects (also of New York City), as well as working on his own projects.

Some of the most iconographic American and international buildings the world has seen have sprung from the hero architect's drawing board. The success of his body of work stems, in part, from his projects' inception, starting with their initial "parti," or big idea, which can be effectively communicated as simple diagrams.

I. M. Pei's forms, whether as diagrammatic sketches or built work, are easily discernible, being composed of strong, familiar shapes that cut crisp profiles against the sky. The forms simultaneously juxtapose and reflect the surrounding context both with contrasting elements and by addressing issues inherent to its unique setting.

Prevalent in the master architect's work are the notions of simple geometry and familiar "shape," which are continuously reinforced on the macro – structural – scale and then distilled to a finer micro level found throughout his portfolio. Often a geometric "theme" – the project's contour – might be subtly conveyed in the configuration or design of its structural members, as in the case of one of the architect's earlier works, the Luce Memorial Chapel in Taichung City, Taiwan (completed in 1963).



↑ Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, Luce Memorial Chapel, Campus of Tunghai University in Taichung, Taiwan, 1963. (Courtesy Pei Cobb Freed & Partners)  
The Luce Memorial Chapel's elegantly tapering triangular silhouette suggests two hands coming together in prayer. The chapel's simple profile cuts the sky and imprints a lasting memory upon the human soul.

The chapel's tapering triangular silhouette, suggestive of two hands coming together in prayer, is reiterated on the interior underside of the roof with diamond-shaped ribbed coffering. Architect Pei's attention to detail is revealed through the ribbing, which recalls the triangulation of the exterior, albeit with two inverse triangles (mirror images of each other across the base) that create a diamond. Such thought speaks to the degree of care and sensitivity executed in each campaign.

### Jigsaw Puzzle

I. M. Pei's architecture responds to and draws upon its environment, taking its cues from an array of factors, all the while satisfying the programmatic requirements and needs of clients, end-users, the surrounding community, and its environs. The constructed oeuvre then fits into its locale, much like the final fragment of a jigsaw puzzle – one exact piece that cannot function anywhere else except in that specific site.

An exceptional illustration of his bespoke architectural solutions created for distinct circumstances is the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado (completed in 1967). Here the centenarian drafted a rugged, powerful architecture honed of concrete that expresses the surrounding foothills of the more than fifty-million-year-old Rocky Mountains.



↑ Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado, 1967. (Courtesy George Cserna / Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University)  
The National Center for Atmospheric Research is an example of I. M. Pei's bespoke solutions. The rugged and powerful architecture represent the geology of the surrounding Rocky Mountain foothills. The project could be for no other than its intended location and use.

Set against a backdrop of sandstone and sedimentary rock, the Center is a cluster of buildings that metaphorically represent the fissures, crags and outcroppings common to the geology of the nearby and evocative "Flatirons" rock formations. The sculptural and suggestive complex is decidedly "of the place." Its willful lines and resolute composition be for no other than its intended location and use.

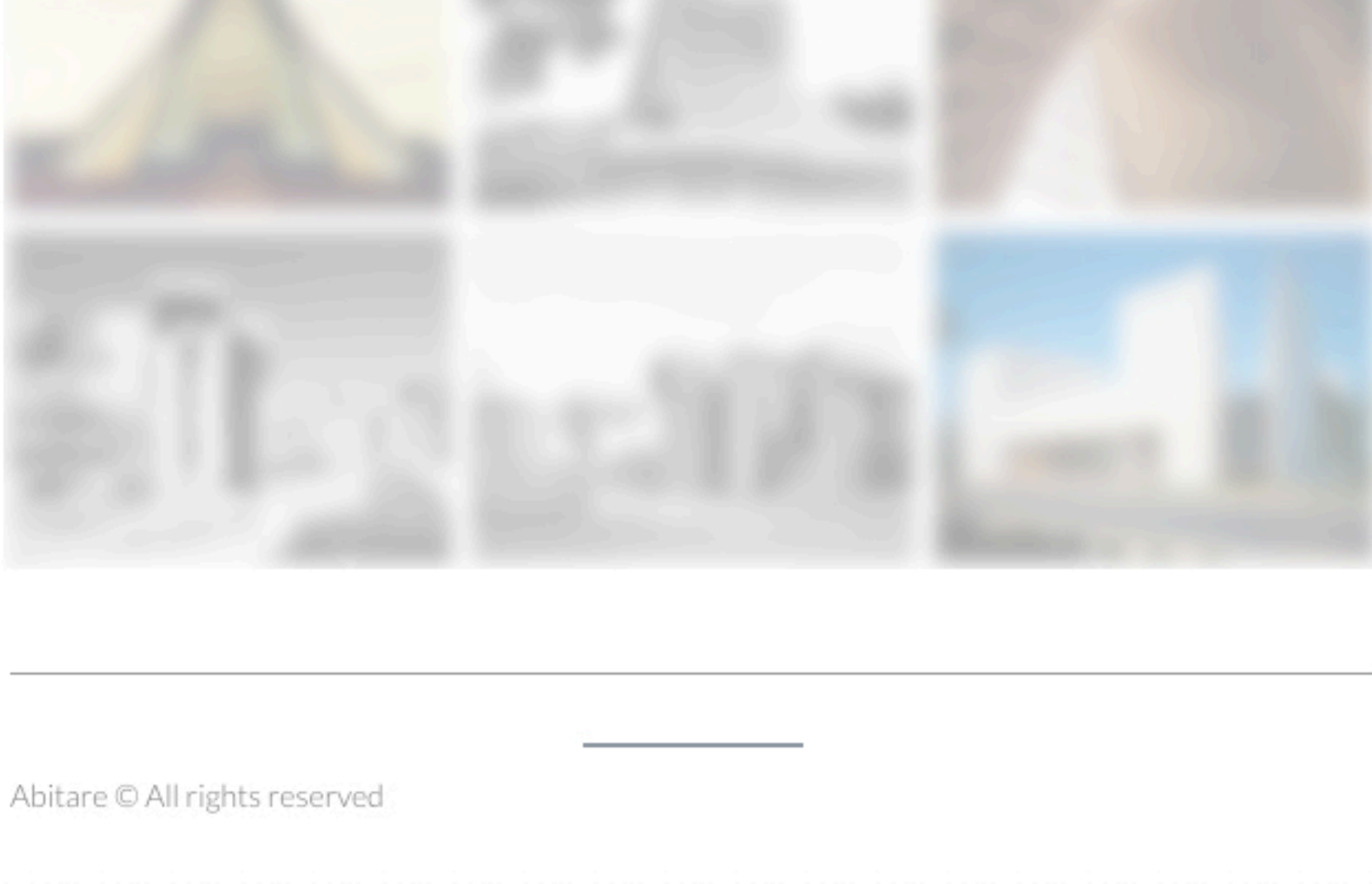
A better known exemplar of the architect's design approach is the Louvre Museum Pyramid (completed in 1989). Arguably one of the noblest museum commissions of the last half of the twentieth century, the Ieoh Ming Pei Louvre campaign reinvented this eighteenth-century institution at a critical juncture of its history.

The museum, which was opened in 1793, was first the French king's residence, having been converted in the mid-1500s from its original late twelfth-century fortress. The twentieth-century Louvre suffered from antiquated circulation in which art lovers would have to traverse the majority of the U-shaped plan (with a single point of entry) to view their favorite collections.

The Pei addition created a programmatic evolution allowing visitors to enter the world's most famous art repository from the center of the palace's courtyard in a steel and glass pyramid that proportionally replicates its Giza predecessor. Visitors then descend circular stairs to one level below grade, allowing them to easily disperse to the wing of their liking.

This solution could be for no other project in the world than the Louvre. Its elegant integration of modern technology with the "Cour Napoleon" facades does not compete with the museum proper, but instead complements it. Nor is it a pastiche that merely copies or imitates surrounding architectural datum, but is a construct derived from an in-depth understanding of the Louvre's history, purpose, use and scale.

Typical of the work of I. M. Pei, this compelling world-renowned project exhibits excellence in a range of command points—from blending historic materials with modern ones to drawing from and building upon a culture to create one of the world's great icons.



↑ Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, Louvre Museum Pyramid, Paris, France, 1989. (Photo Koji Horiuchi)  
The Louvre Museum Pyramid is complemented by fountains and reflecting pool which mirror the "Cour Napoleon" facades.

### Sequence and Layering

In examining the Louvre as well as other I. M. Pei compositions, one discerns a definite hierarchy of sequence and layering – a priority characteristic of his designs. Although his projects are pieces of a unified whole, that is, integral parts of an existing mosaic into which each project plays a role, they are also often "objects" wherein the structure is a single entity standing alone in a "field" – as if a solitary chess figure fixed upon the board. These projects are "destinations." Being approached from a distance, they afford the visitor the anticipation of arrival and the opportunity to relish the entirety of the massing – all of this before entry.

### Entry and Central Spaces

The next layer of the sequence, characteristic of Mr. Pei's design control, consists of the entries and central spaces. Each portal is a highly controlled and exceptionally choreographed experience that transitions the person as if into another realm. Once inside, one is generally exposed to an immense transparent hall of structure and light – again, key elements that are hallmarks of the architect's repertoire. These are grand-scale spaces created by honest engineered members that are always evidenced – never hidden or obfuscated. Beyond the obvious thought to the Louvre, further paradigms are found in Mr. Pei's other prominent compositions, including the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston (completed in 1979) and the Bank of China Headquarters in Beijing (completed in 2001).



↑ I. M. Pei and Pei Partnership Architects, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, 1978. (Photo Thorney Lieberman)  
The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum is a fittingly dignified tribute to the late 35th president of the United States. Its sequential experience starts from afar and ultimately brings the visitor into an enormous atrium space with views of Dorchester Bay and the Boston skyline.



↑ I. M. Pei and Pei Partnership Architects, Bank of China Headquarters, Beijing, 2001. (Photo Bradley Wheeler / CoolNewProjects.com)  
Beijing awakes. The Bank of China Headquarters, Beijing, is composed of easily relatable geometric shapes which dialog with the surrounding context.

In all three cases, as well as others, the structural system supports copious glazing through which an abundance of natural light passes. The natural illumination and structure harmoniously meld together to become one of the most memorable aspects of the project and its *raison d'être*.

### Yin and Yang

If Mr. Pei's grand gallery spaces are considered the "yin" of the edifices, then the "yang" is the "beacon-effect" of his structures from the exterior. During dawn or dusk luminance, these interiors cast light similar to Chinese lanterns against the dark hue of the diminishing day, stamping indelible memories upon the collective human consciousness of the mid- to late-twentieth-century timeline and beyond.

### A Century's Pursuit

Ieoh Ming Pei's architecture is delivered unadorned and boasts no pretense or frivolity, yet travelers from around the globe come to participate in his experience. Every element he incorporates into the whole has utility and purpose. Every line has a reason. Each work makes a bold and deliberate statement. However, his tendency towards the geometric is not overbearing. To the point, his endeavors impart the hope and tectonic zeitgeist of every project's vintage.

By going beyond mere programmatic requirements, his century's pursuit of architectural excellence has created some of the greatest monuments to the human spirit ever constructed.

