

I.M. Pei

By Joseph Giovannini

THOUGH WESTERNIZED, PEI RETAINS HIS RETICENT CHINESE SENSIBILITY, A CHARACTERISTIC THAT SUFFUSES HIS WORK AND HIS PROFESSIONAL PERSONA: THE ARCHITECT HAS THE DEMEANOR OF A DIPLOMAT.

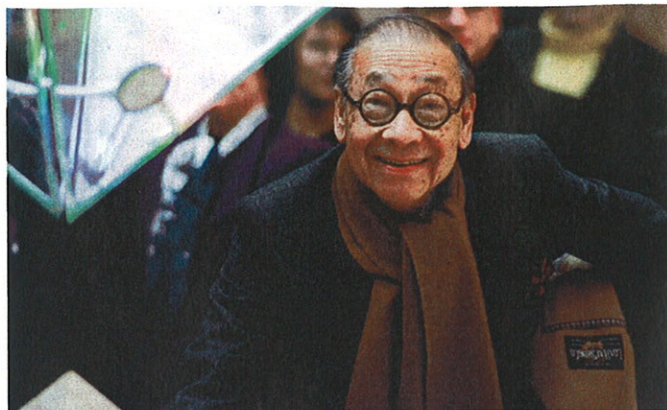
Character is as character does, when an architect designs a building, and the aura of serenity that surrounds all of the structures by New York architect Ieoh Ming Pei emanates from his own sensibility. I.M.—as he is affectionately known to his friends and colleagues—is, after all, the architect who captured Jacqueline Kennedy's trust and eye by placing a big bouquet of flowers in a clear glass bowl when she visited his office in Manhattan, looking for an architect to design the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

I.M., like his buildings, is calm, cool and elegant.

Few top-flight architectural careers have turned on a bouquet, but until that vase commanded the reception room, I.M. had conducted a commercial practice: He made his reputation designing, with his partners, large projects such as the Place Ville-Marie office tower in Montreal and Kips Bay Plaza housing in New York for William Zeckendorf, one of the most ambitious and expansive developers of the postwar era. But even then, in the 1950s and '60s, I.M. transcended commercialism and delivered serenity: The 48-story Place Ville-Marie was huge but clean-lined and refined, the details subordinated to the disciplined order of a simple, reductive whole. His noble palette of materials featured rich, creamy travertines in the shopping concourses. I.M.'s apartment towers for New York University still preside over the Village with a timeless purity, the windows recessed in gridded concrete frames that wrap the buildings with what seems an inevitable simplicity. From the beginning, I.M. made architecture look effortless.

After the episode of the bouquet, the nature of Pei's commissions changed, becoming more select and institutional. His talents flowered thanks to more generous budgets and explicit cultural ambitions: Clients now wanted architecture that verged on art. In Dallas, the architect designed the new city hall, a monumentally dynamic building with a leaning facade fronting an immense plaza. With partner Harry Cobb, the firm designed the John Hancock Building in Boston, whose knifelike prow, split facade and mirrored surfaces belied the mass of a huge building settled into a delicate, old urban fabric. James Freed became a third partner in what eventually became Pei Cobb Freed.

Pei was born into a prosperous Shanghai family with Western values. His father, a prominent banker, promoted notions of trade and industry instead of adherence to traditional Confucian culture. I.M. went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as an undergraduate, and then Harvard's architecture school. The Second World War and then the Chinese Revolution stranded him in America, where he finally remained, setting up practice in New York. Ironically, the Westernized Chinese student retained his reticent Chinese sensibility, a characteristic that suffused his work and his professional persona: The architect had the demeanor of a diplomat.



In an age when architects morphed into masters of public relations, I.M. maintained a discretion that suited a series of clients bearing governmental commissions. In 1974, the premier of China, opening the country after its xenophobic Cultural Revolution, invited Pei to design a hotel, Fragrant Hill, which symbolized China's new openness. Culturally, the design was a hybrid of Eastern and Western forms, at once traditional and fresh: Jacqueline Kennedy pitched in before the opening, scrubbing floors.

But after the Kennedy Library, the breakthrough project that shot I.M. irreversibly into the pantheon of American architects was the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, a granite-faced building seamlessly triangulated within a wedge of land left over by Washington's diagonal street system. In a city styled after Jeffersonian classicism, I.M. gave the capital modernism with dignity.

I.M. went on to international triumphs, including the spectacular, if controversial, expansion of the Louvre in Paris, where he famously introduced a monumental glass pyramid in the Cour Napoleon. On axis with the Champs Élysées, the new entry leads via an open, glass piston elevator and circular staircase to the underground concourse that makes functional sense of the museum. In an ironic twist, I.M. was even invited in 1982 to design the Hong Kong branch of the Bank of China, which the Communists had seized from his father: Pei accepted, producing one of the most lithe, subtle and original skyscrapers of our time, based on illusory geometries that shift along the shaft on their way to the pointed pinnacle.

About 12 years ago, I.M. entered another phase of his long, distinguished career, as he branched out from his long-standing partnership in Pei Cobb Freed to work simultaneously in a smaller partnership focused on even more selective commissions with his two architect sons, DiDi and Sandi, both also Harvard-trained architects. Within that partnership, he has completed midsized buildings for cultural institutions, which have allowed him great expressive range. The meditative geometries that typified his earlier work continue in these more rarefied commissions.

And, as always, the character remains consistent: Down to the doorknob, the new buildings are calm, cool and elegant. BG