

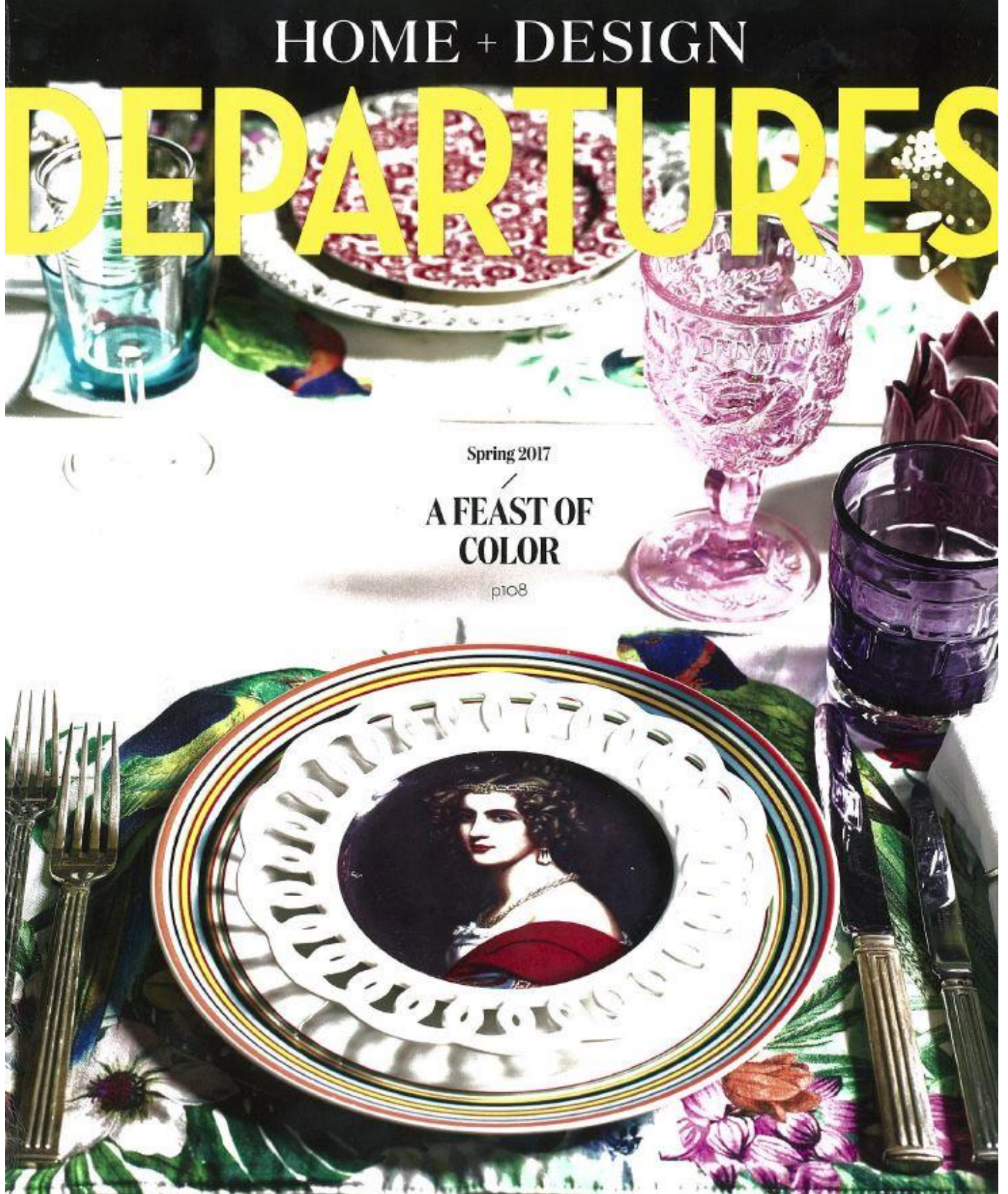
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I. M. PEI'S FIRST 100 YEARS

How the celebrated architect helped shape the 20th century

by IAN VOLNER AND RACHEL HURN



I. M. Pei surveys his design of the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., 1978.

For architects, longevity is a career asset. It takes a sinful to build any one building, s you stick around, the better; of leaving a large body of work l Frank Lloyd Wright made it to 91; son died at 98; and now comes I. l ing the best of them at a solid 100

Raised in and around Shanghai, architectural education early—the district boasting an extraordinary

colonial-era Beaux Arts structures. His family also had roots in the nearby city of Suzhou: A sort of Chinese Venice, the town features some of the oldest and most beautiful gardens in the world, and Pei made them his childhood playground. The exposure to both Western and Eastern influences was to prove decisive in his thinking. "I have never forgotten those gardens," Pei said in later years, describing them as "wonderful marriages of man-made and natural design."

An adventure seeker by nature, Pei made the unusual decision to come to the United States to study architecture, enrolling at the University of Pennsylvania before transferring to MIT. Architecture culture in America in the 1930s was racing to catch up to Europe, and Pei had to discover for himself the revolutionary ideas of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and the other pioneering modernists then making waves abroad. Eventually Pei found himself in Gropius's orbit when the Bauhaus founder became a teacher at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where Pei was a student. His commitment to modernism has (almost) never wavered in the decades since.

It was Pei's good fortune to be quasi-adopted in the late '40s by swashbuckling New York developer William Zeckendorf Sr., who was on a nationwide building spree. Under the aegis of Zeckendorf's company, Webb & Knapp, Pei completed a suite of residential and commercial projects that established him as a practitioner of a singularly elegant brand of the International Style. From his Atlanta headquarters for Gulf Oil in 1949 to his L'Enfant Plaza complex in Washington, D.C., in 1968, the architect—now with his own firm, I. M. Pei & Associates—developed a reduced vocabulary of blocky, concrete forms



LOUVRE PYRAMID

PARIS, 1989

Pei insists the structure was not idiosyncratic: Napoleon, he said in 2010, was "fascinated by Egyptian architecture."

VIEWS FROM THE TOP

Pei's leading collaborators, colleagues, and protégés pay tribute to his mastery.



RICHARD MEIER

Architect known for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, friend of Pei's former partners Jim Freed and Henry Cobb

What's interesting about I. M.'s museums, as opposed to maybe many others', is he's concerned about the galleries, obviously, but he's also concerned about the public space as part of the museum experience. When you go to the National Gallery extension, you walk into that big public space and have a look around, and you say, Wow, this is something. It's a place to go. It's a communal space. Museums today are about viewing art, but they're also about interacting with people. **CONTINUED ▶**

arranged in artful compositions with a robustly civic character.

The same spirit is in evidence in the trio of projects for which Pei is most renowned today: the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1978), with concrete so richly textured it begs to be touched; the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston (1979); and the Grand Louvre plan in Paris, the glass pyramid completed amid much controversy in 1989 and today a beloved symbol of the world's most famous museum. Pei's catalog continued to grow and evolve in the years that followed—he is now in retirement in New York City—and he would even depart slightly from the modernist formula with Manhattan's Four Seasons hotel in 1993, a nod to the Art Deco skyscrapers of old. Pei's record is incredible: 60-plus projects in no fewer than 12 countries.

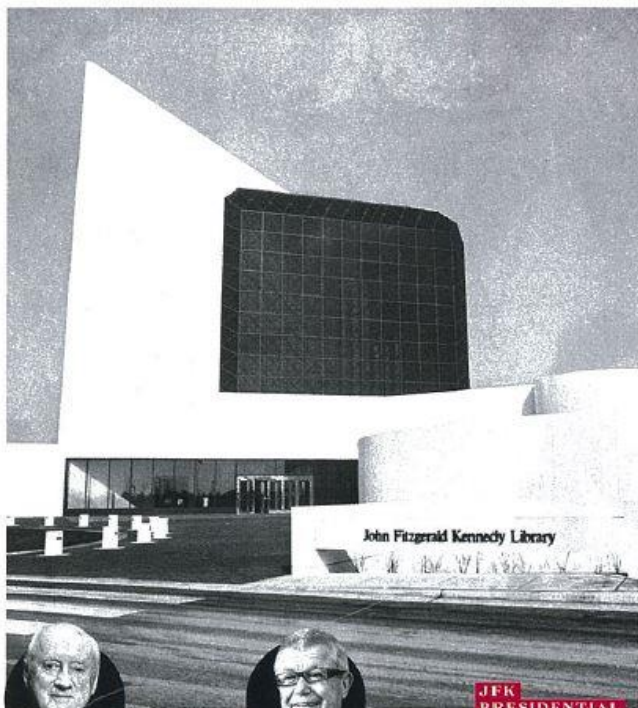
As much as his buildings, Pei himself is an institution. His reputation stands entirely on the strength of his work, and for that reason it will long outlive him—unless, of course, he just keeps on going. Here's hoping. ♦



DAVID ROCKWELL

Architect, interior designer, and stage-set designer

The thing I respect most about I. M. Pei and his work is his ability and interest to talk to a broader audience and not just to architects. I remember the year he won the National Design Award. His speech at the ceremony was stunning, especially the part when he said, "This proves if you live long enough, they forget your mistakes." Anyone who's lived in New York knows the Javits Center, and when it opened, there was an exhibit at MoMA on its structural qualities. Then it fell into great disfavor. Pei has survived so many cycles of being in and out, always focusing on timeless work. What an inspiration, to stay that creative and that vital, and constantly reinvent yourself, and not just focus on what a small group of people thinks about your work, but really engage the broader world.



KEVIN ROCHE

Architect, Pritzker-winning designer of New York's Ford Foundation building

I was a little jealous of Pei, since I was up for a number of the projects that he ended up doing. I didn't particularly like the Louvre project, but it commands respect. His collection of buildings overall is so fine, and together they describe 20th-century architecture.



DANIEL LIBESKIND

Architect, designer of the Denver Art Museum and Jewish Museum Berlin

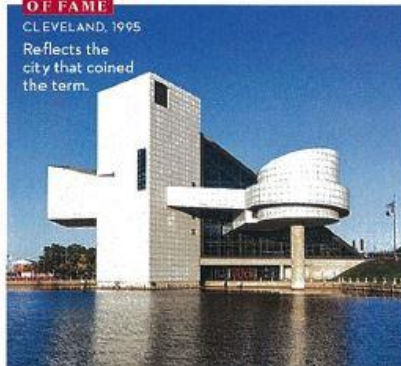
Pei never followed fashion. He always had his own ethos, and as a result a lot of his work still looks fresher today than many contemporary projects: those sharp, very clear geometries; the sense of proportion. You can see his breadth of experience. To have longevity in your life and work, you have to have an ethical and artistic vision that allows you to go that far.

JFK PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY
BOSTON, 1979

Exudes the grace and optimism of the young president.

ROCK & ROLL HALL OF FAME

CLEVELAND, 1995
Reflects the city that coined the term.



ROBERT DALLEK

Presidential historian, author of the best-selling biography An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963

I've done research in pretty much all of the presidential libraries, and Pei's is among my favorites. Much more so than the LBJ library in Austin, which is kind of like Mussolini architecture: There's a grandiose quality to it. The FDR and Truman libraries are both very attractive—they have a modesty, a certain sense of class and decorum—but JFK is just a pleasant building to work in. You go down through the lunchroom, and it has a wonderful vista, and you have to prod yourself to get back to work and stop looking out at Boston Harbor. It's really a reflection of the fact that Kennedy himself was so special, a president remembered as a martyr, killed when he was so young, and who still maintains an 85 percent approval rating.



JEFFREY BEERS

Architect, former Pei protégé

I joined Pei's office as a young architect; maybe I was 25 at the time. He was one of the first modern architects to perfect the glass curtain wall, and I really wanted to work with him. I spent seven years with I. M. I was lucky to work in Singapore on a project called Raffles City. It was a mega-complex, with a hotel and an office, a residential compound, a lot of retail. I became fascinated with that and went on to form my own practice. I. M. was very supportive. He spent a lot of time with all of us. He cared deeply about the work and how we conducted ourselves. He taught me wonderful ways to run my own firm. I am forever indebted to him.