

PROTOTYPE AND PROGENY

Some Recent Monumental Architecture

Richard Hennessy

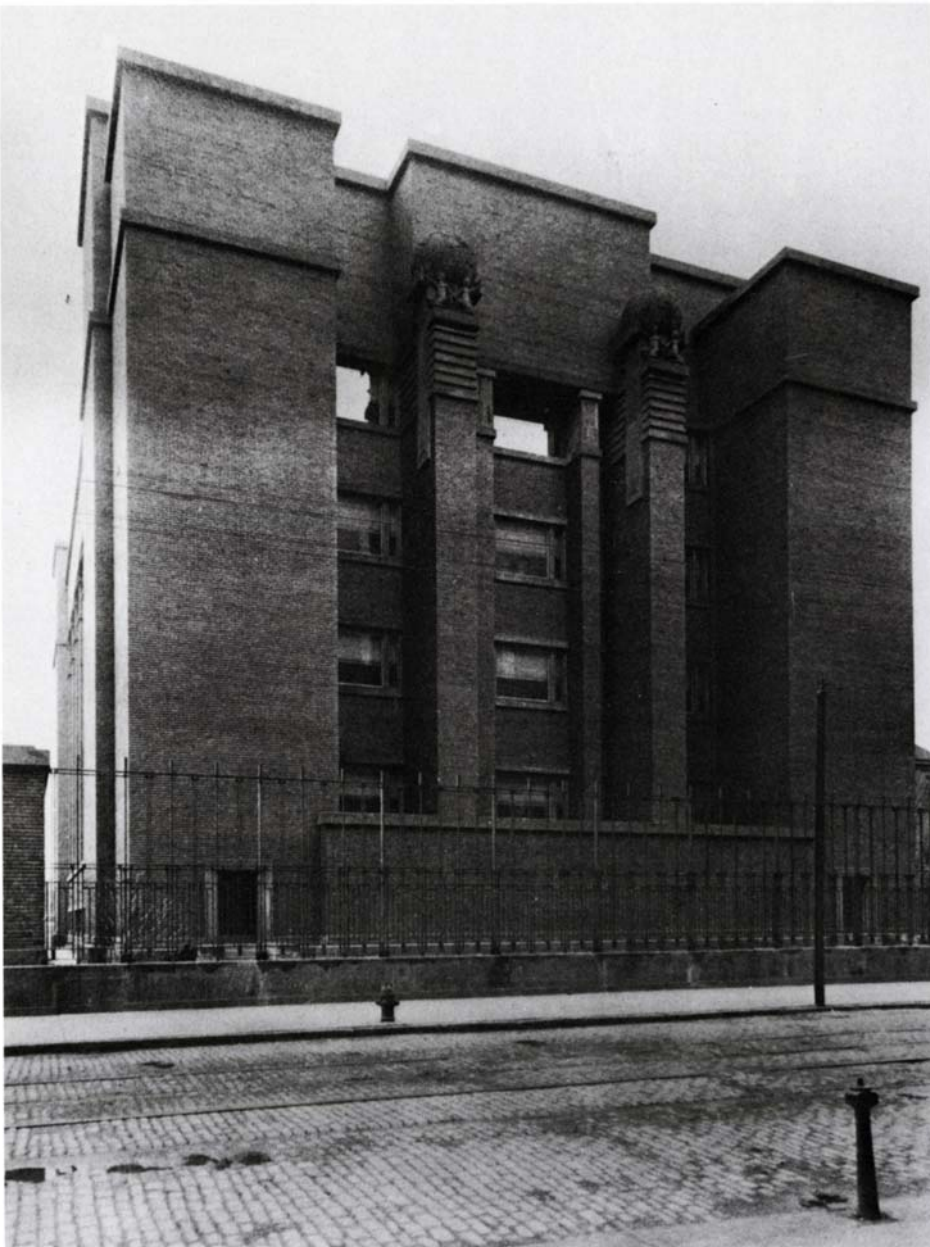
... I have seen ambition without understanding in a variety of forms.
—Marianne Moore

Were Frank Lloyd Wright alive today, he might be pleased to see how inspiring his Larkin Building of 1904 has proved to be. There, in combining monumental towers with a multistoried office block, he succeeded at a stroke in creating an urgent and powerful design. The lesson of the Larkin Building's dramatic towers, sharp-edged forms and velvety shadows has not been lost on succeeding generations of American architects—who are often asked to provide for complex programs and large numbers of people on a restricted site and yet still to make the required major architectural statement.

Wright's building served as inspiration for at least one masterpiece, but the mood of that, Louis Kahn's laboratory complex at the University of Pennsylvania, is softer. The severity of the earlier work, its moral uprightness—so literally expressed—is absent; Kahn's building is strong, yet profoundly gracious. We feel ourselves in the presence of a great intellect, so convinced are we of an absolute rightness in the disposition of every form. The delicious interlocking and meshing of structural elements both produces and expresses the deep pleasures afforded by architectural thinking. This is fittingness in every sense of the word.

But we are also affected by the shocking speed of the soaring brick shafts, and the miragelike, hovering oscillation of the stacked medical laboratories. These towers look as if they could be added to, or subtracted from, with an openendedness that in turn suggests that the floors could move up or down, like those stacks of dishes in cafeterias that retract on platforms placed on springs. This effect is especially pronounced in the towers to left and right of the central core, where we see floors actually emerging from the ground. In the biology towers, the horizontal concrete elements have been drastically simplified and thickened, with only a single deep jog, this stepped form lining up with the floor-to-ceiling window and brick wall of the lab. An edge is formed, which reads as a kind of fault line, along which the floors seem to be moving upward, only to be emphatically halted by protruding study carrels. These varied forms of vertical movement produce a delightful sense of lightness, relieving us, however briefly, from the iron law of gravity. Also, the lateral motion is every bit as compelling, for the eye is irresistibly drawn along by the two-way procession of attached towers.

The mystery of how this building—so open, so asymmetrical, so deeply romantic—could also seem so classical, restrained and noble, may reside in the fact that it is in reality a number of buildings, each one of which is symmetrical. These units exercise a powerful centering force on the observer. In attempting to see the building whole, we must struggle with a natural visual tendency to be drawn to symmetry and to line up with it—an impossible task in this case, since there are so many symmetrical units, with the added complication of having identical units tending to cluster together in subgroups. We are, instead, seduced by something subtly enigmatic: like Cham-



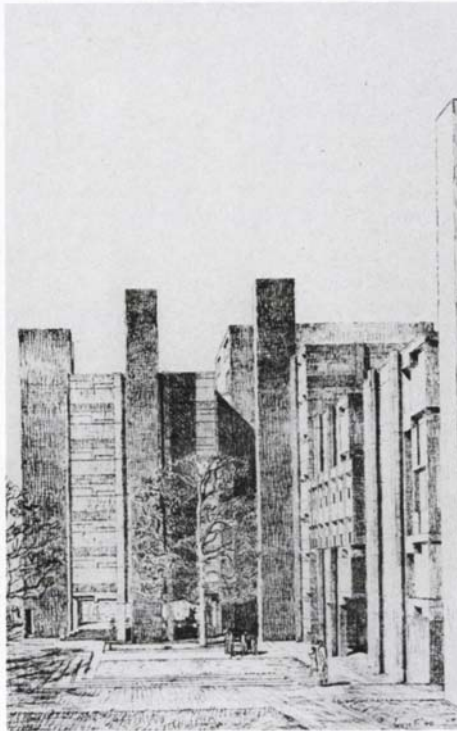
Frank Lloyd Wright, Larkin Building, Buffalo, N.Y., 1904 (demolished 1950, photo courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society)



Louis Kahn. A. N. Richards Medical Research Building and Biology Building, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1957.

board, this is a Mona Lisa of a building. The lack of hierarchy in the interior spaces and the relation of the individual labs to one another, and to the outside world, contribute to the soothing effect, presenting the image of a truly civilized society, one in which each person has agreed to *share* the world with everyone else.

The influence of this building, in turn, was enormous. Wright's complexity had been combined with a Miesian love of exquisite joinery—his and Corbusier's noble drama wedded to a fresh technological look. Further, Kahn's humanity and unpretentiousness of effect suggested a reexamination of Alvar Aalto. Kahn had broken up *the* stylistic logjam of 20th-century architecture, but only the Englishman James Stirling was ready. The Americans chose now this element, now that, creating curious hybrids—among them, Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale, Roche and Dinkeloo's Ford Foundation Building in New York, I. M. Pei's East Building of the National Gallery of Art, in Washington. These buildings have more in common than a shared source of inspiration in Wright and Kahn. They were widely hailed as major achievements when they opened. Each successively epitomized American architectural taste as it moved from Corbusian shagginess through Kahnian smoothness to a Minimalist deadness of touch. And each is, at heart, an *utterly Victorian* building. All the ingredients are there—confused and confusing spaces, greenery and skylights, grand staircases with mean denouements, structural incoherence (if and when structure is suggested), a striving for



effects which quickly turn pompous, impossible combinations of steel and stone: in sum, *pictorial* thinking parading as architecture.

The Ford Foundation and the East Building look like enormous objects—careful reproductions of the model that probably “sold” the “concepts” in the first place. Now if we do not perceive buildings as objects it is because of how they are made. Consider how Claes Oldenburg's projects for monuments, those one-shot jokes on paper, are dismal when executed for they step out of the seamless continuum of pictorial space into a world where things are constructed out of pieces of material. This fact of life has not been taken into consideration in the design process; or, to be more precise, there has been no design process (Oldenburg's recently dedicated *Batcolumn* in Chicago is basically the work of engineers). Except for concrete, materials arrive at building sites in finite shapes, where they are then assembled. When the design of a building does not reflect this process of assembly—when the unit of design and the unit of construction are not related—the human body is denied, and as a consequence, human scale can never be achieved. In a fine building we can start from the overall impression and work down to the unit of construction, or vice versa (although there are exceptions). But in drafting-table architecture there is no possibility of our mind being engaged in this way. We are faced with deadening inertness, with huge objects clumsily patched together. Their surrealist effect appeals to those who have settled for anxiety as a way of life, but not to those who prefer to live in a

world where buildings like Kahn's library at the Phillips Exeter Academy are created: there function, unit of design and unit of construction are totally harmonized.

Kahn generated the Exeter library façades by completely rethinking the logic of brick construction. The openings are the design unit, the lintels of the lower ones serving as the sills for the ones above. The inevitable wedge shape produced by brick construction means that the top will always be wider than the bottom, so that the openings become progressively broader with each floor. Nonspanning brick rises between them in pierlike forms that narrow with each story. An artificial perspective is created which suggests that these forms are tilting backward, rising to vertiginous heights. The openings, on the other hand, get larger, looming and thrusting forward, so that two contrary perspectives are contained in a single design; the dynamism that this produces could be described without exaggeration as Michelangeloesque. The façade heaves and swells like a gigantic torso. Did only Kahn have the courage and desire to contemplate the possibilities that this idea unleashed (and in them, certain awesome aspects of life itself)?

The Yale Art and Architecture Building, the Ford Foundation and the East Building all, on the other hand, show a dismaying tendency to be over-determined, unrelenting in the pursuit of an idea—a quality shared, alas, by a good deal of Wright's work. Is this a case of what Henry James called the American intensity? Perhaps it is well to keep Yeats' remarks about the now demolished Penn Station in mind:

... But the Pennsylvania terminus, noble in austerity, is the work of a single mind... a mind that—supported by the American deference to authority—has been permitted to refuse everything not relevant to a single dominating idea... The Town Hall of Stockholm, upon the other hand, is decorated by many artists, working in harmony with one another and with the design of the building as a whole, and yet all in seeming perfect freedom... These myth-makers and mask-makers worked as if they belonged to one family... all that multitude and unity, could hardly have been possible, had not love of Stockholm and belief in its future so filled men of different minds, classes, and occupations that they almost attained the supreme miracle, the dream that has haunted all religions, and loved one another.²

But is the city of Washington, for instance, so easy to love? The pall of willful unreality that hangs over it is palpable from the moment one steps out of the train station. Where is it, we ask, as we look up and only see sky. Can this be the only major city left in the world that still doesn't have a skyscraper? We fall into a time warp, for that form of architecture most closely identified with our century is absent. This would not be as disastrous as it is if there were at least a number of tall constructions of some kind—steeple, towers, campaniles, minarets, pagodas, domes, spires—to suggest the many ways in which people have responded to a felt need to enliven the skyline. These forms *aspire*, and inspire as a result. They affirm one of childhood's greatest triumphs, its victory over gravity in the miracle of uprightness, the feat of balance which consists in walking. They also make it possible for the citizen to locate himself in an enlarged spatial framework, to escape the claustrophobic effect of being perpetually trapped with what is directly in front

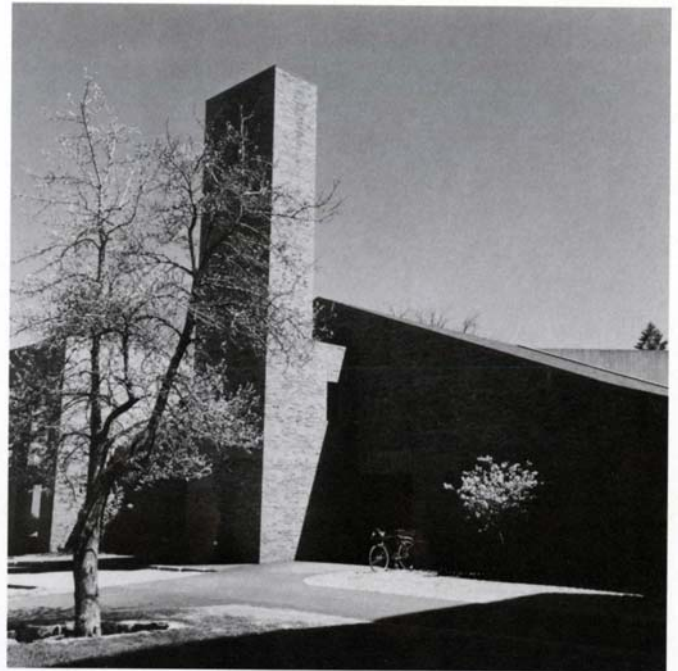
of him. (The emphatically vertical is of especial importance in our own time as an antidote to the sensation of relentless, dragging horizontality created by endless streams of rushing traffic, a universal condition of city life that is especially intense in Washington.)

This city reeks of esthetic timidity, the fear of making a mistake. It is difficult to understand the reverence accorded to L'Enfant's 18th-century plan (revived at the beginning of the 20th.) Its most celebrated feature—the Mall—with Capitol and Washington Monument on opposed eminences at either end, strikes one as a failure. Devoid of cross-axial interest, the Mall is much too wide and too long, given the height restrictions placed upon the buildings that line it. These, sunk in the lowlands between two hills, have been doomed to a condition of relative nonentity, passive spectators at a foolish staring match between the Capitol and the Monument. The intervals between the buildings have gone undesigned, so that each one sits on its plot, disconsolate and isolated, like a house in a dreary suburban development. The Capitol dome, which must have been of great emotional significance at the time of its construction during the Civil War—and later, in its aftermath—now looms in a truly repellent, Big-Brother fashion. It has become so familiar that no one ever remarks the absurdity of capping a governmental building with a form so closely associated with religious edifices (St. Peter's, St. Paul's, Les Invalides). Poor L'Enfant would probably be horrified to see Washington today (but then the Founding Fathers might also feel a similar horror at governmental attitudes there). None of these men was averse to striking out boldly in new directions, and they certainly did not feel the need to refer to a written document every time they did so. They would

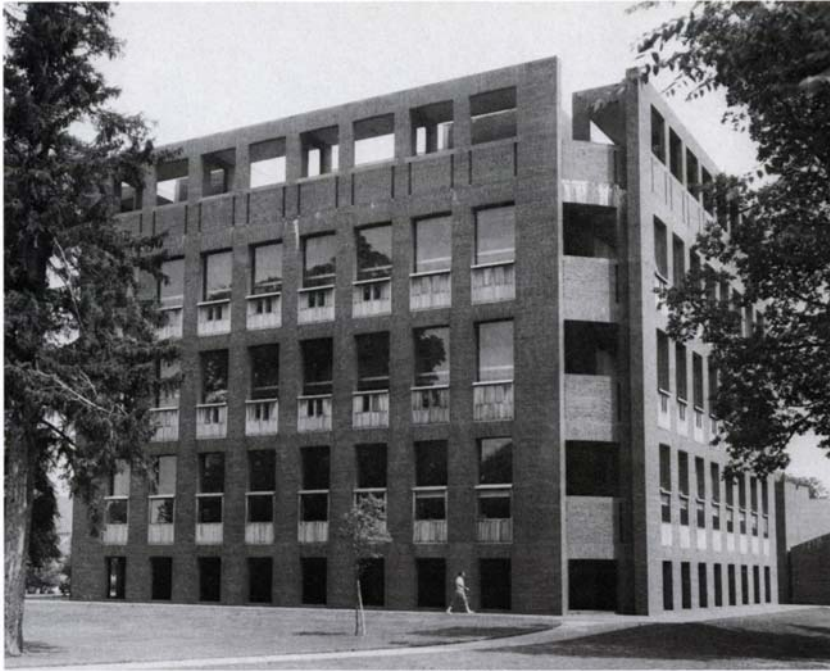
be distressed by a society that has turned their work into fetishes, arguments for timidity and lack of imagination; a society that approaches every document possessed of history with a fundamentalist attitude. Given what we know of attitudes in Washington, it is amazing that Pei was able to come up with as lively a building as he has.

A clue to this particular architectural undertaking can be found in pondering one of the inaugural exhibitions, where Piranesi's architectural fantasies were singled out for attention. No one should think that this is accidental. We are intended to ruminate on the similarities between the famous prison etchings—with their staircases and bridges teetering over bottomless voids, their dramatic overhead lighting, their confusion of inside and outside—with the interior of the East Building. (An enterprising decorator who employed massive chains, enormous timbers, and artfully arranged steaming cauldrons could easily recreate their atmosphere in the central space.) Piranesi's prints have, over the years, become increasingly popular with architects and art-lovers in general. Yet they bear about the same relation to architecture as it exists in the world as does pornography to the act of love. Since they provide few hints as to what the real esthetic materials of architecture are, they can create a false taste, arousing inappropriate expectations and demands. The few buildings that Piranesi actually designed reveal a heavy hand indeed. His gift was pictorial in nature, not architectural. And the same could be said of I. M. Pei.

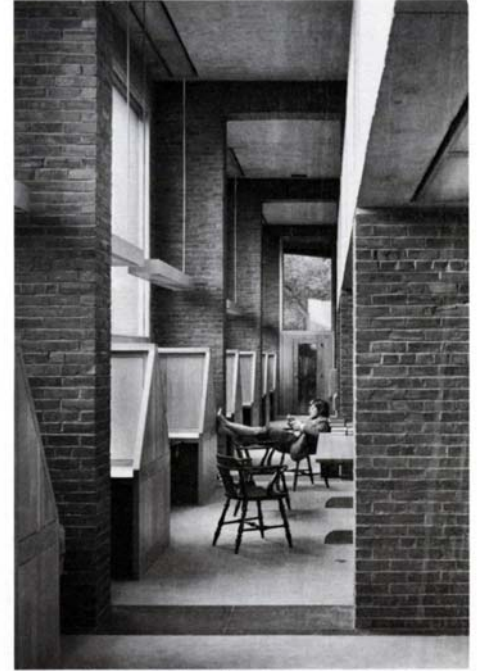
The East Building's central space is triangular in shape, with three gallery towers positioned at each corner. A large study center, containing library, art archives, and offices, runs along one side. The floor is



Louis Kahn, The Phillips Exeter Academy Library, Exeter, N.H., 1971.



Louis Kahn, The Phillips Exeter Academy Library, Exeter, N.H., 1971.



Louis Kahn, The Phillips Exeter Academy Library, Exeter, N.H., 1971.
interior view showing carrels in bay windows.

composed of triangular pieces of marble which imitate in miniature the shape of the hall. All of the walls, information booths, pillars, bridges, etc., follow the lines of the triangulated grid that these pieces create, appearing to be generated by them. This geometrical thinking owes a great deal to Wright. A glance at the floor plan of the Boomer House, for instance, shows the similarity of approach, but should also alert us to some important differences in design thinking. Wright's triangular areas intermesh, creating intricate, intriguing spaces, whereas Pei's shapes are merely juxtaposed. Wright locates the inevitably awkward, most acute, angles of his triangles in service areas. He designs a sitting room with a feeling of openness. We enter it facing the windows. But in Pei's hall, we enter facing the acutest angle of the triangle. Instead of the essential architectural impression of expansion, on entering, we have contraction and closure. During the time of my visits thousands of people streamed through this hall, but practically no one ventured down into this corner, despite the lure of a huge window with a perfect view of the vehicular traffic on Pennsylvania Ave. For upwards of 60 to 70 feet, fanning out from this corner, the space is inert—psychologically dead. Little wonder that the architect had recourse to redundant trees (there are hundreds outside lining the Mall), planted here to camouflage this fatal design flaw.

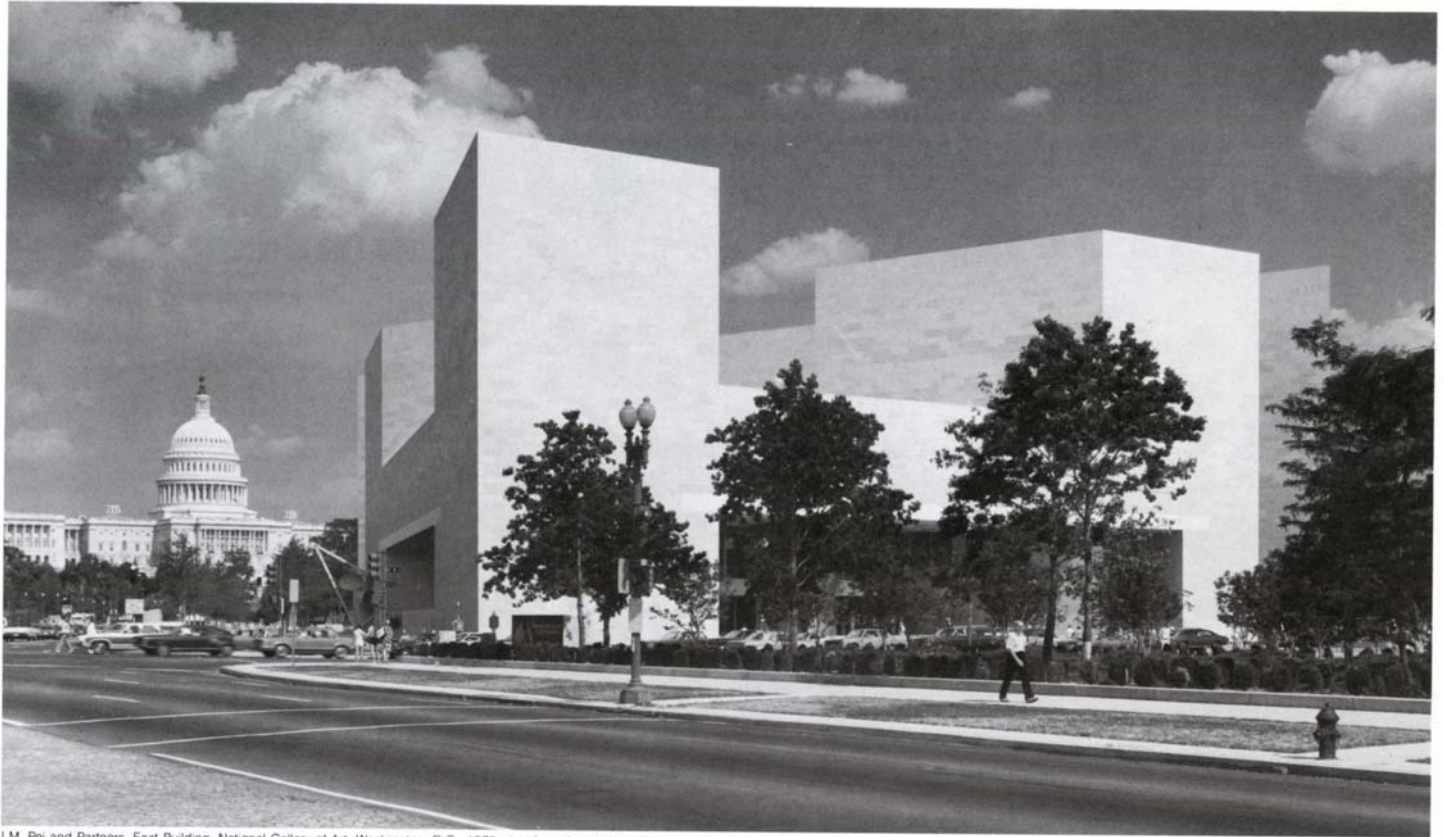
It is no secret that one of the most difficult design problems facing an architect is the spanning of large spaces, and modern architecture has been weakest here. Pei takes the easy way out by not thinking of this space as an interior at all, but as a kind of plaza surrounded by the gallery towers and study center, a plaza made magically immune to the elements by

filling in the vertical spaces between the various sections with wall-to-wall windows, and by stretching a glass canopy overhead. An early rendering depicts a delicately structured glass roof striving for the state of invisibility. The eye sees through it to the towers above. This effect has been lost in the realization. The engineers had to be called in and the present roof is infinitely more massive as a result. Sun blinds have made it more opaque still (on the principle that all the light in the world should be let in and only then attempts made to control it). You must remind yourself to look for the towers now obscured are they by the roof. But even if the wished-for had been achieved, architectural taste could not have been satisfied. The glazed roof and the windows represent a conflict between the ideal and the possible. No matter how minimized the window mullions and overhead trusses are, they still cannot be thought away, any more than the glass can be—always reflective, often dirtied by rain, smudged with fingerprints. As the exterior inevitably darkens under the effects of weather and pollution, the illusion of continuity between inside and outside will be just that much more diminished. Nothing that we see in a building should strike us as being an impediment to the goal an architect has set himself, for this creates a saddening underimage of self-defeat. Furthermore, the roof plus the rest of the building represents the shotgun marriage of two utterly opposed construction techniques, a classically Victorian note. Fine architecture aspires to a higher order of unity than this. In the arduous pursuit of said unity, the merely spectacular must be renounced in the interests of profounder gratifications. As the hall stands today, it describes an insoluble problem, insoluble because it is not architectural but pictorial—

which is only to say that a better drawing could be made out of this concept than a building. This is why the architect has resorted to the pictorial subterfuges of trees, bridges, and an immense, crazily spinning and distracting Calder mobile—seemingly obligatory on these occasions, definitely ubiquitous and, by now, dreadfully predictable.

But why this immense glassed-over breezeway in the first place? No doubt it was intended to be an object lesson in modern architecture, though it strikes this viewer, at least, more as an attempt to fuse engineering with set design. Depending on how you count, only about six to eight art objects can be seen at the entrance level. What most strikes the eye are elevators, escalators, staircases, bridges, balconies, promenades—people-movers, glimpses of traffic through windows—everywhere a dizzying appeal to, and ringing affirmation of, the morbid restlessness of crowds—a perfect setting for the kids to tear around in. Is it naive to think that an architect might set himself the task of *slowing people down*, creating an atmosphere of quiet and reserve, so that the visitor could be prepared by degrees for the successive acts of concentration that art exhibitions demand of him?

The chorus of oohs and ahs which greeted this building at its opening left me completely unprepared for its shocking fun-house atmosphere, its deeply philistine unseriousness. Airport '78. One does not share the being-in-the-space with others, but the passing through it. This would be all right if we were moving in a significant architectural progression. But nothing could prepare one for the baths of moving from this hyperactive, naturally lit, extravagantly expensive space to what can only be described as the squalor of the actual exhibition areas. The absence of



I.M. Pei and Partners, East Building, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1978, view from the northwest.

natural light in the vast majority of them is the gravest possible offense against art a museum could perpetrate, and it inevitably evokes a department store atmosphere. No plausible excuse exists for this. Can there be any question that the galleries should have been given the entire top floor, jazzily top-lit halls notwithstanding? And when will museum people learn that painting needs an architectural setting to be seen to best advantage?

The pictorial poetry specific to painting is diluted by pictorial settings where all-important boundaries are, not surprisingly, blurred. Who hasn't tired of dreadful plasterboard partitions and dim, mean little rooms, often poorly ventilated, as in this case? Temporary exhibition spaces make it impossible for memory to play its full role in the looking at art. Over the years, a gallery can become richly redolent of all the experiences one has had there, which, in turn, can be brought to bear on the present. In addition, these spaces tend to be so completely anonymous that we have the literally unsettling sensation that we might be anywhere in the country. In some rooms of the East Building, however, there could be no mistaking where we are. A particularly unforgettable one is found at the top of one of the towers. Naturally lit, it is difficult of access, approachable either by an elevator or a small, elaborately wrought twisting staircase, enclosed in its very own claustrophobic silo. Once

I.M. Pei and Partners, East Building, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1978, view from the southeast.



extruded from the stairway, or the nasty little hall leading from the elevator, we see some magnificent late Matisse collages housed in a large, absurdly shaped gallery, whose three main wall planes are acutely angled to one another. That is it. We have climbed or taken an elevator to see one room and now must turn around and head back. It is kindness itself to characterize this arrangement as awkward.

Pei, like Paul Rudolph, fell in love with his towers. The inspiration is unquestionably Louis Kahn's Unitarian Church. By opening up the top of the building, Kahn courted disaster, for the center is always the visually weakest point. Traditionally architects have accumulated mass here in order to overcome the tendency toward inward and downward design collapse; hence their recourse to staircases, porticoes, cupolas, and so on. Kahn bolsters the lower stories by pulling them forward, out of the mass of the building, so that the design "builds" upward. He makes them both psychologically impenetrable, through a complex and unpredictable fenestration, and literally impenetrable (the entrance is at the back through an attached section). And instead of the space between the four towers seeming void and hollow, he works it into the design by giving it a shape more positive than the towers themselves, interlocking sky and building in a play of joinery that is pushed to the visionary. The end result is one of the most original silhouettes in the history of architecture, and one achieved against impossible odds.

At this point the reader should be able to evaluate the various façades of the East Building on his own: On the entrance side the dead space between the towers; the inertness of the design—that is, the way it

neither presses down nor pushes up, expressing no relation either to rigidity or to gravity—just sitting there; an overextended, about-to-snap lintel (the only allusion on the facade to building, if not architectural, practice); the hollowed-out entrance porch at the structurally and visually weakest point. The six-story visual studies center and the administration offices face the Mall with the busiest and artiest façade of the building. Masonry towers alternate with six-story-high glazed areas that read more as abstract pattern than as actual windows. A floor has been pulled out and threaded through the towers (much as in the Ford Foundation building) in a lame attempt to give this chaotic design some unity and stability. Corporate anonymity oddly reigns on the façade, which faces toward Capitol Hill (here you might expect a focal point for all the traffic which streams toward it).

And now for the famous pink Tennessee marble: the supposedly glorious craft, the expense, the beauty of the stone itself. Yet this aspect of the building is the single greatest obstacle to success with which it has to contend. The design grew out of, and demands, cast concrete construction. The shapes wish to be grasped instantaneously, and continuously unfolding concrete surface would have made this possible. The relentless, finicky patterning of the masonry slows the eye disastrously, and disturbingly evokes the veneering techniques of the decorative arts. In classical ashlar construction, blocks are never piled this high without making the lower ones larger, in recognition of the fact they carry the burden of those above, showing the effects of gravity. A building will look built up from the ground as a result, with all the satisfactions of stable appearance; of a firm

marriage between site and structure; of a positive image of accumulated individual effort. Of course, the stone facing on the East Building has not been piled up, but hung from the walls. How "honest" to express this; but then, why the awkward lintels? They are certainly not needed to support the three-inch thick veneer. Here are two stools, and something has fallen between them.

The masonry has the insubstantial feel of wallpaper. Weightlessness is not architecturally expressive because it has, by definition, no relation to gravity. Hence the exterior, which aims at seriousness, at "gravity," is merely grim. There is a good "weightless" and a bad one in architecture, even if these distinctions are all too rarely made in American practice. The columns of Philip Johnson's glass house, for example, read as part of the design, and do not express support of the roof, whereas in Mies Van der Rohe's Farnsworth House the two rigid planes of floor and roof are clearly held in place by eight steel I-beams, although they also magically pass by each other—delightfully structural and nonstructural at the same time. The Johnson house sits complacently inert and glum on the site, as if it had been set down like a box, while the Farnsworth House hovers and expands, but is also firmly tied to the site at the same time. The latter expresses the reality of weight more fully than the former; light, but not lightweight.

A Brobdingnagian budget has made it possible to torture the stone of the East Building into knife-edge precision. At first amazing, this ultimately disgusts, for craft has been made an end in itself, pursuing an object that could have been better and more easily realized in cast concrete. The effort expended on these forms seems out of all proportion to the intrinsic merit of the esthetic effect. Henry Moore no doubt intended an obeisance to the building that his sculptural group was commissioned for when he included a sharply pointed edge in his enormous two-piece bronze now sheltering in the entrance porch. The expressive possibilities of the knife edge—the grossly material attenuating into the spiritual (the oblique influence of Giacometti?)—have held his interest, off and on, for many years now, and are perfectly realizable in the medium he has chosen. But for a knife-edge form pieced together out of stone, please refer to our earlier discussion of Oldenburg. We also have the added infelicity, in an architectural context, of those small-angled shapes. They could not possibly enclose a useful or architecturally significant space.

Apologists for the structure say that it is as much a sculpture as a building. If this were true—and it is not—would it not represent a tremendous waste of opportunity to pursue sculptural beauty instead of architectural beauty, and would it not be excessively self-denying on the part of the architect as well? Of course the "sculptural" has enormous prestige in architecture today. Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, for instance, is the most magnificent and extreme example of this modernist interest. Yet there we see how, even at his most "sculptural," Le Corbusier is as much an architect as ever: he emphasizes as never before or since in his work the age-old relation of walls to roof. But the design miracle is that the walls not only support the roof, but appear to have been thickened

I.M. Pei and Partners, East Building, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1978, view of courtyard.



in order to keep it from flying away. The roof rests on the walls, but it also lifts off in soaring flight. Corbusier's sculptural gifts were developed by an actual involvement with sculpture, and he discovered his vocabulary of plastic forms through the art of painting, which he practiced daily. Pei's notion of sculpture seems to be bound up with what the art world has been calling sculpture for the last 15 years. But the passages of time will reveal the Minimalist esthetic to be yet another period taste, as quaint in its way as Art Deco, if not as lovable. For that matter, the East Building bears about the same relation to high modern purpose that Art Deco furniture does to design, for it too plays up to conservative luxury taste by sugarcating its mostly derivative forms with irrelevantly crafted, expensive materials.

A.R. Ammons has written:

so I went back down and gathered mud
and with my hands made an image for *longing*:

I took the image to the summit: first
I set it here, on the top rock, but it completed
nothing: then I set it there among the tiny firs
but it would not fit:

so I returned to the city and built a house to set the image in
and men came into my house and said
that is an image for *longing*
and nothing will ever be the same again³

Has a house been built for images of longing in Washington? Or is this a house for vast crowds to mill around in, a splendid shelter for the art history professoriat and museum personnel? Here lies a true marriage of interests: the crowd and those who offer it distraction. An aura of ancient Roman patronage hovers about this endeavor. Do these popularizers of the "art experience," these people who promise fun and excitement, pose the same threat to art-viewing, and the physical survival of the art object itself, that propagandists for nature's wonders unwittingly did in years gone by—so many of these same wonders now overwhelmed by thoughtless, destructive crowds? Does the institution itself desire the status of an art object or a natural wonder? (We already know that it wishes to be considered a "sculpture.") Might it not be an exact contemporary equivalent to those huge 19th-century American paintings of the Grand Canyon? Or, ambition vaulting higher still, is it trying to be the spectacular Grand Canyon itself, the ogled cynosure of the new mass art audience?

Hard to believe as we stand looking at this building that art history barely existed as a discipline at the turn of the century, much less as a respectable profession. That has been a remarkable Cinderella story. No less remarkable is the transformation of the National Gallery, once content simply to house, catalogue, preserve and exhibit works of art, now become an edubusiness conglomerate, and at a time when many educational institutions struggle for survival.

The great design enigma of this building resides in the strange contrast between the giddy, playground atmosphere of the interior and the grim, forbidding aspect of the exterior. Not that gravity, solemnity, or even impressiveness are improper qualities to pursue, but seriousness of bearing need not obviate grace. Have we sat for our national portrait—anarchic and confused on the inside, all fortress and corporate

rationality to the world? This brittle museum does not express a love of the sun. Think of Wright's Guggenheim Museum, so much like a flower swelling into the light, or Kahn's Center for British Art, where roof and walls open and divide to welcome it. Here, instead, the walls stare blindly. Their uninflected surfaces reflect light rather than admit it, creating, under the intense sun of Washington, a harsh, glaring bleakness. Is this building so radically different in spirit or in effect from its neighbor, the old National Gallery, a building that some people still don't realize must be apologized for?

What other *self-respecting* democracy built this way in the 20th century? The National Gallery was a portent of empire: it must be seen in relation to the roughly contemporary Viceroy's House in New Delhi, that late work of Lutyens completed just as the British Empire was going under, its mandate passing to the United States—empire tending inevitably westward. Both the old and new buildings in Washington are stiff, cold and pretentious. They demonstrate America's abiding provincialism in relation to the great humanist architecture of Europe, its failure ever permanently to learn the great lesson of this (still living) tradition: that nobility and grace are not exclusive.

Man has never built more nobly or more obviously than in the Parthenon. There nothing is extraneous to the esthetic purpose. This consists in the representation of two activities—the interplay of architectural forces and the love affair of light and matter. It would reward some analysis to see how this building manages to be noble, monumental, and gracious at the same time. Firstly, this derives from the treatment of the surfaces. The superficialities are all inflected by the human hand, so as to animate the light, spreading a glowing skin about the building. The columns were sculpted *in situ*. Only after their assembly was the fluting carved into them. The resultant play of light softens the stone, redeems it from its purely material state. When a row of columns is seen from an angle, so that no spaces show between them, we gaze at a slightly swelling curtain of softly folded stone stirred, as it were, by a breeze. But more than this, more than the entasis, the siting, the ineffable proportions, the sculptured peopling of the building, there is a something at work here which goes a long way toward reconciling us to the tragic vision signaled by the simplicity of approach. I would characterize this thing as psychological permeability, by which I mean something very simple. The temple is approachable from every side and every angle, completely open to the visitor. The walls have parted. The three steps of the pedestal it is raised upon remove it from contagion, yet reemphasize its open-spiritedness. Because they are higher than normal steps, they make the building look less large from a distance and, so, more inviting. We have already begun to enter the temple before we arrive. It has opened up to us and the surrounding light and air, offering shade and shelter *unconditionally*, without our having to enter the space within to commit ourselves to the building's programme.

Isn't this poetry of graciousness, of acceptance and welcome, an important one for architecture, especially for cities? A forced march the length of an unbroken façade is always unpleasant. For its dura-

tion, we have ceased to feel free, for necessity hounds our every step. Even the humble ground-floor shop has a wonderful way of humanizing a building: it solicits us, offers a service, flatters us with its attentions. It is space we can use or not use as we please; it makes the street scene permeable.

A building should not look abstract. It should represent architectural forces. We will recognize ourselves in them, for these are the very forces our bodies must arbitrate every day. A building should also hint at human purposes. These will provide absolute scale. There are ways of doing this. Arcades, balconies, stairs, ramps, windows and doors that look like themselves: these are some of them. But however accomplished, the building will ideally be alive around its entire circumference, drawing us willingly and gladly along its periphery. Lest this be thought impossible in modernist terms, one has only to consult James Stirling's magnificent project for Siemens AG to see how it can be done.

Why do we as a people ask for so little gratification from our art and architecture? Why so cold, so stony-hearted, so viciously geometric? Wilhelm Worringer wrote that

... wherever in the inner process of man's development we detect an increase in the sensuousness of feeling, we know that an alleviation of the relation, at first strongly dualistic, between man and the outer world, has so far set in that the individual man dares to separate himself from the crowd, and to face the outer world alone. For abstractness of feeling is nothing but the result of subjection to the crowd. The feeling of the coherent crowd, still undifferentiated as individuals, is of necessity abstract, for its coherence, its fear of a relaxation of that cohesion, betokens that it is still far too much oppressed by a dualistic anxiety and consequently oppressed also by an urge towards liberation; that abstract values with their superhuman, fatalistic character of necessity can alone give it rest and appeasement. . . . For the abstract is precisely the impersonal, the super-personal, and, as such, an expression of the undifferentiated crowd, while sensuous feeling is inseparably bound up with the process of the individualization of humanity, and can only be experienced by individual personalities. The man who has been set free from the crowd feels of necessity sensuously and naturally, because his detachment from the crowd proves precisely that dualism has to a certain extent vanished, and a certain feeling of unity between man and the outer world has set in.⁴

Quite clearly the "oppressive urge towards liberation" is appeased by the central hall of the East Building, itself altogether liberated from architecture. The deadly inertness of the exterior tranquilizes, encourages quiescence.

Do we accept the diet of esthetic gruel so universal today in a spirit of penitence, to soothe a bad conscience? Does fear make us willfully naive about the stark realities of life, the irrelevance of our hopes and wishes? Would we accept this pitiless art's relentless postponement of deep gratification, if we were convinced of our own mortality? This is the American "innocence" par excellence. It makes us a danger to ourselves and to others. ■

1. *Critic and Connoisseur: The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, New York, 1967, p. 38.
2. William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, Garden City, 1958, pp. 374-5 (italics mine).
3. A.R. Ammons, *Sphere The Form of a Motion*, New York, 1974, p. 5.
4. Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, New York, 1964, pp. 172-3.