

# I. M. PEI



I. M. Pei in the East Building, c. 1978, © Dennis Brack/Black Star, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

**Like John Russell Pope, I. M. (Ieoh Ming) Pei**, the architect of the National Gallery's East Building, is known for both his private and public buildings. Pei has designed a wide range of buildings in the United States and around the world, including his family's two-bedroom country retreat, low-cost housing for the cities of New York and Philadelphia, university facilities, international banking headquarters, art museums, and even a presidential library. Born in Canton, China, in 1917, he left his homeland in 1934 to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Pei began his career as the in-house designer for a real estate developer, leaving his employ in 1955 to start his own firm, I. M. Pei & Associates. Although his firm, subsequently known as Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, still did work for commercial clients, Pei established himself not only as a designer of institutional and civic buildings but also as the creator of monuments—some believe as the preeminent designer of modernist monuments of our time.

He rose from the ranks of commercial architects in 1964 when he was selected by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to design the John F. Kennedy Library. After a number of revisions to its design and a change of site, the building was finally completed in 1979. In the interim, Pei continued to design commercial buildings, expanded his repertoire to include civic buildings and university buildings, and created what was to

become the East Building of the National Gallery of Art.

As the Gallery's collections burgeoned—thanks to the generosity of the founding benefactors—the need for additional space also grew. Furthermore, support and service facilities became increasingly inadequate as the professional staff increased and the role of the Gallery expanded. Plans to devote more staff and resources to art-historical scholarship, which led to the formation of the Gallery's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), also intensified the need for additional facilities. In 1967, the Gallery began the search for an architect to design its new building.

Andrew Mellon's plans for the founding of the National Gallery incorporated for its eventual expansion a trapezoidal plot of land immediately to the east of the original building. The triangulation of Pei's design—an inspiration that came to the architect in 1968 during a return flight to New York after a meeting with Gallery administrators—complemented the plot itself as well as the larger triangle established by Pierre L'Enfant's scheme for the National Mall: the Capitol, White House, and Washington Monument. The new building was also compatible with Pope's design without copying its classical elements. As one critic described Pei's design: "Mr. Pei's decision to reject Pope's classicism in favor of a sleek angular modernism seemed initially an act of defiance, but it was more of an homage than it may have seemed. For Mr. Pei was able to see beyond Pope's classical details to the cool, restrained order that lay beneath. There is a severe and formal quality to the West Building, and this more than anything else ties it to Mr. Pei's work."

At its completion in 1978, the East Building became Pei's most acclaimed work to date. Designs for other Pei buildings, including the seventy-story skyscraper headquarters of the Bank of China in Hong Kong, have incorporated the same triangular forms that are so prominent a feature of the East Building. Other elements of the Gallery's design have also reappeared in later Pei commissions. The Grand Louvre, for which President François Mitterrand of France specifically chose Pei on the basis of his design for the East Building, is

entered from a glass pyramid reminiscent of the pyramidal prisms on the Plaza facing the East Building. The opening of the Louvre Pyramid coincided with four other projects, leading the *New York Times* to declare that 1989 was “the year of Pei.”

Pei won the acclaim of critics as well as awards from his peers, including the Pritzker Architecture Prize (1983) established in 1979 by the Hyatt Foundation to reward a body of work in a field not honored by the Nobel Prizes. In 1986, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) conducted a survey of the members of its College of Fellows, which named Pei’s East Building of the National Gallery of Art one of the ten most successful examples of architectural design in this country. His contributions to architecture were again recognized in 1988 when he was selected by President Ronald Reagan to receive the National Medal of Arts. In 2003, Pei received the Henry C. Turner Prize for Innovation in Construction Technology awarded by the National Building Museum and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Smithsonian Institution’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum for his overall contribution to the advancement of modernist architecture. Also in 2003, the AIA awarded Pei and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art its 25-Year Award for Architecture of Enduring Significance. Most recently, in 2010, the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded the Royal Gold Medal to Pei, recognizing his groundbreaking role in the architecture of our time.