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I.M. Pei's East Building of The National Gallery of Art Captures The AIA Twenty-Five Year Award for Architecture of Enduring Significance

Washington D.C. 's much loved art museum proves timeless in design

For Immediate Release

WASHINGTON , D.C. , January 8, 2004 –The American Institute of Architects (AIA) announced today the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, designed by New York City 's I.M. Pei & Partners, Architects, as the recipient of the AIA Twenty-five Year Award. The prestigious award honors significant architectural landmarks completed 25-35 years ago that have withstood the test of time. The East Building and its architects will be honored at the American Architectural Foundation's Accent on Architecture gala March 3 at the National Building Museum in Washington , D.C.

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Built of pink Tennessee marble with broad expanses of glass, the 604,000-square-foot structure became an architectural icon—as much sculpture as the art it houses—from the moment it opened its doors. Described at its opening in 1978 by Washington Post architecture critic Wolf Von Eckardt as “an architectonic symphony of light and marble, color and glass, painting and sculpture,” the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in the nation's capital still draws awe-inspired gazes from first-time guests as well as those lucky enough to visit regularly. When the East Building won a national AIA Honor Award in 1981, the jury stated, “The marble and glass building was cited for its sensitive grid, meticulous workmanship, dramatic interior vistas, and integration of permanent artwork into public spaces. In a city of monuments, it is appropriate.”

“ After a quarter century, this icon of contemporary architecture in a city of traditional monuments continues to delight and impress visitors from all over the

world," said Twenty-five Year Award Jury Chair Adrian Smith, FAIA. "Almost nothing has changed! Even with the addition of staff, the increase of library collections, the invention of computers and the increasing sophistication of mechanical systems, every detail of this structure continues to exude elegance and grace. It is every bit as fresh and innovative as it was on opening day."

It is difficult to imagine another structure that could provide the square footage necessary to house grand-scale traveling exhibits, an office facility for museum personnel, and the Center for Advanced Study of the Visual Arts—and still show proper respect for both its surroundings and its dignified neighbors. With 30 percent of its space underground, the building does not overwhelm the site. In fact, the underlying reason the building works so well is its embrace of the site, a snub-nosed trapezoid at the convergence of Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall. The resulting building is a study in triangles: The architects created two complementary triangles for its two main functions of exhibit and office, with a triangular sky-lighted courtyard to tie the composition together. The study center describes its own smaller triangle, which wraps around a six-story-tall reading room.

This sky-lighted sculpture court provides a protected space of 16,000 square feet for crowds waiting to see the exhibitions, as well as a stage for formal events. "It is a hub of public reception, orientation, circulation, and also relief from museum fatigue," in the words of the architects. Three exhibition towers around the court can house one large exhibition, or be broken into smaller spaces for a number of simultaneous shows.

Built of the same pink marble as the original National Gallery (designed by John Russell Pope and opened in 1941), the East Building also shows respect to this older sibling by repeating its strong east-west axis and offering a parallel façade across the court that separates the two buildings. Under the court, a 154,000-square-foot concourse housing a bookstore, restaurant, and other public services connects the two galleries. Atop, seven huge mirrored glass pyramids and a 50-foot-long waterfall echo the triangle motif while delivering light plus the sound and movement of rushing water into the concourse.

Among its many accolades, the East Building's 23 Washington Building Congress Craftsmanship Awards attest to the architect's attention to the smallest detail. Its marble walls, designed to look like the load-bearing blocks of the original building, actually are three-inch cladding in 2-foot x 5-foot pieces that wrap around corners to recreate the effect of solid stone blocks. Arguably, this effect is most striking in the knife-edged wall that turns 19 degrees from the east-west axis to meet the angle of Pennsylvania Avenue. Skilled craftsmanship shows up equally in the 500-ton welded space frame that creates the sky-lighted roof over the interior court. Picking up the building's triangle theme, the frame supports double-paned laminated glass that sandwiches an ultraviolet interlayer to protect the artwork from sun damage.

From its inception, the structure has been meticulously maintained for the enjoyment of the millions of visitors who have marveled at both its grand scale and delightful details as much as its artwork. "The East Building continues to serve its original purpose with dignity and grace. It truly meets the criteria of eligibility," wrote Louis R. Pounders, AIA, for the nominating AIA Committee on Design. "The East Building of the National Gallery is in excellent condition and fully satisfies the requirement for distinguished execution of an original program continuing to function into the present."

About The American Institute of Architects

Since 1857, the AIA has represented the professional interests of America 's architects. As AIA members, nearly 70,000 licensed architects, emerging professionals, and allied partners express their commitment to excellence in design and livability in our nation's buildings and communities. Members adhere to a code of ethics and professional conduct that assures the client, the public, and colleagues of an AIA-member architect's dedication to the highest standards in professional practice

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