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## National Gallery of Art Statement on the Death of I. M. Pei



Architect I.M. Pei in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art on opening day, June 1, 1978. Photo © Dennis Brack/Black Star. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Washington, DC—"We at the National Gallery of Art are deeply saddened to learn of the passing of architect I. M. Pei. His death is a great loss to the nation, to the Gallery, and to each one of our visitors who has marveled at his timeless design of our East Building. Pei's vision for the East Building was a gift to our nation." —Kaywin Feldman, director, National Gallery of Art

Opened in 1978, the I. M. Pei-designed East Building houses the National Gallery of Art's collection of modern and contemporary art. Built with funds donated by Paul Mellon and his sister, Ailsa Mellon Bruce (philanthropists and children of Andrew W. Mellon), and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the East Building has welcomed some 75 million visitors since it opened on June 1, 1978. Pei's masterpiece has provided an eloquent setting for the display of great works of modern art from the permanent collection, some 300 temporary exhibitions, a library and rare book collection,

administrative offices, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, which fosters international understanding of art and culture.

While harmonizing with architect John Russell Pope's neoclassical West Building, the award-winning East Building was designed in the modern idiom of its time. Magnificently realizing the long-term vision of Gallery founder Andrew W. Mellon and his children, the East Building has taken its place as one of the great public structures in the nation's capital.

Born in China in 1917, Ieoh Ming Pei moved to the United States at age 18 to study architecture, and eventually received degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. He opened his own firm in New York City in 1955.

On July 9, 1968, the trustees of the National Gallery of Art selected I. M. Pei to design a building to provide additional space for the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions, as well as a new center for research in the history of art. The building was to be constructed on the plot of land directly east of the West Building that Congress had reserved for the museum at its establishment in 1937.

Designed at a crucial point in Pei's long and productive career, the architect faced several challenges in planning for the East Building. The new building had to fit an irregularly shaped, trapezoidal site; conform to the monumental scale of the National Mall; and correlate with John Russell Pope's classicizing West Building, completed in 1941. During the laborious design process, Pei and a small team of young architects explored many creative possibilities for the building's plan, exterior profile, and roofing of the great atrium. In a moment of insight, Pei solved the problem of the site's irregular shape by dividing it into an isosceles triangle and a smaller right triangle. He later recalled, "I sketched a trapezoid on the back of an envelope. I drew a diagonal line across the trapezoid and produced two triangles. That was the beginning."

Pei received many accolades for his work, including the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1979, the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1983, and the Smithsonian Institution National Design Award for lifetime achievement in 2003. In 1991, the East Building was voted one of the top ten buildings in the United States by the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects and the building won the American Institute of Architects' Twenty-five Year Award in 2004.

### **East Building Background**

Designed for the Gallery's 20th-century art collection, library, and its Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), the East Building is known for its triangular shapes and dramatic skylit atrium, a sculptural space framing a 16,000-square-foot interior court. Constructed of the same Tennessee marble used in John Russell Pope's 1941 neoclassical West Building, the modernist East Building has

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been recognized not only for its groundbreaking design, but also for its technical innovations and—with 23 craftsmanship awards—exquisite attention to detail.

Foreseeing the need for the museum's eventual expansion, National Gallery of Art founder Andrew W. Mellon requested that Congress set aside a plot of land adjacent to the original 1941 neoclassical building. In 1967, Mellon's children, Paul Mellon and Ailsa Mellon Bruce, along with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, offered to fund an extension of the museum in keeping with their father's vision. Planning moved forward under the leadership of Paul Mellon, Gallery director J. Carter Brown, and director emeritus John Walker, and in July 1968 they selected architect I. M. Pei. He devised a radical design solution for the trapezoidal site by drawing a diagonal line through it, creating two triangles—one to house the museum's public functions; the other, the Gallery's study center and library. Once Pei's final designs were completed, construction began in 1971. On June 1, 1978, President Jimmy Carter and Paul Mellon dedicated the new building to the people of the United States.

Pei's innovative use of geometric shapes as a space for the public display of art attracted wide public attention and critical acclaim, with attendance at the East Building reaching one million less than two months after the building opened.

From 2011 to 2013, the Gallery removed and subsequently reinstalled the marble veneer of the East Building, designed and built according to the highest standards of the late 1970s. During the building's lifetime, however, displacement occurred in the stone cladding because of thermal movement and systemic structural distress of the anchors that support the marble veneer panels. Over 17,000 Tennessee pink marble panels were reinstalled with new supports to their original appearance. Each three-inch-thick panel weighs approximately 450 pounds and typically measures five feet wide by two feet high.

In 2016, the Gallery unveiled a three-year renovation and expansion of the north side of the East Building. Constructed with private donations, some 12,250 square feet of new exhibition space was added within the existing footprint of the building, including two soaring tower galleries and a rooftop terrace for outdoor sculpture that overlooks Pennsylvania Avenue. Also new are two staircases and an elevator that permit easier access to all levels of the building. In the galleries, a reimagined installation of the collection integrates new acquisitions and includes, for the first time, photography, works on paper, and media arts in addition to painting and sculpture to tell a more expansive story of modern art. Chronological, stylistic, and thematic arrangements provide new and thought-provoking juxtapositions. The number of works on view from the collection increased from 350 to 500.

As the time for renovations drew near, Gallery officials consulted Pei on interior architectural changes required by updated fire and life-safety codes. Pei recommended his longtime associate Perry Y. Chin, who prepared a concept design. The design focused on the underutilized attic spaces above

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the glass laylight ceilings, creating two new tower galleries connected by a roof terrace. Hartman-Cox Architects was retained by the Gallery to further develop the design and see it through construction.

The new spaces include the Roof Terrace—an outdoor sculpture terrace overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue—as well as two flanking, sky-lit, interior tower galleries. The Roof Terrace features several outdoor sculptures, including the monumental, electric blue *Hahn/Cock* (2013) by Katharina Fritsch, on view as a long-term loan from Glenstone Museum in Potomac, MD. The northwest Tower Gallery showcases a lively installation of works by Alexander Calder (1898–1976), and the northeast Tower Gallery presents abstract expressionist works, including a changing selection of paintings by Mark Rothko (1903–1970), most of them given to the Gallery by the Mark Rothko Foundation in 1986 (a gift that made the Gallery the largest public repository of his art). Trees, plantings, and built-in seating make the Roof Terrace an inviting place to relax, look out over the city, and see the architecture of the East Building from an entirely new perspective.

The interior expansion has occurred in coordination with the federally funded Master Facilities Plan, a renovation program that began in the West Building in 1999 and continues in the East Building. Subsequent phases of the renovations in other public parts of the East Building will begin in late 2019 and last through 2021.

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](https://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt), Twitter at [www.twitter.com/ngadc](https://www.twitter.com/ngadc), and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably

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and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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