

ARCHITECTURE

## For I. M. Pei, History Is Still Happening



Hassan Ammar/Associated Press

The Museum of Islamic Art at Doha, Qatar, was designed by I. M. Pei. The building is on a small man-made island that is accessible from a short bridge.

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I CAN'T seem to get the Museum of Islamic Art out of my mind. There's nothing revolutionary about the building. But its clean, chiseled forms have a tranquility that distinguishes it in an age that often seems trapped somewhere between gimmickry and a cloying nostalgia.

Part of the allure may have to do with I. M. Pei, the museum's architect. Mr. Pei reached the height of his popularity decades ago with projects like the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Louvre pyramid in Paris. Since then he has been an enigmatic figure at the periphery of the profession. His best work has admirers, but it has largely been ignored within architecture's intellectual circles. Now, at 91 and near the end of a long career, Mr. Pei seems to be enjoying the kind of revival accorded to most serious architects if they have the luck to live long enough.

But the museum is also notable for its place within a broader effort to reshape the region's cultural identity. The myriad large-scale civic projects, from a Guggenheim museum that is planned for Abu Dhabi to Education City in Doha — a vast area of new buildings that house outposts of foreign universities — are often dismissed in Western circles as superficial fantasies. As the first to reach completion, the Museum of Islamic Art is proof that the boom is not a mirage. The building's austere, almost primitive forms and the dazzling collections it houses underscore the seriousness of the country's cultural ambition.

Perhaps even more compelling, the design is rooted in an optimistic worldview, — one at odds with the schism between cosmopolitan modernity and backward fundamentalism that has come to define the last few decades in the Middle East. The ideals it embodies — that the past and the present can co-exist harmoniously — are a throwback to a time when America's overseas ambitions were still cloaked in a progressive agenda.

To Mr. Pei, whose self-deprecating charm suggests a certain noblesse oblige, all serious architecture is



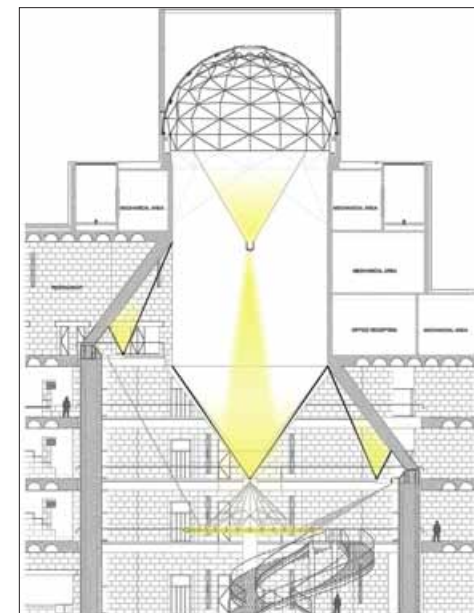
found somewhere between the extremes of an overly sentimental view of the past and a form of historical amnesia.

“Contemporary architects tend to impose modernity on something,” he said in an interview. “There is a certain concern for history but it's not very deep. I understand that time has changed, we have evolved. But I don't want to forget the beginning. A lasting architecture has to have roots.” This moderation should come as no surprise to those who have followed Mr. Pei's career closely. I recall first hearing his name during construction on his design for the Kennedy Library in Boston in the mid-1970s. The library, enclosed behind a towering glass atrium overlooking the water, was not one of Mr. Pei's most memorable early works, nor was it particularly innovative, but the link to Kennedy lent him instant glamour.

The building's pure geometries and muscular trusses seemed at the time to be the architectural equivalent of the space program. They suggested an enlightened, cultivated Modernism, albeit toned down to serve an educated, well-polished elite. Completed 16 years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the library's construction seemed to be an act of hope, as if the values that Kennedy's generation embodied could be preserved in stone, steel and glass.

In many ways Mr. Pei's career followed the unraveling of that era, from the economic downturn of the 1970s through the hollow victories of the Reagan years. Yet his work never lost its aura of measured idealism. It reached its highest expression in the National Gallery of Art's East Building, a composition of angular stone forms completed in 1978 that remains the most visible emblem of modern Washington.

Since that popular triumph Mr. Pei has often seemed to take the kind of leisurely, slow-paced approach to design that other architects, no matter how well established, can only dream of. When first approached in 1983 to take part in a competition to design the addition to the Louvre, he refused, saying that he would not submit a preliminary design. President François Mitterrand nevertheless hired him outright. Mr. Pei then asked him if he could take several months to study French history.

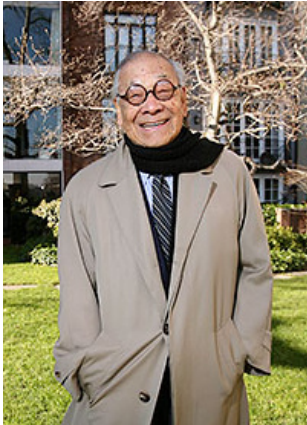


“I told him I wanted to learn about his culture,” Pei recalled. “I knew the Louvre well. But I wanted to see more than just architecture. I think he understood immediately.” Mr. Pei spent months traveling across Europe and North Africa before earnestly beginning work on the final design of the glass pyramids that now anchor the museum's central court.

In 1990, a year after the project's completion, he left his firm, handing its reins over to his partners Harry Cobb and James Ingo Freed so that he could concentrate more on design. More recently he has lived in semi-retirement, sometimes working on the

fourth floor office of his Sutton Place town house or sketching quietly in a rocking chair in his living room. He rarely takes on more than a single project at a time.

Such an attitude runs counter to the ever-accelerating pace of the global age — not to mention our obsession with novelty. But if Mr. Pei's methods seem anachronistic, they



also offer a gentle resistance to the short-sightedness of so many contemporary cultural undertakings.

Many successful architects today are global nomads, sketching ideas on paper napkins as they jet from one city to another. In their designs they tend to be more interested in exposing cultural frictions — the clashing of social, political and economic forces that undergird contemporary society — than in offering visions of harmony.

Mr. Pei, by contrast, imagines history as a smooth continuous process — a view that is deftly embodied by the Islamic Museum, whose clean abstract surfaces are an echo of both high Modernism and ancient Islamic architecture. Conceived by the Qatari emir and his 26-year-old daughter, Sheikha al Mayassa, it is the centerpiece of a larger cultural project whose aim is to forge a cosmopolitan, urban society in a place that not so long ago was a collection of Bedouin encampments and fishing villages. The aim is to recall a time that extended from the birth of Islam through the height of the Ottoman Empire, when the Islamic world was a center of scientific experimentation and cultural tolerance.

“My father's vision was to build a cross-cultural institution,” said Sheikha al Mayassa, who has been charged with overseeing the city's cultural development, during a recent interview here. “It is to reconnect the historical threads that have been broken, and finding peaceful ways to resolve conflict.”

Mr. Pei's aim was to integrate the values of that earlier era into today's culture — to capture, as he put it, the “essence of Islamic architecture.”

The museum's hard, chiseled forms take their inspiration from the ablution fountain of Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo, as well as from fortresses built in Tunisia in the eighth and ninth centuries — simple stone structures strong enough to hold their own in the barrenness of the desert landscape.



In order to create a similar sense of withdrawal from the world, Mr. Pei located his museum on a small man-made island, approachable from a short bridge. Seen from a distance, its blocklike forms are a powerful contrast to the half-finished towers and swiveling construction cranes that line the waterfront. Stepped on both sides, the apex of the main building is punctuated by a short tower with an eye-shaped opening that masks an interior dome.

From certain angles the structure has a flat, chimeric quality, like a stage set. From others it seems to be floating on the surface of the water — an effect that recalls Santa Maria della Salute, the imposing Baroque church that guards the entry to the Grand Canal in Venice.

As one approaches the building, the full weight of the structure begins to bear down,

and the forms become more imposing. The bridge, flanked by rows of tall palm trees, is set diagonally to the entry, which makes the stacked geometric forms appear more angular and the contrast between light and shadow more extreme.

Soon a few traditional details begin to appear: the two small arched windows over the entry; a covered arcade that links the museum to an education center. These touches seem minor, but they provide a sense of scale, so that the size of the building can be understood according to the size of the human body.

The blend of modern and Islamic themes continues inside, where Mr. Pei draws most directly from religious precedents. The hemispherical dome, an intricate pattern of stainless steel plates pierced by a single small oculus, brings to mind the geometric patterns used in Baroque churches as well as in ancient mosques.

The weight of the interior's chiseled stone forms, with the dome resting on a faceted drum and square base, evokes both classical precedents and the late works of Louis Kahn, whose fusion of modern structure with a timeless monumentality was a turning point in Modernist history.

Mr. Pei's design lacks the depth and cohesion of Kahn's greatest work. The structural system that supports the dome, for instance, is not particularly elegant; on one side the drum that supports it rests on slender three-story-tall columns, on the other it extends down to meet a wall that encloses a floor of offices before resting on a series of shorter columns, upsetting the room's natural symmetry.

Nonetheless the meaning of the space is clear. Mr. Pei has created a temple of high art, placing culture on the same pedestal as religion. His aim is both to create a symbol of Islamic culture and to forge a common heritage for the citizens of Qatar and the region.

The grandeur of the atrium is only a prelude to the real climax: the galleries, which are as intimate as the atrium is soaring. Objects are encased in towering glass cabinets set on tables, giving them an accessibility rare in a major museum. There is also just the right amount of space between the objects — enough to let them breathe without being isolated.

And like the building itself, the collections are a reflection of the notion that Modernity and Islamic culture are not in opposition, but woven out of the same historical thread. There are dazzling scientific objects here, including a display of astrolabes, as well as priceless works of calligraphy. (Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns one of the world's premier collections of Islamic Art, put it best when I spoke to him at the museum's inaugural gala: “Many of the pieces I've bid on over the past 10 years, they got.”)

Yet the most moving works are those that underscore the cosmopolitan values that are at the core of this museum: the notion that the free, open exchange of ideas is what builds great — and tolerant — civilizations: a matrix of Spanish Corinthian columns with Islamic flourishes; early translations of classical texts that formed the hinge between antiquity and the European Renaissance; a silk tapestry of a couple in front of a tent, illustrating the Islamic fable “Laila and Majnun” that is likened to Romeo and Juliet.

These are the moments that Mr. Pei's architecture is meant to embody. His museum reminds us that building a culture, as much as a political or social agenda, can be an act of healing. Like all great art, it requires forging seemingly conflicting values into a common whole

