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I.M. Pei, Master Architect Whose Buildings Dazzled the World, Dies at 102

By Paul Goldberger

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I. M. Pei, who began his long career designing buildings for a New York real estate developer and ended it as one of the most revered architects in the world, died early Thursday at his home in Manhattan. He was 102.

His death was confirmed by his son Li Chung Pei, who is also an architect and known as Sandi. He said his father had recently celebrated his birthday with a family dinner.

Best known for designing the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the glass pyramid at the entrance to the Louvre in Paris, Mr. Pei was one of the few architects who were equally attractive to real estate developers, corporate chieftains and art museum boards (the third group, of course, often made up of members of the first two). And all of his work — from his commercial skyscrapers to his art museums — represented a careful balance of the cutting edge and the conservative.

Mr. Pei's addition to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, known as the East Building, is made from massive blocks of Tennessee marble arranged around a triangular courtyard. It was a rare example of a modernist structure that appeared so permanent and well crafted that even lovers of traditional architecture were smitten.
Carol M. Highsmith/Buyenlarge, via Getty Images

[See six of I.M. Pei's most important buildings.]

Mr. Pei remained a committed modernist, and while none of his buildings could ever be called old-fashioned or traditional, his particular brand of modernism — clean, reserved, sharp-edged and unapologetic in its use of simple geometries and its aspirations to monumentality — sometimes seemed to be a throwback, at least when compared with the latest architectural trends.

This hardly bothered him. What he valued most in architecture, he said, was that it "stand the test of time."

He maintained that he wanted not just to solve problems but also to produce "an architecture of ideas." He worried, he added, "that ideas and professional practice do not intersect enough."

Mr. Pei (pronounced pay), who was born in China and moved to the United States in the 1930s, was hired by William Zeckendorf in 1948, shortly after he received his graduate degree in architecture from Harvard, to oversee the design of buildings produced by Zeckendorf's firm, Webb & Knapp.

President Jimmy Carter dedicated the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1978. He was joined by, from left, Carter Brown, director of the gallery; Mr. Pei; Bunny Mellon, whose family donated money for the structure; and Joan Mondale, wife of Vice President Walter F. Mondale.
Associated Press

At a time when most of his Harvard classmates considered themselves fortunate to get to design a single-family house or two, Mr. Pei quickly found himself engaged in the design of high-rise buildings, and he used that experience as a springboard to establish his own firm, I. M. Pei & Associates, which he set up in 1955 with Henry Cobb and Eason Leonard, the team he had assembled at Webb & Knapp.

In its early years, I. M. Pei & Associates mainly executed projects for Zeckendorf, including Kips Bay Plaza in New York, finished in 1963; Society Hill Towers in Philadelphia (1964); and Silver Towers in New York (1967). All were notable for their gridded concrete facades.

The firm became fully independent from Webb & Knapp in 1960, by which time Mr. Pei, a cultivated man whose understated manner and easy charm masked an intense, competitive ambition, was winning commissions for major projects that had nothing to do with Zeckendorf. Among these were the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., completed in 1967, and the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse and the Des Moines Art Center, both finished in 1968.

They were the first in a series of museums he designed that would come to include the East Building (1978) and the Louvre pyramid (1989) as well as the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, for which he designed what amounted to a huge glass tent in 1995. It was perhaps his most surprising commission.

The National Gallery project helped Mr. Pei win the commission to renovate the Louvre in Paris. The 70-foot-high glass pyramid appalled preservationists, but the public eventually warmed to it. Claude Paris/Associated Press

Mr. Pei, not a rock ’n’ roll fan, initially turned down that job. After he changed his mind, he prepared for the challenge of expressing the spirit of the music by traveling to rock concerts with Jann Wenner, the publisher of Rolling Stone.

The Cleveland project would not be Mr. Pei’s last unlikely museum commission: His museum oeuvre would culminate in the call to design the Museum of Islamic Art, in Doha, Qatar, in 2008, a challenge Mr. Pei accepted with relish. A longtime collector of Western Abstract Expressionist art, he admitted to knowing little about Islamic art.

As with the rock museum, Mr. Pei saw the Qatar commission as an opportunity to learn about a culture he did not claim to understand. He began his research by reading a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and then commenced a tour of great Islamic architecture around the world.

Bold Yet Pragmatic

While the waffle-like concrete facades of the Zeckendorf buildings were an early signature of his, Mr. Pei soon moved beyond concrete to a more sculptural but equally modernist approach. Throughout his long career he combined a willingness to use bold, assertive forms with a pragmatism born in his years with Zeckendorf, and he alternated between designing commercial projects and making a name for himself in other architectural realms.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, one of Mr. Pei's most surprising commissions.
Mark Duncan/Associated Press

Besides his many art museums, he designed concert halls, academic structures, hospitals, office towers and civic buildings like the Dallas City Hall, completed in 1977; the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, finished in 1979; and the Guggenheim Pavilion of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, finished in 1992.

(I. M. Pei & Associates eventually became I. M. Pei & Partners and later Pei Cobb Freed & Partners.)

When Mr. Pei was invited to design the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, he had the opportunity to demonstrate his belief that modernism was capable of producing buildings with the gravitas, the sense of permanence and the popular appeal of the greatest traditional structures. When the building opened in 1978, Ada Louise Huxtable, the senior architecture critic of The New York Times, hailed it as the most important building of the era, and she called Mr. Pei, at least by implication, the pre-eminent architect of the time.

Most other critics also praised Mr. Pei's angular structure of glass and marble, constructed out of the same Tennessee marble as John Russell Pope's original National Gallery Building of 1941, reshaped into a building of crisp, angular forms set around a triangular courtyard. Mr. Pei, many critics said, had found a way to get beyond both the casual, temporal air and the coldness of much modern architecture, and to create a building that was both boldly monumental and warmly inviting, even exhilarating.

The Bank of China building, center, in Hong Kong was designed by Mr. Pei to look like an angular bamboo shoot. It was completed in 1989. Jerome Favre/EPA, via Shutterstock

[Architects remember I.M. Pei. and his work.]

In 1979, the year after the National Gallery was completed, Mr. Pei received the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, its highest honor.

At the same time that he was receiving plaudits in Washington, however, Mr. Pei was recovering from one of the most devastating setbacks any architect of his generation had faced anywhere: the nearly total failure of one of his most conspicuous projects, the 700-foot-tall John Hancock Tower at Copley Square in Boston.

A thin, elegant slab of bluish glass designed by his partner Henry Cobb, it was nearing completion in 1973 when sheets of glass began popping out of its facade. They were quickly replaced with plywood, but before the source of the problem could be detected, nearly a third of the glass had fallen out, creating both a professional embarrassment and an enormous legal liability for Mr. Pei and his firm.

The fault, experts believed, was not in the Pei design but in the glass itself: The Hancock Tower was one of the first high-rise buildings to use a new type of reflective, double-paned glass.

Mr. Pei was far from the obvious choice to design the Kennedy library and museum, but when Jacqueline Kennedy visited him in his office in 1964, she was so impressed by his erudition and elegant manners that she chose him on the spot. At a meeting of trustees and directors of the library, Mr. Pei shared a laugh with Mrs. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy.
Eddie Hausner/The New York Times

The building ultimately won numerous awards, including the American Institute of Architects' 25-Year Award. But it took eight years of legal wrangling, millions of dollars and the replacement of all 10,344 panes of glass in the facade before the Hancock's troubles could be put to rest and the building could be appreciated as one of the most beautiful skyscrapers of the late 20th century.

The problems delayed its opening by three years, its temporary plywood windows a constant reminder to all Boston of its troubles, which cost I. M. Pei & Partners so many clients that Mr. Pei almost had to close the firm.

“The glass company had a lot of money, and Hancock had a lot of money, but we didn’t have a lot of money,” he told The Times in 2007.

The long struggle to resolve the problems at the Hancock, and the fallout from the crisis, made the 1970s, despite the triumph of the National Gallery in Washington, a bittersweet decade for Mr. Pei.

Workmen replaced numerous panes of glass, blown out in high winds, with plywood at Mr. Pei’s John Hancock Tower in Boston in June 1973. Though the fault was in the glass, not the architecture, the episode was a devastating setback for Mr. Pei.

Bill Chaplis/Associated Press

Although he was correct that his firm lacked the funds of the huge corporations he was struggling with, he was not without substantial resources, at least for an architect.

Son of a Banker

Ieoh Ming Pei was born in Canton (now Guangzhou) on April 26, 1917, the son of Tsuyee Pei, one of China's leading bankers. When he was an infant, his father moved the family to Hong Kong to assume the head position at the Hong Kong branch of the Bank of China, and when Ieoh Ming was 9, his father was put in charge of the larger branch in Shanghai. He remembered being fascinated by the construction of a 25-story hotel.

"I couldn't resist looking into the hole," he recalled in 2007. "That's when I knew I wanted to build."

He was brought up in a well-to-do household that was steeped in both Chinese tradition — he spent summers in a country village, where his father's family had lived for more than 500 years, learning the rites of ancestor worship — and Western sophistication.

Mr. Pei in his Madison Avenue office in Manhattan in 1970. Ernie Sisto/The New York Times

Deciding to attend college in the United States, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania. But when he concluded that he was not up to the classical drawing techniques then being taught at Penn, he transferred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, from which he received a bachelor of architecture degree in 1940.

At the recommendation of his father, who was concerned about the threat of war and the growing possibility of a Communist revolution in China, he postponed his plan to return home. Instead he enrolled at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, where he studied under the German modernist architect Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School.

Discovering that there were relatively few men at Harvard during the war years — “It was me, a Chinese national, and the ladies,” he once recalled — he decided to join the war effort and volunteered to work for the National Defense Research Committee in Princeton, N.J., where he became an expert on fusing bombs.

“They figured if you knew how to build buildings, you knew how to destroy them,” Mr. Pei said.

While he was at M.I.T., Mr. Pei met another Chinese national, Eileen Loo, who had come to the United States in 1938 to study art at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Like Mr. Pei, she was from a distinguished Chinese family. The two married as soon as she graduated, in 1942. Eileen Pei began graduate work in landscape architecture at Harvard while her husband worked toward his advanced architecture degree, which he received in 1946.

Mr. Pei designed large, publicly subsidized projects like Kips Bay Towers (1963), a Manhattan complex whose gridded, poured-in-place concrete facades proved, he said, that concrete was an acceptable material for large-scale urban housing.
Bob Glass/The New York Times

He taught briefly at Harvard and planned to return to China in time. But then he was approached by Zeckendorf, who was looking for a talented young architect to head a new in-house design team.

Mr. Pei, refined and genteel, could not have been more different on the surface from the brash Zeckendorf. But the men shared a bold ambition, a love of French wine and a belief that architecture could improve cities. Mr. Pei decided to make the move to New York. He, his wife and their two young sons left Cambridge, Mass., and settled in an apartment on Beekman Place in Manhattan.

The Zeckendorf years were a heady beginning for Mr. Pei's career. Before long he had hired one of his former students at Harvard, Henry Cobb, who would remain associated with him for more than 60 years. The architect Ulrich Franzen also began his career working under Mr. Pei at Webb & Knapp, where the architecture department had charge of large-scale projects in New York, Washington, Montreal, Denver, Boston and other cities.

No matter how committed William Zeckendorf was to Mr. Pei's designs, however, he was still a commercial real estate developer, and Mr. Pei did not want to spend his entire career working for someone else. With Zeckendorf's blessing he began to seek some outside commissions, including the Luce Memorial Chapel in Taiwan and the Green Earth Sciences building at M.I.T., and he gradually began to separate himself from his patron.

One of Mr. Pei's earliest works was The Silver Towers at New York University, part of what he called his "concrete series." Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

When Zeckendorf's empire ran into serious financial problems in 1960, that became a good excuse to turn I. M. Pei & Associates into a fully independent firm.

The Choice of the Kennedys

Mr. Pei quickly began to gather both large and small architectural assignments, among them the National Airlines terminal at what is now John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University, and the Cleo Rogers Memorial Library in Columbus, Ind., a city famous for its architecture.

But the commission that truly thrust Mr. Pei into the forefront of American architects was for a building that would take 15 years to build and would bring him a sense of triumph and frustration in equal parts: the John F. Kennedy Library.

He was chosen in 1964 by Jacqueline Kennedy (later Onassis), who liked the fact that he was young — he and John F. Kennedy were born just a month apart — and only beginning to come into his own. His selection over Louis Kahn, Philip Johnson, Gordon Bunshaft and Paul Rudolph made it clear that he was no longer viewed as a developer's architect but as a major talent on his own.

Mr. Pei, right, and the developer William Zeckendorf Jr., left, with a model of the proposed Regent hotel (now the Four Seasons) in Manhattan in 1989. Here Mr. Pei sought to evoke the romantic, stepped-back forms of prewar New York skyscrapers.
Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

But political objections to the library's original site in Cambridge delayed the project for years, and by the time it was built, both the new site, at Columbia Point in Boston Harbor, and the scaled-down design represented major compromises.

During the years the Kennedy Library was being planned, the Pei firm grew rapidly. There were still more museums, like the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, and large urban complexes like the Christian Science Center in Boston, as well as the project that would bring Mr. Pei his greatest notoriety in Boston, the John Hancock Tower, and the museum that would bring him his greatest acclaim, the East Building of the National Gallery.

As his firm grew in size and prestige — it would eventually employ 300 people — Mr. Pei seemed to become the quintessential New Yorker. He and his wife and family, which grew to include three sons and a daughter, moved to a townhouse on Sutton Place, facing the East River, where he remained for the rest of his life. He

became an avid collector of postwar American art, and his townhouse contained works by Morris Louis, Dubuffet and de Kooning; he also designed a weekend house for his family in Katonah, N.Y., in Westchester County, where he installed a 16-foot-high sculpture by Anthony Caro.

Mr. Pei never played down his connections to China. His children were all given Chinese names, and when he won the Pritzker Prize in 1983, widely viewed as the highest honor a living architect can receive, he used the $100,000 award to establish a scholarship fund for Chinese architecture students.

Mr. Pei made his first trip back to China in 1974, and in the 1980s he designed the Fragrant Hill Hotel, outside Beijing. (He said it was not one of his most successful buildings.)
Heung Shing Liu/Associated Press

His eldest son, T'ing Chung, an urban planner, died in 2003. His wife of 72 years, Eileen, died in 2014. In addition to his son Li Chung, who is known as Sandi, he is survived by another son, Chien Chung, also an architect, who is known as Didi; his daughter, Liane; and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Mr. Pei's younger sons joined with him to form their own firm, the Pei Partnership, in 1992, at which point I. M. Pei began stepping aside from the firm he had founded and devoted most of the last years of his career to working with his sons.

He did not go back to China until 1974, when he returned as part of a cultural exchange tour organized by the American Institute of Architects. There, he did not hesitate to criticize the banal, Soviet-influenced architecture that he saw, and he gave a talk in which he urged the Chinese to look back at their own traditions rather than "slavishly following Eastern European patterns."

The criticism did not deter the Chinese government from inviting Mr. Pei, by then the most famous Chinese-born architect in the world, back again, this time to design a group of high-rise hotels in the center of Beijing. He declined, saying that he feared such buildings would deface the city.

In 1992, Mr. Pei began working with his sons Chien Chung Pei, known as Didi, and Li Chung Pei, known as Sandi, at Pei Partnership Architects. Among their most visible projects was the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Hassan Ammar/Associated Press

The government, not willing to let him get away so easily, then offered him a rural site outside the city and asked him to design a resort hotel there. This time he said yes, and produced the design for Fragrant Hill, a sprawling building in which he tried to combine the geometric modernism of his other buildings with elements from traditional Chinese architecture.

It was the first of a few attempts Mr. Pei made to acknowledge the growing interest of many architects in reusing historical form; in a similar vein, he would later design a high-rise hotel in Midtown Manhattan, the Regent (now the Four Seasons), which tried to evoke the romantic, stepped-back forms of prewar New York skyscrapers.

The opening of Fragrant Hill was a major international event. Jacqueline Onassis, whose friendship with Mr. Pei remained strong throughout the years of delay over the Kennedy Library, attended, as did Carter Brown, the director of the National Gallery. But Mr. Pei later admitted that he considered the building, which was poorly constructed and not well maintained, a disappointment.

In 1982, Mr. Pei would have a very different kind of opportunity in China when the governors of the Bank of China in Hong Kong, the bank his father had once run, traveled to New York to meet with Tsuyee Pei, who had long since left China and was living in Manhattan. Their mission was to ask the senior Pei, in a

demonstration of traditional Chinese etiquette, if he would agree to allow them to invite his son to design a new skyscraper headquarters for the bank in Hong Kong. (Tsuyee Pei was bitterly opposed to the Communist Chinese government, but he did not stand in the way of his son's taking the job.)

Mr. Pei and his wife, Eileen, with Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker at an awards ceremony in Luxembourg in 2006. The couple married in 1942 and had four children.
Harald Tittel/picture-alliance and dpa, via Associated Press

It would turn out to be one of Mr. Pei's most notable towers, a narrow 70-story composition of triangular and diamond shapes, built of glass and steel.

A Pyramid as a Portal

Mr. Pei would make his biggest international mark, however, in France, with a smaller but far more contentious project. In the early 1980s President François Mitterrand, an admirer of the East Building at the National Gallery, invited Mr. Pei to update and expand the Louvre Museum, which was sorely in need of renovation to accommodate a huge increase in visitors.

Mr. Pei proposed building a glass pyramid in the center of the ancient Cour Napoleon to serve as a new main entrance to the museum. He quickly found himself in the center of an international controversy, accused of defacing one of the world's great landmarks.

He argued that his glass pyramid was merely an updated version of a traditional form, and that his redesigned courtyard had been influenced by the geometric work of the French landscape architect Le Notre. It was rigorously rational, in other words, and in that sense classically French.

Mr. Pei in his Sutton Place home in Manhattan in 2008. As a boy in Shanghai, he was fascinated by the construction of a 25-story hotel. “I couldn’t resist looking into the hole,” he recalled. “That’s when I decided I wanted to build.” Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

What carried the day, however, was not Mr. Pei’s argument, true as it may have been, but President Mitterrand’s determination. The pyramid opened in the spring of 1989, and the elegance of the finished building, not to mention its geometric precision, won over most, if not all, of its opponents.

Within a few years the pyramid had become an accepted, and generally admired, symbol of a re-energized Paris. And like the Kennedy Library, the John Hancock Tower and another controversial Pei project from the 1980s, the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York, it stood as a measure not just of I. M. Pei’s design talent but also of his patience and perseverance.

In retirement, Mr. Pei remained eager for news of both architecture and art and, until his last year, continued to make the occasional trip downtown to lunch with friends and consume his share of red Bordeaux.

His 100th birthday, in 2017, was marked with an elaborate black-tie dinner, given by his children, at the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center, where he was toasted by many of the world’s leading architects, some of whom had begun their careers working for him, and a circle of friends that included prominent members of the Chinese community in the United States, who considered him among their most eminent figures.

As he blew out the candles on an enormous cake in the angular shape of the monumental Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, his last major building project, Mr. Pei beamed.

Correction: *May 16, 2019*
An earlier version of this obituary misidentified the son of Mr. Pei who confirmed his death. He is Li Chung Pei, not Chien Chung Pei.

Correction: *May 17, 2019*
An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the surname of the former president of France who invited Mr. Pei to update and expand the Louvre Museum. He was François Mitterrand, not Mitterand.

Correction: *May 17, 2019*
An earlier version of this obituary misstated the current name of the firm originally known as I.M. Pei & Associates. It is Pei Cobb Freed & Partners — not Pei, Cobb and Freed.

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