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"Well-tempered Piano"

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No living architect has shaped the character of the contemporary art museum more than Renzo Piano. The past quarter century has seen the completion of fourteen major commissions—nine in the past decade alone—yielding a roster of buildings that is unprecedented in its scope and prestige. Whether creating new institutions from the ground up, as at the Menil Collection in Houston and the Fondation Beyeler near Basel, or expanding already-sprawling quarters for encyclopedic collections in Los Angeles and Chicago, Piano has designed an influential portion of the spaces in which we see art today. Given the ongoing crises in finance and philanthropy, these are also likely to be the spaces in which we will see art for some time to come. Four other major US projects remain on the books at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, and the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Within the architectural star system, Piano has emerged as a veteran character actor: the star who doesn't act like one. Unassuming, polite, and compromising, both the man and his buildings signal a *rappel à l'ordre* for institutions wary of more theatrical architects such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, or Daniel Libeskind. Yet if Piano is cautious not to do too much, he is equally careful not to do too little, so that his museums also avoid the minimalist intensity achieved by Tadao Ando, SANAA, and Peter Zumthor (or Herzog & de Meuron in their other mode). Not one to argue, Piano typically declines to enter even highly selective competitions with these peers, only to occasionally receive the commissions nonetheless

after the collapse of some more radical scheme (see both the Whitney and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where he arrived to calm the wake of the pointedly uncompromising Rem Koolhaas).

Characterizing Piano's wide institutional acceptance, architectural historian Antoine Picon has remarked that he is the I. M. Pei of our time. Structurally, this seems right: Pei, too, was the favorite of museum trustees who delighted in the tasteful modernism he spread from small university galleries to vast expansions, most famously of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and the Louvre. Yet compared to Piano, Pei looks like a hard-liner, with his crystalline geometries, sepulchral galleries, and minimal details. If Piano is our Pei, it suggests we might be getting a little soft.

All of which presents the critic (or at least this critic) with a specific challenge: How can one engage with buildings that, in their modesty, shun engagement, that consistently aim for such unprovocative goals as refinement, quality, and urbanity? Accustomed to more aggressive projects that demand attention, how does one assess such well-mannered architecture that usually seems content to remain as the background, as the frame? (Surely this is no small issue when we are speaking about gallery spaces.) There is a temptation to treat Piano's museums as a singular bloc and then to dismiss them as tastefully mild and mildly predictable. Yet if, as has been alleged, Piano has become the American museum world's "default architect," what could be more important than to find a critical hold on his smoothly successful projects and to examine these default settings? With so many projects recently completed, now is the time to draw attention to these normally self-effacing buildings, to make distinctions among projects that are in fact not equivalent, and to foreground the backgrounds against which so much art is now seen.

Piano, of course, was not always so polite. Like many baby boomers, he had a radical youth (or what passes for youth in architecture) before tacking

center at middle age to become part of the establishment. His early career was defined by the single epochal project of the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1971-77), the cathedral-size block of saturated color, demonstrative building technology, and social ambition that he and Richard Rogers designed for Paris's Plateau Beaubourg. At the time, Piano and Rogers—ages 33 and 37 respectively—were radical newcomers, implausibly winning a state competition of 681 entries with their Archigram-inspired vision of a high-tech flexible framework for socializing (and perhaps socialism), electronic communication (the proto-media wall), books, film, music, street performers, and, among it all, art. The center did become a hugely popular building—though more as a good public space than as a good space for art—and played an important role in shifting institutional assumptions about what a museum did and for whom.

As critics Reyner Banham and Alan Colquhoun pointed out at the time of its opening, the Centre Pompidou is a deeply contradictory proposition: a permanent monument to impermanence. Of its two architects, Piano had always been the more conservative, and, after an amiable separation from Rogers, he chose a direction that avoided the Pompidou's contradictions. Instead of brash monuments to social fluidity, Piano's museums after the Pompidou would be designed as serene settings for the celebration of cultural permanence. This second phase of Piano's career, devoted to the reassertion of institutional and architectural stability, began with the Menil Collection (1982-87); and the Menil, like all of Piano's subsequent museums, began with the roof.

One could argue, as eighteenth-century French rationalist Marc-Antoine Laugier famously did, that the mythical first act of architecture is the construction of a covering to protect a space from rain, snow, and sun. Yet this origin was never simple but always a composite assembly of exterior sheathing, structural members to carry the sheathing, and often a distinct interior surface as well. (Note that we need two words to indicate this

ensemble: roof and ceiling.) Modern architects took aim at the roof/ceiling dyad both symbolically and practically, reducing it to a unified horizontal slab-the flat roof-idealized as both a geometric plane and an industrial component. From the exterior the results were clear, allowing elementarist compositions that effectively erased the roofline and its accreted symbolism from view. From the interior, the success of the flat roof has been more ambiguous, particularly for large buildings such as museums, where even a master like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe surrendered on occasion to banal uninflected expanses of acoustic tiles pocked by light fixtures.

In light of this history, Piano's greatest contribution to architectural syntax has been his thorough reconsideration of the roof/ceiling ensemble, the strongest evidence of which appears in his museum and gallery projects. It is also an interest that reaches back to his earliest work. Influenced by the pioneering tensile structures of Frei Otto and by Z. S. Makowski's research into structural plastics, Piano's first independent architectural projects in the mid-1960s were experimental roof systems made of translucent polyester membranes. Long-span trusses and light-providing louvers appear in several projects he designed around 1970. Here we see already Piano's interest in dematerializing the roof/ceiling system into a hovering lightweight, light-giving boundary. As the first monograph of his work puts it, for Piano, "The roof's the thing."

Under the tutelage of patron Dominique de Menil, Piano came to believe that viewing art required patient, quasi-religious contemplation in what he has termed a "suspended atmosphere" of diffuse light and near silence. In order to provide the gentle, indirect natural light that de Menil desired, Piano returned to his pre-Pompidou experiments with roofs, devising the first version of the floating roof/ceiling system that has become the hallmark of his museum work.

Unlike the early polyester membrane experiments, which attempted to unify the functions of the roof into a single thin surface, the Menil Collection's roof is separated into a series of layers, each performing a specific role: an upper layer of glass, which keeps out the weather and tunes the sunlight, via special coatings, to a specific range of wavelengths; open steel trusses, which span the galleries and support the glass; and, at the lowest level, the curvaceous ferroconcrete "leaves" that intercept and reflect sunlight indirectly to the space below while also carrying the artificial lights that a contemporary gallery still demands. The result is the soft full-spectrum light for which Piano's galleries have become famous, covered by a roof/ceiling that is no longer a unified slab-and no longer even opaque-but instead a stratified zone of articulated elements that gradually separates interior from exterior. Piano has taken seriously Le Corbusier's description of the modernist roof as the "fifth facade" (to be appreciated from high-rises and airplanes), applying to a building's horizontal face techniques of layering and filtering usually reserved for its vertical ones.

In the lineage of museum projects descended from the Menil, Piano has expanded and refined his approach to the roof/ceiling problem, testing novel components and recycling known ones in new combinations. The Cy Twombly Gallery (1992-95), part of the Menil campus, introduced two important innovations: a "flying carpet" comprising a structural grid and solar control grille, and taut fabric scrims on the ceiling.

The flying carpet then repeats with variations in the Fondation Beyeler (1992-97), the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli at the Lingotto (the former Fiat factory in Turin, Italy, to which Piano added a rooftop gallery in 2000-2002), and, most recently, the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago (1999-2009), where the Twombly scrims also reappear in a modified, maintenance-friendly version. The Menil "leaves" are echoed in the dimpled, striated ceiling of Piano's sizable addition to Richard Meier's iconic High

Museum of Art in Atlanta (1999-2005), though the result is far more ambiguous, as the linear elements play no structural role and are subdivided into a series of concave cones capped by angled glass apertures to catch the northern light. Influenced by Louis Kahn's nearby Kimbell Art Museum, Piano introduced a new approach for the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas (1999-2003): a parallel series of extremely shallow barrel vaults of steel and glass, topped by an aluminum sunscreen dimpled like a miniature version of the High roof. The shallow glass vault then reappears in the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA (2003-2008), but in the middle of the roof ensemble beneath a series of sawtooth louvers.

This process of repetition with variation is the clearest sign of Piano's long-running effort to practice architecture as a craft rather than an art of self-expression, and it marks his deepest split with many of his equally famous peers. For although it is true that in a world of signature design, every architect seems destined-or doomed-to repetition, this outcome can seem like failure in the case of self-proclaimed individualists such as Gehry, Hadid, and Libeskind. In contrast, since Piano's process is devoted to refinement, repetition is expected from the start. The result is a high degree of consistency in his gallery spaces-no doubt one reason he garners the trust of many museum boards and the indifference of many critics.

Despite his well-promoted modesty, Piano routinely describes the galleries housed beneath his elaborate roofs as "sacred" spaces in which art is preserved from the "profane" world outside. Having used the Centre Pompidou to breach the highbrow barricades of the museum, he has since devoted himself to reestablishing control over the heterogeneous programs-café, shops, education centers, auditoriums-that rushed in, working to hold them at a safe distance from the art. Without feeling his religion, one can appreciate Piano's desire for a space that permits a concentrated engagement with works of art-a visit to the redesigned Museum of Modern Art in New York

demonstrates what the lack of such space can mean-and he has given us what one might imagine to be the basic requirements of any decent contemporary gallery: large, high-ceilinged spaces, with good light and discreet but effective environmental controls.

Yet most of his museums have been built during, and on account of, an unprecedented boom in the market for art. Sacred seems like a willfully misleading word to describe the experience of looking at Jeff Koons's Michael Jackson and Bubbles, 1988, bathed in carefully scripted Hollywood sunlight in a pavilion on Wilshire Boulevard paid for by home-construction mogul Eli Broad. Spectacular, maybe; but worldly surely. Or perhaps Piano's galleries are sacred spaces, but only inasmuch as these have always been created out of a combination of money, power, advanced technology, and aesthetic devices.

Without a deity to celebrate, however, his galleries remain ecumenically vague, devoted only to the god of light itself, who, the myths tell us, can never be confronted directly. Apparently too reasonable to play Icarus, Piano is nonetheless forced into a subtly masochistic relationship with the natural light he worships: repeatedly creating openings for sunlight, which then must be screened, filtered, or reflected. Like Victorian sexuality, the result is either highly titillating or simply frustrating. Ignoring several decades of institutional critique, Piano's light, and the quasi-religious rhetoric around it, seems designed to cleanse art objects of their earthly entanglements, leaving behind a putatively pure aesthetic experience. (Koons's work looks good in such spaces because he flirts with the same transubstantiation.) Indeed, like a church, Piano's "suspended atmosphere" creates a highly constrained idea of how its icons, and their viewers, should-or should not-perform.

As with his individual buildings, Piano's career has proceeded from the development of details to larger-scale work. This brings his projects their

celebrated level of refinement, but it is unclear whether his responses to larger-scale concerns are as consistently sophisticated as his details.

Piano's infatuation with the top-lit gallery creates an imbalance in some of his bigger, multistory structures. Since the prized light can typically be provided only on the uppermost floor, there is an inevitable sense of deflation when one moves to the lower galleries at the Broad or the High. They are nicely finished and well proportioned (except for the wedge-shaped spaces at the High, which defer to the site), but the ethereal light is gone and its absence is present. Further, where his low-rise projects—the Menil, the Beyeler, and the Nasher—are each motivated and unified by his conception of the roof, the roof alone is not sufficient to organize the more complex High and the taller Broad. Vertical circulation is another uneven area. Having helped design a monument to movement with the external escalators at the Centre Pompidou (the facade that launched a thousand student projects), Piano's subsequent attitude toward getting up and down has been ambiguous (another reason that the flatter buildings are better).

One senses that, despite his technical interests, his post-Pompidou sensibility is unsure what to make of something as antispacial as an elevator, which is more of a gadget than an inspirational architectural technology. After entirely prosaic treatment at the High, bold vertical circulation has returned to quite different effect in two of Piano's recent museums. In New York, the new atrium of the Morgan Library & Museum (2000–2006) is graced by two vitrinelike elevator cars, which ride gleaming hydraulic pistons over their exposed pumps and reservoirs below. Seen but not heard, they are idealized mechanical servants elegantly shuttling visitors along the vertical axis that organizes the composition. At the Broad, Piano has created his most self-consciously self-referential moment: an exuberant red scaffolding that carries a long outdoor escalator and stairway along the northern facade. This belated postmodern assembly immediately recalls the

thirty-year-old Centre Pompidou (as well as Bernard Tschumi's folie at Parc de la Villette in Paris [1982-98]) and is complemented on the interior by a room-size glass elevator that moves within a Barbara Kruger-emblazoned shaft. (No activism in the sacred space, please!) By either the inside or outside route, the circulation is overwrought and disruptive, experientially disassembling the three floors of a building that otherwise seems to strive for integration.

Also oddly postmodernist are Piano's planning ideas, which, at least as manifest in some of his US museums, are highly conventional, focusing on traditionally scaled, quasi-public urban spaces on a European model: piazzas, to use the term Piano has often employed. On issues of site, he has emerged as a contemporary Camillo Sitte, with a radically conservative belief in the necessity of well-bounded public spaces for the life of a city. Yet without denying either the charm of the European piazza or the shortage of good public spaces in America, one can question Piano's apparent thesis that the former should always be the remedy for the latter.

As could be expected, his approach works best in the high-density fabric of New York City, where Piano has created a pleasant atrium linking the existing and new structures of the Morgan Library. Far more problematic are his attempts to create traditional urban plazas in Atlanta and Los Angeles—two of our most auto-centric (which is to say anticentric) metropolises. For the High, Piano claims to have been inspired by the Piazza San Matteo in his hometown of Genoa, Italy, and the museum's raised inner plaza does provide some relief in the alienating terrain of Midtown (read "Edgetown") Atlanta. Still, the arts complex is by necessity an island in this landscape of postmodern deracination, so that the "piazza" is in fact a courtyard, wrapped by a single institution simulating a collection of distinct buildings and opening up in an awkward shift of scale toward Roy

Lichtenstein's House III, 1997, Meier's self-involved pavilion, and an undefined horizon of Southern sprawl beyond.

Overly deferential to Meier, Piano has also made an uncharacteristic error in material effect: Used on his freestanding pavilion, Meier's signature white exterior produced a gleaming, purist object in the Atlanta sun; but as the boundary of Piano's new three-sided piazza, where one is invited to linger on the lawn or at café tables, it becomes a blinding solar reflector that disrupts any resemblance to the project's warmly glowing European archetype.

At LACMA the European model is even broader. Describing his master plan for the institution's jumbled campus, Piano imagines that "LACMA can be like San Gimignano in Italy. In a short walk, you find surprises—a church, a piazza, a palazzo . . . this balancing of 'sacro and profano' offers the guiding spirit for an architectural vision that aspires to energize and transform the experience of a museum visit." The invocation of such Old World concepts for a site bounded by Wilshire Boulevard, the La Brea tar pits, and a reclaimed May department store seems akin to postmodernism's strategy of mixing high and low, venerable and contemporary (see Robert Venturi's overlay of ancient Rome and postwar Las Vegas).

Yet where Venturi discovered admirable order in the apparent chaos of the Strip and always kept his historical contrasts carefully balanced, Piano resists the charms of Angeleno urbanism and wants only to tame its "mess" with familiar categories and axial planning. Here, as in Atlanta, one is confronted with the provincialism of his urbanism. More generally, his work in these cities suggests that in our globalized world we should be aware of a distinction between the urbane and the metropolitan (to use Koolhaas's key term), between a singular model of the good city and one based on more general urban qualities such as heterogeneity, differentiation, and intensity.

Encouragingly, Piano's largest project for an art museum since the Centre Pompidou, the recently completed Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago, avoids many of these difficulties and demonstrates a new sense of assurance at this greater scale. Adding 264,000 square feet, it makes the Art Institute the second-largest art museum in the United States, behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Perhaps more sympathetic to the architectural history of Chicago than to that of his other American sites, Piano has wisely forgone the Old World metaphors, instead organizing the project around an interior "main street"-essentially a long, wide arcade that bisects the two principal gallery blocks and links the existing building to a new entry facing Millennium Park. (While sound in theory, the effectiveness of the new entry may be hampered by its isolated location on traffic-dominated Monroe Street. Direct access to the park is provided by a long arcing pedestrian bridge two levels above the sidewalk.) The arcade also contains an ample stairway allowing civilized, but not overly ceremonial, circulation between gallery levels.

Coherence through a range of scales is nicely established by the correspondence between the orientation of Piano's "flying carpet" roof structure and Chicago's prominent ordinal grid: The highly controlled relationship to the sun within the galleries echoes the city's underlying organization as well as that of the Jeffersonian grid that orders the entire Midwest.

The galleries themselves are generously proportioned and, on the upper floor of the main east pavilion, are topped with one of Piano's signature light-modulating systems: a high flying carpet of louvers, a weather barrier of slightly pitched glass, and a grid of white fabric panels as a ceiling. This top gallery is devoted to some of the Art Institute's great early-twentieth-century works, providing a rare chance to see works by Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, Brancusi, and Giacometti touched by natural light (though

this is still augmented by artificial). As the northern and southern facades are nearly all glass, both gallery levels in the east block also offer expansive and highly flattering views of Millennium Park, Gehry's band shell, and the city beyond. These views helpfully relieve the sometimes smothering effect of Piano's "suspended atmosphere," nicely contributing to the lower galleries not just light, but welcome opportunities to rejuvenate art-strained eyes by taking in long-range urban vistas. (A more complete set of gorgeously framed panoramas of the park, the Michigan Avenue street wall, and Lake Michigan are offered by the third-floor restaurant and terrace of the west pavilion.)

The Art Institute's Modern Wing demonstrates Piano's long-developing themes convincingly applied at a newly grand scale. Yet, despite its size and many successful moments, the Modern Wing still lacks the strong character that one might expect from a major civic monument. Or, better, it avoids such a character, since its mild temperament is the intentional result of Piano's approach. By understanding the museum primarily as a device that tempers the environment (to borrow Reyner Banham's phrase) in order to create a specific atmosphere for viewing works of art, Piano chooses to neglect the other side of architecture's inherent dialectic: the building as a work of art itself demanding an autonomous conception.

In his well-known essay on art and museums, "Valéry Proust Museum," Theodor W. Adorno noted that for Paul Valéry, painting and sculpture were mythical children who had lost their mother, architecture. Although Valéry mourned this condition as evidence of the modern world's barbarity, Adorno countered that "one must remember that in myths the heroes, who represent the emancipation of the human from fate, always lost their mothers." No longer the mother of the arts, architecture becomes their peer, so that, emancipated, both architecture and art must grapple with their autonomy. Lacking the assurances of a common language, contemporary architecture must

be judged on a case-by-case basis and largely on the strength of the concepts-formal, technical, material, programmatic-embodied in a building and the conviction with which they are carried out. It is in this sense that architecture now exists in a state parallel to that of art: In a world where anything is possible, the work must form its own ground.

Suspicious of such self-generated meaning, Piano has turned to two external sources of legitimation. The first, represented by his roofs, is craft-the patient, cumulative investigation of materials and their assembly. Though seemingly progressive, this is actually a nostalgic basis for architecture-a fact nicely captured by Piano calling his vast global practice a "workshop" and by the image of hand tools and wooden forms that unironically introduces the firm's website. One of the historical lessons of modernism and its aftermath is that contemporary building technology cannot provide a firm foundation for architecture-the technologies of our late-industrial age are too promiscuous to be stable. In fact, aided by computational analysis and computer-controlled fabrication, the range of technical development has only accelerated during Piano's lifetime. One way of interpreting the variations in his gallery roofs is that they play out within a circumscribed boundary the tension between Piano's constitutional desire for coherence and the open-ended range of possibilities offered by contemporary technology.

If the turn to technologized craft reprises a core modernist belief (and its faults), Piano's second conceptual foundation is decidedly antimodernist. More than half a century after Adorno's essay, Piano and his institutional clients, with their talk of sacred spaces and premodern European models, aim to restore the maternal order by giving us the museum as a cultural comfort zone. Yet the historical trajectory that destroyed the hierarchy of the arts cannot be reversed, nor should we want it to be. In their very success, Piano's museums offer a too-soothing denial of this

overarching historical condition (this is also the point at which they slip toward corporatism).

One fears that the advantages of Piano's celebrated modesty may be short-lived, and that his larger museums, though often brittlely elegant, may lack the strong aesthetic integrity needed to endure architecture's very long run. The problem may not be that Piano has lately been our default architect, but that his buildings, lacking intensity, tend to fall back on a default architecture of convention and fussy technicism.

Piano likes to talk about his buildings' sense of permanence, but whether his string of recent museums will prove to be the first models of a new age of temperance or the last self-reassuring monuments of an unsustainable era will depend on precisely those external forces they work so hard to suspend: economics, politics, and the ever warmer sunlight itself.