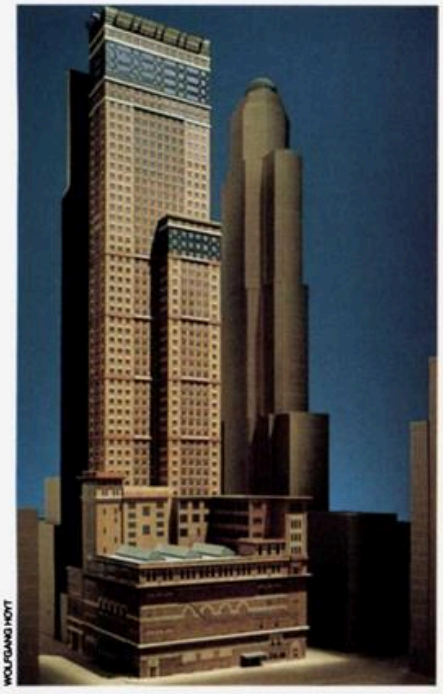
## Pieces of the City

THERE IS NOTHING quite so pleasurable for me as to visit my buildings when they're finished and occupied. It is like being part of a miracle taking place. Months and even years of caring and dreaming become reality.

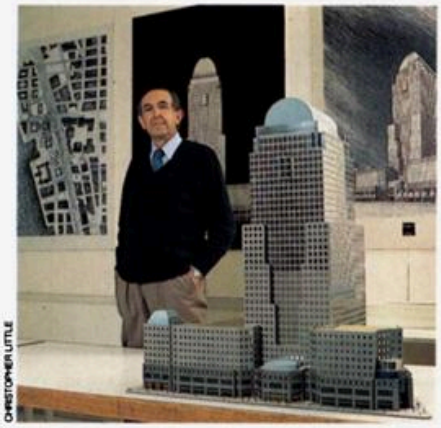
Beyond all the expected pleasures, there are the unexpected ones. New vistas, compositions and patterns of sunlight come to life, and they are particularly precious because I do not remember designing them. They are wonderful strokes of luck.

The building is my design, but it is also its own entity separate from me. This allows me—perhaps forces me—to enter into a long dialogue with it in which every premise, every theory is questioned and reconsidered.



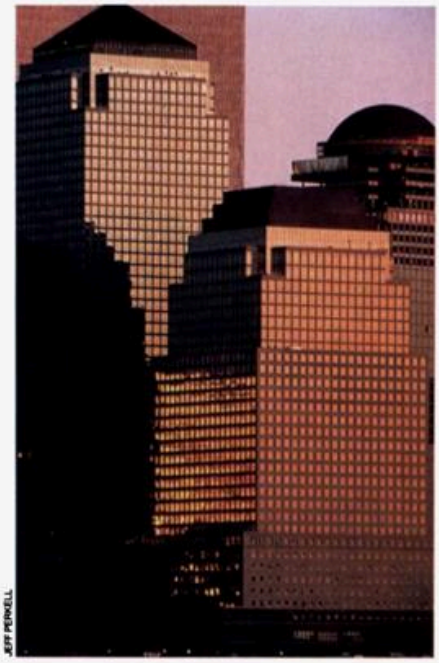
WOLFGANG HOYT

Pelli's model for the Rembrandt Tower, a 59-story brick-clad office addition to Manhattan's Carnegie Hall. "The materials, colors, patterns and general composition are derived from those of the concert hall, creating a new composition of great harmony," he says.



CHRISTOPHER LITTLE

"The postmodernist reaction has brought renewed concern for the quality of our cities," says Cesar Pelli, "but two great enemies are aesthetic ideology and artistic signature." LEFT: Pelli in his New Haven, Connecticut, offices with a model for the World Financial Center in Manhattan. BELOW: "The World Financial Center towers, each with a distinctive roofline, have varying heights corresponding to the surrounding buildings," says Pelli.



JEFF PERKELL

The finished building is my severest critic. Every little error glares back at me reprovingly. I never tell of those because I know many of them will remain invisible to less interested onlookers, but I cannot forget them. There are also more important issues that a building brings to my attention. Often good ideas—well executed, theoretically correct and successful in their intentions—force me to say, "This is good, but is it right?"

This is a question perhaps unique to the art of architecture. The ethical issues usually come to the surface when aesthetic intentions are in conflict with some of the social roles a building must play. Here is where architecture separates itself almost completely from the other visual arts.

To be good architecture, a building needs to be not only beautiful but responsible and responsive. Some of these responses are rather obvious. That is, a building has to fulfill reasonably well the purposes for which it was built. If it is an art museum, it should provide an environment where paintings and sculptures can be properly exhibited.

We also know that a building is responsible to the place it occupies and makes in a city. It is a great responsibility for any architect to be given a piece of a city to design—however small it may be—and it is clear to me that the obligations of a building to be a good piece of the city are greater than its obligations as an art object or as part of an architect's oeuvre. That is, the city is more important than the building, and the building is more important than the architect.

When we design a building, we participate in the never-complete, imperfect, collaborative work of art that is a city, perhaps the most impor-

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tant work of art of any culture. The making of good cities requires not just pragmatic responses to context but lyrical, creative acts respectful of the greater purpose.

The often wrenching clash between the inner drives of an architect and the external forces he or she must respect are not a weakness but a permanent source of strength and renewal of the art of architecture. Great cities are the product of this dynamic balance. It has to be dynamic to be art, and it has to be in balance for the necessary harmony of the whole.

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PAUL HESTER


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ABOVE LEFT: Pelli's design for Herring Hall at Rice University in Houston, Texas, was completed in 1984. "It is a modern building, true to its time and to its system of construction," says Pelli, "but it is also very sympathetic to the beautiful older buildings designed by Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson in 1910." ABOVE: Pelli's diamond-patterned brickwork for the Ley Student Center expansion, 1986. "A particular design challenge was to continue the system of expression and ornamentation begun with Herring Hall," he says.

I question blind contextualism, because if the art of building yields completely to context or external conditions, we have no renewing, only blandness. On the other hand, if the architect's internal agenda—be it intellectual, aesthetic or ideological—is imposed on the building, a piece of the city may be harmed. Good cities are very resilient and have been able to absorb rather violent attacks on their fabric. Sometimes the intruding object can become a beautiful and vitalizing exception, such as the Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue, but we can see now that there is a limit to the resiliency of our cities.

The postmodernist reaction has brought renewed concern for the quality of our cities, but two great enemies are very much alive. They are the concepts of aesthetic ideology and artistic signature.

Architectural ideology, whether it be modernism, classicism or postmodernism, tells us that there is an aesthetic system that is best in all circumstances. It is clear to me that this is not so, that each circumstance is unique and requires a uniquely calibrated artistic response. The concept of individual artistic signature says that an architect should have a personal style like a painter or sculptor, usually with a consistent system of forms, materials and colors that is then used, with variations, for every building type in every place. Fidelity to an aesthetic ideology, to an individual vision—or, worse still, to both—has been highly applauded and respected. More so, it has been considered an essential quality of a good architect. I believe these attitudes to be damaging to our cities.

The problem is particularly severe today, when every well-known architect is working in cities that range from Fairbanks to Miami, from Hong Kong to Berlin—completely different contexts that should require carefully considered and different architectural responses. If we continue to build signature buildings in every city of the world—and if architects keep on imitating the latest forms and ideas of a few—each city will end up as a collection of disparate individual statements, be they first-rate or second-rate, originals or imitations.

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The importance of an artist's individual style is a concept that comes from painting—an art that can detach itself completely from external pressures. Architecture is very different. It is not a three-dimensional, inhabitable painting. An architect rarely chooses a building's site, purpose or size. A collection of an architect's buildings is an absurdity both physically and intellectually. A collection of photographs, drawings and models of buildings can have historical interest but does not in itself have much artistic value.

The architect begins by understanding and responding to these conditions and then must continue to guide a design through a thicket of laws and ordinances. We all need to understand the circumstances, but instead of doing so to figure out what we can get away with, we must do so with respect. I believe that our artistic purpose gains strength from this attitude of respect. Architects have done so for millennia without weakening their artistic achievements.

After every new design of mine becomes a building, I am once again impressed with its uniqueness. More and more, my designs have been responding to the unique circumstances of purpose and place; more and more I find the greatest excitement in arriving at the deepest possible understanding of a place—its character, its past—and through that understanding nurturing a fresh, poetic response into a design.

Instead of concentrating on one particular personal style, I find that to be a good architect I need to be more flexible and open. We work today in more places and with more building types than architects ever have. Not only do I collaborate with engineers and consultants and with other architects in my studio, but I also need to collaborate with the architects who preceded me in a city and with those who will come after me.

We should not judge a building by how beautiful it is in isolation, but instead by how much better or worse that particular place—a city or campus, a neighborhood or landscape—has become by its addition. If the city has not gained by the addition, we should seriously question the design and the building itself, no matter how beautiful and theoretically correct it may be.

Architecture is so complex and multi-rooted that its learning is slow and gradual. I know that I am a much better architect now than I was ten years ago. I can feel that I am in a particularly rich and creative period of my architectural life, and it is obvious to me that if I continue to learn as I have, in another ten years I should be very, very good.□

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