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For \$8 Million, the House Where I.M. Pei Dreamed Up His Designs

The four-story townhouse where the late architect, best known for the Louvre pyramid, lived modestly with his wife of 72 years, is going on the market

By Katherine Clarke

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For more than 45 years, the architect I.M. Pei and his wife, Eileen Pei, lived in a modest house on New York's Sutton Place, a historic enclave on Manhattan's east side known for its prewar townhomes, tree-lined streets and expansive East River views. While the neighborhood attracted many famous faces over the years—Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller and Freddie Mercury all called it home—the Peis lived there discreetly, surrounded by their extensive art collection.

Mr. Pei, whose well-known works include the iconic glass pyramid at the Louvre museum in Paris, often worked at home, sometimes waking in the night with an idea for the design of a new building. He kept a marker and notepad by the bed so he could quickly sketch what he had dreamed up before it slipped away, according to his son, the architect Li Chung Pei, who goes by Sandi.

The younger Mr. Pei said his father would sit in his study working to a soundtrack of classical music, sometimes Bach or Beethoven, or recline in his bentwood rocking chair, designed by the German-Austrian cabinet maker Michael Thonet, and look out at the large magnolia and plane trees in the back garden.

Now, after his death earlier this year at age 102, the home where he churned out ideas is coming

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The Home Designed by the Master

I.M. Pei and his wife Eileen Pei bought their four-story Sutton Place townhouse when it was ramshackle and rundown. Then he worked his magic on it



The longtime home of I.M. Pei and his wife Eileen Pei is coming on the market for \$8 million. KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Peis had been living in a nearby 1930s-era co-op building on Beekman Place, where they had raised their children. Sandi Pei is one of three surviving Pei children; a brother named T'ing Chung died in 2003. Amid a downturn in the New York City economy in the early 1970s, Ms. Pei spotted a bargain for the house. “It was in a dilapidated condition,” his son recalled. “Dark and dirty and sort of crumbling.”

His parents embarked on a significant renovation. His father’s design called for an extension at the rear of the property and the installation of floor-to-ceiling glass windows, which flooded the home with light and gave way to views of the expansive rear garden, which is shared by about 14 neighboring houses. Mr. Pei also designed a dramatic serpentine staircase in the center of the

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The study where I.M. Pei came up with some of his most groundbreaking design ideas. PHOTO: KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Peis lived surrounded by art. Grand sculptures by Jean Dubuffet, an artist known for his cellular forms, were displayed around the space, as were works by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Next to his rocking chair, Mr. Pei displayed a piece by his friend, cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, called “Homme à la guitare.” Sandi recalled the day Mr. Pei purchased the sculpture, when Sandi was only about 10 or 12 years old. They’d made a trip to Mr. Lipchitz’s studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., where Mr. Pei selected the piece. “Mr. Lipchitz said, ‘Just pay me a little and I’ll tell you if you’ve paid me enough,’” Sandi laughed.

Many of the Peis artworks will be sold by Christie’s, the auction house, later this year. Sandi said it is hard to see the home, which is now staged for sale, without the art on the walls. “It’s sad because the two things—the home and the art—seemed inseparable,” he said.

The home’s main living spaces, which include a large library with built-in bookshelves and an airy living room used to host parties, are located on the second floor. The space was kept “immaculately clean,” according to “I.M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture,” by Carter Wiseman.

“Every piece of furniture is obviously arranged with a larger composition in mind; there is no stack of old magazines or Sunday papers. If a picture frame should be left askew by the cleaning woman, Eileen is likely to excuse herself from a conversation to straighten it,” Mr. Wiseman wrote.

On the first floor, a formal dining room opens onto a private garden, said the listing agent, Edward F. Joseph of Christie’s International Real Estate.

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The view from the garden behind the Peis' four-story, Sutton Place townhouse. PHOTO: KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Zao Wou-Ki. They also hosted diplomats like Henry Kissinger and Richard Holbrooke, their son said. Their neighbors included Annalee Newman, the widow of abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman; Ms. Newman, who lived at the iconic River House co-op nearby, became a close friend and was a fixture at family dinners.



The home's master bedroom. PHOTO: KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The official residence of the U.N. secretary-general, an elaborate double-wide townhouse built in 1921 for Anne Morgan, the daughter of J.P. Morgan, is located a few homes away; Kofi Annan and Boutros Boutros-Ghali both lived there during the Peis' residence.

Ms. Pei was a prolific cook with a penchant for French cuisine, her son said. After traveling abroad, she would return and re-create the dishes they had eaten from memory. A landscape architect and botanist by training, she filled the house with flowers. Mr. Pei was a wine aficionado, enjoying a glass of French Bordeaux—or, more infrequently, a martini. The Peis built a basement wine cellar that

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and, on weekends, Mr. Pei would sometimes take his team of architects to the now-defunct restaurant to go over plans. “It had totally unremarkable food but a wonderful ambience,” Sandi said. “You knew the menu by heart even though it was two pages long.”

I.M. Pei's Most Iconic Designs

The legendary architect completed over 50 projects around the world



I.M. Pei poses at his Louvre pyramid in Paris in 2010. FRÉDÉRIC REGLAIN/ALAMY

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Towers, a massive apartment complex on East 33rd Street. Mr. Pei went on to start his own practice. His projects include the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland and the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. He won the Pritzker Prize, widely considered to be architecture's highest honor, in 1983.

Mr. Pei was the consummate salesman and always pristinely presented, said Matt Tyrnauer, a writer and documentarian who interviewed Mr. Pei on several occasions. “He was always impeccably turned out in trademark bespoke suits and horn-rimmed glasses a la Le Corbusier,” said Mr. Tyrnauer.

While wooing Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for one of his other memorable commissions, the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, Mr. Pei famously charmed the former first lady by redoing his office in fresh white paint and placing an impressive bouquet

Both born in China, the Peis met while in college in Boston. He was studying architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and she was studying art at Wellesley College. They married in 1942. Ms. Pei died in 2014.

After studying at M.I.T. and Harvard University, Mr. Pei was recruited as an in-house architect for William Zeckendorf, a major developer of the time. He designed multiple projects for Mr. Zeckendorf's firm, including Kips Bay

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Sandi Pei, the son of Eileen and I.M. Pei, sitting in the home, which is listed for \$8 million. PHOTO: KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

the 1950s, a simple one-story glass pavilion that hovers above the ground on columns, their son said. Its interior measured just 30 by 60 feet, so the children would spend most of their time outside, while Mr. Pei sat reading on the screened-in porch. The Pei children have decided to keep that property, said Sandi.

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THE PRESIDENT'S COUSIN



Laura Delano, center, traveling with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her cousin. **PHOTO:** EVERETT COLLECTION

The previous owner of the Peis' home was Laura "Polly" Delano, the cousin of president Franklin D. Roosevelt. Her father, Warren Delano III and the president's mother, Sara Ann Delano Roosevelt, were siblings. Ms. Delano never married and she and another cousin, Margaret "Daisy" Suckley, were frequently by the side of the president and his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. They stumped for him when he launched his campaign for president in the 1930s and were by his side when he died in 1945 in Warm Springs, Georgia. Ms. Delano was widely regarded as the more boisterous of the two unmarried women. "She was flamboyant, high-spirited and unpredictable. She also delighted in gossip though sometimes to the point of recklessness. As one member of the Delano family once put it, Polly 'was a law unto herself,'" according to "The Last 100 Days: FDR at War and Peace," by David B. Woolner. Ms. Delano was also a breeder of Irish setters and dachshunds and served as a judge in dog shows.

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ITEMS OF NOTE IN THE PEIS' ART COLLECTION AUCTION

The Peis' art will be sold at auctions in New York on November 12, in Hong Kong on November 23 and in Paris on December 3, according to Christie's. The pieces will include:



PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD, 2019

Jacques Lipchitz's "Man with Guitar," which is estimated to sell for between \$700,000 and \$1 million.



PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD, 2019

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“La Brouette,” or “The Wheelbarrow,” an oil on canvas by Jean Dubuffet, which is estimated to sell for between roughly \$393,000 and \$618,000.

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