Mr. Pei Comes To Washington
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Architecture

Mr. Pei Comes To Washington

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON is finally going to have a good 20th-century building. I will go further: Washington is finally going to have a *great* 20th-century building. The rigid rule of mediocrity through uneasy compromise with an uncertain past that has characterized the best and worst of Washington construction in our day will be broken by the new East Building of the National Gallery of Art, scheduled for completion in 1975. Let's go even further: it can be a great building for all time.

I am, of course, judging from architects' plans by I. M. Pei and Partners, and that is risky business. But the promise of these plans is enough to make one go dancing down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Washington is a wide-skied, seriously troubled, lovely city in which the whole is greater than the parts. It doesn't have many great buildings. (London, for example, is studded with them like raisins in a pudding.) But it has a style, due to its plan and its period — a genuine, spacious, formal classicism of the 19th century that was historically and esthetically true to its time, and a failed classicism of the 20th century when changing times made it a futile gesture — and it is embellished, softened and embraced by all those trees.

No matter what an architect may be at home, he becomes a monumentalist when he comes to Washington. Even iron-willed modernists succumb to marble doublethink. They are soon mouthing rationalizations of how to make a contemporary building "go" with a tradition now so confused and weakened that trees are a necessity. This is the Washington play-it-safe syndrome. It is also the fall-on-your-face syndrome.

Ieoh Ming Pei, the designer of the new East Building, is a gifted man in his ebullient, productive maturity who may very likely be America's best architect. Each building he does attests to growing taste and power. For the National Gallery he is not playing it safe; he is playing it right.

This is fortunate, because the site of the new building is one of the most important and conspicuous in Washington. It is the curiously awkward trapezoidal plot where two of L'Enfant's radial avenues, Pennsylvania and Constitution converge on the Capitol.

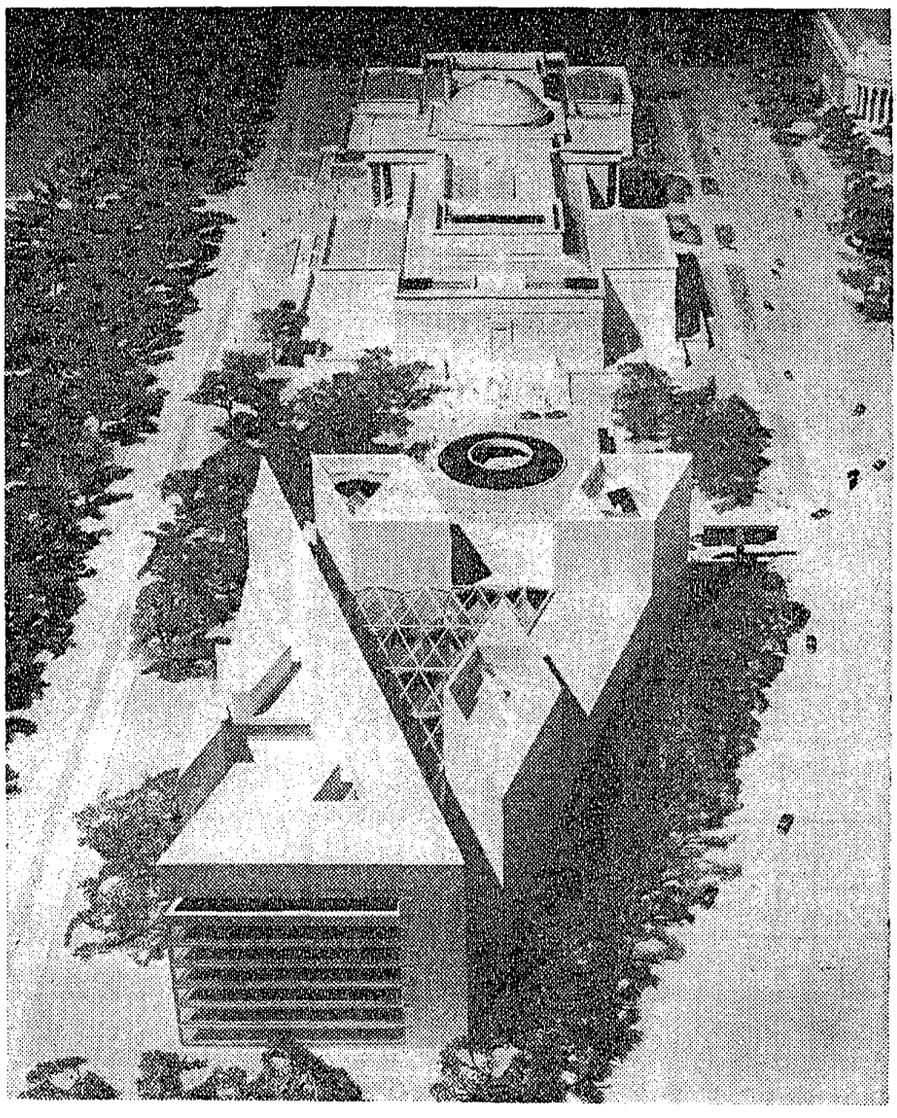
It is made even more sensitive by the fact that the Constitution Avenue side is on the Mall, and that it adjoins and must relate to John Russell Pope's last magnificent fling of frozen mega-classicism that houses the National Gallery. The new building will be one of Washington's most focal structures, functioning like an arrow pointing directly at the Capitol, while it forms the capstone of the superscaled row of monuments ranged along the Mall. That is practically a script for falling on your face.

In addition, the plot is awful. What do you do with a lopsided triangle? Pei's answer is perhaps the golden rule of design — or should be. You don't fight it; you join it. You don't torture it, or try to make it something it's not. You accept the "givens" and make the most of them. You design rationally and creatively with what you have. Not surprisingly, this leads to rational and creative solutions.

One critical "given" is the National Gallery itself, and the fact that the odd-shaped plot and anything on it must tie into this overpoweringly formal, axial and symmetrical structure. Another "given" is the program.

It consists of two parts: gallery space of a kind to deal with the art experience of today — architecture is a legitimate part of that experience — and provision for a Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. Visual, rather than fine arts, denotes another step into the 20th century. And then there are all those complex museum problems, some peculiar to the capital, such as feeding hordes of national cultural sightseers in an enlarged cafeteria and dealing with busloads of children, and the juggling of curatorial functions now spread unsystematically through miles of misused marble halls.

In the Pei plan, it all seems to come out just fine. New and old buildings will be linked by a plaza across Fourth Street, with a glass-sided fountain providing a skylight for a cafeteria-concourse below ground, between the two structures. The Fourth Street entrance, closed now — a gigantic bronze door behind which one expects at least the Delphic oracle — will be opened. Escalators and stairs will ease and redirect circulation.



Model of the National Gallery's projected East Building (foreground), Washington, D.C.
"Promise enough to make one go dancing down Pennsylvania Avenue"

This is all logical, efficient, and except for the numbing scale that one must adjust to in our national institutions, inviting. But the new building is more. It is brilliant.

The trapezoidal shape is divided diagonally into two parts, making two nested triangles. The larger triangle is the new exhibition gallery, with its blunt end facing the present building to provide an on-axis entrance facade. The smaller triangle becomes the Study Center, entered at its point, well to the side of the main entrance.

Every natural peculiarity of this scheme, dictated by the nature of the "given" space, becomes an asset — both as rational design and as esthetic effect. The two building triangles are joined by a triangular skylit court, a feature that gives essential orientation to the visitor. (This function of the central court is one of the great lessons of the National Gallery.)

Instead of surrounding the court with bulk gallery space, the concept devised by Pei and the National Gallery's director, J. Carter Brown, divides the space into "houses," scaled like "house museums" — the happiest way to view art. These "houses" form four-story units at the three corners of the triangle, and are connected by stairs and bridges.

The design is intricately vertical; one floor opens to another visually, in a variety of ways, with a layering of spaces that reveals gardens or galleries above or below, and that always takes one from the full enclosure of a gallery to the full openness of the skylit orientation court. Unlike the serene, static, horizontal classicism of the present building, the new one will be a dynamic, sense-awakening, multi-level experience.

The Study Center focuses on a six-story library core. This part of the building will contain offices for staff and scholars, and there will be a terrace cafe with a view of the Mall for visitors. The long Mall facade, unlike other long, Mall facades, will not look like the wall of a tomb.

A sense of scale can be suggested by the length of the avenue facades, which will be 405 and 382 feet; a New York avenue blockfront is 200 feet. The walls will be faced in the same Tennessee marble as the original structure. Modern technology will replace Pope's marble-over-masonry construction, however, because it cannot be duplicated today even for the Mellon family's generous $20-million gift. Structural members, such as horizontal trusses, will be exposed concrete.

Anyone who has seen Pei's small Everson Museum in Syracuse knows how superbly he marries the sensuousness of space and art in a seamless contemporary blend. That *is* art, and Washington deserves it.