

A Most Bostonian Building- the Significance of I.M. Pei's MFA West Wing

Harvard University S-HARC 183

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August 2, 2013

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There has been debate among experts, in previous decades at least, as to whether the architectural style of the Chinese-born, Harvard-educated, New York-based and currently retired architect I.M. Pei's (b. April 26, 1917) portfolio of buildings designed for Boston were not extraneous to Boston's true architectural identity and whether buildings designed by Pei were discordantly inharmonious with their surrounding architectural environment, or whether Pei's buildings were not too radical for conservative Boston's tastes. In the case of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's West Wing (fig. 1, 2, 3), referred to by architectural historian Douglas Shand-Tucci as the "most Bostonian of buildings,"ⁱ Pei's design conforms to and encloses elements representing the MFA's changing needs, which in function outpace the Modernist aesthetic of Pei's contribution in their radical juxtaposition with that which the pre-existing, immediate architectural environment, i.e. the rest of the museum, enclosed by architect Guy Lowell's plan of 1907, had ever performed. The challenge for I.M. Pei was to dress up 80,000 square feet, of which 10,000 square feet was to be used for exhibition space, representing the MFA's almost Jekyll-and-Hyde versioned new policy initiative of an industry-standard definition of "modernization;" in name and partial actuality housing an art which had been one of the more radical components of American culture, and at the cutting edge internationally since Abstract Expressionism, in the decades leading up to the design project for an institution which had formerly been almost exclusively associated with mostly pre-modern, historical, academic and classical art and, entirely and highly conspicuously through its own, architecture. Not only has Pei been thoroughly outdone in radical change by what some consider a bastion of cultural conservatism, his design for the MFA is actually down-to-earth, somewhat literally as well as figuratively, reflects a movement in architecture which was by the time already being succeeded by newer modes including Post-modern architecture and, according to Minimalist theory, is so humble in formal expression that it requires the physical presence of a viewer for any artistic meaning to even occur. However, nonetheless Pei's West Wing design was radically modern in relation to the Beaux-Arts style of the MFA's other wings, which finds its merits, outweighing reason for disconcertment, in that, as Pei himself has put it, "Life is architecture and architecture reflects life," and "life," the modern age, has indeed moved on in quite a rapid pace since the days when the MFA was first built at its current site in 1909.ⁱⁱ

In 1977, when I.M. Pei & Partners was commissioned to design the MFA West Wing to house modern art and amenities, the Museum of Fine Arts wanted three restaurants and a bookstore to fit into the space along with an exhibition hall for modern and contemporary art and another gallery for temporary exhibitions. Food has not long been associated with high art, particularly to this extent, to put it mildly, in actual practice as much as was likely to have been in the popular imagination; and while the entire scale of the MFA arguably warrants three dining facilities and two stores, including the museum shop near the Huntington Avenue entrance, to cloister four of these together in one wing must have been an exception rather than a norm, particularly at the time, the logical connotations of which may have interfered with the MFA's original plan to use this new western-side wing as its main entrance for visitors. Pei himself had at least on one occasion expressed personal distaste for the cultural institution of a museum putting "too much emphasis on food services, on selling reproductions," and that such was "not [his] idea of what a museum should be." In fact as a museum donor, Pei said he "hate[s] to see [his] money go to gift shops."ⁱⁱⁱ Pei's firm had designed a number of art museums to that

point- Everson Museum of Art, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, National Gallery of Art East Building, Des Moines Art Center Addition and the Fine Arts Academic and Museum Building of Indiana University^{iv}- and according to Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel in her interview with I.M. Pei in 1980, there were at least rumors at the time that the MFA's plan to construct the West Wing to house modern and contemporary art was inspired by I.M. Pei's suggestion to them. The MFA needed to equip its storage facility with high-tech climate control when it first consulted I.M. Pei, according to this theory, and Pei inspired them into acknowledging a need to exhibit modern and contemporary art and thus commissioning him to design a space for it. Documents regarding the MFA West Wing project from I.M. Pei & Partners is currently being processed at the Library of Congress, but if the above were true, then it would appear that the restaurants and bookshop were a lesser part of the MFA's overall operational planning and instead employed as a means to help finance the construction of the West Wing itself, making them for Pei a concession in order to "commission" a new institutional facility for art.^v

Prior to the West Wing, the MFA did not have a separate space for modern or contemporary art, thus arguably neglecting 21st century art in favor of its collection of ancient, medieval and pre-modern art, the design of the museum building consisted of such classical elements as enormous Greek colonnades, and one of the wings for Guy Lowell's original plan of 1907 had not been built per the plan so that the extent of visitor access was restricted beyond an area of an asymmetrical, and thus rather unbecoming of the building's classical style, horizontally flipped, U-shaped plan which reportedly caused circulatory inconvenience, since visitors had to make a redundant walk along the museum's north-south axis on their exits. The new West Wing was to provide visitors more exhibition space and relatively less traveling of traffic corridors while completing a figure-eight floor plan. The museum had also intended to open the West Wing entrance as the entire museum's new main entryway, to greet guests with a café and bookstore, as well as a second-floor restaurant partly visible from the first, directly facing the entrance, i.e. almost all of the museum's commercial elements, enclosed in shiny glass walls, out in front at the entrance. What was perhaps unusual about this scheme is that the 616,937 square-foot MFA is the one of the largest art museums in America in, mostly conservative, art collection size as well as floor area and that therefore the contrast between old and new with the West Wing addition was amplified by the MFA's retail concerns as much by the modern art exhibited inside or the Modernist aesthetics of Pei's architectural design for it.^{vi}

Just as I.M. Pei's glass pyramids at the Louvre courtyard has connoted to many the presence of a rich collection of Egyptian art at the Parisian museum, as if they were metaphors for the soul of Egypt arising from below the Louvre courtyard, even though Pei has denied ever having intended the pyramids to represent Egyptian ones or that he even agrees to the perceived resemblance, on the basis of texture and material; the visitor experience of Pei's West Wing, renamed the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art in 2008, may yield readings extraneous to the architect's own intentions, which would have been based on his general museum-design philosophy that "a museum should be a fun place to be" and also "pleasant," where visitors can occasionally "refresh themselves" to experience the exhibitions with renewed energy and focus, and that the architect of a museum building must allow these through his designs while museums themselves may edify, educate and otherwise enrich their visitors. Perhaps the most unique and conspicuous characteristic of the Linde Family Wing, a 200-foot long barrel-vaulted glass skylight offers a sky view while evenly illuminating the galleria consisting of a balconied promenade and some works on exhibition including a super-flat print by Takashi Murakami, a wall-sized neon sign giving a list of random instructions for spontaneously achievable actions such as "hug," "laugh" or "don't steal," and a forklift as well as an out-doors style cafe. The

appearance of this vaulted skylight itself may yield itself to derisive aesthetic judgment today—that it looks like a 1980s science-fiction movie prop— but precisely for that reason it also serves to help redirect observers to what Pei has, rather than what he has not, achieved with relative perfection.^{vii}

"The galleria is the climax of Pei's design and it is spectacular," Eleni Constantine writes, "Long, light, white and covered with a 210-foot-long barrel vault of glass, this three-story nave of the new wing illuminates and organizes the structure, dividing the exhibition space on the first and second floors from the museum shop and the restaurant above."^{viii} Pei has achieved the most visible component of the galleria using the transparent medium of glass and the natural element of the blue sky, bringing the museum closer to its celestial natural environment, and this also functions as a structural component purely through its high visibility to demarcate the boundary between spaciouly proportioned galleries on one side and restaurants and a shop on the other. Other than this a round opening in the first floor ceiling where an escalator once rode up to the balconied promenade is the only noticeable stylistic involvement on the part of Pei, whose design offers minimal visual or structural interference in the museum environment, and taken together with the plain-surfaced granite exterior façade the design of the MFA West Wing is the antithesis of the controversially loud museum architecture of more recent years, most notably Frank O. Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Bilbao— the MFA West Wing stands to one side, its most stylistic architectural element being of the most transparent surface material, its exterior more muted than the interior, allowing visitors to pass through and move about for their own purposes; while the likes of the Guggenheim Bilbao inspire widespread concern that the building visually relativizes its contents, and its contents are art at that.

In Post-modern architecture, architects value the practice of taking a building site's context, in addition to the above-mentioned user experience, into design consideration.^{ix} In 1981 as well, architecture critic Jane Holtz Kay (July 7, 1938 - Nov. 5, 2012) has criticized the West Wing's design for failing to address its geographical proximity to the Back Bay Fens park and the train stop connecting the MFA to Boston's downtown. Referring to what she described as "Pei's true failing, the failing of our time" and "a staggering myopia which [Pei] himself criticizes in his complaints about the Guggenheim's 'lack of concern with context,'" Kay has written in "Boston Museum of Fine Arts- West Wing Luminous Yet 'Exclusive'" for *The Christian Science Monitor* on July 24, 1981 that the West Wing's design should have seized an opportunity to "make a countrylike connection" with its surrounding elements, but has instead chosen to ignore these avenues through which to imply a functional cohesion with neighboring sites, which Kay felt could have synergized with the MFA's museum and vice versa; instead producing what Kay describes as "a suburban building for the most urban, urbane of enterprises," "the supermarket structure par excellence on an asphalt lot."^x We can note here that non-intervention may be appreciated by museum visitors, perhaps particularly by those who are already faced with large blocks of glass-enclosed restaurant, bookshop and café upon entrance, but in the context of a museum building's relationship with its urban environment, active engagement would be advocated by at least some.

One index of *public* opinion regarding the quality of a museum building's architecture is perhaps attendance, and in that regard the West Wing was a success. The MFA invested twenty-two million dollars in the new West Wing and opened it to the public on July 22nd, 1981, welcoming thousands of visitors a day. According to *Architectural Record* in February 1982, "As a public attraction, the West Wing has succeeded beyond the museum's wildest dreams. On one day shortly after opening in July, it drew 10,000 visitors— 4,000 more than the

most optimistic projections." The article adds that this visitor count was even more impressive for having been reached in the summer, without the aid of field trips from local schools and universities.^{xi} There may have been great novelty and interest in any new, Modernist design together with a contemporary art space at the time, at the dawn of postmodern art and an unprecedented soaring of art prices while following a wave of public enthusiasm for Pop Art of the 1960s; but in the absence any documented public outbursts against the West Wing's design, then or now, with the only renovations since 1981 by the museum being for ceiling height, flooring material and to switch the escalator into a staircase, the high attendance rate in its early days should serve as the most objective indicator that visitors generally admired and appreciated the architecture of the West Wing as well, and Pei's design was received by critics as a success as well.

Of the critics who have commented on a number of the West Wing's architectural aspects shortly following its opening and in the midst of the above-mentioned, intense public interest, one of them points to how the MFA's certain intentions were explicitly revealed in the entire plan itself of the new wing. Critics indeed offered plenty of praise for the MFA's modern addition, using the words and phrases of "elegant," "dramatic," "beautiful," "light" and "spectacular," "offers... dignity and delight," "impressive" and "luminous" to describe it, while the part lacquered panel and part concrete walls were "surprising" and the daylight "triumphantly present." The emphasized presence of a bookshop and restaurants, openly visible in the narrow galleria and rather enormous in actual area within the wing, while perhaps personally objectionable to Pei, who as mentioned above holds reservations against museums placing a high priority on "food services" and "gift shops," appears not to have perturbed many observers. At the same time, Eleni Constantine, writing for *Skyline*, discovered that the floor plan of the West Wing closely resembled that of the New York Convention Center (fig. 4, 5), thus exposing the MFA's commercial attitude with regards to their planned use of the space, possibly raising questions or concern for art's spiritual role in society today:

Although its title invites comparison to Pei's earlier East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, the West Wing is in fact a variation on another more recent Pei design: the projected New York Convention Center. In plan, the two showplaces are almost identical, with two or three stories of exhibition floors opening off a central multistoried galleria. Some effort has been made to revamp the convention center for this other place and purpose; to attach it to the old museum and to give it an artsy, rather than commercial flavor.

Apart from the underscoring of the MFA's commercial agenda by the West Wing's structural resemblance to the New York Convention Center, one aspect of I.M. Pei's West Wing design would have alarmed art historian Michael Fried (b. Apr. 12, 1939), perhaps best known for his attempt to call out Minimalist art in the 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" for what he perceived as its fundamental qualities undermining high art overall, due to possible comparisons between the West Wing and Minimalist sculpture. Note Constantine's following assessment of Pei's West Wing: "Pei has once more achieved the effects for which he is famous: gaspingly big spaces; balconies and glass enclosures that operate as both stage and opera box, making everybody in the building simultaneously actor and audience," with emphasis on "actor and audience." It was in "Art and Objecthood" that Fried famously spoke out against what he described as a "theatrical" aspect of Minimalist art- that Minimalist art objects require an audience in order to attain status as art- while warning against blurring the line between art and plain objects, for this theatricality's infiltration into the art world would threaten the reputation of good, high art, Fried's argument went, because theatre was the antithesis of art, theatre relied

on the presence of an audience simultaneously acknowledging and ignoring the actors on stage as a live presence while for art its own mere existence was proof enough of its value or virtue.

Considering that, due to the architect's mastery of form to such perfect imitation of what the West Wing was purposed to house, the form of Pei's external entrance facade of the West Wing is arguably indistinguishable from that of a piece of Minimalist sculpture, the West Wing is theatrical in Fried's sense in both its interior and exterior. Thus, just as the restaurants and book store would have bordered or encroached on excessive commercialism for Pei himself, the entire design of the West Wing flirts with using elements of what Fried considers to be anti-art to shelter and represent art. However, Michael Fried's views regarding Minimalism were not the prevailing ones in the art world, then or now, and one may even posit some merits of an art museum such as the MFA using a Minimalist building facade and a "theatrical" interior. Architecture too would require an audience, viewers, for its artistic aspect of it to take effect when it echoes art's Minimalism in design. In such case, the aforementioned Minimalism-associated aspects of the MFA West Wing would constitute the West Wing's architectural design interlocking fates with the museum's Minimalist artworks in both entities' art-theoretical need to attract visitors- an architect taking exemplary responsibility for his project's architectural purpose.

Perhaps an important distinction between art-making and architectural design, however, Pei by no means worked alone in designing this modernizing wing for the Museum of Fine Arts. First, there was of course the MFA's agenda to rearrange its collections and renovate the museum's facilities to introduce new galleries and amenities, but even at I.M. Pei & Partners was also a team of designers whom Pei directed for the project, including an administrative partner, project architect, design architect and resident architect, and project consultants and engineers aided the process. This would inform the newly initiate that architectural design is a complex process that, going beyond the efforts of a single individual, perhaps even a genius, at the drawing board, also requires organizational prowess. Pei, when asked in 1980 during an interview for *American Architecture Now* about how he had managed to grow his firm to a size of 200 employees, 135-140 of whom were architects, the master planner and prolific manager responded that he encourages middle-aged associates, who "want more responsibility" and "are ready for it," to take charge in the design projects they are involved in, and that this is conducive to the firm's productivity and talent retention rate. Pei mentioned that he also allows younger architects, "in their thirties," to work independently on what he considers to be some of the "smaller projects," those worth perhaps some "ten million dollars"- "ten million to us is a small project" says Pei smiling- and "run with it," with minimal directorial involvement from Pei. After such an experience, in Pei's estimate, the younger architects would "never" wish to leave the firm.^{xii}

In fact, a feature article titled "I.M. Pei & Partners" in *Architecture Plus* of 1973 counted the Pei firm as a rare and exceptional success case even amongst the biggest firms and best-known names in architecture, that they were one of very few practices with no conceivable flaws in either design quality or client relationships, contrasting them with boutique firms run by a small number of superstars and large corporate-type firms, both of which the author considered to typically suffer from certain drawbacks. The article considered I.M. Pei & Partners to be a democratic confederation of highly talented, intelligent and energetic individuals, many of whom could independently "hold their own" amongst the industry's elite. The reason for such elite individuals to opt for "relative obscurity" at I.M. Pei & Partners over forming their own partnerships, according to the author's analysis, appeared to be because they believed the loosely collaborative atmosphere at Pei's firm to provide uniquely rich "intellectual

resources," which fueled their creative productivity. Observed here is possibly an extension of Walter Gropius's team-spirited practice with The Architects Collaborative in Cambridge, Massachusetts, made a natural pass-on by the fact that Pei has studied with and, according to the architect himself, befriended Professor Gropius at Harvard's Graduate School of Design while a student. Learning to work effectively outside conventional theories, as in this example, is perhaps sometimes an under-heralded aspect of an excellent education's powerful potential influence.^{xiii}

Museums are oftentimes legally barred from selling their works of art, either due to donor agreements or government regulations, and hence a privately funded museum like the MFA introduces extra restaurants a shop in its quarters instead. Being the only privately funded museum of its size among a league of peers including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the MFA's financial concerns, and often constraints, throughout its history were documented by Walter Muir Whitehill in *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History* as having forced the MFA's mode of operation, if not its flamboyant Beaux-Arts design, into lean nimbleness, the successes of which kept the museum going to this day financially as well as, apparently, in terms staff morale. If the MFA appears to have one extra restaurant, one more or a somewhat larger shop compared to some other museums, it may be standard practice done with a gusto to balance the museum's budget. On the last couple of visits by the author, the cafe was crowded and the cafeteria well-visited, even well past two o'clock in the afternoon, but the entrance to the Linde Family Wing denied individuals admission because it was now for "groups only." In a similar sense, Pei's design principles are deeply informed by Walter Gropius' Bauhaus Modernism, and not the architect's individual rogue aesthetics, and literature on Modernist architecture argues of its rational, socially-conscious origins purposefully distanced from the radical machine worship of the Industrial Age. Further, since we have established that the MFA West Wing does not jar with its stylistically contrasting, surrounding MFA wings, eclecticism as embodied by the West Wing and the Guy Lowell-design MFA buildings has been an integral feature of Boston's architectural environment throughout the city's history- the Queen Anne style of architecture in the 19th century is one example, the coexistence of Classical styles with Gothic ones is another.

That the MFA was able to plan for the West Wing to serve as the main entrance to later return the main entrance to the Huntington Avenue façade in 2011 or 2012 proves the wing's architectural versatility. If the closing of the West Wing as the MFA's main entrance was for practical concerns, it may have been for functional reasons besides the wing's architectural design. One such reason may have been that, although the idea to welcome visitors with three tiers of restaurant, cafe and cafeteria, and a glass-walled art bookstore shelved with colorful books implies a sense of euphoria and a kind of enthusiasm on the part of the MFA, having a contemporary art exhibition space in the entrance wing does not appear to provide for a natural progression for visitors in terms of the exhibitions' historic chronology as well as in representing the MFA's collections as a whole, which as mentioned are mostly pre-modern works. Formally too, contemporary art deserves its own category that is not representative of its preceding styles. There is also the factor that the general public is commonly intimidated by contemporary art, perceiving it as arcane and elitist. Temporary exhibitions were held in the West Wing until recent years as well and it perhaps contributes to a sense of spatial balance to not have special exhibitions at museum entrances, particularly if they were to be grouped there with retail facilities because special exhibitions tickets are separately purchased from general admissions tickets and this arrangement would convey a sense of intense commercialism which may distract visitors from the subject of art.

One may not argue in favor of I.M. Pei's design principles in the debate of his overall influence on Boston's architectural landscape using only the example of the MFA's West Wing, which may not even be a part of what Pei's critics refer to. However, one can learn to form their own judgment on one of the internationally renowned architect's most warm and elegant, strong piece which is the Museum of Fine Arts' West Wing in Boston, quite apart from what connoisseurs might have to say about Pei's work invoking sweeping generalizations. I.M. Pei's MFA West Wing, despite the MFA's program to introduce concentrated commerce in a museum environment, overcomes possible distractions to the appreciation of art by gently sectioning off restaurants and the bookshop from its galleries using an elongated view of the sky, avoids tension with the museum's program by using a semi-identical floor plan with a convention center, also allows visitors to rejuvenate themselves with the skylight, and acknowledges the language of art by designing the structure to resemble Minimalist art more closely than is usual even for an art museum, while arguably suspending potential outside distractions by muting any connections with the Back Bay Fens or downtown Boston. Further, according to at least two reputable sources, I.M. Pei directs his architectural firm in a way that offers its members exceptional creative freedom, which proves that Pei's contribution as an architect cannot be an overall detriment to the traditional architectural environment of Boston. Also, the critical and popular success of the West Wing, situated in direct juxtaposition of one of Boston's most classical structures in the MFA's southern and northern wings, proves to a healthy extent that Boston's public at large generally appreciates Pei's style. The MFA West Wing is an outstanding example of a successfully imaginative and well-intended architect's work to enhance a museum program's cultural value while innovatively addressing the presence of uncertain elements in the program to design an aesthetically pleasing and artistically syllogistic, functionally effective, generally uplifting and stylistically eclectic compliment to its existing architectural environment in the great architectural city of Boston.

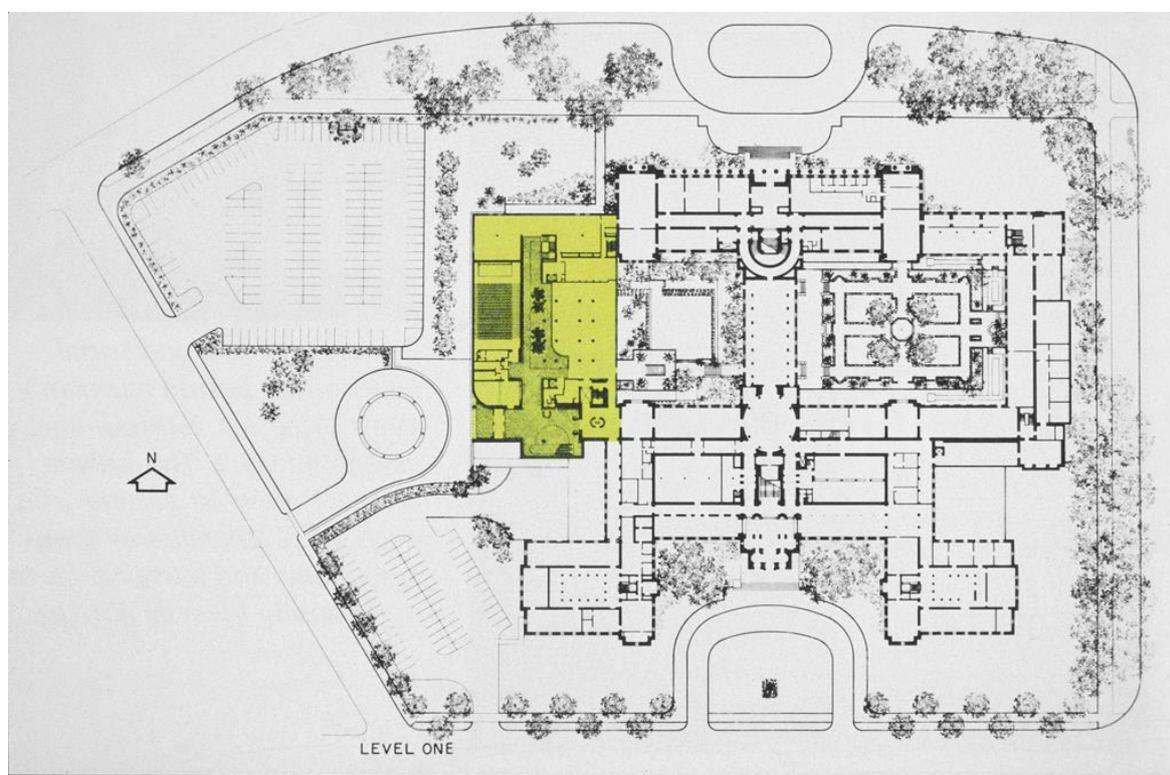


Figure 1 Plan of Museum of Fine Arts



Figure 2 Interior view of MFA



Figure 3 Exterior view of MFA.

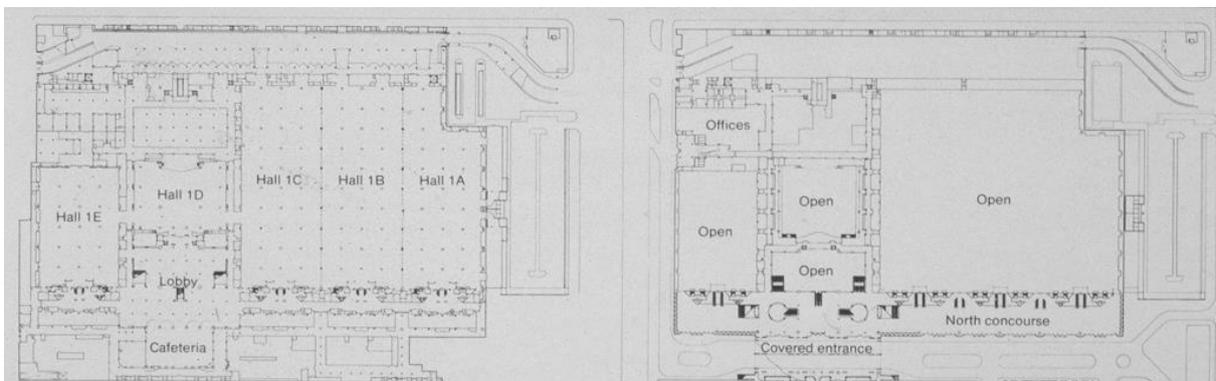


Figure 4 Plan of New York Convention Center.



Figure 5 Interior view of New York Convention Center (<http://hollis.harvard.edu>).

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Notes

ⁱ Shand-Tucci, Douglass. *Built in Boston*. P. 305.

ⁱⁱ Quote from "The Centurion - I.M. Pei Luxury New York Condo." CenturionCondo, Youtube. Web. 27-July-2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ *American Architecture Now: I.M. Pei, 1980*. Duke University Libraries -- Digital Collections, Youtube. Web. 27-July-2013. 00:11:00.

^{iv} Von Boehm, Gero. *Conversations with I.M. Pei: light is the key*. Munich; London; New York: Prestel. c2000. Catalog of Works.

^v Actual quote by Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel: "I guess they started out wanting climate control and after talking to you ended up with a new wing." *American Architecture Now: I.M. Pei, 1980*. Ibid.

^{vi} In fact, of the 80,000 square feet of the MFA West Wing, only 10,000 square feet were planned as exhibition space.

^{vii} Pei's discussion on the Louvre addition in "Designing the Louvre." The Open University, Youtube. Web. 27-

July-2013. Discussion of what is to Pei an ideal museum architecture in *American Architecture Now: I.M. Pei, 1980*. Duke University Libraries -- Digital Collections, Youtube. Web. 27-July-2013.

^{viii} Constantine, Eleni M. "I.M. Pei's West Wing." *Skyline*, 1981 Oct., p. 17. Print.

^{ix} Concept called "contextual architecture."

^x Kay, Jane Holtz. "Boston Museum of Fine Arts- West Wing Luminous yet 'Exclusive.'" *The Christian Science Monitor*. 24-July-1981. Web. 27-July-2013.

^{xi} "Building types study 571: Museums." *Architectural Record*. 1982 Feb., v. 170, no. 2, p. 90-105. New York. Print.

^{xii} *American Architecture Now: I.M. Pei, 1980*. Ibid.

^{xiii} "I.M. Pei & Partners." *Architecture Plus*. 1973 Feb., v. 1, n. 1, p. 52-59. Print. Discussion on The Architects Collaborative, or TAC, in Shand-Tucci, Douglass. *Built in Boston: city and suburb, 1800-2000*. Amherst, Ma.: University of Massachusetts Press. 1999. Pp. 263-299. Print.