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## **East Versus West: The National Gallery of Art's Relationship to Modern Art and Architecture**

Meredith Glasco

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East vs. West: The National Gallery of Art's East Building Identity and Relationship to Modern  
Architecture

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ARTH 491: Individual Study  
Final Paper  
4/22/22  
Dr. Kim

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### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the University of Mary Washington's Department of Art and Art History. I thank Dr. Suzie Kim for her knowledge, grace, and undying support for this project. She has been an amazing resource and friend during this time of research and stress.

I also would like to thank Dr. Julia DeLancey, Liam Kirkpatrick, Sophia Maldonado, and Mario Martinez for being wonderful peers (and professors) and acting as references for sharing tips on undergraduate/graduate school transitioning research.

I hope this paper will help researchers understand some of I.M. Pei's architectural stylings and how the nature of the National Gallery of Art has evolved in context to art history.

The National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, D.C. sits on the National Mall as the national collection of art from both local and international artists. This museum started through the collection of US Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew W. Mellon, whose collection spanned thousands of artifacts and paintings. Construction on the West Building began in 1937 and finished in December 1940. Then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the museum as a national community art space on March 17, 1941. Art within the NGA's West Building span all art movements up until the turn of contemporary art when the collection outgrew its classical walls. A new question was raised in the Capitol community; to add on to the NGA and replicate the motifs of the West Building, or create a new structure that would need its own identity. Research for this paper is a combination of several sources, including interview transcriptions, textbooks, and professional articles. A late 1990s interview with I.M. Pei (1917-2019) gives his personal insight into his architectural and spatial desires for the East Building, as well as the architecture that came afterward. This paper argues that the National Gallery of Art's East Building in Washington, D.C. is both a space for celebrating and isolating modern and contemporary art through the use of local material and reforms the museum experiences through I.M. Pei's neo-contemporary architectural relationships, becoming a cultural research center for the art history field and influence on the non-traditional forms of art museum architecture after the East Building.

## **I. Material Culture**

It is impossible to describe the societal impact the East Building has had on its neighboring museums without first expanding on its materials and form. The East Building's development began in the 1930s as the original West Building was under initial construction. Though the need for addition would not arise until the 1960s, Mellon also added the extra site in

his gift to the museum for future needs.<sup>1</sup> Kopper's textbook, *National Gallery of Art*, is the premier reference book for the National Gallery, going into specialized details about the planning, construction, and legacy of both wings from its opening in 1971 until the book was written in 2018. Opened to the public in June 1971, the empty trapezoidal site reserved for expansion of the National Gallery (or NGA for short, and specifically referring to the West Building) led to many problems of how to adequately create a functional and aesthetically pleasing facade. Pietro Bellushi (1899-1994), a renowned architect known for proposing modern themes to city architecture and is credited with creating the MetLife Building and the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, was asked by the NGA's overseeing trustees to find a suitable architect for the new structure.<sup>2</sup> The first two directors of the National Gallery of Art were David Finley and John Walker, both men would dream of expanding the space in the West Building as the second World War caused an explosion in donations to the Andrew W. Mellon Collection.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, under Walker, the NGA would host an expansion project to fulfill the nation's desire to see more of the extended collection by sending out traveling exhibitions across the nation.<sup>4</sup>

After traveling to different sites for each possible commissioned architect, the Trustees were stunned by the sculptural ingenuity of Chinese-American architect, Ieoh Ming Pei, better known as I.M. Pei (1917-2019).<sup>5</sup> Pei was born in Hong Kong, China and recounts seeing the Park Hotel in Shanghai, one of the first western skyscrapers and the first one he had ever seen.<sup>6</sup>

The classical styling of the twenty-six story high building was a part of Shanghai's emerging

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Kopper, *America's National Gallery of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Maygene Daniels and Susan Wertheim, *National Gallery of Art: Architecture + Design* (Washington: National Gallery of Art Press): 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Modernist Museum in Perspective: The East Building, The National Gallery of Art* (2009, London: Yale University Press), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Alofsin, *Modernist Museum in Perspective: The East Building, The National Gallery of Art*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Daniels and Wertheim, *Architecture + Design*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Gero von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei with I.M. Pei*, (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2000.), 33.

Westernized bank, called the Bund, that was inspired through commercialization of China.<sup>7</sup> Pei saw the way that Shanghai was integrating western architecture into their city with new materials that allowed for higher structures, and essentially new ornamentation. When Pei emigrated to the United States in 1935, he would not be able to return to China until 1974, after he had built the East Building. There is a sense of how much the traditions of Hong Kong before the Cultural Revolution must have stayed with Pei, especially those of his practicing Buddhist mother and the Confucian foundation of China's government at the time.<sup>8</sup> Pei talks in his interview with von Boehm about how important light is to the experience of the visitor to all of his buildings, so it is no wonder that one of the largest attractions to the East Building is its main atrium.<sup>9</sup>

Pei's angular and quasi-Pueblo Revival repertoire of the Mesa Laboratory of the Center for Atmospheric Research (CAR) in Boulder, Colorado, built in 1961, was a fresh take on the look of research buildings. The use of poured and then formed/stamped concrete as a cladding material on the Research Center meant that its walls had both had substantial textural feel and rich, saturated earth tones to contrast the research going on within the building. Meant to simultaneously fit into the surrounding plains and create a substantial part of the Boulder cityscape.

Compared to the Pantheon-inspired dome and Beaux-arts entrance of the West Building, the East Building's only unifying element between them is the veneer made of Tennessee pink marble. This dusty pink marble is not a true marble stone and was discovered in East Tennessee in the late 19th century as a quarrying industry for rural laborers.<sup>10</sup> White marble accounts for the complete exterior of two important structures in D.C.: the Washington Monument, Lincoln

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<sup>7</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 22-23.

<sup>8</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 34-36.

<sup>9</sup> Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne G. Powell, "Tennessee Marble,"

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/geology/powell/613webpage/NYCbuilding/TennesseeMarble/TennesseeMarble.htm>

Memorial, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.<sup>11</sup> White marble is used in most of D.C.'s interior buildings as a characteristic of the Greek and Roman architectural revival style used for example in the White House, Capitol Building, and National Archives. This stone is extremely visible and is seen as a status symbol of both wealth and purity of values within D.C. architecture. So, why would both architects, John Russell Pope of the West Building and I.M. Pei of the East Building, use a different colored marble from the rest of the city if they wanted to create cohesive aesthetics within the National Mall? For Pope, the answer was to distinguish the National Gallery of Art as the romanticized architectural branch of Washington's physical identity. For Pei, the answer was both an echo of Pope's desire to create a harmonized instead of cookie-cutter building and to further stand out with the use of one shade of the pink marble compared to the several used on the facade of the West Building. There are seven distinctly different shades of Tennessee pink marble on the West Building, gradient from very light pink at the cornice to almost a dark lavender-gray at the bottom. John Russell Pope, the architect of the original NGA, wanted to expand the vertical lift of the building and make it disappear into a clear overhead sky.<sup>12</sup>

But even then, why is the East Building "plain" or so unornamented on the outside? At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Pei's architectural inspiration was found in Modernist architecture most notably used by famed Swiss-French architect, Le Corbusier (1887-1965).<sup>13</sup> Le Corbusier visited MIT in November 1935 during a time in Pei's college education that he found lacking in contemporary approaches to materialism.<sup>14</sup> Later, when attending the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Pei was introduced to Bauhaus through his

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<sup>11</sup>"US Capitol Building," *Architect of the Capitol.gov*, accessed March 1, 2022.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/marble>

<sup>12</sup>Daniels and Wertheim, *Architecture+Design*, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 36

<sup>14</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 36

program's director, Walter Gropius (1883-1969).<sup>15</sup> Through Gropius' discipline and the emerging artist movement of Abstract Expressionism, Pei slowly begins to build his own identity through Bauhaus's ideals of minimalism while focusing on the connection between organic and angular forms as they appear in the natural environment.

In Colorado, the heavy and thick walls of the CAR were a continuation of the mountainous region of the surrounding Boulder. Washington, D.C. is a Beaux-Arts, man-made city and the National Mall is a rectangular row of glamorous Americanized classic architectural styles. This showroom of styles means that visitors are constantly fighting the urge to look to the next building to analyze the structure of the museum about its contents. Pei needed to utilize the recognizable coloring of the West Building to draw attention to the new structure. But, if he erected a structure that was too similar, the East Building would become a "blur" to the cityscape of D.C.

The corners of the plot meant that Pei could not design with a regular form like the West Building. While Pei was creating the plan for the site of the East Building, he said "The site was not my first concern. I guess my first concern was the fact that it was on the great National Mall of Washington, D.C. I was more concerned about symbolism than anything else."<sup>16</sup> Meaning the irregular shape of the site was less important to his creative plan than the architectural styling and relationship of spaces within the building as part of the same aesthetic community around it. The National Mall of D.C. is a vast collection of different architectural aesthetics, though they are all systematically tied together with their sprawling size and mixed use of Greco-Roman motifs like columns, and vertical emphasis. He was not looking to build a monument for himself

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<sup>15</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 37

<sup>16</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 63.

Looking overtop of the East Building, the form can be categorized into three structures; the main atrium and two towers. Tennessee pink marble with the darker lavender-gray grain was selected for most of the outside cladding material and was stacked horizontally to replicate smooth cinderblocks and the structure of the West Building. This creates a homogenous and sleek surface. There is no ornamentation of the building, relying on the form to draw the eye of the viewer around the structure. At the tops of the two towering “ears,” or towers, a vertically-stacked row of marble differentiates the top as a pseudo-crown molding. Around the doorways of the towers’ shared terrace is quioning. Quioning is the deliberate misalignment of blocks, usually through different colored bricks or sandstone, to draw attention to the main entranceway. Though the color difference between the lavender-gray and pink marble is not negligible in direct sunlight, it is possible Pei meant for this design to appear better in cloudier weather. The veining of quartz or a true white-colored marble stone is visible in most blocks that can be seen up close. As the museum opened to critique, Benjamin Fogey, a columnist for the *Washington Star*, states that the atrium was the most impressive part of the East Building, rather than any of the artworks on display.<sup>17</sup> Instead of being on one side of the other, some critics decided to straddle the line with mixed reviews like an anonymous letter from a visitor; “It is a magnificent monument, truly a beautiful building, fascinating no end, and really something to see. But, as an art museum, it is a giant jungle gym... Unless of course, you call the great central shaft of light the major piece of art being exhibited.”<sup>18</sup>

Inside the main triangular atrium of the East Building is the bracketed southern side (towards the National Mall) with a razor-thin wall separated by a small garden space overlooked by floor-to-ceiling windows. This wall is a modern sculpture in itself and has never failed to

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<sup>17</sup>Alofsin, “The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique,” 47-8.

<sup>18</sup>Alofsin, “The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique,” 50.

draw the eye away from the front entrance's sleek appearance. Anthony Alofsin remarks in his book *Modernist Museum in Perspective: The East Building, The National Gallery of Art* that "Visitors love touching the acute angle of the southwest corner to test its sharpness. Recent cleaning of the interior marble of the atrium has not completely removed the evidence of this desire to feel the texture of stone where, just inside the entrance, thousands of visitors rubbed their fingers over the letters of the architect's name, [I.M. Pei], adding to the patina of the building."<sup>19</sup> Pei discusses in his conversation with Gero von Boehm that he has tried to fix the staining of the razor thin entrance wall to the right of the main entrance, several times, but visitors are so enthralled with the thinness that he eventually gave up trying to mimic the original color of the stone.<sup>20</sup> This statement from Pei is heartwarming because of the way that Pei views his own stamp on the East Building. It is possible for architects to stop trying to keep up a building due to the loss of architectural integrity, yet Pei instead embraced the patina of the visitors' acknowledgments.

Flooring within the atrium echoes the tradition of marble within the interior of D.C. buildings, though this time Pei decides to use the same pink marble. Keeping with the angular theme of the overall museum, the pink marble floor tiles are cut into isosceles triangles in the slight alignment of rows. Differing color variations from a darker pink to the lightest-almost light pink form a waving gradient of color from the second-floor atrium's balcony. Some tiles span in rows, while others have their longest points together and form starburst patterns. This creates a sense of continuity throughout the entire building, except for the gallery spaces that have their coordinated flooring: wood within modern and contemporary art spaces, and carpet within the 19th-century French Painting exhibition. Though most of the tiles face in opposite directions,

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<sup>19</sup>Alofsin, *Modernist Museum in Perspective: The East Building, The National Gallery of Art*, 12.

<sup>20</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 68.

after a few minutes of contemplation, the points of the triangles form lines that lead in different directions throughout the museum as a walking guide. The placement of the front entrance is not on a main street or facing the National Mall. Having the main entrance of the East's Building face one of the exits of the West Building allows for a flow from one wing to the other. It separates the atmospheres of the National Mall's tourist attraction and the bustle of Pennsylvania Avenue NW, creating a buffer zone for contemplation of art without the distractions of other buildings. There was significant pushback to this space however. Nicknamed the Fourth Street Plaza, the space between the two wings has a "carpet" of cobblestones that purposefully separate the two roads of Pennsylvania Avenue NW and Madison Drive NW as a pedestrian-friendly space.<sup>21</sup> A sort of community living room with tables and chairs for visitors to enjoy the view of both the museums and the National Mall, if so.

It took seven years for there to be a public celebration of the opening of the East Building, so there is a discrepancy between the opening critique of 1974 and the public opening in 1978. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter gave a speech that would formally "accept" the East Building as a gift to the United States as an extension of the original National Gallery.<sup>22</sup> Overall there was seemingly endless praise of Pei's new project, though the critics were smaller, they were certainly louder. The general complaint against the East Building was that it was too expressive or modern for Washington's conservative and professional image.<sup>23</sup> One of the sticking points for critics was David Smith's *Voltri* sculpture series, the first installation to be held within one of the Towers.<sup>24</sup> This art was a part of the 1978 art exhibition, *American Art at*

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<sup>21</sup>Neil Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 146-147.

<sup>22</sup>Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique," 48.

<sup>23</sup>Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique," 48.

<sup>24</sup>Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique," 50.

*Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist.*<sup>25</sup> It represents one of the first ways the East Building would represent its new identity in modern art and how they would use the spaces of the Towers in the future.

From the National Mall, it is on the complex Madison Drive NW facade, (looking from the National Mall), Pei truly articulates elements from modern and contemporary art. Windows that bring massive amounts of light into the two-story atrium are hidden between the right side of the right tower and another, larger razor-thin wall that looks as if it were shaved off of the right tower. This wall extends diagonally over the atrium and connects to the opposite corner on Pennsylvania Avenue NW and 3rd Street NW. on Madison Drive NW, the building is broken into three distinct forms. The first is the flat walled edge of the razor-thin wall, then moving towards 3rd street, is a clash of panel windows interrupted by a top-floor terrace space, then the building connects to another angular collection of thin walls. The terrace is utilized by the museum cafe for seating and features a couple of small built-in greenspaces. Underneath the terrace sits six levels of flat, floor-to-ceiling panel windows separated by concrete slabs. Two diagonally thin walls hide a three-window wide wall into the central atrium. Pei explains why the atrium takes up so much space in the general footprint of the East Building, “They [Pei’s children] loved the Guggenheim. They loved the huge void in the middle and the snail-like ramp on which they could run around. I wanted to create the same kind of attractive environment to display the collection to the art-loving public, It is just that today’s museum must pay greater attention to its educational audience.”<sup>26</sup> This atrium brings in natural light, allowing for the polish of the flat stone to shine and create a new color of the open space.

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<sup>25</sup>“American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist,” National Gallery of Art.gov, accessed April 1, 2022. [https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1978/subjects\\_artist.html](https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1978/subjects_artist.html)

<sup>26</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 64-65.

## II. Research Center of Washington, D.C.

The East Building houses the National Gallery of Art's library and servers for the digital collection, meaning that the educational and research goes on in a separate space from the original building. This may have been part of the design for the contemplative aspect of the atrium and entrance you must pass through first. This vision of a grand research center was not thought of until 1969 when J. Carter Brown became the NGA's third Executive Director.<sup>27</sup> After the West Building had been open for twenty years, the collection was starting to make the small storage areas burst with the number of donations, gifts, and bequests pouring into the museum.<sup>28</sup> A cultural and artistic research center within a new wing of the established National Gallery would perhaps foster a larger educational community. Before 1968, no major public art museum had a research library in its floorplan.<sup>29</sup> Art and other departmental museums were under pressure to attract researchers and curators before they went into the University field and worked at on-campus galleries or became college professors. Professorship was more economically lucrative and had more freedom in how they could express their research, causing various philanthropic foundations to pitch in to cover the gap between that paycheck and the curatorship of art museums. This community of National Gallery art research was established through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Kress Foundation, and philanthropist Chester Dale, allowing for national and international fellowships to study in the national center of art.<sup>30</sup> There was rumor that the Smithsonian was going to establish an Institute of Advanced Study, based in the Smithsonian Castle, and take away any potential community research centers.<sup>31</sup> For six months,

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<sup>27</sup>Kopper, *America's National Gallery of Art*, 107-8.

<sup>28</sup>Kopper, *America's National Gallery of Art*, 105.

<sup>29</sup>Neil Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 131.

<sup>30</sup>Kopper, *America*, 109-110.

<sup>31</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 133.

Director Brown interviewed every academic, artist, general researcher of art, librarians, museum specialists, and foundation analysts to compile a paper explaining how the NGA would evolve with the new idea for a research center.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the library, office spaces for both wing's staffing were included, freeing space in the West Building to have each set of Curators and Collection Managers their own space to look after the objects.<sup>33</sup> Research in this new library-coded space was not just for books, but was actually created to house a budding photograph collection of over sixty thousand images, which today has grown to well over 3 million physical photographs and an even larger online collection.<sup>34</sup>

Though the research center located at the back of the East Building certainly caters to the eventual take-over of the internet and media sharing, part of the reason the East Building's center is so attractive is through the research of printed materials. The National Mall's collection of museums has grown to include several different styles to reflect the inner mission of the building. With the National Gallery of Art, it is different from the rest of Washington in its separated (above-ground separation, at least) wings with differing styles. Overall, the form of the East Building can be characterized as having Neo-Minimalist architectural elements. From far away, the wing's sleek and lavender-colored appearance, with some marble blocks slightly darker, creates almost a speckled effect. The two "ears" or towers form an "H" with the second floor's horizontal terrace connecting them as the middle line.

Separating the entrance from the terrace's floor is a light (almost white) pink slab of concrete with recessed lighting. It extends over the entrance and the installation space to the left of the current entrance. Further into the space on the ceiling is a repeating design of concave and

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<sup>32</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 134-135.

<sup>33</sup>Kopper, *America's National Gallery of Art*, 110.

<sup>34</sup>Frances P. Smyth and Tam. Curry. *A Profile of the East Building : Ten Years at the National Gallery of Art, 1978-1988*. Washington: The Gallery, 1989, 17.

convex carved triangle ceiling sconces. While currently being used for an installation of {So Sorry}, the doors are wrapped in vinyl behind the installation with pink marble pressing down on the tops of the doors, with large flat panel windows forming a clerestory above the doors. A razor-thin dividing wall separates into a new walkway that currently is used as the main entrance between the right end of the right tower's foundation. Though the main facade of the East Building is not ornamented traditionally like its predecessor, the subtle changes in color between blocks and the carved design under the overhanging terrace draws attention to the front of the building.

On the back end of the East Building is the same styling of six levels of interrelated concrete and panel windows. These windows and the small layer of darker atrium windows to the left make up the archives, library, and offices. At first, the library's regular rectangular form looks as if it were an afterthought in the overall design, but looking at an aerial view of the East Building, this butt-end creates the smallest end of the trapezoidal land plot and makes the most sense from using all of the plot for maximum use. These windows are all tinted, giving both the patrons of the office privacy, while reflecting the landscape of the Capitol Building at the viewer as a reminder of what space they are standing in. However, Pei does not want the minimalist message of the museum to be a memorial, "Look at all the memorials in Washington; they all have impressively big species to glorify an idea or a person. But art museums are not memorials. They should be designed to attract the public to come for sheer enjoyment."<sup>35</sup>

Space in the West Building was researched to fit an expanded collection while Pope was planning back in the 1930s, however, there was no underground system for storage and no above-ground space for large-scale conservation efforts, leaving the museum to rely on the Smithsonian system for outsourcing preventive and remedial care. The opening of the East

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<sup>35</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 65-66.

Building doubled the square footage of the NGA's available exhibition space, which could then allow for twice the amount of visitors and educational researchers.<sup>36</sup> The National Archives is located a few blocks away from the East Building and Harris was not creating a research center to draw researchers away from the Archives and other museums, but rather to build upon the already established community to create a tighter connection between art and education.<sup>37</sup>

Harris explains the problem of the plaza, "...The National Capital Planning Commission was still vigorously objecting to the paved plaza because the design encouraged pedestrians to move across a busy street [Fourth Street] from one building to the other. They agreed to the plan only after the Gallery agreed to ban bus traffic [on Fourth Street] and to control pedestrian movement."<sup>38</sup> The solution of pedestrian control was the newly conceived concourse, or the connection tunnel underneath Fourth Street between the East and West Buildings. This pathway would have as an "airport effect" tunnel and interrupt pedestrian mobs on the street above ground, until the problem of whether or not the Gallery should create a moving walkway in the concourse to make the distance shorter for visitors.<sup>39</sup> This would be extremely expensive to fund, but was considered important enough to the comfort of visitors that it was quickly funded after 1971. Between the two buildings was a space meant to be the gift shop for the NGA as a neutral space for both museums' differing aesthetic merchandise.

As the concourse and gift shop evolved, the space around the gift shop would become the new restaurant and cafe. Rivalry within the Museum world was high, with the Metropolitan

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<sup>36</sup>Kopper, *America's National Gallery of Art*, 112.

<sup>37</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 145.

<sup>38</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience* 146.

<sup>39</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 147.

Museum of Art's newly opened VIP dining space, *Fountain of Muses*.<sup>40</sup> This restaurant within the New York art museum field had become a celebrity dining space instead of being open to the public like Brown was planning for the NGA. To cover some damage control, there would be a more-upscaled room for more VIP guests, featuring a two story water feature, eventually evolving into the main cascading installation of Pei's glass pyramids in the middle of the current cafeteria. Naming of this space was contested for a year; with anyone from American sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976) to Washington politicians putting in their own suggestions, eventually *Cascade Cafe* would win due to the unanimous appreciation for the water installation as the main attraction to the space.<sup>41</sup> Working as both an attraction and a piece of performance art, the cascading space adds ambient noise to the conversations of patrons within both the gift shop and the cafeteria, acting as a truly neutral space for both museums to be contemplated.

The three wings of the East Building are named the Towers, as their roofline resembles a medieval turret tower. Conceived by Pei himself, varying the heights of the roofline in order to create an interesting outer appearance would allow the East Building to fit within Washington, D.C.'s height regulations, and to have three separate spaces for large installations.<sup>42</sup> The three towers are each currently occupied with a room full of Alexander Calder's mobile sculptures (Tower 1), Mark Rothko's paintings (other side of Tower 1), and Barrett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* painting series (Tower 3). Having these three spaces gives each artist their own atmosphere for visitors to fully contemplate their work, especially in the religious case of Newman, but it also can sheer the artist away from comparison. One of the best feelings within a

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<sup>40</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 148.

<sup>41</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 149.

<sup>42</sup>Von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei*, 66.

art museum is going between galleries to see the progression of artistic styles and correlate them in context of each other instead of being random points in history.

Though, does giving each tower an open space give the artist a blank space to convey their message in full? Is it possible that the use of an entire tower floor dedicated to one artist could be interpreted as placing more emphasis on that artist rather than to have works by several artists to best represent that art movement? Pei's own ideals are blended with museology (the study of museums), to explain how both exhibitions that are more temporary and those that are site-specific installations in order to decide how the East Building feathers the line of art divisionism. Victoria Newhouse, an art critic of New York, states that the overall architecture of an art museum reflect its insides no matter how much the architect wishes to convey a neutral stance.<sup>43</sup> However, the blank, rectilinear forms of the interior galleries of most art museums, like the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York, are static and will never be able to truly create an environment fully within the artist's vision.<sup>44</sup> This is the success of the East Building Towers. Having such a dynamic space creates an immediate air of intrigue for the visitor that will continue into intrigue for the installation.

During the opening in 1978, a critic wrote that the Tower installation hall should stay empty in order for the visitor to truly see the emptiness forced to be perceived as art, then evolved into a grotesque display of "primitive" modern art that was detrimental to the "sanctity of the Capitol of the United States."<sup>45</sup> It is true that the Capitol Building and the White House are sanctified in their architecturally conservative motifs, but they were built much earlier when the nation's identity was wildly changing, that there needed to be a visual foundation for outsiders to

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<sup>43</sup> Victoria Newhouse. "Pei, Painting, and Sculpture: The Perception of Art in the East Building." *Studies in the History of Art* 73 (2009): 64–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622473>.

<sup>44</sup> Newhouse, "Pei, Painting, and Sculpture: The Perception of Art in the East Building," 66-67.

<sup>45</sup> Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique," 50.

know American values. But as a nation, the United States has evolved, especially in how the country views art. Bringing in a Chinese-American architect like Pei to design such a large museum of a new national collection was sure to bring up any conservation values. Today, the newer museums that focus on underrepresented communities are still the focal point of traditional American exclusionism, though they are large parts of the United State's growth and success as a melting pot.

Herein lies the problem with spaces like this in the East Building, the two mostly permanent installations, Calder and Newman, are both large parts of an exclusive canon. Though their installations are great representations of the way architecture can transform a space, leaving these two exhibitions up for so long in their own spaces does not give the spotlight to any underrepresented artists that the East building has collections of. The East Building has been working to be more inclusive in their collection, though the beginning of the museum was started by Mellon, who was a fan of a more conservative modern canon of art.

### **III. The Architecture of the Art Museum After the East Building in relation to the Bilbao Effect**

In 2004, after a stunning career on the National Mall, the East Building was awarded the American Institute of Architecture's *Twenty-Five Year Award*, meant for monuments or structures with significant architectural ideals that have "...withstood the test of time."<sup>46</sup> The unusual footprint and neo-minimalist forms of the East Building were built in the late 20th century, as the art museum scene was gaining attention with the Guggenheim family of New York City pioneering international collection successes. Two Guggenheim museums were established before the East Building; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City was built in 1937, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, was built in 1951.

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<sup>46</sup>Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique.", 47.

Both museums were unconventional in their facades, the New York Guggenheim featuring a striped rotunda amid steel skyscrapers and the Peggy Guggenheim building a bright white marble against Venice's warm-toned cityscape. Though not coined until the construction of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum of Modern Art in the 1990s, the "Guggenheim Effect" or more specifically for the Guggenheim Bilbao building, the "Bilbao Effect" is a theory of the relationship between an architecturally unconventional art museum and its surrounding host city's economic status and artistic value as a community.<sup>47</sup>

The National Gallery of Art's East Building is part of America's legacy of art museums influencing their surroundings by attracting visitors for both its exterior and its collection of art. Art museums in American tradition are seen as repositories of the national artistic treasures and must be pleasing to the average visitor to keep their status as a landmark for the art community.<sup>48</sup>

The Hirschorn Museum of Modern Art began construction in 1969, and paralleled the East Building's construction. There was an intangible rivalry between the two art museums since they were both trying to represent the modern art canon, however, the Hirschorn had an advantage that the collection was from Joseph Hirschorn. It was also federally funded, though the museum was meant to be more of the "deviant" from modern art canon, such as more of the newer avant-garde. The slowly curving inside of the Hirschorn was meant to resemble the inside of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, directly contrasting to the angular floorplan of the East Building across the National Mall from it.

Pei was certainly aware of Hirschorn and Guggenheim's desire to elevate art above the normal person, and he instead decided to use the progression of modern architecture into the

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<sup>47</sup>Sophia Psarra. *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>48</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 22-24.

upper-class ornamented buildings of the National Mall designed by the large Smithsonian campus, This modernist design of the East Building has given many architects the green light for their experimentation with museums, the two most famous being Zaha Hadid (1950-2016) of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum and Frank Gehry (1929-Present) of the Guggenheim Bilbao.

The National Mall has evolved since 1971, there have been several new museums with new architecture that may have borrowed expressive architecture from the East Building: such as the National Museum of the American Indian, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Though these museums are not necessarily focused on just art, there is a connection between Pei's identity in D.C. and the new evolution beyond classical architecture on the National Mall. Reactions at the 1978 opening of the East Building where it is called "plain" or "boring" run much deeper than just a surface-level aesthetic preference. American history is steeped in Manifest Destiny, a theory that the colonizers of North America bring "civilization" rather than respecting the aboriginal communities, and the traditional architecture of the Greeks and Romans are a representation of the conquering of civilization over the uncivilized.<sup>49</sup> By taking away the traditional ornamentation, the East Building is seemingly not representing those values of patriotism.

Though the East Building was an extension of the National Gallery, it needed a separate governing body since the artworks would be aesthetically different than the West Building's exhibitions. When the East Building first opened in 1971, there were only seven finished art pieces ready for exhibition because Pei and Brown were in charge of finding the artists in their spare time instead of the work being delegated to a curator.<sup>50</sup> This may be the cause for why there is a dichotomy of collection aesthetics within the East Building, causing some critics to ask

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<sup>49</sup>Alofsin, "The Opening of the East Building: Acclaim and Critique.", 53.

<sup>50</sup>Harris, *Capital Culture: J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery of Art, and the Reinvention of the Museum Experience*, 151.

questions about the intangible representation of modern and contemporary art within the National Mall. As Pei grappled with designing an addition to a classically ornamented building, the conversation of how to represent art that was deemed out of classical art canon to the normal visitor. Overall, looking at the way the East Building has dealt with art history has been a generally positive impact on Washington, D.C.'s field of art historical research. It was the first public art museum with a planned research center and is the first national museum to have a dedicated place for educational historical research. I believe that the way I.M. Pei's cultural relationship with architecture has evolved has created a successful space for artists to express their commentary without being influenced negatively by the museum's architecture. The "Bilbao Effect"-ification of the East Building has definitely caused an uptick in the visitor numbers, but I believe that the East Building is more recognized for its overall atmosphere as a piece of art both inside and out.

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