

Over the past sixty years, I.M. Pei and his colleagues have assembled what could be the most unsettling architectural portfolio ever. Just where is the firewall that separates the cultural mode of all those prestige offices towers in Houston, Singapore, and La Défense from, say, the Louvre? What if there isn't one? Syracuse's Everson Museum (1961–1968) is the fulcrum project where Pei himself dealt directly with alignments between commer-

CALCULATED RISK:

I.M. Pei's Everson Museum of Art

cial practice, cultural responsibility, and progressive ambitions—not that he resolved them. The design's strong formal presence masks a profoundly inconclusive investigation of these alignments that set a template for much of Pei's further career.

In 1955, Syracuse Mayor Donald Mead returned from a tour of West Germany to warn his constituents about the disappointing modesty with which Europe's flattened cities were being rebuilt. Syracuse, Mead insisted, should launch itself far more forcefully into the future. Urban renewal ensued, including a high-concept *tabula rasa* project from Victor Gruen to remake downtown's Near East Side as a civic/cultural zone.¹

Gruen's design presentation for this new precinct in 1959 coincided with the resolution of local heiress Helen Everson's will, which had been in contest for nearly two decades. Everson's million-dollar bequest to a nebulously defined "museum of art" would finally be accomplished through the merger of her estate corporation with the existing Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, and a new home for the resulting Everson Museum became the sudden centerpiece of the Near East Side plan.

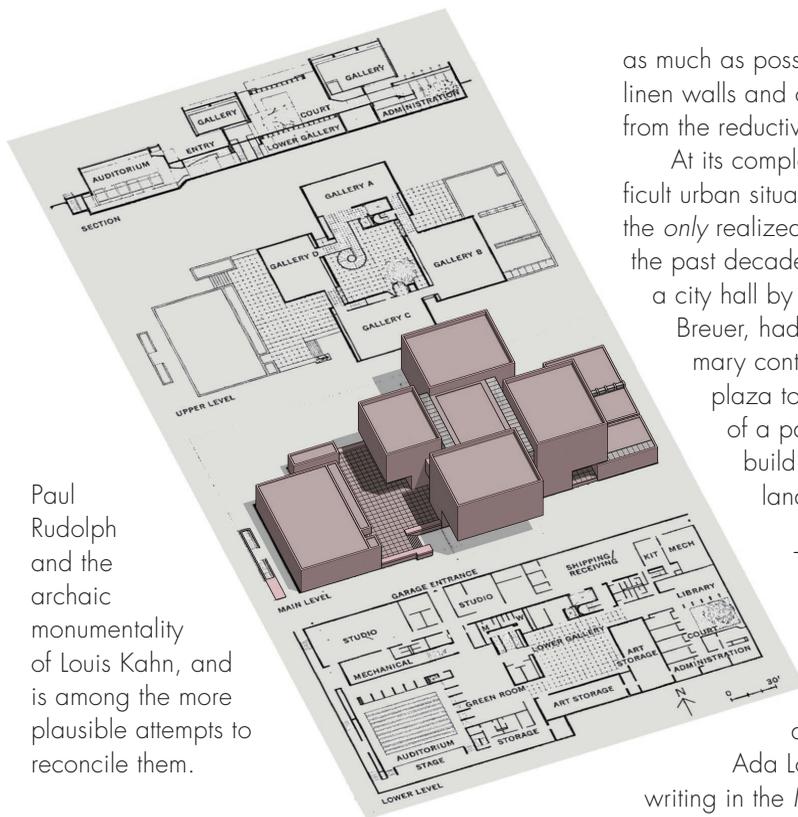
By 1961, the Everson's trustees were interviewing a shortlist of architects including Pei, Mitchell/Giurgola, and Pietro Belluschi—a selection that suggests someone had well-informed ideas about ending up with a respectably current but not-too-aggressive piece of Modernism. However, the trustees should have understood when they chose Pei that he was a wild card. Pei's office had done almost no institutional work at the time; further, Pei was at the end of an incremental disengagement from his patron since 1948, the real estate developer William Zeckendorf, and while he had no intention of leaving commercial architecture behind, he was eager to explore new kinds of projects and corresponding new design modes.

Given the Everson's scanty collection, constituency, and context (nearly everything around the site was to be demolished) the new building had to be a catalyst for the institution it would house. Pei worked with project architect Kellogg Wong on the design, which was presented in its near-final state in 1962. The Everson's director had set one requirement that proved decisive: the collections were to be shown in a series of discrete galleries, not the large "flexible" halls popular at the time. Pei accomplished this with extreme literalism by breaking out the display spaces into four boxy cantilevered elements of incrementally varied sizes. Arranged as a pinwheel, these masses define a double-height interior void punctuated by a helical stair. A low plinth containing most of the support program stretches out to the east and west, popping up as a mute block at either end to accommodate the upper parts of the auditorium and administrative wings. All of this was to be constructed of site-cast concrete and virtually nothing else.

The design's purity results not from a singular attitude but a tightly-edited synthesis of influences. The Everson pushed recent formal investigations by Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer (Pei's close friend) further toward scenographic reduction. Technical developments in concrete casting—some of which Pei's office had helped drive—also heavily shaped the design. Most provocatively, the Everson drew on two intense and competing architectural modes emerging in the early 60s: the spatial matrices of



Central court, Everson Museum of Art, I.M. Pei, 1961–1968, Syracuse, NY. Photo: © Ezra Stoller/Esto.



Paul Rudolph and the archaic monumentality of Louis Kahn, and is among the more plausible attempts to reconcile them.

After three years of fundraising (and controversial site demolition), the Everson was built between 1965 and October 1968. Most of this time was lavished on the cast-in-place concrete that makes up almost every visible element, inside and out. The cantilevered structure was engineered in the office of Roger Nicolet, best known for the 1/3-mile-tall concrete shaft of Toronto's CN Tower.² While the four overhanging blocks appear independent of each other, they are tied together in counterbalance by the waffle-slab roof of the central court and a continuous "belt" through the concrete bridges connecting the upper-level galleries. Nicolet's structure is strongly expressed at the underside of the cantilevers, but the tectonics of the vertical surfaces are effaced by diagonal bush-hammering. The interstices between concrete elements were glazed with minimal details to read

as much as possible as voids.³ Only the painted linen walls and oak floors of the galleries deviated from the reductive material regime.

At its completion, the Everson was left in a difficult urban situation: it was not just the flagship but the *only* realized element of the Gruen plan.⁴ Over the past decade, every adjacent project, including a city hall by Rudolph and an office center by Breuer, had fallen through. The Everson's primary context was parking lots, except for a plaza to the north that was actually the roof of a parking lot. Perhaps by intention, the building looked great in this evacuated landscape.

The Everson was well received when it opened in 1968, and with good reason: thoroughly considered and fully accomplished, the building provides a terrific small-museum experience.

Ada Louise Huxtable was blown away, writing in the *New York Times*: "This is the architecture of today as art history will eventually record it."⁵ In Syracuse, she found "a clear demonstration of the dramatic oneness of contemporary art and architecture," or, as pretty much everyone has described it since then, a giant sculpture to display art in.

Indeed, that looked like the final word on the building. The Pei organization's work has an uncanny capacity to defuse substantial comment, and



South Elevation, Everson Museum of Art. Presentation (top) and as built (lower). Note that upper gallery floors were originally at different levels in each of the cantilevered volumes. Drawings this page: I.M. Pei & Associates.

the Everson had the particular onus of its central New York State location: everyone forgot it existed. Now, however, images of the project are circulating on the internet as part of a growing enthusiasm for the architecture of the Modernist endgame, and it's time to ask what, in retrospect, was going on here.

There is no better place to start than the temptation to celebrate the Everson as a rediscovered Brutalist icon. Certainly, the design checks all the boxes of American Brutalism (suppression of

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conventional features, outré antigravity modeling, and, of course, unrelenting expanses of concrete) but it has *none* of the attitude. Pei did not leave behind commercial taste-cultures for a stab at radicalism here. Quite the opposite: in Syracuse, the

Smithsons' seminal "bloody-mindedness" has been transmuted into the *sauvagerie* of a fancy fur coat. Brutalism may have been raw and fierce, but it got skinned and the Everson wears its mantle as a luxury item. This is evident everywhere in the building, from the mannered refinement of the concrete itself (note the flat "piping" that frames each plane) to the helical main stair, where Hollywood Regency drama passes in reverse drag as geometric purism.

The Everson's virtues have nothing to do with sincerity or immediacy: they're the result of calculation and polish. This isn't a bad thing at all, but it's definitely a source of confusion: this building is not what everyone thinks it is. Far from a break with precedent, its layout is strikingly close to what an American architect might well have done with the same project 50 years earlier. While Pei does introduce contemporary reductivist drama, his plastic modeling is anything but free: it follows a 3'-4" grid imported directly from commercial space planning. As for the Everson as a sculptural environment for art, apart from the



Concrete at work. Pae White, "Ballerina (Wild Raspberry Bush)," 2009, Urban Video Project installation at Everson Museum of Art. Syracuse University photo by Steve Sartori.

central court all the display spaces are traditional room-like galleries (almost never shown in photographs). Pei's biggest success at the Everson may be evoking a brilliant synthesis between art and architecture when, in fact, the two could hardly be more segregated. Moreover, the Everson works so well because of this underlying conservatism, not in spite of it.

The interest generated by the building's debut didn't last long. Within months of opening, the Everson was, as one trustee described it, "a mausoleum." The signature collection of 20th-century

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ceramics was never going to draw crowds and, in a Modernist cliché come to life, it wasn't immediately apparent where to enter the building if you wanted to.

What happened next should give pause to anyone who thinks design sets institutional destiny. Pei's crypto-conservative design became a hub for the radical strategies of James Harithas, the Everson's director from 1971 to 1974. Invariably described as "controversial," Harithas' tenure sounds like the most fun anyone ever had in Syracuse. To build local constituencies, the museum mounted shows on, for example, Ukrainian craftways, Haitian Voodoo, and Iroquois culture, while the auditorium was made available to groups ranging from the American Legion to Lesbians Incorporated. Harithas also set up an innovative video art department and outreach programs for prisoners and psychiatric outpatients.

These attention-getting efforts were punctuated with appearances by, among others, William Kunstler, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and the avant-garde cellist Charlotte Moorman, well known at the time for her arrest following a topless performance of Nam Jun Paik's *Opera Sextronique*. The undisputed triumph of Harithas' strategy, however, was Yoko Ono's "This Is Not Here" (1971), a massive conceptual installation that occupied every public

space in the building and freaked Syracuse out like nothing before or since. However calculated the intent was (and, yes, a Beatles reunion was rumored), documentation suggests that Ono's show activated, for once, the latent potential of Pei's design to serve as a sculptural matrix for art.

The Everson today is physically little changed since 1968, and remains surrounded by surface parking. In 2001, Pei and Wong proposed a small but surprisingly disruptive addition, but in the post-September 11th recession funds went instead to lightly renovating the building envelope and glazing. The ceramics collection has been installed in a basement level study center; more interestingly, current technologies allow the Everson to project work from its video collections directly onto the outside of the building.

Pei has cited the Everson as one of his favorite projects, and it's easy to see why. Beyond its inherent successes, the design's careful positioning of progressive expression, conservative underpinnings, and high-end commercial sensibility enabled Pei to blur the issues here for the next thirty years in major projects for the National Gallery, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and, of course, the Louvre. As a calculated foray into the avant garde, the Everson introduced the genteel extremism that has nonplussed Pei's critics ever since.

—KIMBRO FRUTIGER

1. Gruen had already had a brush with Syracuse in 1943, when he and Elsie Krummeck (then his wife and business partner) designed a shopping center as part of *Architectural Forum's* speculative vision of Syracuse in "194x." However, as with most of the 194x projects, the connection to Syracuse was only notional.

2. with John Andrews, 1972–1975. Nicolet first worked with Pei on Place Ville Marie (Montreal, 1957–1964) and provided the initial structural concepts for the Louvre's glass pyramid.

3. Even in the mid-1960s, it is remarkable Pei convinced anyone that enormous sheets of uninsulated glass and 0.5% slope skylights were appropriate to Syracuse's climate.

4. The Gruen scheme began to fade from view as soon as site clearance began in 1963 and hardly figures in the city's own 1964 Central Syracuse Plan. If you hadn't guessed already, the area demolished for Gruen's unrealized Near East Side corresponded precisely to an existing working-class district that had recently become a destination for Southern black emigrants.

5. Art history, it seems, has left this task mostly to me, although Barry Bergdoll has also cited the Everson as one of Pei's truly strong works.