

## CULTURE

Douglas House,  
Lake Michigan,  
1971-73.



# An American odyssey

Richard Meier has evolved a sophisticated architectural language in a 45-year career, says **Robert Maxwell**

## BOOK

**RICHARD MEIER & PARTNERS, COMPLETE WORKS 1963-2008**

Edited by Philip Jodidio  
Taschen, HB, £80

★★★★★

Alberto Campo Baeza, an architect whom I greatly respect, has written a very poetic introduction to this book in which he casts Richard Meier as a latter-day Ulysses, lashed to the mainmast of architecture, resisting the siren seductions of money, fame and power. He proposes Meier's eventual return to Ithaca, to a waiting Penelope who, it seems, is also architecture.

Ithaca, New York, is real. Meier's alma mater Cornell University is there, and no doubt he goes back there from time to time as a renowned alumnus or to undertake more design; the rest is poetic licence. But it is true that, as Baeza says, despite Meier having won every prize going, there is a

curious silence among critics about the achievement of his work. This massive volume, too heavy to read in bed — it needs to be firmly placed on a reading table — is the answer to that silence.

It is a monumental volume, carried out with the same consistency that attaches to Meier's architecture. Each project is treated in the same way, with an introductory two-page spread, followed by a site plan and ample plan drawings, individual views and finally, a sunset or night view.

The photography is superb. Skies are usually blue, the white walls gleam — it is clearly the best of all possible worlds. The consistency gives a sense of completeness. And that, maybe, is part of the problem. This consistency makes it look easy, too easy to require struggle or to call forth unexpected results. When you employ Richard Meier as an architect, you have a pretty good idea of what you'll get. His work is trademarked by its consistent style.

Yet it is also true that the scope

of his work is enormous. The book lists some 240 jobs that the office has handled over the years, but only 50 of these are illustrated — presumably the best ones. So it is highly selective, but one suspects that the 190 left out would be sufficient in themselves to establish a whole career in architectural design.

The missing works arouse one's curiosity, just as one would like to see the sides of the illustrated works not shown such as the rear ends of the 16-storey residential twin towers at Perry Street in Greenwich Village, or the curved corners at the rear of the Douglas House on Lake Michigan.

Meier has been famous since he was introduced as one of the New York Five in Arthur Drexler's exhibition at MoMA in 1969, and subsequently in the 1972 book, *Five Architects*. All five of them were marked by the influence of Le Corbusier. Hejduk died, Graves went PoMo, Gwathmey vernacular, and Eisenman deconstructivist — only Meier is still clearly

influenced by Corbu, and he has evolved slowly in a manner that is utterly personal while remaining utterly modern.

But this can be put another way. In the Smith House (1967) and even more so in the Douglas House (1971-73), Meier had already invented features that would become established as typically his with the passage of time. What he seems to do is to play with these features as if they were words in a language, creating amazing variety out of elements that themselves remain virtually unchanged, which is exactly what language is capable of.

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The white walls are often composed of porcelain enamelled panels. These give the buildings a purity that makes them almost abstract in their ideality. But the whiteness also reflects light and so takes on the completeness of sculptural form.

Although most of Meier's work is deliberately rectangular in character, he does make use of curves — usually in plan, sometimes in elevation — as a means of enlivening the composition. The Stadthaus at Ulm, Germany, is an example of a systematic use of the circle in plan. The Getty Centre in Los Angeles uses curves to emphasise focal points in a huge layout which, although apparently picturesque, is governed by a strict geometry in its setting out.

There can be no question about Meier's originality, and he is also very knowledgeable about precedent. In his postscript to *Five Architects*, Philip Johnson wrote: "Meier knows his history best of the five, studies it most, learns

from it most. His work is full of references to buildings of modern architecture."

The design in collaboration with Eisenman, Gwathmey and Holl for the World Trade Centre Memorial Square competition uses a gridded motif in elevation to make a stunning image. His Jubilee Church in Rome uses curves both in plan and elevation to make a beautiful space. His protective structure for the Ara Pacis Museum, also in Rome, is the height of discretion.

Within the regularity of Meier's vocabulary, his compositions have an amazing variety, and his mature architecture has a sophisticated ability to follow the programme rather than distort it. And with skyscrapers now twisting themselves into a variety of shapes in order to project their freedom as art, this reticence is something for which we can be grateful.

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