

New York

The architectural authority on all things white is one colorful character.



TASCHEN

CHARD MEIER



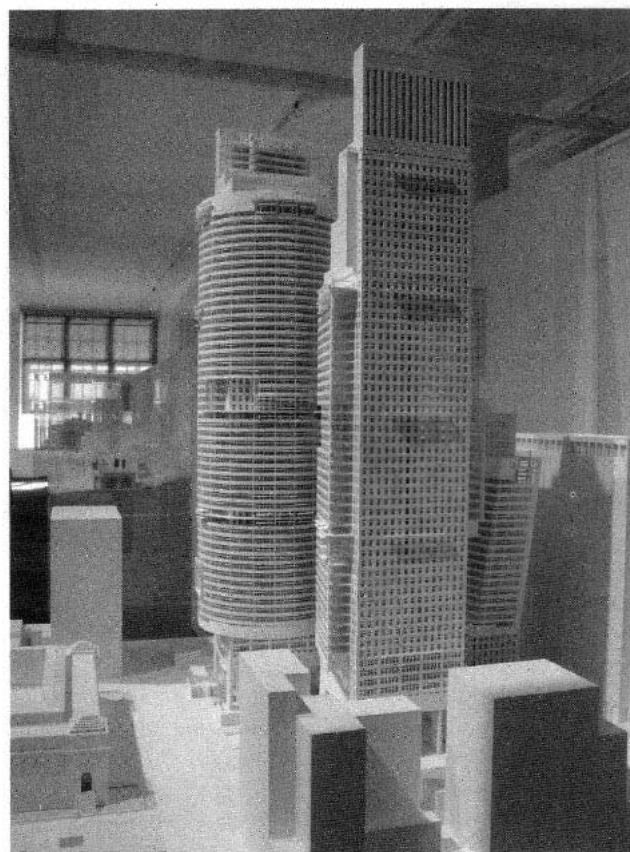
Septuagenarian architect wears Turkish glass beads around his wrist to keep evil spirits at bay.

Interview by
HORACIO SILVA,
Photography by
ATJA RAHLWES.



prototype for one of the many chairs Meier has designed throughout his career.

RICHARD MEIER



The model of a 1987 redesign for Madison Square Garden greets visitors to Meier's office.

Richard Meier needs no introduction. The éminence grise of Neo-Corbusians is so culturally pervasive that he was recently name-checked on that loftiest of forums for architectural discourse, *The Real Housewives of New York City*. A Pritzker Prize-winning rationalist's rationalist, Meier is also known for a prolific oeuvre that includes everything from major museums and civic commissions to luxury condos that have become as famous as their residents. Though he is now 74, and walks with a slight limp, Meier has lost none of his intellectual curiosity or joie de vivre. PIN-UP caught up with him recently at his midtown practice, where Meier was nursing a visibly wounded hand.

Horacio Silva: What did you do to your hand? Don't tell me it was a freak bowling accident!

Richard Meier: No, no. Equally embarrassing though. I asked my housekeeper to leave something out for me to cook for dinner. So she put some oil in a pot and left everything ready for me — all I had to do was, you know, turn it on and throw in some chicken or whatever. But typical of the way I cook, I turned it on and then sat down to watch the news on television. Then I got up and I said, "Oh, gosh, I'd better, you know, do something here," so I put the chicken in and the hot oil splashed all over me. I can't turn on the stove without something going wrong!

HS: You've designed enough restaurants by now to be fed for life. Remind me, was 66 in TriBeCa your first?

RM: Yes, 66 was the first. I used to love that place — it was fabulous and the food was great. And even though they insisted I sit at a private table most of the time, I really liked sitting at the long communal table.

HS: How very mid-90s Asia de Cuba!

RM: I know, but it's fabulous to sit down and talk with absolute strangers. It's one of my great pleasures.

HS: I imagine conversation with strangers comes easily to you. You've been a presence on the New York social scene for a while.

RM: Well, I like to know what's going on. I mean, I do go to things and then wonder why. But I'm naturally curious. And, if I'm not working, you know, why go home and watch the news?

HS: So it doesn't bother you being occasionally called a society architect or a latter-day Stanford White?

RM: Not in the slightest. Stanford White, from what I've read, had a pretty active, rich life and he was also a great architect. A couple of weeks ago I was in the Racquet Club he did on 54th and Fifth. Beautiful place.

HS: Does the dialogue you have with people in a city as diverse as New York inform your work in any way?

RM: Not really. What's important to me, which informs everything we do here, is to ask the question, "What is the nature of public space?" How do people come together, and how do you make a place where people want to meet friends or other people? And I think that's what architecture is about. It's about bringing people together in an environment where you feel uplifted.

HS: Do you see that successfully happening in New York?

RM: Generally speaking, I think architecture is not high on the agenda in New York City. I don't go to clubs, so I can't shed light on that aspect. But let's look at cultural events in the city. People go to cultural events not only to take in what's showing but also to meet other people. If you go to the Metropolitan Museum on a Friday night, which I did recently, you wouldn't believe the number of young people who go there to



To stay abreast of New York real estate, Meier is not above taking pearls of wisdom from Donald Trump.

Right, the master builder photographed in his private office on 10th Avenue in midtown Manhattan.

see a show and then have a drink and meet with friends — it's a great scene. I think it's fabulous when a private cultural event gives way to a public social event. But, in answer to your question, I don't think this happens often enough. I guess that's what makes my job exciting, knowing that possibilities to improve the city still exist.

HS: Are there any areas of New York's development that you lament? I was walking through the Meatpacking District recently and — maybe because I'd just come back from Miami — I found it hard to know what city I was in.

RM: That area has lost a lot of the charm that you associate with New York. I've never seen so many ugly buildings

and boutiques in one place in my life! I don't know who shops there, but obviously many people must, because they wouldn't want to build there otherwise. But the great thing about New York is that it's always changing. I had dinner with my daughter on the Lower East Side a couple of weeks ago. You can't believe how crowded the streets and restaurants were. I don't know where all those people come from — they can't all live there — but it was packed. Even five years ago that wasn't the case.

HS: On the subject of restaurants, why do you think that contemporary food, like a lot of the arts and cultural pursuits, has borrowed so many elements from different cultures, but that architecture remains so one note and white bread?

RM: Oh, boy, that's a good question. I think architecture is about making space that works on a human scale. It's not about interpreting culture. I don't know whether Modernist architecture actively resists non-Western cultures and, like I said, I don't think that's what architecture is about. But certainly the results suggest that there isn't that kind of dialogue between cultures that exists in other endeavors. Of course there is the odd flourish you can introduce with the use of materials, textures and color. Those things can come into play, and reflect certain cultural influences. But at the end of the day, it's still basically about making space.

HS: Since you brought up the dirty M word, when was the apple-falling-on-the-tree moment? At what point did Modernism make sense?

RM: Well, I don't think it was ever a question. It never occurred to me that things should be anything other than contemporary and modern. We live in a modern society. We live a contemporary life.

HS: You and a group of others were posited as combatants in the war between the whites versus grays, or Modernists versus the Postmodernists. Who won?

RM: Well, I don't think there was ever a contest. [Laughs] The grays just disappeared. By sheer force of will, the whites won.

HS: Just as well for you — you've peddled more white goods than General Electric. What does white mean to you?

RM: Well, ironically, it's about color. You know, white reflects all colors and allows us to perceive them more clearly. And white is constantly changing. This room, if you look at it now, in this twilight, is a different white than it was three hours ago, when the sun was out.

HS: I was looking at an "at-home" with you in a recent issue of *Shelter* magazine and, other than its being white, I was surprised by your personal living environment. For one, I didn't expect you to be living in a pre-war building. How different would you say your homes are from the unrelentingly Modernist aesthetic that most people associate with you?

RM: I think it's probably more cozy and a lot more cluttered than people would expect. The problem is that over the years things accumulate, and I'm not very good at throwing things away.

HS: So you're the missing Collyer brother.

RM: [Laughs.] Absolutely, it's out of control! Every week end when I'm home, I say, "What can I get rid of?" But there are stacks of books everywhere.

HS: I notice the Frank Lloyd Wright book, which reminds me of a quote of yours. I'm sorry if I'm bastardizing it, but it was something along the lines of your thinking he's right even though he got a lot wrong. So humor me, in the year of Wright's centenary, what do you think he got wrong?

RM: Well, when I was a student, I read everything I could

get my hands on about Wright. And in fact, when I was at Cornell, Frank Lloyd Wright came to give a lecture and seminars, so we were following him around. And after I graduated, I spent a weekend as a guest of the Kaufmanns at Fallingwater. Not long after that, I was working on the design of my first commission — a house for my parents — and, as you know, Wright talked about the extension of space, interior to exterior, and how the building should be organic and relate to nature. So I designed this house with brick walls which began in the living room and extended out into the garden. And dividing it were big sliding glass doors and a big glass window. And the floors were in stone, which extended outside as well. When I finished it, I remember thinking, you know, the inside *is* different from the outside. The minute you put a glass wall up, you enclose that interior space. Even though you can see through it, there is no extension of space. The glass is a membrane, as much as the brick wall is a membrane. And the building weathers differently. The brick wall on the outside has a little bit of moss and algae on it, but the brick wall on the inside stays pristine. This whole idea of architecture being organic is false, because the minute you build something, that's it. It's static. It doesn't grow. So I said that, as much as I love Wright, Wright is wrong. And the next house I worked on, which was the Smith house in Darien, Connecticut, I did completely differently, as a manmade object sitting on the ground, reflecting nature, enhancing nature ...

HS: But not trying to masquerade as an extension of nature ...

RM: Right! I'm thankful to Wright for enabling me to understand the relationship between the manmade and the natural, and how there's a dialogue that's created between the two.

HS: Let's just change subject here a little and talk about your most famous work, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, which you finished 10 years ago. It's the kind of commission that most architects can only dream of. Looking back at it now, was it a curse or a blessing?

RM: Well, it was 12 years of my life, spending two weeks of every month in Los Angeles. I enjoyed doing it, and every time I go back I'm just awed by the fact that it's there. And it's continued to have enormous numbers of people visiting every day, so I'm very proud of having been part of that. But, you know, it certainly wreaked havoc with my life at the time.

HS: How so?

RM: Well, my kids were young, and every time I talked to them on the phone, they'd say, "Daddy, where are you?" Being bicoastal isn't everything it's cracked up to be, at least it wasn't for me.

HS: Is it like looking back at a long-term relationship that didn't work out in the end?

RM: Well, I think it worked out in the end, as far as I'm concerned. But it was a difficult, long-term, long-distance relationship.

HS: Is there anything you would have done differently?

RM: Oh, I don't think so.

HS: Not the gardens? You did get a bit of flak over those and famously fought with the landscape artist Robert Irwin.

RM: Well, I did what I could. Maybe someday it will be changed to be more in line with what I had in mind. But it's seriously in the past.

HS: There's an almost universal valentine that goes out to you after the completion of a project. I say this not to be

RICHARD MEIER



Meier is known to have a weakness for white models; shown here is an unbuilt project in Luxembourg, 1993.



Model mania: another model for a 1991 project in Berlin and a prototype for a Meier-designed leather chair.