

FAST FORWARD

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In Osaka, Japan, a small, enigmatic building emerging on an urban plaza fits neither the normative terminology for architecture nor the prevailing image of Cesar Pelli & Associates as one of the world's leading architects of high-rise buildings, skyscrapers notable for their elegant skins and diplomatic relationships with context. The structure, the entrance to the underground National Museum of Contemporary Art, is almost unique to the field and to the history of the practice. To describe the entrance pavilion requires a foray into distant metaphoric territory: It looks like a gesture drawing ferociously scribbled in the air, or a delirious spider web, or perhaps a wire-frame drawing lifted from the screen of a computer in the throes of a voltage surge. The three-dimensional anti-gravitational energy field represents a break into new, expressive territory, an exploratory direction for a firm that refuses to be captive of its own success. Cesar Pelli & Associates (CP&A) maintains a practice ready to challenge and transform its own precedent. ■ A move toward an experimental future of freer, more expressive design, the Osaka building loops Pelli's career back to his beginnings in the office of Eero Saarinen, where he worked on the avian, poured-in-place TWA terminal at JFK, and Stiles and Morse Colleges at Yale, both poured-concrete structures with exposed stone aggregate that recall the colleges' Gothic forebears. The Osaka pavilion, a collaboration with partner Fred Clarke, bridges a vast divide between the cold and warm, rational and intuitive design traditions in the field – Mies versus Saarinen. The architects release the frame from its usual cage into flux, into a near dream state of fluidly changing plan, section, and elevation: The structure erupts from the ground in a spray of titanium-coated stainless steel. The architects capture in steel the emotional content normally associated with expressionist work rendered in concrete. They completely transform the tradition of the skeletal metal frame dating from the Crystal Palace, putting modern materials and technology at the service of a liberated geometry. As "architects of the possible," they have taken architectural advantage of shifts in the terrain of possibility, expanding both their repertoire and the vocal range of the field while responding to the demands of the brief: to design a distinctive above-ground image acting as a cultural invitation and semaphore. ■ At the beginning of his career, Pelli famously argued that the Crystal Palace of 1851 marked the end of the masonry age and the beginning of the era of the structural frame. He pursued with great vigor and acuity, first in California and then on the East Coast, a career predicated on the frame, the voluminous interiors it effortlessly defines, and the envelope that encloses both the frame and interior volumes. The Osaka pavilion belongs to the tradition of the Crystal Palace and Pelli's opus, but only obliquely, because it escapes the Platonic form and Cartesian logic that has informed most framed structures, in favor of the logic of a non-rational freely drawn form made structurally feasible by the computer. Pelli the rationalist master of the skyscraper is stepping into indeterminate, mathematically irrational territory to create an enigma with great urban charisma. The pavilion signals entrance into an underground world apart from the more ordinary urban realms above, and a willingness to foreground the emotional content that has remained a subtext in CP&A's extensive oeuvre. ■ CP&A, architects with an international reputation, could have coasted into Osaka and proposed a reiteration of one of the grand halls or public rooms they pioneered decades ago. But Pelli has never practiced as an ideologue importing predetermined solutions and signature designs to commissions, and has always conducted an open practice in the same way the scientific method is open to the trial and error of experimentation. He does not build set ideology but derives principles inductively through the process of building itself. Like Bismarck making *realpolitik* policy, Pelli has practiced *realarchitektur*. He notes that Joseph Paxton, designer of the Crystal Palace, was not an architect saddled with stylistic preconceptions but a gardener-engineer who willingly incorporated the intentions of others into designs based on practicable rather than idealized form and fabrication. Pelli's own openness means that his office is a permeable membrane for ideas and conditions that could radically swerve projects from a pat portfolio predicated on a single signature. The openness allowed by his agnosticism makes the practice not only malleable but also multi-vocal. The very lack of a fixed and fixing ideological system has opened