

## Light fantastic

**People and place are what influence the architecture of Richard Meier. And he's a purist when it comes to light, creating spaces where you can't help but look up in awe.**



For Richard Meier, fashion has no place in modern architecture. Meier's commitment to a completely white palette is legendary, while his relentless manipulation of light and space is an enduring trademark in a world where trendiness often takes precedence over substance. His preoccupation with how his buildings will fit in to their surrounding environment - and be used by the people for whom they are destined - has remained unchanged over five decades; Meier's modernist principles are constant but never static.

Aged 70 this year, Meier's unruffled presence confirms the impression of an intensely focused, confident artist, architect and craftsman. His white, neatly combed wavy locks, large spectacles and dark double-breasted suit give him the air of a sophisticated academic. He is polite, articulate, reserved, well-travelled and looks as if he rarely loses his cool. And he has little reason to. In 1984, he won the profession's highest accolade, the Pritzker prize. In July 1996, Vanity Fair heralded him the "architect of the decade" by virtue of his US\$1 billion commission from the J Paul Getty Trust for its Los Angeles arts centre. One of the largest single commissions in architectural history, it dominated 14 years of his life.

In *Building the Getty*, Meier wrote that the task was so herculean and complex that it "turned into a long personal and professional journey". In a 1998 interview, he said he thought his life's biggest labour was probably behind him.

Despite this expression of humility, Meier is still active. With several museums, residential projects, office blocks and shopping complexes underway in the US, Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic, he has many high-profile openings to look forward to. These include a museum to house the Frieder Burda collection of 20th-century art in Baden-Baden, Germany; a civic centre in San Jose, California; and a new museum complex in Rome to house a ninth century BC Altar erected to celebrate Emperor Augustus's victories.

The latter project, located in the centre of Rome, has been plagued for more than eight years by political and architectural wrangling which Meier finds deeply frustrating. "What's the alternative? To let it decay" he asks incredulously, claiming nevertheless to be "optimistic" about the possibility of the complex being ready by mid-2005.

The most recent major Meier launch also took place in Rome in October 2003. The occasion was the inauguration of the architect's first church. The Jubilee Church, as its name suggests, was supposed to be ready in time for the 2000 celebrations. Technical difficulties, particularly the raising of the pre-cast concrete sails, seriously delayed the project, so much so that at the inauguration a mixed atmosphere of relief and pride was palpable.

The Roman Catholic Church is in an outlying and uninspiring built-up suburb east of the city. Its all-white majesty, abundant use of glass skylights and three curved sails, which range from 17 to almost 27 metres high, take it into the league of truly outstanding buildings.

Upon entering the church, visitors and parishioners are captivated by the play of light. Despite being surrounded by apartment blocks on two sides and a vast car park (which the architect says he hopes "to get rid of and turn into a proper public space") on the other, Meier was able to see the good in the site. "I like the fact that you approach it directly, yet it's also a part of a neighbourhood." He finds the proximity of the houses and the way people come out onto their balconies, almost becoming part of the church, very appealing.

Addressing both a building's specific site and its immediate surroundings are two very important concepts in Meier's personal architectural vocabulary. His two recently completed glass-sided 16-storey towers in Lower Manhattan (in a formerly industrial and desolate waterfront area west of Greenwich village) are special to him. This is because they, along with a third which is still under construction on an adjacent street, have created a "sense of place" and a "neighbourhood" where previously there was none.



## A world of white and light

When Meier was awarded the Pritzker Prize, he explained elegantly and definitively his predilection for the non-colour white. "Where other colours have relative values dependent upon their context, white retains its absoluteness. At the same time, it may function as a colour itself. Goethe said: 'Color is the pain of light.' Whiteness is perhaps the memory and the anticipation of colour."

Meier is very serious about white. So much so that when asked whether he will be following what the Jubilee church's young parish priest will do to the interior's pure and untainted walls, he is only half-joking when he warns: "I certainly hope there won't be any surprises." White is also a fundamental counterpart to light in Meier's work. As he said at the 1984 ceremony: "It is against a white surface that one best appreciates the play of light and shadow, solids and voids."

When designing the Barcelona's Museum of Contemporary Art in a densely inhabited part of the city's old town, Meier was relieved that they were able to remove some of the "decaying buildings...in order to open it up and create a public plaza on two sides". Of course, that let in the vital quotient of light intrinsic to Meier's works.

Although he says all light is unique wherever in the world you may be, Meier admits that he has never worked in Scandinavia "or a place where it's dark half of the year". He believes he would have "difficulty" doing so. If anyone finds this unwavering approach to light too purist or formal, Meier's reasons may surprise them. "Light is different today than it will be two months from today," he says, clearly relishing the fact that light constitutes a constant element of surprise, and can never be pinned down.

As well as being an architect, Meier is also an artist, sculptor and industrial designer. Some of his collages and objects, such as light fixtures, clocks, watches, pens, tableware, furniture and silverware, have been exhibited at recent shows in Frankfurt and Atlanta. Meier explains his prolific output by saying simply that "he likes to make things".

What he doesn't like is choosing one field, one creation or one element of his work, above another. His architecture, sculptures, objects and collages are "separate disciplines," he once said, "and however they come together they do".



Meier is happy to cite past influences, suggesting he is organically linked to them but that this relationship is constantly evolving. Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier figure prominently, as does Alvar Aalto, and, from previous centuries, Donato Bramante and Francesco Borromini. The latter's fine baroque masterpiece, St Ivo church in Rome, comes up regularly in interviews with Meier. He finds the simplicity of this dazzling white building ("where you can't help but look up") utterly and endlessly compelling.

The notion of looking up is something that attracts Meier to another sort of building, one that he has not yet realised but would dearly love to design: a skyscraper in his own district, Manhattan.

His proposal for the World Trade Center site included an innovative take on the traditional skyscraper made up of two buildings with five vertical sections and inter-connecting horizontal floors, with cantilevered ends "reaching toward the city and each other". The proposed structure, at once soaring and reassuring in its horizontality, is meant to suggest "screens of presence and absence" that would encourage reflection and imagination.

Meier once said that architecture "is vital and enduring because it contains us; it describes space, space we move through, exit in and use". Move through one of Meier's light-filled spaces of white and glass and you'll experience a sense of connection and continuity and an eloquent sense of space and serenity.