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***Richard Meier***  
***The J. Paul Getty Museum***  
***Los Angeles, California, 1984-1997***

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Richard Meier's Getty Center opened to the public in December 1997. It was fourteen years in planning and construction, the result of a decision to build a campus that would house the functions of the Getty Trust, the arts foundation brought into being through the bequest of oilman J. Paul Getty (1892-1976). Built at a cost of more than \$1,000,000,000, the Getty Center was designed to provide a second home for the J. Paul Getty Museum (to supplement the existing Malibu building), and, as planned, new quarters for the Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, the Conservation Institute, the Information Institute, the Education Institute, and the Grant Program. Meier distributed these programs in six buildings, in which approximately 1,200 employees work.

Although the project was under the general direction of the Trust's founding president Harold Williams and the direct supervision of Stephen Rountree, Building Program Director, the directors of each of the Trust's separate programs also interacted with Meier as individual clients.

Among them, the most significantly engaged were the museum's director John Walsh and the Research Institute's founding director Kurt Forster, who both determined that Meier's buildings would articulate their distinct but strong senses of purpose and propriety. Critics and architect alike acknowledge that, of all the buildings on the site, the Research Institute most fully expresses the architectural qualities that Meier has pursued in his practice and for which he is known - a crystalline tectonic clarity, made possible through steel, reinforced concrete, and glass construction, which dynamically expresses innovative functional planning.

In the case of the Research Institute, this was the ramped, open design of the library reading room as a two-story volume a round a skylit, circular well. Designed as a group of five linked, two-story pavilions, each with access to dramatic city views and a serenely beautiful central courtyard, the museum might also have been acclaimed as a canonical masterwork. However, the traditional treatment of its interiors, outfitted by architect Thierry Despont, masks the architectural concept and compromises the integrity of the museum as a whole.

***The Site***

In 1983, the Getty Trust acquired the hill top site on the city's famously wealthy Westside, where it is surrounded by bucolic residential hideaways and where it lies close to the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and the San Diego Freeway - two of the area's most visible thoroughfares. While this site was heralded as one of the last dramatic, unbuilt view sites in the city available for a large-scale public building, the Trust's choice of this site was also greeted with criticism for its connotations of elitist withdrawal from the sprawling urban fabric below. The choice of the site was fraught with practical complications as well - not only the resultant costs of developing a hilltop, but also the ensuing negotiations with neighboring property owners. Their concerns resulted in an agreement

that allowed the Getty to develop only 24 acres on the 742-acre site and that influenced a wide variety of design decisions, from the height of the buildings to exterior claddings.

The Trust named Meier as its architect in October 1984. As early as August of 1984, he wrote about the site, "The spectacular site... invites the architect to search out a precise and exquisitely reciprocal relationship between built architecture and natural topography. This implies a harmony of parts; a rational procedure; concern for qualities of proportion, rhythm, and repose; precision of detail, constructional integrity, programmatic appropriateness; and, not least, a respect for human scale... In my mind's eye I see a classic structure, elegant and timeless, emerging serene and ideal, from the rough hillside, a kind of Aristotelian structure within the landscape."

Both Meier and his clients desired to create a canonical masterpiece with strong classical and classical-modernist pedigrees.

### ***The Parti***

A proper understanding of Meier's design for the Getty Center must begin, as he did, with the generating topography of the site. His respondent plan established the grids and geometries that guided his parti for the Getty's programs. An early orientational decision was to create two overlapping grids that tied the site and Meier's buildings to the larger geographical and urban contexts. One grid reflected the dominant grid of the city spreading to the east and south, and it governed the disposition of the Arrival Plaza, the Food Services Building, the museum, and, eventually, Robert Irwin's Central Garden. The other grid followed the diagonally inflected turn of the adjacent San Diego Freeway as it courses through the Sepulveda Pass in the Santa Monica Mountains; it organized the complex of three structures at the northern end of the site - the Auditorium, the North Building, and the East Building.

Meier's complexly layered parti makes dramatic use of underground or externally sealed programmatic elements and interconnecting passage ways. Above the 896' datum, which establishes the "ground plane" of the building site, Meier's masses are open but reach no higher than three stories, as stipulated by the municipal building permit. However, many buildings at the Getty Center extend as many as three stories below the 896' datum. The Getty's subterranean layers required strong order. Meier not only manipulated the adjacencies of underground volumes and paths to achieve harmonious internal relationships, but also created many patios, sunken gardens, and skylights that bring light and air into these crucial parts of the buildings, which are filled with staff offices and work areas. In its interlocking spatiality, the Getty Center makes reference to densely built Roman urban spaces and reminds us of the imperial forums.

### ***The Architectural Image***

As built, Meier's Getty Center reconciles the open and columnar bodies of Greek temples, the bold and tactile stereometric masses of Roman construction, and the white-washed surfaces of Spanish villages, as well as the California modernisms of Rudolf Schindler's and Richard Neutra's spatially dynamic buildings and Frank Lloyd Wright's inventive concrete-block structures. Meier filtered his allusions through the admiration of the "classical modernists" - Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn - for such archetypal monuments as the Athenian Acropolis, Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, and Mediterranean hill towns.

Through them, he gave the Getty the "urbane" image the complex wanted.

While Meier's sense of the "urbane" was clearly shaped by reference to Roman and Renaissance precedents, he surely did not discount medieval examples, from Assisi to Orvieto and including such a chronologically and culturally heterogeneous site as the Alhambra.

Meier's site plans for the Getty Center reveal a composition in which figure and ground are

conceived as integral units. His compositional strategies, rooted as they are in classical tradition, also recall the twentieth-century artistic experiments in the fifties, sixties, and seventies of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella. Indeed, a case in point are the diagonally inflected, shaped and textured canvases in multiple planes of relief that Stella, with whose artistic production Meier has long been intimately connected, executed in the early seventies.

In light of earlier, "pre-Getty" trajectories of Meier's rigorous design vocabulary and given the centralized administrative structure that emerged in the Getty Trust during the design process, it is remarkable that Meier orchestrated such different architectural vocabularies for the individual buildings within the densely configured site. His distinct solutions responded in many ways to the existing urban and site conditions.

Meier sought forms that might help each program of the Trust realize its goals and express its institutional identity. For each, he developed an appropriately "modernist" geometry, concept, and formal vocabulary to generate unique form: an Aalto-esque arching volume for the Auditorium, a mini-highrise for the North Building, Wrightian (and also echoing Neutra and Schindler) planes cantilevered from a service core for the East Building, Kahn-like rectilinear geometries for the museum, a Meier-esque cylinder with a spiral ramp around an open center for the Research Institute, and a playful, open pavilion for Food Services. The forms of each were, of course, integral to the whole and were manifested most emphatically at the plaza level.

Long views from below the Getty site and roadway approaches reveal massive elevations dictated by the Center's program and specific provisions of the building permit. Nevertheless, neither Meier nor the Getty seemed uncomfortable with the symbolic connotations of hilltops, citadels, fortresses, and walled cities.

Indeed, they were a crucial prototype for the expression as early as the first trips by the program directors to central Italy.

Furthermore, they provided to Meier a unique opportunity to express the monumentality and essential unity of the complex as a whole. At the edges he could position the big forms and monumental movements of the masses that enclosed the museum and basement stories of the other buildings as the image of the Getty. These masses, truly Roman in scale and weight, house vast areas of program, except in the museum, and serve as platforms upon which the recessed buildings in their more architectural articulated systems are seated.

### ***The Getty Center Museum***

At the Getty Center almost all roads lead to the museum, and Meier's composition focuses attention toward, into, and through the museum lobby's rotunda and culminates in views of the Pacific Ocean beyond the museum courtyard. Visitors enter the museum through a magnificent backlit lobby - an open structure defined by spectacular plays of circles, squares, and sweeping arcs of staircases that seem to float in the air.

Meier and his clients conceived the museum in response to the popularity of the Getty Museum in Malibu, where visitors have reacted enthusiastically to the relaxed scale and the balance between architecture and landscape. The new museum's program, therefore, called for independent pavilions to "organize the collections logically and provide the visitor with routes of travel which are rewarding in their variety, surprise, and beauty." Meier's design created informal processional itineraries along which visitors could choose to travel. They could decide to make an ambling circuit on one level or the other, passing into and out of pavilions through either the courtyard at the lower level or through glazed skybridges at the upper level. Alternately, they could choose to explore both levels of a single pavilion before moving on to another.

A three-by-three square parti generates the design of each of the Museum's five pavilions, in which

galleries are composed of volumetric groupings of units. Gallery units, whose geometries are based on the site's governing 2-foot 6-inch module, sometimes contract or expand; sometimes stand alone or connect in twos and threes. They sometimes escape the "tick-tack-toe" frame to be deployed nearby or sometimes rotate to echo the site's secondary axis. The general rule governing their disposition is that galleries for the permanent collections obey the grid established by the dominant site axis that parallels the San Diego Freeway, while galleries for temporary and orientation galleries follow the grid established by the diagonal turn of the Freeway through the Sepulveda Pass. Another general compositional rule is that at least one of the nine units rises like a cortile through both floors of a pavilion to achieve vertical integration and circulation. Avoiding sequential enfilades of symmetrically orchestrated spaces, circulation is generally peripheral and favors modernist, almost Wrightian, plays to the corners. Volumes and processional sequences do not follow any singular geometric order. Each series of spaces creates an experiential domain appropriate to the works of art on display and to processional sequences through the galleries - those twenty-nine on the courtyard level, which are devoid of natural light for the display of light-sensitive works of art, and those twenty skylit volumes above for paintings and other works that benefit from viewing in conditions of controlled natural light. The galleries, however, are most powerful where coved ceilings and/or distinctively shaped skylights give critical and powerful definition to the formal character of the spaces, providing variety throughout the museum experience.

During the design process, Meier never ceased attempting to meet the aesthetic requirements of the museum, which apparently did not return the gift of good faith in its ability to compromise on issues fundamental to the integrity of his work.

The fate of Meier's gallery interiors was perhaps predictable from the outset of the commission. The museum's programmatic and public statements about the ideal museum-goer's experience pointed strongly to the eventuality that Meier's surfaces would be covered by the decorative wall treatments and color schemes associated with some of the grandes dames of European and American museums - a tradition for which the museum's staff had never disguised their esteem. "We need a museum building that plays skillful accompanist to the collection. The building should subordinate itself to the works of art in the galleries, assert itself with dignity and grace in the public spaces... We hope that the building can give modern form to the well-proven virtues, aesthetic and functional, of the great museums of the past. We require settings for the works of art that bear some relation to their original context, with lighting, scale, décor, and materials chosen to make works of art look at home - albeit in a home of the 1990s. Visual competition needs to be kept to a minimum."

As early as 1989, the Trust commissioned New York architect and decorator Thierry Despont to design period-inspired, historical sets for the fifteen museum galleries dedicated to the display of the decorative arts collection; suddenly in 1994, his commission was extended to include the materials and finishes for the museum's other galleries. Despont and his clients chose to cover the walls with fabrics that would, in their view, mediate between Meier's architecture and the collections, creating a third medium that could bring harmony to the aesthetic ensemble. This represented for Meier a painful compromise of foundational principles upon which rest his modernist commitment to tectonic expression and to the values of "materiality" and "surface" over "illusion" and "decoration." Consequently, only a few signature spaces remain in the museum as remnants of Meier's unremittent desires for the galleries - most unadulterated is the space in the southwest pavilion, which was reserved for the expected acquisition of Canova's *Three Graces*, but, after the denial of a British export license, is temporarily empty.

Indeed, the museum's architectural concept survives primarily in the pure volumetric geometries of the galleries where the cove vaulting and skylight structures hover splendidly above the comfort

zone that Despont created to protect the works of art from architectural competition. So, too, does it survive in Meier's powerfully modernist passageways among pavilions that frankly express their concrete and steel construction and glass and metal panel cladding. These unique zones of pure architectural expression create poetic transitions that link interior and exterior forms and tie the buildings to the landscape. Ironically, the museum imagined these transitions as furnishing "intervals of relaxation" to many visitors. Instead, they provide intervals of architectural excitement between the decorous but anomalous covered surfaces reserved for works of art.

Nevertheless, the museum's courtyard is one of the consummate ensembles of Meier's Getty and of his career. Its drama derives from the subtle orchestration of a structural vocabulary that juxtaposes cleft travertine blocks with smooth metal and glass panels. The rectilinear stone masses demarcate the volumes of the museum's galleries and signify security and permanence. The free-form metal and glass shapes are subtly deployed in the bridges linking the pavilions and in their separate entrances, where they connote passage and transition. A long, gently rising ramp that sweeps visitors up to the temporary exhibition gallery enhances the patio's quiet grandeur. Polished, translucent travertine pavers and tranquil water channels record changes in the California light, which, in turn, brings to life the patio's textural contrasts and proportional dynamics. Soft plantings and seemingly incidentally placed stone benches, which Meier rescued as discarded fragments from the Italian quarry, provide a calm and poetic effect. In every direction are sequential opportunities for views of the Central Garden and the Research Institute, as well as of the Pacific Ocean to the west and of Bel Air, the San Gabriel Mountains, and downtown Los Angeles to the east, all of which Meier carefully framed with the buildings' masses. In this patio stonescape of sublime power, he achieves a poetry of material expression that is perhaps unsurpassed since Louis Kahn. It is here in the museum courtyard that Meier's architectural achievement at the Getty Center is most clearly and unequivocally realized.