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## INTERIORS

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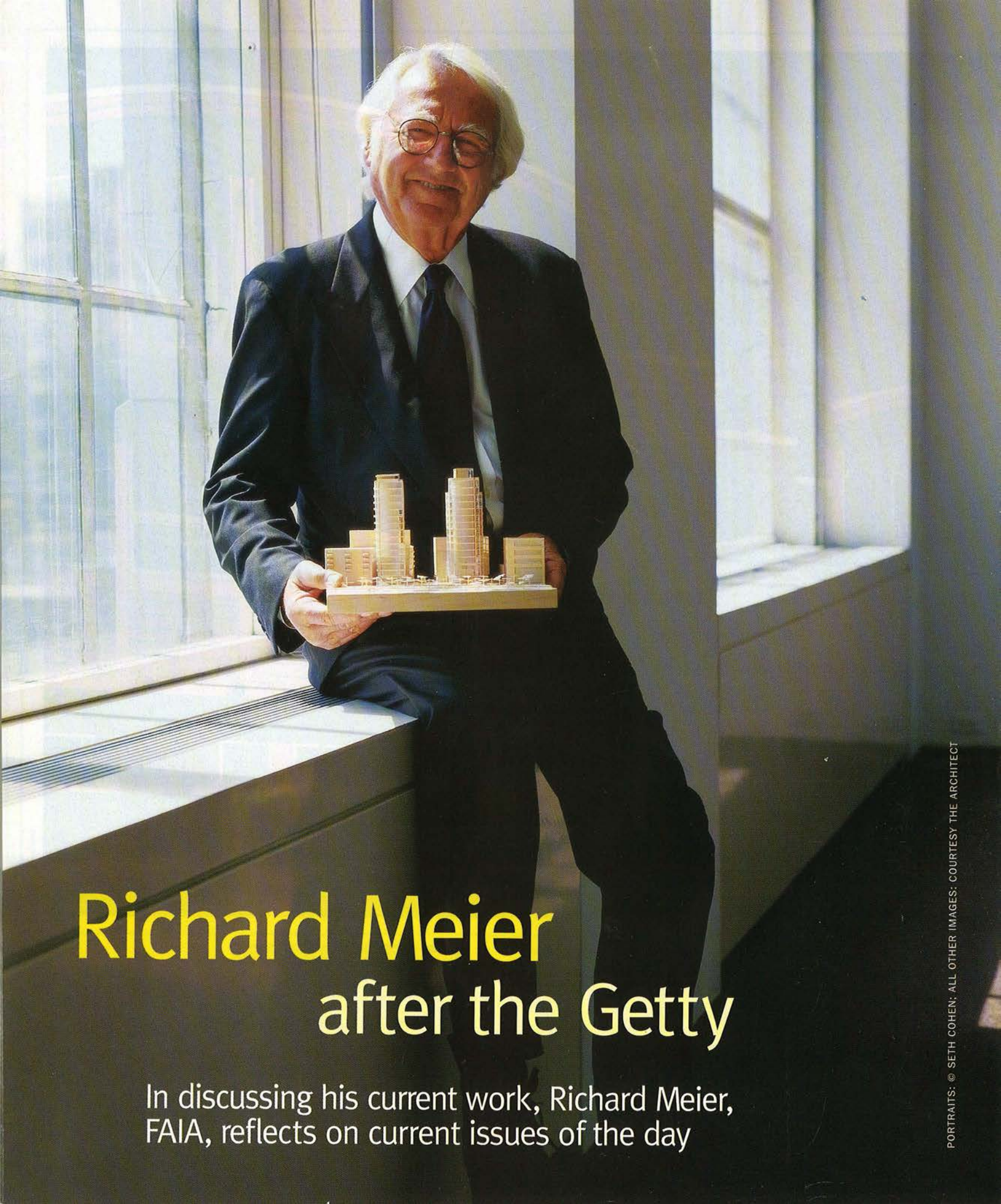
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Record Visits Richard Meier

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# Richard Meier after the Getty

In discussing his current work, Richard Meier, FAIA, reflects on current issues of the day

Interviewed by Robert Ivy, FAIA

**I**t's been five years since the opening of the Getty Center—the Big Kahuna of Richard Meier's career [ARCHITECTURAL RECORD, November 1997, page 78]. Since the Getty was completed, the eminent architect has found himself working on a number of smaller projects, while still keeping offices in New York and Los Angeles. On the eve of his 40th year with his own practice, ARCHITECTURAL RECORD visited Meier to discuss his current work and his thoughts on a number of topics, such as the difference between European and American architecture, the importance of technical innovations, the influence of the computer on design, and the planning for the World Trade Center site. As is well known, after he got his B.Arch. from Cornell in 1957 Meier's career began with houses. He worked for Davis Brody Wisniewski, then Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and finally, Marcel Breuer before opening his own office. His designs for houses immediately brought him renown, and he became known for his mastery of scale, detail, and simplicity. During his career, Meier has never wavered from his commitment to the Modernist vocabulary, nor suc-

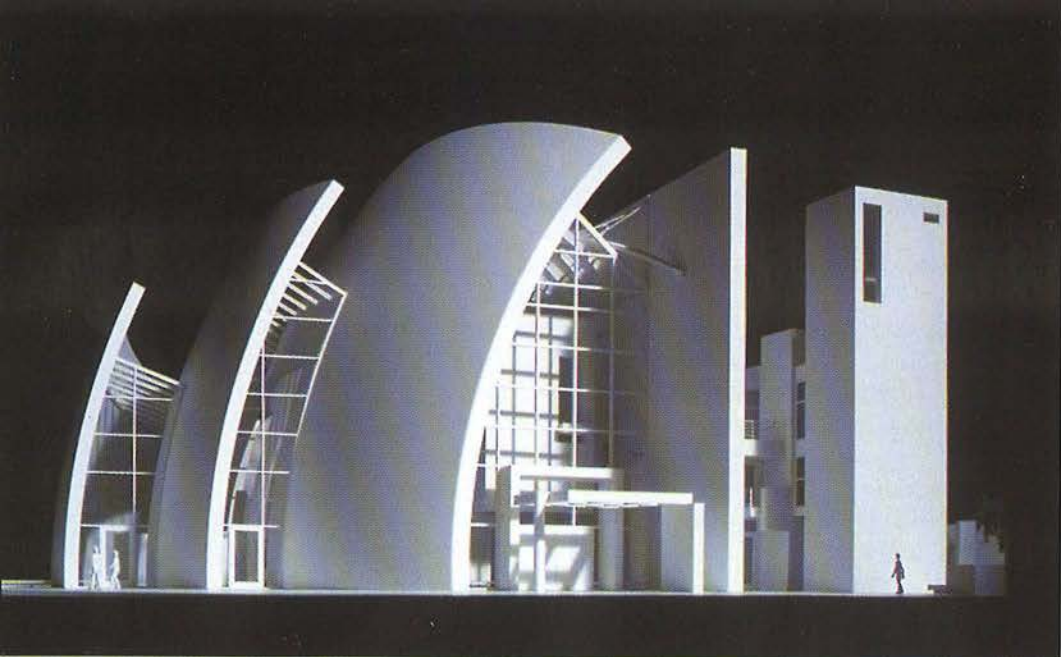
cumbed to the vicissitudes of fashion. Instead, he has been able to accomplish a difficult thing for an "established" architect with an expanding practice: maintain rigorously high standards of design.

**ARCHITECTURAL RECORD:** Your career took off with the Smith House in New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1965, which was followed by other residential projects, museums, schools, office buildings, and town halls, until finally the Getty Center, finished in late 1997. Where do you go after the "commission of the century"?

**RICHARD MEIER:** Ironically, right now we're doing a number of small-scale projects. At the time we were working on the Getty, I was doing many other things. I would spend two weeks a month at the Getty and then two weeks working on other projects. When the Getty was completed after 18 years, other work was finished, as well, such as Siemens in Munich (1986). And shortly after the Getty, the federal courthouses in Islip, New York, and Phoenix opened. More recently, we finished the Rickmers Headquarters in Hamburg, Germany, and the Canon

The 173/176 Perry Street Condominium Towers in New York City, shown in a photomontage, is nearing completion.



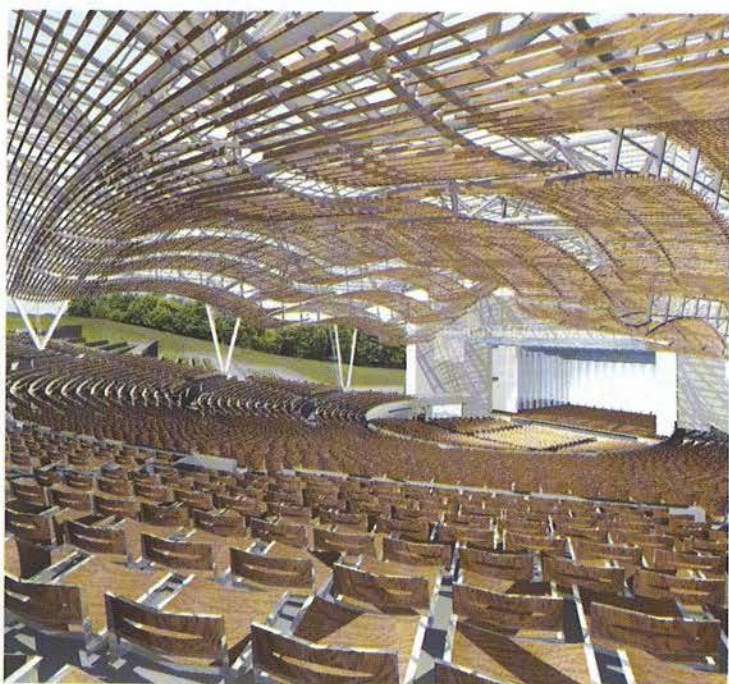


**Jubilee Church, in the Tor Tre Teste area of Rome (left), is under construction; completion is expected in 2004.**

**The Cittadella Bridge, Alessandria, Italy, awaits approvals for a go-ahead.**



**The Bethel Performing Arts Center was designed in 2001 for Bethel, New York.**



Headquarters in Tokyo.

Yet I hadn't thought the Getty would leave as much of a void as in fact it has. The current economic and political situation has slowed things down. Universities seem to be our most active source of work right now; for example, we are designing the new building for the History of Art department and Arts Library at Yale, and a Life

Science Technology Building at Cornell University. But the private sector has pulled back the greatest amount in terms of their planning for the future.

**AR:** Which small-scale projects are of particular interest to you?

**RM:** We're doing a small, private art museum in Baden-Baden for Frieder Burda—an entrepreneur who has an extraordinary collection of contemporary art. The project, which is in a city park next to the Kunsthalle, is like a big house. Burda is giving the building and the collection to the city. We're also doing the Peek & Cloppenburg Department Store in Mannheim, Germany, and a bridge in Alessandria, in northern Italy, which did have some problems but is going ahead. In the United States, our L.A. office is adding onto Philip Johnson's Crystal Cathedral in Orange Grove, California, with a Hospitality and Visitors Center. And we are designing some houses—one in Katonah, New York, the other in Santa Barbara, California.

**AR:** Yet you still design houses. Why? Often architectural offices of a certain size don't want to be bothered.

**RM:** I enjoy houses—that's why I got involved advising Coco Brown on selecting architects for his Sagaponack development on Long Island. A house goes quickly compared to a public building. And you can do different things with houses, such as explore energy conservation by making use of location, climate, orientation to the site. We've explored the use of glass louvers on the Katonah house to cut down glare.

**AR:** And, of course, there is the Jubilee Church in Rome, which is not so simple. This series of curved shells has a more plastic expression than much of your previous work. Is this fluidity a design direction on your part?

**RM:** This church really demanded a different attitude and a different approach. The sanctuary space is composed of three sections of a sphere, which enclose the day chapel, the baptistry, and the atrium, with natural light coming in from above. These curved walls are cantilevered vertically from the ground, with glass all around and between them. Rather than being poured-in-place concrete, they are precast, since it was easier to control the form of the sphere and give the sections the same smooth, white surface inside and out. By the way, we're using the concrete originally developed by Nervi, when he designed the Palazzo and Palazzetto dello Sport stadiums in Rome in the late 1950s.

In the church, each segment of the sphere weighs about 8 tons. The segments were shipped to the site, where a crane moved along a track and installed the pieces, which were then posttensioned. No one's ever erected anything of this scale in terms of a precast assembly system. And I must say, we have extraordinary structural engineers, Italcementi, who



The Peek & Cloppenburg Department Store, in Mannheim, Germany (above), to open in 2004, features a three-story-high glass enclosure cantilevered from the main structure.

The Rickmers Reederei Headquarters, in Hamburg, Germany (right), has just been completed. Notable is an elegantly glazed screenlike wall.



The Burda Collection Museum, in Baden-Baden, Germany (below), goes into construction this fall.



worked with us in Italy and figured out how this thing could be manufactured, taken to the site, and erected.

**AR:** Initially you described a challenging business environment, but intellectually, you're involved with new ideas here. Although the church has been going slowly, doesn't it explore form and material differently from anything you have done?

**RM:** No one's done it before! With another project, the Performing Arts Center in Bethel, New York, we designed a curved glass roof over a louvered timber ceiling, all supported by a space frame that spans 200 feet. Unfortunately, the project is not going ahead, but the concept, which we worked out with Arup, would have provided an outdoor roofed space sheltering 3,500 people, with additional seating on the lawn for 10,000.

**AR:** As an architect, you have been readily accepted in Europe. Here in Manhattan—other than the renovation for Westbeth artists' housing (1970)—you hadn't had a major new building until you designed the Perry Street apartments now being completed in the West Village. How did you get involved with an American developer?

**RM:** The Perry Street project is actually owned by a consortium of developers, including Richard Born, Ira Drukier, Charles Blaichman—and other investors, one of whom suggested me. Certain ones in the group have been involved in boutique hotels. This is also a small project: There are only 14 floors and 28 apartments in two buildings. Each building stands on the corner of Perry Street and West Street to create a gateway for the Village near the water. It makes Perry Street a symbol of the regeneration of this area.

**AR:** Why are the buildings split into two towers and placed across a street from each other?

**RM:** The consortium owned the two sites, and one site is almost twice the size of the other one. The smaller one, on the north, has 2,200 square feet per floor, while the southern side has 4,400 square feet. They are designed as simplexes, or to be combined into duplexes and triplexes.

**AR:** Are you going to live there?

**RM:** I think so.

**AR:** It is said that one reason the architecture is so good in Europe is the widespread competition process. Do you agree?

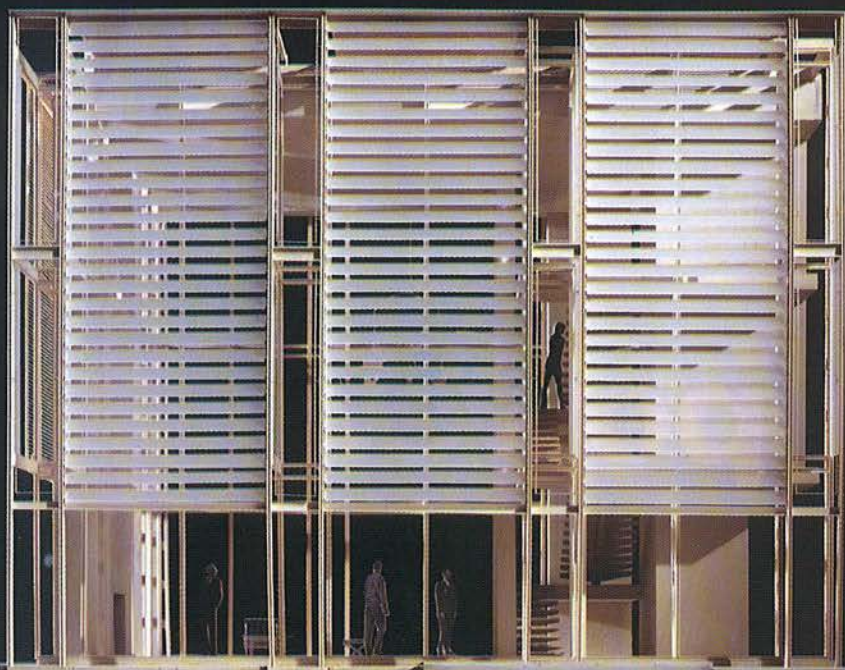
**RM:** The Jubilee Church resulted from a competition. Almost all of our European projects resulted from competitions, which enable architects to do very important work.

**AR:** You had both municipal and corporate clients there?

**RM:** That's right. And they were all competitions.

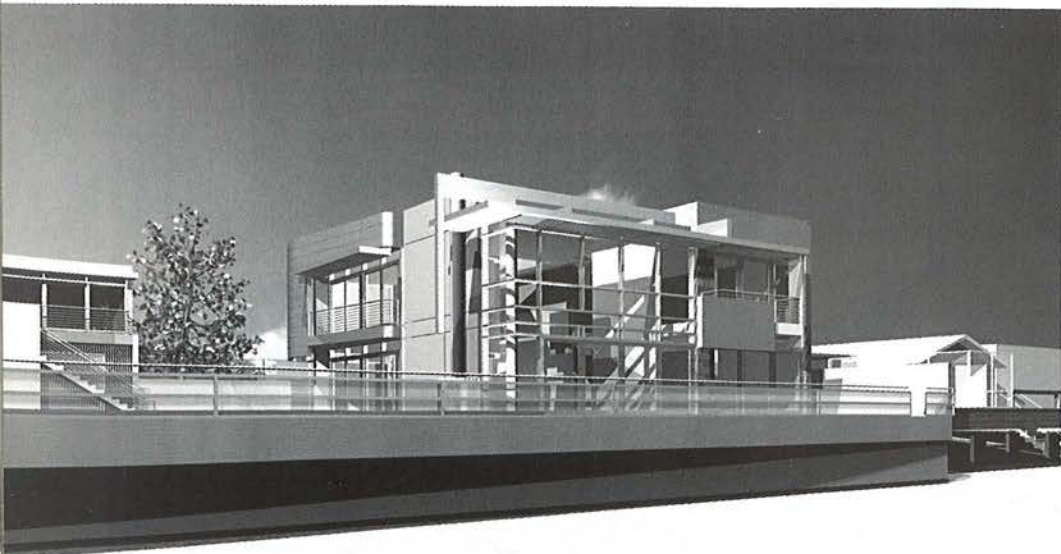
**AR:** If the competition model were accepted in America, would that be beneficial to architecture?

**RM:** That's a good question, because I keep saying I'm not doing any



A house in Katonah, New York, unbuilt, was designed to be covered with a skin of glass louvers and stainless-steel rods. A portion of the model shows the triple-height living room facing south.

A Southern California house, just finished, has painted aluminum wall panels.



more competitions. And yet, I'm working on one now—in New York. It's for the redevelopment of Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, and I'm doing it with Arata Isozaki. But often a competition requires a huge amount of work for very little payback. I was a young architect when I began entering competitions in Europe. Also, European offices are set up in a way to do them—where a whole portion of the office just works on competitions. And European competitions are run well. It is the way of selecting an architect for a building that's going to be built. In America, a competition is often used to throw out some ideas and then decide what to do.

**AR:** Here the competition is the beginning stage for the fund-raising.

**RM:** That's exactly right. And you're just being used. For that reason, many competitions in America are a sham. Another drawback is that

too often the winning design is not thought through—the architects just move on. There's no new engagement with a client as a result of it.

**AR:** Do you think Lower Manhattan could benefit from a competition for the World Trade Center site?

**RM:** No one knows enough about how to write the program for this site in order to conduct a competition. Ground Zero is such an emotionally and politically complicated situation that it's going to take time to figure out what ideas are appropriate. Everyone has to be heard.

**AR:** Let's assume that the Development Authority comes up with a realistic program five or six months from now, and there's a real competition process set up. Then ...?

**RM:** Then a competition would be fabulous. Of course, you'd have to have a good jury. It should not be open. It should be an invited, limited competition. Some people wouldn't like that because it raises the question about why X is chosen and not Y. Nevertheless, it puts a certain seriousness into the process.

**AR:** And then there is that old question about building tall buildings. Where do you weigh in? Do they have a place in our future?

**RM:** The 21st century should be a century of tall buildings—as was the 20th. Now there is a hesitation to design an important tall building because of the fear of creating a symbol of something wonderful, which then becomes a target for terrorism. Eventually, I hope and pray this will no longer be the case. But it is going to be difficult, especially at Ground Zero, to design very tall buildings. They could sit empty for quite a while. But, tall is relative. Towers don't have to be 110 stories. Buildings of 50, 60, 70 stories make sense (continued on page 248)

**RICHARD MEIER** (continued from page 106) since everything around the World Trade Center site is 55 stories.

**AR:** The ghastly changes proposed to convert your Bronx Developmental Center of 1978 into an office building [ARCHITECTURAL RECORD, March, page 23] must have been another sort of shock.

**RM:** Shock, horror, sadness, and disbelief all apply. I believe in progress and change, but when you see your own work being destroyed for something that is not going to be half of what it was, you wonder. It just needed a good cleaning.

We talk about architecture being like your child—when it's built, there's a point it has a life of its own, and you hope it's a good one. You've given it all the learning and experience you have. For the most part, I feel very gratified when I go back and see buildings I did 10, 15, and 20 years ago.

**AR:** How have you been affected by changes in technology? Such as virtual architecture?

**RM:** With virtual architecture and anything ephemeral, the idea behind it has to be relevant and meaningful. Otherwise it's without ideas and who cares? I also have a real peeve, which everyone in this office knows very much firsthand, and I've expressed it to students whenever I can. Everything is drawn on the computer so we can do certain things faster, and hopefully more accurately.



Richard Meier, shown with a model of the Peek & Cloppenburg Department Store in Mannheim, Germany.

But many people, especially those coming out of school today, show a lack of understanding of scale. And I don't only mean the scale of the spaces they are drawing on the computer, but the scale of a line, which determines the scale of that opening. How big is that door? This has to do with scale at every level, from the overall concept to the last detail. Often someone will say, "I'll measure it." But, you shouldn't have to measure it—you should know what you're drawing.

**AR:** Do you use this computer technology in the office? Do you build your models virtually?

**RM:** No, no, we still build actual models. We use the computer for presentations.

**AR:** American architecture has taken a drubbing for playing it safe—for a lack of risk-taking. What do you think about the status of American architecture today?

**RM:** Architecture's in a great place at the moment. There's an extraordinary amount of innovation and creativity, as well as a return to a search for clarity. We see this not only in America; we see it all over the world. Communication is faster than ever—it's

really creating an awareness and thoughtfulness on the part of architects everywhere. There's a search for what's meaningful and appropriate to the place, and for the most straightforward, simplest way to express architectural ideas. ■

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