

# THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING RENZO PIANO

THE MAVERICK GENOESE ARCHITECT  
HAS BUILT AN INTERNATIONAL  
REPUTATION WITH DARING  
PROJECTS THAT SPAN THE GLOBE  
By Richard Covington, *Smithsonian*, June 1999

The IBM executives were skeptical. The polycarbonate pyramid that architect Renzo Piano had lugged into the Paris offices looked far too fragile. After all, it had to serve as the fundamental building block for the company's new traveling exhibition pavilion, not as some flimsy circus tent. Fortunately for Piano, he had come prepared. Blue eyes gleaming behind wire-rimmed glasses like a gleeful Rasputin, the black-bearded architect set the pyramid on the floor, hauled out a sledgehammer and delivered it a crashing blow. The pyramid wasn't even scratched. Later that day, Piano got word that his design for the pavilion had been approved.



The striking wooden forms of the Tjibaou Cultural Center in Noumea, New Caledonia, were inspired by indigenous Kanak designs and beliefs.

That was in the spring of 1983, when the Genoese architect was an obstreperous 45-year-old. Now, the 1998 winner of the Pritzker Prize, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in the field of architecture, rarely resorts to such drama to prove his point. These days, he prefers comedy.

Piano's beard may have turned an avuncular white and his rumpled hair gray, but he still cuts a trim, energetic figure. Dapper in blue workshirt, khakis and no tie, the architect is presiding over a recent meeting at Punta Nave, his workshop on Italy's Ligurian coast. Clients, architects, construction engineers and builders have converged on the workshop to discuss a 38-story office tower for Sydney, Australia, that will be enveloped by a massive translucent "sail," a dramatically innovative design that has the dual purpose of capturing sea breezes off the harbor and at the same time echoing the sail-like chambered-nautilus roof of the city's signature opera house 2,600 feet away. It is classic Piano, a fundamentally practical and graceful gesture intended to complement rather than upstage the existing skyline.

The clients are concerned that pedestrians may knock off some of the ground level "baguettes," the terra-cotta strips that run horizontally along the building's facade. When one of the Sydney builders suggests starting the strips higher up the building, Piano playfully pulls his pant legs up from his leather-topped boating shoes and toddles about like Charlie Chaplin.

"If we do that, your building will look like it has on shorts," deadpans the architect, amid general good-natured laughter.

Shining through his unflappable charm, engaging sense of humor and wry self-effacement is a will as tough and resilient as the polycarbonate pyramid of long ago. As usual, Piano gets his own way, and he gets it without making anyone else regret not getting theirs.

Ever since 1977, when Piano and British partner Richard Rogers shocked the architectural establishment with the Georges Pompidou Center, that parody of high-tech design moored in the 18th-century heart of Paris, he has relished and exploited his role as maverick. With its jaunty red, blue, yellow and green exposed ducts and a covered escalator snaking up its transparent façade (*right*), the Pompidou, also known as the Beaubourg, is now one of the most recognized landmarks in Paris. A five-story cultural complex covering more than a million square feet, the center



contains a museum devoted to modern art, temporary exhibition spaces, cinemas, a concert hall, traditional and multimedia libraries and archives, and a spectacular rooftop view. With 25,000 visitors a day, the Pompidou soon became the most-visited building in the city and is now closed for sorely needed renovations and a thoroughgoing makeover.

Under Piano's supervision, the cavernous entrance hall will be filled with a new cafe and media center; a separate entrance for library patrons will reduce long waiting lines; and the charmless rooftop eatery will be spruced up into a fancier, full-service restaurant. The center is scheduled to reopen for the millennium, rather theatrically on the stroke of midnight December 31, 1999. Given the architect's record for punctuality, you can bet it will.

French president Georges Pompidou chose Piano and Rogers, both in their early 30s when the Pompidou commission was awarded in 1970, because he wanted to make a bold architectural statement. With the Piano-Rogers design, he got his wish and then some. The Pompidou Center attracted controversy the way the former nearby food market of Les Halles once drew three-star chefs. French steelmakers insisted that the girders the duo had designed would collapse and refused en masse to build them. Piano and Rogers did the unthinkable: they hired German contractors who delivered the girders under cover of night.

When President Valery Giscard d'Estaing followed his rival Pompidou into office, he tried to persuade the architects to lop the top floor off the as-yet-unfinished building. Refusing to be intimidated, Piano replied diplomatically that it was not possible to change the design so late in the process. The top floor went up as planned.

Even at the Pritzker ceremony, held last June at the White House, Piano was careful to remind President and Mrs. Clinton and the assembled guests what a die-hard iconoclast he remains, prize or no prize.

The jury, Piano noted with a touch of tongue-in-cheek irony in his voice, "has taken on a tremendous responsibility in opening the doors of the temple to someone like me who has always lived outside of it."

Jury chairman J. Carter Brown, director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art, praised Piano's command of technology and his refusal to let it command him. "His understanding of the museum's mission to put the art first has resulted in some of the most poetic and successful art museum structures anywhere," Brown observed.

Since the Pompidou project, Piano has crisscrossed the architectural map, forging an international reputation with daring commercial and public-works projects in Japan, Germany, Italy and France, and becoming renowned for designing museums that serve their collections and not the other way round.



The indefatigable, peripatetic Piano returns to the light-filled open spaces of Punta Nave, his Genoa workshop, whenever he can.

He has earned accolades for the Menil Collection museum in Houston and the Beyeler Foundation Museum near Basel, Switzerland; graced an artificial island in Japan's Osaka Bay with a dramatic terminal for Kansai Airport; and erected a strikingly graceful cultural center of soaring wood huts in Noumea, New Caledonia, where he won over the indigenous Kanaks, whose elders were deeply suspicious of Western colonial manipulation, through painstaking consultations about their customs, beliefs and aesthetic concerns.

He has designed subway stations, bridges, a prototype car, cruise ships and a ferro-cement sailboat, experimented with plant-fiber roofs in Senegal and low-cost housing in a working-class quarter of Paris. When he insisted on setting aside room for employee recreation areas in a French electronics factory, defying heated protests by management, grateful workers dubbed the spaces "Renzos."

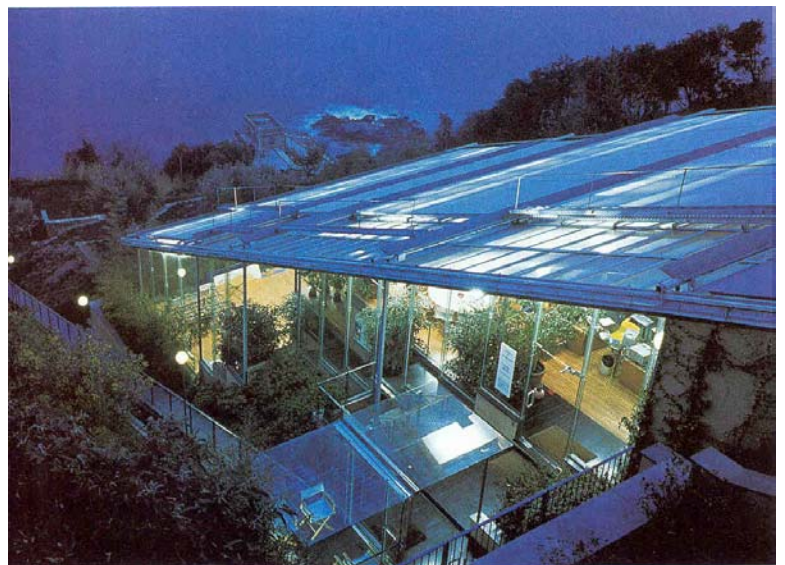
Apart from the Sydney office tower, current projects include a major performing arts complex in Rome, a pilgrimage church in southern Italy that will have one of the longest stone arches ever built, a combination store and artisans' studio for the luxury-goods maker Hermes in Tokyo, and a proposed groundbreaking new museum for Harvard University. Just recently, the architect was asked to design a major addition for the Art Institute of Chicago.

Piano is also overseeing one of the most politically and symbolically charged building ventures in postwar European history. Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, the largest urban construction project in Europe, is rising within sight of the former Berlin Wall and the Reichstag, the recently renovated and rededicated German parliament building. Spanning an area the size of 100 football fields on the once-deadly no-man's-land dividing East from West, this high-rise complex of offices, residences, shops, theaters, cinemas and a casino is intended to recapture the prewar vibrancy of the city's central district.

With workshops in Paris and Genoa and smaller quarters in Berlin, the 100-person staff of Piano's architectural firm stays in a permanent fever of activity, juggling a dozen world-class projects at any one time. Piano himself caroms across the globe as if it were a pool table. I recently tagged along in his wake from Genoa to Berlin to Paris, my tongue hanging out.

My whirlwind odyssey around planet Piano started in Punta Nave (*right*), the architect's workshop in Genoa and a spectacular advertisement for his ideals of lightness, transparency and the vibration of light on surfaces—immaterial elements that Piano believes are as important as glass and steel for the poetic continuity of his buildings.

An airy construction of glass walls, glass roof and laminated wood supports, Punta Nave looks somewhat like a sleek ship come to rest 150 feet up on the steep, terraced hillside. Ascending to the workshop is an antic escapade out of Jules Verne. From the bottom of the hillside, a glass-enclosed elevator fitted out with director's chairs glides along slanting rails, whisking visitors past close-clipped lawns, olive and cypress trees, a stand of bamboo, wind sculptures by the



Japanese artist Susumu Shingu (a favorite contributor to Piano's projects) and a 13-foot-high wooden statue from Vanuatu, a gift from the staff for the architect's 60th birthday.

Once inside, the open-plan workshop unfolds in a series of sunlit decks. It's a workplace without apparent hierarchies. Even the boss doesn't have a separate office, only a marginally larger desk table than everyone else's, tucked along one wall. Window shades and rooftop louvers are governed by photosensitive cells and operate automatically to adjust the amount of natural sunlight. If it's cloudy or dark outside, inside lights beam up to reflecting panels that produce a warmer, softer illumination than direct lamps.

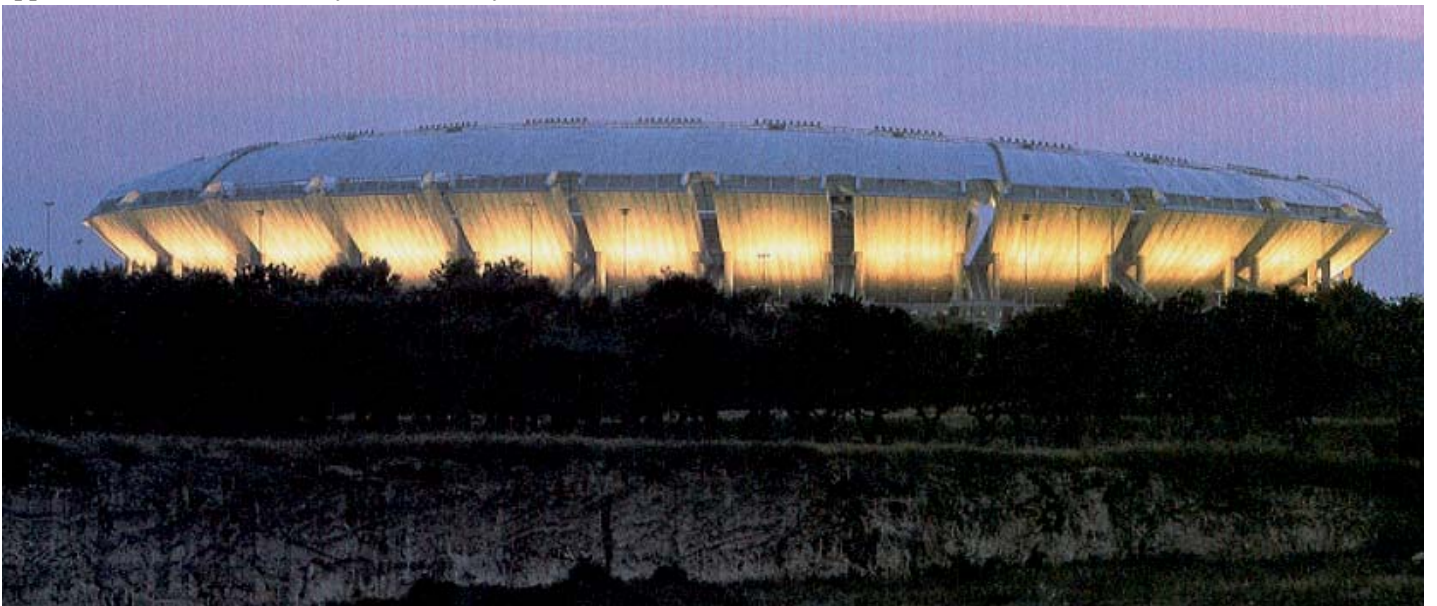
Although Piano has an apartment near his offices in Paris, a small chalet in Switzerland and a sailboat moored in Sardinia, he prefers returning to Punta Nave whenever he can. "It's the hot-air balloon that allows me to look at things from above," he observes, gazing out from his corner table at the Gulf of Genoa far below.

Born about 18 miles south of his current workshop, Piano developed an early and abiding attachment to the sea, the harbor and ships-passions that are reflected today in his work and in his choice of projects. His father, grandfather, uncles and elder brother Ermanno, who died in 1991, were all builders. As a boy, Renzo loved clambering over construction sites, marveling at the magical transformation of a pile of sand and stone into a house or a bridge. Spending so much time around builders, he absorbed a deep-seated respect for craftsmanship and materials.

When Renzo told his father he wanted to become an architect, the elder Piano, a man as taciturn as his son is exuberant, took a puff on his pipe and asked, Why would you want to be an architect when you can become a builder? "In his opinion, being an architect was a good deal less worthy," muses Piano, who nonetheless followed his own road.

After earning his architecture degree from Milan Polytechnic in 1964, Piano launched his rolling-stone career pattern, working in the offices of Louis I. Kahn in Philadelphia and Z. S. Makowsky in London and founding his own fledgling studio in Genoa, where he plunged into experimental designs, turning out a mobile factory for extracting sulfur, exposition spaces for traveling pavilions, and a modular hospital. Although Piano was influenced by the work of Pierluigi Nervi, Jean Prouve, Buckminster Fuller and Kahn, he set his maverick course from the outset, concentrating on open-plan designs and natural lighting effects—themes that have persisted throughout his career.

During two days at Punta Nave, I sit in on several no-holds-barred meetings with clients from Sydney, Stockholm and Paris, and chat with a dozen clients and staff members. It is an eye-opening introduction to Piano's feistily cooperative approach and his shamelessly hands-on style.



Floodlit at night, the massive concrete San Nicola Stadium in Bari, Italy, built for the 1992 World Cup, resembles a giant spaceship

Meeting with the Sydney clients, the architect agilely hunkers down on hands and knees to execute a rapid sketch of tree placements directly on the office tower's architectural plans. When Piano is on a roll, drawings, wooden scale models, steel and plastic prototypes—anything with a surface—are all fair game for his doodles.

"Make them light, transparent trees, like birches," he suggests. "Don't put in evergreens, whatever you do. If they're massive trees to stop the wind, then my God, you block the light. It comes down to the same old problem. You take care of the design, but you lose the man. You solve the technical problems, but you turn away the people you want to attract into the space."

Upstairs, after the Sydney meeting breaks up, a table is laid for a working lunch with clients from Hermes. Bottles of wine and sparkling water, and baskets of bread, are spread out on the white tablecloth. Arriving by the funicular-like elevator, a small brigade of caterers hauls up trays of veal, fish, pasta, eggplant, salad, cheese and tiramisu.

For the epicurean Piano, working hard doesn't exclude enjoying oneself. Even with 60 staff in Paris and 40 in Punta Nave, coming from a number of different countries, the firm maintains the camaraderie of a Renaissance guild.

Piano inspires intense loyalty among his staff. Some, like the Japanese-born Shunji Ishida, have been with him almost 30 years. Over lunch, I speak with Ishida about why he has stayed so long. "Even though Renzo likes to control things quite a lot, he always manages to teach me something new about enjoying the process of designing," Ishida reflects. "From the outset of every project, he keeps in mind the global vision and the nuts and bolts at the same time." Piano is, in fact, a meticulous craftsman, insisting that door handles, steel joints and other building details be designed within the workshop.

Ishida and Piano had recently returned from a trip to Harvard, where they had tramped around the site of the proposed new museum along the banks of the Charles River. At this preliminary stage in the design process, Piano was mulling over the conundrum of accommodating and welcoming museum crowds while maintaining the contemplative nature of the exhibitions.

"The mixing of sacred and profane has happily contaminated museums, but sometimes it gets to be too much," he explains back at his desk after lunch. "For popular exhibitions, you can't even see the art for all the people around it."

Piano's novel proposal for the new Harvard museum involves placing what he calls the profane (shops, library, restaurant and conference rooms) on the ground level, while positioning the sacred (the exhibition spaces themselves) upstairs in a sort of gigantic flying-saucer dish, camouflaged amid the trees.

"On the ground level, you buy a T-shirt—why not?—or have a coffee, attend a conference or listen to a concert. It's more convivial, more about exchange. Then comes the moment when you take your shoes off, metaphorically at least, and you go up into the place for art, for the sacred. Here, the speed changes, the space becomes more silent, the atmosphere more refined. The ground floor is extroverted, it's about communication. Then you go up and you become introverted, just talking to yourself, just wandering around."

Three weeks later, I catch up with Piano in Berlin at Potsdamer Platz. He is in "extroverted" mode, racing to put the finishing touches on the project before the official opening in October 1998, only three months away. It is 10 o'clock at night and Piano is squinting into the spotlights above the Marlene Dietrich Platz, a cinema-theater-casino complex in the heart of the development. He is bouncing ideas off his longtime colleague Bernard Plattner, the supervising project architect, about how to cut down the glare.

"Being blinded by one spotlight is already too much," Piano complains, puffing on his ever-present Italian cheroot. "But ten! Bernard, my friend, what are we going to do?"

"It's the same problem we had more than 20 years ago with the Pompidou Center," Plattner reminds his boss, less than reassuringly. "The authorities insist on a certain level of illumination, full stop."

"Well then, why don't we put up a series of light poles around the square like we did in Paris," Piano suggests.

"The trouble is that this square is much smaller than the one at the Pompidou," objects Plattner. "If you put up enough light poles to light the space, you risk making it look like it's being fenced off."

"You're right," says Piano, shaking his head. "I'm stumped. Let's come back in the morning and see what we can come up with." (Eventually, a limited number of streetlights are installed and a handful of unobtrusive spotlights are discreetly tucked into the theater's projecting roof.)

With that, Piano bounds away to have a look inside the theater-in-progress. There's a gaping hole in the floor, scaffolding everywhere and exactly two rows of red plush seats, but Piano is as fired up as a kid on Christmas Day.

"We will be ready, won't we?" he asks Plattner somewhat anxiously. "We better be. The owners have already guaranteed bookings. Right here, in fact, is where the next Berlin Film Festival will take place. Imagine that," continues Piano, plopping down in the lonesome seats as if the curtain is about to go up.

After this brisk inspection, Piano sprints back outside, where he launches into a description of the moon image he's conjured up to project onto the giant globe of the IMAX theater overlooking the plaza.

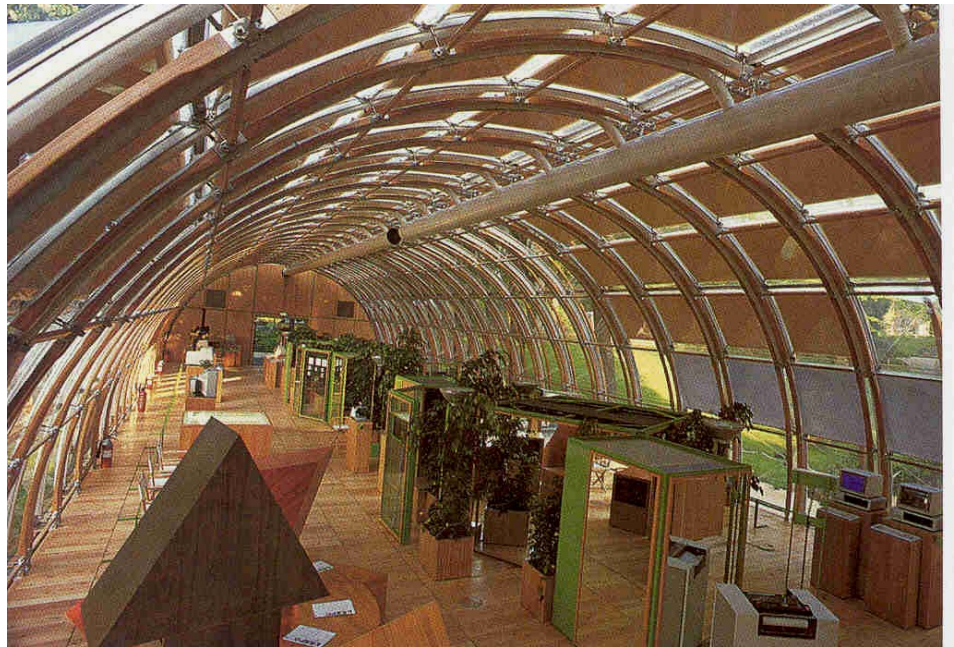
"People will think a meteorite has crashed into the building," Plattner chimes in, obviously still amused by the nuttiness of the idea. After more than 20 years of working with Piano, Plattner has become a dedicated convert to his boss's taste for playful shock effects.

"Renzo is like a long-distance runner, but one who is always a bit ahead of you," Plattner tells me later as we tour the emerging shopping mall. "He keeps you constantly out of breath."

Does he always keep up this pace? I ask Piano the next day, when we are momentarily at rest inside his office. Surveying the sea of cranes and scaffolding outside, he laughs. "I love to work the way I work," he says. "Going around on-site, touching things, coming back, sketching, screwing in things and unscrewing them. Bigger firms do not work this way, but I think I will never change."

When I ask him to describe his work process, Piano does not miss a beat. "Have a look," he says, as he hauls out his overnight bag and pulls everything out onto the table as if for a customs check. In addition to an extra shirt, a rarely worn tie, a toiletries bag and a copy of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, are six or seven dossiers of projects in various stages of progress. Everywhere he goes, even sailing in the Mediterranean, he carries a number of these dossiers with him. Crammed with initial sketches, notes, postcards and photographs, the files grow ever larger as the projects go forward.

"Every day you have to keep in mind where you have started from and where you want to go; otherwise you lose direction. It's a constant gymnastic between the day-to-day life and this," he says, tapping the dossiers. "This is the course. That's why I don't mind moving around so much. By getting away from a place, you let the mind slow down and refocus. Eventually, you see things clearly that you had missed completely."



The polycarbonate plastic pyramid that Piano had lugged into IBM's Paris offices looked far too fragile to serve as the fundamental building block for the company's new traveling exhibition pavilion.

If Punta Nave is Piano's hot-air balloon, far above the hurly-burly, then the Paris workshop is the mother ship, in the midst of the cafes, galleries and chic clothing stores of the Marais, almost in sight of the Pompidou Center. From an open-plan office inside a converted 18th-century townhouse, its two levels lit by a massive skylight, Piano's staff navigates through projects from Lyons to Sydney. Every inch of wall space is covered with sketches, photographs and drawings of projects in various stages of completion-object lessons in the staggering diversity of Piano's output.

The Debis company's glass and terra-cotta office tower in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz artfully blends transparent and opaque elements.

Looking at the drawings, I recall an article I had read by Peter Buchanan, the author of an exhaustive, three-volume survey of Piano's career. "A great Piano virtue is that there is no such thing as a typical Piano building," Buchanan observed. Unlike Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier, all architects with an instantly recognizable stamp that runs throughout all their works, Piano's signature is that there is no signature. That said, it's clear that one theme underlying all of Piano's designs is lightness.

"Anyone can build using a lot of material," Piano explains in *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, an engrossing layman's survey of the architect's career. "Taking weight away from things, however, teaches you to make the shape of structures do the work." The Tjibaou Cultural Center in New Caledonia, based on indigenous hut design, is a perfect example. Leading me downstairs, past rows of architects at their computers, Piano and Paul Vincent, a longtime associate heading up the project, usher me into a conference room to inspect a model of the center. It is an unlikely array of what look to be truncated barrels made of wooden lattices and spines, some more than 90 feet high in the actual construction. Frankly, they don't look as if they could withstand South Pacific typhoons, and originally, they couldn't.

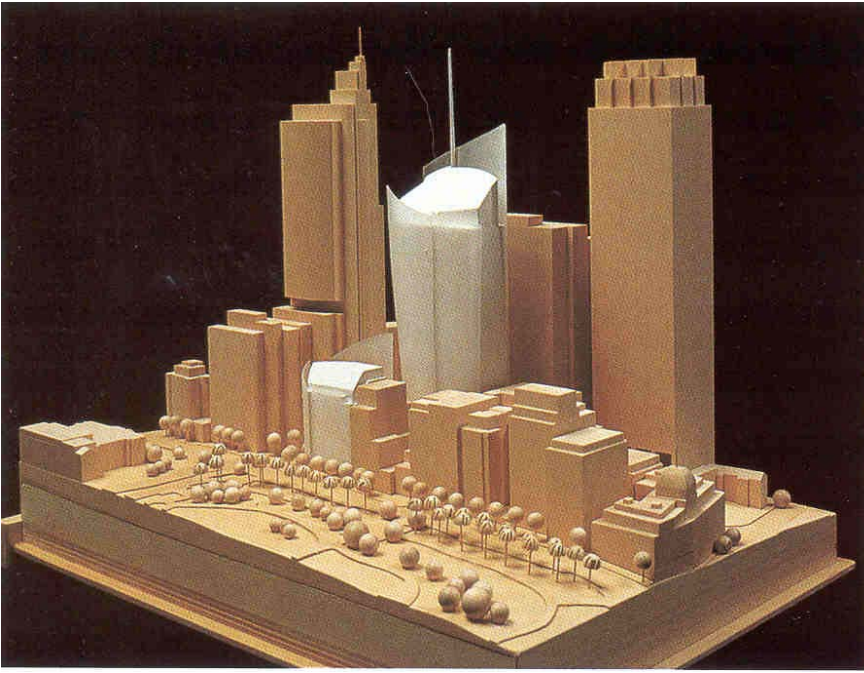
As Vincent explains, the early prototypes of the twin-layered conical huts ignominiously collapsed in wind-tunnel tests. Piano then came up with the elegant solution of making the slender spines hexagonal instead of square. That simple structural adjustment did the trick, strengthening the lightweight iroko wood enough to withstand typhoon-strength winds of 155 miles per hour.

Throughout his career, Piano has experimented with techniques that make use of wood, stone, glass, terra-cotta and other traditional building materials in thoroughly modern and unexpected ways. In the room next to the New Caledonia project, the two architects show me a model of the Cite Internationale, a sprawling residential and office complex with a museum, cinema, hotel and casino for the French city of Lyons. The entire project is covered with glass, and terra-cotta the color of burnt umber, in what Piano terms the "double skin" facade, a striking innovation that he has also adapted for Berlin and Sydney. Although other architects have employed the technology, the double-skin facade has become a Piano trademark.

Piano and Vincent explain that the original notion was inspired by greenhouse construction. In the double-skin design, an external layer of louvered glass panels is placed at a distance—generally about 30 inches—from terra-cotta cladding and interior windows. This breathing space facilitates heating and cooling. People inside the building can open windows for cooling, even in the rain, or they can close both exterior panels and interior windows, creating a layer of air warmed by the sun in the daytime.

"The glass panels also give a building interesting color vibrations that shift as sunlight and cloud shadows move across the surface," Piano observes.





A 38-story office tower for Sydney, Australia, will be enveloped by a massive translucent "sail," a dramatically innovative design that has the dual purpose of capturing sea breezes off the harbor and echoing the sail-like roof of the city's opera house.

Like the double skin of the greenhouse and the Kanak huts, Piano's inspirations come from anywhere and everywhere. "The geography, topography and history of a place are all very important sources for ideas," he explains back upstairs in his Paris office. (Unlike Punta Nave, this one has a door, even though it's invariably open.) "In Berlin, all the historical references had been wiped away, so we drew on the plentiful mythology of the site. For New Caledonia, we hired an ethnologist to give us a crash course in Kanak customs and beliefs. Sure, you can sit down and have a great idea, but wait a second—before doing that, first you have to dig in the quarry."

Because Piano is so down-to-earth and wary of theorizing, he is a formidable source of inspiration, not just for his staff and clients, but for the general public forced to live with the reality of architects' dreams for better or—too often—for worse. As he reminded his White House audience during the Pritzker ceremony: "You can put down a bad book; you can avoid listening to bad music; but you cannot miss the ugly tower block opposite your house."

"I was 7 years old in 1945, when the miracle of postwar reconstruction began," he continued. "In the name of progress and modernity, a lot of stupid things have been said and done. But for my generation, the word 'progress' really meant something. Every year that went by took us further from the horrors of war....I belong to a generation of people who have maintained an experimental approach throughout their life, exploring different fields, ignoring boundaries between disciplines, reshuffling the cards, taking risks and making mistakes....But at the same time, you love your past (as an Italian, or, rather, European, you have no choice). And so you live in a limbo between gratitude towards the past and a great passion for experimentation, for exploration of the future."

"So we beat on," he concluded, quoting Fitzgerald's narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, "boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Yes, indeed, but bringing us bravely into the future, if Piano and his particular blend of Renaissance and 21st-century workshops have anything to do with it.

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By RICHARD COVINGTON

Author Richard Covington writes about the arts and other cultural subjects from his home near Paris.