

Multiplicity in Pei and Chinese Thought: a study

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Ieoh Ming (I. M.) Pei

Born 26 April 1917 (Guangzhou/China)

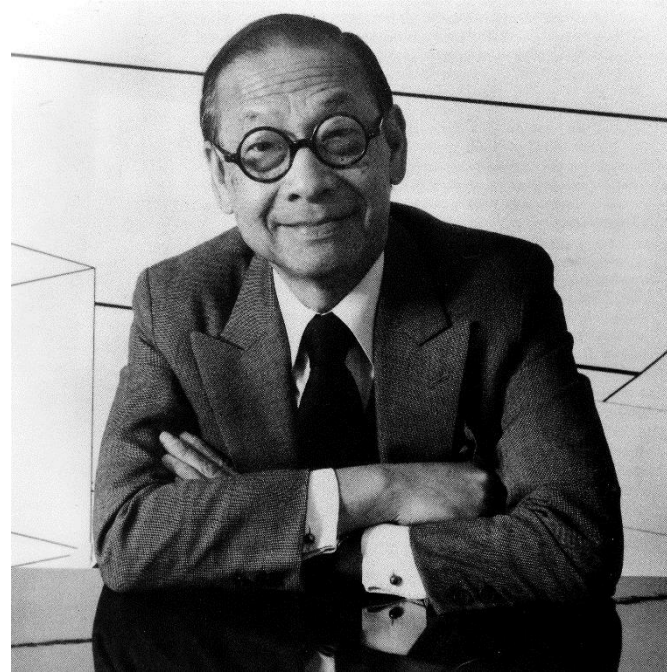
1917-35: educated in Suzhou & Shanghai China

1935-now: USA, studied MIT+ Harvard (1935-46)

1955: I M Pei & Associates; 1989: Pei Cobb Freed & Partners

Designer of Kennedy Library (Mass.), National Gallery East (DC)
Grand Louvre (Paris), Bank of China (BJ + HK)

Recipient of AIA Gold Medal (1979)
Pritzker Prize (1983)
Lifetime Achievement Award (2003)
Gold Medal (RIBA 2010)



Considered an **enigma**

(charming smile, impressive work profile, provided some finest late-modern buildings in USA/World, don't write much nor explain a lot; a Chinese-American: how 'Chinese' and how 'western'? What design position does he promote?)

Impressions on/about Pei

‘His thought process is ... Chinese’ (intimates)

‘Pei is a cultural cross-dresser’ (H. Cobb)

‘He is many things to many people’ (C. Tsao)

‘It (living in Suzhou) does affect my philosophy of life, relations with people; (it was) an old society where people treat each other with thoughtfulness and respect’ (Pei)

‘The relationship between men is very important in our tradition. To receive and to give ... is a way of life. Confucian ethics ... a pragmatic philosophy’ (Pei)

‘She (mother) had many friends, extremely warm as a person; that has influenced me’ (Pei)

Apparent lack of style and design position

no (distinctive) signature style

not defined by a stylistic or formal 'signature'

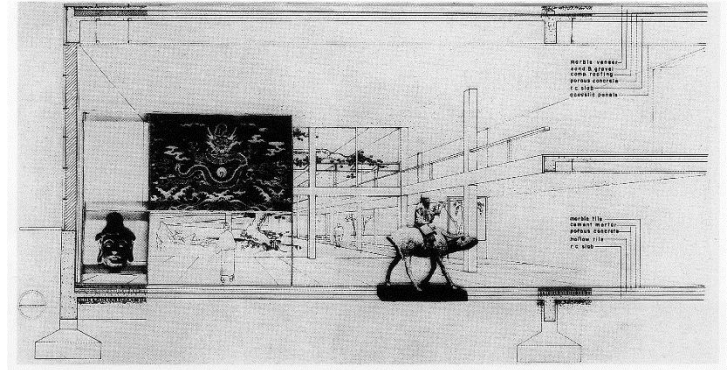
no textural theorization (or labelling)

... dependent on *time, place & purpose* of a give project, which are variable

'my analytical approach ... gives due consideration to time, place and purpose; variables' (Pei)

Flexible, varied, modern +

Harvard Design Thesis



W. Gropius: International Style to prevail worldwide

Pei disagreed, arguing for culture and tradition;

Gropius replied 'well, maybe you have a point; ... prove it'

Pei's design thesis (under Gropius): museum of art in China – a 'Chinese' arch. in/with modernism 1946

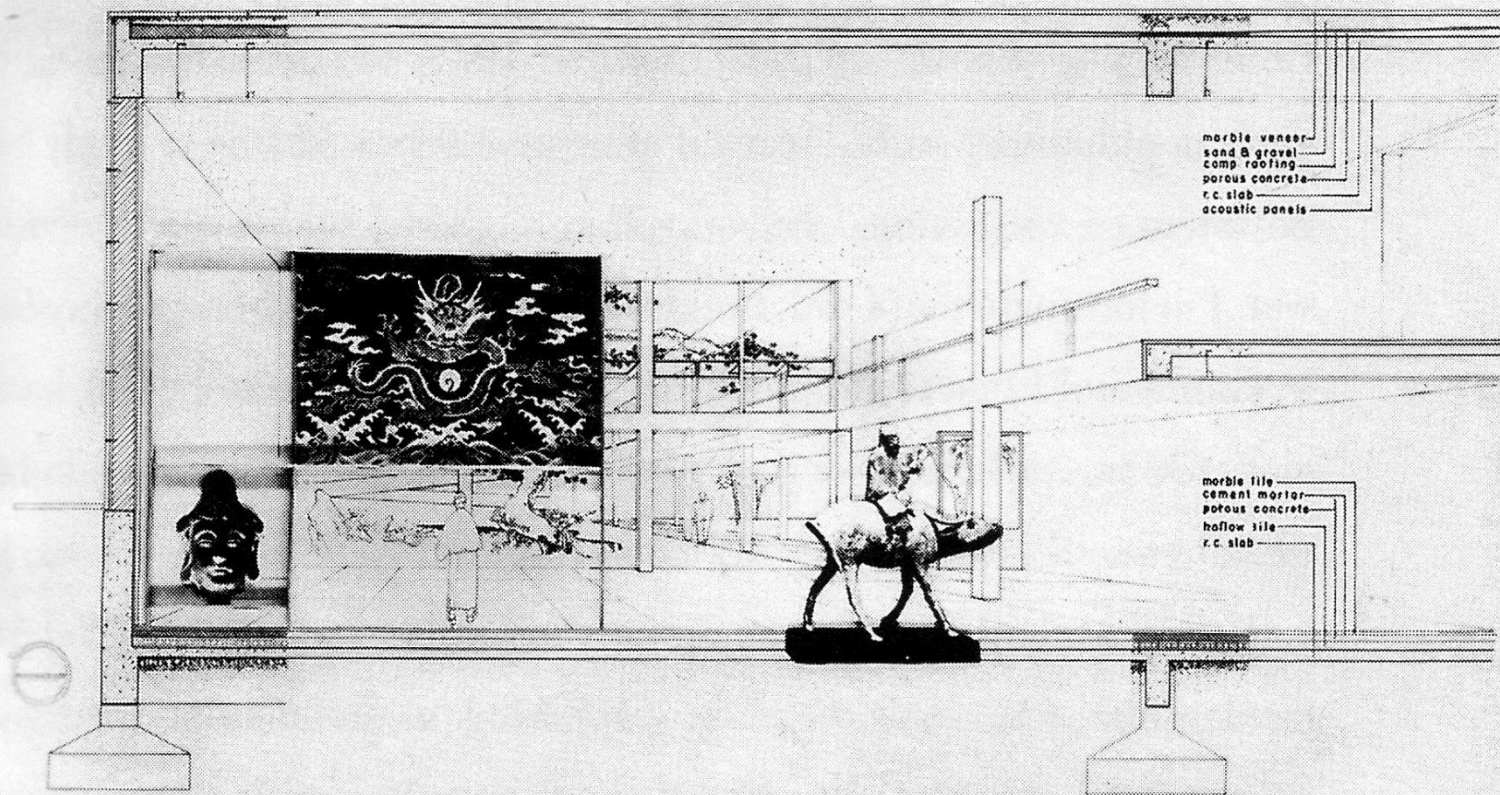
... always interested in history/tradition/culture

... modernism + tradition (cultural content)

... *deeply eclectic & multifaceted*

MUSEUM

A STUDY



SECTION

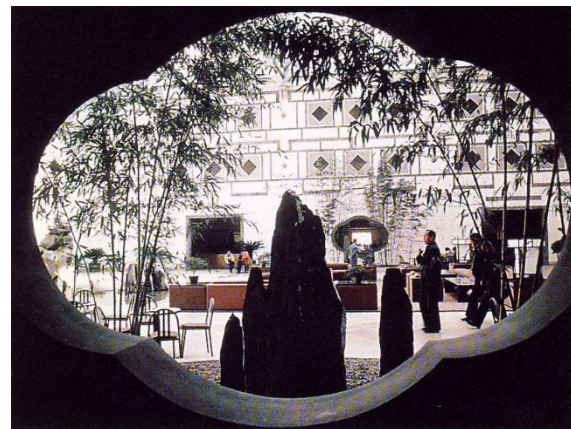
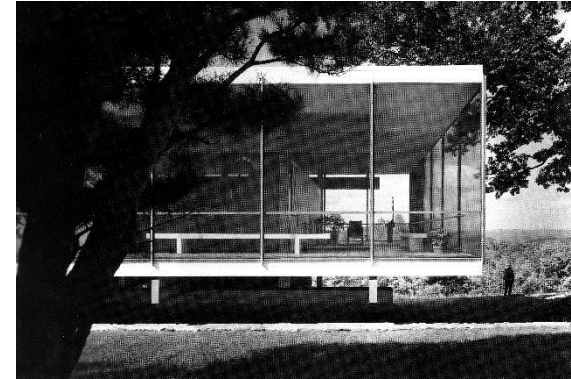
SCALE 3/8" = 1'

Diversity/Multiplicity of Pei's Positions

modern, late-modern, historical,
cultural, ornamental

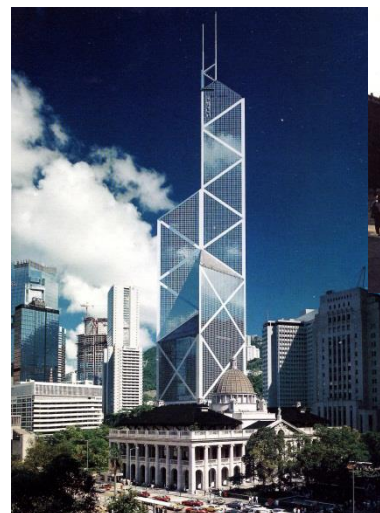
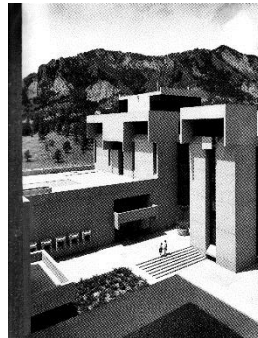
Yet, there seems to be a consistency
a flexible & analytical approach
'a certain analytical process and
design sensibility that is mine' (Pei)

a 'Chinese' thinking process?
... multiplicity with a hidden oneness?



A Variety of Designs

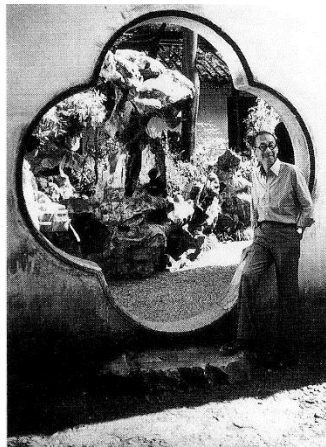
Kips Bay (NY 57-62); NCAR (Boulder 61-67); Everson Museum (Syracuse 68); Kennedy Library (Dorchester 64-79); National Gallery of Art East (Washington DC 68-78); Fragrant Hill Hotel (BJ 79-82); BoC (HK 82-89); Grand Louvre (Paris 83-89); Miho Museum (Misono 91-97), BoC (BJ 94-01), Suzhou Museum (SZ 00-06); Islamic Art Museum (Doha 00-08)



Projects with Chinese Gardens as Key Reference

Fragrant Hill Hotel (Beijing, 79-82) & **Suzhou Museum** (Suzhou, 00-06)

- Continuing the Harvard thesis of 46
- Search for a 'third way': modern Chinese architecture
- *Extensive tours/studies in the Suzhou region*
- Discovered 'vernacular' (house + garden, south)
- A typology of residence, living with nature (garden)



I wanted to see if aspects of Chinese tradition were still valid parts of people's lives. ... A Chinese garden is a maze; you never see straight

I M Pei (P Jodidio & J A Strong, eds,
I. M. Pei: Complete Works, 2008, pp 182-3)

I would like in a small way to pay a debt to a culture from which I came, to try to help them search for a new way ... it is an approach that can be replicated by architects all over the country in a hundred and one ways. And I think that's the only way to begin a new vernacular in architecture. This is how the Renaissance started.

I M Pei (Michael Cannell,
I. M. Pei: Mandarin of Modernism, 1995, 305)



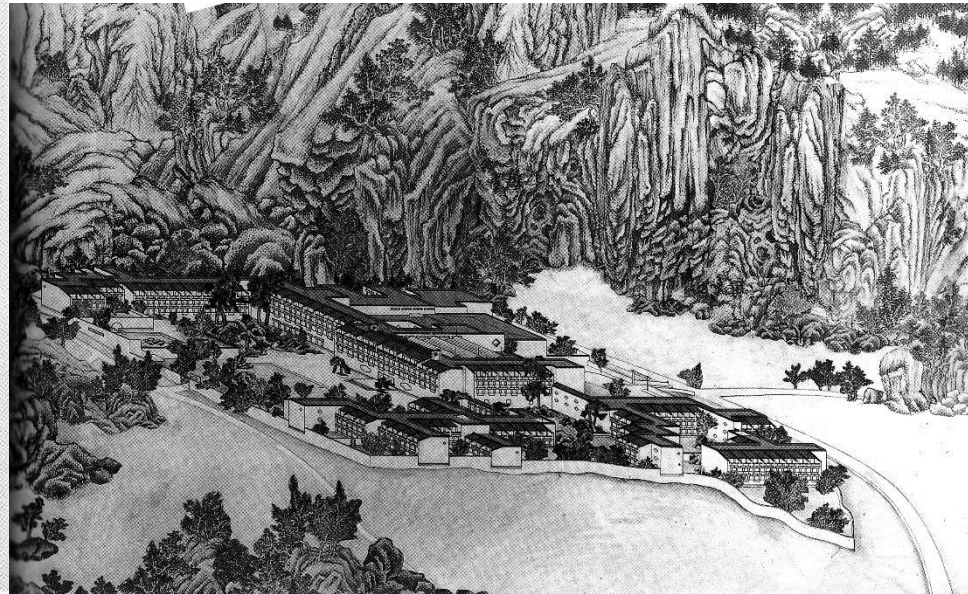
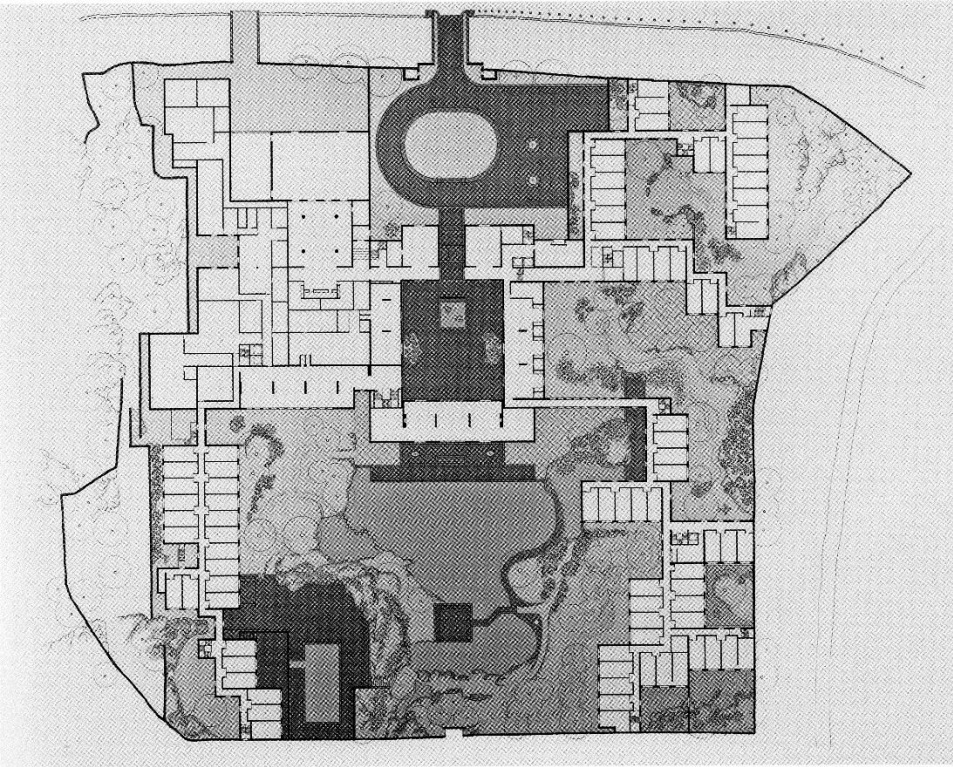
Projects with Chinese Gardens as Key Reference

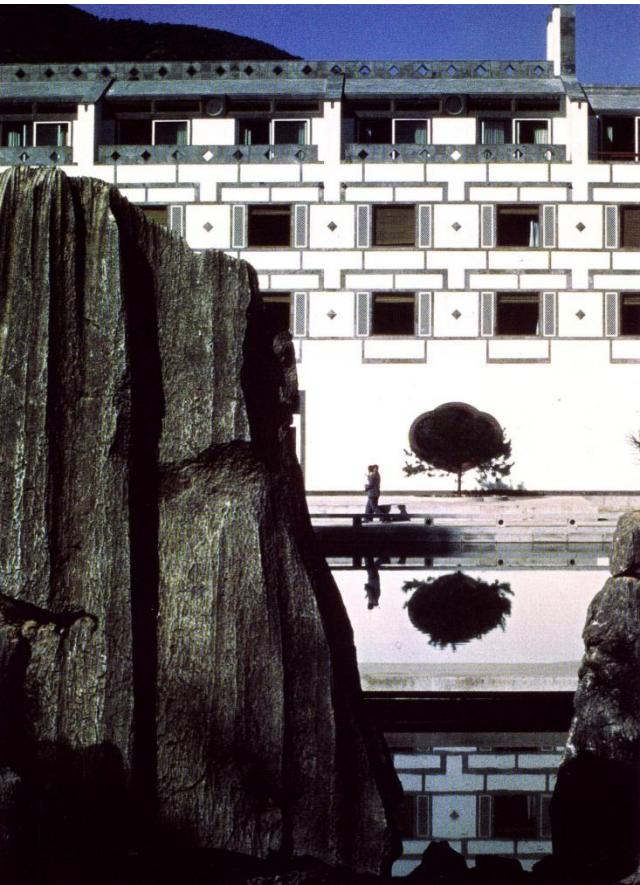
Fragrant Hill Hotel (Beijing, 79-82)

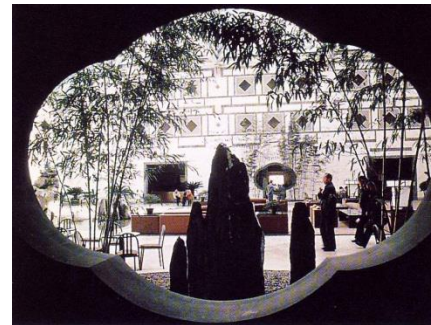
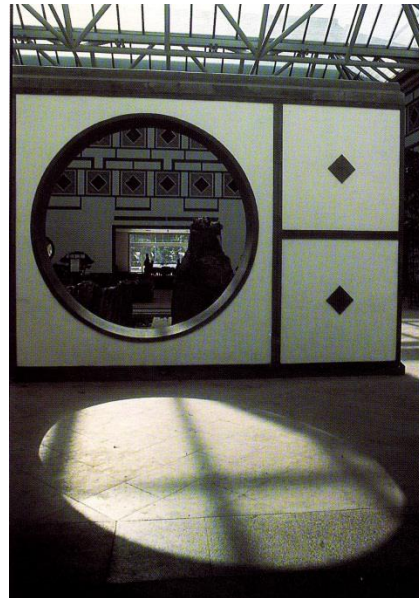
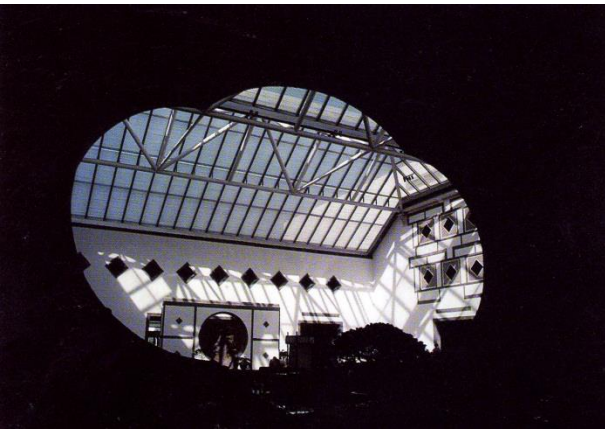
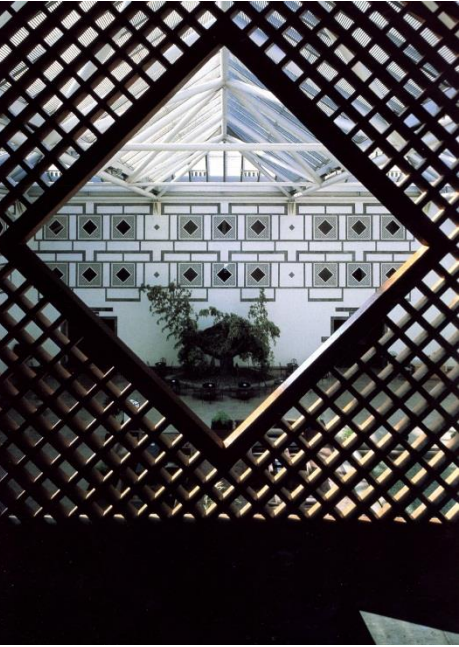
Suzhou Museum (Suzhou, 00-06)

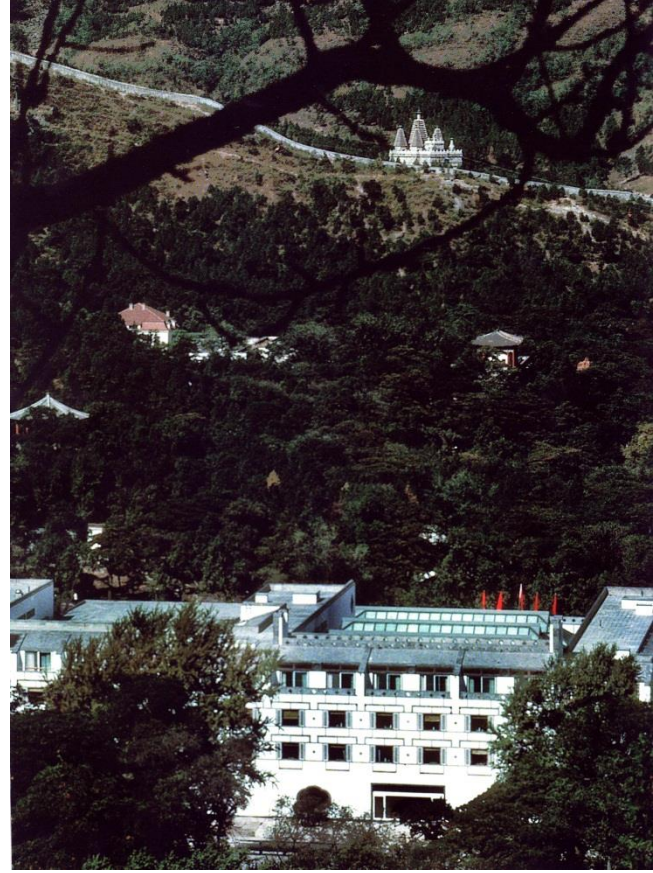
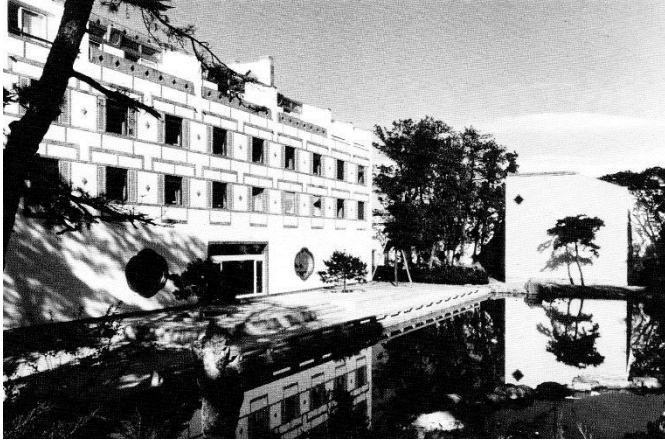
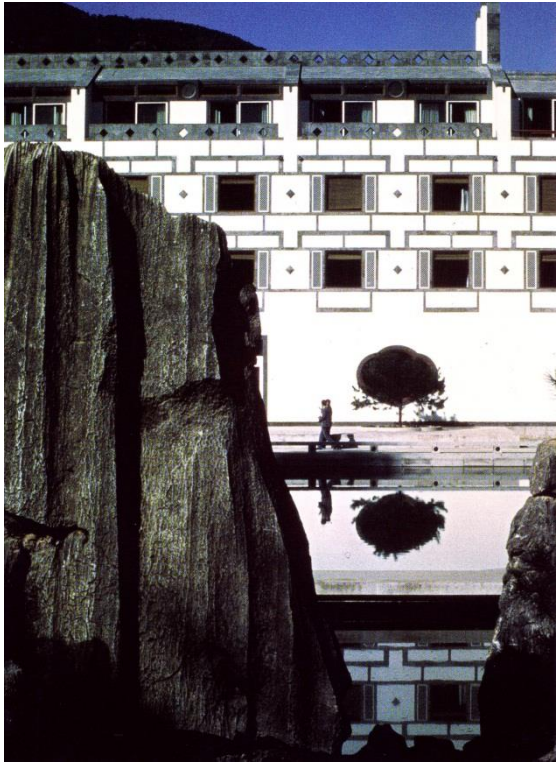
The design ...

Fragrant Hill Hotel (Beijing, 79-82)

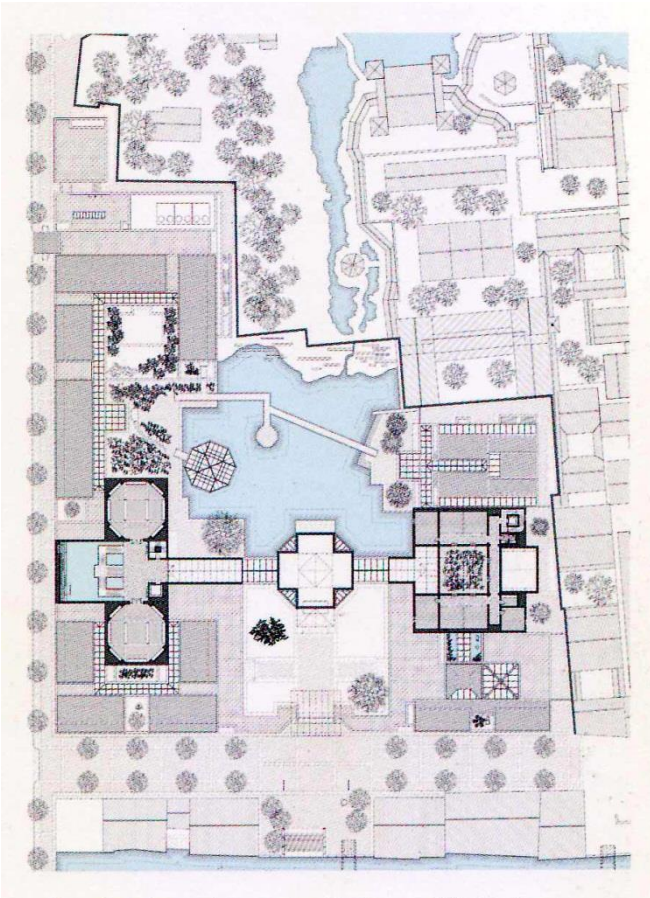


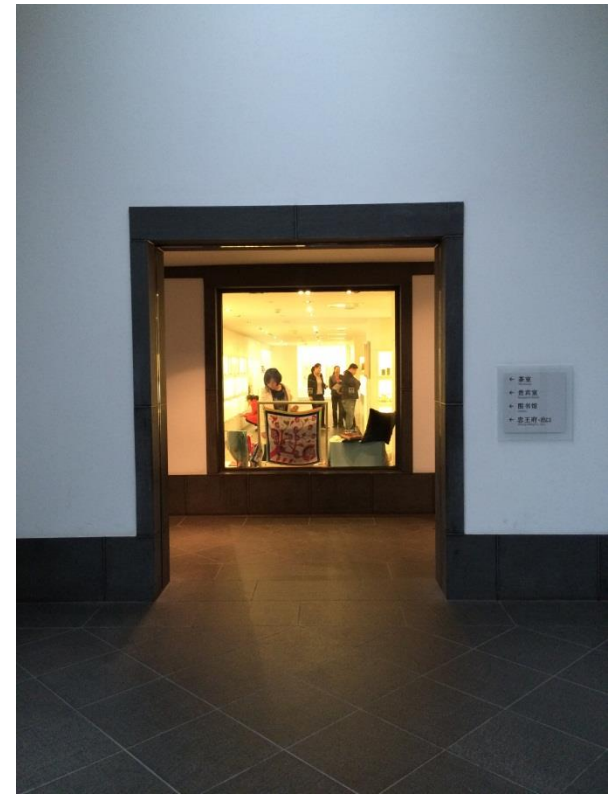




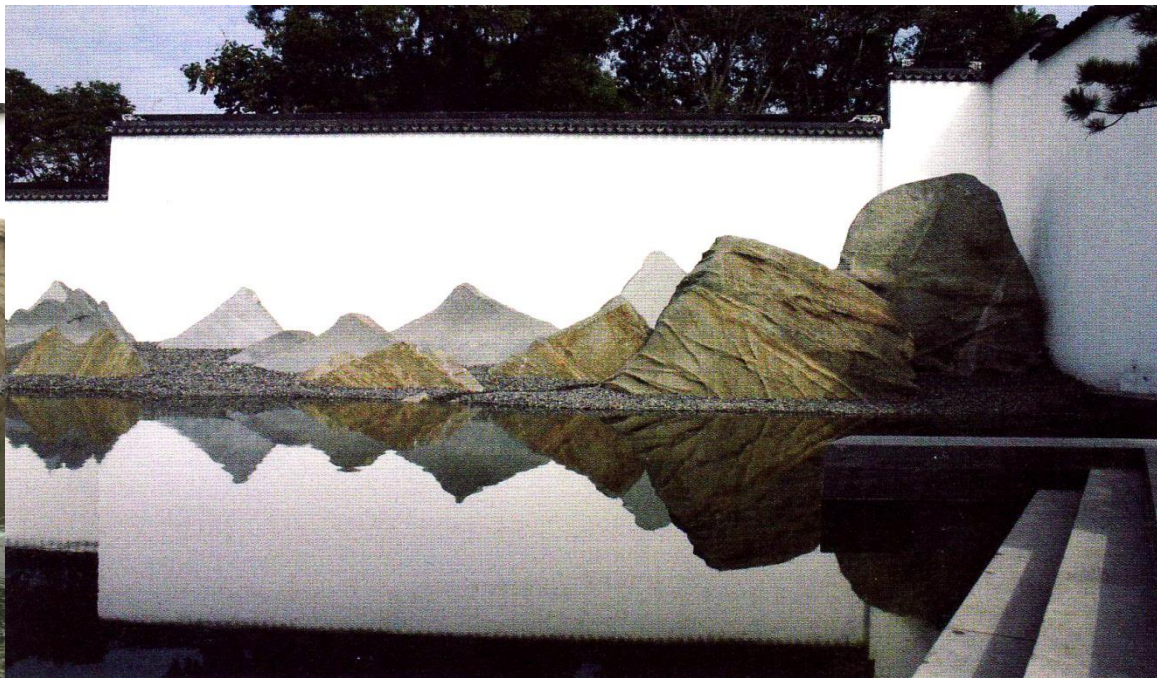


Suzhou Museum (Suzhou, 00-06)









- The design: a Chinese typology (southern scholar gardens) – reinterpreted & reinvented; key elements

Nature in abundance

Organized in a Chinese way (tangible & intangible)

... white & grey forms, window patterns, moon-gates, bamboos, trees, rocks, ponds, streams, *liu-shui-yin*

... layering, not seeing through, shifting views, borrowing views, meandering

... multiplicity (another view, another surprise, a universe in a small enclosure)

- A typology modernized
 - multiplicity, endless views, one-with-nature
(heaven & earth, ten thousand things)

The Base:

His childhood in Suzhou (1927-35) and his re-discovery of the place (1978-)



- My argument:

This is the map of his thought.

The completed design, Fragrant Hill Hotel 1982 or Suzhou Museum 2006,
is a visualized map of
his thought (or thinking process),
rooted in the Chinese tradition.

Chinese Thinking

- humans are in/part of **nature** 人法地 / 天 / 道 / 自然
- nature to be represented in painting
画山水序（宗炳 4th-5th C）
- nature is **self-created**, from within, in good order
no need for outside force/reason 自然 / 万物自生
- all in nature (and us) are **inter-related** (yin & yang)
君臣父子夫妇之义，皆取阴阳之道
- nature is **ten-thousand-things** (1 & 100,000 things)
道生一。。。三生万物
we are with 100,000 things 万物与我为一

inevitability of relations

multiplicity of all things

moral order (already there) between us &
among 100,000 things (heaven & earth, nature)

Chinese characters

no alphabet, no (clear) building blocks

you learn the square-words *directly* (... to be humble)

a vast sea of singular signs

multiplicity

A large, bold Chinese character '無' (wú) written in a cursive, calligraphic style. The character is black and set against a light, textured background.Large Chinese characters '漢字' (hàn zì) written in a cursive, calligraphic style. The characters are black and set against a light, textured background.Large Chinese characters '漢字' (hàn zì) written in a cursive, calligraphic style. The characters are red and set against a light, textured background.

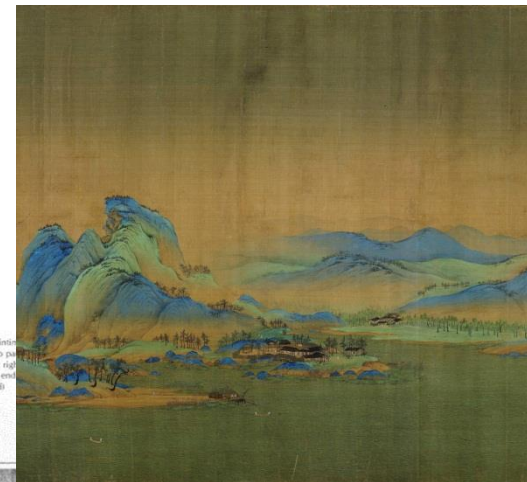
Chinese landscape scroll (painting)

viewed over time, as it unfolds

roughly 1:24 in its height-length ratio (25cm x 600 cm or 50 cm x 1200 cm)

there is always another view ...

multiplicity (of views)



Complete painting shown in two parts (beginning at right first part and end left of second)



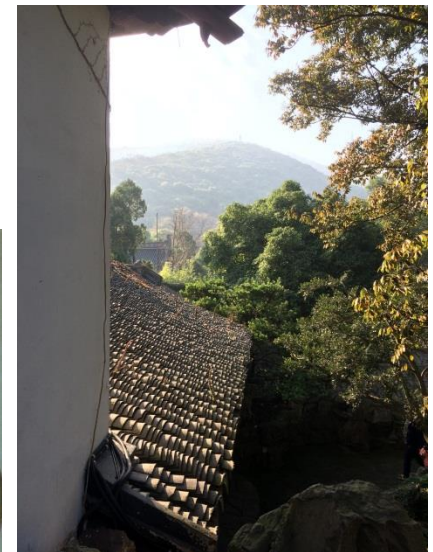
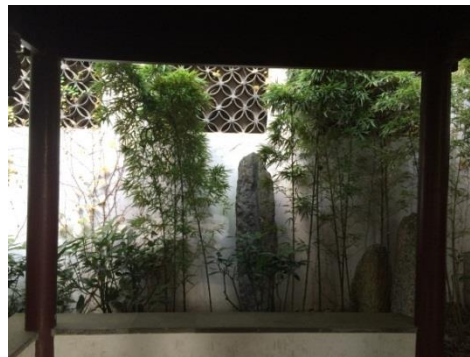
Chinese (southern, scholar) gardens

packing many ... in a small enclosure (the large in the small)

viewing across/beyond, another view, a 'surprise'

shifting views with moving steps

***multiplicity** (of views/spaces/themes)*



Chinese gardens are always built in a very small place.

Within a very small piece of land, one can create maximum variety.
Why? Because of the constantly changing perspective.

It is the opposite of gardens like Versailles. The oriental garden is designed to engage the visitor with a series of surprises. Once you think you have seen the most exciting object, a rock or something, and then you turn around and see something else. And then you turn again – constant movement and change.

IM Pei (Gero von Boehm,
Conversations with Pei, 2000, p. 38)

A Chinese garden is like a maze;

you never see straight or clear to the end, never apprehend the whole. You enter, something attracts your attention so you pause. It might be just a single tree or a rock or crevice of light.

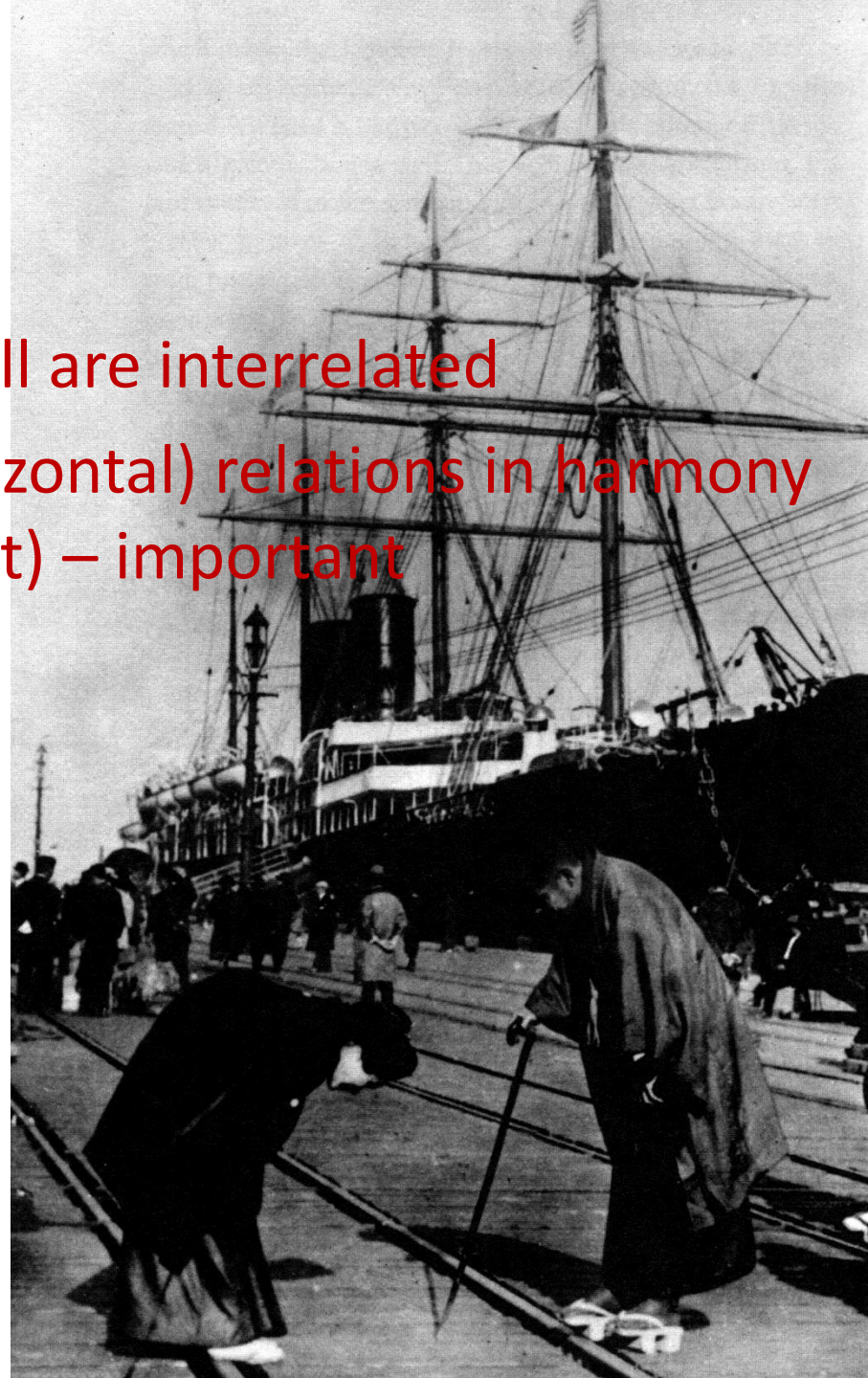
Then you move further on a path or perhaps across a bridge, zigging and zagging so you always see something different.

It is a matter of scale, of multiple vanishing points and also of surprise – the delight of the unexpected.

IM Pei (Gero von Boehm,
Conversations with Pei, 2000, p. 183)

Chinese social ethics

there is no autonomy; all are interrelated
yin-yang (vertical & horizontal) relations in harmony
(with thoughtfulness & respect) – important
social multiplicities



After I returned to Suzhou, I realized that I came from much deeper roots. It does affect my philosophy of life, relationships with people. I am much more sensitive to that than if I hadn't been to Suzhou because that is an old word ... an old society where people treat each other with thoughtfulness and respect.

IM Pei (Gero von Boehm,
Conversations with Pei, 2000, p. 19)

Pei's mind (& Chinese thinking):

relational ethics accommodating multiplicities
(many views, positions, systems, ideologies)

with nature: in garden-related design

with others: in design/social approach

important today, increasingly,

in a world of conflict

with nature (ecological crisis) &

with others (groups, regions, races, nations, ideologies)

Answering the questions:

- Will China's urbanization threaten its relation to art, culture & nature?
China has a long tradition of urban landscape design (eg Suzhou gardens) & urban-rural intermixing
- How will climate change affect relations between art, architecture & nature in China?
... a re-appreciation of China's indigenous art tradition that incorporates nature & landscape is on the rise (eg, a renewed interest in garden design)
- Social & demographic changes affect architects' work?
more leisure & culture-related projects on the rise ...
- Sources of my ideas:
Augustin Berque (*Thinking through landscape*, 2013)
Francois Julien (*The propensity of things*, 2000)
Jacques Rancière (*The politics of aesthetics*, 2006)
Chinese classics
- Reference:
Jianfei Zhu, 'Empire of Signs of Empire', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 38, 2014, pp 132-141