

Pianoforte

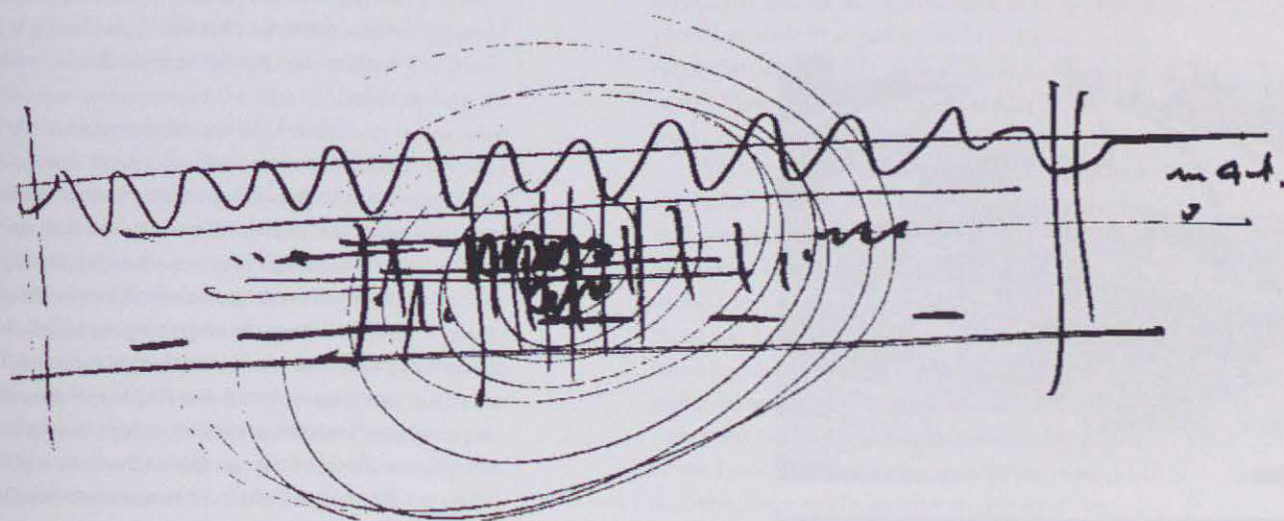
Latimer Hu

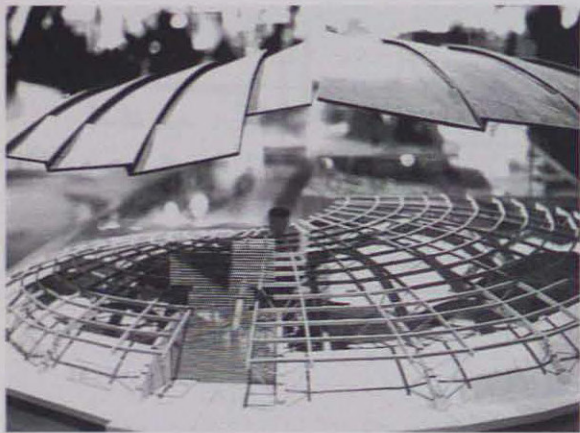
GUSTAV EIFFEL'S TOWER was considered an iron eyesore, a blight on an otherwise beautiful cityscape. The new Louvre disgusted Parisians so much that one of them spat on I. M. Pei's shoes. Today, however, both Eiffel's expo piece and Pei's pyramid have become icons of Paris, loved by locals and tourists alike. More often referred to as the Beaubourg, the Centre Pompidou began with the young, unknown Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers mocked for their whimsy. But unlike other Paris landmarks, it is an architecture still not universally accepted. Maybe that is why it is not on nearly as many postcards as the Louvre, though it takes in more visitors annually. With its ducts repainted and its glass walls cleaned, the Mechano-set masterpiece was recently reopened to the waiting public. These days, the lay architecture critics stay home. Only eager exhibit-goers, and yes, the requisite Japanese tourists are in line. Up the escalators and past the futurist gadgets on display in the lobby, a space was devoted last spring devoted to an architect who, since co-authoring the Beaubourg nearly thirty years ago, has been back so often for renovations and additions that he calls himself its Quasimodo.

Before the main entrance of the Renzo Piano exhibit, aptly entitled *un regard construit*, a few deftly-cut models were presented as appetizers. They increased in size and complexity, but were no preparation for the buffet around the bend. Most visitors stopped under the wide doorway, stuck in a good long stare at the partition-less 1500 m² of pure Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW) that awaited them. Piano's first sketches for his retrospective showed that the "explosion" was intended. The hanging structural spine of the Kansai International Airport, the skeletal eggs of the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, and the entire Postdammer Platz city block stuck out in a sea of wooden models because they were simply enormous. The eye also jumped between full-scale elements such as footings, joints, and other details that, conceivably, could have been ripped right off the buildings themselves. A space three times larger than the last Renzo Piano exhibit could afford some biggies. It was, after all, la *grande mostra* (the great exhibit).

There were no arrows on the floor but most exhibit-goers started on the left with the early works (1965-1973) rather than with the Beaubourg display immediately before them. Since almost everyone stayed to see almost every project, where to begin seemed a moot point. However, there was an order, and the early works, or *preistoria*, marked the start of







a section Piano called *l'invenzione* (invention). Lightness, modularity, and composite materials have been ideas bounced around from the very beginning of Piano's career: the best example of their synthesis in the exhibition was his itinerant IBM pavilion (1983-86). A clever series of photos showed the ephemeral nature of the project that was set up and taken down in over a dozen European cities. Invention seemed more the mix of inventiveness and construction in the Nola Services Complex, the Padre Pio Liturgical Space, and a Sydney skyscraper, all three still far from seeing their ribbon cutting. All three also share a very strong sculptural character; the skyscraper display contained a dozen study models built as a search for the perfect silhouette. For the same project, a full-scale prototype window with its novel mechanisms was a reminder that the Piano family is a family of builders, and that his firm is indeed a "building workshop."

Treated like any other project of the RPBW, the exhibit was the work of a team headed by Giorgio Bianchi that took over two years to realise. To balance the "explosion" was an idea that visitors should feel as though they were walking through a RPBW studio, an organised environment with an open aesthetic. Hence the huge hanging tables, one for each project, on which everything was placed. The suspension riggings are not as fragile as they seemed. Someone leaned brutally on an edge to get a better look at a model of the San Nicola Stadium and the table vibrated but slightly. Since next to nothing touched the floor, the room must have been very easy to clean.

Between *l'invenzione* and *la città* (the city), there was what all exhibits seem to have nowadays: internet stations. Since most people can surf the net from home (even in the technological sloth of France), it was no great loss that none of them seemed to work. However, the media zone merited a stop to peruse a little library containing every monogram by or about Renzo Piano and his collaborators, past and present.

The Lingotto factory's only architectural fame was its rooftop race track before Piano added a helipad/ bulbous conference centre and renovated

most of the interior (1983-95). The old port of Genoa, Piano's hometown, was an industrial wasteland until he rehabilitated it (1985-92). Berlin's Potsdamer Platz was a confused postwar mess until the RPBW brought in axes and sharp geometries. These before and after images seemed undeniably important to Piano's urban projects and were not too bad as self-promotion. The Beaubourg also finds itself in this category, justifiably so because its piazza is one of the most convivial of all Paris and thus represents Piano's primary urban goal of creating spaces for public exchange. Tourists conned into having their portraits or caricatures drawn on the slopes of the square do not have the fondest memory of the space, but they at least have a story. And for Piano, the stories are important. The use of little scale figures in nearly every rendering and model showed something of his interest in the human relationships with his designs. The lesser-known underground facilities of the Beaubourg are shown in sectional drawings with parts cut out and replaced by models. The auditorium cutaway even has a full orchestra playing for a captive audience. Convincing drawing-model hybrids, complete with simple human cut-outs, were also used in a trio of amphitheatres under construction in Rome. Even in a full-scale sectional working drawing for Hermès House in Tokyo, there was the light grey silhouette of a walking man. The architecture itself may not please everyone's palate, but the mastery of graphic representation and the high standard of craftsmanship that Piano demands of his technical minions are undisputed. Like a Transformer stuck in mid-metamorphosis, an enormous exploded model of the Potsdamer Platz theatre (1992-99) showed off its inner workings. It was also the last example of Piano's urban thinking before visitors moved on to the last of the three sections, called *la poesia* (the accompanying Italian hand gestures cannot be helped.)

Poetry, also translated as sensitivity, was the common ground between a housing project, an opera space, a cultural centre, and two museums all on display. All these projects required of RPBW members that they listen to and address environmental, social,

and cultural concerns more pronounced than the usual fare. Snippets of caught conversation confirmed the architecture student status of a few visitors. If not photographing the exacting models or wishing they could execute equally nifty graphics, they were certainly curious about the genesis and process of design. And Piano is not a cryptic poet; his projects, especially the current ones along the back wall, were shown as evolutions from doodles to designs to details.

It became evident in *la poesia* that Piano is not only a builder-engineer, but also an architect sensitive enough for the art world, designing the temporary Calder retrospective in Turin and the Brancusi Studio beside the Beaubourg. Three periods of decreasing amplitude in a thin sinusoidal strip of pine glued to a dark blue background (a material-colour combination used throughout the exhibit) represented Piano's concept for the Paul Klee Museum in Bern.

It is hoped that those who experienced *la grande mostra* left fascinated by Piano's technical wizardry and conscious of the art in architecture. If they simply spend more time looking at the spaces that surround them as a result of *un regard construit*, then Piano will have achieved more than most attempts at educating the public about architecture. With buildings morphologically divergent enough to insure that he is never typecast, and two dozen current projects, Renzo Piano will not be retiring anytime soon. And of course, there will be another exhibit some day... *a Pianoforte fortissimo*.

Latimer Hu enjoyed his academic exchange in France, but he admits to having seen higher buildings than the Eiffel Tower.