

I. M. PEI:

BUILDING CHINA MODERN 1 x 53



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I. M. Pei, perhaps the world's greatest living modern architect, returned with his sons to the family's ancestral home of Suzhou, China to launch an ambitious project of bringing modernity to the heart of China's preeminent classical city. "It is my greatest challenge," said Pei as he was beginning the project at the age of 84, "and probably also my last challenge."

For the architect who placed the pyramid at the Louvre, the challenge of integrating the new with the old is familiar but still difficult. The challenge is to help move China architecturally forward without ignoring or trivializing its past.

Part of the challenge arises from the personal nature of this project. For 600 years his family has called Suzhou home; as a child, Pei played in the garden of his great-uncle, which today sits next door to the museum site. And the choice of the museum site has also stirred controversy—it is, after all, the oldest neighborhood of a 2,500 year-old city, and an area filled with poor residents living amidst Ming and Qing dynasty structures. Further, Pei acknowledges feeling tension within himself—upon returning to Suzhou after seventy years in the West, he admits that modernity has changed him far more than it has his hometown ("I am a foreigner here," he said upon his return).

To meet the challenge of incorporating modernism with tradition, Pei draws on ideas that stretch far back within his own life and work—including a 1946 thesis project at Harvard's Graduate School of Design in which he began a professional journey that aims to integrate modernity and tradition in architectural form. At the time, he labeled it his "impossible dream."

In fact, it is a dream that has infused much of the work throughout his career—from the Louvre in Paris to the Bank of China in Hong Kong to the new museum in Suzhou. The film traces Pei's journey to all of these important sites—and accompanies him every time he visits China over eight years until Pei is 93 years old.

The result is the most intimate portrait ever made of the man who has shaped some of the greatest monuments of the modern world, East and West—captured while he is at work designing and building a museum whose form, he says, embodies "my biography."

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CREDITS

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