I. M. Pei's La Pyramide du Louvre:
A Diamond in the Rough or Merely Junkspace?
By Rebecca L. Moyer

After a moment of astonishment at first sight of the model of the Pyramide du Louvre, Emile Biasini reportedly exclaimed, "It looks like a diamond!"[1] Biasini, chosen by Francois Mitterand to chair the Etablissement Public du Grand Louvre, was first to see Ieoh Ming Pei's design. The Pyramide, completed in 1989, was designed by the Chinese-American, who offered the "luminous structure-symbol" as a distinct way to avoid distracting attention away from the Louvre, but rather, as a structure that would complement or "gracefully blend" with the great palace.[2]

Further, he rationalized, its geometric shape would enclose the greatest area within the smallest possible volume, so it would stand as unobtrusively as possible. It was, Pei assured, "a natural solution."[3] Pei argued that a traditional horizontal roof would only bring in light; a high, pointed roof would bring in both volume and light, with the added advantage of making the entrance very visible.[4]

This was the point of the project, after all. Before the construction of the Pyramide, the Louvre was known for puzzling its visitors – the entrance was concealed and hard to locate; congestion and chaos plagued the courtyard (la cour Napoleon); the hallways of the galleries beneath were dimly lit and incoherent in structure; the entire Richelieu wing was off limits. Pei saw the "L" shape of the museum as nonconducive to public life. By liberating this wing from the French Treasury and restoring it as part of the museum, Pei would reshape the Louvre as a "U."[5] Finding this a much friendlier, more inviting shape, Pei determined the new entrance would, therefore, have to be located in the center. Occupying the center of gravity, this object would maintain and encourage a more harmonious, balanced environment.

I.

The Pyramide, smack dab in the middle of the courtyard, is now the main entrance to the Louvre. Reaching 70 feet into the air, and angling at 51 degrees, the Pyramide pays homage to the first architects, the Egyptians, who standardized 51 degrees for their own pyramids.[6] However, there is a clear distinction (no pun intended) between the two. This modern "pyramid" is made of transparent glass facades. In fact, this was a point Pei was steadfast in defending – there would be no hue, no tint, no gray allowed – the glass was to be pure, clear, transparent. As a result, today the structure stands lucid, obvious, and naked in the courtyard.

To avoid disturbing the balance of the courtyard, small progeny offset it; these small cubic triangles, too, provide light and ventilation to the subterranean spaces below.[7] Steel rods and cables crisscross in complex arithmetic patterns to promote an aura of equilibrium; indeed the new now stands in the midst of the old in the cour Napoleon.

Ideally, the portico leads to a single descending escalator, which escorts visitors to the Main Galleries below. Yet, before reaching these Main Galleries, visitors must navigate through a new shopping center, food court, and open entryway, lit by the unnatural, luminous structure above. The light dramatically intervenes into the hollow corridors below, casting kaleidoscopic shadows through the glass. It illuminates and metamorphosizes with the weather, the time of day, and the strength of the sun above.

Then, there is the Pyramide Inversee, an inverted, undersized version of the Pyramide.[8] The apex suspends only a few feet above the floor, and its base levels with the street above. Out of place and unaccompanied, this substructure reverses the perspective that one had in the cour Napoleon, yet simultaneously calls to its likeness.

II.

While Pei assuredly freed up support spaces for the Louvre with additional galleries, auditoriums, and the Richelieu wing, it remains less than successful as an enclosed entrance. Lines of people wait in the courtyard, fully exposed to the elements, squeezing into the *single* entrance, to traverse down the *single* escalator, leaving the "smaller, flanking pyramids [seemingly] aesthetically gratuitous."[9] Therefore, even with the Pyramide, the courtyard remains just as chaotic, disserving its original and primary intended technical purpose.

As an urban structure, it has been highly criticized as "[reshaping] the city's profile and [opening] the door for further vulgarism."[10] As French critics questioned the taste of the design, as well as the American roots of its architect, the "Battle of the Pyramid became a philosophical debate over the future of French culture."[11]

Surely, this Pyramide was to inherit status as an imperative aesthetic mark of the Parisian landscape; Le Grand Louvre holds great cultural and historical significance for the French. But the Louvre is no newcomer to change. First built by King Philippe Auguste around 1200, the great building was to be a fortress to protect the royalty against robbers and thieves. Charles V enlarged it; Napoleon III extended it even further with the addition of the Richelieu wing.[12] Not only has it represented a proud, French nostalgia for days of chivalry and power, its interior is a shrine to international greatness as it houses some of the greatest artworks of all time.

The debate, or battle if you will, surrounding the look, feel, and locale of this aesthetic object, especially in the confines of such a French historical stronghold, surely acknowledged what a significant cultural construct Pei's building would be. A question remains, then, once finally constructed, what did this "luminous symbol-structure" actually represent?

III.

The Pyramide du Louvre has been termed Pei's "legacy to modernism."[13] Modernism, which celebrated it's glory in the early decades of the 20th century, aesthetically encouraged subjectivity over objectivity; an emphasis on HOW perception takes place over WHAT is perceived; the blurring of genres and lessening of criteria; the multi-narration of grand, cultural narratives; the rejection of the distinction between "high" and "low" culture; and an emphasis on fragmentation and discontinuity.[14]

Both modernism and postmodernism embrace these criteria; both are criticized for generating an abundance of provisional, incoherent, ahistorical objects. While postmodernity emphasizes this fragmentation and encourages repetition, modernity supposedly laments it.[15] Regardless, the Pyramide is characteristically rooted in this modernist tradition. It serves as a decorative, pastiche of a doorway that is *not* functional, and divorces itself from its historical surroundings. Also, it has an anything-goes exuberance by disassociating itself from any class distinction. As a structure of glass, cable, and steel, it is highly simplistic and non-exclusive.

Its own populist positioning within the courtyard makes it an aesthetically (hyper)modern object – its aim is to be seen, to attract its "consumers" to a single location. This doorway itself is vague and ambiguous. It mystically invites visitors down a moving, inescapable escalator, dropping them off into the throes of, no, not the museum, but a shopping arena. The prerequisite of a single-file line makes entering the museum an entirely subjective experience, as visitors are dumped freely, one by one, into the seemingly open, yet confined space below. Also, because an engrossing Pyramide pleasantly lights the sky above, there's a modernistic dualism here that makes the visitor focus on HOW the structure exists, rather than WHAT it really means. This

trait is exemplified by its recurrence below ground level, in which the visitor again encounters the Pyramide Inversee. This reversal, then, lends itself to another paradox: skewing the perspective of the visitor by turning things upside down, and also, by its own skewed perspective as a reflective construct.

The Pyramide is also a free-floating entity, liberated from its surroundings, recycled in smaller copies scattered above and below the horizontal courtyard plane. These are disconnected from one another. The purpose, therefore, is not the actual production of a space, but the re-production of emblematic qualities of an image, which are reproduced in the partnering lustrous images of the smaller pyramids.

Likewise, back in the courtyard, the experience of visiting the Louvre has been commodified. The pyramid is inescapable; it is obligatory that one must see it. It makes itself known and serves to sell itself. Through its insubstantial, mythic walls, it glimmers, shines, and invites – appealing to us an object to be had, much like a diamond. And, fear not (!), lights surround the Pyramide at night, electronically putting the Pyramide on display.

Pei, himself, has been noted as saying he "does not believe the architecture must find forms to express the times or that it should remain isolated from commercial forces."[16] Rather, his geometric and sophisticated designs loosely relate themselves to the high-tech movement, inferring a relationship to the surroundings of an electronic culture. As a three-dimensional construct, the Pyramide screens or provides windows for looking across the courtyard, functioning much like the electronic screen that one uses to look *through* to discover, enjoy, see, or learn about something else.

IV.

Published in a recent non-profit art webzine, architect Rem Koolhaas, in "The Bloke Alone,"
sums up the modern condition of aesthetic structural designs in his description of the
automonument (his term for the 20th century monument):

> Beyond a certain critical mass each structure becomes a monument, or at least raises that
> expectation through its size alone, even if the sum or the nature of the individual activities it
> accommodates does not deserve a monumental expression. The category of monument
> presents a radical, morally traumatic break with the conventions of symbolism: its physical
> manifestation does not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a
> three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial; it merely is itself
> and through sheer volume cannot avoid being a symbol – an empty one, available for
> meaning as a billboard is for advertisement. It is a solipsism, celebrating only the fact of its
> disproportionate existence, the shamelessness of its own process of creation…[17]

Koolhaas is describing contemporary architecture as *not* technical, aesthetic, or ideological – the

automonument is most closely indicative of an epistemological crisis, because it is not

representative of current state of knowledge. In another stream-of-consciousness article, he

describes the scenario more critically and more bluntly, saying, "the built product of

modernization is not modern architecture but *Junkspace*." Rationalizing the terms *junk* and

space, he writes, "if *space-junk* is the human debris that litters the universe, *junk-space* is the

residue mankind leaves on the planet."[18]

Junkspace, according to Koolhaas, is the product of mechanization and technology, mainly,

the escalator and air conditioning, jailing progress within the confines of newly built structures.

The *automonument* is *junkspace*. The Pyramide, then, with its interior-focused, mechanized

transportation fixation, is another example of Koolhaas' *junkspace* from the moment of entry,

where "an escalator takes you to an invisible destination, facing a provisional vista of plaster,

inspired by forgettable sources. (…'Space' is scooped out of *Junkspace* as from a soggy block of

ice cream that has languished too long in the freezer…)."[19]

A Koolhaas antithesis of *Junkspace* – namely accessible, is his Prada store in Manhattan.[20] This renovated store was coincidentally once a museum itself – museum turned store mind you – in which the interior public space (like inside the Pyramide) is not enclosed. Instead, you voyeuristically observe others while conscious of being watched. A glass-enclosed machine juxtaposes a gaping hole in the floor, which openly exposes the subterranean basement area. A waving wall and brightly colored murals serve to further disorient and suggest movement between upper and lower floor – one is compelled to look below in a manner reminiscent of peering into and inward the Pyramide du Louvre.

It's critical to note that both Pei and Koolhaas utilize the physical material of transparent glass; both architects acknowledge glass is to be used for creating ostensible partitions, ornamental structures really, that take on geometric forms. Also, both architects use steel; Pei within the stitching of pyramid cables, Koolhaas in the large, mechanical lift inside the glass encasing. This juxtaposition of urbanity and nature provides differing relationships of hardness and lightness, cloudiness and transparency. These physical materials are responsive computational media – they serve as meaningful responses to the urban condition of their respective cities (whether New York City or Paris).

Yet, the outcome is ironically twisted. Koolhaas' Prada store spawns an attentive, quiet consideration, the composure mandated within the designated walls of a museum. Pei's plain and earthy Pyramide produces a chaotic, noisy milieu, a la the frenzy of a shopping mall. Conversely, the brightly decorated Prada store is open and outward, but in this respect directed toward particular tastes; the Pyramide is inward and single-minded, yet unchallenging and therefore aspires to all tastes. Here, is a distinct difference in conditions of attendance. The Pyramide calls for submission; the Prada store invites interaction.

Look a little deeper, and you'll find that it's a serious difference of aesthetic proportions. Koolhaas' design is striving for authentic distinctness; Pei's design is striving for simulated difference. Pei's design gives off the simulacrum of authenticity and uniqueness; examined in retrospect, there is little unique or authentic about it – designed to match the angles of the Egyptian pyramids; designed with its own replicas already in place; designed as a gateway to the museum but really a gateway to shopping; designed to *not* subtract attention away from or alter the ambiance of the Louvre, yet, in fact, is unavoidable and commands attention; designed to reduce chaos yet encourages it; etc.

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V.

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The Pyramide is a product of uniformity that is completely detached from its historical surroundings. Functioning as an *automonument*, it does not incorporate any of the physical or aesthetic traits of Le Grand Louvre – it is entirely disconnected, dropped like a foreign object into the center of the courtyard. It, in fact, exemplifies the following statement made by the contemporary postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who said, "this gives the whole thing a science-fiction feel, as if an attempt had been made to gather all the marks of earthly endeavor and culture together here for the benefit of a visitor from outer space."[21]

Discussing the role of the museum in culture and in public life, Baudrillard sees the contemporary museum as a means of fossilizing human nature; a bizarre way of encapsulating human experience and human existence in narcissism.[22] The quote is applicable not only to Le Grand Louvre itself, but to this shimmering, foreign icon poised at the center of gravity in the cour Napoleon. Even Koolhaas says, "museums are sanctimonious *Junkspace*; no sturdier aura than holiness. To accommodate the convert they have attracted by default, museums massively turn 'bad' space into 'good' space." [23] The Pyramide, centered in the cour Napoleon, gives a

false impression of stability, of organization. It's shiny and clear walls, too, give it a mystical feel (or science-fiction feel as Baudrillard would put it), reminiscent of the stained-glass windows built into cathedral walls and ceilings. But the Pyramide is non-exclusive to any particular taste – it is clear, uniform, and monotonous.

That this revolutionary object was built in the midst of the urban, Parisian landscape, it serves to identify with the 'good' French principles toward democracy, freedom, justice, and individual free will. (It wouldn't want to hint at the 'bad', for fear of not including the masses or of excluding a taste culture.) Yet, its overriding high-tech characteristics misunderstand the French way of life; the Pyramide breaks away from the French notions of living a simple life. It lacks cultural relevance, cultural identity, and therefore wanes in form as a cultural symbol. Its symbol is bland, generic, empty – as is the falsity of an *automonument*. The French are by no means a high-tech, electronic society – new technologies are distrusted and they remain a relatively wireless culture, for fear of being tied down or manipulated. Counter this with the United States, a super-dooper electronic society that is wired in every respect – everything is *plugged in* or *dialed up* or *wired into* (i.e., cable).

Furthermore, the Pyramide is not representative of the French definition of beauty. Beauty in France is pure, simple, and proud. Take, for an example, La Tour Eiffel, a great steel frame reaching tall into sky. Surely, it, too, is electronically lit at night. But here the lights only serve to outline the great structure, not to reflect radiant walls as with the Pyramide. La Tour Eiffel has no walls. It is open, free, inviting, and honest. With La Tour Eiffel, what you see is what you get. This is not so with the Pyramide. It is closed in, exclusionary, and peculiar. It invites visitors inside, then transports them somewhere else beyond (or below in this case!) the structure itself. Deep inside Le Grand Louvre, the (thoughtless) pyramids are all but forgotten. Their light only

glorifies the entryway, and of course the shopping area, which is the misplaced result of entering the Pyramide.

Koolhaas once said, "it's a very depressing phenomenon that we can deal with decaying conditions in the city only by inventing weak attempts to restore them or to declare them historical. It would be much more powerful and creative to use other tactics."[24] Here, Koolhaas is lamenting the thoughtless restoration of old or "historical" monuments in urban life. While the Pyramide as an addition and means of restoring the gateway into Le Grand Louvre isn't exactly what one would call thoughtless, its screened-in walls and replicated cohorts render it a symbol of technology, seemingly detached from the French, or from *Frenchness*. It is futuristic and uninvolved with contemporary life; it is conditioned commercial space that "does not pretend to create perfection, only interest."[25] It is, really, *junkspace*, a geometric edifice that, to put it simply, *just takes up space.*

VI.

With the Pyramide, Pei placed great emphasis on a small design, on preventing the Pyramide from surpassing the height or stature of Le Grand Louvre, but as Koolhaas says,

> minimum is the ultimate ornament…it does not signify beauty, but guilt…the stricter the lines, the more irresistible the seductions. Its role is not to approximate the sublime, but to minimize the same of consumption, drain embarrassment, to lower the higher…[26]

The Pyramide is a pyramid geometrically, but it does not carry the same connotation as the word *pyramid* suggests. Its full name La Pyramide du Louvre, giving ownership over to the Le Grand Louvre. This, alongside its inferior, subordinate *taille* render it ornamental – a distraction from seeing the bigger picture.

Pei's vision was, perhaps, too pragmatic. Meaning, it placed a great emphasis on doing (the design), and not enough emphasis on questioning the epistemology behind designing such

an important landmark (its *Frenchness*). Unless, of course, it was his intention to produce mediated meaning for and within the mass culture of the consumer marketplace. For the Pyramide is not only replicated, it is replicable, and likewise serves as a channel to the delivery of the consumption of musings (the shopping area) over our own existence. This was most likely not Pei's original intention, though, in developing an ancillary cultural icon or as an architect in general. Yet, his structure does not document what he finds; it does not document French reflection; it is not inimitable, therefore wanes in the face of credibility.

Once upon a time, architects and craftsmen built because the need to inhabit was in our very own human nature. Buildings say a great deal about who we are, our needs and our tastes, about our culture and our systems of belief at a particular time. This structure is merely a bright advertisement in a high-tech design. Its mathematical composition gives it false credibility, while radiating electric light and the hum of electronic means of transport (the escalator) please the eye and internalize the experience – a reversal of its origins as an integral part of public life. Instead, really, the Pyramide serves as a gateway directly into a vulgarized facet of culture. Whether shaped as an 'L' or shaped as a 'U' is no matter, when visiting Le Grand Louvre, or even looking at a photograph, all one will ever see is Pei's bright "luminous structure-symbol." And so while it may look like a diamond, the Pyramide is simply not one.

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[2] Cannell, Michael T. I.M. Pei: Mandarin of Modernism. Crown Publishing Group, 1995. Chapter 1.

[3] Cannell, *I.M. Pei*, Chap. 1.

[4] Compain, *Le Bataille de la Pyramide du Louvre,* 1999.

[5] Compain, *Le Bataille de la Pyramide du Louvre*, 1999.

[6] Compain, *Le Bataille de la Pyramide du Louvre*, 1999.

[7] Sharp, Dennis. Twentieth Century Architecture: A Visual History. New York: Facts on File, 1991. pg. 407.

[8] www.atkielski.com/PhotoGallery/Paris/Louvre/LouvrePyramideSmall.html

[9] Heyer, Paul. American Architecture: Ideas and Ideologies in the Late Twentieth Century. New York: Van Norstrand Reinhold, 1993. Discussion pgs. 275-278.

[10] Cannell, *I.M. Pei*, Chap. 1.

[11] Cannell, *I.M. Pei*, Chap. 1.

[12] Compain, *Le Bataille de la Pyramide du Louvre,* 1999.

[13] Heyer, *American Architecture*, pgs. 275-278.

[14] Cahoone, Lawrence E. Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology. Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

[15] Modernity is the term for the philosophical, political, and ethical ideas behind the aesthetic aspects of modernism.

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[21] Baudrillard, Jean. America. London: Verso, 1988. pg. 51.

[22] Baudrillard, *America*, pg. 41.

[23] Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, 2002.

[24] Heron, Katrina. "From Bauhaus to Koolhaas." *Wired Magazine*. Issue 4.07, July 1996.

[25] Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, 2002.

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