

ARCHITECTURE VIEW/Herbert Muschamp

A Shrine to Rock Music With a Roll All Its Own



Photographs by Tim Hursley

I. M. Pei's Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, looking up from the promenade to what the architect calls the "tent" area and, below, as seen from Lake Erie.

A monument to a cultural revolution, the Rock Hall of Fame on the shores of Lake Erie is the jaunty design of a pillar of cultural respectability.

Architecturally, the building's main event is the third floor, cafe level: a floating platform from which you can take in the entire space. Visually the reverse of the Hall of Fame's dark enclosure, this is an open, radiant space, custom-made for people-watching. But the powerful steel trusses and Mr. Pei's gripping command of space also offer a breathtaking spectacle.

THE MUSEUM TRACES THE HISTORY of rock back to its roots in the 1920's. But the architecture takes the story even further back, to the Romantic movement of the 19th century and the spirit of social and artistic rebellion it fostered. Rock represents a culmination of that spirit. With rock, Romanticism was transformed from an antisocial proposition into the expected rite of passage for a normal adolescence. What was once the defiant impulse of an artistic elite became an integral part of the cultural mainstream.

Modern architecture accomplished something similar. It took the explosive energies of modern society — its industry, its insecurity, its appetite for change — and channeled them into an urbane, civilizing art. I. M. Pei is a pivotal figure in that transfor-



mation. In his work, modernism shifts from a radical campaign to reform society to the highly polished reflection of an idealized liberal society.

Mr. Pei has said that before setting out to design the Hall of Fame, his only personal connection to rock-and-roll was the not unusual one of disapproving parent. Mr. Pei himself prefers jazz; he found his way into designing the museum when he spent a week traveling with Mr. Ertegun and Jann Wenner, the publisher of Rolling Stone, two of the Hall of Fame's sponsors, exploring New Orleans, Memphis and the links between jazz and rock.

Mr. Pei feels that his taste may be of another era: he has mixed feelings about the neon and zebra-striped cars hanging in the atrium lobby. The cars are not Calders. But they look marvelous, as bright and wiry as Calder's little circus. And Mr. Pei has not designed a disco. But it is moving to see a leading architect of the liberal imagination develop a new vocabulary for the Rolling Stone generation.

Those of us who identify with that generation are well past youth ourselves, as the museum's hit parade of album covers and effigies of dead rock artists bittersweetly remind us. We look around now, dazed by the noise of the so-called culture wars, wondering what happened to the older liberal culture that we once mocked with youthful arrogance. This symbolic bridge between two golden-oldie generations offers a prospect of continuity where a gap once yawned. Rock is old, liberalism is in disarray, but the beat goes on. □

CLEVELAND

ELVIS SIGHTINGS SHOULD BE even more common now that the glittering new Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland has opened. Not only do we get to see Michael Jackson's deceased father-in-law (or at least an anatomically correct mannequin of him) dressed in full leather regalia. The building itself, designed by I. M. Pei, has an Elvis-like swagger of its own. Featuring saucy geometric forms cantilevered out from the middle of a six-story tower, the Hall of Fame is a swivel-hipped apparition in metal and glass. From certain angles, the building even seems to be trailing a cape.

Initiated by a group of music industry executives in 1983, the Hall of Fame, which officially opened yesterday, celebrates the heritage of this distinctive American art form. In addition to honoring legendary performers, the Hall of Fame will maintain and display a collection of rock artifacts that already includes Wilson Pickett's jumpsuit and the acoustic guitar on which Pete Townshend composed tunes for "Tommy." (Cleveland was chosen as the site for the Hall of Fame because the city offered to pay nearly half the \$92 million cost of building it. The city was also home to Alan Freed, the disk jockey who gave the music its name.)

It's a little disconcerting when rolling stones begin to gather moss. The Hall of Fame and Museum may strike some hardcore rock fans as a glorified sell-out to the establishment that rock was born to rock. The choice of I. M. Pei to design the building will do little to dispell their dismay. Mr. Pei, after all, is the man who redesigned the Louvre, the National Gallery in Washington and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, among other bastions of cultural respect-

ability. Couldn't they have picked an architect with less impeccable credentials?

Well, they didn't. And it's a good thing. However unlikely the marriage between Mr. Pei and rock-and-roll, the union has produced a fine building. Beyond that, it has catalyzed an uncommon display of solidarity within a beleaguered liberal culture.

Standing on the shore of Lake Erie, along a waterfront strip now being developed as a park with cultural and recreational attractions, the Hall of Fame faces the city with a glass facade, a sloping triangle five stories tall. Not fully pyramidal, the facade is described by Mr. Pei as a "tent," though the slope, the shape and the truss-supported glass inevitably bring to mind Mr. Pei's crystalline entrance to the Louvre.

The tent is moored at the top to the square six-story tower, made of concrete sheathed with white metal panels. Two cantilevered wings, also sheathed in white metal, project from either side of the tower. One wing, a drum wrapped by a spiral, sits atop a tall, slender column, an allusion, perhaps, to a stack of 45's revolving on a record spindle. The other, a trapezoidal box, flares outward like a speaker or a frozen blast of sound.

The images are suggested, not explicit; yet they are unusually figurative for Mr. Pei; and, for an architect known for polish and finesse, the cantilevered forms are also conspicuously awkward. They bring back memories of gawky teen-agers on the dance floors of the early 1960's, groping toward adulthood in the era when dances still had names. Here, Mr. Pei adds the Pyramid, the Spiral and the Drum to the Frug, the Swim and the Watusi.

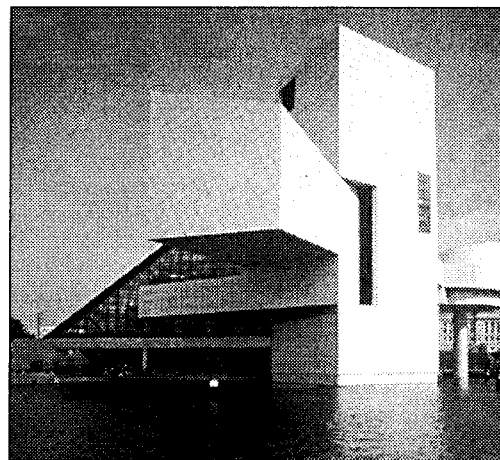
Inside the entrance, the architect puts on a show of pure vintage Pei: a soaring, open space, a transcendent greenhouse, it is

punctuated but not terminated by the metal trusses; the glass expands the interior to take in the sky. Neon and zebra-striped cars, relics of a U-2 tour, hang inside the atrium; balconies, staircases and escalators ripple upward in visual syncopation. A disk jockey's booth, intended for visiting radio personalities, lords over the space from above. Many museums today are designed to function as party spaces for opening nights; here, the rock goes on around the clock.

THE HISTORICALLY MINDED may note a distant resemblance between Mr. Pei's design and Vladimir Tatlin's iconic Monument to the Third International, an unbuilt tribute to the founders of the Soviet state. The articulation of the building's spaces as separate volumes; the design of the volumes as abstract geometric forms (spiral, pyramid, cylinder); the diagonal thrust of the glass tent; the open space behind the metal space frame: these elements bring unmistakably to mind Tatlin's design.

The resemblance may be fortuitous, but, as you wander around this pinball machine of a museum, the comparison does not seem gaga. What has more political power? A political party or a dance party? Forget about Lenin. It's Elvis who changed the world.

Most of the museum's exhibition space is below the ground, in a 30-square-foot space named for the record magnate Ahmet Ertegun. Colorfully designed by the San Francisco team of Bruce and Susan Burdick, with flashing lights and pounding bass, it's the bingo game in the basement of a church. The display splices miniature auditoriums and listening booths into open areas dedicated to different aspects of rock as music, style and social history. Stage costumes,



props from tours and album covers are interwoven with interactive video displays.

A double escalator ascends through the open space of the tent to smaller exhibition spaces, a 200-seat auditorium (housed in the trapezoidal wing) and the cantilevered drum, which will eventually contain a circular dance floor.

The Hall of Fame proper is an anticlimax. Lodged at the top of the white tower and approached by a dizzying double-spiral stair, the hall is a large black box lined with glass on which the signatures of inducted rock stars have been inscribed. The names glow in the dark, as do video monitors that show the stars' pictures. The space is starkly dramatic: a high-tech version of the autographed pavement at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. But the atmosphere is so lugubrious that you may be tempted to ask the deejay to give the Monster Mash a spin.