



Cesar Pelli was born in Tucumán, Argentina in 1926. He received his architectural training at the University of Tucumán and at the University of Illinois. From 1954 until 1964 he was associated with Eero Saarinen and with the firm of Eero Saarinen and Associates. Pelli was director of design for Daniel, Mann,

Johnson and Mendenhall of Los Angeles from 1964 until 1968 and partner-in-charge of design at Gruen Associates, also of Los Angeles, from 1968 until 1977. Since 1977 he has been Dean of the School of Architecture at Yale University as well as head of the firm of Cesar Pelli and Associates Architects of New Haven.

Mr. Pelli lectured in Houston under the auspices of the Rice Design Alliance in 1981, and was interviewed by Cite on 12 May 1982.

Cite: Mr. Pelli you have at least four projects currently underway in Houston: Four Leaf Towers; Four Oaks Place; the Pin Oak project, and Herring Hall for the Jones Graduate School of Administration at Rice. In addition you have participated in two design competitions: one for the Texas Commerce Tower; and one for the Hermann Park Towers, which you won. What changes within your approach to architecture are contained in this series of

to the live oaks that are so common on the campus. The Hermann Park project benefits a little from the character of Rice University and its surroundings and from the park itself. And the buildings we did there are definitely part of that area, the area of beautiful old homes between Rice University and Main street called Shadyside. One senses in that area that one is working in a city or neighborhood with an architectural character that people are aware of, that they perceive and enjoy. Pin Oak is the most different of all problems because we are dealing not only with ninety-five acres of empty land but these are surrounded by many other acres that are also fairly empty. In the ninety-five acres we are really starting with a clean slate and so the most important things we have done there are not the buildings which I think are going to be beautiful but the urban concept that we are using as a base and structure for the architecture to come. The most important decision was to start by defining a public place, and to make this place at Pin Oak the park, and around the park the buildings. The buildings are all being designed to support that space primarily, and secondarily to express their own identity in a number of ways. So that the circumstances of each project, each area, each different need of the project area, are different: to design a corporate headquarters, then the housing, or the school of business, those are very different problems. And primarily the sub-areas in Houston (which are much more different than anybody outside of Houston imagines or that I imagined before coming here) have led us to put greater emphasis on different aspects of architecture in the diverse projects.

Cite: Are you saying that it is possible for architects in Houston to be contextually responsive?

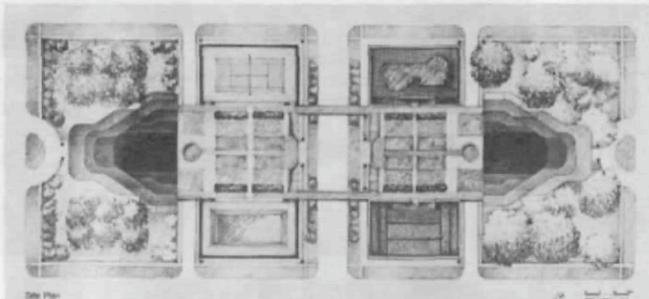
when the building is built you are building a complex of rooms with highly differentiated functions, and the units themselves are each under a different ownership. And that affects, and should affect, what the building looks like. Of course it has been possible, and many buildings have been built, where those highly differentiated functions are subsumed in an even-looking exterior. But these are highly differentiated functions with highly differentiated exterior needs. If you are in a high building, you like to have large windows in your living room because you could enjoy the view. You don't need such large windows in your bedroom and certainly not in your bathrooms. But it is possible to do them all with large windows and then obscure them inside.

An office building is a very different matter. Offices, represent layers of space, horizontal layers of space, that are built to be for uses not determined before the buildings are built. You don't know when or where there is going to be a conference room and where there is going to be somebody's private office or a secretarial pool. And even after the building is built those functions keep on shifting and changing. In some ways an office building is more like a mechanism of production.

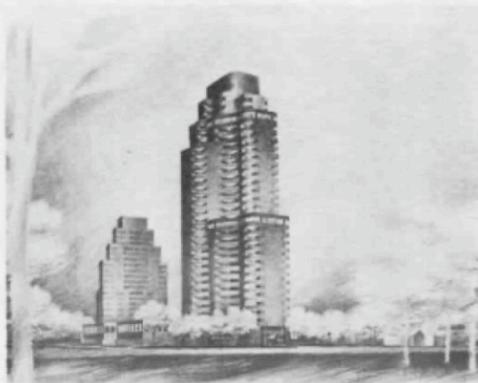
Also offices in our society are part of our production system. Wealth is being created in those spaces and the value of the space and the kind of space is related to that production system. So it is therefore a bit like designing factories, only it is more than factory space and you have to be able to move the present-day machinery, which may be desks, word processors or computers, around. So therefore that horizontal layering of space is a critical and dominant characteristic of an office build-

An Interview with Cesar

Four Leaf Towers.



Project: Hermann Park Towers. 1979. Cesar Pelli and Associates, architects. Site plan of two towers.



Hermann Park Towers, perspective view from Hermann Park.



Model of Four Oaks Place. 1980 (in construction).

building designs?

CP: What a difficult question. Let's see, the designs have all been done through a period in my career in architecture that I find very rich; a period of exploration—not wild exploration, trying to get out of the jungle, but very rich, fruitful exploration—for more appropriate and responsive forms and attitudes about architecture and what makes architecture. What is interesting is that all of those six projects are more conditioned by specific circumstances in each project than by those tendencies or interests that could be in me. For example, the location of the Four Leaf Towers in Houston is very interesting because there are very well defined subzones of context: downtown Houston is very much a cosmopolitan, vigorous, growing metropolis, like Manhattan, Chicago, Denver or San Francisco, with great emphasis and dominance by financial institutions and corporations. The Post Oak Boulevard zone represents the Houston that people outside of Houston imagine—growing very rapidly, a bit trashy, full of energy, optimism, and a bit disjointed; where each building or group of buildings tends to stand on its own because of the magnitude of the parcels, and because the buildings need to be surrounded by parking lots or parking structures that tend to pull them apart. The buildings we designed there—the Four Leaf and the Four Oaks groups—are therefore designed to fit in this environment.

Rice University, on the other hand, is a delightful, mature campus. It's one of the most beautiful campuses I know. At least in the older parts it has a great architectural coherence and even the newer parts are gentle in their scale, and the whole thing comes together thanks

CP: I think you have to be. I think that even buildings that appear to be non-contextually responsive, buildings that appear to be more concerned with themselves and—let me not talk about my own building, but let us say the Post Oak Central towers that Philip Johnson did—are responding to the contextual pressures or opportunities, or the lack of pressures, that exist in the Post Oak Boulevard area. And the other extreme is of course working in such a strongly defined context as Rice University. That's the most difficult contextual problem we have. And indeed working in the Post Oak Boulevard area is the easiest from the point of view of context—that's where the least pressure exists. So that of all the projects we have, the two extremes are both represented in Houston.

Cite: A very striking thing about both your projects for Interfin is the detailing of the curtain walls. The Four Leaf Towers seem obviously related to your earlier exploration at the Museum Tower. Given the fact that Four Leaf and Four Oaks are for the same developer and that the sites are contiguous, what would you say about the difference between the exterior treatment of the two groups of buildings?

CP: The primary difference is that Four Leaf is residential and Four Oaks is commercial—offices—and these are really two different building types with different effects on their external appearance and image.

A residential building is made up of residential apartment and condominium units, and the units are in themselves subdivided into components like living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms. The units, and the most critical elements of each unit, are part of the design. So

ing, and the lack of differentiation is also very critical.

Also it has to do with the perception of what residential buildings are like, the fact that this is private. On the other hand offices, although they are also private in an economic sense, have a certain public character. Anybody can come to an office building, enter the elevators, punch a floor and go and visit somebody and try to sell something. They are buildings of ready access during business hours and they also have that very important quality, typical during business hours: they will open at 8 o'clock or 8:30 or whatever time offices open and they will close at 5:30 or 6:00, and they have that diurnal function. The apartments will function the day long and they are continuously occupied and are very private. You will have to go through a doorman and usually explain why you are there and who you want to see.

But the two groups of buildings are built in the same way. Practically all high rise buildings built today have a structure either of steel or concrete—in this case it is concrete, in both cases—enclosed by some sort of a light-weight enclosure for protection, or curtain wall. In both of these cases we are using an all-glass curtain wall with vision glass in the windows and color spandrel in the closed areas. What gives very strong differences are the glazing systems. In an apartment, where the views out in the evening are very important you need tinted glass because [reflective glass wouldn't work and] clear glass results in too much glare. It's very inefficient and very wasteful in terms of energy consumption. So you are really left with only one choice: to use some form of tinted glass. Even if you have very deep overhangs you still have the problem of glare with clear glass. So that

in an apartment, up in the air, you have to use tinted glass for the windows. In an office building reflective glass is much better, because during the day it does not obscure the landscape any more than tinted glass—sometimes less—and is much more efficient in terms of shielding the energies of the sun, particularly in such a hot climate as Houston. The reflective coat to the glass is very, very efficient, almost a mandatory requirement. Both glasses of course are insulated glass.

We have chosen to differentiate the two sets of buildings. To make them look different we are working with warm, if you wish, "residential" colors for Four Leaf, and with "cold" blues (which are beautiful colors but not necessarily residential) in Four Oaks. The Four Leaf tops, although they can be seen as single pieces of carved glass, like a glass-covered pylon, can also be seen as roofs, as pitched, tile-covered roofs. On the Four Oaks, because they are office buildings, the representation of these more residential roofs would have been inappropriate. The buildings, although they step up, end up in a flat top, although they have a gesture toward the sky. But the technology is the same, and in both cases we are doing something that I don't believe anybody has done before and certainly very different from what you see in The Museum of Modern Art.

In The Museum of Modern Art, what we have is a grid of black mullions with colors floating in the grid and these are, in very general terms, the compositional principles of a Mondrian painting, where the colors play with each other in a compositional way within a black grid. Of course as the building is very large and this repeats many times, we have too many lines and the

(1969) it already has started to change to a more uniform grid that ceases to represent structure and floors. And in The Museum of Modern Art Tower, the grid has ceased to be regular so it's not Mies van der Rohe, but it comes from there. Here it's gone. The grid is gone. The surface is dominant and the grids of color are there to support the fields of color in the surface. And by the changes in the color of the mullions, the interruptions are made stronger. We are doing these in both cases to two different effects. In Four Leaf, the changes in colors of the mullions is to support the fields. In Four Oaks, the changes of colors in the mullions will be to support the horizontality of the functions. In Four Oaks, all of the vertical mullions are dark and painted in fluorocarbon. The horizontal mullions are all bright aluminum so that the whole building is going to be held in a set of bright horizontal lines. As you can see, the attitudes towards technology and the technology itself are identical in both sets of buildings, although used a little differently, and also the attitudes and the principles about the use of colors and fields and mullions are also the same in both sets of buildings.

Cite: You seem to have adopted a quite different representational strategy in the design of the Hermann Park Towers. One wonders, were you inspired by any sort of historic precedent in that instance?

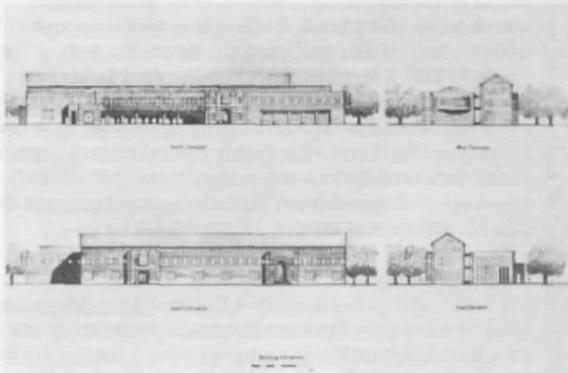
CP: Directly, no. Clearly no. I was concerned with Shadyside. I was very interested subliminally in the character of those buildings, and the only thing that led us to was to propose a painted brick structure. No, what I was interested in was the qualities of two things. Some ideas had to do with the specifics of the problem; some

apartments in the front end up facing the park, and all the units that don't [face the park] face inwards. They are different from Four Leaf, where the organization of plans was given, and we were really not involved in the development of the basic conceptual *parti*. Here we tried to make basic changes in traditional attitudes towards the development of residential places. We were also very concerned with the creation of place, which is the same thing as Pin Oak, and in both cases we had to be able to develop a place. And the external place is very definitely created between the two towers in Hermann Park.

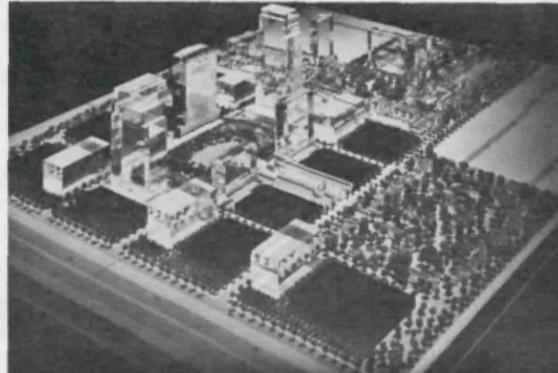
Cite: The way that you have chosen to make a place at the Hermann Park Towers and also at Pin Oak is by using axiality and frontality. I came across a statement you had made in 1976 in which you said you preferred not to use frontality because it seemed to you authoritarian. I wonder now, in Houston, what evokes the desire to create very formal spaces, (although I notice that you also use the same thing in the Cleveland Clinic)? Is this an implicit criticism of the way that space is organized in Houston?

CP: No. Not necessarily a criticism, but I believe it is definitely moving in a different direction, trying to bring to Houston something that Houston has little of, which is formal space. I don't remember the statement that you read to me—I am sure that I made it. That's definitely a change of mind. The formality of the face—and indeed I was concerned before with the authoritarian character—I feel now is a basic responsibility that buildings have to assume. They do bring with themselves, unquestionably, a certain sense of perception of power which may or may not be authority. But I do believe, that in order to

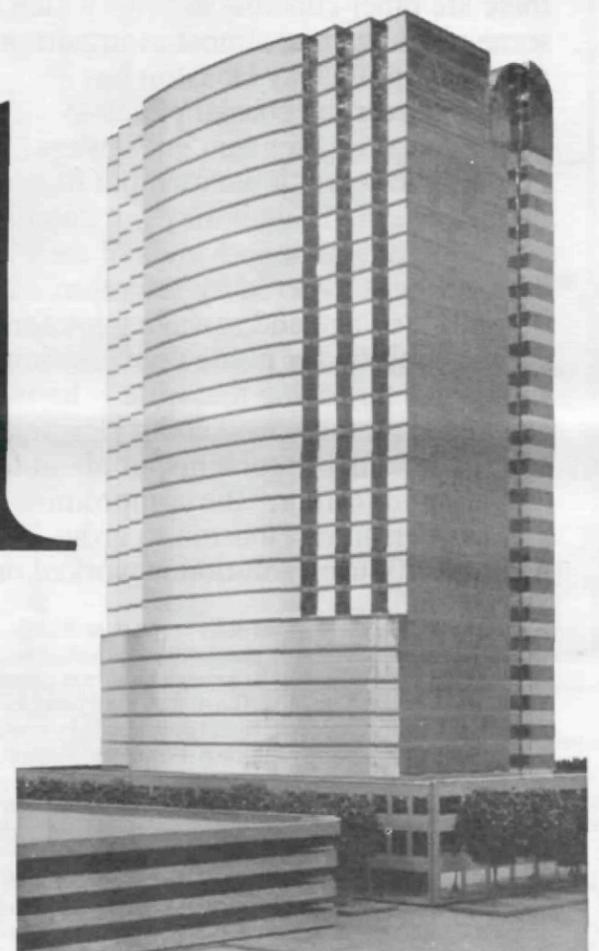
Pelli



Herring Hall, Rice University. 1982 (in design).
Rendered elevation drawings.



Model of Pin Oak. 1979 (in construction).
Photograph by Wolfgang Hoyt, ESTO.



Model of Pin Oak Office Building. In design.
East elevation.

building is symmetrical, it's nothing like a Mondrian. But it definitely comes from that attitude about how you place colors on a field. It could also be seen as related to colored glass windows, vitreous [panels] where each was an entire piece of colored glass, which I think Mondrian also had in mind. So they all come back to similar sources.

In the Four Leaf and Four Oaks what we are doing is something different. The buildings are organized in color patterns and the color patterns are coded, used very consistently to represent certain functional or structural realities. In Four Leaf, all of the vertical columns have the dark brown color. The light beige color always represents a window sill, or a horizontal slab, and separates one apartment from the next. And the medium color is always a panel enclosing a space. The code is very clear and consistent and is repeated formally throughout the building. We have three bays between columns and always in the center bay we have a window. So that repeats consistently, as opposed to The Museum of Modern Art, which is more freely composed. The most important thing is that the mullions change color, and although one would think that the change in color of the very thin lines is unimportant, it really provokes substantial changes in the reading of the facades. Because, instead of being a single plane held by black lines, where the colors float rather freely, that cage of lines disappears. In some ways in my buildings, the cage of lines has come from the first one we did (that was the Century City Medical Plaza in Los Angeles of 1965), which would be a subsumed Mies van der Rohe structure, where only the lines remain so that the surface becomes important. In the San Bernardino City Hall

ideas had to do with interests of mine. Some of the specifics of the problem were that we had to do two structures in two blocks, in each block of different height. One of the blocks faces Hermann Park and the other is behind the first. So you start with two blocks and if you treat them the same, one ends up as favored because it's in front of the park and it's bigger. Very critical for us was how we could deal with the problem so that the identity of the project is more important than each one of the two parts; so that the buildings are designed as two halves of one total. And if they are built there will clearly be an identity of importance in the two buildings.

Also they were reversed, in the sense that the buildings have a formal side and an informal side. What is particularly delightful for me here is that in Houston, which is a city that is so informally organized and where most buildings take an informal attitude towards city form, the external part of these buildings is informal and the internal part is formal. This is the reverse of what you would expect in a European city but very appropriate in Houston. They do play, of course, a more complex role because the internal part of the inner building, which is the formal face, is the one which faces the park. And on the building that is on the park-side block, the formal face really is facing inward toward the city, so that those qualities tend to balance the two buildings and to make them into one unit.

But as you can see now I am dealing with the primary issues in Hermann Park, issues of basic *parti*, of scheme decision, with the organization of plans being secondary, although they make for very good plans because all

have informal qualities in a city, or in any urban context, you need formal ones to refer to. In Hermann Park the reference is immediate because each building possesses both, but you may have it in a city where some buildings are very formal and therefore allow for the informality of other areas. Also, as I have been confronted with the creation of space that I was not dealing with before, the spaces cannot be held together without this formality. I guess you need that power in order to keep that space from dissipating or floating away. I would not see this today as being necessarily authoritarian, although that possibility is always there.

Cite: A final question. Given your visits to Houston over the past several years, are there any specific architectural measures that you can see which would improve the quality of the urban environment?

CP: Get rid of the cars. I don't know how you would do it. Cars are the problem in Houston. I don't have an answer in my pocket. It's an incredibly difficult problem. But definitely the automobiles that are giving form to Houston and are also giving Houston tremendous mobility, are contributing to immobilizing it and to creating barriers between buildings. They are not allowing for an urban form to take place in many cases. The automobile is the most serious problem I think Houston has in terms of urban form or development.

Cite: So we just don't need more beautiful parking garages and freeways?

CP: No. Certainly not.