

# I.M. PEI IN



> BY JOHN GENDALL

## One of the most indelible contributions to Colorado architecture

came from New York-based Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei, FAIA. The National Center for Atmospheric Research building, which he began designing in 1961, is widely regarded as one of the finest buildings in Pei's portfolio—and in Colorado. The Boulder landmark, which was completed in 1966, sits atop a 600-ft mesa above the city, against the dramatic Flatirons to the west.

When he landed the NCAR commission, Pei had just left an executive design position at William Zeckendorf's New York development firm, so NCAR was one of the first projects where he could fully immerse himself in the entire design process, Pei told *Architect Colorado* in an August 2007 conversation in his Manhattan home.

"The Rocky Mountains can be absolutely overwhelming, especially for a young designer," he said. At the time that he was designing NCAR, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill had recently completed the Air Force Academy Chapel. That project, Pei said, addressed the site by separating itself from the landscape on pilotis or piers.

"That was one approach—to just remove the building from the landscape," Pei said. "But I wanted to design into the landscape."

So he looked to Mesa Verde for inspiration. Like the cliff dwellings, NCAR integrates closely with its setting in the Boulder foothills. At NCAR, two clusters of geometric towers that house offices and laboratories are linked by two levels of corridors and communal facilities.

Pei included observation areas in the upper levels of the towers to encourage appreciation of the surroundings, and he specified local aggregate in the concrete to visually blend the building materials with the landscape.

"NCAR is my favorite building in Colorado," says John D. Anderson, FAIA, of AndersonMason Dale Architects. "It's quiet, and it really gets a sense of the place."

In 1997, AIA Colorado awarded NCAR its 25-Year Award, acknowledging its enduring design.

**OPPOSITE** The Mesa Laboratory of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, located atop Table Mesa at the west end of Boulder, Colorado, is recognized as one of the major works of architect I.M. Pei.

# COLORADO

## PEI IN DENVER

But NCAR was neither Pei's first nor his only building in the state. In 1948, Zeckendorf, who was doing development work in Colorado, chose the young Pei to oversee his firm's architecture department. It was in this capacity that Pei designed The Mile High Center in 1955 and Court House Square in 1960. Though the designs themselves could be considered timeless, the built work capitulated to future development.

The Mile High Center, a 23-story office building at 1700 Broadway in Denver, was swallowed up by Philip Johnson's "cash-register" building in the early '80s. Court House Square, at 1550 Court Pl., which received an AIA National Honor Award in 1959 and an AIA Colorado 25-Year Award in 1995, was remodeled in 1996 to accommodate the Adam's Mark Hotel.

Pei's design for the mixed-use complex, which included a 22-story hotel, convention center, department store and public plaza, called for using precast concrete made with aggregate excavated from the site itself, and for the country's largest hyperbolic paraboloid enclosure.

In 1982, Pei's firm, Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, oversaw the design for one of the most-used projects in the state—Denver's 16th Street Mall. Converting the busy arterial into a pedestrian mall created an important cultural, commercial and transit corridor. The project won an AIA Denver 25-Year Award in 2006.

Although he has not been back to Colorado in about 30 years, Pei fondly remembers his time in the state. "It's an incredible setting," he said. "I used to spend a lot of time on the site [in Boulder] when I was designing NCAR, just contemplating the setting."

In recounting his career of more than 50 years, Pei, now 90, named three projects he considers his pivotal achievements: the 1989 Louvre modernization in Paris, the 1978 National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.—and Boulder's NCAR.

Though he just finished designing a museum in his hometown in China last year, Pei has been officially retired since 1990 and maintains that he is just an observer now.

"There's a lot of fashionable architecture these days," he said, "and only history will say what is truly timeless. Timeless architecture digs into culture, digs into history and digs into its setting." ◆

