



# Model citizen

Spanning 50 years, architect Richard Meier's work now fills its own museum

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEFAN RUIZ WRITER: SHONQUIS MORENO

MEIER IN FRONT OF THE FINAL GETTY CENTER MODEL, AT THE NEWLY OPENED RICHARD MEIER MODEL MUSEUM IN NEW JERSEY

DETAIL OF THE STAIRS OF THE FINAL GETTY CENTER MODEL. THE MODELS ARE HANDMADE WITH JOINERY ADHESIVE - THERE'S NO LASER-CUTTING, 3D-PRINTING, CNC MILLING OR NAILING



FOR RICHARD MEIER'S RENOVATION OF THE 1930 SURF CLUB BUILDING IN MIAMI FOR FOUR SEASONS, PLUS ARCHIVE IMAGES, SEE WALLPAPER.COM

**A**rchitect Richard Meier is sitting at a table that is lacquered blank-paper white and still draped with sheets of polystyrene packing foam at the newly installed Richard Meier Model Museum in, of all places, Jersey City, New Jersey. He is wearing a dark, loose-fitting suit, eating a sandwich he brought from home and saying, 'Today's the first day that things are pretty well set', with great satisfaction. 'Frankly, I didn't know what I was getting into at the start. Like so many things, it sort of grew.'

In 2007, the American 1984 Pritzker Architecture Prize winner, who will be 80 this October and celebrated a half-century of practice last year, saw his office's creative output – drawings, models of furniture and buildings – languishing in storage. He decided to establish a first model museum in a raw industrial space in Long Island City, Queens. The museum's reopening in the grounds of Mana Contemporary marks a move into a brand-new white-box gallery space with interiors designed by the practice. Crucially, the move increased the museum's capacity almost five-fold to 15,000 sq ft.

Mana, deemed 'one of the art world's best-kept secrets', by *The New York Times* last summer, is a 35-acre factory-turned-moving and storage empire-turned cultural complex that manages, stores and transports fine art collections, but also offers studios in which artists can make, exhibit and perform. A dancers' rehearsal space, faced with a glass wall, makes every run-through a performance for passers-by and is shared by dancers and choreographers such as Karole Armitage and Shen Wei. Mana came recommended by the architect's friend and gallerist Gary Lichtenstein, whose own space now flanks the museum. For Meier, then, while being easily accessible by train from Manhattan and his own Tenth Avenue office, the facility offers both community and creative critical mass.

Behind Meier, for now, the museum's library shelves are sparsely ranged with design and art books and magazines from his personal subscriptions, like *Domus*, that date back to the 1960s, as well as 50 or so of his framed collages – a portion only. Across the main gallery from the library, Meier has also set up a studio



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Tel Aviv, Israel

**Leblon Offices**  
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**Teachers Village**  
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Gardone Riviera, Italy

2015

**HH Resort and Spa**  
Gangneung, South Korea

**The Surf Club**  
Surfside, Miami, Florida

**Reforma Towers**  
Mexico City, Mexico

2016

**Harumi Residential Towers**  
Tokyo, Japan

2017

**Xin-Yi Residential Tower**  
Taipei, Taiwan

2018

**Taichung Condominium Tower**  
Taichung, Taiwan

for himself, and the deeply textural stainless-steel sculptures he forged using scraps salvaged from architectural models in an upstate New York foundry (Mana too has an on-site foundry now). 'I didn't even realise that I had this number of wall sculptures,' he admits. 'But I stopped doing sculpture because I had no place to put it.' The architect's daughter, Ana, a designer, will open a furniture showroom on the other side of the gallery wall.

When Meier rises from the table, he is tall, with white hair and blue eyes. He walks with a cane into the gallery, bathed in light from factory windows. It is a garden of 400 mostly bass-wood models, some flushed with age, along with several rows of industrial bracket shelving and, hanging from ceiling tracks in an alcove, architectural drawings. The models are handmade with joinery adhesive – no laser-cutting, 3D-printing, CNC-milling or nailing – and it was Meier who organised them, for the sake of clear sight-lines and not always in relation to each other. They embody his preference for light, precision and clarity, and feature fine orthogonal lines and planes, intersecting with arcing geometries. A model for the National Library of France competition depicts an architecture of light-filtering: it soaks its visitors in light from vast glazed >>>

RIGHT, STUDY MODELS BY RICHARD MEIER & PARTNERS ARCHITECTS, NOW DISPLAYED IN THE MANA CONTEMPORARY  
BELOW, UNDERGRADUATE HOUSING MODEL FOR CORNELL UNIVERSITY

walls and a glazed double roof shaped like an aerofoil. Meanwhile, Meier planted some of the book stacks below ground, like gestating seeds.

The architect maintains a small rotating cast of model-makers under model shop manager Tetsuhito Abe, usually interns and recent graduates, people passing through on their way into the office ranks. The models begin as living (and hard-working) documents of the design process, revised and refined over and over again, and offer windows into a painstaking political and creative process. On the biggest Getty Center model, walls and walkways sculpturally change from textured surfaces scored in a grid, resembling a stone wall, to perfectly smooth ones. In reality, all were built in mortared stacks and travertine blocks, but the team never had time to render all of it in detail.

Meier's undulating 1974 Cornell University dormitory scheme is here too. 'It reminds me of the disappointment of having not built it,' he says, even though it hangs in his studio at the back, where he will see it often. Elsewhere on the floor-to-ceiling shelves, massing models, studies devoid of detail, resemble children's building blocks, while others have dramatic Ronchamp-ian roofs (Le Corbusier is among Meier's touchstones). The Neugebauer House is crowned with a deep, asymmetrical V-shape, illustrating how Meier bent the rigid building code of the gated community in which it sits concerning pitched roofs.

A dust-speckled model of the 1967 Smith House lies amid a plethora of Getty Center studies of skylights,



canopies and garden trellises, often displayed on their sides, abstracted, like sculptures. One of the 200 Getty models – Meier devoted an entire Los Angeles workshop to the 13-year project – had to be craned through the windows.

At 10ft x 18ft x 3ft, it rests on a black-wheeled platform and resembles an oversize, unpainted grand piano. The final Getty model is 21ft x 37ft x 5ft and, though it's difficult to discern its seams, cleaves into 17 pieces so that the client could walk into the plan. An early wall-mounted model depicts in a Cubist, almost Picasso-esque way, the steep, irregular grade of the Getty site and its footprint – the architect alternately carved into the hilltop and built atop it.

In retirement, the models have become art objects, if they weren't already. Though the actual buildings are teeming with life somewhere far away, the models remain totems, describing what is, while suggesting what might have been and what may still be. In this sense, the museum contains ideas as much as artifacts. It's a catalogue of the architect's accomplishments, a garden cultivated for 50 years. For the moment, it feels like a secret garden and, for the moment, Meier seems to like it that way. 'I may hang out here when I'm not in the office,' he announces. 'People will begin to wonder where I am.'\*

*The Richard Meier Model Museum is open by appointment only, [www.richardmeier.com](http://www.richardmeier.com)*