

The new JPMorgan Chase headquarters. MAX TOUHEY/JPMORGANCHASE; XOROSHO/ISTOCKPHOTO

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

The Best Architecture of 2025: Place Over Pizzazz

The year’s best buildings, including the new headquarters of JPMorgan Chase and the revamped Frick Collection, didn’t deploy flashy styles, instead smartly and sensitively embracing their specific settings.

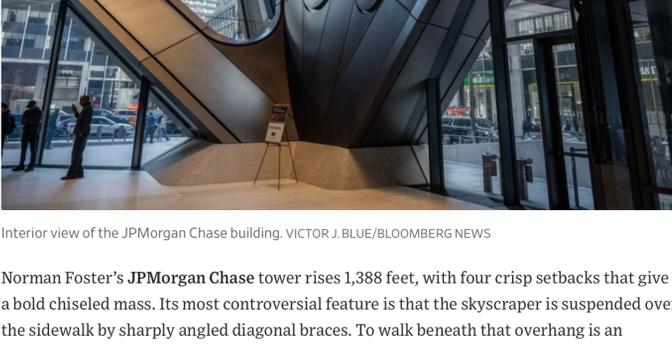
By **Michael J. Lewis**

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The word *starchitect* was still new in 1996 when critics were already announcing that the starchitect era was over. Reports of its death may have been greatly exaggerated. We still live in a world where a small cohort of architectural celebrities enjoy international practices. Yet they are far less likely to be known by their distinctive “signature” styles. The most interesting of last year’s buildings are not those that strained for novelty, but those that addressed their surroundings, and made the most of them.

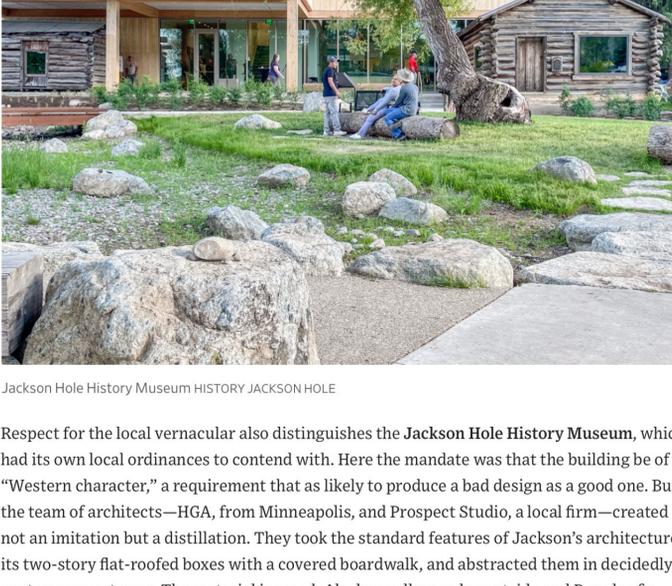
The New York headquarters of JPMorgan Chase at 270 Park Ave. is far bigger than Wyoming’s Jackson Hole History Museum—more than two orders of magnitude bigger—but each is superbly attuned to its location. Their designers accomplished this not by a token gesture to the setting, as roving politicians tweak their standard speech with a local joke, but by respectful attention to the infinite variables that make up the mysterious sense of place. Their solutions are as specifically adapted to the architectural ecosystem as any specialized animal in the Galápagos Islands is to the natural one, which is to say that they would make sense nowhere else in the world.



Interior view of the JPMorgan Chase building. VICTOR J. BLUE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

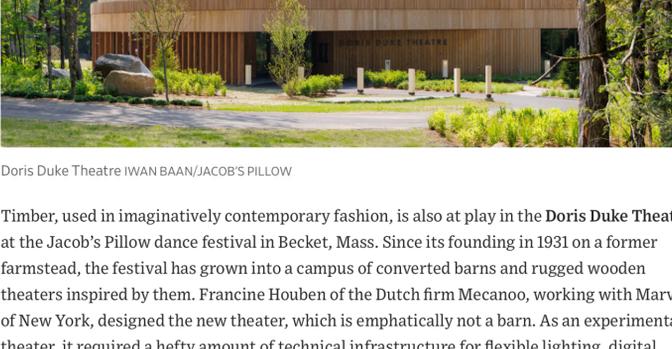
Norman Foster’s JPMorgan Chase tower rises 1,388 feet, with four crisp setbacks that give it a bold chiseled mass. Its most controversial feature is that the skyscraper is suspended over the sidewalk by sharply angled diagonal braces. To walk beneath that overhang is an unsettling experience, like walking under one very large car jack, but it was unavoidable. The 2017 relaxation of New York’s zoning ordinance permitted such larger buildings conditional on their providing public space at ground level. It does so handsomely, particularly on Madison Avenue where the plaza is adorned by Maya Lin’s “A Parallel Nature,” a work that replicates a section of Central Park bedrock as architectural relief.

But it is the building’s mass that is most imaginative. Although it has been compared to New York’s recent spate of skinny supertalls, it is nothing like them. None of those vertical coffee stirrers takes up a whole city block, as 270 Park Ave. does. In fact, few New York skyscrapers have done so since bulky piles like the Barclay-Vesey Building and the original AT&T Long Lines Building in lower Manhattan rose nearly a century ago. With their low centers of gravity, tapered torsos and strongly marked setbacks, they were as much ziggurats as towers. It is this architectural tradition that links Mr. Foster’s imaginative building to the best of the Roaring ’20s, and the New York skyscraper vernacular.



Jackson Hole History Museum HISTORY JACKSON HOLE

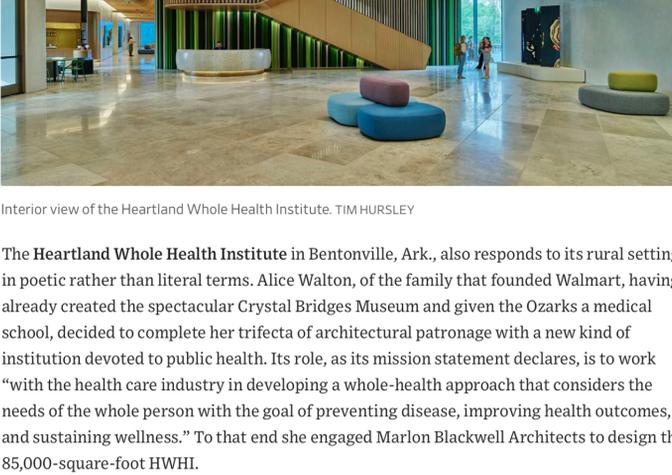
Respect for the local vernacular also distinguishes the Jackson Hole History Museum, which had its own local ordinances to contend with. Here the mandate was that the building be of “Western character,” a requirement that as likely to produce a bad design as a good one. But the team of architects—HGA, from Minneapolis, and Prospect Studio, a local firm—created not an imitation but a distillation. They took the standard features of Jackson’s architecture, its two-story flat-roofed boxes with a covered boardwalk, and abstracted them in decidedly contemporary terms. The material is wood, Alaskan yellow cedar outside and Douglas fir inside, treated in a way to convey its “woodiness” without any show of quaint rusticity. It is band-sawn, to show its grain, and oiled rather than painted. But instead of conventional clapboard siding, the boards are cut to irregular widths and placed vertically, giving it an attractive tautness. Here is Western character not as theater but as a living thing.



Doris Duke Theatre IWAN BAAAN/JACOB’S PILLOW

Timber, used in imaginatively contemporary fashion, is also at play in the Doris Duke Theatre at the Jacob’s Pillow dance festival in Becket, Mass. Since its founding in 1931 on a former farmstead, the festival has grown into a campus of converted barns and rugged wooden theaters inspired by them. Francine Houben of the Dutch firm Mecanoo, working with Marvel of New York, designed the new theater, which is emphatically not a barn. As an experimental theater, it required a hefty amount of technical infrastructure for flexible lighting, digital projection and such, more than could be squeezed into the gable of a barn. The need for a goodly amount of flyspace gave the theater its form of a high-waisted vertical box, wrapped by a green room, the rest serving as an open porch. Ms. Houben spoke to me about the importance of this “veranda,” that adaptation to the hot American summer that strikes the attentive European visitor.

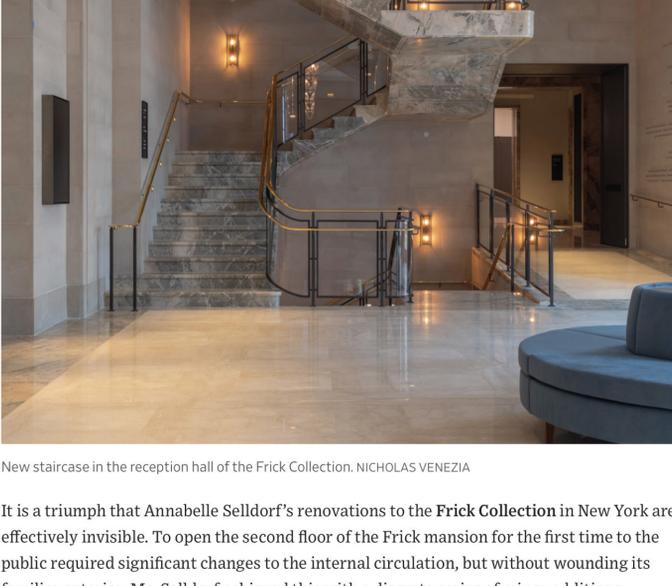
The wood siding of the Duke Theatre, unlike the rough boards of the Jackson museum, is of glued and cross-laminated mass timber, although the effect is anything but industrial. The siding is vertical but organized into discrete bands of different textures and tones. The sense is of a package wrapped in ribbons of wood, and gently curved at the corners in a way that hints at the freedom of dance. Only the theater within is strictly rectilinear, a high-tech wonder that can be counted on to stun the audience when a wall swings open to show you the wooded hills of Western Massachusetts.



Interior view of the Heartland Whole Health Institute. TIM HURSFLEY

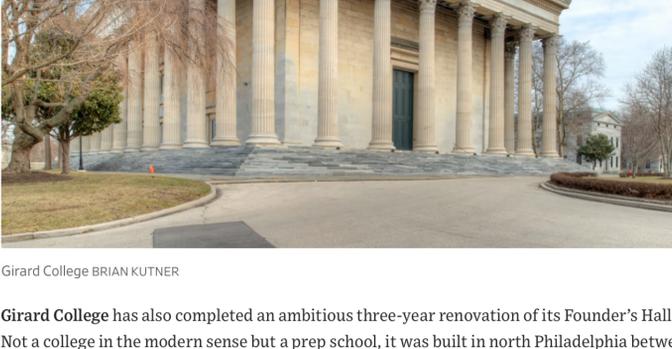
The Heartland Whole Health Institute in Bentonville, Ark., also responds to its rural setting in poetic rather than literal terms. Alice Walton, of the family that founded Walmart, having already created the spectacular Crystal Bridges Museum and given the Ozarks a medical school, decided to complete her trifecta of architectural patronage with a new kind of institution devoted to public health. Its role, as its mission statement declares, is to work “with the health care industry in developing a whole-health approach that considers the needs of the whole person with the goal of preventing disease, improving health outcomes, and sustaining wellness.” To that end she engaged Marlon Blackwell Architects to design the 85,000-square-foot HWHI.

Although it is essentially an office building, it looks nothing like one. Mr. Blackwell told me that his guiding idea was that of “the cave and forest,” a structure that addresses the earth beneath it, firmly and intimately, and then rises skyward like a living thing. Its interior is adroitly arranged to put the working spaces in the center so that no one is far removed from nature and sunlight, and views of the Ozark landscape—a demonstration of Ms. Walton’s insistence that well-being is just as much psychological as physical.



New staircase in the reception hall of the Frick Collection. NICHOLAS VENEZIA

It is a triumph that Annabelle Selldorf’s renovations to the Frick Collection in New York are effectively invisible. To open the second floor of the Frick mansion for the first time to the public required significant changes to the internal circulation, but without wounding its familiar exterior. Ms. Selldorf achieved this with a discrete series of minor additions, including the limestone extension of the south facade of the Frick Library by 22 feet. In the context of the Frick campus, which goes all the way from 70th to 71st Street, this addition is wafer-thin, but it makes it possible for you to enter the mansion from either story, and also to enter the library from the inside. It is beautifully composed, the sort of thing the original architects might have done; in a few years it will look as if it had always been there. The new auditorium, deep beneath the 70th Street garden, is the most dazzling new space I saw this year, like a German Expressionist’s dream of the inside of an egg. As with all spatial marvels no photograph can render it; only personal experience will do.



Girard College BRIAN KUTNER

Girard College has also completed an ambitious three-year renovation of its Founder’s Hall. Not a college in the modern sense but a prep school, it was built in north Philadelphia between 1832 and 1847 according to the persnickety will of merchant Stephen Girard. That will insisted on a strict utilitarian plan of 50-by-50-foot classrooms, which might have worked had the executor of the will not insisted that they be encased within an archaeologically correct classical Greek temple. The first phase of the restoration, which was led by Seiler + Drury Architecture, involved removing internal partitions to open up the cumbersome spaces of the first floor, but the final step was to restore its stenciled ceiling paintings, an important early example of decorative aluminum. These date from circa 1890, the moment when the material was just becoming available commercially. The paintings were by George Herzog, the celebrated decorative artist, and as restored by Jacinta Kruc of Johnson & Griffiths they sparkle again as they did some 135 years ago.

In all these buildings is a certain humility, a certain deference to what has been and to what is down the street, the very opposite of starchitecture. If that trend continues, it will be one bright spot of this strange cultural moment, reminding us to lift our eyes up from the screen to look at the world around us.

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