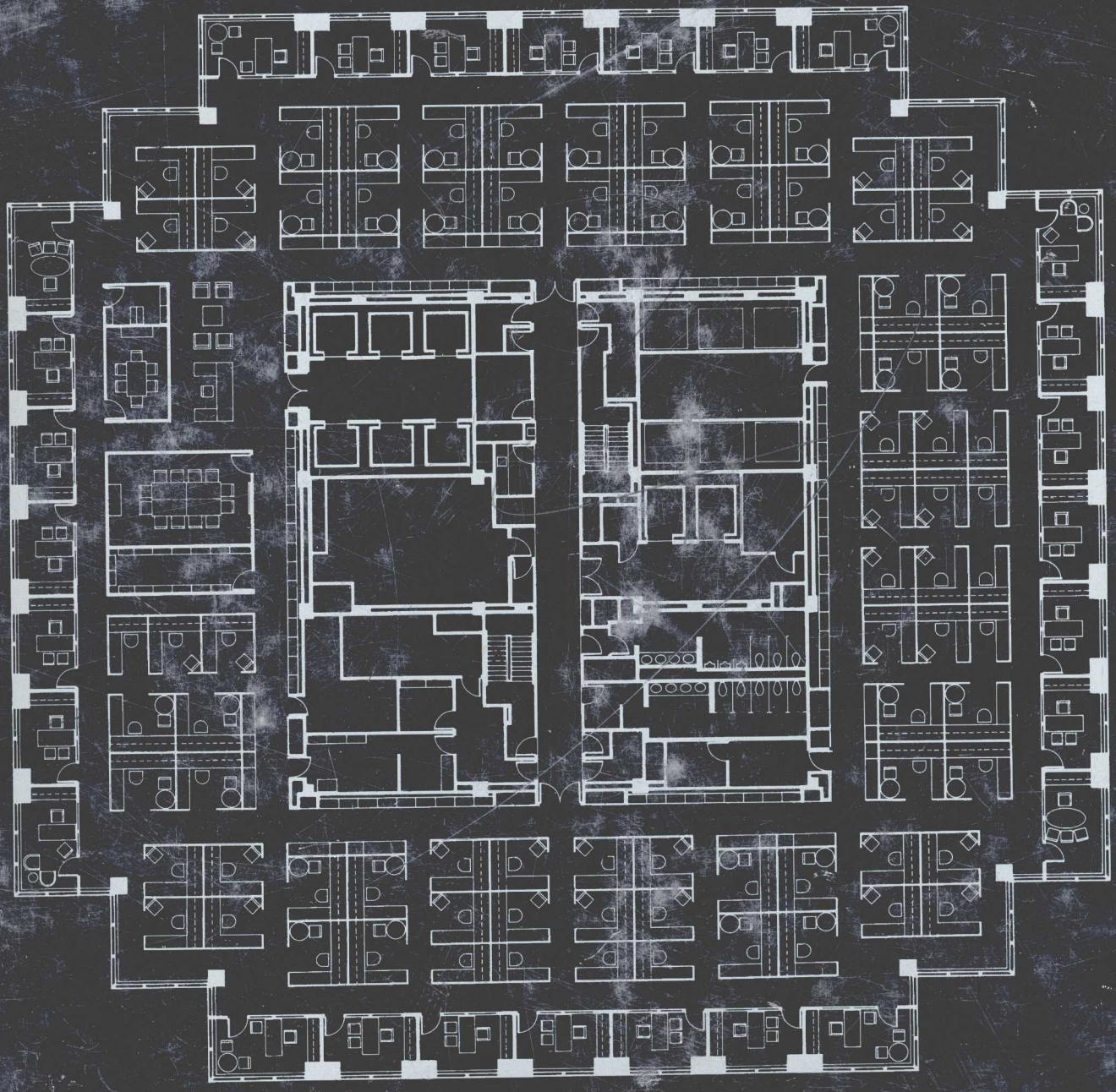
SOM
建筑设计事务所
SOM

当代世界建筑经典精选
Selected and Current Works



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SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL

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Contents

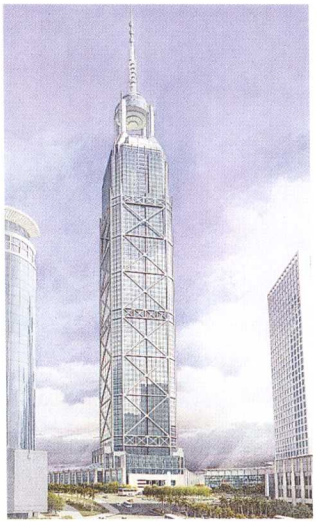
Selected and Current Works

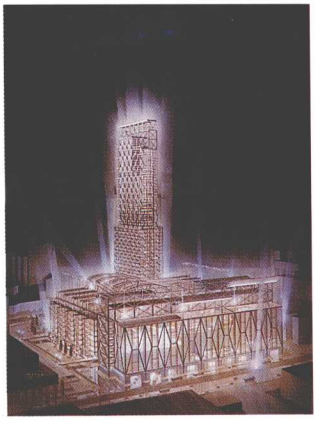
Design for Commercial Use

Introduction

SOM 1984–1994

By Joan Ockman





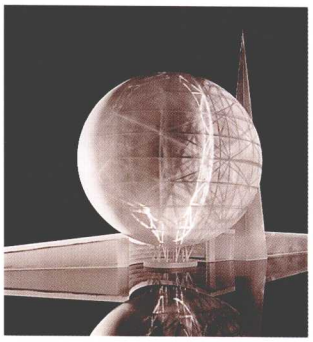
As one of the largest and most prestigious architectural firms in the world, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) has for half a century set the standard of American corporate design practice. In the decades after World War II, SOM's name was synonymous with some of the most illustrious examples of International Style architecture. In more recent years, as modernist orthodoxy has been revised, the firm has continued to occupy the forefront of a field that has become both more aesthetically diverse and more geographically fluid, presiding over a transition from International Style to global practice.

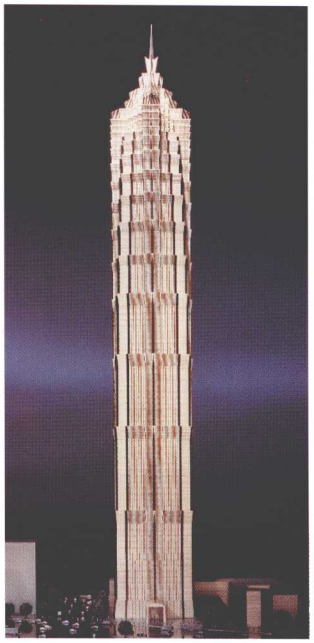
A relative index of this change is provided by the series of monographs SOM has published over the last four decades. Of the projects included in the volumes for the 1950s and 1960s, those outside the United States accounted for barely 10 percent of the total. In the volume for the 1970s, when major commissions came from the Middle East, this number doubled. In the current volume, almost half the work is in foreign countries.

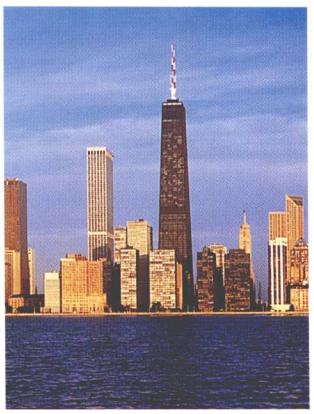
Following the new inroads of capital accumulation, SOM's projects today range the globe from Manhattan to Moscow, Chicago to Shanghai, London and Berlin to Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Ho Chi Minh City. It is a historical irony that the modernist aspiration to a world architecture is being realized within a "postmodernist" cultural climate. It is also remarkable that precisely the areas that have witnessed America's greatest international conflicts—Germany, Japan, Russia, China, Korea, Vietnam—are now offering SOM some of its major opportunities.

SOM's experiences exemplify the dramatic changes that have affected the profession in the last decade. While the Cold War's end and new computer and telecommunications technologies promised to transform practice in far-reaching ways, a recession in 1987 created more immediate uncertainties for architects, halting an ambitious array of commercial and urban development schemes launched earlier in the decade. In response to these changing conditions, SOM, like other large practices at home and abroad, scaled down and shifted orientation. Long known for its multi-disciplinary in-house structure, which enabled it to offer comprehensive architecture, planning, interior design, and engineering services, the firm now emphasizes flexibility and efficiency. Certain specializations have been eliminated in some of its offices and the use of inter-office teams and outside consultants has increased. This restructuring has been greatly facilitated by the new technologies.

Beyond such organizational changes, the impact of globalization has manifested itself in what is literally a new "world view." In this regard, a project now being designed by SOM for a location in Hawaii but planned as a prototype





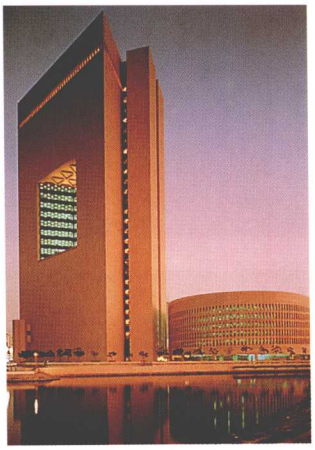


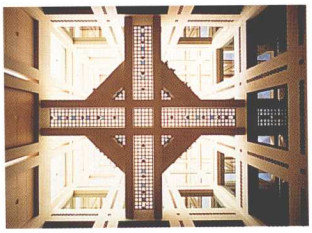
could hardly be more emblematic. An immense spherical entertainment and commercial center, SOM's World Trade Center Prototype centers on a multi-use stadium at the base of a vast atrium and is linked by a bridge to a pyramidal elevator tower. The curved surfaces of its inner and outer shells double as giant telescreens onto which a computer maps world events.

The architectural dream of internationalism—initially embodied in the world's fairs of the second half of the 19th century and permeated with utopian idealism in modernist projects like Le Corbusier's Mundaneum—is here animated less by the spirit of progress and production than by that of profit and play. Yet it appears no less optimistic in its wedding of monumental form to high technology. Between the virtuosity of SOM's global theme park and such formal predecessors as Boullée's Cenotaph for Newton with its awesome metaphysical interiority or Leonidov's lightly tethered Lenin Institute aspiring toward the perfect socialist society, a long distance has been traveled. Closer in its vision of the future to the centerpiece Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939 New York World's Fair (a fair which gave SOM early work and helped to boost its career), the sphere for Hawaii combines popular culture, current aesthetic trends, and advanced engineering into an audacious icon of late 20th century capitalism.

No less symbolic of the ambitions associated with an epoch of multi-nationalism and global communications are the tall buildings designed by SOM during the past decade. These high profiles, including a handful of "supertowers" exceeding Sears in Chicago (at this point still on paper), convey the power and affluence of clients that can command so formidable an amount of ground and air space. Apart from the problems of engineering them—above 90 stories they exact increasingly rigorous structural demands—the continuing competition to dominate the skyline raises basic questions of economic feasibility and environmental impact.

Contemporary clients, however, often tend to be more concerned with matters of symbolic representation. Should a skyscraper in Shanghai look like buildings in China or Chicago? The answer depends on the specific conjunction of economics, politics, and culture. A supertower in a developing area of the world is above all a lightning rod for investment, a hypodermic to inject capital into the economy. The subject of regionalism has been rather sentimentally broached by architects in the last decade as a matter of preserving cultural differences. But the transition from donkey cart to supersonic jet is not necessarily palliated by the recall of familiar forms. From a more realistic (and less patronizing) standpoint, Western architects are called to build in developing countries today for two principal





reasons: to provide expertise in handling complex design problems, and to give currency and cultural value to a focal building intended to function as a monumental sign. SOM's buildings tend to fulfill these requirements with great skill.

Ideally the global skyscraper also goes further, offering an eloquent and unsentimentalized response to its context. An admirable example is SOM's National Commercial Bank in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. When, in the 1930s, the brise-soleil wall was first invented by modern architects, it represented an original solution to building in tropical climates. By the 1950s and 1960s, however, it had largely become a cliché applied reflexively to the universal glass box. In SOM's bank for this desert city, the typology of the high-rise in a harsh environment is entirely rethought. The window wall is abandoned for three stark facades uninterrupted except by multi-story square apertures that filter sunlight and views into elevated courtyards overlooked by glazed interior office walls. The building's pure triangular volume, a minimalist sculpture rising from the flat landscape, comments on the transparent modernist prism, but now translated into the taut planarity of travertine. At the same time, the triangle's reiteration at the scale of the paving patterns and the opulent materiality recall motifs of Arabic culture in a nonliteral way, creating a powerful monument for a sophisticated commercial institution in a traditional national setting.

Similarly but at a smaller scale, another bank building in the Middle East, United Gulf in Manama, Bahrain, uses an elegantly articulated curved plane of sunscreening, aerial cross-walks, and jewel-like detailing to make high technology and monumental form sympathetic to local climate and cultural tradition.

In both instances, SOM was able to carry its design through most stages of development. Such opportunities, however, are becoming rarer as the "architecture" component in commercial buildings is increasingly relegated to the skin, crown, and lobby. This phenomenon is a function of two factors. First, advances in technology have enabled the high-rise's engineering design to be dissociated from its surface, making the tower a structure to be sheathed, a variation on a theme. The computer's integration in the design process fosters this game, multiplying visual possibilities by enabling alternatives to be studied readily. Second, while commercial clients today seek a distinctive image for the most public parts of their buildings, at ground level and on the skyscape, they require maximum flexibility and interchangeability for the rentable space within.

This too represents a significant change for SOM. While the major portion of its work has always been commercial, in the past its primary clients tended to be owner-occupants, hiring SOM to take

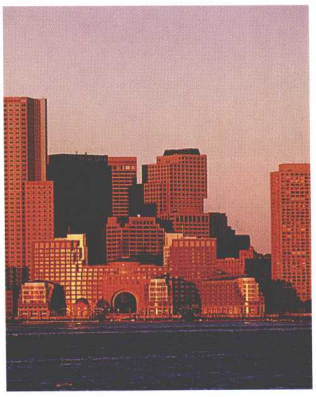
the design "from master plan to ashtrays." Today, however, when fewer owners can afford to be burdened by real estate contingencies, clients tend to be speculators seeking a marketable image for generic office space. Often composite and unlocalized entities, they prefer to control costs and risk by decentralizing responsibility, looking to architects especially to confer prestige.

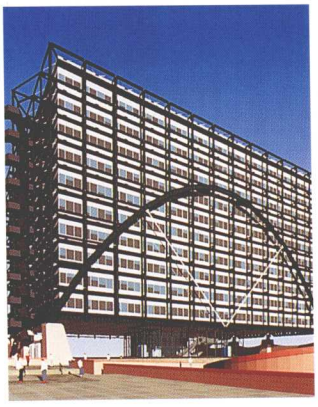
The reputation of SOM's architecture, to its great credit, has always been predicated on the overall building rather than on a superficial "signature." Yet the disjunctiveness of the contemporary design process poses new challenges to an architecture that prides itself on more than facadism. Perhaps the hybrid play of grids, layers, and elements in its recent scheme for the edge of Alameda Park in Mexico City is already a commentary on this condition. This project occurred in context of a collaboration with Frank Gehry and Ricardo Legorreta, in which the three firms designed adjacent towers in a spirited "montage of attractions."

Another unconventional association produced a winning competition entry for Shenzhen International Economic Trade Center. For this 88-story tower and mixed-use development in China, a SOM team traveled to the site to join architects from the state-chartered design institute of the local university; should the project go forward, SOM will continue to work with the same architects. Especially in countries where regulations or politics ensure that a design's execution is entrusted to local architects or consultants, such collaborative arrangements are increasingly routine. Offering unprecedented opportunities for creative dialogue and engagement, the new realities of globalism demand innovative methods and strategies for controlling the design's quality and outcome.

Contradicting the implications of such radical changes—perhaps unconsciously to ward them off—architecture during the last decade exhibited a taste for extremely rich materiality and detailing. SOM has always been known for its superb standards of construction and fabrication, as also demonstrated over the years by the caliber of its interior design, and its recent work remains within this tradition. But in the days when the deity in the details was Miesian, the meaning of refinement seemed to be linked to the industrial precision of metal and glass. Is it an anachronism that the care once taken with expressing steel mullions and spandrels is now also being lavished on cut stone, polished wood, and custom fixtures by artisans working from computer drawings on fast-track contracts?

The revival of craft technique in an age of machine reproduction and urban flux is purely a perquisite of wealth, and yet the rarefied International Style details of Chase Manhattan Bank or Union Carbide, for all their restraint, did not come off the



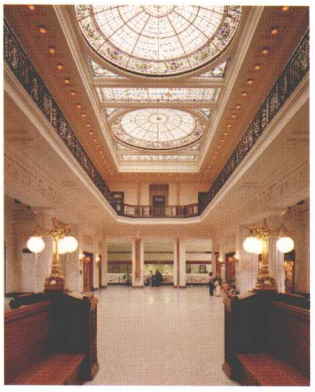


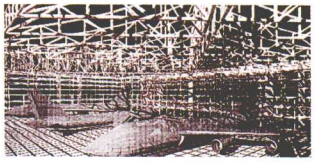
shelf. If the posh lobbies and extravagant materials typical of 1980s taste conspicuously display their owners' privilege, perhaps it is less a matter of "cultural degeneracy," as Adolf Loos would have had it, than of society's need for greater sensual delight. The Sheraton Palace in San Francisco, an expert restoration of a historic grand hotel, gives evidence of this, as does the several million square feet of interiors designed for Merrill Lynch's corporate headquarters in the World Financial Center in New York City. The argument is all the more persuasive when such pleasures are shared generously with the public.

Indeed, the recent revision of modernist orthodoxy has resulted in a welcome emphasis on highly amenable and representative public space, especially at the scale of the city. Whether this is to ignore or to compensate for the universalizing effects of globalization, it is here that the ambivalence between past and future reveals itself most dramatically within late 20th century architectural practice. The theme is amply illustrated in several ambitious urban redevelopment schemes undertaken by SOM in the last decade, where architectural primacy is subordinated to the enhancement of collective use.

At Canary Wharf in London, a 19th century dock area extensively damaged by World War II bombs, SOM was responsible for the master planning, design guidelines, and four office buildings on the site. While the classicism of the plan and the evocations of Edwardian taste reflect the past two decades' preoccupation with historical forms, SOM has also provided public space that is well designed, beautifully crafted, and up to date (in consultation with a talented landscape firm, Hanna/Olin, Ltd.). The same is true at Rowes Wharf in Boston, where architecture and urban design merge to affirm a past when architectonic monumentality was a civic virtue.

It is no accident that obsolescent 19th century ports and railyards have become a prime focus for such urban regenerations. Their often spectacular sites and the nostalgia that a post-industrial society attaches to industrial ruins make these large-scale former places of production ideally suited for conversion to zones where public and commercial space overlap. SOM's master plans for Riverside South in Manhattan, Mission Bay in San Francisco, the Hanseatic Trade Center in Hamburg, and Osaka Sakai Seaport further illustrate the trend. Riverside South dramatizes the stamina required of architects given the political and economic stakes associated with such sites; the master plan there resulted from over 700 meetings with the client, community boards, and other local interests (actually not so surprising in as contestatory a city as New York).





Probably the outstanding example of public urban design and high-quality architecture built by SOM in the last decade is to be seen at Broadgate, another major redevelopment site in London which again involved reusing a 19th century infrastructure. Here the site's special nature—air rights over Liverpool Street Station rail lines—produced a contextual dialogue of an entirely different sort. The fluid central plaza, also designed with Hanna/Olin, Ltd., effectively mediates between the great arching ironwork shed of the train station and the dark green cage of SOM's Exchange House facing it. The building's extruded steel framework straddles the tracks, incorporating a series of four giant parabolic arches that alliterate the station's roof. It is at once a hybrid structure and a very pure synthesis of the site's levitational energies and flows. The latter arrive at an exquisite threshold in the building's suspended open lobby.

Besides adapting former industrial infrastructures to new usages, SOM's planners and designers have also turned their energies to revitalizing older transportation facilities and designing 21st century systems. The firm's master plan and renovation of historic stations along the Northeast Corridor for the Federal Railroad Administration and Amtrak celebrate train travel in America while also promoting its viability. At the same time, its work at air terminals in major American cities and abroad exploits cutting-edge technology. In Seoul a hangar bracketed on three sides by an eight-story office annex, currently under design for Korean Airlines, displays an innovative use of building systems. Fabricated from standard components, its roof structure consists of convexly and concavely arched steel trusses arranged in a V-formation and supported on three box columns. The huge uninterrupted span poetically alludes to the winged aircraft housed beneath.

From high-tech structures to finely detailed interiors, from superscale office towers to urban place-making, SOM's work traverses an extremely wide range of architectural practice, demonstrating the firm's commitment to the broadest possible provision of design services. While those aspects of its work that most reflect the new impact of globalization and post-industrialism have been emphasized here, the second section of this catalogue illustrates SOM's distinguished handling of museums, religious edifices, courthouses, transitional housing, and other institutional building types. These further reveal its success in providing exceptional levels of public amenity. Also notable within the category of design "for the public" are its carefully executed health, leisure, and service facilities. These sometimes "invisible" environmental interventions help to extend the purview of contemporary design practice.

The programmatic, geographic, and aesthetic diversity inherent in this extensive body of work makes SOM's achievement unique in the field and resistant to generalization. While the firm's collective signature has always stood for the different personalities of its partners and design teams, its architecture in the past could still be placed within the developmental framework of canonical buildings like Lever House and Inland Steel. This is no longer the case. Is it, then, still possible to recognize a SOM building as such? Buildings like Southeast Financial Center in Miami or Citicorp in Long Island City, which elegantly extend the firm's rationalist tradition; the wharf projects for London and Boston with their historicist imagery; or, say, the winning competition project for a mixed-use development at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, animated by constructivist kinetics, would seem to represent disparate points on an ideologically embattled aesthetic spectrum. SOM has remained distanced from the vanguard debates that preoccupy journals and architecture schools, yet their traces are reflected in its work, attesting not only to the osmotic relationship of theory to practice in architecture, but also to the firm's bid for currency in a competitive field where taste is strongly shaped by the media and "pluralism" is a current watchword.

At the same time, a building by SOM today is above all a product of a precise "fit" between client, architect, and context. The decision as to whether it is made of granite and marble or glass and steel is an outcome of this relationship, not a matter of ideology. Diversity derives from conscious empiricism rather than willful eclecticism. In this sense, while SOM's variegated recent work departs from post–World War II orthodoxy, it redefines modern architecture's tradition of "problem solving." Architects disdainful of the notion of design as a service profession or made cynical by the complex realities of normative practice may naively imagine their art can be principally a matter of aesthetic theory or bravura form-making. Such attitudes, however intellectually and visually provocative at times, contribute to the profession's lamented marginalization. Ultimately having a far more powerful impact on the future of both the architectural profession and the built environment are the radically new economic and sociocultural forces that are currently reshaping the world. In this context of change, what continues to distinguish a SOM building is its masterly ability to translate contemporary conditions of practice into an exacting and sophisticated art of building.

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