



CULTURAL COMMENTARY

# The Best Architecture of 2017: Buildings of Quiet Ambition

New technology and an aim to create a better world make these projects stand out.

The Public Safety Answering Center II, or PSAC II, in the Bronx, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill ALBERT VECERKA/ESTO/SOM ARCHITECTS

*Julie Iovine*

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This year in architecture saw no major buildings launched with the kind of hoopla that in 2016 greeted Santiago Calatrava's World Trade Center Transportation Hub (the Oculus) and David Adjaye's National Museum of African American History and Culture. And that's probably a good thing.

Aspirational plays for iconic status can miss the mark. The standout buildings completed over the past 12 months were instead notable for focusing on concrete needs, not dazzling form. Long-term planning and a smart use of innovation served a purpose.

On the West Coast, the Portland Japanese Garden's new visitor center opened in April, the first U.S. project by one of Japan's most eminent younger architects, Kengo Kuma. Known for weaving old craft traditions with a modern sensibility often involving water and stone, Mr. Kuma is also designing the stadium for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.



The Portland Japanese Garden's new visitor center, designed by Kengo Kuma PHOTO: BRUCE FORSTER

Conceived in the 1950s as a healing cultural space, the Portland Japanese Garden is the most authentic such garden outside of Japan. The new visitor center functions as a village-like portal to the gardens, which now get over 350,000 visitors a year. The approach follows a steep path rising through Japanese maples and towering native Douglas firs and wending upward to a formal stone stair. Visitors arrive at a plaza surrounded by three bamboo-clad structures with low-swept roofs stacked picturesquely. While the structures house exhibitions, horticulture classes, a gift shop and a tea house that are too busy to achieve much serenity, the visual composition of mossy green roofs—their edges curling out toward the dense, ancient-echoing forest that surrounds the clearing—is unrivaled as a romantically exotic setting.