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Talking the Talk

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kids overcome life's obstacles

Architect William Pedersen • Men's Basketball Coach Dan Monson • Capital Campaign Kickoff

Skyline Designer

Architect William Pedersen's ('61) reputation soars as he lends refinement to urban landscapes around the globe.

By Colin Sokolowski

Completed in 1983, Chicago's 333 Wacker Drive is located on a triangular site in a bend of the Chicago River. It has two contrasting faces: one addressing the city, the other echoing the river's geometry.

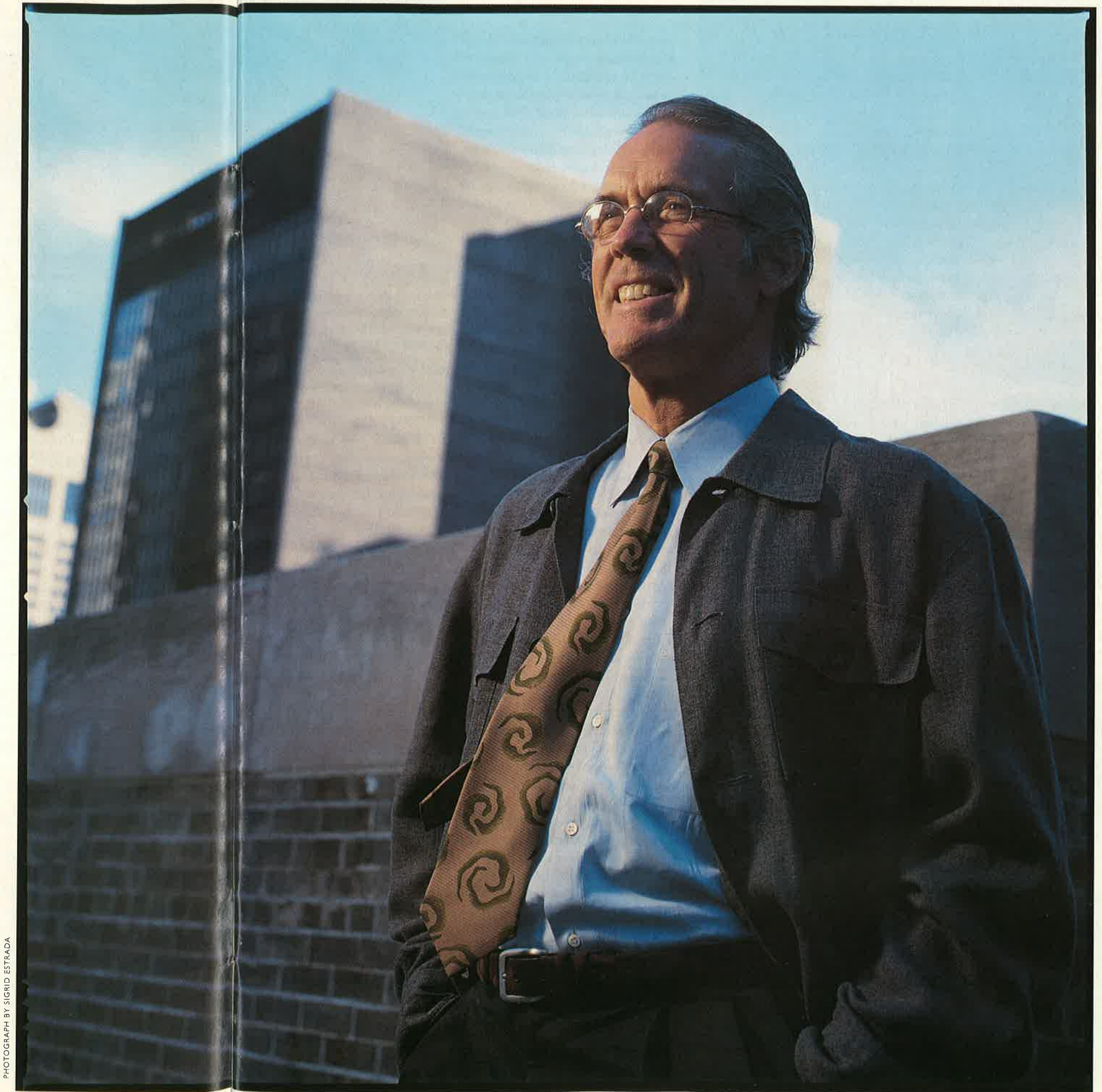


Unless you have a bird's-eye view of William Pedersen's buildings, you might get a sore neck looking at them. Over the past three decades, the 1961 alumnus has built a name for himself designing dozens of high-rise office spaces around the world. A founding partner in New York-based Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF), Pedersen has created a variety of spaces, including skyscrapers, airports, city colleges, and rural residences. But it's his tallest works that have given rise to Pedersen's reputation as a major influence in the evolution of the tall office building in America today.

"He will go down in architectural history as one of the leading people in our era of modern architecture," says Leonard Parker ('48), Pedersen's mentor who taught in the University's School of Architecture from 1959 to 1993. "In all that time, I'd rank Bill among the top young people who graduated from the program. And I had great, great hopes for him going on and proving that to everybody—which he has."

Throughout his career, Parker's protégé has earned critical acclaim and public praise for his award-winning projects of all shapes and sizes. But in the coming years, Pedersen will add a historic accomplishment to his long list of achievements: an impressive monolith that stands to become the world's tallest building, at least for a time. When construction is completed on the Shanghai World Financial Center in China, Pedersen's twisting tower will rise to 1,509 feet, making it the crowning centerpiece in the heart of Pudong, the city's massive financial and trade district. (Construction was halted following the Asian economic crisis but is expected to resume by 2002.)

Pedersen's tower has piqued the interest of many. Yet the soft-spoken architect remains characteristically humble about the project. He dismisses size over substance and chooses to focus on the building's aesthetic contri-



PHOTOGRAPH BY SIGRID ESTRADA

butions rather than its world-record height. "The scale of the work has never been an issue for me," Pedersen says. "It's the size of the opportunity to contribute to a context that really matters."

For decades, Pedersen has uniquely contributed to architectural contexts worldwide. He's the man behind the award-winning designs for the Procter & Gamble general offices complex in Cincinnati, the DG Bank headquarters in Frankfurt, the Goldman Sachs UK headquarters in London, and the World Bank in Washington, D.C. In Minnesota, he designed the St. Paul Companies headquarters in St. Paul and the new Federal Courthouse in Minneapolis, which in 1994 the *Star Tribune* called "the area's most significant public building of the decade."

U.S. Court of Appeals Justice Diana Murphy ('54, '74) worked closely with Pedersen on the courthouse—a challenging project restricted by a limited budget, tight space, and very specific security requirements. "It was almost an impossible task, but he managed it all in quite an elegant way," she says. "He has such a sense of beauty in design."

Pedersen enrolled at the University of Minnesota in 1956 with aspirations of hockey stardom. The closest he got to it, however, was rooming with Herb Brooks ('62), who became a hockey legend. Pedersen struggled to balance ice time with the demands of the University's architecture program. After pulling an all-nighter to work on an architecture assignment, Pedersen encountered an irate Coach John Mariucci, who yelled, "Take a rest, PEEderesen," intentionally mispronouncing his name to further demonstrate his displeasure. Things quickly deteriorated, Pedersen recalls, and he eventually concluded that he should concentrate on architecture. In his sophomore year, he hung up his skates and focused on the drawing board.

Pedersen soon became a proud product of the Ralph Rapson-influenced School of Architecture, a school he believes was among the best of its kind. "I was very fortunate to have gone there,"

he says. "For an institution that was large, I felt students were given a high degree of concern and involvement and that we could take advantage of it."

Without a doubt, Pedersen parlayed his educational experiences into a lifetime of seizing opportunities. In 1963, he earned his master's degree in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Two years later, he won the prestigious Rome Prize in Architecture.

The DG Bank headquarters in Frankfurt, completed in 1993, faces a commercial sector on one side and a residential community on the other. The building design acknowledges and represents this duality, with curving glass facing the commercial side and stone facing the adjacent neighborhood.

ture. "Without it, I wouldn't be in the position I am today," he says. After 18 months of studying at the American Academy in Rome, Pedersen returned to the United States, settled in New York, and began working with legendary architect I.M. Pei, perhaps best known for his addition to the Louvre. Alongside Pei, Pedersen led the design team for one of America's most celebrated buildings: the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

"That experience was profound," Pedersen says. "I.M. is a man who makes you feel as if your ideas count. The manner in which he works with his teams and his clients I've always held as a model."

Today, Pedersen emulates Pei's inclusive leadership style at KPF, the firm he helped found in 1976, now the seventh-largest design firm in the country, specializing in multi-tenant office buildings, retail complexes, and hotels. One reason for KPF's success may be that Pedersen's postmodern strategies for the commercial marketplace fill a niche many architects avoid. As architects doggedly pursue small-scale projects such as museums, libraries, or houses, they neglect the urban environment, Pedersen says.

"In a sense, it's abandonment," he says. "About 90 percent of a city is composed of high-rise urban office buildings. That presents an enormous artistic and architectural challenge—a challenge which, in my eyes, has been largely neglected by the architectural profession."

Pedersen and his firm grab the opportunity to contribute to urban skylines. "We think we've generated specific strategies for these buildings that have tried to allow them to accommodate their context in a provocative way, not just a slavish way. People may have their issues with the buildings we do, but I think most people recognize that we bring a tremendous level of execution, detail, and refinement to this type of large-scale architecture."

A good example is Pedersen's 333 Wacker Drive in Chicago, which gave KPF its first taste of national exposure in 1983. At the time of construction, Realtors considered its site peripheral. Located at a bend in the Chicago River, the building sits on the only triangular site in Chicago's grid. As a result, Pedersen complemented the adjacent river and the city skyline with a large curving glass curtain wall, giving the tower both a river face and city exposure. Today, the area has become a popular site for real estate development, thanks in part to the much-adored building. In 1984, the building earned Pedersen an American Institute of Architects award, and in 1996 Chicagoans voted 333 Wacker Drive the city's most beautiful building.

"I think everybody who sees it feels that it's totally unique to its place," Pedersen says. "There are certain themes in my work, but each building tries to pick up on some aspect of the place that enables it to become very closely bonded to it."



The design of the Federal Courthouse constructed in the mid-1990s in downtown Minneapolis betrays neither its space and budget constraints nor the extensive security requirements the building had to meet.

If Pedersen has a hallmark, it would be the "separate yet complementary" tact visible in much of his work, especially the Shanghai World Financial Center in China. Before designing the building, for a Japanese client, Pedersen decided he would incorporate meaningful Chinese traditions into its form. Because the ancient Chinese conceived of the earth as a square and the heavens as a circle, he incorporated the two geometrical elements into the tower's form. And to relieve wind resistance at the top, he carved a "moon gate" through the tower, equal in diameter to the sphere of an adjacent TV tower.

But Pedersen's translation of Asian culture in context with the cacophonous Shanghai skyline didn't win immediate praise. After his presentation to a 14-member panel of architects, one woman spoke the only English words he heard that day: "Perhaps this building is acceptable, but it certainly isn't desirable." The panel of Chinese professors interpreted the circular hole in the tower as representative of Japan's rising sun. So Pedersen brokered a tense 11th-hour deal between his Japanese client and the local Chinese. He built a bridge, literally and symbolically, spanning the hole's diameter and connecting the gap. His critics were pleased.

"He doesn't bristle at criticism," says Murphy, the justice, who is a former national president of the University of Minnesota Alumni Association and a current University Foundation trustee. "He thinks of ways to overcome it."

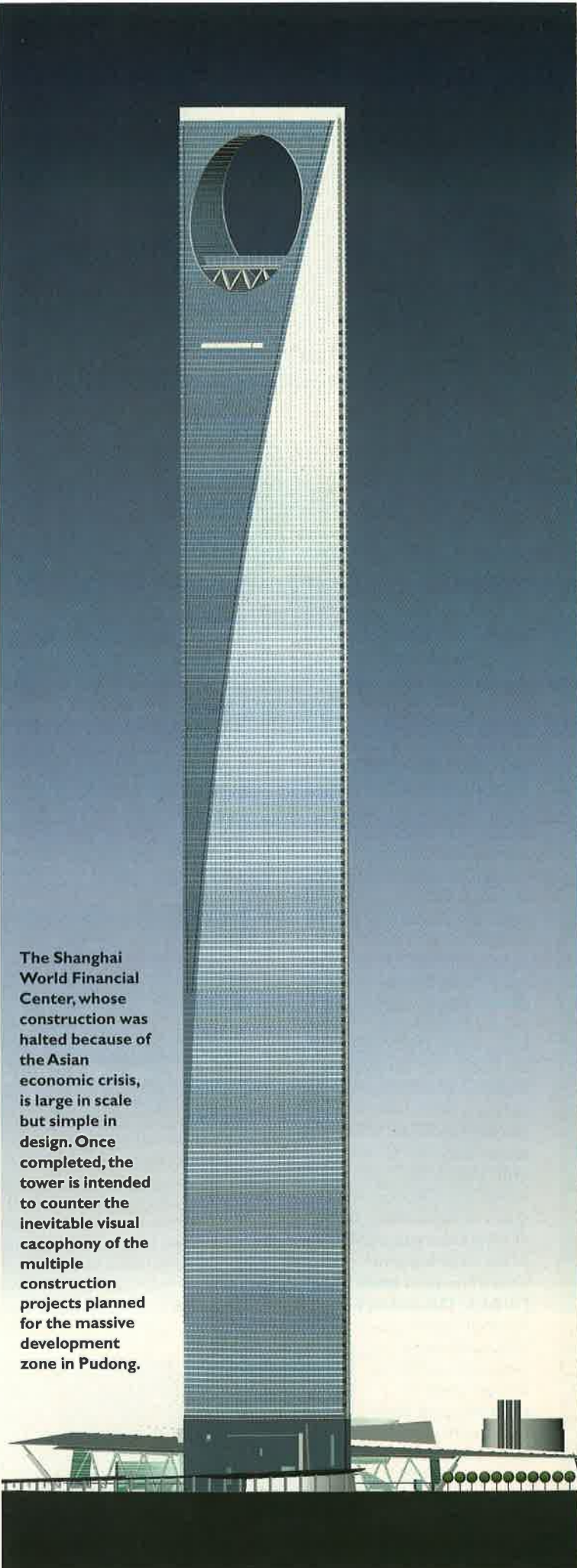
While the Shanghai project awaits Asia's economic recovery, Pedersen is busy with several other projects he has designed, including the Philadelphia International Airport, whose construction just started; the University of Washington law school building, now in the design stage; Penn State's Wharton School of Business, construction of which is also underway; and an academic complex at Baruch College in New York, whose construction is near completion.

Despite Pedersen's global successes as a major metropolitan architect, he remains keenly attuned to his Minnesota roots. When he speaks to groups about architecture, Pedersen shows a photograph of the cherished 1958 Tackaberry hockey skates he wore at the University of Minnesota to demonstrate the alluring way the curve of the blade interacts with other lines. And once, during a layover at the Twin Cities international airport, he rented a car and drove downtown—just to have a quick lunch in one of his buildings.

Pedersen and his wife, Elizabeth ('61), live in Manhattan during the week and are restoring a weekend home on Shelter Island in Gardiners Bay of Long Island. In his free time, he designs his own furniture, although "none of it is comfortable," he claims. And to occasionally escape from the architecture world, he sails the waters off Long Island or visits Minnesota, where he finds peace and inspiration in wide-open spaces, far from the urban skylines almost always on his mind.

Pedersen's mentor admires this quiet vitality. "Bill's just an all-American guy who . . . doesn't allow his success to distort his view of himself or his contribution," says Parker. "And he still feels he's got something to learn. That's a good sign." ■

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The Shanghai World Financial Center, whose construction was halted because of the Asian economic crisis, is large in scale but simple in design. Once completed, the tower is intended to counter the inevitable visual cacophony of the multiple construction projects planned for the massive development zone in Pudong.

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