

Famed architect César Pelli relishes the challenge of designing a chapel for Xavier's campus

MAKING A SPIRITUAL POINT



By John Pope Staff writer

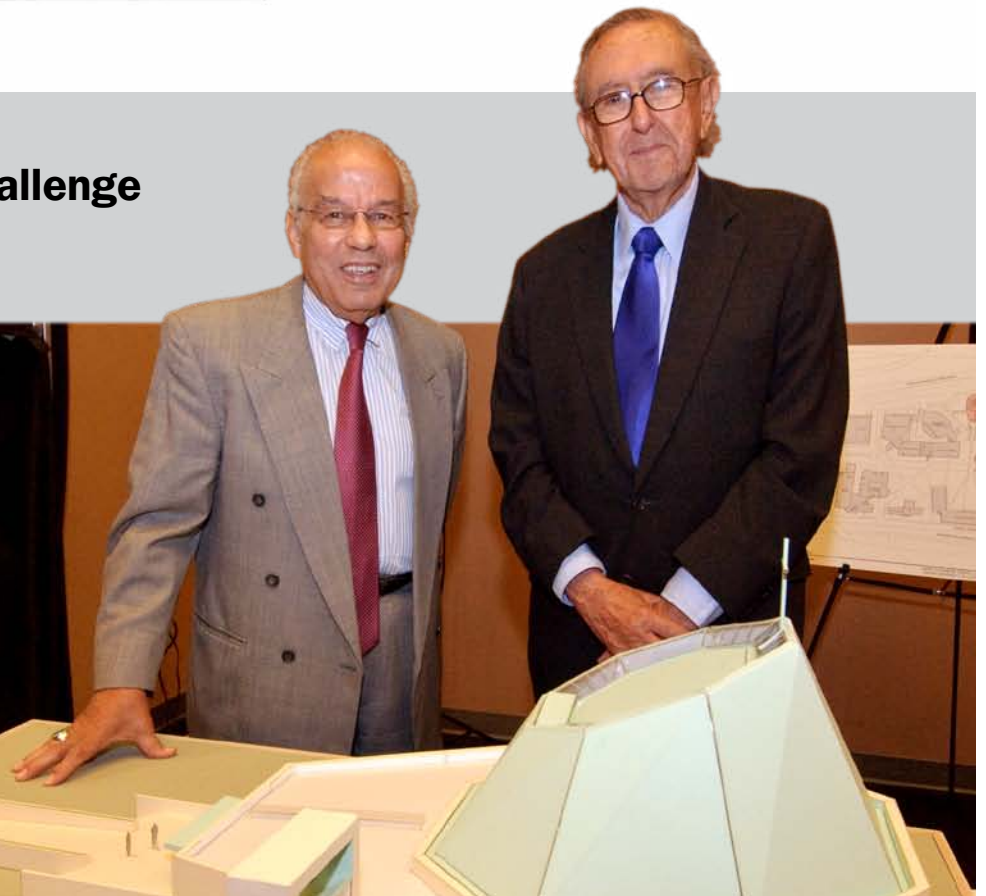
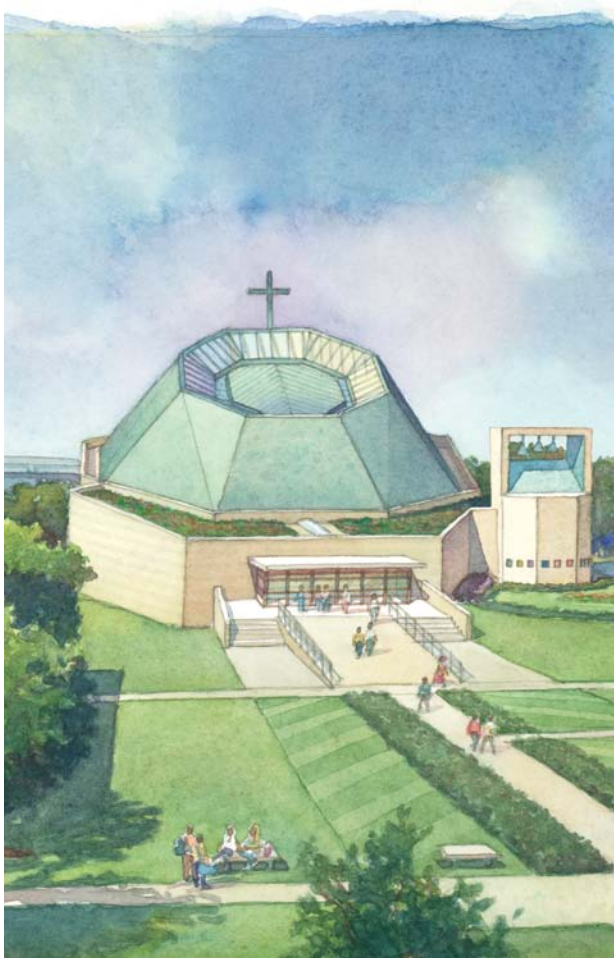


PHOTO BY IRVING JOHNSON III

World-renowned architect César Pelli, shown above at right with Dr. Norman Francis, was in New Orleans on Thursday to discuss plans for the chapel Pelli is designing for the university's campus.



Architect's watercolor rendering of the proposed St. Katharine Drexel Chapel named in honor of the University's Founder.

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—César Pelli, Architect

One of the world's foremost architects, who has built temples of capitalism around the world — including twin towers in Malaysia that once were the tallest structures on the planet — is designing a house of worship at Xavier University.

César Pelli, whom the American Institute of Architects has acclaimed as one of the 10 most influential living architects in the United States, is the principal architect for the chapel that will be named for St. Katharine Drexel, the university's founder.

Construction is expected to start in the spring and take about 18 months on a site across from Xavier's Administration Building that backs up to Interstate 10.

After a long career in which he has designed such structures as the World Financial Center in New York City; Enron headquarters in Houston; the 88-story Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and the Cleveland Clinic, the Drexel Chapel will be Pelli's first free-standing church. He is excited about it — so much so that his eyes twinkled Thursday when he discussed it during a New Orleans visit.

"The idea of constructing a building with spiritual purposes — not commercial purposes, not wealth purposes, but spiritual purposes — is extremely attractive to me," said Pelli, who grew up in a Catholic family. "This allows me to design a vision of what a building with spiritual purposes is to be, how it should make you feel. I'm anxious and excited to see it once it becomes reality."

Pelli, 82, was in New Orleans to meet with Xavier President Norman Francis and other university officials at the campus — and over lunch at Dooky Chase's Restaurant.

Absent from the lunch was the man who brought together Pelli and Xavier: Tim Francis, one of Francis' sons.

In 2003, the younger Francis, a lawyer, met Pelli through one of his clients, the musician Lionel Hampton, who had hired Pelli's firm for a building

that didn't come to fruition. Tim Francis asked Fred Clarke, one of Pelli's colleagues, whether the firm would consider doing a building at Xavier, the nation's only black Catholic university.

Clarke paid a visit to Xavier, Norman Francis said. "He strolled around. He went back, talked to Pelli, and Pelli said, 'We gotta do this.'"

While architectural renderings aren't yet ready for public viewing, Pelli said Thursday that he wants the 11,000-square-foot structure to embody Drexel's traits of modesty, simplicity and high spirituality.

"That is the combination that we have been trying to achieve in this building," he said as he sat in a quiet corner of the landmark restaurant.

Like other buildings on Xavier's campus, the chapel's exterior will be made of limestone. "The materials were chosen not for their ostentatious look but for durability," Pelli said. "This will be a building that will make you feel totally uplifted."

The roof will be copper, which, as a result of oxidation, eventually will turn green. Pelli said it "will capture the change that should happen in one's life."

Francis, noting Pelli's knowledge of details such as door placements, cited a small touch that, he said, impressed him: The cream-colored limestone that will

go around the octagonal building is the color of Drexel's crypt.

The chapel, which will rise next to the massive Qatar Pharmacy Pavilion, will be relatively small, but it will definitely make a point. At its highest point, about 90 feet above the ground, will be a big green cross. It will, Pelli said, "be one of the most notable things you will see when you come from the airport."

Pelli, a native of Argentina, has been a naturalized U.S. citizen since 1964. His office is in New Haven, Conn., which is best known for Yale University, where he was dean of the School of Architecture from 1977 to 1984.

His only previous experience with a chapel was the St. Thomas More Chapel at Yale, which is part

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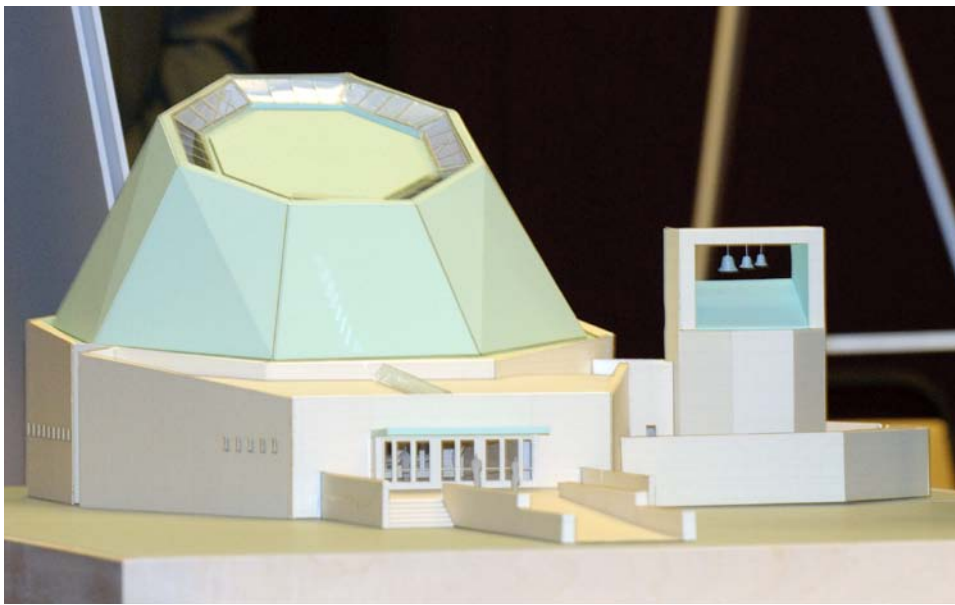


PHOTO BY IRVING JOHNSON III

The architect's model of the chapel exterior as it will be viewed from the main campus. The structure will include a bell tower and a highly visible cross on the roof (the latter not shown).

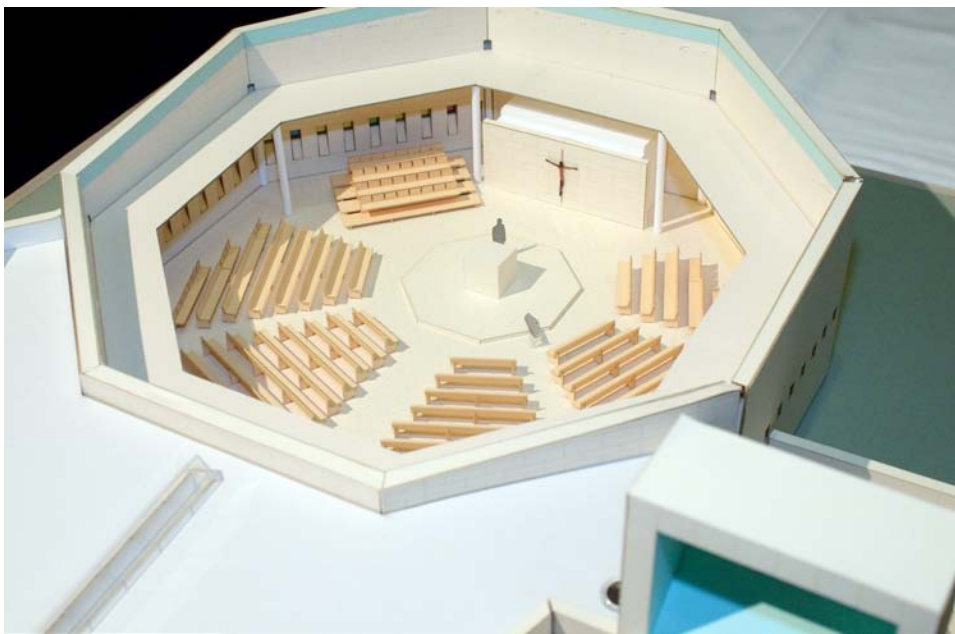


PHOTO BY IRVING JOHNSON III

(Above) A model roof removed to show the octagonal interior of the 11,000 square foot chapel. (Below) President Norman C. Francis and César Pelli (seated) review plans for the new campus chapel with Pelli associate Mitchell Hirsch.

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of the center for Catholic students. Pelli's work on the meditation room there impressed Francis so much, he said, that he asked for a meditation room in the Drexel Chapel.

Pelli's firm was hired less than two months before Hurricane Katrina struck on Aug. 29, 2005, drowning the campus in 6 feet of floodwater and putting the project on hold, said Dave Coon, a Pelli colleague who will be the day-to-day architect on the project.

The design has been in the works for 18 months, Coon said, and it has this purpose: "We're trying as hard as we can to symbolize the renaissance of Xavier after the flood."

The project is expected to cost about \$7 million, said Francis, who is optimistic about raising the money.

"We sometimes don't appreciate how fortunate we have been," he said. "We have faith that things that we would like to do can be done."

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PELLI'S BODY OF WORK

Architect César Pelli, who has been recently announced as the designer of Xavier University's campus chapel, was born on Oct. 12, 1926, in Argentina. He is known for designing some of the world's tallest buildings. His designs are known for their curved facades and metallic elements. Here are some examples of his best-known buildings.



CHEUNG KONG CENTER
Hong Kong
Completed: 1999



PETRONAS TWIN TOWERS
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Completed: 1999



BANK OF AMERICA CORPORATE CENTER
Charlotte, N.C.
Completed: 1992



KEY TOWER
Cleveland
Completed: 1991
The city's tallest building



WELLS FARGO CENTER
Minneapolis
Completed: 1988
Formerly the Norwest Center



KASUMIGASEKI BUILDING
Tokyo
Completed: 1972
Houses the U.S. embassy

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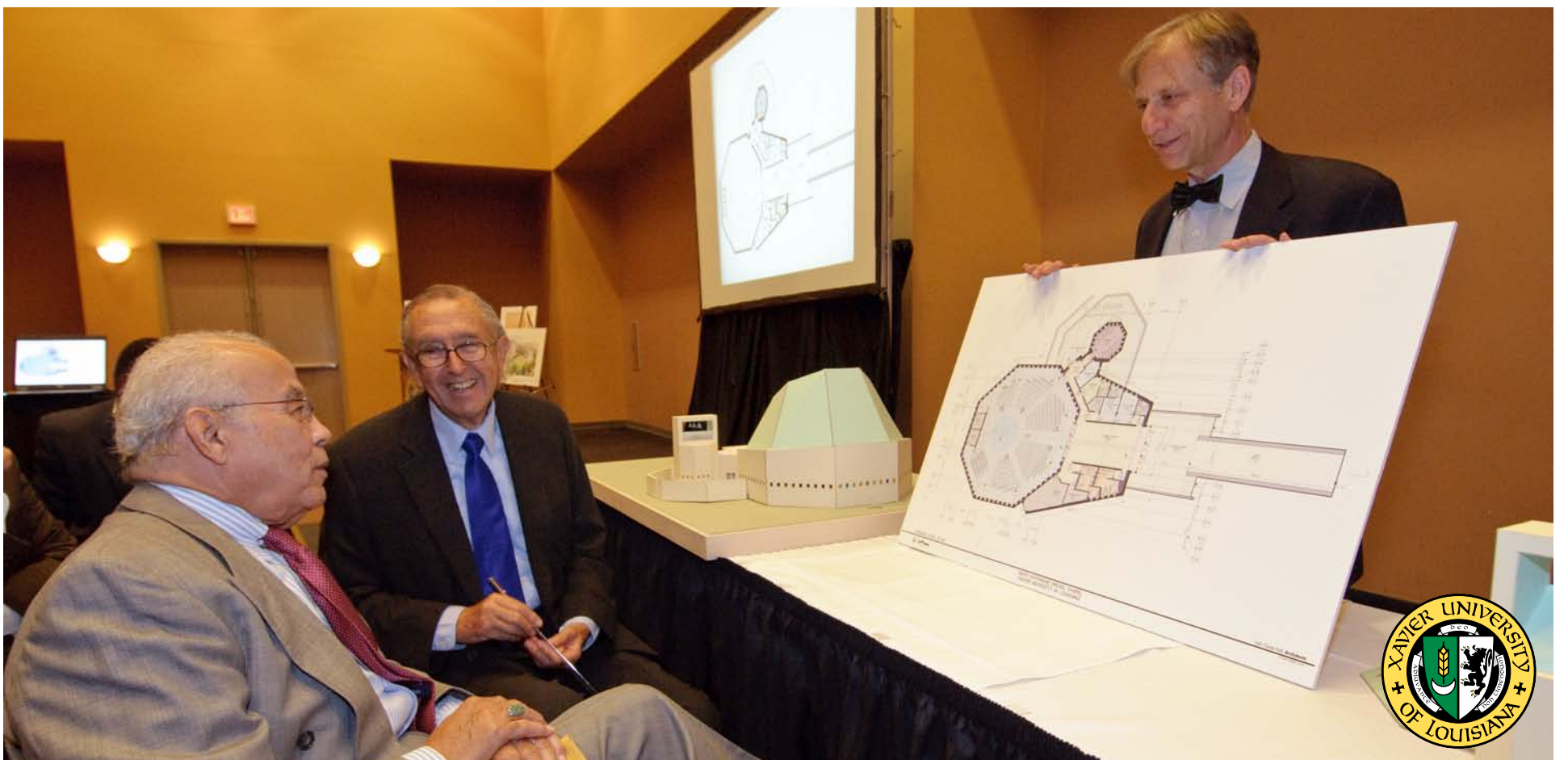


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