

# Unconventional Design

Rafael Viñoly FAIA talks with Andrea Leers FAIA

The new Boston convention center will be built on one of the largest parcels in the seaport; by its mere presence it will influence the future of the entire district.

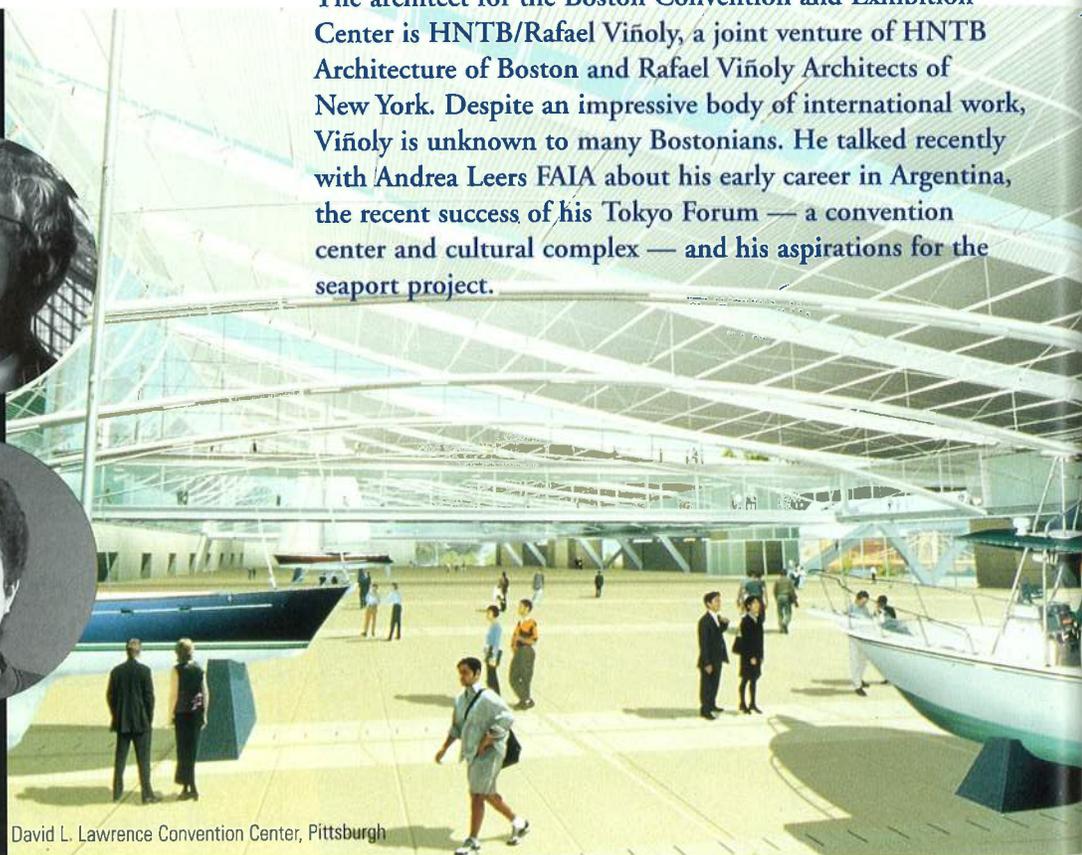
But mere presence isn't enough. The city and the design community have enormous expectations for this building. At stake are a host of formidable planning and urban design concerns such as scale, massing, vehicular circulation, and pedestrian access; social and political tensions in the adjacent South Boston neighborhood; and the desire for a signature building that will not only draw thousands of bauble-buying conventioners, but that will also foster a new level of design innovation and excellence in the seaport area.

The architect for the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center is HNTB/Rafael Viñoly, a joint venture of HNTB Architecture of Boston and Rafael Viñoly Architects of New York. Despite an impressive body of international work, Viñoly is unknown to many Bostonians. He talked recently with Andrea Leers FAIA about his early career in Argentina, the recent success of his Tokyo Forum — a convention center and cultural complex — and his aspirations for the seaport project.

Rafael Viñoly FAIA is a principal of Rafael Viñoly Architects in New York.



Andrea Leers FAIA is a principal of Leers Weinzapfel Associates in Boston.



David L. Lawrence Convention Center, Pittsburgh

rendering: Rafael Viñoly Architects

**Leers** I became aware of your work in the late 1970s, when your book in Buenos Aires was published. Perhaps you could say something about that early part of your career in Argentina.

**Viñoly** I started when I was very young; the Spanish system of education is very different from the American or the Anglo-Saxon one. You have to make a decision pretty early on, when you're only 18 years old, about what you're going to do professionally. My first introduction to the field was through my mother, who was a student of architecture before becoming a mathematician.

I was extremely lucky from the beginning, because the first thing I did when I entered school was to win a competition for one of the school's buildings. And we built it. I started working immediately after that, around the time of the military intervention. Eventually I joined a partnership, and we started doing competitions, which was the typical way of getting important public work. That was the beginning, and it grew into work that was connected to the university. Until the military took over the school. And then all our dreams about the intellectual work at the school were completely shattered.

**Leers** What year was that?

**Viñoly** This was in '73, '74. I decided to start an alternative school so we could actually keep some of that work going. And we formed a school that was an amazing success for several years. It's still remembered.

**Leers** I have heard that you were a very serious musician. Did that precede your interest in architecture?

**Viñoly** Very much so. I started studying music when I was very young. My father was the head of the national opera theater in Uruguay. That's the reason we moved to Argentina — he went there to work at the opera theater [in Buenos Aires]. Later he got involved in theater and movies. I always had an inclination for music. I went into architecture after what you would call a case study of vocational crisis. I had finished a series of piano performances which I had worked on for many years, and that was exactly the moment when I had to decide if I would study architecture or enter music school.

**Leers** You enjoyed phenomenal success early on in Buenos Aires. What prompted you to come to this country?

**Viñoly** It was a series of things. The most important one was the fact that I was working in social and cultural conditions that were not just repressive, but incredibly dictatorial. It is something that you don't really focus on until you have some kind of a moment of objectivity. And despite what people think, that is a very difficult psychological process to go through. I presume this is exactly what happened to most Germans in the late '30s. Unless you're really attentive, you don't know how much you're getting into. Even if you're doing nothing, just living in that environment is a form of collaboration. Moving was a completely ethical decision on our part. There was no other obvious reason to do it, given the kind of life I was living. I had finished an enormous amount of work, the kinds of things that any architect would love to do.

What actually prompted the move was a combination of things. Just to give you an example: It was normal that the security forces would walk into your house and do whatever they wanted to. One day I was talking to a person who worked in our house, and he told me that, the day before, some people had come in and looked at the books in our library, and afterwards he had decided that there were some books that were not safe to have. He was actually packaging

these books and putting them into plastic bags and digging a hole for them in the garden. I found it totally logical and I helped him do it. And then I found myself saying, Wait a second, this is really not quite right. It took me literally less than two weeks to leave after that. We had a house and family and kids and work and the whole thing.

We had a friend, an American rabbi, who died a couple of years ago. A fabulous person. He was a representative of Amnesty International and showed me the documents that they collected to explain the whole situation of the repression. And I saw in those documents the actual stories about how people were killed — people who were my friends, people I had worked with at the university. People who you think have gone off somewhere, but you never know exactly what happened to them. Our friend also gave me a book that had a series of letters that Bruno Walter wrote to Mahler in '34, '36. He was a young conductor working at the Berlin Philharmonic. He wrote that he was having an amazing time, he had never had the chance to conduct such a glorious orchestra, things were great, but that there was something strange: "People tell me that there is something awful happening, but I don't quite see it." It's an interesting series of letters, because it's all about this process of understanding your relationship with a political context.

**Leers** I've always thought, because I knew that you had a substantial body of work before you left, that the experience of leaving must have been a profound one. A lot of other people who came from Buenos Aires at that time were still in the academic world and could transport their scholarship more readily. It must have taken a great deal of conviction and courage to leave a substantial practice.

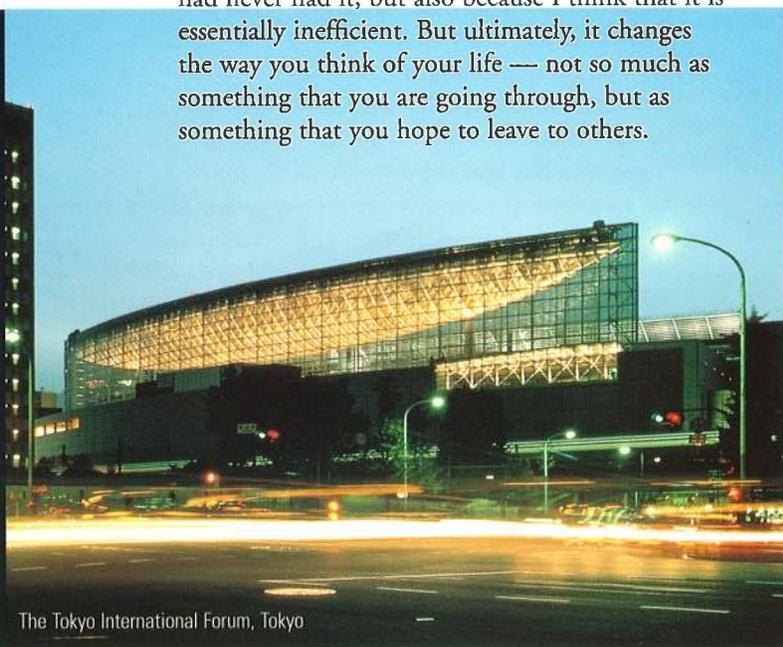
**Viñoly** And gigantic arrogance. But I knew that if I didn't do it at that point I would probably never do it. I was 32.

**Leers** In those formative years, what were the real influences on you?

**Viñoly** Argentina during the '60s and early '70s was extraordinarily exciting — Buenos Aires had an incredibly interesting intellectual life. But you never felt that you had a tradition behind you. It was not the same as working in Mexico, or in Brazil for that matter. You did not have a culture to contribute to. It's a place in which the ruling class was culturally dependent on Europe. The forefathers of Argentina were people who wanted to be French. And so our own cultural and institutional history was never fully formed. And that's the reason why this incredible phenomenon of the Fascist pseudo-social movement that started with Perón was so fascinating: It was completely authentic.

**Leers** Your work stands out by virtue of the fact that you are interested in large structures and the technology that makes them possible as an aesthetic undertaking. Is that what drew you to New York eventually? Did those kinds of projects seem to be more available here?

**Viñoly** No, it really had nothing to do with scale in itself. If anything, it had much more to do with what was an unanswered series of questions. I perceived that it was a special moment — like painters at the turn of the century who had to go to Paris. If you really think you understand Colin Rowe, why don't you go talk to him? Which is what I did. And he wasn't in London or Oxford; he was in New York. I never liked Europe very much — too old, too difficult, too stuffy. The other realization, which came later and was actually more formative, was the significance of the process of organized political involvement. I was very cynical about the mechanism of democracy, not just because we had never had it, but also because I think that it is essentially inefficient. But ultimately, it changes the way you think of your life — not so much as something that you are going through, but as something that you hope to leave to others.



The Tokyo International Forum, Tokyo

photo: Kawasumi

**Leers** That's a feeling that I think is shared by many people who come and make their lives here. Let's jump forward a bit to the most astonishing undertaking that you've had to date — winning the Tokyo Forum competition in 1990. How did that change the way you thought about things?

**Viñoly** It was the beginning of a series of unforgettable experiences over a period of seven years in which I really had more fun than one is allowed to have. I worked like a dog, but it was like a championship game — a situation in which you don't think of anything other than how to do it right.

**Leers** I saw it while it was under construction and then visited the completed building for the first time this summer. Knowing the city of Tokyo reasonably well, I understand that it really is an extraordinary event in the city. The glass hall is astonishing — there's no space like it. And the real gift to the city is the public park that runs through it.

**Viñoly** The one thing that totally amazes me is the fact that the pictures do not show you what the building is. Parts of the building are simplistic and diagrammatic, but they merge into a different reality. It has a level of order which is to me the best thing about it. That's something that I was sure from the beginning was needed, but I couldn't actually articulate it. To tell you the truth, a month before the presentation, every single person in the office who was working on the project — and it was a very large team for the competition — was pushing for exactly the negative of this project. A totally different organization. Everybody thought that this was too direct. I was so conflicted; everybody was pushing in one direction. Finally, with just enough time to finish the drawings, I went back to this scheme. It was the first time that I actually trusted my instincts. But the moment I did that, I knew that it would play with scale in a way that was going to dilute that simple reading. It is a building — and this is the big mistake of every single photographer who has gone there — that you don't necessarily have to see holistically.

**Leers** While it was under construction, I wandered around that part of the city looking for it. And I suddenly found myself on the outside wall where the auditoriums are, and I *knew* I was there. I suddenly had the sense of a, shall we say, European notion of urbanism. There was a street wall that was easy, natural, and inevitable. And I felt the same on the other side of the complex, where the pure geometric form follows the curve of the railroad. It was as though the best of our western urban traditions were being brought to a context which is struggling to find its own sense of urbanism. It's an extraordinarily rich response to both a western and Japanese sense of place. And now, of course, it's completely occupied. People love it — walking around, sitting in it, coming to see it. It has a sense of movement through it, which is very characteristic of Japanese public space.

**Viñoly** It's the dating capital of Japan.

**Leers** So I've heard. You had never done anything quite like the Forum, yet it seems to me that all your projects — I'm thinking especially of the Bronx courthouses and the Lehman College athletic facility — represent the artistic potential of technology, especially in the expression of large spaces.

**Viñoly** Some other people have appropriated this notion of technology, especially the English "high tech" architects. More than anything, that's an ethical posture. Because they're English, ethics becomes in itself a manifesto and a demonstration of moral superiority and all those other things that the Brits are

so keen on. I really never cared very much about being positioned in that repertoire. That's probably due to ignorance — it's not really very intellectual. It's simply that I don't know how to put a building together other than by putting it together. It's through putting a building together that something happens. I try to be sensitive to the logic of my own process, which requires a level of self-criticism. I recognize when I'm doing something that isn't intelligent; I recognize when I'm doing something that is re-interpretive or derivative or something I used before. But I don't have a critical posture beyond those kinds of checking points.

**Leers** Celebrating technology for its own sake is very much the focus of British and even French work of this moment. But your work is not about the celebration of the technology, so much as the easy and joyful use of it to create places and spatial experience. You're working now on another large project, the new Boston convention center. What distinguishes the Boston context for you?

**Viñoly** Boston was the first city in which I lived in America. I was here for a full semester. It's an amazing memory, because it's almost as if I had a real past in the city, which of course I don't. But that has tinted my perception, which is also influenced by all the warnings about the difficulty of working here — the extraordinary level of control and conservatism, if you will. The site is in a heated location, both politically and socially, but it seems to have created a certain kind of space for itself that I think is remarkably positive. The things that people think are important about a project of this magnitude — the design of the face of it, or the public rooms, or even the large spaces — are not really as important as developing a strategy for a connection with the waterfront. The building is grounded on two major ideas, which are basically site planning and circulation, both vehicular as well as public-access circulation. I think we've found a solution that is clever in terms of the building type. A convention center is always conceived as a structure that has a public face and a service face, and more often than not it is practically impossible to articulate spatially the exhibit area, because it's so infinite. Our solution attempts to change these two perceptions. I do not believe that in a place like this you can actually have a service edge. We've taken advantage of the fact that this site essentially has two levels of access. It is a very compact building, both for budget reasons and for urban design reasons.

**Leers** There's not much on the site now — there is an infrastructure context, but not much of the original seaport for which it was constructed. What were your assumptions or hopes for the setting around the building, the area between it and the waterfront?

**Viñoly** My assumptions were pretty much supported by the studies that were already ongoing when we first went to the site. There is a goal of density and circulation and public connection to the waterfront, which I fully support. Now that I know the seaport a little better, I believe that it has the potential of doing something with two opposites — the two opposites being the fabric of South Boston and the high-rise component of downtown Boston. These are the two ends of a scale of potential visions of how you can extend Boston. The first reaction that any of us would have is to imagine that these two visions should each contribute a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I think that probably the right approach is that it shouldn't be a little bit of anything.

**Leers** You're posing the intriguing possibility that there's a third distinct entity — a third scale, a third presence.

**Viñoly** Yes, and it's not just a question of texture, but a question of its relationship to its peculiar geographic context.

**Leers** In fact, historically, the landfill was created for a third purpose. It was neither the residential fabric nor was it the urban commercial scale of the downtown. It was a third dimension in the city, created for the shipping function with its warehouses.

**Viñoly** And now, if you really let the forces play, you have enough of a mass there to create a district which is as important as the downtown and yet has nothing to do with it. It's certainly not an industrial site any more. But it's a great field that can actually become a unifying field where some other things could happen. And that's the reason I think this building is so critical. If it looks like a convention center, then it's not doing its job. It has to be far more outgoing and assertive than I think a mere decorated box can actually be. There is a gigantic infrastructure below this building. By connecting to it through multilevels, you can develop an extraordinary building form.

**Leers** And in fact, that is essence of the Tokyo Forum — a multilevel experience that extends both down into the ground and above the ground.

**Viñoly** My interest in that kind of experience may be the reason why I've tried to become more educated about the Central Artery. If this enormous amount of money is being put underground simply because people couldn't actually live with the results of that site, then you are essentially breaking ground in the relationship between public investment and urban culture. There's no other place in the world that is spending this money just for looks, right? That is nothing to be ashamed of; quite the opposite. It's going to be very exciting, in fact. Change is inevitable, and there are some consequences of change that are totally unstoppable. Renzo Piano says that there is not much future in the past. He's right. It just takes a little time to realize that. ■■■■