In 1969 Renzo Piano staged an exhibition at London's Architectural Association, Architectural Experiment. His early work drew sharp but prophetic criticism from Monica Pidgeon, editor of Architectural Design. In a review entitled 'Piece by Piece' she suggested that the various pieces produced by this young architect might well, one day, amount to something far more substantial. Almost 40 years on, Piano recalls the prophesy fondly. The observation has become his 'natural legacy', recognizing his predilection to break a design problem into component parts, each addressed in order to optimize specific technical performance, while contributing something less measurable (yet equally important) to the building's overall character. Early work, he says, was all about the component, most explicitly placed together at Beaubourg (AR May 1977). By Piano's own admission, however, the Mael Collection a decade later (AR March 1987) was the first building that genuinely reached a harmonious level of resolution. Since then, learning from nature, he has focused and mastered the art of how to make buildings holistic entities that are greater than the sum of their component parts.

Piano's latest projects extend his interest in how to build organically (in the fullest sense of the word), learning from tissues of nature and avoiding the sort of mimicry that can lead designers astray, with a tree-like structure here or a conoid form there. "Stupid shapes," says Piano, "produced by pressing stupid sums on stupid computer." Here, with trademark finesse, he has very eloquently translated the language of

PIECE
BY PIECE

Renzo Piano's new California Academy of Sciences, in San Francisco, creates harmony between nature and the manmade.