

Yankee pyramids

Presidential libraries and America's struggle to remember itself.
By Oliver Roeder

TWO STONE SCULPTURES, WEIGHING 65 TONS EACH, STAND on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC, outside the researchers' entrance to the neo-classical building that houses the National Archives. One is called "Past". It depicts an old man holding a closed book, gazing down streetward. An inscription on his plinth urges its readers to "study the past", Confucius's supposed prerequisite for divining the future. The other is called "Future". It depicts a younger woman holding an open book, similarly gazing, and her inscription insists that "what is past is prologue", from Antonio's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

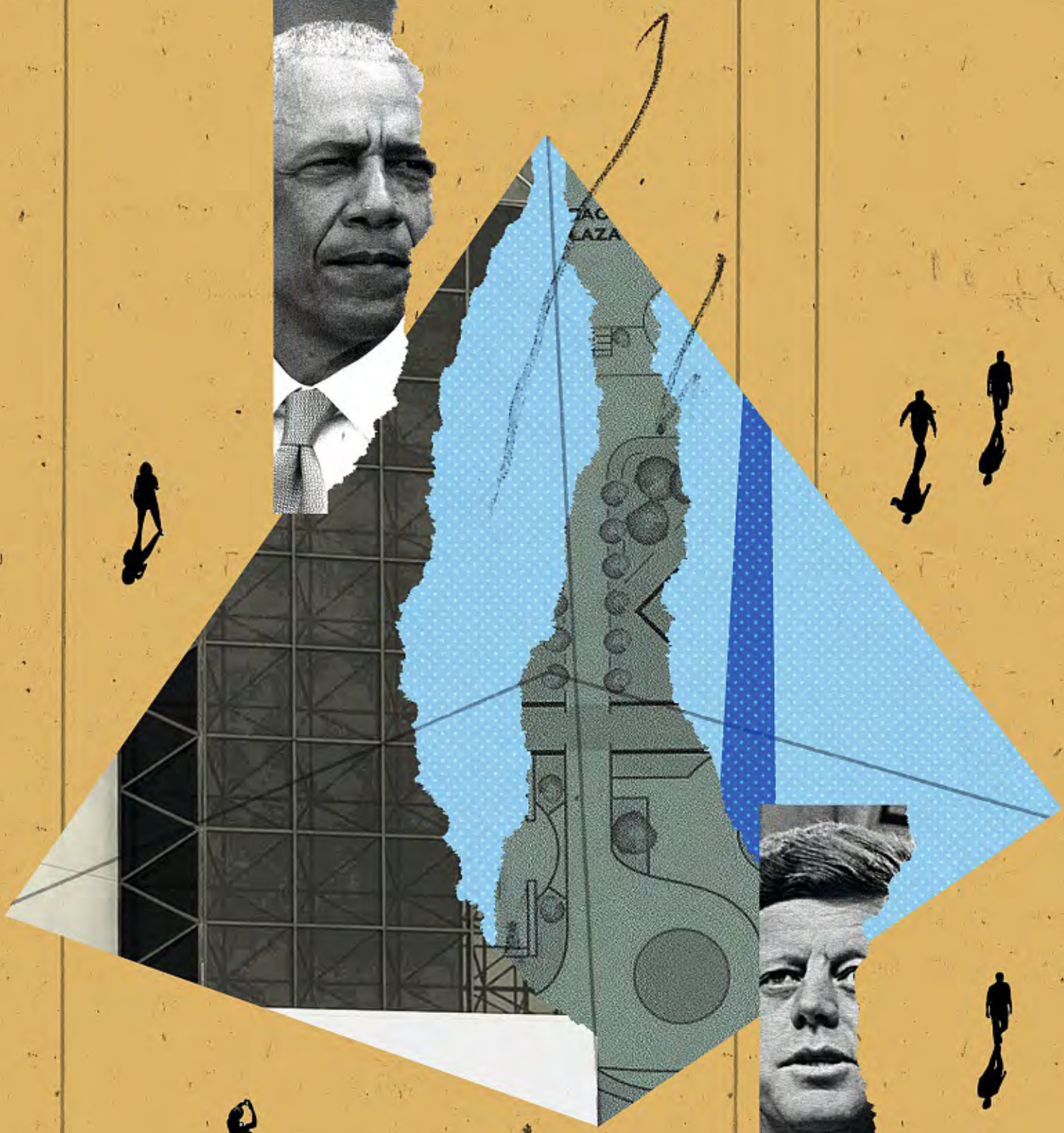
The National Archives devotes a quarter-million pounds of Indiana limestone, therefore, to convincing entrants and passers-by of two versions of the old notion that History Repeats Itself, and that the verb tense of the documents inside is not past, but present and future. One of these documents, displayed among the nation's other "charters of freedom" in the rotunda, is an original parchment copy of the Declaration of Independence.

This weekend, July 4 2026, marks the 250th anniversary of the adoption of that declaration and the founding of the United States. It is impossible,

particularly in Washington DC, to escape that fact. Donald Trump has lashed himself to this historical mast. The festivities have included a "national prayer event" on the National Mall and blood sport on the White House lawn. Trump has been trying to remake the city physically, sometimes literally in his own image.

Every modern American president eventually gets a physical totem of his tenure: a library of his own. One expression of the nation's faith in the importance of archiving the past has been the existence of these buildings. In more than a dozen cities and towns across the US, chosen for their historical relevance, prestigious locale or natural beauty, the National Archives and Records Administration (Nara) oversees the libraries of the former American presidents of roughly the past century. The extent to which the country's charters - the Declaration, the Constitution and its Bill of Rights - and other documents of America's accumulated paper trail remain active can be glimpsed in them.

The presidential libraries of Herbert Hoover (in office 1929-1933) to Barack Obama (2009-2017) are up and running, the former since 1962 and the



latter since last month. Joe Biden's and Trump's are still being fundraised and planned for. They are multifaceted and evolving institutions, but, for the most part, they conform to a certain script: manicured grounds, a congratulatory museum with limousine and replica Oval Office, signage urging visitors to go forth and pursue upstanding citizenship and, crucially, archival space and exhaustive historical documents, the primary source material of the presidency in question.

These libraries are wrenched by a tension, as the country itself is wrenched, between the truth of events and the spin imparted on to them. Which past is it that we ought to study – the poetry of politics or the prose of reality? And whose reality? An individual former leader, whose name is etched in marble or plated in brass at the entrance, exerts a gravity that yanks a building from archive to altar. When that happens, what do we learn in these libraries? Can beautiful monuments to the past express the ugly truths of today and tomorrow? A presidential library might be an archive, but it is also the headquarters of a final political campaign, when there's nothing left to run for but a legacy.

"THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY IS A UNIQUELY AMERICAN institution, as unique as the presidency itself," writes Don W Wilson, who was the Archivist of the United States from 1987 to 1993. No such prime ministerial library system exists in the UK, despite one group's ongoing lobbying for the creation of a PM museum. They point plaintively to the existence of museums for "pencils, dog collars, lawnmowers, cuckoo clocks and defunct police forces". But America's presidential libraries are meant to be something other than curious appreciations. They ought to be, Wilson argues, "less monuments to great men than classrooms of democracy".

The papers of early American presidents, Wilson explains, were precarious and fragile things. They burned in house fires or city fires, were carted off amid civil war, stolen by collectors, chucked by widows, mouldered in attics. Some of George Washington's papers had been, according to his nephew, "extensively mutilated by rats and otherwise injured by damp", like trash on subway tracks. What records do remain for scholars of early presidencies and the public remain by sheer luck, and our ability to "study the past" is therefore impeded.

But on a quiet Saturday afternoon nearly 90 years ago, Franklin Delano Roosevelt called a special press conference in his study. He emphasised those risks to the papers of old. "Material of that kind, for the future, ought not to be broken up," he said. "It ought to be kept intact." Roosevelt, the 32nd and longest-serving president (he served from 1933-1945), was inspired by the example of Rutherford B Hayes, the 19th president (1877-1881), to whom a sort of proto-presidential library had been dedicated in Fremont, Ohio, in 1916.

The Roosevelt library would be built at his family home in upstate New York, which would be given over to the American people. "We do

The papers of early presidents were precarious things, burned in fires, carted off amid civil war, chucked by widows



FROM TOP: THE HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM, THE JOHN F KENNEDY LIBRARY, THE LYNDON B JOHNSON LIBRARY

not know what moved FDR to create his library," Wilson writes. "We do know that after seven years of Depression and New Deal, his presidential files constituted an unprecedented bulk."

The idea was eventually codified into American law. The Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 encouraged former leaders to donate their historical materials for the creation of a "presidential archival depository". The system was altered again in 1986 by another act, which required private endowments to offset some of these libraries' costs. In the interim, the Presidential Records Act of 1978 declared that future presidents' records belonged not to the president but to the government.

There is enough slack in architectural interpretation that you might, if sufficiently motivated, squint and see the character of each president in his own library structure. Roosevelt's on an intergenerational family estate, the picture of presidential longevity. Lyndon Johnson's a pharaonic, travertine box in Austin, Texas, essentially Texan and unembarrassed. Bill Clinton's in Little Rock, Arkansas, modern and sleek, yet aw-shucks. Obama's, in Chicago, Illinois, contemporary and eloquent, but, for some, frustrating and inscrutable.

Donald Trump's proposed monolith – should it be built – will be maximal and maximally apt, a \$1bn glass high-rise, some 50 planned storeys tall by my eyeball count, in downtown Miami. Trump's son Eric posted a 100-second video rendering, which appears to be partially AI-generated, of the skyscraper in late March. The camera pans over a marina and past palm trees. Champagne is to be drunk near a fountain. There is a golden escalator and a replica Oval Office. TRUMP is in all caps at the top of the tower. "I have poured my heart and soul into this project," Eric tweeted, and it "will stand as a lasting testament to an amazing man".

Trump was asked about the project in the Oval Office soon after. "I wouldn't start it until I'm out of office," the president said. "I don't believe in building libraries or museums." He added that this so-called library would be "most likely a hotel... could be an office, but it's most likely gonna be a hotel". There will also be golden statues of Trump himself, a ballroom and a Boeing 747 jetliner in Air Force One livery in the lobby. (A request for an interview directed to Trump's Presidential Library Foundation Inc was not answered.)

Little surprise, all this, from a developer-president intent on remaking the politico-physical world, raising antemortem monuments to himself everywhere. There are the banners with his face on the justice department headquarters; the destruction of the East Wing of the White House and halting construction of Trump's new ballroom; the renaming, remodelling and un-renaming of the Kennedy Center; the draining, re-painting and algal blooming of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. There's the would-be 250ft triumphal arch on a traffic circle on the edge of the Potomac. A reporter asked Trump who the latter was for. "Me," he said.

Trump's original library fund had been promised the settlement payments of lawsuits brought

MY FELLOW AMERICAN

WHO DESERVES TO BE REMEMBERED FOR THE NEXT 250 YEARS?

by the president against ABC, Paramount, Meta and X, each in the double-digit millions of dollars, but last year that fund was dissolved. A group of Democratic legislators, including senators Elizabeth Warren and Richard Blumenthal, asked about the funds in a letter to the president in April, citing what they called “the vast tide of corruption and self-enrichment that has occurred during your administration”.

DECADES ON FROM ROOSEVELT'S REVELATION, THE presidential libraries had reached some level of maturity. In 1991, Linda Fischer, then of Ronald Reagan's library, wrote: “From the vantage point of a new presidential library, an archivist's immediate future seems clear: to fulfil the institution's core archival function of processing the holdings and providing reference service.”

Simple enough, and real research always has been done at these libraries. The journalist Robert Caro, author of a famously meticulous series of books on Lyndon B Johnson, conducted extensive research in Johnson's presidential library. The millions of documents there necessitated Caro's personal motto: “turn every page”. Research for the documentarian Ken Burns' series *The Roosevelts* was conducted in the Roosevelt library. And so on.

But 35 years ago, Fischer was already writing of a fear that the libraries had “degenerated” into monuments rather than archives. Trump is far from alone in his rethinking of the concept of the traditional presidential library. Clinton, for example, supercharged the fundraising process for his own \$165mn library, dedicated in 2004, including about \$10mn from the royal family of Saudi Arabia, according to *The Washington Post*.

Barack Obama's library, a grey, neo-brutalist, \$850mn lump designed by the decorated architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, now occupies former parkland on the south side of Chicago. It opened in June. The building itself is puzzling. “Its chamfered form with deep openings appears hostile, fortified against a precarious future,” wrote the FT's architecture critic Edwin Heathcote. He also compared it to a “blind, ominous alien spacecraft”. Meanwhile, *The New York Times* reported that, “So many people who have visited the Obama museum in its ‘soft launch’ have cried that the staff has left out boxes of tissues.”

In fact, this is not Obama's library at all, but rather the Obama Presidential Center. It will not house his physical archival material as other Nara-run presidential libraries do. Nara will maintain that material at its facility in College Park, Maryland, and records will be available digitally - many presidential records are born-digital these days, of course. (Confusingly, the Obama centre does house a branch of the Chicago Public Library system.) But despite this divorce between structure and holdings, Obama's “centre” is nearly universally called his “library”, evidence that the word “library” has, in this context, been repurposed to mean, quite exactly, “monument”.

A footnote here on the “five laws of library science”, as proposed by the librarian and

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN



DOROTHY PARKER BY CHLOE MALLE

I toggled between Dorothy Parker and Eloise, from the children's book series, because they are probably the two American literary figures I quote most regularly. Parker for her raucous wit and Eloise for her impish insouciance. Both are rulebreakers and both are dyed-in-the-wool New Yorkers who made midtown haunts famous (*The Algonquin* for Parker, *The Plaza* for Eloise). I often think of Parker's remark, “I hate writing, I love having written”, and I deeply identify with Eloise's quote, “Here's what I can do: chew gum, write, spell, stand on my head for the longest amount of time, stand on my toes, get dizzy and fall down, make a terrible face, and here's the thing of it - most of the time I'm on the telephone.” Other than being able to stand on my head, it's pretty spot on.

CHLOE MALLE IS HEAD OF EDITORIAL CONTENT AT AMERICAN VOGUE

JOHN JAY BY MARTHA STEWART

John Jay is a quiet revolutionary, maybe our nation's forgotten founder, and his life truly embodies the American spirit. He left a thriving law career for the cause of the American Revolution. Starting with instrumental work to create the frameworks of New York's laws and constitution, he was indispensable in ending the Revolutionary War, and a de facto head of intelligence for the American Revolution, diverting a kidnapping and assassination attempt against George Washington. He authored the *Federalist Papers* alongside James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, was the chief justice of the US and second governor of New York State. Jay then stepped back from public service and became a farmer, helping to promote the movement for scientific agriculture in New York. He did his duty and then took care of the land. I am proud to shed light on his life and legacy.

MARTHA STEWART IS AN AUTHOR AND ENTREPRENEUR

‘MRS RIVERA’ BY JOSÉ ANDRÉS

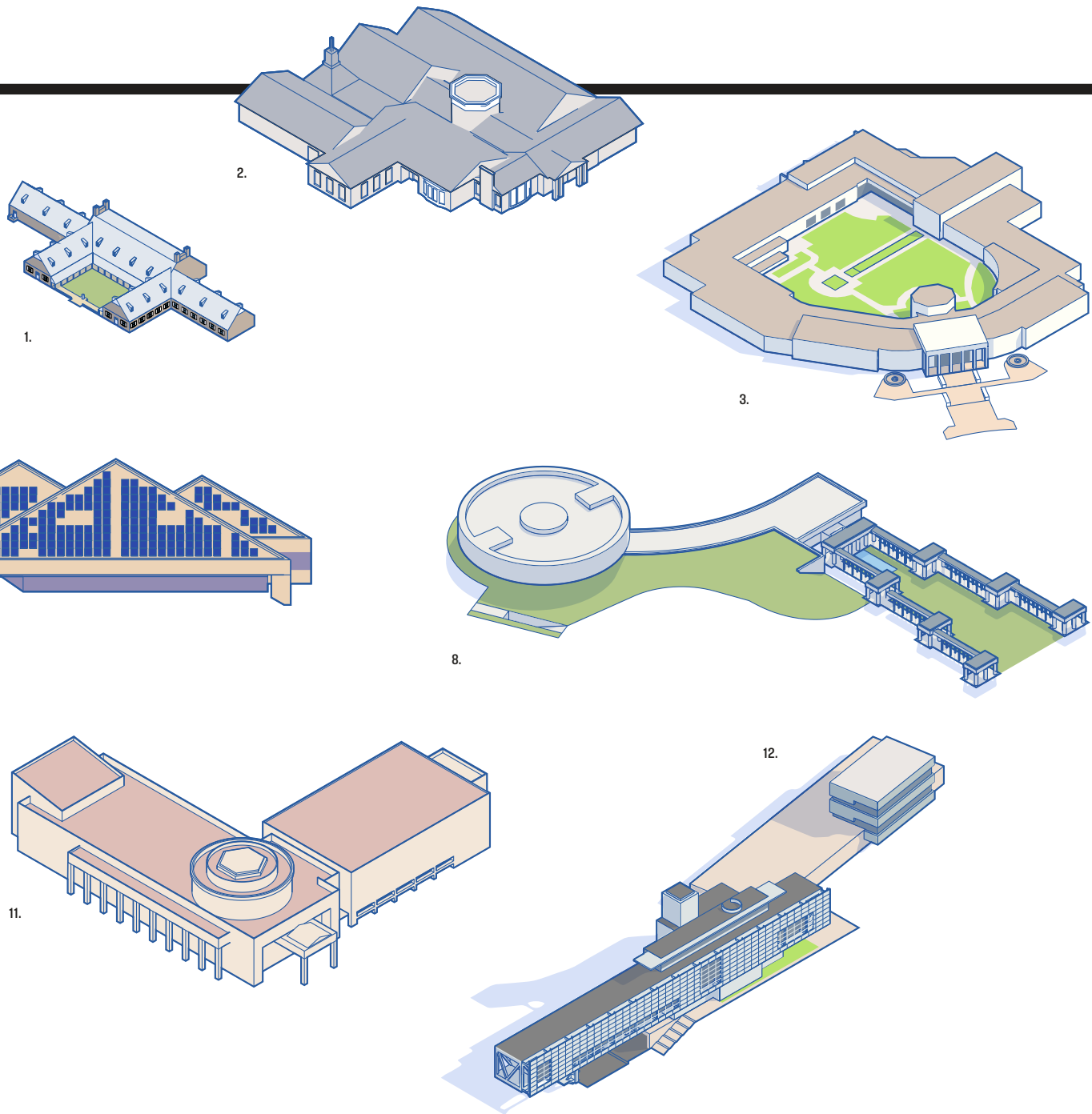
My favourite American is an imaginary person. Let's call her Mrs Rivera. She was not born in America, but she became an American, quiet but essential to its existence. She remembers what it felt like to arrive with nothing more than hope and an accent. When a new family moves in, she brings food. When a storm hits, she checks on her older neighbours. When a child is having trouble in school, she helps with homework. She believes what's good for her neighbour is good for her. She knows empathy is not weakness but strength. Mrs Rivera understands something about America: we are not united by where we came from, but by what we choose to build together. For the next 250 years, America will need more Mrs Riveras: people who understand that “We the People” becomes true only when “we” becomes larger than “me”.

JOSÉ ANDRÉS IS A RESTAURATEUR AND FOUNDER OF WORLD CENTRAL KITCHEN

JAMES BALDWIN BY RUTH ROGERS

James Baldwin had a stunning impact on the cultural life of the US. He was a poet, a novelist, essayist and civil rights activist whose unflinching writings on race, sexuality and class challenged American culture. He bridged the personal and the political in the civil rights movement. Reading his work made him one of the great influences of my life.

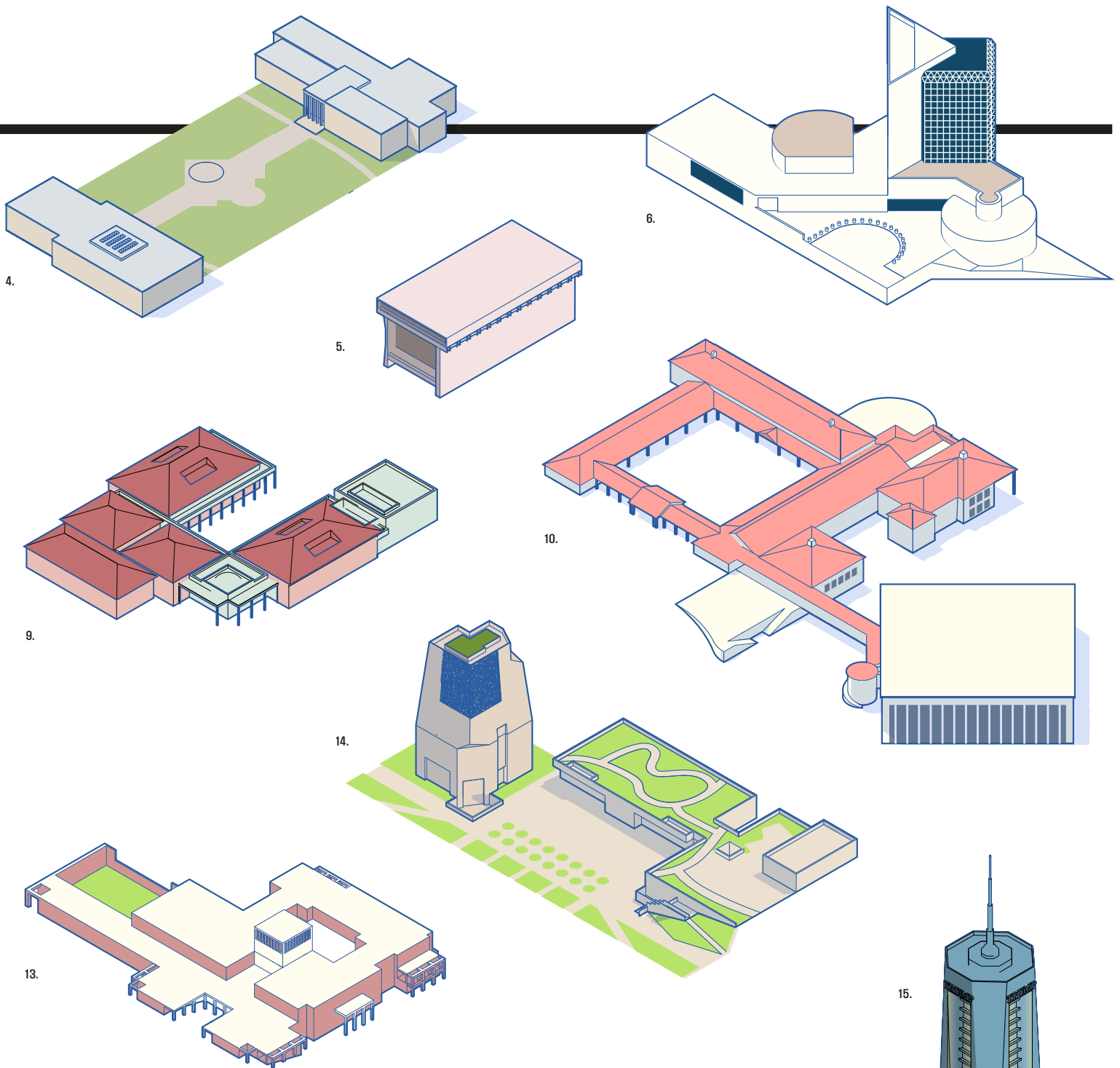
RUTH ROGERS IS A CHEF, BROADCASTER AND OWNER OF RIVER CAFE IN LONDON



PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES & MUSEUMS

By year of dedication, schematics to scale.
Graphics and additional reporting by Alan Smith,
Ian Bott, Bob Haslett and Jana Tauschinski

1. **Franklin D Roosevelt 1941**
Houses FDR's specially modified 1936 Ford Phaeton, with hand controls
2. **Herbert Hoover 1962**
Many exhibits reflect Hoover's tenure during the Great Depression
3. **Harry S Truman 1957**
A rotating collection of artefacts including the Fat Man Safety Plug from the Nagasaki atomic bomb
4. **Dwight D Eisenhower 1962**
Includes the 34th president's fully restored childhood home
5. **Lyndon B Johnson 1971**
Features one of the world's most extensive archives on the Civil Rights Movement
6. **John F Kennedy 1979**
Includes JFK's treasured 25ft sloop, Victura, a 15th birthday gift from his parents
7. **Gerald R Ford 1981**
A Nara presidential library that is separated from its museum by 175km (museum illustrated)



8. Jimmy Carter 1986

Carter's post-White House 2002 Nobel Peace Prize medal is on display

9. Richard Nixon 1990

Attractions include Nixon's original 1912 birthplace cottage and the telephone he used to speak with the Apollo 11 astronauts

10. Ronald Reagan 1991

The Air Force One aircraft, on which Reagan travelled 675,000 miles, is housed in a special pavilion

11. George H W Bush 1997

A restored Grumman TBM Avenger torpedo bomber is on display, along with the Distinguished Flying Cross he was awarded in the second world war

12. William J Clinton 2004

Extensive archives include 78 million pages of official records, 20 million emails and 2.6 million photographs

13. George W Bush 2013

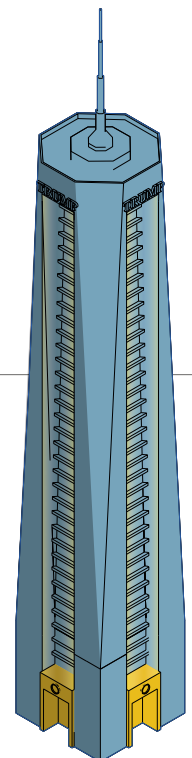
Includes exhibit on September 11 attacks and an interactive "Decision Points" theatre to put visitors in the shoes of the president

14. Barack Obama 2026

The presidential centre includes a full-sized basketball court - but no presidential paper documents

15. Donald J Trump (dedication date not yet confirmed)

Illustration based on artist's impression and therefore not to scale



mathematician SR Ranganathan in 1931. First among them: books are for use. Then: every person has his or her book; every book has its reader; save the time of the reader. Last: a library is a growing organism.

It is unclear what records will be available to stock a Trump “library” when he leaves office. The Presidential Records Act was passed amid the still-smouldering wreckage of Watergate and Richard Nixon’s resignation. “The issue of presidential papers is one of many that rose to public consciousness as a result of Watergate,” said one congressman during debate on the bill. Another referred to the “Watergate tragedy”.

According to the law, the National Archives takes custody and control of a president’s records, and provides access to them “on nondiscriminatory terms”. But in April, Trump’s Office of Legal Counsel declared by fiat that the Presidential Records Act is unconstitutional. Its reasoning mimics the central theme of Trump’s second term: that the executive branch should enjoy unprecedented power and freedom from fetter. At the start of his second term, Trump appointed Marco Rubio, his secretary of state, as acting Archivist of the United States. Rubio handed the job off to James Byron, the president and chief executive of the Richard Nixon Foundation.

The American Historical Association (AHA), the Freedom of the Press Foundation and others sued Trump to defend the records act. The AHA wrote: “The administration believes that the president is legally free to destroy records of his official government conduct, or even spirit away the records for his own future personal use.” (In 2023, Trump had been indicted on 40 felony counts for, among other things, keeping classified documents in a bathroom at Mar-a-Lago; the case was wound down when Trump won re-election.)

In May, the DC district court issued an opinion in the plaintiffs’ favour. Alongside that *Tempest* line again, the judge quoted George Orwell’s 1984: “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” The Trump administration said it would appeal.

A NATION, ROOSEVELT SAID, “MUST, ABOVE ALL, BELIEVE IN the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future”. If there was to be a memorial to him in Washington DC, Roosevelt said it should be a small stone in front of the building of the National Archives, and so it is.

RDW Connor, the first Archivist of the United States, in 1939 called Roosevelt “the nation’s answer to the historian’s prayer. Never before has the White House sheltered a president who has had so clear an understanding and so sympathetic an appreciation of the historian’s unceasing petition for the raw materials of his science.”

Roosevelt’s library is in Hyde Park, New York, a couple of hours north of New York City. On a recent weekday morning, I took a train up the Hudson river to Poughkeepsie, and then a car up again to Hyde Park. The Roosevelt compound is

Lyndon Johnson’s is a travertine box, Texan and unembarrassed, Bill Clinton’s modern and sleek, yet aw-shucks



FROM TOP: THE WILLIAM J CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY, THE GEORGE W BUSH PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM, THE OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL CENTER

flanked by roadside Americana, across from a motel and a drive-in movie theatre.

It was, by then, a sweaty June afternoon and I had the estate nearly all to myself. A small group of tourists sought shade in the Roosevelt family’s former stables. A park ranger walked us through the family home, past the naval artwork, taxidermied birds and a gorgeous library and office, down a long ramp. Behind the house was a sweeping green view of the forested river valley and nearby was the gravesite of Franklin and the former First Lady, Eleanor.

A short walk from the house were the museum and library themselves. Cliff Laube, its public programmes specialist, whisked me through in roughly chronological order. There was pride on Laube’s face and in his voice. A cold, digital wind howled through speakers near the entrance – the soundtrack selected to conjure Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression. The rest of the winding trip told stories of economic recovery, the New Deal, military victory and electoral triumph.

Earlier American presidents have their house museums and small-town birthplace attractions. George Washington has his Mount Vernon estate and Thomas Jefferson has his self-designed mansion, Monticello. But “it was never the way FDR did it”, Laube said, proud again.

Off the main museum floor in Hyde Park, there is a series of darkened rooms full of books and acid-free archival boxes full of papers. There are 17 million pages of documents and 130,000 photos in the archive here, and most of them solely here; less than 10 per cent of them have been digitised, Laube said. The president’s “official file” would span 1,174 linear feet, and there are 22,000 of Roosevelt’s own books. Laube told me that the research rooms here are the busiest in the presidential library system.

A PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY IS AN EX-PRESIDENT’S “MOST important – and most expensive – post-presidential performance”, writes Jodi Kanter, a professor at George Washington University and author of *Presidential Libraries as Performance*.

For Kanter, a theatre scholar, “performance” here means two things undertaken by two different parties: the movement of a visitor around a physical space, and the creation by the president and his curators of a character portrait. She was inspired to undertake this research after visits to the libraries of Reagan, in Simi Valley, California, and of Clinton. In Reagan’s, she told me, Kanter felt like a passenger or an audience member, along for a linear ride of Reagan’s accomplishments, a performance well suited to that president’s previous career as an actor. In Clinton’s, she felt like a participant, free to choose her own path in a space that emphasised the contributions of others, for example via a replica cabinet meeting room.

Kanter went on to visit all the existing libraries. She became intrigued by “the tug of war over the story” of presidents’ tenures – gentle in some cases and aggressive in others. Early arrangements of Nixon’s library in Yorba Linda, California, for

example, made little mention of Watergate, the scandal that now almost to the exclusion of all else defines him. But for any president, with the accretion of enough nip and tuck, emphasis and exclusion, you might end up erecting an edifice of hagiography. This argument has been made with special vehemence by Benjamin Hufbauer, an art history professor at the University of Louisville and the author of *Presidential Temples*. Hufbauer has compared American presidential libraries to “the pyramids and temples of the pharaohs of ancient Egypt that told glorified versions of their reigns”, and to “the Roman Empire’s Imperial Cult, which made most emperors gods for political worship”.

One writer’s answered prayer is another’s royal ascent. In response to the Hyde Park library plans, the journalist John T Flynn wrote that Roosevelt had “decided, like an Egyptian Pharaoh, to transform his home into a great historic shrine – a Yankee pyramid – where his family might live in a kind of imperial dignity, where he might retire if he survived the war as a kind of World Elder Statesman and Dictator Emeritus, and where he would be entombed”. Indeed, there is in Roosevelt’s museum a papier-mâché sculpture of the president as the Great Sphinx, smoking a three-foot cigarette, based on political cartoons skewering his Delphic position on whether he would run for an unprecedented third term. Presidential libraries are now edifices of a “civil religion”, Hufbauer argues, a term coined by Rousseau. If so, its greatest glass-and-gold cathedral is yet to be built on the waterfront in downtown Miami.

The Declaration of Independence itself recognises the value of evidence and documents. “To prove this,” it reads, meaning the tyranny then being exerted over the States, “let Facts be submitted to a candid world.” Among its lengthy list of grievances is that King George III had “called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records”.

But if these presidential libraries have become houses of worship, the faiths observed within them become marginal sects. The attendance at nearly every presidential library, according to National Archives data, starts high upon opening and then tends to decline considerably, perhaps simply with the passage of time.

I stood alone by the Roosevelts’ gravesite, an undecorated monument of white Vermont marble set in a rose garden, which was fenced off for work. No other soul was visible in any direction across the bright-green grounds.

Perhaps ex-presidents in these places are anointed and mummified like quiet, long-ago pharaohs. Or perhaps they are civic beacons calling researchers to the documents at their source. Or perhaps they are the ageing man in the W B Yeats poem: “*Set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*” **FT**

Oliver Roeder is a commissioning editor on FT Weekend Magazine

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR BY ERIC RIPERT

Martin Luther King Jr showed that strength and compassion can go hand in hand. He fought for justice through peaceful means and never lost sight of the dignity of others, even in the face of enormous adversity. His leadership brought people together around a shared belief that everyone deserves respect and equal opportunity. What I admire most is his humanity. He understood that lasting change comes from courage, conviction and the ability to inspire others to be better. More than 50 years after his death, his example continues to resonate because the values he stood for are timeless. His life reminds us that progress is possible when we choose understanding over division and compassion over anger.

ERIC RIPERT IS CO-OWNER OF THREE-MICHELIN-STARRED LE BERNARDIN IN MANHATTAN

PERRY MILLER BY MARGARET ATWOOD

My choice is Perry Miller, one of my professors at the Harvard Graduate School in English literature, who brought the study of the American Puritans into the academy. If you didn’t understand them, he said, you couldn’t understand America. Without him, I wouldn’t have been able to write *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I dedicated the book in part to him, even though I only got B+ on my paper.

MARGARET ATWOOD IS A NOVELIST AND POET

MILES DAVIS BY DANIEL HUMM

“Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.” No artist has influenced me more than Miles Davis. What I admire most is that he understood what many creative people spend a lifetime avoiding: creation requires destruction. At the height of his success, he walked away from what worked. When he released *Bitches Brew* and embraced electric instruments, he left behind what jazz was “supposed to be” and made something new. He was complicated, flawed and difficult, but committed to art. Years ago, my team and I wrote 11 slogans to describe him: Cool, Endless Reinvention, Inspired, Forward-Moving, Fresh, Collaborative, Spontaneous, Vibrant, Adventurous, Light, Innovative. They still hang in our kitchen. Miles taught me creativity isn’t about protecting achievements; it’s about having the courage to let them go.

DANIEL HUMM IS OWNER OF THE HOSPITALITY GROUP BEHIND ELEVEN MADISON PARK

MARION CUNNINGHAM BY JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN

I fell in love with American breakfasts reading *The Breakfast Book* by Marion Cunningham, published in 1987. It is my breakfast bible. Her buttermilk pancakes are a staple at my breakfast table as well as in my restaurant. Her philosophy is “the honest simplicity of breakfast is captivating, the most delicious breakfasts usually derive from the humblest ingredients”. At 13, she taught herself to cook, but didn’t get into writing until her fifties. *The Breakfast Book* was the first book she published under her name, and my favourite.

JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN IS A CHEF, RESTAURATEUR AND AUTHOR