Gagosian Gallery, through Aug 2 (see Chelsea)

Award-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano first came to public attention when he and his then-partner, Richard Rogers, won a 1971 design competition for a new interdisciplinary cultural institution in Paris. Completed in 1977, the radical result—the Centre Georges Pompidou—set the bar for Piano’s succeeding 36 years of innovative architecture.

The go-to guy for sophisticated museums (the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland; the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago; Houston’s Menil Collection; and the new Whitney Museum of Art) and state-of-the-art skyscrapers (such as the New York Times Building and London’s tallest tower, the Shard), Piano and his firm, Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), are being celebrated in “Fragments,” their first retrospective.

The sprawling exhibition consists of 24 tables displaying Piano’s preliminary sketches (marked up with green highlighter and yellow Post-it notes), working blueprints, models, photographs, construction elements, videos on iPads and articles related to some of the firm’s best buildings. Each table, which is surrounded by deck chairs to enable visitors to study or discuss, presents a single project via a selection of fragments from the archives, illustrating the process by which RPBW operates.

Key items—a custom-made support joint used throughout the Pompidou Center, one of the ceramic poles making up the Times Building’s exterior screen and Styrofoam models tracing the nautical scheme for the Whitney—underline this compelling exhibition’s central point: that great buildings are, ultimately, the sum of their parts.—Paul Laster