Japan and the West –
The Different Architectures of East and West

Tom Heneghan

Aside from their particular landmark structures – for example, the Sydney Opera House and the Eiffel Tower – the major cities of the world increasingly appear almost indistinguishable. Indeed, there is a replica Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas and a semi-replica Manhattan skyline in Dubai. In the mind of the general public, and in the minds of most architects of the present time, contemporary architecture is founded on an almost uniform aesthetic. Beneath the aesthetics, though, the issues with which the architects are attempting to deal may be very different.

The International Style

In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, hosted an exhibition entitled 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition', curated by the eminent historians Henry Russell Hitchcock and Lewis Mumford, together with the then-young architect Philip Johnson. Simultaneously with the launch of the exhibition, Hitchcock and Johnson published a co-authored book which codified the characteristics they believed were common to Modernism across the world, and gave its name to a supposedly cohesive movement: 'The International Style: Architecture Since 1922'. The proposition of both exhibition and book was that the different national styles or characteristics of architecture had been superseded by one of universal applicability – the 'International Style' - which embodied the true essence and core-principles of architecture – these being the expression of volume rather than mass, balance rather than symmetry and the elimination of applied ornament.

Critically, however - and necessarily for the presentation of something that might purport to being a unified international theory, Hitchcock and Johnson omitted consideration of the different social agendas that were driving the contemporary architecture of the different nations. As the critic Carter Wiseman subsequently wrote in his book 'Shaping a Nation', "Hitchcock and Johnson… embraced the movement represented by Le Corbusier and Mies more for its novelty as a style than for its potential as social theory. For these museum curators, who were both well-born and thoroughly insulated from the harsher social realities with which the radical Europeans were grappling, Modernism meant something almost entirely aesthetic." (Wisemann 1998).

Architecture, now

The ideologies of social-revolution which – to different degrees – underpinned the aesthetic-revolution of architecture between the 1920's and 60's have generally receded as governments of all nations and persuasions have focussed their societies increasingly on the individual and the global. Nevertheless, in general, modern architecture claims the legitimacy of emerging from the 'zeitgeist' (the spirit of the era) while it simultaneously – and contradictorily - seeks to be timeless. The modern architecture of Japan, though, is cognisant of the past, while being intentionally and unashamedly fo-

Shizuoka Prefectural Convention Arts Centre - Shizuoka - Japan - 1998 - Arata Isozaki

cussed on the fleeting present, with few, if any, pretensions to posterity. This difference is the products of the particular circumstances and history of Japan, and the effect of these on its architectural leaders. Arata Isozaki and Tadao Ando, for example, differ in age by a decade – Isozaki born in 1931 and Ando in 1941 – but this superficially modest difference shapes an entirely different world-view, to which the architecture of their entire careers is a response.

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Tsukuba Centre Building - Japan - 1979-1983 - Arata Isozaki

Arata Isozaki, and the architecture of parody

Isozaki recalls when, as a boy of fourteen years old, he witnessed the last day of the war: "The sky over the archipelago was a cloudless blue on August 15, 1945, the day Japan surrendered. At that time I was a boy in my mid-teens, and although I sensed that an era was ending, I had no idea what was beginning. All I knew was that the roaring had stopped and, for an instant, there was unmitigated calm… The houses and buildings that we had considered mainstays of our way of life, the established belief in the National State with the Emperor at its head, and the social system that controlled even the smallest daily activities, had been destroyed and had vanished, leaving only the void of the blue sky overhead." (Koshalek 1998: 31ff.).

The post-war Japanese 'Economic Miracle' which enabled Japan's rapid physical and social re-construction was achievable only because of the government's almost feudal control of the country, by which it could centrally control and co-ordinate the nation's industries. And, just as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics was seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the character of the reborn society, the apotheosis and exemplar of Japan's new industrial might was the 1970 Osaka Expo, in preparation for which the then 36 year old Isozaki was appointed Chief Architect, under the direction of his former Professor at Tokyo University, Kenzo Tange. Tange conceived the Expo as a hypothetical representation of the future city, with the Festival Plaza being a space of total flexibility, under a huge, technologically-advanced steel truss roof, serviced by robot entertainers. It was a romantically futuristic vision to which Isozaki was fundamentally opposed, seeing it as demonstrably irrelevant to the contemporary situation. The 1960's saw the growth of liberal politics and lifestyles, the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1966, the international opposition to the continuing War in Vietnam, and the street riots between students and police in Paris, London and Tokyo in 1968. The robot-served, 'Big-Industry' financed Festival Plaza, however, celebrated, and attempted to legitimise, the 'status quo' sharing of power by government and industrial bosses. For Isozaki, therefore, the Expo was politically, socially, and architecturally bankrupt, before it began - and yet, through his duty to his 'Master', his role was to serve as its Chief Architect.

In Europe, Modernist architecture had been inspired by a social agenda, and was the expression of a search for social progress. However, at Expo '70 these social ambitions were disregarded by government and business, who hijacked Modernism's 'style' without its meaning. The Osaka Expo became a celebration of the power of government and industry, and of how they would together lead the Japanese people into a technological future. Japan, which had been defeated by the technology of the Atom Bomb, was now the World Master of technology. The Expo was a very highly political event – with political motives that were precisely the opposite of Isozaki's personal views.

Physically drained, and mentally exhausted by the intensity of the contradictions, he collapsed on the night before the opening of the Expo, and was confined to hospital for the following three months.

Nine years later, Isozaki took up the argument in his design for the Tsukuba Centre Building. On a site surrounded – at the time - by open fields, he was commissioned to create the administrative and commercial centre of a city that did not yet exist, but which would gradually aggregate around it over following years. It was by definition a political project. In his design he created architecture that the state would perceive as supportive of its sense of itself, but which at the same time would implicitly satirise its pretensions. His Tsukuba Centre Building is a vast assembly of symbols centred around a sunken piazza based on Michelangelo's design for the Campidoglio in Rome. While Michelangelo's convex plaza, surmounted by a statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, symbolised the world dominated by the power of Rome, the sunken convex version at Tsukuba, which focuses on a drain at its centre, symbolises the empty centre of the post-war Japanese State, with the Emperor no longer divine, and its traditional ways no longer part of everyday culture. It documents the end of the Japanese nation-state. Around the piazza, Isozaki arranged a collection of architectural quotations from the works of contemporary European architects such as Archigram and Hans Hollein, but also from historical figures including Giulio

Romano, Francesco Borromini, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux – all intended as a polemic against any resurgence of Japanese nationalism.

While the formal and spatial qualities of Isozaki's architecture – as with any good architecture – can only be fully appreciated by visit, the political agenda of his architecture can be clearly understood through his writings, descriptions and publications. His work engages with our intellect by connecting with knowledge that we already have. We understand his parodies because we know what it is that is being parodied.

Tadao Ando, and the architecture of resistance.

Tadao Ando's architecture is equally political, and his agenda addresses similar aims – the assertion of the individual citizen's precedence over the State and over the commercial interests of 'Big Business'. But, his methods are very different. While Isozaki's political agenda is effected through parody, Ando's political agenda is effected through resistance – in particular, resistance to the consumer culture of which Japan is world epicentre. Like Isozaki's, Ando's work also engages with our intellect by connecting with what we already know, but mostly by what we discover when there. We understand the architecture's argument by what is evoked by, or during, our movement through it.

Born in 1941, Ando was less affected than Isozaki by the nation's post-war trauma and resulting immense changes. But, reaching maturity during the 1960's, he was as affected as Isozaki by world events, and by their impact within Japan. He recalls: "Traditionally in Japan we do not have many plazas or public spaces, except the gardens of temples or shrines. During the 1960's and 70's there were many movements in Japan protesting against defence treaties, and the National authorities intentionally dismembered plazas and open spaces, and prohibited citizens gathering together to exchange opinions. If there are no public spaces, opinion is suppressed, and people are made into robots whose only purpose is to work. In the history of western countries – for example at the time of the French Revolution – people struggled and fought to win democracy. But, in Japan we have never had a serious struggle to gain democracy. Each of us, in our own way, must be conscious of this fact. Ever since I started, I have tried to express this struggle through my architecture. In my projects I try to create public spaces that will encourage dialogue. This might be an individual's dialogue between himself, nature, and time – or it might be a dialogue between people. I can't dictate how people will use these spaces, but I want people to be aware of the possibility of dialogue. Space cannot dictate to people, but it can guide people." (Ando 1993).

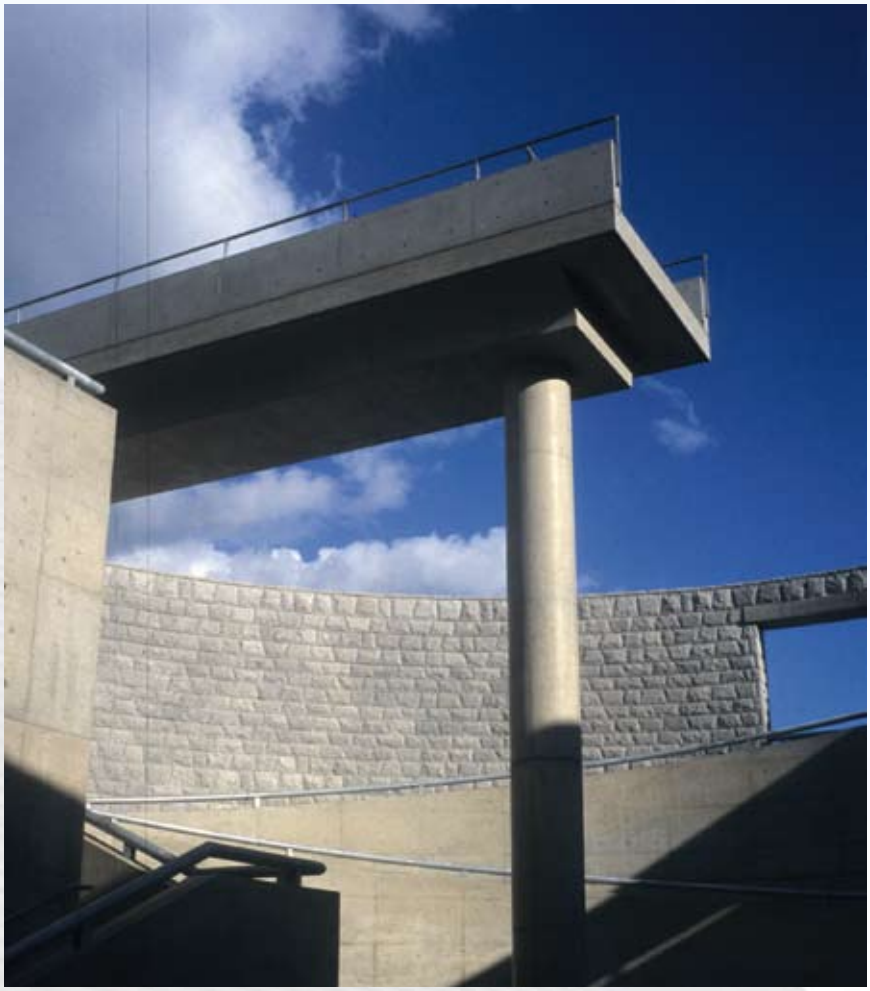
One can see Ando's strategy most vividly at his Chikatsu-Asuka Museum, and at his Suntory Museum in Osaka – where, in both cases, Ando was clearly less interested in the design of the building than in the creation of new public space. At the former, the building is a vast stepped terrain, serving as an arena for lectures, music and drama festivals, and for the contemplation of the surrounding nature, while the exhibits are located in a subterranean chamber, below. At the latter, which involved the design of a sea-edge art-gallery and IMAX cinema, and which was at the time by far the largest and most important of Ando's projects, Ando's primary endeavour was his long, ultimately successful, political battle with the government for permission to replace the high sea-wall by an equally-secure stepped public plaza.

But, it is in the language of his architecture that Ando's resistance is most easily seen. The stark, stern concrete walls of Ando's buildings show an agenda similar to that of the great 16th Century Japanese tea-master Sen no Rikyu, who re-created the tea-ceremony as an exemplar of the ideal of 'wabi' – the Zen aesthetic of humble plain-ness and simplicity which is what we now consider characteristic of the traditional architecture of Japan. However, as the historian Udo Kulterman pointed out in his book 'New Architecture in Japan', the refinement that we think of as characteristic of Japanese architecture – the plain, un-adorned traditional house – is, in fact, atypical. Both the exquisitely restrained Katsura Imperial Villa and the exquisitely excessesive Nikko Shrine gateway are 17th century works. Kulterman wrote: "The fantastic roof-shapes of Japanese temples, gateways and monuments…[are] expressive of a mercurial, exuberant temperament, which for a short time only – during the classic age – maintained a self-imposed discipline and restraint…The Japanese house, in its clarity and harmony, is a reflection of mastery over a primitive, capricious, emotionalism, a fantastic imagination and a baroque extravagance which far exceed the most extreme manifestations of European art…these extremes were combined in Japan in the same works… producing an effect which cannot be logically explained."

That last sentence is key to an understanding of the complex architecture of Tadao Ando. We can understand the severe plainness of his works in the same way that we understand the resistance of Sen no Rikyu – as a rejection of the vulgar and un-necessary, and an embrace of the essential and the spiritual – although it is the Shinto-like spirit of nature, and of mankind, rather than that of a godhead, which the atheist Ando embraces. But, Ando also embraces the irrational, seeing the 'fantastic' as a balance to the de-humanising emphasis on logic the pervades the modern world: "not everything can be accounted for reasonably… there are things in society that cannot be explained just in functional terms… I feel this irrational quality is important. The Modernism of the past became insipid because it rejected such irrationalism." He describes his wish to create an architecture that "pulsates in the gap between reality and fiction, between the rational and the illogical." and "to create de-familiarized space where fiction informs the everyday."

At his Sumiyoshi Row House (1976), for example, tall concrete walls delineate the site boundaries, resisting and excluding the chaos of the surrounding urban morass and enclosing the inhabitants within their own world. The tiny site is divided linearly into three equal parts, the centre part being an open court through which the inhabitants are obliged to pass – and harmonize their daily lives with the vagaries of the climate - as they move from room to room. Ando explained, " I was determined to give the house…anti-modern organization, with the dwelling space cut in the middle. After satisfying the minimum conditions

of ventilation, day-lighting and exposure to sunlight, I thought the question of functionality could be left to the inhabitant. I believed that the important thing was to permit people to nurture themselves there spiritually and physically. No matter how advanced society becomes, institutionally or technologically, a house in which nature can be sensed represents for me the ideal environment in which to live. From a functional viewpoint, the courtyard of the rowhouse in Sumiyoshi forces the inhabitant to endure occasional hardships. At the same time, however, the open courtyard is capable of becoming the house's vital organ, introducing into everyday life, and assimilating, precious stimuli such as changes in nature. I placed the courtyard at the centre in full knowledge of the irrationality of such a decision, precisely because the house was small." (Ando 2007: 85) The Sumiyoshi Row House is both a residence – its success may be judged by its continuing occupation by the original clients after a period of more than 30 years - and a stern architectural and social manifesto.



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Chapel on Mount Rokko - Kobe - Japan - 1996 - Tadao Ando

Conclusions

In the west, during the past half-century we have seen our architecture become gradually de-politicised, at least when compared to the radical '20's and '30's, and when compared to the post-war reconstruction programs of social housing, schools and hospitals. It is therefore ironic that in Japan – which we customarily think of as socially and politically conformist, with political institutions that are profoundly averse to criticism - architecture continues its role of aggressive political and social activism. As Isozaki explained, "If you are going to be an architect then you develop your own ideas by deciding what you are going to criticise. There is always something, somewhere to criticise."

The cities, and the architectures of the world may be increasingly similar in appearance, but, as with modes of clothing, in which the western suit has become ubiquitous, these similarities do not erase the very significant differences of the societies' cultural histories, ways of thinking and ambitions, and particularly the differences of climate. The 'International Style' propounded by Hitchcock and Johnson in 1932 was possible only because the issues of a building's location could be ignored. The technology of air-conditioning negated climate. Now, within 'globalisation', global warming requires architecture that responds, with minimal need for artificial energy-consuming remedy, to the climate of its particular place. The western architecture of the temperate climatic zones can no longer be credibly proposed as the universal answer. As the architecture of the world becomes less 'generic' and more responsive to the specifics of its location, it will increasingly need to, again, acknowledge the culture, social situation and politics of its location. At that point, it may be that the politically-focussed contemporary architecture of Japan will be seen as the 'torch-bearer' of the idealism of European Modernism which emerged in the 1920's, only to be doused by the aestheticisation of Hitchcock and Johnson.

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Tom Heneghan [heneghan@arch.usyd.edu.au] is the Chair of Architecture at the University of Sydney; he has built, lectured, published and exhibited internationally. For his works in Japan he was awarded both, the 'Gakkai Shoh', the most prestigious award of the Architectural Institute of Japan, and the Japanese Government Public Building of the Year Award in 2002.