

The Shock of the New MoMA

Taniguchi: Nine Museums, essay by Terence Riley. Published by Distributed Art Publishers, 2004. 204 pp., \$60

The Architecture of Yoshio Taniguchi by Yoshio Taniguchi. Published by Harry N. Abrams, 1999. 282 pp., \$125

Reviewed by David Hay

Harried New Yorkers, looking for a shortcut between 53rd and 54th streets, may well head for a walkway that doubles as the lobby of Yoshio Taniguchi's newly conceived Museum of Modern Art. If they do, they'll be surprised midway through to discover a light-filled atrium, seven stories high. A multistory glass façade to the east will then draw their eyes toward the museum's famous sculpture garden. And they will run head on into some very contemporary art. Many of the treasures that belong here—for example, Cézanne's *The Bather*—are now in galleries on the upper floors. What is deemed to be cutting-edge “modern” sits right above the lobby, with some works visible from below. The shock of the new—if any—confronts the visitor right away. Even the unwitting pedestrian seeking a shortcut.

This heightened interaction with the city—windows in the architecture and photography galleries afford views of nearby skyscrapers—exemplifies an urbanist stance that is a throwback to a period of optimism in architecture. Indeed, Taniguchi's sophisticated design is a conservative reworking of Modernism, and it helps explain why he was chosen for the project. This is a museum that came of age at a time when Modernist architecture was at its apex. Now, with Modernism in danger of becoming merely a historical style, the museum found in Taniguchi a practitioner who has advanced this design strategy's reach in formal, even sculptural terms, playing with mass and material, but who firmly rejects the whimsy of contemporary fads.

But to judge Taniguchi solely from his work on the new MoMA, a commission that involved making a workable museum out of a group of existing buildings, would be grossly unfair. Which is why two books on the architect, one five years old and another just released, are highly significant. *The Architecture of*

Yoshio Taniguchi, with a forward by his Japanese contemporary Fumihiko Maki, provides a handsome overview of his major projects in Japan. *Nine Museums*, with an introduction by Terence Riley, the curator of the Department of Architecture and Design at the museum, concentrates on the architect's justifiably famous designs in this area.

In *Nine Museums* Riley describes the major influences on the architect. He plays down, perhaps too forcefully, Taniguchi's introduction to Modernism at Harvard's Graduate School of Design since, he argues, the architect's time there coincided with a decline in Modernism's cachet. Taniguchi was the son of a powerful architect, Yoshiro Taniguchi, whose own design sensibility owed much to his love affair with construction. (He insisted his son train as a carpenter.) There is also the architect's fealty to the traditional Japanese conception of museums as places of quiet repose and respect for art. Finally, Riley argues that Taniguchi's passion for expressing materiality in his forms gives him a direct affinity to Mies van der Rohe.

Fumihiko Maki's much less scholarly take in the older volume—he's been a friend of Taniguchi's for years—allows him access to the architect's mind. In his discussion of Taniguchi's skill in balancing centripetal and centrifugal elements, Maki contends that seeing structures as forms in motion is vital to understanding any Taniguchi building.

Although both texts hint at how Taniguchi applies this mix of ideas, it is

left to the photos, particularly in *Nine Museums*, to show us exactly how he articulates spaces.

Taniguchi likes to use both light and the massing of heavy materials, including such favorites as dark green Vermont slate, to create a sense of tranquillity in his museums. (He uses this slate on the entry staircase at MoMA.) The greater the solidity, the more heightened the sense of interior quiet. He uses screens—for example, a long granite partition that serves as a lakeside façade and courtyard wall at the Ken Domon Museum; and the glorious screen that hangs over the front of his Gallery of Horyuji Treasures at the Tokyo National Museum—to add a depth perspective to his forms, as well as to provide diffuse light for the galleries inside. His almost playful use of planes, both vertical and horizontal, serves to bring some of these heavy masses together. Indeed, the 54th Street façades of the new MoMA, each sheathed with darkened glass and containing a hollow square, work to forge a unity between two wings separated by the sculpture garden.

Taniguchi's effort to “sculpt” his strict forms is often expressed through juxtaposition. His Shiseido Art Museum joins a circular form to a square structure; inside he reverses them by placing a circular gallery inside the square section of the museum and putting the rectangular galleries in the adjoining circular element.

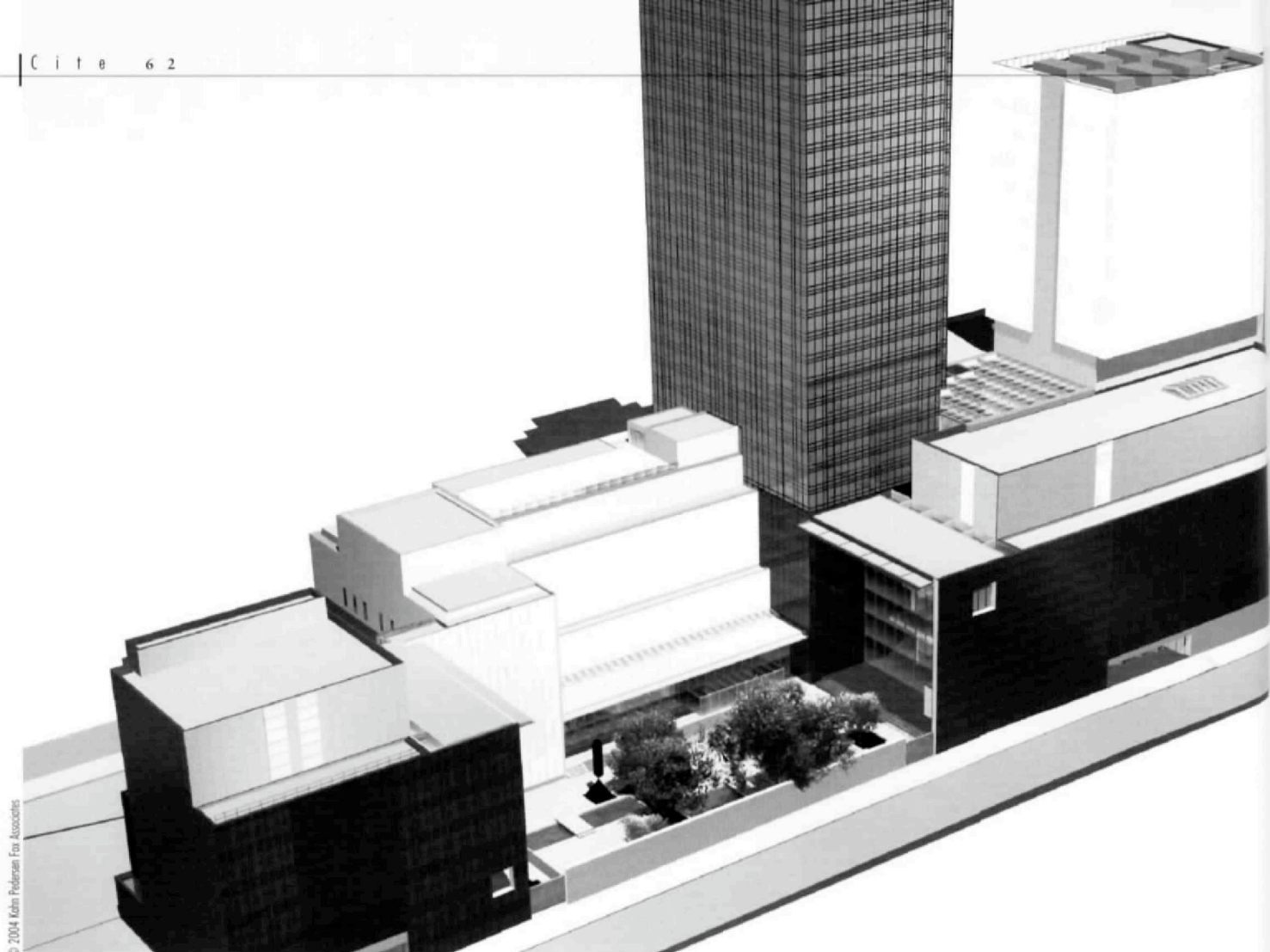
Nine Museums briefly describes how this design sensibility was brought to his plan for MoMA. Here Taniguchi had to work with the original Philip Goodwin

and Edward Durrell Stone structure built in 1939, and the sculpture garden from 1953 and the 1964 east wing, both designed by Philip Johnson. Sitting in the middle of the site—the Drake Hotel to the west was bought and demolished—was a large impediment, Cesar Pelli's 1984 Museum Tower.

Taniguchi decided that engaging the surrounding skyline, including the Pelli tower, offered a way of unifying the interior experience. (The galleries run through all the structures except the education wing.) So he added numerous windows throughout. Knowing that New York City is all around reminds visitors, no matter which wing they are in, that they share the same space.

The light pouring in affords a sense of peace that is a Taniguchi trademark. By opening up the spaces, and with such gestures as the flowing staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, the enclosed “forced march” aspect of the earlier remodels is gone. On a smaller scale, Taniguchi has floated the display walls of his new exhibition galleries away from the museum walls, adding yet another plane.

But in many ways, the MoMA redesign remains a limited expression of Taniguchi's sensibility. There is only so much an architect can do to unite a set of relatively disparate structures. When he starts from scratch, Taniguchi's ability to balance forms in order to create a sense of serenity is unparalleled. Thanks to these two large volumes on the architect, this legacy is now readily accessible.



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54th Street view of Yoshio Taniguchi's re-imagined MoMA: Darkened glass and hollow squares unify two museum wings separated by the pre-existing sculpture garden.