



Shin'enkan, a Collaboration in L.A.

The Pavilion for Japanese Art by Bruce Goff and Bart Prince at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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The Pavilion for Japanese Art rises next to La Brea Tar Pits at the edge of Hancock Park in Los Angeles. Floating on its strip of earth between water and sky, the pavilion turns away from Wilshire Boulevard and the urban babel of modernist pavilions by William Pereira (1965) buried within postmodernist additions by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates (1986) that make up the bulk of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Its ideal is a more natural world, an earlier southern California of sun-drenched Pacific beaches, untouched landscapes, and crystalline skies before the devastation wrought by freeways, overdevelopment, and smog. The pavilion seduces and, at least for a moment, offers a refuge of tranquillity in the midst of the sprawling reality that is late-20th-century Los Angeles.

Projected by the architect Bruce Goff between 1978 and 1982, the 32,100-square-foot building was definitively designed and built by the architect Bart Prince between 1982 and 1988 at a cost of \$12.7 million. Joe Price, the original client before the commission was taken over by LACMA in 1982, contributed \$5 million toward the project, whose principal purpose is to provide exhibition space for

Price's collection of more than 300 Japanese painted scrolls and screens of the Edo period (1615–1868). When the pavilion was completed in September 1988, a gaggle of critics responded with a series of passionately overwritten reviews. Inspired by the juxtaposition of the structure's curved exterior beams with the tusked concrete mastodons in the nearby tar pits, critics likened the pavilion variously to "the carcass of some prehistoric creatures pushed up out of that bubbling black bog," "a lumbering dinosaur," "some breathtaking remnant of Flintstones architecture," "a beast-like carapace perched by the water, antennae extended," "a samurai helmet and sword," and "a futuristic sampan."¹ Informing this mix of metaphors was a consensus summarized by Robert Hughes in *Time* magazine that the pavilion was at best a masterpiece of kitsch, one last example of bad art by "America's maestro of post-Wrightian, off-the-wall kitsch, Bruce Goff." With inimitable condescension, Hughes added that "the design was finished by his disciple, Bart Prince, to whom the urban fabric of Los Angeles owes some gratitude: the green bulk that rises beside the La Brea Tar Pits has been toned down from Goff's original sketches."²

A few critics demurred. Better informed about the work of the Oklahoma architect Bruce Goff and the New Mexican architect Bart Prince,³ as well as their place in the organic tradition inaugurated by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, these writers questioned the relevance of kitsch as a criterion of judgment. Martin Filler wrote in *House and Garden*, "There is nothing debased or sentimental – the prerequisites of kitsch – in Goff's powerful architecture."⁴ But even the sympathetic critics found the pavilion to be an irresistible temptation to metaphorical excess and, with the notable exception of an article for *Architectural Record* by Paul Sachner,⁵ offered in their reviews more rhetoric than explanation.

The pavilion deserves explanation. This refreshingly original rethinking of museum design is at once a case study of the sometimes difficult process by which the architectural idea of a project is translated into the architectural reality of a building, and the remarkable product of a multiple collaboration between the architects, the clients, art, and architecture. So understood, the Pavilion for Japanese Art begins to speak for itself, and becomes both more interesting and more substantive than the critics would have us believe.

The Pavilion for Japanese Art is actually composed of two pavilions, east and west. Linked at their center by a circulation node that contains the entrance lobby along with stair and elevator towers, the pavilions are reached by an elevated walkway from LACMA's Times Mirror Central Court. The three-story west pavilion houses a ground-level study center (and storage vault beneath the entrance lobby), a plaza-level gift shop and gallery for *netsuke* (decorative ivory toggles), and a third-level sculpture gallery. The east pavilion rises three stories as a single volume of space devoted to exhibiting the Price collection. This collection, and Price's insistence that "the art itself" be the museum's client, determined the building's design and consequent structural system.⁶

Japanese screens and scrolls were traditionally meant to be seen singly – the scrolls in the *tokonoma*, or display alcove, of a Japanese house, the screens standing free in a room – under the changing conditions of natural light filtered through shoji screens. While the resulting soft illumination favored the delicate paintings on their typically gold ground, the real motive was an aesthetic that Jun'ichiro Tanizaki captured in his 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows*:

SHIN'ENKAN PAVILION LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
 ARCHITECTS: BRUCE GOFF AND BART PRINCE
 DATE: 1982-1988
 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"
 NO. 14



Right: View of stair tower and entrance ramps looking northeast.

Below: West wing. Shoji screens illuminate Buddhist sculptures.



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And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows – it has nothing else....

Of course the Japanese room does have its picture alcove, and in it a banging scroll and a flower arrangement. But the scroll and the flowers serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows.⁷

The standard space of a Western museum, with its clinically white walls planned for collectively hung works seen under a uniform and artificial light, was completely unsuited to the Japanese experience of a penumbral domestic space given depth by one work of art. The challenge in the design of the Pavilion for Japanese Art was to reconcile this aesthetic with the curatorial and archival concerns of a modern museum.

The screens and scrolls of the Price collection are displayed in the east pavilion in three freestanding, two-story, two-sided curved tokonomas. One visits the collection literally from top to bottom, riding the elevator to the third level and then returning by a ramp that descends continuously around the periphery of the pavilion. Connected to the ramp are six viewing platforms shaped like chrysanthemum petals: each platform faces one concave tokonoma for the exhibition of a single screen, and one convex tokonoma subdivided by partitions into alcoves for the exhibition of several scrolls. The chrysanthemum plan permits one to view the screen at any distance from 6 to 60 feet. The natural light bathing each tokonoma is filtered through walls made of fiberglass panels called Kalwall, a modern equivalent of the shoji screen, which

produces a comparably gentle yellow light while blocking some 95 percent of the harmful ultraviolet rays. To eliminate the need for protective, but also reflective, glass fronts on the tokonomas, the viewing platforms are separated from the displays by a spatial moat. The entire building is climate controlled; to help keep the interior at the constant 55 percent humidity required by the fragile works of art, open pools murmur at the bases of the tokonomas.

The conditions imposed on the exhibition space by the screens and scrolls dictated the structure of the east as well as the west pavilion. Instead of a conventional structure around the building's perimeter, three steel column-masts rise inside each pavilion and penetrate the roof to support triads of curved steel box beams from which the radially structured steel framing of the roof is suspended by steel cables. The shoji-like Kalwall panels, liberated from any structural constraint, circle the interior as one continuous curtain of light that responds to the advancing time of day, the sun's shifting arc, the sudden shadows cast by a passing cloud. This unceasing if subtle flux constantly renews by changing one's experience of the screens and scrolls on display.

The fusion of triangular and circular geometries defined by the structure is synonymous with the pavilion's formal expression, which reveals itself in plan to be two triangles with curved sides. This triangular motif is also the logogram adopted by Joe Price to identify the pavilion housing his collection as the Shin'enkan. So called after the name that the Edo painter Ito Jakuchu (1716–1800) gave to his studio, the Shin'enkan is best translated as "the house of the tranquil mind."⁸

Despite its name, the Shin'enkan has a complex history. Ultimately, the project is rooted in the collaborative friendship between Bruce Goff and his most important client, Joe Price, which developed between 1953 and 1976 in tandem with the growth of Price's original house in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. The house's cumulative additions were themselves partly a response to the growth of Price's collection (begun systematically in 1963, although its origins date to the 1950s) of Edo screens and scrolls. Late in 1976, urged on and (more to the point) funded by Joe Price, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City commissioned Bruce Goff to design a new wing for Japanese art. Although the commission went to Kevin Roche after Goff's project was rejected in May 1978, the experiment turned Price's thoughts to his own collection, which even his continuously expanding house could no longer contain. In October of that same year, Price asked Goff to design the Shin'enkan for an unspecified location, although the Price estate in Bartlesville was being considered along with university and museum sites around the country that included Los Angeles.

The viewing requirements of the art quickly led Goff to the solution that, despite the numerous subsequent alterations, would finally be built. Thus his preliminary project of March 1979 posited the use of several tokonomas connected by a ramp with cantilevered viewing platforms, within a space wrapped and lit by translucent walls. Advised by his structural consultant of long standing, the engineer J. Palmer Boggs, Goff completed the eighth revision of this preliminary project in November 1980: a pair of two-story,

curved-triangular pavilions, each with roofs suspended by steel cables from steel box beams resting on steel columns, with translucent walls of Kalwall.

The main west pavilion housed three two-story and two-sided tokonomas, circled by a ramp that was suspended from the ceiling and from which the viewing platforms were cantilevered. During the winter of 1981–82, a full-scale mock-up of one tokonoma and viewing platform was constructed in a barn on the Price estate. Bart Prince, with whom Goff had been discussing the project for several years, then built a cardboard study model of the entire museum in March 1982. By April, the choice of site had narrowed unofficially to Los Angeles, in part because that city's increasingly Pacific culture made it an obvious choice, but also because Price was contemplating the possibility of transplanting himself from Oklahoma to California. This prospective location did not, however, influence the version of the Shin'enkan included in the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition *New American Art Museums* (June–October 1982), at which were displayed for a still unspecified site two schematic plans, one schematic elevation, and a beautifully detailed presentation model fabricated by Prince.⁹ Then, on 4 August 1982, Bruce Goff died.

Bart Prince assumed responsibility for the project that fall, working as the architect of record for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which succeeded Joe Price as the client. Yet Price remained an active participant as the project's principal patron. When in January 1984 he



Above: East wing. Edo-period screens and scrolls are displayed in alcovelike tokonomas. **Left:** Perspective view looking northwest.

commissioned Prince to build his new residence at Corona Del Mar, south of Los Angeles, he signaled both his intention to supervise the museum closely and his acceptance of Prince as Goff's successor. Prince spent the next three years adjusting Goff's conception of the Shin'enkan to the specific realities of an addition to the east side of LACMA: he refined the structure in consultation with the engineer, August Mosimann, to guarantee that it satisfied the stringent requirements of the California building code, particularly the seismic code; he reoriented, revised, and expanded the interior spaces to answer LACMA's programmatic needs; and he saw the definitive design through the protracted review process required by both LACMA and the city of Los Angeles, during which virtually every detail of this unprecedented building was questioned. Typically, the recommendations put forth threatened the very conception of the Shin'enkan, as when one engineering firm advised that the roof's suspended structure be replaced by conventional columns around the building's perimeter.

The groundbreaking ceremonies for the Pavilion for Japanese Art, formerly called the Shin'enkan, finally took place on 12 December 1985. Yet Prince's sense of both victory and relief was soon frustrated by the discovery of dinosaur bones during the excavation of the site. Bulldozers were replaced by paleontologists' trowels, spoons, and toothbrushes, and the start of construction was delayed until April 1986. Once begun, however, the structure went up uneventfully; the Pavilion for Japanese Art was dedicated 30 months later, on 17 September 1988.

The translation of idea into building left its traces on the design. The building's location at the northeast corner of LACMA required both the addition of the elevated walkway linking the pavilion to the rest of the complex and its reorientation, so that the main pavilion now faces east instead of west. Less immediately visible but as important are the numerous structural and mechanical refinements. A poured-concrete-mat foundation placed above the site's exceptionally high water table was designed to distribute loads evenly in the event of an earthquake and compensate for the absence of any bedrock or firm subsoil on which to seat a conventional pier foundation. Incorporated into this foundation is a system to monitor and collect the site's naturally occurring methane gas with pipes laid in a gravel bed beneath the mat, which vent the gas through the pavilion's six column-masts. This conjures up the image of an oil refinery with its chimneys burning off escaped gas, and indeed Prince once ignited a small but satisfying explosion of methane when he struck a match to an outlet at the top of one column-mast. The realities of structure determined the final curved profile of the exterior box beams and required substantially thicker column-masts than had initially been planned. Equivalently, on the interior, the circulation ramp of the main pavilion now rests on columns instead of being hung from the roof; the viewing platforms are tied structurally to both the ramp and the tokonomas, instead of being cantilevered from the ramp; and the tokonomas, like the column-masts, have been thickened to receive this added structural load and to permit the inclusion of ventilation ductwork.

When LACMA replaced Joe Price as the client, the building program immediately became more complicated. The main, now east, pavilion was realized without any substantive changes to Goff's scheme, but the west pavilion was increased from two to three stories and completely reorganized. Besides housing the expanded mechanical spaces and toilets, it also includes a basement floor for the study center. This contains a screen viewing area with a contiguous storage vault beneath the entrance lobby, a library, and a scroll storage and viewing room. The entry level, with its new lobby, was divided into the gift shop and the netsuke gallery. The upper level, where Goff had located the study center and storage vault, became a sculpture gallery for displaying works from LACMA's permanent collection, reached by a prints gallery (over the entrance lobby).

Apart from Goff's intention to articulate the Kalwall panels as shoji screens, to clad portions of the exterior with a green quartz stone from Utah, and to enliven the stairwell and elevator towers with ornamental crests, little of the building's decoration had been decided upon, let alone detailed, by the time of Goff's death. Besides the strictures of taste and economies of budget imposed by LACMA, which eliminated such gestures as the ornamental crests, most of the decorative decisions were left to Prince. He selected the pale, sea green stucco when LACMA rejected his proposal to surface the exterior with polychromatic tiles; he detailed the Kalwall panels as shoji screens and designed the steel frames that hold the panels, along with the outside lighting of quarter-globes nestled into bottom corners of those frames; on the interior, he profiled the

parapets that run along the base of the Kalwall panels in the east and west pavilions; he selected the deep gray carpeting and the creamy yellow plaster (the plaster in lieu of the opalescent tile with which he had hoped to cover the column-masts before LACMA objected); he designed the furniture, including the semicircular laminated-wood desk in the lobby and the netsuke gallery's narrow display cases arranged like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Since, throughout, Prince's impulses were as richly decorative as those of Goff, Robert Hughes is simply and flatly wrong when he suggests that Prince willingly "toned down... Goff's original sketches."¹⁰ Rather, faced with LACMA's insistence that he temper the project's ornamental exuberance, he sought to preserve its sensuous spirit even as he was forced to compromise the decorative drama that he as much as Goff had intended for the building.

The pavilion's metamorphic history continues. The arrival of the curatorial staff in the final stages of construction caused the last-minute transformation of the scroll study and storage room into an office for the curator and assistant curator. The landscaping of a Japanese garden around the building following its completion changed the grade of the site, particularly on the north side, with the predictable result that some seepage of moisture has occurred on the basement level: inverting the more usual client's complaint about leaky roofs, LACMA complains about leaky foundations. After the Plexiglas balustrades in the east pavilion were heightened to conform to the Los Angeles building code, it turned out that their tops cut across the bottoms



Perspective view looking northeast. Ramp connecting the pavilion to the central court of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art appears in foreground.

of the screens on exhibit in the concave tokonomas. Joe Price complained, and the museum maintenance personnel built crudely detailed plywood platforms that indeed raised the screens above the balustrades but also hid the original, carefully executed tokonoma floors.

The Shin'enkan's aesthetic of shadows has provoked the greatest controversy and resulting change in the Pavilion for Japanese Art. Anonymous members of the public, either unwilling or unable to accept the premise of a museum illuminated by the vagaries of natural light, have complained about the darkness of the displays. Caught between this public and the diametrically opposed wishes of Joe Price, LACMA has compromised by installing rheostats in the tokonomas that switch on artificial lighting when the ambient light drops below five footcandles (the normal museum minimum is eight footcandles). However, because the tokonoma lighting was designed only for exceptional use (nighttime, cleaning), the raking lights cast shadows on the often uneven surfaces of the scrolls, with the result that Prince has been called back to conceive a new, balanced system. Conversely, the museum staff complains about the intensity of natural light in the west sculpture gallery, which in the afternoon can reach 15 footcandles and can therefore reduce the objects on exhibit to cryptic black silhouettes. The staff has so far resisted the architect's suggestion that the exhibition layout be reversed so that viewers circulate around the edge, with the light behind them as they look inward at the objects.

The point of itemizing these problems is not to furnish the building's critics with ammunition in their war against the architecture of Goff and Prince. Any architect who has had experience with a large and complex commission knows that such problems are not only inevitable, but also are often the product of circumstances not controlled by the architect. The real point is that a building continues to live after its completion, as previously unforeseen needs subject it to an ongoing process of adjustment. This open-ended sense of architecture, of an architecture whose built

expressions are always understood to be in the end merely conditional, is central to the work of both Goff and Prince. What either baffles or enrages most critics is the essential unpredictability of their architecture.

Left unrecognized by those critics is the functionalism of Goff and Prince. This does not mean, naïvely, that their solutions always work perfectly – their architecture is too experimental for conventionally safe results. But architecture for them does mean the design of spaces that generate a building from the inside out according to its particular purpose.

This adherence to one of Frank Lloyd Wright's cardinal beliefs informs the kinship noted by more than one critic between the Pavilion for Japanese Art and Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York (1943–59). The kinship lies in not any immediate similarity of form, since the structures, geometry, spaces, and ramps of the two buildings are consistently different. Indeed, the museum by Goff and Prince suggests several functional improvements on Wright's. The horizontal viewing platforms of the Shin'enkan eliminate the vertigo caused in the Guggenheim by viewing works from an inclined ramp, and tokonomas efficiently inhabit what remains a grandiose void at the Guggenheim's center. Moreover, the Shin'enkan's peripheral curtain of light, originating behind the spectator and illuminating the centrally placed tokonomas, resolves the Guggenheim's problematic clerestory lighting, which glares in the spectator's face as he squints into each alcove.¹¹

Yet function, as Louis Sullivan lectured in his *Kindergarten Chats*, is as much a matter of metaphor as of fact, which means that a museum must do more than solve problems of circulation and lighting. Because the Guggenheim was built for a modernist collection of nonobjective art particularly rich in Kandinskys, it follows that the Guggenheim and the Pavilion for Japanese Art are as foreign to each other as a painting by Kandinsky is to an Edo screen. These differences of aesthetic focus cannot, however, obscure the profound sympathy of purpose relating the two buildings: both transform the conventional museum into a

cascading experience of space that echoes, as it passes each alcove, the spirit of the art on display. That Wright seems grudgingly to have excepted the work of Kandinsky from his rhetorical dislike of European modernism perhaps partly explains this sympathy;¹² more to the point is the suspicion that Wright really designed the Guggenheim thinking of the Japanese prints that he spent his life collecting and with which he invariably surrounded himself.¹³ This latter possibility – that the Guggenheim and the Shin'enkan implicitly had as their client the same art – would explain why Wright as

much as Goff and Prince sought to deinstitutionalize the art by housing it in such a poetically evocative space. The subjective experience of art had to be protected against the tendency of modern museums to reduce works of art to clinical artifacts.

The Pavilion for Japanese Art is in fact directly related to the architecture of houses. Appropriately, since Edo screens and scrolls were conceived as an essentially bourgeois art, the Shin'enkan collection was first assembled in the gallery pavilion that Goff added in 1966–69 to the Price residence in Bartlesville. This pavilion shares with the much larger Pavilion for Japanese Art a single purpose: both are domestic structures that were literally commissioned to be houses for art. This domestic conception of the Shin'enkan reminds one that a client's individual desires tend to be more determinant in the personal realm of his house than in the impersonal realm of a public building. It should thus come as no surprise that the Pavilion for Japanese Art shares with the houses successively designed for Price by Goff and Prince the same type of interior, at once spatially continuous and yet so protectively internalized as to eliminate any sense of the outside world. Since these are also the characteristics of the traditional Japanese teahouse, isolated within its garden behind sheltering walls, the result at the Pavilion for Japanese Art justifies the claim of Price that here "the art itself" is the real client.

Like the art with which it collaborates, the Shin'enkan requires a meditative appreciation for the nuanced passage of time. It is less a museum whose contents are to be consumed at once, like so many helpings of information, than a place to be discovered elliptically over many hours. Moving slowly through the building's cycle, up the elevator and down the ramp from platform to platform, hands gliding along the sinuous balustrade, feet cushioned by the carpet, pausing before a screen or scroll that emerges into the light, soothed by a silence heightened by the whispering of water, one becomes, like Edo Japan, an island unto oneself, lost in contemplation. ■

1 In order, the quotations are from Martin Filler, "Magnificent Monster: A Bizarre Museum by Bruce Goff Rises Like a Dinosaur Next to the La Brea Tar Pits," *House and Garden*, October 1988, p. 58; Aaron Betsky, "The Tar Pit Teahouse: LACMA and the Pavilion Oklahoma Crude Built," *L.A. Style*, September 1988, pp. 176–80, 180; Brooks Adams, "The Delirious Palace," *Art in America*, December 1989, pp. 136–45, 139; Jacques Gillet, "Bruce Goff: Un Présent en Perpétuel Mouvement," *Techniques et Architecture*, December 1988–January 1989, pp. 10–15, 12; "Bruce Goff et l'Art Japonais," *Construction Moderne*, March 1989, pp. 6–8, 6; Phil Patton, "Only in L.A.: The Los Angeles County Museum's New Japanese Pavilion," *Connoisseur*, October 1988, pp. 162–65, 162. See also Edward M. Gomez, "Edo Treasures in L.A.," *Art News*, October 1988, p. 166; Roger K. Lewis, "Intimate Spaces for a Delicate Art: LACMA's Pavilion for Japanese Art," *Museum News*, November–December 1988, pp. 18–21; H. G. Kauschke, "Museumspavillon für Japanische Kunst in LA/USA," *Deutsche Bauzeitschrift*, January 1989, pp. 49–52.

2 Robert Hughes, "Splendor Packaged in Kitsch," *Time*, 3 October 1988, p. 84. Hughes's judgment is of course informed by Charles Jencks, "Bruce Goff: The Michelangelo of Kitsch," in John Sergeant and Stephen Mooring, eds., *Bruce Goff: Architectural Design Profiles* no. 16 (London, 1978), pp. 10–14.

3 See David De Long, *Bruce Goff: Toward Absolute Architecture* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1988); Christopher Mead, *Houses by Bart Prince: An American Architecture for the Continuous Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

4 See note 1.

5 Paul M. Sachner, "House of the Tranquil Mind," *Architectural Record*, September 1988, pp. 92–99. See also Bart Prince, "Bruce Goff/Bart Prince: Pavilion for Japanese Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art," *Global Architecture*, document 22 (Tokyo, 1989), pp. 112–19.

6 Joe Price, "A Personal Explanation of the Shin'enkan Collection," in *Masterpieces From the Shin'enkan Collection* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 27–34, 27. On the collection, see also the entire issue of *Arts of Asia*, March–April 1989.

7 Jun'ichiro Tanizake, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. T. J. Harper and E. G. Seidensticker (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1977), pp. 18–19.

8 Shin'enkan is also translated as the "far-away heart house" and the "losing your heart house."

9 See Helen Searing, *New American Art Museums* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), pp. 92–97.

10 Hughes, p. 84. See note 2.

11 In fairness to Wright, it should be noted that the lighting problems were exacerbated when his original scheme of natural lighting filtered through a curved clerestory strip of glass tubing was replaced by fluorescent lighting and a clerestory of flat glass panels.

12 See Wright's 1958 interior perspective, titled *The Masterpiece* and showing his interpretation of a painting by Kandinsky in one of the Guggenheim alcoves, reproduced in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and the Phoenix Art Museum, 1990), p. 147.

13 This suspicion, voiced most recently by Brendan Gill in *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 441, is rooted in Wright's imitation at the Guggenheim of the slanting shelves that he had devised to display his collection of Japanese prints: at the Guggenheim, paintings were to be tilted back on a platform against the rear wall of each alcove.