

SOME ADO ABOUT
NOTHINGNESS

ASIA SOCIETY TEXAS CENTER

THE MUCH-ANTICIPATED HOUSTON MUSEUM DISTRICT opening this April of Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi's exquisitely constructed Asia Society Texas Center (ASTC) follows the unveiling in February of a similar center in Hong Kong designed by the American architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. Though the Asia Society has facilities in ten cities in the U.S. and Asia, these commissions are only its second and third substantial new constructions, after the 1981 New York City headquarters building designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes. Both new centers are cross-cultural emissaries, resolving complex demands. Still, Taniguchi may have been faced with the more difficult task: giving poetic dimension to a Houston lobby.

If, on the surface, the Asia Society's hiring of a Japanese architect to design in Texas, and American architects to design in China, seems crass and diagrammatic—like *Wife Swap*, except with extraordinary construction budgets—the decision is actually subtle and complicated. The work of both firms is already invested in complex East/West cross-cultural influences. Understanding that influence is useful, particularly in Taniguchi's case. The ASTC has been called overly formal and rude to the city in its relationship to the street (as has Taniguchi's only other building in the United States, his addition to the Museum of Modern Art in New York). Arguably, the ATSC embodies a different idea of respect, one in which a Modern syntax carries historical memory across cultural lines.

THE NON-PROFIT ASIA SOCIETY, FOUNDED IN 1956 BY JOHN D. Rockefeller III—he grew up surrounded by his parents' extraordinary collection of Asian artifacts—promotes mutual understanding among the peoples of Asia (defined as Japan to Iran and Russia to New Zealand) and the United States. The Society's press materials state that the centers seek to “increase and enhance dialogue, encourage creative expression, and generate new ideas across the fields of arts and culture, policy and business, and education.” To this end the public space of the new ASTC is a two-level array of elegant set-piece gathering spaces: theater, gallery, flexible meeting room (a small, sub-dividable conference hall), sculpture garden, café, and gift shop (initially serving as a small gallery). Each component is perfectly, richly neutral, fraught with potential. All are linked by a serene entry-level common hall. An open lounge, central to the upper level, overlooks and extends this hall.

Both new centers serve as concrete manifestations of cross-cultural dialogue. The Rockefellers have long been influential supporters of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the 2004 expansion of which was designed by Taniguchi, chosen from a list that included Williams and Tsien. I think one can safely say the Asia Society shares a core belief often central to the curatorial agenda of the Modern. Flatly stated: there may well be differences between cultures, but these differences are entirely meaningless—in the over-arching sense of the pan-cultural ecumenical humanism long embraced by the Modern—and also

deeply meaningful, the means by which you understand relatives rather than define enemies.

An eager embrace of Asian aesthetic sensibilities was pivotal for many great Modernists in the West, from Van Gogh to Wright to Taut to Gropius to Cage to Rauschenberg, and so on. Western influence has also powerfully affected Asian cultural production, particularly after World War II. Yet, if much has been made of the dialogue's possibility, actually defining the distinction between “Western” and “Eastern” sensibilities poses intractable dilemmas. Broadly speaking, one consequence of increasingly fine-grain curation and objective historical research of recent years has been a growing difficulty to speak of any culture as absolutely isolated from others.

For example, we conventionally think of Japanese aesthetic tradition developing in isolation. Still, it's hard to separate out entirely the cyclical influence of Chinese Imperial life, of craft and construction techniques imported from the Korean peninsula, and of the arrival from mainland Asia of various forms of Buddhism, as the Japanese islands and the continent beyond continued connecting and disconnecting like a faulty wire. The consequence of the later arrival of Americans, Dutch, and Portuguese would seem easier to parse, but it is not, or not exactly. After the forced opening of their markets in the 1850s, Japanese artisans rapidly developed aesthetic objects for Western consumption—Japonica—based in part on Japanese interpretations of Western desires. Successes in this market rebounded on Japonica's stylistic development. Thus, for example, the Japanese woodcuts that early Modernists treasured were frequently already cross-cultural interpretations, as complex in layered influence as the folded steel at the edge of a samurai sword.

It's likely a Western impulse to want to take these folds apart, making a diagram of difference. But doing so is not really the point with either of these firms. At stake is not clarity of hindsight, but continuity of potential. The architecture of Williams and Tsien has long been admired for difficult simplicity, abstraction arising from close attention to material possibility, use of asymmetrical circulation vested in narrative and landscape, and a preference for exception at the scale of the body. Though these architectural means are solutions to pressing issues in Western architectural discourse—how to enrich Modern abstraction as an alternative to Post-Modern representation—they are also associated with iconic Asian architectures, like those of Heian-era Japan.

With Taniguchi, it suffices that his own foundation myth as architect starts with three and a half formative years of study at Harvard, under a Bauhaus-inspired curriculum run by International Style architects whose borderless agenda was partly informed by close study of certain Japanese buildings, notably the Katsura Imperial Villa.¹ Taniguchi's early professional work was marked by a brittle enslavement to squares, a trend, probably arising from publication of early works of Eisenman, Meier, etc., that spread virulently through Japanese architecture in the early 1980s. But Taniguchi also worked for Kenzo Tange, and



ABOVE: Gallery of the Horyuji Treasures, Tokyo, 1999.

of the Japanese architects whose design has come to the fore recently, Taniguchi alone remains committed to the simplistic geometry of mute, monumental mass associated with Tange, and with similar late High-Modern corporate architectures—Roche and Dinkaloo, I. M. Pei—of the West.

As with Pei, Taniguchi's work is frequently described as both controlled and restrained. It is obsessive though not, as with Richard Meier, oppressive. Consider the soft rigor present in an internal corner at the ASTC. Meier would have angle-mitered the limestone edges to impossibly brittle thinness to avoid violating the geometric purity of the intersection. Taniguchi accommodates the necessary material dimension, then exacts his revenge in the installation's excruciating precision. The result is orderly without seeming retentive (as shown in the opening photograph). Having escaped Meier's nervous self-referential squares, Taniguchi arranges his rectangular fields of exquisite materials (tending to the same limited palette) to settle experience. The resulting quiet spatial stability is not only a result of this understated un-insistent insistent rigor. As is immediately apparent in the ASTC interiors, Taniguchi is also a master of stable proportion and scale, and of rendering those in natural light (he is also good, within an otherwise hard-surfaced acoustical nightmare, of obtaining actual, acoustical quiet).

There is one bizarre aspect to Taniguchi's success. The largely corporate, mostly Western-developed architectural language he uses was moribund—dead, actually—when he adopted it. Likely for this reason, Taniguchi's work was, prior to the MOMA commission, frequently ignored in surveys of Japanese architecture (in a June 27, 1999, *New York Times* review of a book on

Taniguchi, Martin Filler describes the confusion that followed Taniguchi's being named to design the MOMA addition: it was almost impossible to find images of his buildings). But ruthless control of mass by Cartesian geometry is not what makes Taniguchi's buildings consequential. Instead, he is able to enliven their ponderous architectural language with vibrancy and uncertainty. This Taniguchi accomplishes by deeply idiosyncratic means. Into a neutral International syntax—the architecture of corporations everywhere!—he quietly imports a series of architectural strategies associated with archaic patterns of form and use in historic Japanese architectures. The startling consequence of this importation is both familiar and foreign, and so resonates with the Asia Society's purpose.

Before I describe how those strategies work at the ASTC, I'd like to summarize the cross-cultural influences at work. We're talking about a forum in Houston, designed by a Harvard-trained Japanese architect, serving to enable discourses between and about Asia and America, in which a ponderous Western Modern architectural syntax, influenced in its formative years by exposure to Asian models of formal thought, is reactivated by the use of historical Japanese architectural constructs, that evolved, perhaps influenced by Korean construction techniques, from earlier Chinese spatial patterns, which in part arose to accommodate a new religion arriving from the Indian sub-continent ...

Re-reading that last sentence, I suddenly realized Houston might well be the perfect place for such a venture.

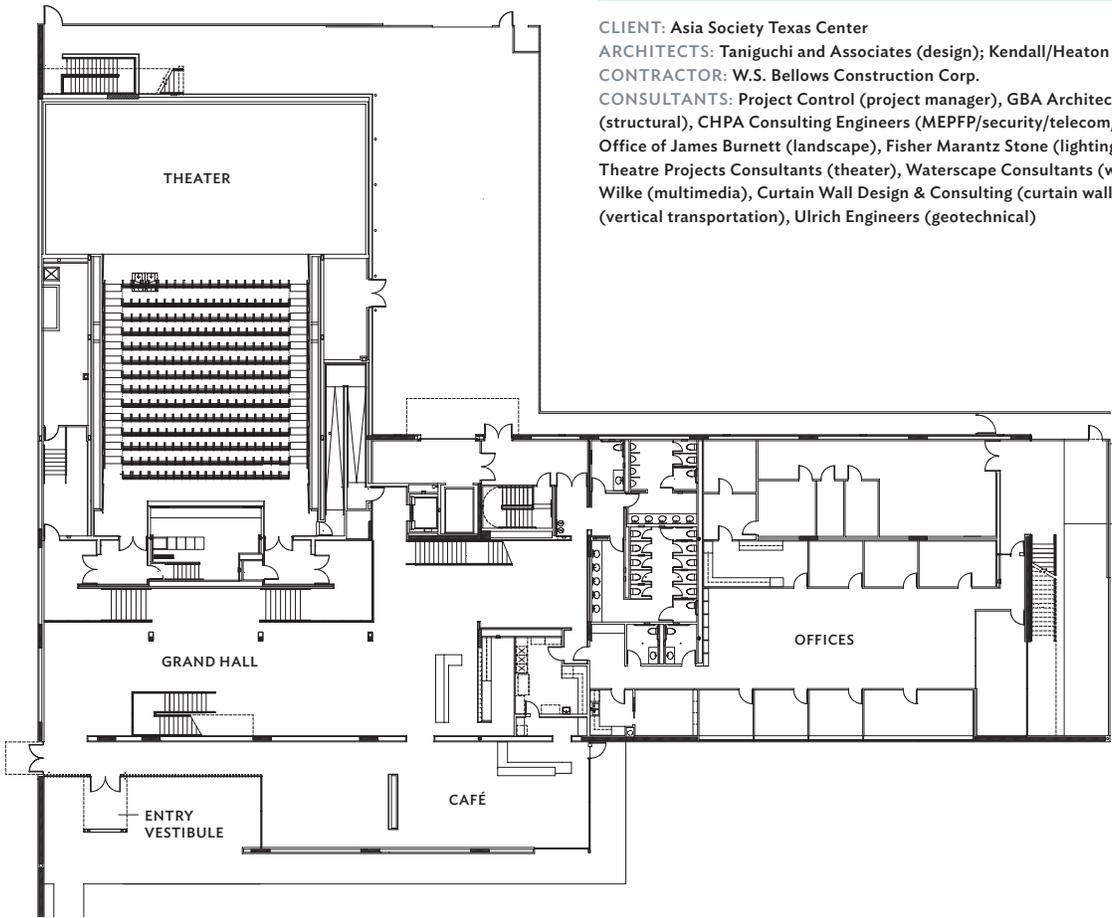
WHEN DESIGNING CULTURAL BUILDINGS, TANIGUCHI

regularly starts with an opaque sanctified box, a closed trea-

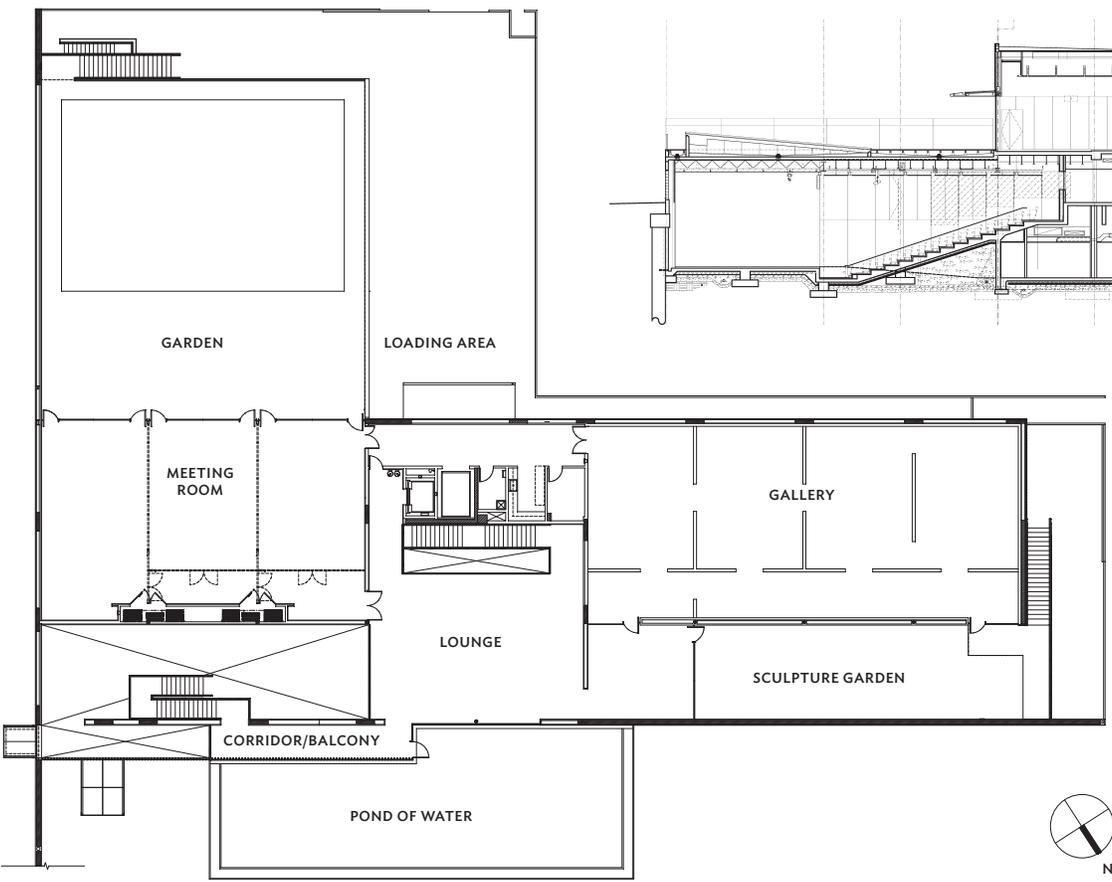
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NOTES 1. Fumihiko Maki, in "Stillness and Plenitude," the excellent introductory essay to *The Architecture of Yoshio Taniguchi* (Abrams, 1999), retells the story of Taniguchi—having studied engineering—being (so the story goes) tricked into architecture by a glowing description of the education at Harvard's Graduate School of Design given by a friend of Taniguchi's father (who secretly wanted his son to follow in his footsteps as an architect). Taniguchi's arrival at the GSD in the early 1960s coincided with Sert's death, but the curriculum was still largely a continuation of that left by Gropius. In 1960, Gropius, with Tange, Ishimoto, and Bayer, published the seminal *Tradition and Creation in*

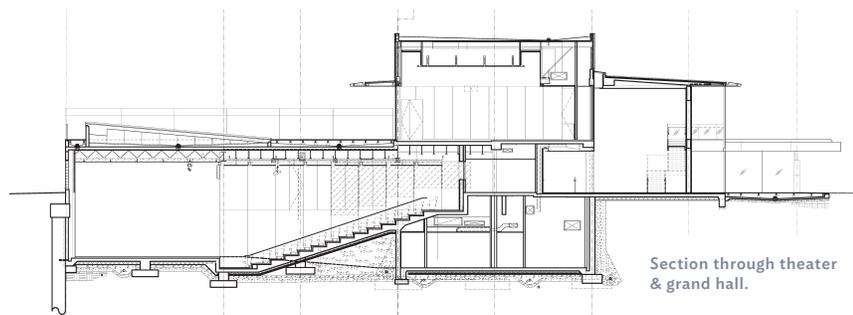
CLIENT: Asia Society Texas Center
ARCHITECTS: Taniguchi and Associates (design); Kendall/Heaton Associates (Architect of Record)
CONTRACTOR: W.S. Bellows Construction Corp.
CONSULTANTS: Project Control (project manager), GBA Architecture (design liason), Ingenium (structural), CHPA Consulting Engineers (MEFPF/security/telecom/data); Walter P Moore (civil); Office of James Burnett (landscape), Fisher Marantz Stone (lighting); Minor Design Group (graphics), Theatre Projects Consultants (theater), Waterscape Consultants (water feature), Shen Milsom & Wilke (multimedia), Curtain Wall Design & Consulting (curtain wall), Persohn/Hahn Associates (vertical transportation), Ulrich Engineers (geotechnical)



First floor plan.



Second floor plan.



Section through theater & grand hall.



sury, sometimes lifted on posts (the "ur-model" of the type is the eighth-century Shosoin in Nara). Taniguchi uses this box to establish dark, actual interior space. This isn't particularly odd, though it flies in the face of an essential Modern trope, the necessity of continuity between inside and out. This powerful mechanism is clearly apparent in Taniguchi's masterpiece, the freestanding Gallery of the Horyuji Treasures, at the National Museum of Japan in Tokyo. There, dark protected interiority, a literal treasury, renders more remarkable the objects—including gilt bronze Buddhist Kannon statues reflecting infinitely in a Taniguchi-designed grid of glass vitrines—protected within.

At the ASTC, Taniguchi's signature treasure box sits behind the building's most identifiable elements: the two Jura limestone-clad walls extending along the north and east sides. The box is clearest from the west, but it's intentionally if subtly evident from all sides. Outside, its exterior is clad mostly in grey metal. Inside—isolated by a continuous linear skylight—its outer wrapping changes to dark panels of impossibly consistent Cherry veneer. In the hierarchy of public spaces at the ASTC, the box houses programmatic treasures: the large gallery, the meeting room, and the public seating of the theater. But the mysterious box also contains a large, central service core, a Western definition of dark program, so you understand it as organizational or diagrammatic more than sanctifying.

Perhaps for this reason, Taniguchi occasionally relinquishes the box's didactic logic. For example, the meeting room is entirely contained within the treasure box, and you perceive it as such—it sits on columns over the theater. But when you enter the room, you discover its entire south wall (what should be the far side of the box) is cut away, opening to a garden that, sloping up to a bamboo hedgerow at its far edge, re-establishes containment. It's a beautiful room, better for upending expectation. Taniguchi makes similar exceptions in the sculpture garden, where the grey metal changes to white stucco to better reflect light and define sculpture garden, and in the lounge, on which more in a moment.

The two limestone-clad bounding walls previously mentioned serve a second historical stratagem. Taniguchi invariably obscures his treasure boxes behind layered screens and walls, or within walled compounds. In historic Japanese (and other Asian) architectures, a precinct so defined was already a crucial interior, as such sets of walls defined hierarchies of access. At the Ise Shrine, for example, only Imperial family and ranking priests could pass the innermost walls, into a bounded space lacking any mechanism to specify behavior aside from the mute presence of the treasure house, and the forbidden central axis.

At the ASTC, you do not really enter the building satisfactorily (though you're already inside the air-conditioned envelope) until you've passed through the tight gap left where those two bounding walls are held back from intersecting, a lovely moment. The building's public entry sequence, beginning in the parking lot, and abetted by Taniguchi's placement of heritage live oaks, perversely requires everyone to squeeze through this narrow slot at the building's northeast corner. The grand hall—really, an audience hall—opens to one's right immediately upon so doing. The darkness, scale, proportion, and rectangular ordering (set by the column lines) of the hall recall similar spaces in Imperial architectures in Japan, for example, the Shishinden (throne room) in the Kyoto Imperial Palace or the various audience rooms of the Ninomaru in the Nijo Castle. The hall's monumental interiority is pleasingly aloof, unconcerned with the outside world, or with you (you correctly enter off axis).

Though two levels, it is both a room and interstitial space between treasure house and bounding walls. Taniguchi brings his full attention to bear on its design.

For most of its length the hall is lobby, the arcane rituals of which Houstonians should now, after generations of practice, be tenth-level masters. Taniguchi's vision of a Houston lobby accommodates and distinguishes between the collective and the individual. On your left as you move west into the hall's three-square bay length is the theater entry: from the central bay, two mirrored stairs drop a half level to the left and right through the screen of columns supporting the treasure box above. This large-scale symmetrical and centralizing public gesture is carefully offset on the opposite side of the hall by a lovely free stair that, folding back on itself, offers a smaller-scale path moving up, and then back out through the bounding wall, escaping outside of the precinct so carefully established.

This escape stair introduces an asymmetrical path binding the stable public hall at its edges. Turning on the stair's mid-landing you see, diagonally across and beyond the far limit of the hall, behind the lounge and improbably cut into the treasure house, a similarly dimensioned stair lit from above. It's like children becoming aware of each other across an adult party. To reach that far stair Taniguchi takes the wanderer outside the bounding wall, along a narrow corridor—a balcony really—flush with a plane of water outside (covering the café and shop below). This balcony is enclosed by the vertically mullioned glass curtain wall veiling the building upon approach, itself a Taniguchi signature, the vertical glazing so narrow—the pieces have the rough proportion of the cut strips of noren, the cloth screens hanging over public entryways in Japan—you are surprised your eye and mind can conspire to make the window wall transparent at all.

Then back through the bounding wall to the lounge, the calm center of a calm building. From this sitting room Taniguchi cuts a series of surprising garden views: through the open doors of the treasure box meeting room and out its great south-facing window to that sloping garden; past the edge of a cherry-clad wall (folded out from the box to screen the gallery) out to a west-facing sculpture garden; through a startlingly large north-facing window cut in the bounding wall out across that pond of water to an Oz-like downtown Houston (the view framed between the planted oaks).

In the downtown view Taniguchi utilizes shakkei, or borrowed landscape—one of the oldest techniques associated with Japanese and Chinese garden design—in which the middle ground is screened from view with foreground form specifically configured to engage circumstances of the distance in dialogue. The pond, lined in black granite to more perfectly reflect the skyline, hides the lawn, the street, the parking beyond. The easy mysticism of the intermittent fog spewing from its edges will at least serve as an excuse to leave a slow-moving conversation in the hall below.

To activate these views, Taniguchi shades their ultra-clear glass openings with deep, shallow-sloped awnings. These are curious elements, appended to the building. They are neither abstract nor abstractly representational—unlike every other element in the building—but are pragmatic and normative constructions, derived from movement of the sun and drainage of rain. The interplay between abstract logic and normative form is historically a source of deeply satisfying invention in Japanese architectures. Unlike most architects working in an abstract geometric syntax, Taniguchi does not always repress the

Japanese Architecture, with its famously edited photos (making it appear a Bauhaus masterwork) of the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto (likely brought to Gropius' attention by Bruno Taut's 1936 study). In the early 1960s a number of popular and influential studies linking Modern and Japanese aesthetic concerns were readily available, of which Arthur Drexler's *The Architecture of Japan* (Museum of Modern Art, 1955), Heinrich Engel, *The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture* (Tuttle, Rutland, 1964), and Werner Blaser, *Structure and Form in Japan* (Artemis, 1963), were widely known (I was shown all three by various professors at Rice 15 years later).



ABOVE: The hall is entered from the corner.

Turning on the stair's mid-landing you see, diagonally across and beyond the far limit of the hall, behind the lounge and improbably cut into the treasure house, a similarly dimensioned stair lit from above.

normative, and frequently obtains startling success with its introduction, most powerfully in similar awnings at the Nagano Prefectural Art Museum. At the ASTC the dialogue seems underdeveloped, particularly in the east elevation, where the two pragmatic diagonals, sitting atop that immense gridded limestone wall, feel entirely overwhelmed.

Of Taniguchi's archaic strategies, the last I'll describe is at work in the powerful honorific approach axis of the ASTC's public entry. This discrete walkway aligns with that monumental entry gap between the bounding walls, through which you can darkly make out the wooden treasure box. But to enter you first have to pass through the noren-configured glass screen wall. To do so you must leave the axis: the entry doors are in an offset, body-sized, cowl-like vestibule (a Taniguchi signature). There is a larger path, but you cannot traverse its full length.

The entry path so conceptualized makes clear the strengths and limits of Taniguchi's method. Entry is handled similarly at the Gallery of the Horyuji Treasures in Tokyo. There, Taniguchi interrupts the axis of approach from the east with a large shallow pool, in which, aligned with your approach, is an intermittent vertical jet. Beyond the pool, the axis is completed within the building by a crucial stair (you're meant to go up this stair first), veiled in glass. As at the ATSC you enter the building on an offset path through a boxed vestibule.

But at the Horyuji Gallery—unlike at the ASTC—something deeper is embedded in the organization. In the morning, the Jura limestone of the Horyuji treasury house burns golden in the sunrise. Reflected in the pool, it appears desirable but unavailable to those wishing to see the treasures. This is the traditional scenographic format for temple siting associated with the

Pure Land form of Buddhism. A mark of Taniguchi's genius, the construct also works at the end of the day, when the inside stair shines in the late afternoon sun.

The carry forward of that old and deeply acculturated pattern, stated in the most abstract Modern syntax, is brilliant: you don't suspect the pattern's presence, since such backward-gazing was unwelcome in the Modern. But it's also crucial to the architecture's success that, in the program of the Horyuji Gallery, Taniguchi was given the content to challenge the capacity of abstraction to carry narrative and cultural content. Is the same true at the ATSC, both in the small matter of the approach, and the larger matter of the general program? That is less clear to me. See it when it's full of people. I saw this subtle building empty, when its nothingness held out mostly promises.

But for now: congratulations, Asia Society, continued success to Houston. I'm writing this in Austin. We can't even build an art museum, and struggle to construct exceptionally. That said, we do some things well, and now would be the right time to red-flag the building's obstinate proudness about carbon footprint—they have to stop bragging about how much limestone was cut in Germany to get pieces Taniguchi would accept! The building uses geothermal wells for heating and cooling, but my sneaking suspicion is Taniguchi likes geothermal because it's quiet. But, enough: here's a non-profit offering proofs beyond promises in its desire to promote complex cross-cultural understanding through an architecture that does not pander to the least common denominator, but begins with difficult ambitions supported by a healthy budget and a commitment to see the work through to the highest level of detail and finish. ☺