



LETTERS

SOME ADO ABOUT NOTHINGNESS

I found the basic premise of “Some Ado About Nothingness: Asia Society Texas Center” (*Cite* 89) to be vexing. That a Japanese architect would design buildings following ancient examples of Japanese architecture seems to reinforce one of the many orientalist stereotypes that “Asians” are somehow more spiritual and connected to their cultural past than “Westerners.” Essentialist arguments like this usually assume a perfect model (Ise Shrine, Imperial Palace, generally the older, the better) that can never be surpassed, which is also disappointing. It doesn’t really allow for new models or true innovation to be established. To continue his logic, I suppose French modern architects must endlessly reinterpret Cistercian monasteries and those in the United States should reference Anasazi Cliff Dwellings if they want to imbue their designs with cultural significance.

Good architecture that is rooted both in tradition and modernism is certainly possible. Wang Shu’s work has been celebrated as a “fusion of sensibilities.” However, I think that Wang Shu’s work is fundamentally different. His hybrid traditional/modern position is a pointed critique of the disagreeable aspects of China’s rapid urban development. To that extent the Pritzker Prize jury was making a political statement by not only picking a Chinese architect, but one who makes a point of being beside the mainstream there. It appears to me that the architecture of the Asia Society is about accommodating what appears to be the conservative desires of its patrons, members of the entrepreneurial elite (the Rockefellers!). I don’t detect the energizing critical stance of someone like Wang Shu in any of the design moves of that building. Instead Heymann seems to suggest that Taniguchi’s choices are

determined mainly by aesthetics. Unlike Wang Shu, whose choice of typological models and materials is aimed at questioning the status quo, Taniguchi’s materials and cultural references appear only to reinforce the cool, clean global corporate aesthetic that could be built in any cosmopolitan city in the world. To that extent, Asia Society Texas Center is like wasabi-flavored ice cream, an unremarkable product with an exotic ingredient added to increase its appeal in a saturated market. Had Heymann perhaps quoted Taniguchi saying something to the contrary his argument might have been more persuasive.

—Ben Koush

Writer Responds *I certainly agree with the writer’s assessment of Wang Shu’s work, as well as Taniguchi’s. That said, I did not remotely suggest that a Japanese architect should design this way—that was not in any way my “basic premise,” as suggested in the letter’s first line. I merely pointed out what Taniguchi was doing, and, to the degree that his method added “wasabi” to the “ice cream,” it was more interesting to discuss that aspect of the building than merely looking at it, as many have done, as an exercise in generic late-Modern detail. There are certainly many Japanese architects, starting with Ito (and almost everyone coming from his office, like Sejima), who ask far more pointed questions about what the content of Japanese architecture might be. In Ito’s case, these questions often have to do with the proper role of architectural monumentality in present Japanese society: see, for example, the extraordinary TAMA Art University Library, in which the irrational grid makes the individual the primary unit in the interpretation of monumental public space.*

—David Heymann

Rice Design Alliance and *Cite* connect you to great design every day and any time through the web. The calendar at ricedesignalliance.org keeps you up-to-date. Missed a lecture? Find the links to YouTube uploads. OffCite.org continues the thoughtful discussions of *Cite* on a weekly basis. “Like” the RDA and *Cite* Facebook pages, which are alive with frequent posts and comments.

RDA CALENDAR

LECTURES

NEW COMMONS: BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ENGAGEMENT

Peter Gadanho

Curator of Contemporary Architecture at MoMA

Wednesday, January 16

Luis Callejas

LCLAOFFICE, Cambridge

Wednesday, January 23

David Gissen

Associate Professor,
The California College of the Arts

Wednesday, February 6

Xaveer de Geyter

xgga Architects, Brussels

Tuesday, February 19

Lectures will be held at the Brown Auditorium, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Please join us for a pre-lecture reception at 6 p.m.

SAVE
THE DATE!

04.6-4.7

THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE
2013 TOUR

THE CENTENNIAL TOUR WILL
FEATURE TEN HOUSES FROM
TEN DECADES.

Write for Cite

Cite is Greater Houston’s forum for architectural, design, and planning issues. Articles should address a broad audience and include reviews, essays, analyses, and commentaries. Article ideas and proposals are reviewed by the editorial committee and are welcome in one of three forms:

TIPS: Tell us your ideas.

DETAILED ARTICLE PROPOSALS:

Include context about the subject, an explanation of why the article would be of interest to the *Cite* audience, and a writing sample.

FULL MANUSCRIPTS: Send manuscripts for consideration by peer-review.

OffCite.org is an additional venue for timely coverage and short pieces as well as an opportunity for writers to start establishing themselves as part of the pool from which the magazine draws. Send all submissions and questions to mankad@rice.edu or to the *Cite* mailing address:

**CITE MAGAZINE - MS 51
RICE UNIVERSITY
P.O. BOX 1892
HOUSTON, TEXAS 77251-1892**