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 also not choosing a Chinese architectural model. It is my opinion that Wang Shu’s work should be celebrated as a “fusion of sensibilities” but not as a return to traditional Chinese architecture. It is 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

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.

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