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BEYOND BUILDINGS

Building Question Marks: Why Arata Isozaki Deserves a Pritzker Prize

Aaron Betsky writes that the greatest living architect never to have won the prize has now finally gotten (some of) his due.

By [AARON BETSKY](#)



Fernando Tricas García

Arata Isozaki's Domus Museum in Galicia, Spain

Until last week, Arata Isozaki was, in my humble opinion, the best and most influential living architect never to have received a Pritzker Architecture Prize. I was, in fact, so convinced that he had already been so honored, way back when the prize started, that I bet a friend on that fact. I lost. Why an architect of such protean talents and prodigious output, let alone who created images and forms that continue to resonate through the

discipline, [had to wait until the end of his eighth decade to receive this recognition](#) remains a bit of a mystery to me. Perhaps there are, however, reasons—so let me try to explain.

What is most impressive about Isozaki, Hon. FAIA's work is his ability to put together the basic building blocks out of which we make architecture, and then to twist them, sometimes quite literally, to create a composition or sometimes just an icon that remains with you. The result is often disturbing, though not in the manner of the work of some of his more seemingly radical colleagues like Peter Eisenman, FAIA, or Daniel Libeskind, FAIA. Sometimes Isozaki has created this effect with pure scale, as in the giant cities of stacked cubes or tetrahedrons he imagined during his early, Metabolist period, and sometimes he throws us for a curve, draping a cowl around a cut-off part of a building such as the Domus Museum in Galicia, Spain, or the CAFA Art Museum in Beijing.



Carlos de Paz

The Domus Museum in its Galicia urban ecosystem



Ryoussei

CAFA Art Museum in Beijing



Rob Deutscher

CAFA Art Museum interior

Along the way, Isozaki erodes the certainty about what the building is or how it is organized, or even why it is: He famously turned the floor plan of a golf course clubhouse he designed into a question mark because he didn't understand the obsession with the sport. For the Tsukuba Center Building, a science suburb built from scratch outside of Tokyo, he published a drawing of the complex as an instant ruin. Sometimes his gestures are just enigmatic, like the giant trees that hold up the portico of the Qatar National Convention Center in Doha or the twisted geometries of the Art Tower Mito in Ibaraki, Japan.

All of this is, I believe, because Isozaki has always questioned the very notion and nature of architecture. Fascinated with the relation between Western and Japanese ideas about the discipline, he balances his work between an attempt to create monuments, especially for his cultural buildings, and an interest in the ephemeral, the passing of all things, and the uncertainty of knowing. More than anything else, he has produced memento mori for the modern age, reminding us that all our vaulting ambition will someday be swept away, as we will be, and thus we must examine, cherish, and question our own productions.



Jun Seita

The Tsukuba Center Building

Early in his career, in 1962, Isozaki wrote “[City Demolition Industry, Inc.](#),” an essay in which he claimed that his real job was not to construct more monuments to reconstruction and the go-go economy of postwar Japan but rather to take apart the modern city's pretensions and prisons to create a freedom and possibility that the purpose-built structures going up everywhere were precluding:

The city ... was the killer of all killers and, worse still, being anonymous, it was a curious enterprise to which no responsibilities were attached. And he felt that in order to create an age in which the killing profession would again be an art, and in which this human act could be performed with pleasure, there was nothing more urgent than to destroy these inhuman cities. ... When I think of the hollow sound of the slogans for building, renewing and improving cities—in reality the political propping-up of the metropolis—I come to think in terms of destruction as the only reality.

He carried out his intentions even when he received large commissions, creating endless tubes and collages that never seemed to come to any particular point of resolution. He might not have killed the city, but he certainly seeded it with a certain ruinous quality.

When I once showed Philip Johnson around Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, he walked through the sky-lit galleries and connective spaces, only to ask me at the end: “OK, I have seen all the corridors, when does the building start?” In a sense, the building had indeed not started, as Isozaki had imagined it not only as an endless circuit around a sunken courtyard, but also as a small rock you might find at the base of a forest of skyscrapers meant to be built around a building barely rising out of a plinth of parking and services.



Minnaert

Museum of Contemporary Art (foreground) in its Los Angeles street context



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📍 MOCA is thrilled to congratulate the iconic architect [#ArataIsozaki](#) for being this year's recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize! Isozaki was the architect behind the creation and construction of MOCA Grand from 1981-1986. In the words of MOCA director [@KlausBiesenbach](#), "Wholehearted congratulations to Arata Isozaki for the Pritzker Prize - long overdue! Since having started at MOCA in late October, I have looked at the building with different eyes, focusing on its geometry and primary shapes - circles, squares, triangles, cylinders, cubes, and pyramids. The architecture is truly congenial with its location on Bunker Hill and acts as a sunken pool with skylights all throughout the museum. I love this building and we are uncovering more and more of the original architectural ideas and returning it to Isozaki's original design. For example, we are currently doing a study that would allow us to open the skylights and the pyramids and once again let his vision of light back into the galleries." The following images are a project drawing by Isozaki and a photograph by Joe Deal of the building's construction.

[Project drawings of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles by MOCA architect Arata Isozaki], [Joe Deal, Library Vault, Forms Removed (detail), AUGUST 1984 - JANUARY 1986, Gelatin silver print, Paper: 14 x 17 in. (35.56 x 43.18 cm)]

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Perhaps that is the reason why Arata Isozaki has not received architecture's biggest prize until now (and maybe why he still has not received [the Praemium Imperiale](#), which has a larger purse): His buildings are not only difficult to categorize—being neither modernist nor postmodernist, neither deconstructive nor Neoclassical, neither western nor eastern, but all of that and more—but they also never seem to resolve themselves into grand and imposing structures. You would be hard-pressed to find the awe-inspiring space or the clever moment, the perfect façade or the section that takes you through the building in the manner that an opera unfolds. Instead, Isozaki's architecture mixes the grand and the mundane, the eye-catching and the confusing, and the composed and the unfinished. That is exactly its difficult beauty.

I know, the Pritzker Prize could have gone to somebody younger, for whom the recognition would be a boost, and it could have gone to a deserving woman or a person from a less developed country—and I hope the next prize does. But Arata Isozaki has been the perfect architect for our confused and perilous times exactly because he has shown us that we should aspire and believe in architecture that brings us together and makes us at home, and that we should not trust it to actually fulfill its lofty ambitions. His uncertainty has rubbed off in important ways—the existential thinness of SANAA, for instance, would never have occurred without the example of his work. Isozaki has taught us not to believe in architecture, or even in his architecture, but to continue the quest towards what makes architecture matter. He does not have an answer, but he does have some pretty good buildings to show for his eight decades of searching.



Sadamu Saito

Hara Museum in Shibukawa, Gunma, Japan

Original by Jordi Payà

Palau Sant Jordi Sports Palace in Barcelona, Spain

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Aaron Betsky](#)



Aaron Betsky is president of the School of Architecture at Taliesin and a critic and author of more than a dozen books on art, architecture, and design. Trained at Yale, Betsky has worked as a designer for Frank O. Gehry & Associates and Hodgetts + Fung, taught at SCI-Arc, and served as the director of the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale.