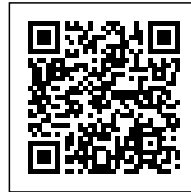


Benesse Art Site Naoshima
Maroje Mrduljaš

BENESSE ART SITE NAOSHIMA: THE CULTURAL ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE

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According to Ando, the cultural role of architecture is the affirmation of individual experiences of physical and spiritual existence in the world. But this process is not being realized through the domestication of buildings or the accessibility of their spatial concept. On the contrary, it is necessary to establish a distance between the individual and the architecture to be filled with his or her existence in that space. Architecture in the conceptual sense may, therefore, not be literally transparent and easily readable, but should be discovered as a process in which an individual maintains an active relationship with the building. Still, a building for Ando may not be an ephemeral, but a permanent participant of the universal development of architectural thought. In his effort to draw the project near to the universal, Ando applies rigorous spatial geometry, as well as the reduction of the building to the minimal set of abstract materials and forms.

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Naoshima Benesse House Oval © Mitsumasa Fujitsuka

The precision of the project, solidity of performance and the robustness of construction elements emphasize the materiality and the reality of architecture and thus confirm its relationship with the human body. On the other hand, the uniqueness, simplicity and particularity of the effects the building offers, rely on imaginative spatial organizations and the unusual use of spatial elements. Therefore, the architecture sets a kind of a challenge and also certain requirements for the individual faced with the abandonment of known patterns. The individual is practically forced to reflect and sharpen his relationship with the environment and reality. Since Ando's architecture speaks to both the spiritual and the physical, it offers a fullness of existential experience surpassing the visual

perception. In this way, the distantness of architecture enables the individual to realize his various affinities and potentials.

Based on these premises, he is developing project strategies on Naoshima to establish relationships between phenomena usually considered opposites: between natural and artificial topography, between art and space, between the body and the building. Ando insists on the integrity and inseparability of those phenomenological pairs. At the same time, each phenomenon maintains its integrity so that a network of their various, but legible interrelationships is established. This network is a whole in which space, nature and art play equally important roles, support and emphasize each other.

Ando's works on Naoshima, as well as his other works, are connected by a series of project design procedures: serial spatial sequences, discontinuities between spaces, authoritarian linear routes branching into multiple connections between the spaces, including or precluding nature from a certain scene. The space is generally defined by concrete, large walls, but due to their smoothness, they react to the light and the environment. These procedures were consequently carried out in all projects, but each with specific features depending on the project task, as well as the location.



Naoshima Lee Ufan Museum © Shigeo Ogawa

In the development of artistic and architectural interventions on Naoshima there was no urban planning, and the projects were conditioned by the fact that the area was protected as a nature park. Ando's constructions stretch along the coast and none of the museums was placed as a house/object in the nature, but rather integrated into the topography. This integration is not mimicry because the strict geometry and the materiality of architecture emphasizes its artificial origin, even when only the discretely visible.

In all the museums on Naoshima Ando designs long approach paths to buildings, with rotational

trajectories. This process serves as a psychological preparation and a gradual passage from the world of nature to the world of architecture, and it is familiar from numerous other projects of Ando's. The Benesse House is revealed through a steep climb up a hill, then a tour around a long free-standing stone wall, at the end of which one sees only a portion of the building's entrance. The paths through the building are various and equally valid; not one vertical communication has priority. The interlacing of stereotomic elementary volumes creates a complex spatial configuration which is never revealed as a whole, but sequentially, and that is also true of the relation to the topography. The interior is expanded towards various outside spaces, while the relationship with nature is always carefully controlled and graded, from the introverted atrium in the basement, through the yard partially framed by walls, to the terraces open towards the sea. The Benesse House is connected by cable car with the Oval, the hotel's annex with rooms around an intimate inner atrium with a pool.

The Lee Ufan Museum stands out as an accent in the landscape defined by a tall vertical spike which is a part of a Lee installation and a long outer wall as a carefully constructed horizontal cut in the topography. The artificiality and the sternness of the composition contrast with the landscape, but the spatial distribution of the museum remains hidden. The free-standing wall is situated vertically on the hill and leads to the stairway and the valley. It directs movement through the plateau with Lee's installations and towards the gap in the outer wall. A narrow, high passageway follows, meandering without suggesting an ending to the visitor, but encouraging him to move on. The passageway ends at a covered entrance space with dimmed light leading to the spacious atrium with a Lee Ufan installation. The atrium offers the visitor the chance to stop and contemplate before entering the museum's interior. The entrance sequence is discontinued, every spatial segment in the sequence is revealed suddenly and as a separate element.



Naoshima Chichu Art Museum © Kaori Ichikawa

The Chichu Art Museum is probably the most complex movement sequence that Ando has ever realized. The visitors' path begins at the ticket centre with an ascending path through nature to the edge of the complex. The path continues over the ramp to the entrance carved in a concrete wall behind which the adventure begins, a walk through a meandering promenade of longitudinal and prismatic, open and closed spaces. Narrow corridors lead to a square atrium planted with bamboos and a staircase around it. An intimate and naturally illuminated space with a small bookshop follows, and movement continues through the corridor connected to the roofed ramp. A slim horizontal gap follows the outer wall of the ramp and opens to another, triangular atrium paved by stone. The

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hallways and the atriums are freely located around the floor plan, so that the angle of motion changes when one passes from one spatial sequence to another. The walls of some hallways are slanted, and the choreography of intermittent climbs and inclines add to the feeling of almost a pilgrim's descent to the museum's core. The architecture is experienced exclusively through spatial boundaries, that is, as an inverted object, because the entire museum is underground. There is no building, but only the inside, regardless whether it is interior or exterior space. The geometry of architectural boundaries hosts the differences and changes created by the nature: the sky cut-out scenes change, such as the illumination levels, senses of warmth, wind or moisture. Especially impressive is a visit to the museum when it is raining, because the visitor passes alternately through roofed and open spaces exposed to the atmosphere. In the end, the visitor feels completely separated from the outside world and faces artworks in the order of his or her own choosing.

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