From Little Things

The value of small public architecture.

Alberto Quizon

Byera Hadley
Travelling Scholarships
Journal Series
2018

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1

Introduction

The Sydney 2000 Olympics triggered a flurry of public investment as the value of civic architecture was brought into the foreground of public discourse. Projects such as the Olympic Park public amenities by Durbach Block fundamentally reshaped the public's preconceptions of the role of this highly specific typology within the public realm.

Since then a myriad of beautifully crafted, small scale public buildings have emerged. Public amenities, shade structures, kiosks, lookouts and pavilions have become anchor points within broader public realm redevelopments. As a typology they exist across architecture and landscape, both as an inhabitable building and an extension of public space. These small public buildings and the landscapes they service bring people together around shared interests and community purpose. They are attractors and activators. They are an expression of how a community seeks to present itself to the rest of the world. They can become the micro-icons of the public realm.

As Sydney matures, local councils outside the metropolitan area are beginning to see the value high quality small public buildings bring to the public domain. These structures are small yet transformative. They are important contributors to Sydney's architecture scene and have unexpectedly become a typology worthy of deeper investigation. They also contribute to the growth of our local profession and serve as foundational typologies for many emerging Sydney practices.

In the last decade there has been a community of contemporary Japanese architects that have been vanguards of small public buildings and are important reference points for many Sydney architects, myself included. The work of practices such as SANAA, Juniya Ishigami, Sou Fujimoto, Tezuka Architects, Toyo Ito, Atelier BowWow, Kengo Kuma, and Tadao Ando is transformative, uniquely experimental and often explicitly examines the relationships between human nature, human habitats and natural systems. There is a diverse yet distinctly regional language in these examples of Japanese architecture. There is a rich diversity of form, material and detailing but what underlies each project is playful experimentation, a deep understanding of place and a belief in architecture's capacity to shape public life.

The following report seeks to situate small public buildings and articulate their value firstly through a review of the literature exploring the concept of 'public' in the context of architecture and urbanism, and secondly through first hand case studies of projects visited during my travel in Japan. There is an ineffable quality to all great architecture that cannot be grasped through articles and photos. The Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship has provided an opportunity to study small public buildings under culturally contrasting conditions and has provided the immense privilege of learning from these projects through first hand experience of dwelling, inhabiting and observing.

2

Situating Public Space

The word 'Public' holds different meanings depending on the context of its use. In the context of urban spaces we typically associate the words 'public' and 'private' together as a dichotomy, perceiving spaces as either public or private. In his book Public and Private Spaces of the City, Ali Madinpour begins to unpack this dichotomy by understanding spaces as layers of access and control, starting from the mind of the individual as the source of ineffable subjective experience and the foundation of private space. By interrogating the concept of 'public' through its antithesis, Madinpour begins to understand public and private territories as a gradation of layered boundaries (A. Madanipour, 2003) beginning from the most intimate of territories, the personal space of an individual, and moving outward to incorporate the interpersonal relations across spaces of the home, neighbourhood and city. These boundaries are socially constructed and permeable, an invisible 'soft' order that is the meta-structure of the built environment. We can understand personal space as a subjective territory surrounding individuals that is implicitly negotiated and maintained through social performance. It is a territory that grows and shrinks in response to changing circumstances, shrinking to the space defined by the placement of arms and legs on a train seat and expanding to the space defined by a picnic rug in an urban park. This 'portable territory' (Sommer, 1969) moves with the body and demarcates a portion of physical space assumed to be within an individual's control. The discomfort caused by an uninvited intrusion into this territory is palpable. Fundamental to this discomfort is the sense of autonomy that is violated when another body exerts their control over our claim to space. It is this assumption of control that serves as the foundation of subsequent assumptions about what is and is not socially permissible within private territories, formalised by legal frameworks, spatialised by the built environment and politicised by acts of intrusion and fortification, defiance and enforcement.

For Madanipour, a contemporary formulation of private space begins with the formation of the modern bourgeois family, with the single family dwelling serving as a spatialised analogue of the social relations that demarcate the nuclear family from the rest of society (A. Madanipour, 2003). The increasing dominance of neo-liberal values has moved societies towards increasing individuation, transitioning from collective forms of domesticity to highly individual. The once communal and multi-functional condition of the house has transitioned over time into a space of exclusion and control separated from the social expectations of public life and codified through property law and architecture. The concern for sociability was supplanted by the concern for privacy. From this perspective public space can be understood as the spaces in between these private territories that allow a degree of freedom of access and movement for all at the cost of compliance with the standards and expectations of social performance. It is the shared space of temporary occupation where interpersonal relations outside the sanctity of the family unit are negotiated and performed. Private space is a retreat from public life and from the unending gaze of the other.

Public and Private are not binary terms as the typical dichotomy may suggest. Rather they exist as overlapping territories with gradations of access and control. While all public spaces are subject to various forms of social control, some spaces allow greater freedoms than others

"The boundary between the public and the private, as any other form of boundary, is an expression of a power that can subdivide space, give its subdivisions different meanings, and expect others to share these meanings by believing in them."

Ali Madanipour
Public and Private Spaces of The City

and as such can be considered more public than others. This applies to buildings we traditionally consider 'public' such as libraries, as much as it does to buildings owned and operated by private enterprises such as a shopping mall. While anyone staging a protest in a shopping mall would be quickly ushered out, a similar response would unfold were a protest to be held within a public library. In this sense, we see a gradation of degrees of 'publicness': a street is more public than a library, which in turn is more public than a school, and so on.

Drawing on the writings of several notable political theorists, John R Parkinson outlines and critiques 4 broad categories of definition when referring to public and private (Parkinson, 2014):

1. Access: Public can refer to places that are freely accessible where strangers are encountered while private can refer to places that are not freely accessible and have controllers who limit access to or use of that space.

2. Interest: 'Public' can refer to things that concern, affect, or are for the benefit of everyone while 'private' refers to things that primarily concern individuals

3. People: The people or groups that have control and responsibility for (2), for example 'public figures' or more broadly, 'the public' to mean all people.

4. Ownership: Public can refer to things which are owned by the state or the people in (3) and paid for out of collective resources like taxes. Private can refer to things and places that are privately owned.

While these categories serve as useful starting points, as Parkinson discusses in his book Democracy and Public Space, there is ambivalence and ambiguity within each category particularly in the formulation of space and place. For example, publicly owned buildings such as sewerage treatment plants can be entirely closed off from public access while privately owned spaces can at times meaningfully contribute to the public domain, serving as extensions to the public spaces of the city. Cafés and shopping malls are examples of privately owned enterprises that offer a degree of freedom of access that allows these spaces to serve as de facto public spaces. Regardless of who or what owns the space, what matters to this discussion is whether the space allows the performance of public life to play out. Along these lines, Parkinson offers 4 conditions whereby if one or more of these conditions are met a space can be defined in some sense as 'public' (Parkinson, 2014):

A. Openly accessible: is able to be accessed by a broad range of the population. It is worth noting that some public spaces are only openly accessible if certain conditions are met, such as the purchasing of a ticket as is the case with a museum or train station platform. The same is true for many privately owned public spaces.

B. Consumes common resources: public money in the form of tax revenue is one example of a common resource.

C. Has common effects: transport infrastructure such as train stations have effects on public life beyond its immediate users.

"The free use of open space may offend us, endanger us, or even threaten the seat of power. Yet that freedom is one of our essential values. We prize the right to speak and act as we wish. When others act more freely, we learn about them, and thus about ourselves. The pleasure of an urban space freely used is the spectacle of those peculiar ways, and the chance of interesting encounter."

Stephen Carr and Kevin Lynch
Open Space: Freedom and Control

D. Used for the performance of public roles: including spaces of protest, celebration, debates and memorials.

Through Parkinsons' 4 conditions we can understand that what is fundamentally at stake in the discussion of public and private spaces is a negotiation between the interests of the collective and the interest of individuals, between a life of communality and a life of autonomy. In this sense, most buildings and spaces must negotiate both public and private concerns. For example a private single family dwelling can still have common impacts such as its presentation to the street and its contribution to passive surveillance. It also consumes common resources like electricity and water. Thus we can discuss both the more public spaces of the house, such as its front yard, as well as the more private spaces, such as the bedrooms, as gradations of public and private in terms of levels of communal access, consumption, effects and performance. Condition (D) speaks of the capacity of a space to serve as a platform for public roles and provide a forum for dissenting views (Kohn, 2004). This includes forms of maco-political expression such as demonstrations and campaigns which are crucial to the maintenance of democratic processes and the formation of a common civic arena (Parkinson, 2014). However, this research seeks to focus more on the contribution of architecture and public spaces to the day to day micro-politics negotiated between strangers trying to live their lives in the context of a high density urban environment. Fundamentally what is of interest is the contribution of architecture to the public domain and to the day-to-day lived experience of the citizen engaging with the public realm.

The false dichotomy presented by the public/private binary has been codified into spatial and legal frameworks and maintained through common parlance. This discussion seeks to unravel this public / private dichotomy in order to focus on the communal effects of buildings, spaces and places. What is of interest is the capacity for buildings and spaces to allow people to be in the same place at the same time, within a common world of objects and relations. In this sense architecture serves as a context for the negotiation of social relations between individuals and contributes to the creation of a shared experience of the world; an inter-subjective reality.

The projects examined in this research provide spaces accessible to a broad segment of the population, offering a stage for the performance of public life to play out regardless of the structures of ownership and control. The projects vary in the degree to which they encourage collective encounter with others. Some are intimate, providing a space of escape and contemplation with strangers. Some serve as an attractor, drawing in passers by. Some serve as an anchor, encouraging repeat visits and the formation of community. What is common across the projects is the offering of spaces for the occupation of unknown others. These spaces are not inert containers of public life. Rather they contribute to the formation of associations, group identities, familiarities and encounters that make up public life. These projects are of interest in the way in which they structure the lived experience of a collective through their occupation and contribute to the social infrastructure of the city.

3

The Other

Richard Sennett provides a concise definition of the public realm as simply “a place where strangers meet.” (Sennett, 2014). The term ‘stranger’ appears often in writings about urban public spaces, used as a noun to refer to people that are unfamiliar, that exist outside our established social relations. In more private spaces we typically encounter people that have similar behaviours, values and habits as ourselves while in more public spaces we are exposed to other people that may exhibit unfamiliar behaviours and characteristics. Unlike the space of the home or work where we tend to encounter family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances, the public realm is a space of situated multiplicity (Amin, 2008) where we encounter difference outside the controlled conditions of our daily habits.

Hannah Arendt describes the public realm as a world common to all of us that relates and separates people at the same time. It is a world of objects and relations that exists between those that occupy it (Arendt, 1958). The public realm is the space that can turn human plurality, or difference, into productive engagements. We emerge from the sanctity and safety of our private domains to act upon and benefit from the common world. For Arendt, to live an entirely private life is to be absent from a shared reality and to live without significance and consequence to others. Conversely, to live an entirely public life is to live a life of a slave, without autonomy and no place to call one’s own. A productive engagement with others is conditioned by our freedom and ability to move between public and private realms, to engage or to escape as needed. According to Arendt, taking action in the world cannot be done in isolation. Action requires the presence of others to attribute value. Like an actor to an audience we compare our judgements with the possible judgements of others and we evaluate our thoughts in relation to the thoughts of imagined others, a concept Arendt calls “enlarged mentality”. In this sense our identity and sense of value in the world is built on the foundation of our relationality with other human beings.

Regularly encountering difference dispels the normalisation of a particular way of life that can happen within socially homogeneous environments, working to bring about a gradual acceptance of plurality (Kohn, 2004). Homogeneity can breed distrust of others that exist outside the borders of group identity. Encountering difference may be at times uncomfortable or inconvenient, the otherness of a person can seem threatening to our sense of belonging and safety. We can see these anxieties manifest spatially in the form of defensive architectural tactics such as walls and deterrents. For example, gated communities maintain social and economic homogeneity within a controlled quasi-public realm through the use of walls and private security forces. Corporate plazas deploy anti-homeless spikes and skateboard deterrents to discourage use and occupation by so-called undesirables. The increasing trend towards suburbanisation amplifies these anxieties by reducing opportunities for unexpected encounters with others within the public realm (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, Stone, 1993). As walking becomes more and more impractical due to larger and larger distances, the car becomes a preferred mode of transport. The once multi-functional networked public space of the street (Jacobs, 1961) gives way to roads and highways designed only for speed and vehicular capacity. The fetishisation of private life driven by the need to sell consumer goods

"Public space is made up of more than parks, plazas and sidewalks; it is a shared world where individuals can identify with one another and see themselves through the eyes of others. Seeing oneself through the other's eyes may be a first step towards recognising one's own privilege and, perhaps, criticising structures of systemic privilege and deprivation."

Margaret Kohn
Brave new neighborhood : the privatization of public space

has individuated many functions and services that were once attractions in the public realm. The cinema gives way to the home theatre, the park gives way to the back yard, the market gives way to online shopping and home deliveries, mobility is privatised and isolated into individual vehicles. For the suburbs, public space is a destination rather than a natural extension of life.

It is difficult to identify with another person's way of life without encountering their lived reality. Public spaces make visible the multiplicity of social practices, daily habits, rituals and identities of others and provide the context for experiencing a shared world where we encounter these differences whether we want to or not (Kohn, 2004). A sense of commonality arises from sharing a public space and engaging in the practices, rituals and activities that are characteristic of that space. A shared intuition also emerges from being in the same space at the same time with others. Through observation of common patterns of action and behaviour a 'common sense' is constructed, resulting in implicit etiquettes such as the respect for personal space in a park or the avoidance of a prolonged gaze on a crowded train. These unconscious practices constitute a form of collective understanding enacted and maintained by bodies in space, contributing to a sense of commonality. To identify with others requires a recognition of both difference and commonality. Integrating attractive, multi-valent and accessible public spaces into daily life encourages habituation in the encountering of difference. Like a form of exposure therapy, where people are gradually exposed to feared stimuli within a safe context to disarm the fear response, public spaces assist in the humanisation of the other through a recognition of the mundane commonality of daily life. Public space creates a framework that encourages people to relate morally to each other and evaluate ourselves through the eyes of others (Kohn, 2004).

It may be naïvely optimistic to argue that the character of public space can directly improve civility and democracy at the level of the individual in any predictable way (Amin, 2008)(Kohn, 2004). However at the scale of an urban population public spaces serve as crucial social infrastructure that helps to reinforce the positive social frameworks needed for co-existence in a high density environment. Just as the provision of access to public transportation will not guarantee whether a specific individual will reduce their reliance on their car, at the scale of a city the differences in patterns of mobility can be predicted and measured. Creating public spaces does not guarantee an absence of conflict, just as providing public transport does not guarantee an absence of traffic and congestion. However a mild form of conflict seen in the micro-politics of social friction can be understood as a productive actualisation of difference, a creative force that is at times uncomfortable, at times enriching. Well designed, attractive public spaces provide a reason to venture out and be exposed to the risks and discomforts of public life, to see the other and in turn to allow the other to see you.

4

Community and Public Life

Community is formed through commonality, it is the flattening of difference through a common identity. A community can be formed by spatial proximity, as in the case of neighbours, locals and residents. It can be formed through social networks such as friendships, cultural ties and institutions such as clubs, associations and religious organisations. It can be formed through shared identities and interests where a sense of belonging does not require proximity or close association and can include diasporic communities (Tonkiss, 2005).

In the early twentieth century, progressive urban planners propelled by the Garden City movement sought to solve social problems associated with the urban poor by integrating new public spaces with public housing developments in the form of parks and playgrounds. The intention was to improve the health and sociability of urban dwellers through spatial influences to foster a sense of community, a local environment where neighbours felt connected and mutually supported. This concept of community was a nostalgic idealisation of small town life where interdependence, familiarity and homogeneity are dominant social conditions (Kohn, 2004). The desireability and allure of this agrarian fantasy is still evident in contemporary advertising and marketing. Large greenfield suburban developments are re-branded by developers as 'masterplanned communities', public housing is re-branded by government agencies as 'community housing', disruptive tech companies re-brand their clients as their 'community of creators'. Many writers lament the loss of community in urban neighbourhoods, revealing a shared longing for sociability (Bonaiuto, Fornara, & Bonnes, 2003; Scopelliti & Giuliani, 2004). Factors such as smaller families, surburbanisation, decentralisation of work and home and the increasing focus on private leisure consumption have been attributed to the decline of community values (J. Francis et al. 2012). As a counterpoint to this trend, public authorities and private developers have become increasingly aware of the important role public spaces play in the formation of local communities.

A number of studies in urban design and environmental psychology have correlated the quality and character of public spaces with social interaction (Carr et al., 1992; Francis, 2003; Gehl, 2006; Jacobs, 1962; Lynch, 1960; Whyte, 1980). A common conclusion across these studies is that successful public spaces increase socialisation by facilitating chance encounters between strangers (J. Francis et al. 2012). Spatial tactics that encourage proximity, repeated inhabitation and prolonged use by members of the public increase the likelihood of a chance encounter. Repeated encounters are the foundation of new social bonds built on the basis of familiarity and commonality. These positive incidental interactions aggregate together to create an overall sense of community. This sense of community is predicated on a feeling of similarity between its members and the comfort and familiarity that comes with being surrounded by people that share a similar identity.

Outside the boundaries of community and its familiar sociability is the anonymous civility of public life. While in a community we share with others that are similar to us in some way, in the context of a broader public life we are forced to share with others that are different. Community fosters interpersonal relationships between group members, while public life fosters impersonal

"The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them."

Hannah Arendt
The Human Condition

relationships between strangers. While community promotes conformity, public life embraces difference. Cultivating public life promotes solidarity across members of the public, rather than just those within a particular group, encompassing strangers to regard one another as citizens in the public realm.

A prerequisite for coexistence in urban life is a mutual regard for the rights, privacy and autonomy of strangers. While familiarity offered by community provides a form of comfort, there is also a comfort to anonymity. The freedom of being invisible as just another stranger provides an escape from active social engagement, a right to privacy within a field of public bodies. Public life is predicated on an indifference towards the differences between individuals. This 'ethical indifference' (Tonkiss, 2005) allows the otherness of strangers to become ordinary, to accept difference as a condition of living in the city. Public spaces provide an arena for the differences between strangers to be visible and knowable to one another, providing the foundation for civility and at times, community.

Unlike the streets, town squares and marketplaces of the pre-modern city, public spaces no longer serve as essential infrastructure supporting the exchange of goods, information and services on a day to day basis. The dominance of private transportation and centralised malls have reduced many streets to mono-functional spaces, optimised for speed and capacity rather than multi-valent human occupation. The consumerist enchantment of the private realm has lessened the imperative to venture out to meet functional needs. Online marketplaces have begun to erode the demand for retail. This is amplified in suburbia where the tyranny of distance reduces the practicality of walking, limiting the possibility of incidental social interaction. However, a counterpoint to this trend is a gradually increasing investment from both public and private entities in the development of multi-valent public spaces. Infrastructure that supports alternative forms of transportation such as bicycles, light rail and trains have become increasingly mainstream. The benefits of promoting passive and active recreation amongst populations is accepted by politicians across the political spectrum. The social and political benefits of promoting new public spaces is leveraged by politicians and the media.

Public spaces have long been promoted as a catalyst for community formation. The romanticised vision of community as a village of familiar faces has an almost universal appeal, playing to our desire for sociability and the comfort of being surrounded by people just like ourselves. However the implication of community is the marking of a boundary between insiders and outsiders, between those that belong and those that do not. Beyond the appeal of community is a broader imperative. Public spaces promote public life, a condition of being an individual in the company of strangers. Co-existence requires a civil acceptance of difference. Public spaces play an important role in encountering difference and integrating regular encounters into the day to day rhythms of life.

5

Place Identity

The term Place Identity was introduced in the late 1970's by environmental and social psychologists Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff. Place identity is a symbolic expression of social identity in relation to environments. It allows people to distinguish themselves from others and construct positive associations between the attributes of a place and their sense of self (Mannarinia, et. al. 2006). For example residents living neighbourhoods that have a reputation for affluence and sophistication are more likely to view themselves as being affluent and sophisticated by extension. As place becomes embedded into the daily experience of life it becomes more deeply linked to the sense of self. People imbue meaning and significance to the places they inhabit and at the same time these places contribute to the construction of self identity.

Place identity is a two-way interaction between the salient reality of the immediate environment and the past experiences of the observer. The environment presents objects, symbols and relations, and the observer projects patterns, meanings, associations and values (Lynch, 1960). According to urban theorist, Kevin Lynch, we can understand our visual perception of the built environment as comprised of three components: identity, structure, and meaning. The construction of an image of place begins with the formation of an identity, the recognition of an object individuated and set apart from the surrounding fabric. Structure refers to a pattern relation between the observer and other objects, a place must be able to be understood in the context of a network of associations. Lastly an object must have practical or emotional meaning for the observer (Lynch, 1960). So, for example, a park has a distinct visual identity from the surrounding city, it is a green void set against a backdrop of built fabric. Its physical structure aligns with past experiences of parks, displaying common symbols and sub-objects like trees, benches and foot paths. Lastly it carries meaning in terms of its functional offerings, it is a place to play and to lie on the grass, inferred through structural symbols and social patterns, as well as its emotional meanings if it is a familiar place.

While each individual projects their own image over their environmental reality, there tends to be large intersubjective overlaps and common associations. Many environmental psychologists have argued that meanings are not just individual acts but also formed from observation and interaction with symbolic processes within a social context (Saegert, Winkel, 1990). Thus meanings are not just created by individuals but also absorbed from the cultural milieu. This observation allows for consistent readings of environment across diverse individuals and opens up the possibility that the design of place can have consistent affect at social and individual levels. A sense of meaning and connection with a public space leads to repeated visits which in turn increases the probability of repeated encounters with others, the beginnings of social connection and community.

In the dialogue between environment and observer, only the environment is within our scope of control. Continuing Lynch's thinking, environmental behaviourists identify three fundamental qualities that must be considered in the creation of public spaces to increase the probability of eliciting a positive place identity and creating a place of meaning and connection. The first is legibility, which refers to the ease of which a place is able to be recognised

"A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world. This is the obverse of the fear that comes with disorientation; it means that the sweet sense of home is strongest when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well."

Kevin Lynch
The Image of the City

and organised into a pattern of symbols and associations. A legible place provides clear cues as to the intended function, symbolic associations and degree of openness. These symbolic cues are embedded in physical elements such as advertising, fences, furniture and materials, as well as in non-physical elements such as patterns of use, legal frameworks, reputation and symbolic associations. Secondly, a public space must have relevance to its users, it must offer possibilities and patters of use that fulfil a latent need or desire. Relevance can be embedded in the functional offerings of a space, the cultural meanings associated with the space or personal meanings created through familiarity and daily habit. Thirdly, it must allow physical, social and symbolic connections. A public space must be connected to the fabric of the city, provide a setting for sociability and offer symbols and associations that connect with other patterns of use (Carr, et al. 1992). The symbolic projections of public space are an atmospheric influence, operating at the background of public life, projecting meanings and associations into public culture and influencing the patterns of daily life.

Public spaces have the potential to create a positive feedback loop between place identity and self identity. Well designed public spaces strengthen self-identification with a place and place-based communities. In turn, adopting a place based identity tends to bring with it a positive bias towards the place, reinforcing the positive associations between place and self. For example, a resident living in close proximity to a destinational park may feel a sense of pride towards the park and its reputation, incorporating the park as an extension of their sense of home. This in turn colours their view of the park and increases the likelihood of positive meanings and associations. Attractive, destinational public spaces encourage repeated visitation and use. Repetition and habit embed patterns of meaning and use into place and increase the likelihood of positive associations between a place and a sense of self.

In contemporary developed societies the primary role of public space is promoting sociability. As traditionally public activities are increasingly privatised, decentralised and despatialised, public spaces have taken on an increasingly specialised role within the public realm. Public spaces serve as symbolic expressions of public culture, codifying normality and aspiration into the physicality of the built environment. The architecture of public spaces project meanings and functions that shape public expectation and influence the quality and conditions of public life (Amin, 2008). As public spaces become less embedded into the daily necessities of life there is a greater need for spaces to be destinational and offer a distinct experience centred around landscapes of socialisation. Attractive public spaces draw people out from the comforts of their private realms and encourage participation in the novelty and dissonance of public life.

6

Achitecture's Role in Public Space

Architect and Urbanist, Jan Gehl proposed that there are three broad categories of outdoor activities in public spaces: Necessary, Optional and Social. Necessary activities are those that take place as a necessary part of daily life and include activities such as movement to and from work, running errands and shopping. Necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the public space in which they occur. For example, as long as a sense of safety is not compromised, an undesirable park that exists within an important path of travel will still be regularly inhabited by people that are fulfilling a need to get from point A to point B. Optional activities are those that take place out of a desire to enjoy the offerings of public spaces and typically take place when environmental conditions are optimal. These activities include recreational walking, outdoor exercise, sunbathing and outdoor dining. Social activities emerge as a direct result of people inhabiting space simultaneously to undertake necessary or optional activities and can include active interactions and passive co-existence (Ghel, 1987). Social activities are the foundation of public life and are the beginnings of new social relations between strangers. Poor quality public spaces are only inhabited by necessary activities as people tend to traverse quickly without a desire to interact, dwell or meander. High quality public spaces are inhabited by a variety of both necessary and optional activities, creating a richer public life and amplifying the possibility for social activities to emerge (Ghel, 1987). An important contribution that architecture can make to public space is in the curation of a diverse range of optional activities within proximity of necessary activities to create a place of social and functional multiplicity where different rhythms of use are co-located within a bounded space.

Political theorist Michael Walzer argued that public spaces exist on a continuum between two poles: 'single-minded space' and 'open-minded space' (Walzer 1986). Single-minded space is singular and clear in intent, expressed through its function, aesthetics, social culture and in what activities the space prioritises and suppresses. In contrast, open-minded spaces are designed for a variety of uses and occupations, and allow for unexpected and unforeseen uses. A highway is an example of a single-minded space while a city street activated by shops and cafés is an example of an open-minded space. Walzer argues that this distinction goes beyond function, as a space can be designed with a single function in mind yet still allow and encourage a diversity of other uses. A cafe that provides comfortable places to meet, linger and work serves as an example. Walzer argues that open-minded spaces are crucial sites of civil discourse and contribute to the building of mutual respect necessary for peaceful co-existence. Spaces that are singular in use, expression and spatial offering are places of efficiency and have their place and benefit in daily life. Not every encounter needs to be a social one. However in spaces that intend to contribute to public life, the design should allow for a degree of purposeful ambiguity and indeterminacy.

One of the most potent contributions of architecture to public life is in shaping the visual culture of public space. Urban planner and theorist Kevin Lynch examined the 'imageability' of urban environments. One of the roles architecture can play in public space is that of a landmark, a vivid, memorable object in the city that observers to situate themselves and develop familiarity with their context.

"Ethical practices in public space are formed pre-cognitively and reflexively rather than rationally or consciously, guided by routines of neurological response and material practice, rather than by acts of human will. The vitality of the space, its functional and symbolic interpretation, its material arrangements the swirl of the crowd, the many happenings form a compulsive field of

Ash Amin
Collective culture and urban public space

Lynch called this its singularity or figure-background clarity. In order to make architecture remarkable, recognisable and more likely to be remembered as significant it must define itself through contrast to its surrounding context or contrast to the observer's prior experiences and expectations (Lynch, 1960). This contrast can be achieved through material and detailing that elevates it from the mundane. It can be a contrast through an inversion, such as the negative space offered by an open public square. It can be a contrast in form, such as a lyical roof set against the backdrop of conventional gables. It can be a contrast in use, such as a beer garden in an industrial precinct. These contrasts allow the architecture to be read as a figure against the background of the urban fabric. The image-ability of architecture amplifies its ability to attract, inviting curiosity and contributing to the legibility of the city and its public spaces. It also allows it to function as an orienting device and meeting point, increasing the likelihood of return visits. It is this ability to attract new people and returning occupants that over time creates social ties to place and increases the possibility of chance encounter, social bonding and community formation.

Public life emerges out of the dynamic between people, activity and the spatial culture of public space. Successful public spaces domesticate the complexity of urban life, rendering the rhythms and energies of social activity as familiar and desirable (Amin, 2008). At the same time, successful public spaces are spaces of simultaneity, creating ecologies of difference where civil co-existence with others is practiced (Madanipour, 2003).

Architecture has the capacity to curate common effects and affects that contribute to the culture of public space. Through its programmatic culture, architecture can situate necessary and optional activities together, creating the conditions for repeated socialisation. Through its spatial culture, architecture can be open-minded, offer spaces of difference and allow for unexpected uses. Through its visual culture, architecture can provide clear cues and invitations for use and amplify the significance of place by rendering it vivid and memorable, offering itself as a landmark and legible meeting point.

7

Case Studies: Ceremony and Ritual

Sayama Forest Chapel Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP

The Sayama Forest Chapel is located within Sayama Lakeside Cemetery in Tokorozawa, Saitama, on the outskirts of Tokyo. The Chapel is one of a pair of buildings designed by Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP for the Eternalica Foundation.

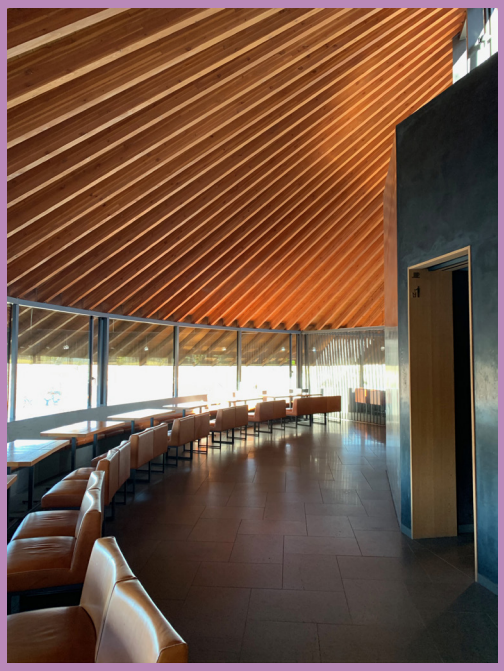
A circular Community Hall and administration building greets visitors at the entry to the cemetery. The main space of the hall is organised around a central administration core and surrounded by a shallow pool of water, reflecting sunlight onto the expressed timber soffit and mirroring the surrounding forest. The architecture carefully edits out the suburban context, leaving only the experience of water and trees brushed by wind. The Community Hall is a restful space for gathering, dining, waiting, and a place for families to begin their own rituals of commemoration.

Perched on the ridge and set against the backdrop of a small forest reserve, the chapel is offered as a space of intimate spiritual reflection. Its material and tectonic language sets up a clear dialogue with the larger Community Hall. The same expressed timber beams define the interior of the Chapel and give the interior warmth and tactility akin to a cave or a clearing in an old growth forest.

In dialogue with the zinc clad roof of the Community Hall, the Chapel roof is clad in 21,000 aluminium panels hand-cast by local craftsmen, and bent to conform to the curves of the roof's valleys. The light reflecting off this hand crafted surface gives the roof a shimmering quality reminiscent of the water reflections that illuminate the Community Hall.

According to the architect the Chapel's geometry is derived from the forms of Gassho-Zukuri, traditional Japanese thatched roof houses that are often described as 'hands in prayer'. The plan is sculpted to frame views to the forest and the cemetery.

The space is free of religious symbolism, relying instead on the architecture and the surrounding forest to imbue the space with a sacred reverence. There is no fixed alter or central axis, allowing different orientations and backdrops for ritual or quiet contemplation. It is a space that invites others to bring their own meaning and narrative into it, amplifying the significance of shared rituals.



7

Case Studies: Ceremony and Ritual

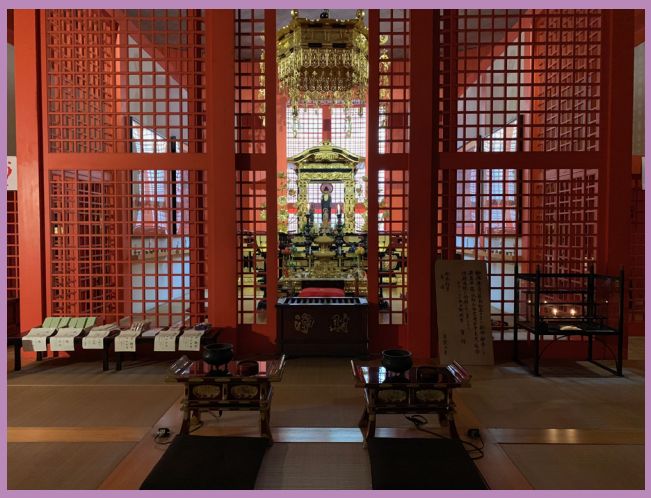
Water Temple Tadao Ando

The Hompukuji Water Temple is located in Awaji Island, about an hour drive from Osaka. It is a Buddhist temple built on a hillside amongst terraced fields and rural villages. It is a significant place of worship for the local Buddhist community.

The architecture eschews traditional Japanese symbolism to convey meaning and significance. instead, it is an architecture of geometric clarity and experiential contrasts. In describing the work Tadao Ando noted "I thought about how to respond to the theme of tradition by drawing not on past forms and styles but rather on the spirit behind them." This spirit of tradition is embedded in the procession of entry, the curation of light, and the poetry of its geometry.

On arrival a blank and monumental concrete wall greets visitors, inviting entry through a single punched opening that leads you between two large concrete walls splaying out in plan, spatially expanding towards a grove of trees with a glimpse of the valley beyond. The rural context is edited out of this experience, leaving only trees, sky and architecture. When turning the corner the pond is revealed all at once, expressed as a singular, monumental object within a clearing of trees. Amongst the reflections of the trees, a grid of lotus flowers adorns the pond. The lotus is the first recognisable symbol of the temple's Buddhist associations. The temple's entry is through this pond, effectively the roof of the building. Descending through the pool of water is an experience of compression and a transition into darkness and uncertainty. A curved vermilion red wall defines the interior as the entry procession descends further into the darkness. This entry experience sets up a transition from a secular world into a spiritual one, the movement of water, trees and wind gives way to the stillness of the architecture and the glow of diffuse light. The interior is bathed in vermilion red, reminiscent of traditional Japanese Tori gates, a symbol of entry marking the transition from the mundane to the sacred and a place for spirits to be welcomed. The traditional vermilion red paint is often found on shrines and temples throughout Japan and is typically considered a sacred substance that protects against evil spirits.

The sunlight brought in through a courtyard filters through a screen and reflects off the painted walls, saturating the space with vermilion. At sunset the light intensifies, bathing the space in a warm glow. The mass of the mute concrete blade walls contrasts with the delicate and unexpected lightness and vibrancy of the interior below.



8

Case Studies: Seeding Community

Naoshima Community Centre Hiroshi Samuichi

Commissioned by the Naoshima municipality as part of an overall strategy to revitalise the island, the Community Centre comprises of two buildings set amongst a small village on Naoshima island, one of Japan's 'art islands' globally recognised for it's many outdoor art installations, museums, galleries. Born out of research and collaboration with the town's residents spanning two years, the Community Centre provides community facilities including an event space, a gymnasium, communal kitchen and dining space, restrooms and meeting rooms.

The roofs define the building's identity, taking the form of a traditional Japanese thatched roof but expressed in Japanese cypress – known locally as hinoki. As Sambuichi notes "the large roof of the hall is a traditional hipped shape that is often seen in the villages of Naoshima". Sambuichi was interested in the movement of light an air and sculpted the two roof forms to illuminate the deep floor plans with natural daylight.

The main hall is a large, multi-purpose space. A timber floor is marked with lines for sports but otherwise kept clear and flexible for performances and gatherings. A small, elevated pavilion within the main space can be used as a stage for Bunraku, a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre. An outdoor timber platform is elevated over an artificial pond offering a space for outdoor performance or tea ceremonies.

The main hall offers space for up to 300 people and does not rely on mechanical ventilation. Instead the roof form has a triangular 'scoop' at its apex oriented to capture prevailing winds. The monumental conical form of the roof utilises the stack effect and the Bernoulli principle top allow air to be drawn upwards through air inlets concealed in the landscape. Air is cooled through an underground thermal maze before entering the space through vents in the floor, utilising the thermal mass of the earth to maintain stable air temperatures.

The smaller of the two buildings is expressed as a micro village unified by a large roof. Four separate pavilions, each slightly elevated off the slab with their own sub-roof, provide more intimate spaces and facilities. A small skylight sits at the apex of the unifying roof, bringing in daylight to the in-between spaces of the pinwheel plan. A hand pump and drain is placed in the centre of the pin-wheel, akin to a traditional village well.

8

Case Studies: Seeding Community

Home For All SANAA

In 2011 a magnitude 9.0 earthquake caused a devastating tsunami that obliterated towns and cities along Japan's east coast. 5 years after the destruction, rebuilding efforts are underway but recovery is slow. To aid the recovery of communities the not-for-profit and volunteer-run Home-For-All program was created by a group of Japanese architects lead by Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, and Riken Yamamoto. This program oversaw the design and construction of 16 community centres within the disaster zones that were designed by Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, Riken Yamamoto, Astrid Klein, Mark Dytham, Yukinari Hisayama, Michiko Okano, Jun Yanagisawa, Tetsuo Kondo, Maki Onishi and Yuki Hyakuda. Toyo Ito explained the intent of the community centres as "a place where people would like to gather every day, even if they do not have a particular reason for doing so," the second purpose is "to be a place where we can reconsider the architecture that we have created." Each Home-for-All is designed as a flexible gathering space for people living in surrounding temporary housing and working in recovering primary industries.

Before the 2011 disaster, Tsukihama was a hotspot for local tourists who were attracted to its sandy beaches and local inns. Since the destruction of much of this tourist infrastructure, the recovery of the local community of Tsukihama has been primarily led by the fishing industry.

The Home-for-all in Tsukihama designed by SANAA is an outdoor communal work space for local fishermen and serves as a market place and visitor rest stop. Effectively an open shade structure with a small, lockable office, the pavilion is defined by its lyrically undulating roof, offering shelter for gathering, local meetings and small markets. It is a simple, low cost structure that offers a space of joyful significance against a backdrop of quiet necessity.


巡る。
撮る。
当たる。

9

Case Studies: Public Amenity

Itabu Amenities Sou Fujimoto

The Kominato Line is one of Japan's most famous local railway lines with several small, unmanned stations and a track that meanders through rural villages and agricultural fields of Chiba Prefecture. The line is an icon of country life and in the spring the track is lined with cherry blossoms. Itabu is a little-known industrial and agricultural village along the Kominato Line, 2 hours by train south east of Tokyo.

The public toilet is positioned next to Itabu station in ilhihara-city, chiba. Known as 'The Toilet in Nature', it was commissioned by Ichihara City to replace an existing pit toilet and serve as a tourist attraction as part of the 2014 Ichihara City Arts Festival.

A 2 meter high timber wall surrounds a 185m2 garden with a glass cubicle sheltered by a cherry blossom tree. The walls are just tall enough to prevent overlooking from the train carriage and station. Sou Fujimoto notes that "the toilet's domain is this natural garden, which is closed off from the eyes of the public. It simultaneously maintains and melts away the dichotomy of public and private, the feeling of openness and being protected, inside and outside, natural and constructed, big and small." The entry to the toilet is a black door at the surrounding wall. Once locked the garden is a private space with a timber sleeper path to the glass cubicle. One can imagine the landscape and planting changing dramatically with the seasons, inviting repeat visits.

Side note: Unfortunately for me, the toilet is female only. However I had travelled two hours to see it and could not contain my curiosity. On opening the door to leave I was greeted by an elderly local woman who simply rolled her eyes and brushed passed me as I bowed to apologise.

9

Case Studies: Public Amenity

Hut with the Arc Wall Tato Architects

The Setouchi Triennale takes place for three seasons across several islands in the Seto Inland Sea, off the coast of Okayama. The aim of the Triennale is to revitalise the unique island communities which have been steadily declining and aging and transform the islands into places of tourism and cultural exchange.

The amenities building was built on Shodoshima Island as a permanent fixture for visitors to the Setouchi Triennale. Drawing from local industries of Shodoshima including the growing of olives and soy sauce breweries, Tato Architects combined residential and industrial vernaculars in the design of the amenities building. Yo Shimada of Tato Architects said "I decided to make the toilet adapt to such surroundings and make it the starting point of a walk by partitioning the space with curved surfaces, as softly as a cloth under a traditional cabin roof."

The tiled gable roof sets up a dialogue with the surrounding tiled roof houses and is clad with a mix of opaque and transparent tiles, softly illuminating the sheltered cubicles and giving the structure a sense of lightness. At night the effect is reversed and the tiles glow giving the effect of a lantern against a backdrop of dark, quiet streets.

The cubicles are hidden behind curved steel plate walls. According to Shimada (translated) "The site is in the area called Hishio-no-sato (native place of sauce) where pre-modern architecture of soy sauce making warehouses remains collectively most in Japan...Framing of a traditional cabin and large cedar barrels on the floor are the characteristic scene." The curved steel plate walls read like large white barrels under a shed roof.

The direct tectonic expression of the roof is set against the organic and seemingly impossible construction of the curved walls to create a space that is at once familiar as it is unexpected.

10

Case Studies: Public Life on Campus

Junko Fukutake Terrace SANAA

Commonly referred to as the J-Terrace, this delicate steel and glass cafe pavilion was created to become a meeting and gathering place for the university and the public. The project was funded through a donation by Junko Fukutake, Deputy Director of the Fukutake Education and Culture Foundation.

Situated along one of the main roads bisecting Okayama University Campus, the pavilion is one of three projects designed by SANAA for the university. Each project embodies the university's ambition to create new social spaces that attract students, staff and the general public to gather an interact on campus.

The J-Terrace is immediately identifiable from the road, expressed as a roof that seems impossibly thin, almost paper-like and propped up by a field of thin columns. The surface of the roof gently rises and falls to direct rainwater to gravel drains at the edges of the slab. The structure inspires a sense of incredulity and wonder in a way that is so characteristic of SANAA's work.

The cafe itself sits within curved glass walls and offers quieter space, sheltered from the sounds of the wind and the road but still visually connected. The large overhangs of the roof reduce glare and reflection on the glass, allowing it appear as transparent as possible The field of columns and the material of the roof and slab continues within the space dissolving the sense of interiority.

The architectural expression of the pavilion imparts a unique identity to the campus, one that seems welcoming, playful and open. There is an indeterminacy in the spaces implied by the roof and slab, which blurs into the interior of the cafe through the field condition of columns, furniture and cafe pod. The lessons learnt from SANAA's similarly sinuous serpentine pavilion have been redeployed here and made permanent. Sejima and Nishizawa described their Serpentine Pavilion as "a field of activity with no walls, allowing uninterrupted views across the park and encouraging access from all sides."

10

Case Studies: Public Life on Campus

Aichi Sangyo Centre Studio Velocity

The Educational Centre contains a language study lab, IT centre, presentation space, lounge, and bus shelter for Aichi Sangyo University, a private university on the outskirts of Nagoya.

The site are was much larger than required for the briefed area, however rather than consolidating program to create a building or object within a landscape, Studio Velocity created a field condition, embracing the site's 4m slope and allowing for spaces of ambiguity and indeterminacy punctuated by framed landscapes.

The pavilion is expressed as a loose grid of roofs with punched courtyards. Interiors are enclosed with glass walls and sliding doors and linked by covered walkways. Building and park blur into one to create a landscaped civic square unified by a clear material and formal language. As Studio Velocity describes their intent was "to create a single environment where people could play soccer on grass, read beneath a roof, and use computers with friends: an environment where indoor and outdoor activities blend seamlessly."

Like many of Studio Velocity's projects, the architecture is unified by a singular, highly legible gesture and given nuance, difference and complexity through carefully curated shifts and tactics. For example, each courtyard feels like a defined public space, framed by the roof and the grid of columns. Each of the enclosed glass rooms can open out to the surrounding courtyards, expanding the usable space and connecting courtyards together. This operability dissolves the building, functioning more like a landscape pavilion. Courtyards and interior spaces can expand and contract with the users needs and potentially fully open to create a singular, covered outdoor space. This is architecture as a field condition.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11

Case Studies: Public Play

Woods of Net Tezuka Architects

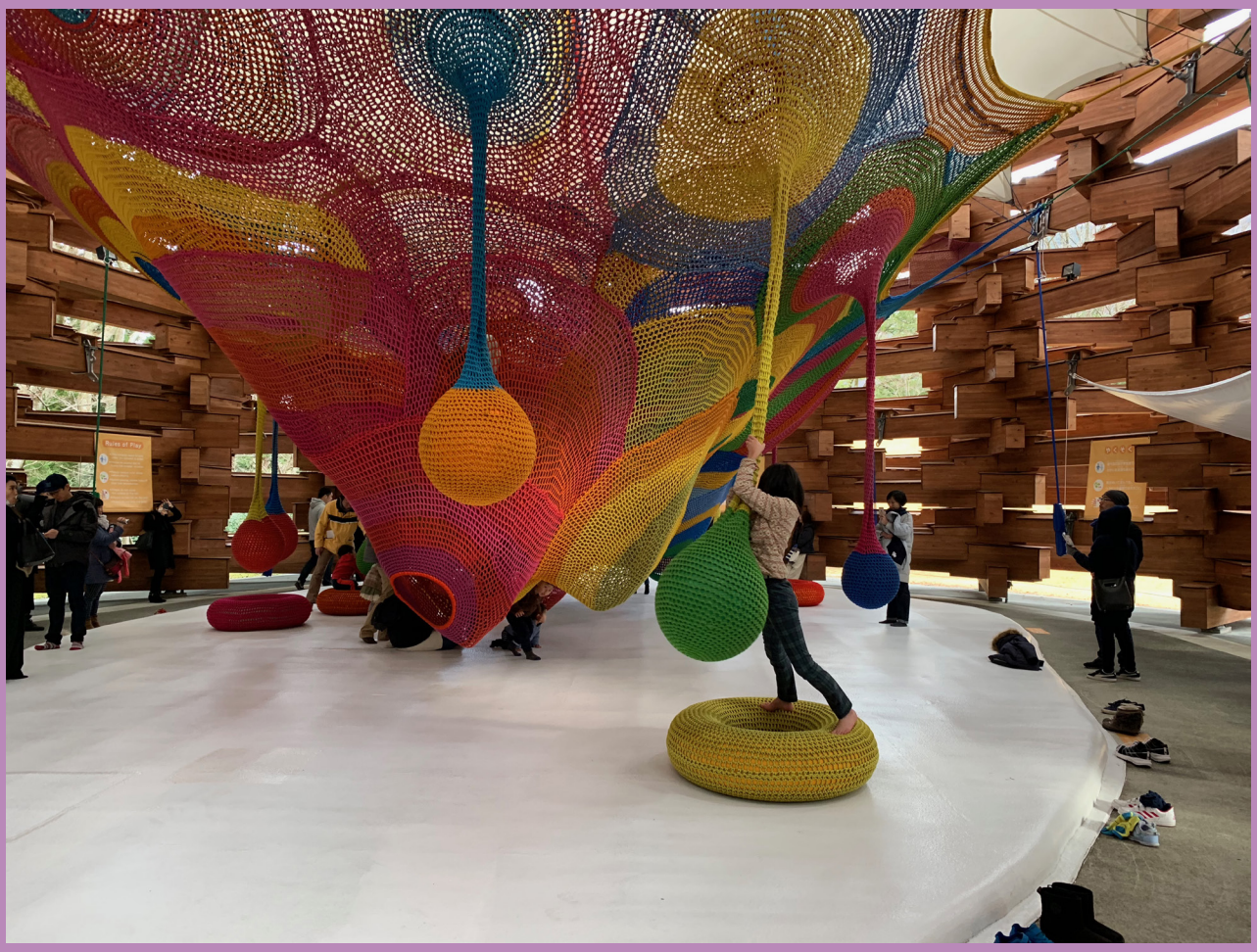
The Hakone Open Air Museum is situated on a mountainside along a circular ridge that frames Lake Ashi. The museum was the first of its kind in Japan, offering an experience that blends art and nature, presenting the emerging field of environmental sculpture against a backdrop of mountains and forests.

Woods of Net is a permanent pavilion within the grounds of the museum designed to house art by Toshiko Horiuchi Macadam. The artwork is part sculpture, part play structure and is made from hand-knitted coloured net. The sculpture invites children to crawl in, explore and play. Tezuka describes the space as “soft as the forest where the boundary between outside and inside disappears. The space attracts people like campfire. The children play inside of the net just as fire and parents sit around and lay on the woods.”

Seen from afar, its form the pavilion reads like an oversized children’s toy. It’s members seem loosely stacked in a child-like manner. However, when examined closely the structure is composed of dowel-jointed timber beams, each one unique. The tectonic expression and detailing alludes to sophisticated Japanese construction techniques seen in ancient timber temples.

Daylight and natural breezes permeate the space, sheltered by a canvas pulled taught to shelter the artwork from direct sun and rain.

The loose, frayed timber form alludes to the natural constructions of bird nests. Glimpses of colour can be seen between the gaps. The soft, joyful artwork hangs from the space like a giant, colourful cocoon.



11

Case Studies: Public Play

Naoshima Pavilion Sou Fujimoto

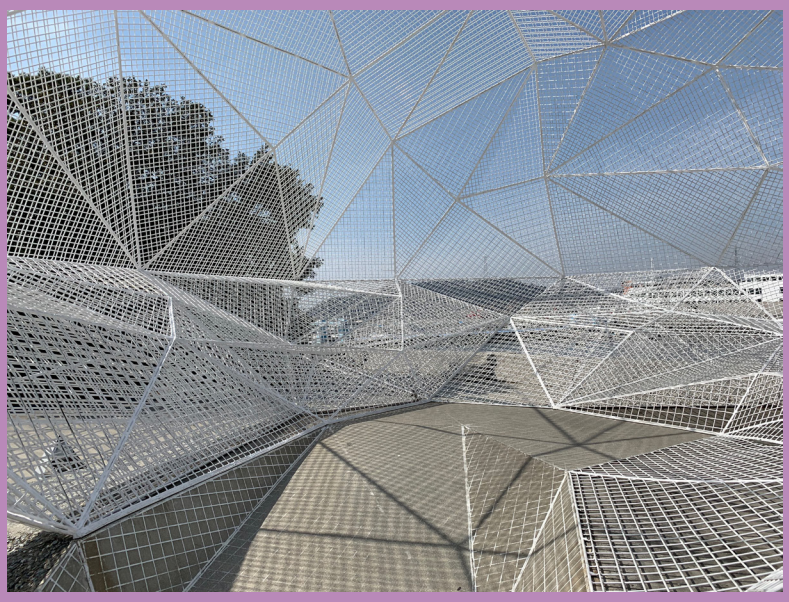
Perched opposite SANAA's Naoshima Ferry Terminal, the Naoshima Pavilion by Sou Fujimoto is a small art pavilion constructed for the 2016 Setouchi Triennial. Like the other art and architecture landmarks of the island the pavilion invites curiosity and interaction from the island's many visitors.

The pavilion is conceived as a light, highly transparent mesh structure and able to be entered through a low opening. The tesselated geometry creates surfaces for sitting, alluding to primitive gathering spaces like a campfire or cave.

Sou Fujimoto describes the pavilion as "a community space and a new landmark. The town of Naoshima consists of 28 islands. We decided to create one more, the 29th island. The space is softly enveloped in a white metal mesh structure. Outside, it resembles an irregular stone, floating like an island on the ground. Inside, the space also has an irregular topography, allowing people to find a place where they feel comfortable and sit down. The interior space, cloaked in the translucent mesh, creates the sensation of a soft white spatial membrane, only allowing the wind, sounds, and smells of the port in. It is a kind of an inverted island and a new form of space that is different from rigid architectural spaces made with conventional floors, walls, and ceilings.

While our sense of vision is diminished, our sense of hearing, touch and smell are enhanced, allowing us to experience the place with all of our senses. Though small, this is an ambitious work designed to provide a new architectural experience."

Though Fujimoto's claims of amplifying senses may be a stretch, the pavilion is impactful and does draw people in. The novel formal and material language catches the eye from afar, both as a ghostly mirage in the daylight and as a glowing jewel in the evening. The unexpected intimacy within encourages gathering and conversation within small groups.



12

Reflections

The following are personal reflections on the research and case studies, summarised as a set of recommendations for the design of small public buildings.

Be openly accessible
Small public buildings should be welcoming for many different people. They should be inviting and legible, signalling their openness to visitors. They should be accessible to people of different ages and abilities.

Create spaces for difference
Small public buildings should allow for different uses and user groups, offering settings for different preferences. They should be spaces that cultivate mutual respect between strangers and allow for overlapping uses. They should offer spaces that are visible and open, allowing strangers to see each other within and through the building.

Be relevant
Small public buildings should be relevant to people and place, fulfilling a latent need or desire. They should co-locate activities that are purposeful and specific with activities that are ambiguous and indeterminate. They should be effective in serving their use yet offer opportunities to dwell, meander and explore.

Welcome the unexpected
Small public buildings should be open-minded and loose fit to allow for unexpected uses. They should offer both specificity and indeterminacy in its spaces and programs. They should invite curiosity and offer moments of contrast from everyday experience.

Be attractive
Small public buildings should draw people towards it. They should contrast in some way from the surrounding context to be legible and identifiable from the everyday. They should be comfortable yet stimulating to encourage repeat visitation.

Be meaningful
Small public buildings should engage with the senses to create moments of significance. They should offer experiences that make visiting worthwhile. They should be highly legible and provide clear cues for use and occupation.

Have some joy
Small public buildings should connect us to nature in some way and amplify the beauty of the world. It should remind us of our shared humanity and the joy that can be found in small moments.

13

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Byera Hadley and his travelling scholarship bequest. It has been an educational legacy that continues to build a community of passionate, life-long learners.

Thank you to the NSW Architects Registration Board for building on the legacy, administering the scholarship and providing me with the opportunity to travel and visit projects in Japan that I have long admired. This scholarship has provided an incredibly enriching, formative experience and I look forward continuing architectural practice with the same playful optimism and fearless experimentation embodied in the projects I had the privilege of visiting.

14

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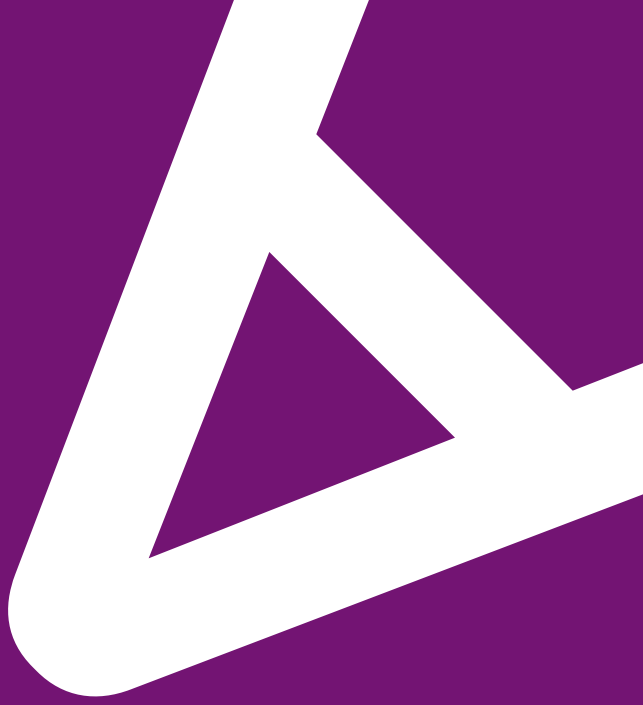

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A publication of the NSW Architects Registration Board 2018
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