

Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa
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Essay

Inventing New Hierarchies

By Eve Blau

The approach is carefully choreographed. As always, there are many options. The building has glass walls and many points of entry. Pathways woven among carefully preserved memorial trees (their twisted trunks braced by bamboo poles), curve in intersecting arcs across the grass and around the circumference of the perfectly cylindrical building, and toward the four entrances that make the building accessible from multiple directions. The glass outer walls are both reflective and transparent depending on the time of day, angle of the sun, and weather. At times they allow one to see deep into the center of the building and, in places, through to the opposite side. At other times they become reflective, bouncing back refracted images of trees, houses, and bodies moving among them; their glass surfaces layering glimpses of nature with self-reflection as they project images of the mind's eye through the spaces of the building and into the imagination.

Inside, the options multiply. Each space is shaped into an independent volume with its own distinctive proportions, visual access, and scale in relation to the spaces around it. Yet, each particularized space is also intricately interwoven with those around it through a carefully calibrated network of transparent, interstitial spaces. It is a non-hierarchical structure—a field configuration—that operates in terms of two orders of transparency. The first is a functional transparency that articulates the programmatic logic of the plan and clarifies patterns of movement through it. The second is a visual transparency, which cuts across the logic of the plan and introduces a contradictory optical pattern of connections and disconnections that adds layer upon layer of visual information to the abstract information figured in the plan. Because of the many layers of glass, the walls not only reflect and refract the spaces they enclose, they also visually project those spaces onto, through, and beyond one another. The effect creates visual complexity and spatial layering. But, the multilayered transparencies also articulate the architecture and reveal its social agenda; they show the potential of each space to be open and closed, to be connected and separate from the others, to offer solitude and society, and to create places of rest and activity. The transparencies allow users of the architecture to orient themselves while heightening their awareness of their own relationships to things and spaces around them. All of this can be read from the architecture itself.

The building is the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, which was designed by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of the architectural firm, SANAA. Completed in 2004, the museum was SANAA's first major public building. The museum itself is a hub of activity at all times of the day. It is a place where visitors, mostly urban citizens of all ages—preschoolers transported in lightweight wagons, mothers with infants, well-behaved groups of school children in uniforms, 20-something art students, office workers stopping for lunch, shoppers meeting between errands for tea, old age pensioners observing the scene—come to spend a part of their day. The building contains exhibition galleries, a small permanent collection (including commissioned works by James Turrell, Patrick Blanc, Olafur Eliasson, and Mathieu Briand), a restaurant-cafe, shop, and other museum amenities, but also a nursery, day care facility, public library, lecture hall, theatre, and meeting rooms. The museum-specific functions are clustered in the center of the building, the communal functions around the periphery. When it rains, which it often does in Kanazawa, the museum building comes alive as the outer public zones fill with people and organized activities. At dusk, one can see deep into the central core, and along the grid of glazed corridors and passageways that penetrate the exhibition zone.

When it opened, the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum was celebrated as a new kind of cultural institution in Japan in which high art and daily life mix. In fact, that synthesis has deep roots in traditional Japanese culture. The involvement of art in daily life is ritually enfolded in the Japanese Tea Ceremony in which aesthetic forms shape social and cultural practices into a mode of being in

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which art and life are inextricably intertwined. As it developed in the 17th century, the Japanese “Way of Tea” was understood as bringing the aesthetic and lived worlds together into a unified, if ritualized, practice. At Kanazawa, that synthesis is never ritualized. Instead, it “permeates the consciousness, influencing it subtly.”¹ The originality of the Kanazawa Museum is not a function of the program, but of the architecture.

Sejima and Nishizawa are concerned with exploring the cognitive possibilities of architecture, how the built work can impact the way in which we know our world and ourselves and the processes by which knowledge and understanding are acquired through experience. Analysis goes far beyond the functional considerations of program; it is based on intimate engagement with the details and dynamics of lived experience in all its multiscalar contemporary complexity. The capacity to make the strange seem familiar makes the architecture itself at once accessible and remote. No matter how abstract the forms, there is always something familiar about the spaces they create. In referencing SANAA’s buildings, Koji Taki has said, “One’s body slips into, without any resistance, the abnormality of contemporary society.”²

The capacity to seem remote and accessible at the same time derives, I would suggest, from the logic of the work itself. The structural organization of Sejima and Nishizawa’s buildings—from small houses to museums to large institutional buildings—operates in terms of an inherently contradictory (double) spatial logic that is predicated on combining the maximum independence of parts with the closest possible interrelation among them. The tension between these logics operates at all scales of the work; it generates the geometry of the plans, the proportions of the volumes, and the material properties of the structures. The dialectical logic of independence and interconnection also generates the highly performative visual layering of the glazed surfaces of so many of their buildings and the nonhierarchical structure of their spatial organization. It also accounts for the perceived contradiction between the physical organization of the spaces (the information inscribed in the plan) and the visual experience of those spaces—a contradiction that opens up a cognitive gap between ways of knowing the architecture; between information and experience. In each successive work the relationships become increasingly complex and the experience of the spaces intensifies. In the Toledo Glass Pavilion (2006), for example, the doubling of the glazed walls increases the physical independence of the parts, but also increases the visual connection between them. The multiple layers of glass add a third order of ‘intramural’ transparency to the functional and visual transparencies of the Kanazawa museum that transforms the material transparency of the walls into perceptual opacity. In the New Museum (2008), the layering is vertical and surfaces are opaque; the transparency is conceptual and operates proportionally in terms of choreographed shifts in scale and dimension.

For SANAA, the double spatial logic of independence and interconnection produces what Sejima and Nishizawa call “public space.” This is a space defined by human activity not by terms of ownership, access, or formal typology. Public space allows one to be alone and in company at the same time. It is a condition predicated on freedom and flexibility of use and it provides its users with both independence and connection. Sejima and Nishizawa often use the metaphor of the park to describe the options that such spaces afford: “In a park you can join a big group, but at the same time, somebody could be next to you alone, reading a book or just drinking juice.”³ This is a fundamentally urban and civic conception of public space. It is a structure that is both carefully calibrated and radically open to experience and inhabitation; it seeks the urban in the architectural and finds the private in the public. Its character is to provide a clear organizational structure and many options for using and experiencing the space.

Like the spatial logic of their architecture, the organization of SANAA’s practice is also a non-hierarchical structure, and is predicated on combining independence with interconnection. Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue

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Nishizawa began working together in the early 1990s, when Nishizawa joined Sejima's office. In 1995 they formed SANAA, a partnership originally conceived as a way to enter international competitions. Since then, Sejima and Nishizawa have worked together as SANAA on international and large-scale institutional projects, while also maintaining their own separate and independent practices (Nishizawa formed his own office in 1997), which tend to focus on smaller local projects. All three entities are housed in the same single-story warehouse building in Tatsumi, where they share a loosely divided large open space that looks out onto Tokyo Harbor.

Within the office, design is developed collaboratively between the partners, with input, especially at the start of a project, from many people in the office. The organization of the work is almost purely experimental; concepts are developed and options are tested, studied, and redesigned in countless physical and digital models that are examined under "laboratory conditions." The rule of thumb is that "if different options are not realized, the project doesn't exist...every option must have a plan, drawing, and a model..."⁴ As a result, the office is piled high with study models, hundreds of which are generated for each project. Every stage in the process of conception of a project, every change in design, each decision is worked out in the studio (and often on site as well), in three-dimensions, using different materials, and at different scales.

The serial nature of these methods: testing multiple options in a linear progression before developing any one design, are often seen as aligning SANAA's work with art practices. The process, as I have suggested elsewhere, is more accurately understood as aligned with experimental methods of scientific investigation. In science, experimentation is an operation carried out under controlled conditions in order to discover something unknown or to test a hypothesis or law. It involves a set of protocols adopted in uncertainty. The objective is discovery by pushing the boundaries of knowledge.

Experimentation in architecture, as Manfredo Tafuri pointed out, "is...constantly taking apart, putting together, contradicting, and provoking...Its innovations can be bravely launched towards the unknown, but the launching pad is solidly anchored to the ground... its real task is not subversion but widening;" the production of knowledge is the goal.⁵ In architecture, just as in science, it is not enough to launch the experiments, one has to study the results—"to check the effects on the public" is the way Tafuri put it—and act on them, if the experiments are to generate new knowledge. Experimentalism defined in this way is predicated on the actuality of the built work in physical space. Materiality gives the architectural object its own agency to produce knowledge—beyond the projection of the hypothesis and the intentionality of its author—to act on the social and physical world.

Sejima and Nishizawa insist on the physical instantiation of architectural ideas in the built object in physical space. Again, materiality gives the architecture agency. The operative concept in this formulation is what they call *atmosphere*, which, as Nishizawa explains, "has two meanings for us. One relates to the surroundings of the building and the other has to do with space. One... does not exist before the building is constructed. The other...exists before the building is constructed."⁶ Atmosphere is not a thing, but a condition that is negotiated; a kind of engagement that entails reciprocity and meaningful contact over time. It emerges out of the interactions between the built object and its physical and social environments and the constant and consequential negotiation of relative conditions of boundary, connection, sequence, and scale. Atmosphere, in other words, puts a critical distance between the work and its author—a distance that opens the work to an indeterminate aesthetic experience and the interactive construction of meaning with the users of the architecture. It gives the architectural object its own agency to produce knowledge beyond the intentionality of its author, and to act on the social and physical. Ironically, precisely this quality of SANAA's architecture—accessibility in terms of use—has made it seem inaccessible in terms of the ideas that generate it.

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Yet Sejima and Nishizawa are not alone in conceptualizing the agency of the built work in experimentalist terms. A century ago, Otto Wagner, the Viennese architect of the fin-de-siècle claimed that the built work of architecture produces *effects* that “frequently act like a *revelation to the creator* of such works. They are, as it were, the counterpoint of the architecture.”⁷ What Wagner conceived as the counterpoint of architecture—its capacity to produce its own form of knowledge—corresponds to SANAA’s conception of the cognitive instrumentality of architecture to generate *atmosphere*—a new form of experience. It also relates to what Mies van der Rohe called the *betonte Leere* (punctuated void) of his houses of the 1920s—the performativity of the architecture and its openness to experience and disparate acts of inhabitation and use, which make the architecture itself immanent. For Rem Koolhaas, architecture’s agency is conceived in urban terms as the staging of uncertainty, or, generating conditions that set in motion urban processes with indeterminate outcomes. Whether conceptualized as *counterpoint*, *immanence*, *atmosphere*, or the *staging of uncertainty*, the generation of a “new” or “other” condition is predicated on the actuality of the built work of architecture in lived space.

But most important, SANAA’s conception of *atmosphere* actualizes the *operative* and *strategic* rather than the *formal* qualities of architecture. It privileges the *intellectual* over the phenomenological apprehension of form and space. As such, it has little in common with the affect-driven, non-oppositional stance of the *post-critical* and its anti-dialectical terms of engagement.⁸ It is closer to the process of engagement entailed in Peter Sloterdijk’s concept of *explicitation*, a process by which some latency (physical, social, phenomenal), is rendered explicit through engagement. For Bruno Latour, Sloterdijk’s *explicitation* offers a means of conceptualizing design in terms of action, as intervention and interpretation, a process that never begins from scratch, but is always working on something that already exists. (The most intelligent designers, Latour notes, never start from a *tabula rasa*.) In this schema, design has broad agency and responsibility; everything (Latour claims) is, and has to be, designed, including nature. Design is properly conceived as generating *projects* rather than *objects*, producing *practices* and *things* with agency.⁹

For Sejima and Nishizawa, emphasis on the physical instantiation of architectural ideas likewise links design to responsibility. It implies a position that is critical in terms of its social and ethical commitments. In SANAA’s practice, that commitment entails rigorous interrogation of conventional hierarchies of spatial organization and form. Each new project is the occasion for rethinking fundamental architectonic relationships—of part to part, part to whole, organization to structure, materials to techniques, light to space, surface to volume, edge to boundary, interior to exterior—as well as for recalibrating scalar relationships between building, city, landscape, and territory. This is especially evident in Sejima and Nishizawa’s small houses. In *House in a Plum Grove* (2003) for example, conventions of the domestic plan are discarded in favor of multi-use spaces conceived in terms of potential activities (rather than prescribed functions) and organized in a complex three dimensional volumetric plan. As in the *Almere Stadstheater* (2007) and *Toledo Glass Pavilion*, all circulation space is eliminated; movement, instead of being channeled, filters through adjacent volumes. Public and private are relational and contingent, rather than absolute conditions, they are determined by acts of inhabitation rather than functionally designated space. Private space is generated by withdrawing from company, public space by interaction. Both can occur anywhere. Nishizawa’s *Moriyama House* (2006) splits the domestic program apart into separate volumes distributed across the lot that can be combined in any number of ways to form individual dwelling units, and that make the boundary between the space of the city and space of dwelling indeterminate and fluid.

The ultimate objective is the invention of new hierarchies. It is clear, from even the most cursory look at the plans of SANAA’s larger institutional buildings, that the organization of space is conceived very differently from the channeled flow of space in modernist planning. Instead of open plans with

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shifting planes and grids, SANAA constructs discrete volumes. With few exceptions, designated circulation space is eliminated entirely from their plans. Instead, the individually shaped volumes establish their own organizational logic in terms of physical relationships of size, scale, proportion, proximity, and juxtaposition. In Kanazawa, Almere, and Toledo, for example, nothing exists on its own terms; the identity of any part is contingent on its physical relationship to others. Space is filtered rather than channeled. Its use is left up to the users: "one receives suggestions from the building up to a certain point, but after that one discovers the building oneself."¹⁰ Inhabitation requires constant and active decision on the part of the user. "Sometimes a very rigid grid gives you freedom, although the form is not free," Sejima points out.¹¹ The Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne (2010) is a new departure in this sense. A single open space between parallel undulating horizontal planes, it configures a vertically differentiated landscape; a terrain where vantage point and topography suggest (without dictating) patterns of use and inhabitation.

SANAA's plans, one could say, operate as abstract notational systems for the three dimensional performance of the architecture. They constitute a system—much like the score of a musical composition—that is both carefully orchestrated and radically open to interpretation and variation. The result is typological indeterminacy of the spaces that allows for enormous flexibility of use. As Yuko Hasegawa points out, Sejima and Nishizawa have "a unique way of relating to their creations: they simply want to place their architecture and observe what will happen, rather than predicting and planning what effect it will have on the surrounding environment...The architectural design reveals itself in time and is given its "wholeness" through the relationship with the people who use the building."¹² The architecture constructs a set of conditions that demand action on the part of the user. For SANAA, in other words, the agency of the architecture is linked to the agency of the user.

But—and this is one of the most important qualities of SANAA's architecture that signals its significance for practice today—flexibility of use is combined in their work with resilience of form. Even large multifunctional institutional structures like the Almere Stadstheater and Naoshima Ferry Terminal (2006) can accommodate the mess and disorder of intensive use and programmatic overlap without loss of integrity or coherence. Is there (as has often been suggested) something quintessentially Japanese about the combination of resilience of form and flexibility of use, of elegance and toughness, in SANAA's architecture? Might these qualities be identified as connecting SANAA's architecture to traditional Japanese attitudes toward form and space making, in particular, attitudes toward change, impermanence, and mutability related to Buddhist conceptions of temporality and sensitivity to nature? Sejima and Nishizawa resolutely deny any interest in explicit reference to Japanese traditions in their work. "We never refer to anything from Japanese traditional buildings," they have said. "We do not transform Japanese elements into our own architectural language. We might be inspired by history or tradition, but this could come from any country or culture." They insist "it is all about context."¹³ That context includes Japan's recent urban experience during the Bubble Economy of the 1980s, during which time Sejima began practicing. It is also the context of her joining the office of Toyo Ito during the accelerated cycles of construction, obsolescence, destruction, and reconstruction that defined architectural practice in the years before the Bubble burst. Sejima has acknowledged the influence on her own practice, of Ito's highly evocative conceptions of architecture in terms of *action and event*, the *space of flows*, and the Deleuzian concept of *urban nomads*, as well as his experiments with lightweight industrial materials and products, which were among the most innovative and consequential responses to the architectural conditions and culture of obsolescence generated by the Bubble economy. Sejima's early Platform Houses and Pachinko Parlors (of the late 1980s and early 1990s) and can be understood within that context, as assimilating the example of Ito to engage temporality in architecture. In the houses, which she and Nishizawa designed together and individually in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and especially the Saishunkan Seiyaku Women's

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Dormitory (1991) and the Gifu Kitagata Apartments (2000, begun in 1994), that exploration expanded into a fundamental rethinking of type—what Sejima and Nishizawa have called the invention of new hierarchies in their work.

For SANAA the invention of new hierarchies constitutes an engagement with contemporary culture, especially with the smoothness of “the world of information” with its porous boundaries and invisible, omnipresent networks. “Although information society is invisible,” Sejima insists, “architecture must have some sort of relationship with such a society.”¹⁴ What is at stake here is architecture’s agency in the media-dominated world of the early 21st century. This was the theme of the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale *People Meet in Architecture*, which was curated by Sejima. The first Architecture Biennale since 2000 to be curated by a practicing architect, and the first ever to be curated by a woman, it was a summons to engage the cultural significance of the world of information for architecture (not just the formal possibilities of the new media) through the medium of architecture itself. In other words, it was a call for architecture to engage the media environment in terms of its own techniques and practices and to stake out a position in relation to the conditions of its own making and use.

Clearly, Sejima and Nishizawa’s search for new hierarchies is not about self-conscious form making. Instead, it is directly related to SANAA’s engagement with the cultural smoothness of the information society, and the extraterritorial spatial and economic logics, flexible and porous boundaries, and social dynamics of the world of information. The resulting typological indeterminacy of their architecture is one reason that SANAA’s work travels so easily; fitting into radically different contexts: on the shores of Lac Lemman amid the 1970s slab blocks of the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne; among the gritty warehouses and tenements of New York’s Bowery; and in tiny lots tucked into the dense residential neighborhoods of Tokyo. It is not insignificant in this regard that SANAA use different units of measurement depending on where they are building: in Japan they use meters or standard Japanese (tatami) units of measure, in Europe they use meters, and in the U.S. they often use feet and inches.

This is architecture, conceived in the active terms of communication, information exchange, and interaction, that finds the local in the global and seeks the collective in the individual. While focusing on the particular conditions of site, program, materials, and structure, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa’s architecture also engages with the larger cultural and economic conditions of its making—the cultural smoothness and connectivity of the world of information—to invent new hierarchies that produce hybrid, flexible environments and explore action-based logics for organizing space to give users the agency to inhabit them as they wish.

The objective is the promotion of freedom. In practice this constitutes a conception of design, in which the particular solution is always conceived as one among a multitude of viable options, and where each condition seems to contain its opposite within it: transparency of opacity, openness of closure, independence of connection, regularity of flexibility, and clarity of obscurity. The contradictions that proliferate in the ongoing process of exploration are (what Tafuri identified as) the widening capacity of experimental architectural practices that combine control with indeterminacy and coherence with open-endedness.

Sejima and Nishizawa’s architecture and the example of the SANAA practice are important for today. Both are profoundly optimistic, humane, clear-eyed, curious and responsible and characterized by openness, independence, and fascination with the world we live in. Implicit in the hybridity of the work is the recognition that design has broad agency and responsibility; that architecture must stake out a position in relation to the conditions of its own making; interdisciplinarity extends far beyond

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the design disciplines; and the true significance of globalization is that it forces us to rethink categories and to invent new hierarchies.

¹ Quotation from Yuko Hasegawa, "Polyphony," in Kanazawa Nijūisseiki Bijutsukan, *Encounters in the 21st Century: Polyphony—Emerging Resonances*, (Kanazawa: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art and Tankosha Publishing Co., 2005), p. 34.

² Koli Taki quoted in Yuko Hasegawa, "New Flexibility," *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa / SANAA 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa*, ed. Meruro Washida (Kanazawa: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), p. 100.

³ Kazuyo Sejima quoted in *El Croquis 77[1]+99+121/122* (2004): *Sejima Nishizawa SANAA 1983–2004* (Madrid: El Croquis SL, 2007), p. 23.

⁴ Nishizawa quoted in Agustín Pérez Rubio, ed., *Houses: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa SANAA* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007), p. 15.

⁵ Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 104–5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24–25.

⁷ Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Barbara, Calif., Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), pp. 87–88. [emphasis added]

⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*. 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004)

⁹ Bruno Latour, 'A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)' in *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society*, ed. Fiona Hackney, Jonathan Glynnne and Viv Minton (Florida: Universal-Publishers, 2009), p. 5.

¹⁰ *GA Sejima Kazuyo + Nishizawa Ryue Dokuhon*, A.D.T, EDITA, Tokyo, 2005, p. 280. English translation Yuko Hasegawa, "New Flexibility," in ed. Meruro Washida, *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa / SANAA 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa* (Kanazawa: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), p. 102.

¹¹ Sejima quoted in Juan Antonio Cortés, "A Conversation with Kazuyo Sejima & Ryue Nishizawa," in *El Croquis 77[1]+99+121/122* (2004), p. 17.

¹² *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa / SANAA 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa*, ed. Meruro Washida (Kanazawa: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), p. 100–101.

¹³ Sejima and Nishizawa quoted in Kristin Feireiss ed., *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA: The Zollverein School of Management and Design, Essen, Germany* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: 2006), p. 64.

¹⁴ Sejima quoted in Alejandro Zaera-Polo, 'A Conversation with Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa', in *El Croquis 77* (2000), p. 14.

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