

Fumihiko Maki 1993 Laureate Essay

Thoughts On Fumihiko Maki

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Profoundly influenced by Jose Lluís Sert and hence steeped in the ameliorative rationalism of the early modern movement, Fumihiko Maki enjoys the reputation of consistently creating an architecture that aside from responding to society's needs, also comprises a constructional fabric which is durable and aesthetically vibrant. In this regard his practice may be fairly compared to that of Norman Foster, Gunter Benisch and Renzo Piano, all of whom, while expressively different, have displayed a similar penchant for efficient, lucid, lightweight form.

Lightness, both in fact and in metaphor, has been an emerging theme in Maki's architecture for some time and today his work invariably manifests a spatiality that derives in large measure from the immateriality of modern material. Like much of today's production his work places a particular emphasis on the membrane irrespective of whether this is an *atectonic* layering of planes or a taut skin drawn over a vaulted superstructure. Either way Maki gravitates towards an architecture that is both present and absent at the same time, like the transitory illusions of the cinema screen for which he retains a particular passion. This last came to the fore in 1990, when he entered the competition for the Palazzo del Cinema in Venice. Of this he wrote:

"Our proposal for the Palazzo del Cinema attempts to express the spirit of Venice, both external and temporal, in one striking entity: a glass palace on the water, Changing from day to night; its solid mass is gradually transformed and dissolved into a glowing festive illusion. Under the glistening of twilight, appears an alluring image of glass, a reflection of the ephemeral state of Venice seen through a screen of fog, or perhaps a vision of a world that exists only through the magic of light as in the cinema itself."

This technocratic re-interpretation of the traditional Japanese Ukiyoe or "floating-world" has hardly come easily to Maki, as we may judge from the Hillside Terrace apartments in Tokyo with which his career began in 1966 and to which he would add one fragment after another, including a recent phase, dating from 1992.

Needless to say, his syntax has changed across time, from the informal, cubic rationalism of the initial buildings, evidently indebted to Sert, to the tessellated minimalism of the middle period and the layered, light membraceous character of the last. Throughout this long haul Maki has maintained the sense of a loosely-assembled "city-in-miniature" in which interlocking, in-between spaces, paralleling the street, assure the civic character of the whole while subtly avoiding gratuitous aestheticism on the one hand and simple-minded functionalism on the other.

Two works announce the emergence of lightness as an all-pervasive theme in Maki's architecture, the Fujisawa Gymnasium, completed in 1984, and the Tepia Science Pavilion, built at Minato, Tokyo in 1989. Of the two it is the gymnasium that takes its cue from the Japanese modern tradition by re-interpreting the heavy-weight, catenary form of Kenzo Tange's Olympic Stadia of 1960. Unlike Tange's anti-seismic, megastructural heroics, however, Fujisawa is a light, athletic and critically responsive work, directly related to the ephemeral character of the late modern world. Of this work Maki has written:

"If a strong totality, with suppressed parts and a hierarchical composition are characteristic of classicist architecture, active and assertive parts are characteristic of Gothic architecture, and the early works of modern architecture. Today, I find myself more strongly attracted to the second organizational type. One reason is that working from the parts permits a freer formal interpretation of how various formal and environmental demands—including those of a historical and symbolic nature—are to be met..."

Thoughts On Fumihiko Maki (continued)

Elsewhere he will write of the profile of Fujisawa as symbolizing through its sharp but simultaneously soft outline the fundamental ambiguity of the modern world. However Fujisawa will only be the first in a series of such thin shell structures in which layered, crustaceous membranes of stainless steel are carried on long-span steel trusses, grounded in concrete podia. Within this development both the Makuhari Messe, built at Chiba in 1989 and the Tokyo Municipal Gymnasium of 1990 are equally dematerialized shell structures of a similar order.

Through such hovering forms, Maki has been able to render his concept of a fragmentary urbanism at a higher symbolic level, in which these modern “cathedrals” stand out against the chaos of the Megalopolis as civic catalysts. The highly reflective shell roofs of Fujisawa and Makuhari imply, at vastly different scales, a new kind of urban enclave with which to engender and sustain a more fluid and shifting conception of public space. With its 540 meter-long undulating metal roof (40 meters short of Paxton’s Crystal Palace) and its 120 meter span, the Makuhari Exhibition Hall dwarfs the two-way, shell roofed spans of the Fujisawa and Tokyo gymnasiums, so that one spontaneously associates its vastness with such mega-engineering works as the George Washington Bridge. Its length is such that the various ancillary structures running down its side, entry-foyer, events hall, etc., recall nothing so much as so many tugboats at the side of a transatlantic liner.

If the ultimate point of departure for Fujisawa Gymnasium resides in the Gothic, the Tepia Pavilion finds its *parti* in the Rietveld/Schroeder House of 1924 and in Le Corbusier’s Villa Shodan of 1956. And yet while Maki is indebted to these canonically modern paradigms for the overall planar, pin-wheeling, form assumed by the pavilion, the underlying order is classic, even if the implicit cubic mass and the regular columnar grid never fully materialize. Thus unlike the Iwasaki Museum and his own house, dating from the late 1970s, where an asymmetrical mass is stabilized about an axis, Tepia establishes its center of gravity in relation to a small triangular oculus set in the center of its main facade. While Tepia is planned like a palazzo about an “atrium,” little of this classicism prevails in the overall spatial organization, so that it both evokes and denies the classic to an equal degree. If, as Serge Lalat has argued, Maki proceeds by a process of crystallization, he also undermines this procedure by simultaneously engaging in an act of dematerialization. This is particularly true of his orthogonal works, such as Tepia, where the detailing of the fenestration, tends to dissolve the surface into which it is set. Thus, notwithstanding Maki’s unwavering commitment to programmatic rationality, the final expression is subtly mannered. It is, as Arata Isozaki once put it, an architecture of quotation par excellence, so that Tepia recalls not only Rietveld and Le Corbusier, but also Walter Gropius; in particular the thin-oversailing roofs and transparent cylindrical stair towers of Gropius’ Werkbund Building of 1914.

Whether Maki is *tectonic* as in the Fujisawa, or *atectonic* as in Tepia, the dematerialization of the surface persists throughout and in this regard, Maki’s work may be compared to that of Carlo Scarpa, wherein as Manfred Tafuri once put it, “one is confronted by a perverse dialectic between the celebration of form and the scattering of its parts.” And yet while Maki is willing to acknowledge his proximity to Scarpa, he also evokes an immaterial spirituality that seems totally removed from the tactile, ontological depth that is so characteristic of Scarpa’s architecture. In each instance a common cross-cultural collagiste strategy is employed, to quite different ends; Scarpa being as much influenced by the East, as Maki has been touched by the West. However, Maki’s mode of synthesis is quite unique for while his Wacoa Building combines elements drawn to an equal degree from the occident and orient, the synthesis of the two is achieved through the tradition of *sukiya*. This same procedure may be found in the Tepia Building only at a higher level of resolution. In taking its distance from the aristocratic tradition of the *shoin*, the *sukiya* manner opened itself to a wider and more heterogeneous assembly of different values. This sense of eclectic subversion, endemic to the *sukiya* style, appears as Kazuhiro Ishii has pointed out, in the categorical departure of Tepia from the *parti* the Villa Shodan.

“The transformation from the concrete of the Villa Shodan to high-tech metal, breaks abruptly with the contradictory traditional theories of the past. Symbolic of the break are the sharp corners, which relate

Thoughts On Fumihiko Maki (continued)

to the beveling of corners (*hakkake*) practiced in *sukiya* buildings, to make posts and alcove framework members look more slender.”

Unlike most of his contemporaries Maki unites within his practice two rather contradictory positions; on the one hand an ethical commitment to the provision of an architecture that is both rational and appropriate, on the other, an ironic disposition capable of acknowledging the aporias of the modern world and of confronting the ever-escalating implosion of information and development. Maki regards the inescapably disjunctive character of this last with a dispassionate, Olympian eye. Generous to a fault, he will acknowledge that the programmatic indifference of Deconstructivist Architecture as an understandable reaction to the schismatic character of our time. At the same time he remains detached and judicious, resisting, without becoming reactionary, the temptation to indulge in the plastic and iconographic excesses of the younger generation. Instead his work is informed by a disconcerting and contradictory combination of anxiety and optimism. On the one hand he remains extremely skeptical, while, on the other, he projects the Blochian idea of hope; the famous “not yet” of the Weimar Republic.

There is surely no non-Gallic architect who is more French than Fumihiko Maki for one cannot look at his career or listen to his words without being reminded of the French intellectual tradition at its best. Master architect and mandarin he turns his face towards technology in the belief that this apocalyptic demiurge carries within itself the sole seeds of our salvation. While maintaining a playful and ironic stance, Maki insists that only thought is transferable, so that when one thinks of his impeccable self-discipline one is irresistibly reminded of Le Corbusier’s immortal words: “The man who is intelligent, cold and calm has grown wings to himself.”

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