Aspen Art Museum

Rumiko Handa

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, rhanda1@unl.edu

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Reviewers A

The architect had a different approach to the structural design and design of the façade, but two separated designs are finally integrated into the building’s function. The visual connection between the internal and external structure is highly appreciated.

Reviewer B

The skin is made through a repeated structural element in the inside (roof) and the outside (façade). The repetition of a unit element achieves consistency. The building has a clear concept in its structure.
The corner of Hyman Avenue and Spring Street was chosen for the site of Aspen Art Museum.

The 47 feet tall Woven Wood Screen forms each facade.

1. entry Lobby
2. gallery elevator
3. Grand stair outdoor
4. Grand stair indoor
5. gallery 1
6. gallery 2
7. gallery 3
8. gallery 4
9. gallery 5
10. gallery 6
11. museum shop
12. education workshop
13. loading
14. lounge
15. administrative offices
16. cafe
17. roof garden sculpture terrace
18. prefunction
19. preparation/conservation

The 47 feet tall Woven Wood Screen forms each facade.
The nine-square grid exercise is further elaborated in Aspen by an introduction of another set of lines — glass enclosures.

These interior walls separate the galleries from supporting functions, also protect the art from harmful sunlight.

Paper tubes make the ceilings of the stairs to the basement and of the conference room as well as pieces of furniture.
On the top floor, the space is freed from the nine-square grid exercise except from the single wall on the west beyond which lie the kitchen and the mechanical room.

The Wooden Roof Structure takes over the geometry, the open space uniformly into $25 \times 25$ units of $4' \times 4'$ each.
By placing a line of glass behind the woven screen, the architect has turned the buffer-cum-circulation zones into a collection of intriguing spaces.

Shigeru Ban, born in Tokyo in 1957, graduated from the Cooper Union School of Architecture. In 1985, he established Shigeru Ban Architects, a private practice in Tokyo. Then in 1995, he began working as a consultant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and at the same time established an NGO, Voluntary Architects’ Network (VAN). He has been recognized through numerous awards, including the Grande Medaille France Academie d’Architecture (2004), the Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize in Architecture (2005), the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal in Architecture (2005), the National Order of the Legion of Honor in France (2009), and the Pritzker Prize (2014). He has been a professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design from 2011.
At Home in Aspen

Rumiko Handa

‘I hope when people come to the New Aspen Art Museum they will sense that this building is very much at home in Aspen and could only live here’, Shigeru Ban states in a short essay to visitors included in the museum brochure. Indeed, the way in which Ban’s design fits uniquely within its context is nothing less than extraordinary. A full appreciation of his accomplishment, however, requires a study of Aspen’s history.

Aspen, Colorado, home to just over 6,500 people, is an internationally renowned ski resort in the Rocky Mountains, having its slopes developed first in 1836. It had been used as a hunting ground by the indigenous Ute people, before silver miners settled there in 1879. The settlement was named Ute City, but soon was renamed Aspen, after the abundant trees in the environs. Mining began, a bank opened, a smeltery was built, and two railroads arrived. The city swelled rapidly, and in 1893 was the third largest city in the State of Colorado, with 10,000 residents. With amenities including an elegant hotel and an opera house, the wealthy boasted a lifestyle comparable to the social elite of any civilized city. Even after the demonetization of silver later that year, some residents remained, charmed by its remote location, brilliant sun and year-round natural beauty.

It was Walter Paepcke, a Chicago industrialist, and his wife Elizabeth who steered Aspen in a new direction. Elizabeth had visited Aspen before World War II, and in 1945 brought her husband to the scenic area. In 1949, the Goethe Bicentennial was held in Aspen. Invited speakers included the humanitarians Albert Schweitzer and the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Eero Saarinen designed an auditorium, which was a large tent structure. Paepcke then established the Design Conference, the Music Festival, and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies in 1950. These institutions are still in operation and well respected. The Paepckes’ vision has come to be known as the Aspen Idea, and today’s community continues to pride itself in its wide range of art and humanity offerings.

In fact it was with this community spirit that an idea was conceived to locate it near the Roaring Fork River was scrapped, and a more wide range of art and humanity offerings.

Ban was named the architect of a new building in 2008. After the first idea to locate it near the Roaring Fork River was scrapped, and a more urban and constrained site, at the corner of Hyman Avenue and Spring Street, was chosen. The Museum opened in August last year, following Ban’s Pritzker Prize announcement in March.

What strategies are available to the architect who intends to design a museum that fits well for a community with keen interests in arts but lacking in a distinct architectural style? Is Ban cubic design meant to be in line with the Modernist works of the Paepckes’ and subsequent times? Just across the street is in fact a box-like building with circular windows and a wooden exterior finish. Even if this and other buildings had given the architect some source of inspiration, Ban has dug a route deeper into an abstract architectural language to create his place-specific design.

Ban’s geometry for the Museum is an almost perfect example of the nine-square grid exercise, which John Hejduk developed as a part of architectural pedagogy while at the University of Texas at Austin in the 1950s. There is an obvious connection: Ban studied under Hejduk at Cooper Union. In this exercise, four intersecting lines are drawn to divide a square into nine small squares, which provide possible wall placement. At Aspen, the building’s footprint is a 100’ x 100’ square, with its north and east sides facing Hyman Avenue and Spring Street respectively. The Woven Wood Screen, 47 feet tall and one of the five important design features listed by the architect, forms each facade, made by weaving thin slats on site (photograph). 8 mm thick, each slat is a composite of a plastic core, covered with a veneer of African okoumé wood, which then is treated for durability and maintenance.

The four lines that cut through the square in the Museum are placed closer to the edges than in Hejduk’s model, making the middle areas larger than the peripheries. Programmatically, these interior walls separate the galleries from supporting functions, such as circulation spaces and administrative areas. They also protect the art from harmful sunlight, while allowing it to be enjoyed by visitors and staff members elsewhere.

The nine-square grid exercise is further elaborated in Aspen by an introduction of another set of lines — glass enclosures. By placing a line of glass immediately behind the woven screen in some areas and pulling it away in others, the architect has turned the buffer-cum-circulation zones into a collection of intriguing spaces. At the northeast corner of the building, immediately behind the woven screens, stands a large elevator, or the Moving Glass Room. The Grand Stair connecting the street to the top floor occupies the rest of the east side. A line of glass, pulled away from the woven facade, slices the stair’s width into exterior and interior sections. On the building’s north side, the sliver of space between the two parallel lines makes an entry sequence, starting with a showcase window, set back from the street, an entrance door and a lobby. On the second floor, a lounge jets out from the gallery, hanging over the showcase window below.

In adopting the abstract exercise of architectural syntax, how can the architect achieve a place-specific design? A clue is in the parallel he draws between the Museum’s processional sequence and the skier’s experience: ‘It is like the experience of skiing — you go up to the top of a mountain, enjoy the view, and then slide down’. Indeed, for a museum with no permanent collection, the view is the permanent feature. On the top floor, the space is freed from the nine-square grid exercise except from the single wall on the west beyond which lie the kitchen and the mechanical room. The Wooden Roof Structure takes over the geometry instead, the open space uniformly into 25 x 25 units of 4’ x 4’. A low translucent wall on the south edge, articulated also into 4-wide units, hides the neighboring buildings, allowing the visitors to focus on the view of the Aspen Mountain.

Following the edge of the eave, which runs diagonally from the northwest to the southeast corners of the building, one finds the Roaring Fork Valley and Independence Pass, through which the first prospectors traveled to reach Aspen. In a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, a member of the public shared how much he enjoys the view from this rooftop. With the highest real estate price in the nation, it is in fact the first publicly accessible roof deck in the town.

A last of the five design features is the Walkable Skylights, translucent plates laid in the floor to provide the space underneath with light. In addition to those in the top floor for the benefit of the second-floor gallery, there are two, more intriguing ones in the ground floor, which bring light to a gallery and the circulation/pre-function space in the basement. Both run parallel to Hyman Avenue at the northern edge of each space, providing a subtle reminder of where one stands, in relation to the city grid.

Ban travels freely between Ban the humanitarian and Ban the high-end architect, and in the Museum there are plenty of material references made to his humanitarian works. Paper tubes make the ceilings of the stairs to the basement and of the conference room as well as pieces of furniture. The Grand Stair’s sidewall is made of paper tubes cut to the thickness of the wall and piled on top of the other.

However, I saw Ban the humanitarian in the ways he has taken care of the visitors and staff members, in the way they experience the Museum. By travelling freely between the abstract syntax of a game on paper and the people’s experiences inside the building, Ban has succeeded in creating a point in the community from which people can reflect on the complexity of the natural, historical, and cultural assets Aspen has to offer.

Rumiko Handa, as Professor of Architecture at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln teaches architectural theory, history, and design. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and a B.Arch. from the University of Tokyo. Her writings have appeared in Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture; The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians; Preservation Education & Research; The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America; Design Studies, etc. She co-edited Conjuring the Real: The Role of Architecture in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (2011). Her most recent work is Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent: Designing and Appreciating Architecture as Nature (2015).