

EUROPE VERSUS ASIA

A debate between RENZO PIANO and SUSUMU SHINGU

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Moderated by Catherine Segal and William Echikson

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They come from opposite ends of the world, from two completely different urban traditions. And yet Italian architect Renzo Piano and Japanese sculptor Susumu Shingu form a winning tandem. Together, they have produced a series of prize winning buildings in both of their homelands. This fall, both men will participate in a conference in China sponsored by the Paris Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art.

Before then, the two artists discussed with World Media's William Echikson and Catherine Segal the joys and difficulties of their trans-continental collaborations and the difference of Asian and European approaches to the city.

Question : One often hears that Asians are constantly tearing down and rebuilding their cities. Is this true ?

Piano : Japan achieves permanence only by rebuilding. When you go to Rome and you touch the Coliseum, the stone you touch is the same one that was there 2.000 years ago. When you go see the temples in Kyoto, the piece of wood you touch is not the same. It has been remade at least five times.

Shingu : They are actually rebuilding the same temples every 70 years, not because they are destroyed, but out of principle.

Piano : It's not because the Japanese don't have stone. They have it but they use wood and light materials because of earthquakes. When you have earthquakes, you are instinctively obliged to use light materials, because you need less energy to stop buildings from moving. After the earthquake in Kobe, I was very happy to learn that the building we made in Osaka was unharmed. The reason was the lightness of the design.

Shingu : Cities in Japan are obliged to change due to earthquakes. Material reasons are only one explanation. It comes from our philosophy, our religion, our special way of life in Japan. There is a tendency to replace old things with new ones only because it is more efficient and economical.

Piano : In Japan, the streets at night are sacred; they are a great monument to ephemeralism. Their streets are even much better than Las Vegas. If you talk about the European cathedral as a meeting place, then in Japan this function takes place in the streets.

Question: How does this different attitude affect architectural styles ?

Piano : You can say that Europe is the culture of mass, and permanence and eternity. By contrast, the Pacific Rim, including the West Coast of the United States, is about lightness.

Shingu : I recognized this the first time I came to Italy 35 years ago. The Italian government gave me a scholarship and I came to Rome.

My first cultural shock was to realize that everything was built in massive stones, and had been here for thousands years. Italians still live with their heritage, from the Renaissance and Baroque periods and even the earlier Roman and Etruscan periods. But both the architecture and the food were a bit heavy for me. That is the reason why I moved to kinetic sculpture. I do not have as much strength as the Italians to carve massive marble blocks.

So in a way, I started to be very Japanese after I lived in Italy.

I also realized then that Japanese have a special sensibility for the changing seasons. In Japan the four seasons are clearly divided. Traditional houses are designed to be adjustable to the changes of the seasons. I want to make something modest that co-exists with nature and shows the beauty and greatness of nature. I don't want to make a heavy man-made monument which fights against nature. All of my works move with the natural energies of wind and water. They change expressions in different weather and in different seasons.

I hoped that we would use new technology to reinvent the philosophy of co-existing with nature. Perhaps I am a little romantic, but I fear that Japan is now losing this ability to breathe in nature.

Piano : You often hear about the pomposity of European culture. Instead, we could talk about the humility of Asian culture. Their monuments compete against time, not with power and mass, but with the spirit.

Of course all of this has been lost in the modern building that has taken place over the past thirty years. What is left is somewhat perverse pleasure to remake everything for money. In Japanese towns, land is too valuable. The cost of building is never more than ten percent of the total. That's the opposite relationship from Europe.

Question : Is it really possible for a city to forget its past ?

Piano : I spent one week in Kyoto talking about this. "Should we demolish that part of the city ?" the Mayor asked me. I was astonished. "You must be mad," I said. You cannot find the mayor of Berlin or Paris asking "What do you think, can I demolish the Marais ?"

Shingu : In Italy, there are many friendly piazzas. In Spoleto, a small town between Rome and Florence, it is possible to use the central piazza down the steps in front of the cathedral of the city for multiple purposes, opera, theater and a big market. And it was built hundreds of years ago.

In Japan, they started to make new plazas in front of buildings and in the center of shopping malls. People have just started to think about how to use these plazas. Last year I did an open-air theater in a park where there is my water sculpture. I invented a story and choreographed. It started at twilight and the sky was full of stars when the show was over. It was very successful and so much fun.

But it was not easy to organize such a show in a park. We had to advertise in many ways in order to bring a lot of people there and arrange special bus services from the station to the park.

Question : How do the two of you work together ?

Piano : In the case of the Genoa harbor, we spoke about using sculptures like sails. Although you don't understand exactly, you see something that you recognize. This is part of the game and ambiguity. Art is ambiguous in a positive sense.

In Shingu's work, there is sudden unpredictable movement and then quiet. It's like watching TV. Many evenings in Paris, I smoke my cigar and watch your sculpture. It is better than watching TV.

Shingu : That is what I like when I'm working with Renzo. Other architects always ask me to show them my sketches. Then they tell me where my artwork would go. To them, it isn't necessary to fit the concept of the building. It is simply added. I think sculptures must serve an urban function, not necessarily a practical use for daily life but a very strong meaning.

In the Amsterdam Museum of Science, we are putting nine sculptures, five wind and four water sculptures. Windmills and water mills are part of Holland's long history. We do not want to imitate typical mills but I hope it will evoke something familiar to the Dutch.

Question : And how is Renzo Piano's work considered in Japan ?

Shingu : His Kansai airport in Osaka shocked lots of people. It is very different compared to the other modern buildings in Japan.

Piano : The first day I went to the island I was asked, what is the final color for the structure ? The land was completely empty. There were not any foundations. I told them I had said it would be gray, and they said please but tell us exactly which color. They need to know everything. Our culture is very experimental. Galileo said, "Provando e riprovando" which means trying and retrying.

Now my Japanese client has come to see me because he has a big problem. The airport has some 30,000 visitors a day, not passengers, but visitors.

Question : What is your ideal city?

Piano : An old city. I don't want to be nostalgic, but it is true.

In the country you are like a bird flying around and when you go to the city you discover how great it is.

Shingu : We still have to build my ideal city. I live outside of the town because I think we need space, and water and wind. I can accept the proximity of the city because I live outside of it. People want to have my sculptures in the cities because they are under the impression they bring nature with them.