

## *The Virtues of Modernity*

ARATA ISOZAKI

I am very pleased to return to Tehran after thirty years, my last visit being in the middle of the 1970s. As a practising architect I have created many different types of buildings over the past forty years, most of them in Japan. I have also written a number of theoretical texts about contemporary architecture and the historical architecture of Europe and Japan. My thoughts in standing in Tehran today turn to the past and present, but also to the best ways to look ahead to the future.

The study of traditional architecture in Japan is increasing, just as Iranians today are interested in their own past. About 150 years ago, Japan started its so-called modernisation. At the beginning of that period we had only traditional Japanese-style architecture that had of course been influenced by China and Korea. In the latter part of the nineteenth century we received strong influences from Europe which were historically oriented buildings born of the Victorian period. Only later did the so-called Modern Movement arrive in Japan. For more than two generations there was a conflict within the country about how to keep some character or specific meaning of traditional Japanese architecture while integrating Modernism.

The middle of the twentieth century brought what we might call the first evidence of globalisation to Japan with the arrival of the International Style of architecture. Again, many Japanese architects debated about the proper way to make use of these trends in our country. The architect Kenzo Tange was my teacher and he actively sought ways of combining modern and Japanese architecture. Many of his aesthetic ideas had to do with Japanese tradition, but he was convinced of the virtues of modernity. With structures like those he designed for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, Kenzo Tange came to be recognised even outside Japan as having created a specifically Japanese version of Modernism. This is when I was starting out as an architect, and it meant that I had to find other directions, to develop other ideas.

Around that time I started studying not only modern architecture but also the history of architecture – traditional Japanese architecture, but also that of Europe. I came to understand the solutions found in different parts of the world in the past and to begin to see relations between these methods. I was determined not to simply follow a modern style, but, by enriching my thoughts with the

learning of the past, I sought to create something new. And much of my thought has to do with bringing the past and the present together. I published books about the history of architecture at the same time as I practised as an architect. I became involved in the so-called Metabolist movement of the 1960s that imagined projects related to the future of the city, and its society.

I have heard myself referred to on occasion as a “Post-Modern” architect. If it is true that in the late 1960s I was determined to make constructive use of historical elements, I do not think I really fit into what Charles Jencks called Post-Modernism. My concern with the past was more one of thought than of appearances. How do we define the concept of architecture? I did design some buildings in the 1980s that were published as examples of Post-Modernism, but, again, I sought actively to avoid following any specific style, and to somehow shift the meaning of the elements of architecture. This is what I would call a post-modern way of thinking but not a Post-Modern style of historical quotations.

In the early 1990s information technology began to change our way of designing. Many of my friends, who were indeed of the Post-Modern generation, suffered because they were familiar with what I would call an analogue form of tracing historic elements. They could not keep up with the new trends. Personally this did not pose a problem for me because I did not reuse historical elements in that way. I do have a handwritten design method, but in my office everyone uses computers and my thoughts can be transmitted in this new digital way. Surely we will soon be able to use computers as tools to develop the forms themselves, and this is what I call the process of digitalisation.

I am sure that in Iran many are familiar with my work up through the 1990s. I have chosen to focus more on what I have done in the past three years, in good part through competitions. In competitions, architects are asked to work very rapidly and, despite the aid of the computer, one always lacks the time necessary to fully develop ideas.

A competition I recently lost concerns the Florence Railway Station (pl. 121). The stations in Florence were built in about 1935 under the influence of Mussolini and they are situated on the edge of the town so as to preserve the historic core. A very rapid service has now been laid for Florence and the trains will arrive twenty-five metres underground. The end of the building I proposed was about five hundred metres long and fifty metres wide – like an aircraft carrier. Inspired by the Italian Futurist idea of cars, trains and aircraft in movement, I imagined a sort of airport, a contemporary transportation node conceived around the dynamics of movement (pl. 120). There is a large platform, where helicopters can land and there would be a restaurant with a view of the cathedral and the rest of the city. Because of the height of the building this was strictly limited; the platform was to be sixteen metres high.

For the same city, Florence, I was asked a few years ago by several international architects to make a proposal for the city square and exit from the Uffizi Museum (pls. 122, 123). The Uffizi has significant problems because it was originally designed for the Medici. Now, of course, it serves as a great museum, but it is so popular you have to queue three to four hours to get in. The entrance is one problem, but so is the capacity of the building. The difficulty for the architect is to respond to the historical situation, and at the same time to create a new city square.

I also recently worked on the Caixa Forum in Barcelona, Spain (pls. 124-126). Located near the Barcelona Pavilion designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, this is a contemporary art gallery. Because we could not touch the exterior of that building, my proposal was for an underground gallery with a kind of secret garden with a tree-like structure.

Another recent project concerns a concert hall and a library for Shenzhen, a city with a population of seven million, in China. The concert hall and library would have a common entrance with an atrium supported by four tree-like structures. I used forms that were more geometric than organic for the tree structures, covering one side in gold and the other in silver.

In Doha, the capital of Qatar, we were asked to create a complex containing the national library, a science and natural history museum and a ‘space theatre’ which is next to the science museum and natural history museum (pls. 127, 128). It is a kind of roofed plaza with four columns supporting the structure. We created this so that spectators would see the fireworks displays that are launched regularly from an island in the bay of Doha. If you look at my earlier work, from the 1960s, you may be familiar with my imaginary project called “The City in the Air”. All the city functions would have been set in the sky on a series of columns. When the Emir of Qatar looked at my book and found my city project there he asked me, why not use this idea for the new national library?

And so it seems that ideas continue to live even when we imagine that they are forgotten. It is in the study of architectural tradition that I have found much of the inspiration for my architecture. By looking at the past we learn not to imitate, but if we look more closely, we can see the ideas behind structures – the ways in which they were conceived. That is the real lesson of the past and the way forward to the future.

*For projects by Arata Isozaki, the reader is referred to pls. 118-130.*



118.



119.

118, 119. Arata Isozaki, Isozaki Atea, Bilbao, Spain, 2001.

120. Antonio Sant'Elia, "Station for Aeroplanes and Trains with Funicular Railways and Elevators Connecting Three Street Levels", 1914, ink and pencil on paper, Musei Civici, Como, Italy.



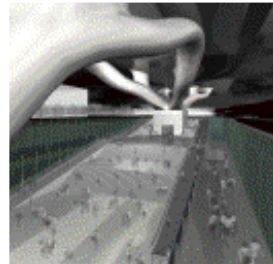
120.

121. Arata Isozaki, new Florence Station competition scheme, Florence, Italy, 2002.

122, 123. Arata Isozaki, new exit for the Uffizi Museum, competition scheme for Piazza Castellani, Florence, Italy, 1998.



122.



121.



123.



124.



125.



126.

124-126. Arata Isozaki, new gate to the Caixa Forum Cultural Centre, Barcelona, Spain, 2002.

127, 128. Arata Isozaki, Qatar National Library, Doha, Qatar, 2005.

129, 130. Arata Isozaki, Distrito 38 for Zona Franca, Barcelona, Spain, 2002.



127.



128.



129.



130.