





The Japanese believe that there is beauty in humility, strength in flexibility and power in subtle, rather than grand, gestures. Although Japanese architect Arata Isozaki is considered in his own country to be a heretical renegade, cavorting in all manner of Westernized forms and practices, his Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), which opens next month in Los Angeles, is clearly influenced by his native traditions.

cruise past the monolithic office and hotel towers without a second glance routinely pull to the curb of Grand Avenue between Second and Fourth streets to gape in pleasure and awe at Isozaki's rosy building.

"In the end," the architect has said, "the museum was like a small piece of stone beneath a giant forest of tall trees. I designed a small piece of jewelry instead, to be that stone in the forest." It takes a kind of artistic

appreciated his free-wheeling, problem-solving ability, talents of consequence given the difficult site for the museum, a wedge nudged into the heart of California Plaza, a Bunker Hill redevelopment project.

An "invisible city" is how Isozaki characterizes L.A. "The whole experience of it is temporary: lights, sounds, temperature. But no structure. It is like a star exploding. Like an infinite expansion with a void at its center. It is only land waiting to be covered. The buildings cannot rely upon the structure of the city for their meaning. They must have independent characters. Each one must create its own independent symbolic self."

Unlike many museums, which stand aloof, monuments rather than enclosures, Isozaki's MOCA makes a point of its accessibility. If you can find a place to park on Grand Avenue, you can walk right onto the MOCA plaza. It feels warm, scaled for entertaining human beings rather than for posterity. The walls of the pyramid-topped buildings are red Indian sandstone, soft to the touch, non-reflective. In color, they echo the pink granite Crocker Towers across the street, but those sleek knife-edged pylons are cold, illusionistic statues by comparison. Even the ticket booth at MOCA—a cube of forest-green aluminum scored with a magenta checkerboard—is a humorous appeal to passersby, a P.T. Barnum enticement to step right up and see the art inside.

Seen as a single building of fragmented shapes, MOCA is composed of the same simple forms as the Zen monk Sengai's most famous painting: *Circle, Square, Triangle*. Here, they are fattened to three dimensions to become a cylinder, cube and pyramid. For Sengai, these geometric shapes belong essentially to the Void; yet, according to Zen thought, it is the nature of this world that there should be disparity and intercourse between apparently dissimilar things.

Isozaki has cloaked the different forms in Southern California materials. Glass block lets light filter through the sandstone walls; there are gray-concrete vaulted ceilings in the library and board room, buffed maple floors and voluptuous white-tile curves at the museum's entrance that were inspired by none other than ... Marilyn Monroe. Yet, three of the

galleries are pure and essential Void, space as holy and charged as a Zen rock garden.

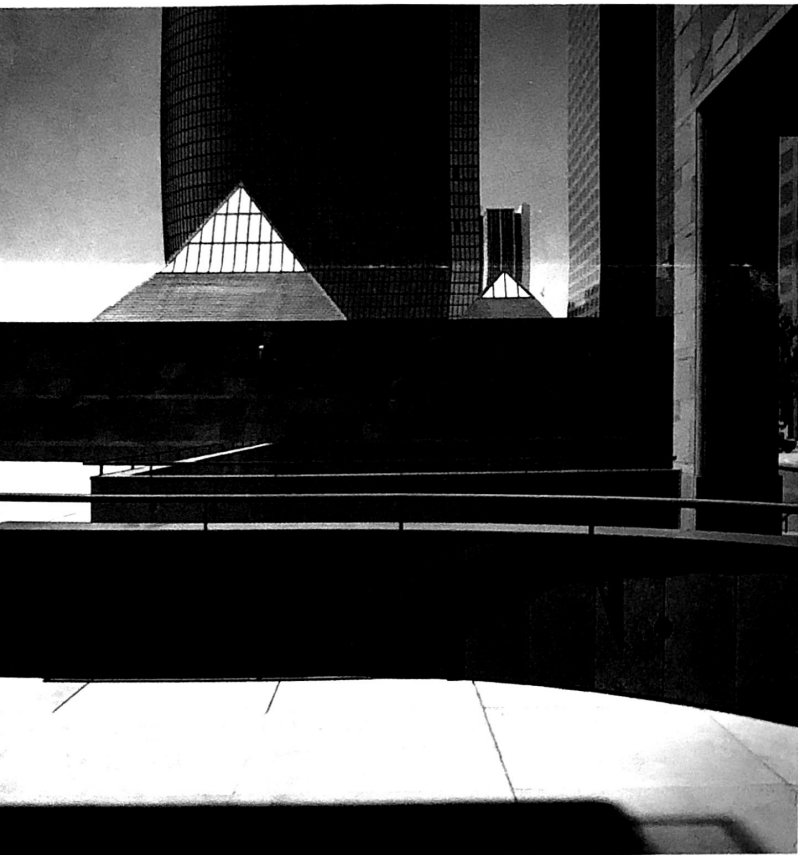
The largest gallery, topped with a soaring pyramidal skylight, is a room of such vibrant, pearly light, it is almost inconceivable that the place should be sullied by anything as mundane as art. At this writing, the room is still virginal. Partitions have not broken its perfect proportions; nails have not been driven into her snowy walls. Maybe one of Joel Shapiro's unbalanced sculptures, a figure poised unsteadily on one foot; perhaps a single, scarred ceramic bowl from the Zen tea ceremony. Anything else in that gallery seems a sacrilege.

This could be a problem. The north galleries have regulation museum ceilings, gridded with track lighting, and are divided into cubicals for the paintings of the opening exhibition, *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1985*. They look ... well, normal. But the southern galleries, suffused with cloudy, evanescent light from their frosted-glass pyramid skylights, seem to have lives of their own, as though in the dialogue between architectural space and work of art, they might represent a Zen koan. "The Buddha says: 'The ultimate law of the law is that there is no law,'" said Sengai.

A museum being the repository of visual culture, the galleries must be its heart, and the library should be its mind. MOCA's library should seduce the nonliterary world back to the joys of the written word, once the books arrive. The cool, gray-vaulted concrete room is illuminated with warm rays from the west, filtering through a window of thin onyx slabs that look like finely veined Japanese mulberry paper.

The board room, also a semi-cylinder, is paneled with brushed stainless steel to manifest the cooler and more rational spirit of budgetary meetings. The concrete auditorium is similarly fitted.

Hundreds of people in Los Angeles have given time, money and art to MOCA. It is the city's first museum wholly devoted to contemporary art, and it has been a long time coming. That MOCA's increasingly important permanent collection will be housed in Isozaki's building makes the museum seem more like a resource than a monument, less like a building than a gift.



MOCA is Isozaki's first American commission. It has turned out to be the most dramatic, witty and sophisticated contribution to the manic development of downtown Los Angeles. Just 98,000 square feet, MOCA is a fraction of the size of the neighboring forest of shiny-skinned towers, cloned one from the other by award-winning architectural firms. Attracted by the modesty and grace of the new art museum, drivers who

confidence and, perhaps, Japanese conviction to comprehend that a teaspoon of caviar can be tastier than a slab of prime rib.

Isozaki, 55, went to the University of Tokyo to study architecture as a melding of his interests in art and engineering. From the many architects considered for the museum job, he was selected in 1980 by a MOCA board that included artists Robert Irwin and Sam Francis. They