

Poetic Structure and Popular Taste

Yamasaki, Emerson, and the Delicate Balance of Form and Tectonics

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Abstract

In 1973, architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable published her sharpest criticism of Minoru Yamasaki's World Trade Center when she called it "big, but not so bold", further observing that the "Gothic trees" at the base "do not express structure so much as tart it up". Troubled by her interpretation, the architect responded with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Beauty" to describe the project's formal moves: "the line of beauty is a result of perfect economy ... our art saves material by more skillful arrangement; and reaches beauty by taking every superfluous ounce that can be spared from a wall and keeping its strength in the poetry of columns". Yamasaki adds, "This delicate wall, which you call 'dainty', is not only a very beautiful truss, but carries spans of sixty and thirty-seven feet ... To me, this is one of the gifts of our technology ..". Unfazed by Yamasaki's explanation, the critic defended her assessment, "You are the architect, and I am the critic, and it is an honest parting of the ways". This public dispute provides a backdrop against which I explore Yamasaki's use of both literary quotations in his writings and formal quotation of abstracted architectural elements in defense of a human-centered late modernism that has been labeled everything from "New Formalism" to the "sugar-spun school of architecture". By examining the World Trade Center, I revisit a corporate modern architecture that reacted against the austerity of high modernism. Today seen as outliers in the discipline, Yamasaki's projects showcased formal abstraction and repetition of historical motifs without a full embrace of the playful postmodern posturing that dominated the architecture scene by the 1970s and 1980s. In spite of their perceived shortcomings, these forms were further replicated, or quoted, in myriad "postwar vernacular" buildings across the United States in the years that followed.

Introduction

In one sense, we might consider early architectural treatises as a kind of blueprint for architectural reference; that is, a guidebook or pattern book from which architects might learn proper scale or proportion, as in Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture*. An architect might similarly have referred to Le Corbusier's "Five Points on Architecture" as a guiding set of principles for design. But the late twentieth century has brought about a new kind of architectural borrowing that has become less directed, more diverse, and even ubiquitous - what I would like to call, architectonic quotation. Take for example, an architect who uses borrowed forms and elements from other architectural or temporal contexts in a new building that is neither in the place nor the time of the original. One might read this act as a kind of "architectonic quotation", which may or may not be directly attributed to the original source, and as with language, it too may be paraphrased, or abstracted. The borrowing of historical references was of course most visibly popularised in the postmodern period, which in addition to Charles Jencks' insistence on semiotic underpinnings is also a style in which "buildings ... self-reflexively 'quote' historical characteristics and make ironic use of local context".¹ Indeed, it is generally accepted that irony was involved in much of the work produced under this aegis of postmodern architecture. To this end, Emmanuel Petit has even argued that following the destruction of Minoru Yamasaki's Twin Towers on the morning of September 11th, 2001 the ironic era of architecture came to an abrupt close barely twenty-nine years after it began with the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe on a July afternoon in St. Louis at 3:32 p.m.

Although irony and camp may be central to Jencks' argument for postmodern architecture, and later used by Jencks against Yamasaki's contributions to the profession, this paper seeks a more nuanced approach to architectonic and literary quotation in service of architectural design. Indeed, Jencks and others have suggested some of Yamasaki's formal moves exhibit Susan Sontag's definition of "camp", however, I examine Yamasaki's work in a manner that eschews this notion of frivolity and excess. Even though historical quotation is understood as part and parcel with the irony of postmodernism, I will examine an earlier form of architectonic quotation that was not yet bound up in this thoroughly-examined pairing. In so doing, I explore Yamasaki's use of both literary quotation in his writings, along with formal, architectonic quotation of abstracted architectural elements, many of which came from experiences during the architect's world travels. Together, these forms of quotation are levied in defense of a human-centered late modernism that has been labeled everything from "New Formalism" to the "sugar-spun school of architecture" - or what I will refer to as a poetic populist aesthetic. Centered on an examination of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, I explore the ways in which Yamasaki considers historical reference. This is achieved primarily through revisiting a corporate modern architecture that reacted against the austerity of high modernism by using historical references such as the Gothic arch that was labeled by critics as overt ornamentation. In his own defense, Yamasaki quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings to justify his design decisions, couching them in terms of structural efficiency rather than historically-referent ornamentation. Today seen as outliers in the discipline, Yamasaki's projects showcased formal abstraction and repetition of historical motifs without a full embrace of the playful postmodern posturing that dominated the architecture scene by the 1970s and 1980s. In conclusion, in spite of their perceived shortcomings, I consider how these forms were further replicated, or quoted, in myriad "postwar vernacular" buildings across the United States in the years that followed - a move that the architectural press considered was towards an aesthetic of popular taste.

Architectonic Quotation, Travel, and Popular Taste

On May 21 1961, Ada Louise Huxtable, not yet a full time architecture critic at the *New York Times*, asked six leading architects a seemingly simple question: What is your favorite building? Four of the architects responded with revered Roman and Italian masterpieces in Venice, Rome, Paestum and Maser. Philip Johnson and Minoru Yamasaki, on the other hand, were a little more creative. For Johnson, the answer was not even a building, but rather the celebrated rock garden at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto. He stated it was a

place where architecture was “un-understandable in western terms, but can be *felt*”.² For Yamasaki, however, the answer was even further off the beaten path of most architects. The Detroit-based Japanese American replied that the experience of the Shah’s Mosque in Isfahan was a study in “contrast and surprise”, noting further that, “Its delicacy and beautiful proportions are very thrilling. It is my belief that buildings should not be overpowering in their grandeur; here there is no sense of feeling overpowered or overwhelmed. One feels in touch with it and uplifted by it”.³ He had the good fortune to have traveled around the world in the early 1950s, a trip which left him desiring to eschew the austere lines of high modernism and instead focus on imbuing the built environment with “elements of surprise” - an idea that he acknowledges first came from his time in Japan. This was later revised to “serenity and delight” - terms he used frequently in writings and speeches to describe his aesthetic and technical ambitions for architecture, the result of which led architects and architecture critics to link his work with his contemporary Edward Durrell Stone under the rubric of “New Formalism” or “New Romanticism”.

These terms begin to point to a late modern architectural form that was born of a sense of developing architectural practices based on appropriation, or quotation, combined with the architect’s own design sensibilities. As Stone described in 1966, “There is too much conformity in contemporary architecture. I like to think of architecture as an individual creative expression ... an architect should try to find his own expression”.⁴ Yamasaki’s own design ethos had been formulated around a desire to not only soften what he perceived as the hard lines of modernism, but also to respond to the chaos and instability of the time:

The chaos brought on by political turmoil, mobility, the population explosion, and by the tremendous impact of the machine, demands that man - if he is to retain his sanity - must have a serene environment. But with serenity we must have delight - the delight of interesting silhouettes, of waterplay, of variety in the outdoor and indoor spatial experience. But serenity, the physical manifestation of the belief that man can live in quiet dignity, must unify the whole.⁵

Indeed, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Yamasaki sought to enhance urban skylines and streetscapes with carefully detailed facades that borrowed abstracted elements from his travels, including references to Gothic and Islamic arches. This might also be considered an example of what historian James Marston Fitch has described as one of the three main qualities espoused in late modern American architecture—a kind of acquisitiveness, that is, a “tendency to rely on imported forms”.⁶ In so doing, Yamasaki was in a sense, inventing a new architectural style through a subtle employment of architectonic quotation.

Big, But Not So Bold: World Trade Center

Commissioned in 1962 by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey as the Trade Center, the Yamasaki and Associates-designed World Trade Center needs little introduction. Yamasaki and his team were faced with myriad challenges, not the least of which was the small area of the site and the tight blocks that made up Lower Manhattan. From the beginning, Yamasaki saw this as “a unique opportunity to create a group of tall and low buildings, combined with a significant expanse of open space at ground level”, although the main pair of towers that were to be a focal point of the project would be astoundingly tall, a fact that concerned the architect and his associates. These early concerns about the sheer scale of the buildings were allayed by frequent visits to the Empire State Building in Midtown, reassuring the architect “that one becomes as comfortable standing next to a 100-story building as as one forty stories high ...” He suggested his associates do the same, and they too became convinced that “there was no diminution of the soul, no antlike feelings in the face of such a large object. Man had made it and could comprehend it, and its parts could be understood to relate to its whole”.⁷ Although the towers were loved by some, they had many critics, including Huxtable, the outspoken New York Times architecture critic.

One of the more pointed debates between an architect and his or her critic might be that which arose in a series of strongly-worded newspaper columns and letters between Huxtable and Yamasaki during the construction of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. As early as 1966, in an article entitled “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Buildings?”, Huxtable enumerated the many issues that plagued the architects, engineers, and planners as they sought design approval: opponents claimed that the buildings’ sheer size would “break the skyline” and be “barbaric, oversized wreckers of scale and sunlight” in lower Manhattan.⁸ However overwrought the criticism may have been, the World Trade Center did indeed tower above the city’s skyline as an unquestionable monument to power and wealth, and became the most visible landmark in the city for passengers arriving in New York by air. Given Yamasaki’s own rhetoric towards a human-scaled architecture, the monumental scale of the World Trade Center was perhaps incongruous in its own right. Although the architect supported designing buildings in a manner that meant they could be enjoyed, even revered, by society, in the 1960s he criticised design strategies that dwarfed a buildings’ users, citing a Le Corbusier-designed project in India as the consummate example:

I question even as great an artistic example as Le Corbusier’s High Court at Chandigarh. Though I admire its tremendous visual impact, its power and crudeness create the feeling of a great pagan temple where man must enter on his knees. This kind of egocentric reasoning is one of the major causes of the confusion in architectural training.⁹

Nevertheless, the high demands for leasable floor area placed on the architect and his team by the clients, coupled with the relatively small site in Lower Manhattan, all but required that the architects create a pair of towers at an outsized scale, or what a Los Angeles Times reporter called, “a monumental change in the façade of the nation’s largest city”.¹⁰

By 1973, when the Twin Towers had been completed, Huxtable published what was perhaps her sharpest criticism of the project, calling it “big, but not so bold”. She admitted the towers’ scale was impressive and technology advanced, but noted the (perhaps surprising) particular attention to the human scale, a signature move for Yamasaki. Huxtable criticised the project as decorative, disparagingly observing, “These are big buildings, but they are not great architecture. The grill-like metal facade stripes are curiously without scale. They taper into more widely spaced columns of ‘Gothic trees’, a detail that does not express structure so much as tart it up”. Huxtable asserts further, seemingly blaming the clients as well as the architects, “The Port Authority has built the ultimate Disneyland fairytale blockbuster. It is General Motors Gothic”.¹¹ This was neither the first nor the last time people referred to Yamasaki’s formal aesthetic as an abstracted, appropriated Gothic arch - a kind of architectonic quotation with which the architect did not totally agree. In his own monograph, *A Life in Architecture*, Yamasaki argues against the idea that the inspiration for the Federal Science Pavilion (1962) was Gothic architecture, suggesting, “While the form of the arch may be Gothic, I have never seen towers like these in any Gothic architecture”. The World Trade Center undoubtedly shares a formal aesthetic with the Federal Science Pavilion, and other Yamasaki-designed projects, albeit on a much larger scale. To this end, Huxtable critiques further,

As design, the World Trade Center is a conundrum. It is a contradiction in terms: the daintiest big buildings in the world. In spite of their size, the towers emphasize an almost miniature module—3 feet 4 inches—and the close grid of their decorative facades has a delicacy that its architect, Minoru Yamasaki, chose deliberately.¹²

Yamasaki, troubled by Huxtable’s column, responded in a lengthy letter, written in numerous drafts, and with the advice of several colleagues. Turning to literary quotation to defend the formal attributes of the World Trade Center’s façade, the architect called upon Emerson to describe his formal moves as a result of structural performance and efficiency, quoting, “the line of beauty is a result of perfect economy...our

art saves material by more skillful arrangement; and reaches beauty by taking every superfluous ounce that can be spared from a wall and keeping its strength in the poetry of columns".¹³ This, Yamasaki claimed, was the inspiration for making the facades load-bearing and efficiently transferring the load to the ground, while still allowing an open and airy space for people and goods to pass through. He continued, "This delicate wall, which you call 'dainty', is not only a very beautiful truss, but carries spans of sixty and thirty-seven feet ... To me, this is one of the gifts of our technology..".¹⁴ The marriage between structural efficiency and formal expression was an important aspect of his practice, and much loved by his corporate clients, although it did not always fare well with architects and critics.

Although Huxtable and Yamasaki's dispute over the project's formal and structural choices was never entirely resolved, it provides a backdrop for understanding the myriad conflicting interpretations of the project that continued to accumulate throughout its existence. Yamasaki concluded his defense by offering that it would be the users of the building who would ultimately decide its worth: "I am not implying by this letter that these buildings are great. That is perhaps for neither of us to say, but for the people to decide during the many years in which the buildings will live".¹⁵ A few weeks later, Huxtable replied, closing the debate, "You are the architect, and I am the critic, and it is an honest parting of the ways".¹⁶ Of course, neither Yamasaki nor Huxtable could have predicted the Twin Towers' relatively short lifespan of only twenty-eight years. What was once considered an intrusion into Manhattan's skyline suddenly became a politically-charged lacuna.

It is perhaps in this context, then, that we might reconsider the World Trade Center, and the criticism of the project that came only after the towers were destroyed. Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the *New York Times* from 1973 to 1997, further underscored the project's early lack of acceptance. He outlines that for him, the World Trade Center followed a multi-stage experience: first outright resentment, then reluctant acceptance, but this was never followed by admiration, even in the wake of their demise. For Goldberger, as with Huxtable, the buildings were just too big, even if they did come to have a commanding presence with some positive attributes. Given the extensive use of metal in the facades, and relatively minimal amount of fenestration, the buildings "did wonderful things in the light; they reflected the warm sunlight of dawn and dusk especially well, but at all times they shimmered, and their texture gave them a richness that people did come to value".¹⁷ But this alone was not enough to propel them into favor with architectural critics. As Goldberger viewed it, their outsized scale rendered them a modern paradox:

...the towers represented an ideal of modernity that seemed to communicate most effectively to people who were not particularly interested in modernity, if not outright hostile to it. Their hugeness and simplicity made them almost a cartoon version of gargantuan modern architecture - and as such, all the more attractive to tourists, who took pleasure in riding to the top of the buildings, and all the more pernicious to those who saw in them all of the evils of modern culture.¹⁸

Although the opinions of the architectural critics may not have been revised following the towers' destruction - and why should they - this was certainly not the view of the general public, for whom the towers suddenly became a symbol of American freedom and prowess, perhaps in a way that had previously escaped popular understanding. As architectural historian John Summerson has suggested, it is often the case that architecture must first fall out of favor before it is truly appreciated.

Quotation, Quoted: Popular Taste and the Postwar Vernacular

Relative to the firm's many smaller-scale projects on university campuses and in central cities across the United States, the World Trade Center is perhaps an outsized example, and yet one that embodies Yamasaki's various uses of quotation, both architectonic and literary. But perhaps the larger question lies in the evolution of a kind of popular taste aesthetic, perhaps accidentally championed by Yamasaki and

his contemporaries, Edward Durrell Stone and Paul Rudolph, among others. Their projects, along with scores of lesser-known architects whose buildings dot the American landscape, point toward a growing interest in a kind of pop architecture at a time when pop art hit the scene with fervor. This new tendency toward populism in architecture was not overlooked by the architectural press.

Douglas Haskell, editor of *Architectural Forum* and longtime friend of Yamasaki, devoted particular attention to the relationship between the increased decoration and what he understood as popular taste. In a 1958 article "Architecture and Popular Taste", Haskell outlines what in his view were three main rationales of the late modern architectural trends. First, he suggests there was "a popular demand for more decorativeness and romance...what a more sophisticated critic might christen 'the new Alhambra'". Secondly, he saw a need for "a good show" in architecture, or what he later termed, "googie architecture". Thirdly, Haskell suggested that the public had a growing "desire for an architectural counterpart to jazz", or more simply, if not more clearly put, "honky-tonk". Together, these three ideas, Haskell argues, form the basis for "the new romanticism, the new baroque, and the new improvisation".¹⁹ Although Yamasaki's work falls best into a combination of the three categories, Haskell places his university campus work in the third category:

The concrete and beams that will support Wayne's forthcoming education building are to be prefabricated in the accepted 'modern' manner but with a big difference: they will be cast in the form of trees three story high, that will be as decorative in their own way as the columns and spandrels of Venetian Gothic buildings.²⁰

If this kind of work continues, Haskell argues, "the public will gain a popular architecture far more thoroughbred than most of its own gingerbread efforts, and, in the long run, far more rewarding".²¹

Borrowed architectural elements and historical references were essential components to both Yamasaki and Stone's practices, and set them apart from other architects whose careers spanned the shift from High Modernism to Postmodernism. With little exception, the architectonic quotation employed by Yamasaki and his firm is not one of direct mimesis, but instead a kind of adaptation of elements inflected through the architect's interpretation and application to a building in another programmatic or geographic context. In a certain sense, like his own identity which was largely constructed by both Yamasaki and the popular and architectural press, so too was his design aesthetic, channeling architectural forms from places as disparate as France, Japan, and Iran. His architectonic quotation in buildings across the United States delighted his corporate clients with a showy, over-the-top aesthetic that in some cases bordered on the excessive - and in other ways, his work might be understood today as a kind of "Orientalisation" of American Late Modern architecture, neither truly Modern nor fully Postmodern. To conclude, I will also turn to quotation, giving Yamasaki the last word in the debate between the architect and his critic:

I was trained in the twenties and early thirties, when classic design was the theme of the day. Though the traditional historic architectures I was taught are not appropriate to our present-day techniques of building, their graceful proportions are still vital to any structure. The ensuing peace and sense of permanency are essential parts of fine buildings, and the search for these qualities should never be forsaken.²²

By his own admission, Emerson's writings had a profound effect on Yamasaki's design ethos and he often quoted him in speeches and lectures. In spite of his many vocal critics, he stood by this ethos throughout his career and it served him well during his lifetime, if not in his legacy.

Endnotes

- ¹ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 99
- ² Philip Johnson, as quoted in, Ada Louise Huxtable, "What is your favorite building?", *New York Times*, May 21, 1961.
- ³ Minoru Yamasaki, as quoted in, Huxtable, "What is your favorite building?".
- ⁴ Edward Durell Stone, as quoted in, Paul Heyer, "Edward Durell Stone", in *Architects on Architecture* (New York: Walker and Company, 1966), 177.
- ⁵ Minoru Yamasaki, as quoted in, Paul Heyer, "Minoru Yamasaki", in *Architects on Architecture* (New York: Walker and Company, 1966), 187.
- ⁶ James Marston Fitch, *Architecture and the Esthetics of Plenty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 4.
- ⁷ Yamasaki, *A Life in Architecture* (New York, NY: Weatherhill, 1979), 115.
- ⁸ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Bldgs?", *New York Times*, May 29, 1966.
- ⁹ Yamasaki, as quoted in, Heyer, *Architects on Architecture*, 187.
- ¹⁰ John J. Goldman, "World's Tallest Structure: Clouds, Criticism Surround N.Y. Building", *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1971.
- ¹¹ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Big, but Not So Bold", *New York Times*, April 5, 1973.
- ¹² Huxtable, "Big, but Not So Bold".
- ¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted in, Minoru Yamasaki, letter to Ada Louis Huxtable, April 10, 1973. Retrieved from "Minoru Yamasaki Papers" Box 13, Folder 14, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- ¹⁴ Yamasaki, letter to Ada Louis Huxtable, April 10, 1973. Retrieved from "Minoru Yamasaki Papers" Box 13, Folder 14, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- ¹⁵ Yamasaki, letter to Ada Louis Huxtable, April 10, 1973. Retrieved from "Minoru Yamasaki Papers" Box 13, Folder 14, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- ¹⁶ Ada Louise Huxtable, letter to Minoru Yamasaki, April 23, 1973. Retrieved from "Minoru Yamasaki Papers" Box 13, Folder 14, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- ¹⁷ Paul Goldberger, *Why Architecture Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 175.
- ¹⁸ Goldberger, *Why Architecture Matters*, 177.
- ¹⁹ Douglas Haskell, "Architecture and Popular Taste", *Architectural Forum* 109 (August 1958), 106.
- ²⁰ Haskell, "Architecture and Popular Taste", 106.
- ²¹ Haskell, "Architecture and Popular Taste", 107.
- ²² Yamasaki, *A Life in Architecture*, 118.

