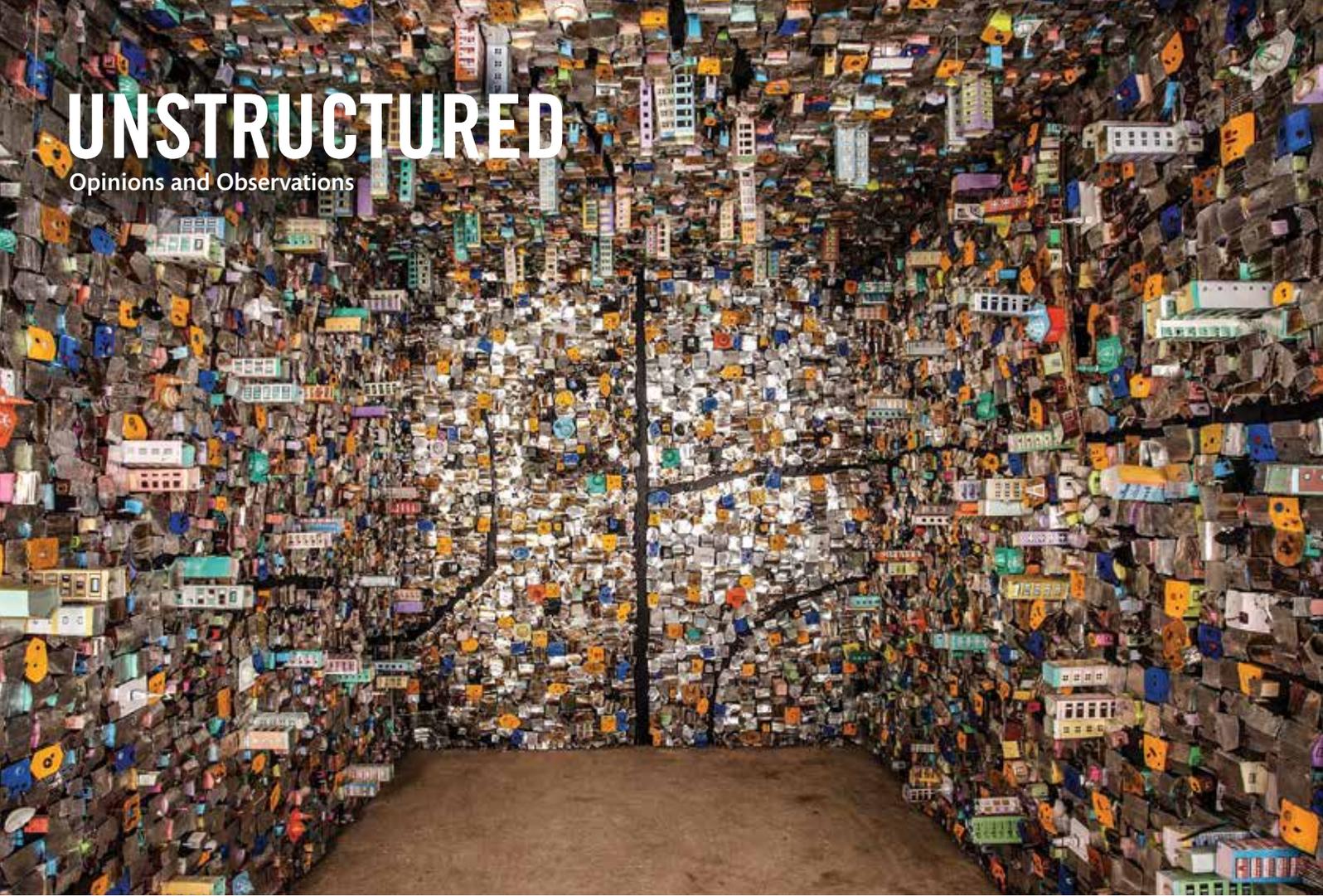


UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



Megacities Asia

Through July 17
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Although only China's Ai Weiwei is a household name in the United States, the 11 artists from five Asian cities showcased in *Megacities Asia* pack a cumulative punch. The overall collection is provocative, visually spectacular, and often profound, particularly the core of nine artworks located in the MFA's Gund Gallery (the others are found elsewhere in the museum, with one outside the Huntington entrance and one near Faneuil Hall).

Like Asian cities themselves, the show's art varies in texture, color, material, form, and experience. Metal and plastic represent materials used by many low-income city dwellers, while wood, brick, and bamboo represent historic buildings demolished by rapid urban growth. Immersive works have material from typical Mumbai houses (Hema Upadhyay's *8' x 12'*) and from demolished Shanghai homes (Hu Xiangcheng's *Doors Away from Home—Doors Back Home*); Asim Waqaf's enterable and touchable bamboo-and-rope structure, *Venu*, thrilled children visiting the exhibit.

Upadhyay's *Build me a nest so I can rest* is particularly poignant. Dozens of anonymous, migratory birds, each

clutching a message in its beak, speak to new city dwellers' diverse views and life stories. And a destroyed or vanished past animates Jeon Yongseok/flyingCity's *Drifting Producers* series, Yin Xiuzhen's *Temperature*, and both works by Ai Weiwei. *Megacities Asia* installations outside the Gund Gallery are large, loud, and colorful, like the iconic architecture of new Asian cities. Each of these works is designed for photography, and best of all is Choi Jeong Hwa's *Fruit Tree* at Faneuil Hall's Marketplace Center: a selfie there will provide one free admission to the MFA.

BRENT D. RYAN is associate professor of urban design and public policy and head of the city design and development group in the department of urban studies and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

ABOVE

8' x 12', 2009, Hema Upadhyay. Aluminum, scrap metal from cars, enamel paint, plastic, found objects, M-Seal sealant, resin, and hardware. Photo: Anil Rahe; courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

JUST ONE LOOK

South Street Station

Most buildings tell a story, and a great story does not have a universal interpretation; it is informed by your unique point of view and imagination. I love to envision historic buildings in their heyday, as one might wish to be a spectator at the Roman Colosseum or alight a DC-3 via Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at JFK airport. I have been fascinated by stories of industrial strength architecture—especially the robust, unapologetic power plants that fueled New England's manufacturing past.

One example is the South Street Station, also known as the Narragansett Electric Company Power Station in Providence, Rhode Island. Designed by Jenks & Ballou around 1912 in the Georgian Revival style, it is exactly how you would imagine an architect might design a major infrastructure building

in the early 20th century. A functional simplicity is conveyed in its massing, with a cubic headhouse facing the city and a long turbine hall stretching to the Providence River. While it does not stir my soul like my favorite buildings by Le Corbusier or Louis Kahn, it does stir my imagination.

I can see the cavernous interior, lit with enormous arched windows, sunlight slicing through the coal dust in fierce beams as in a high Gothic cathedral. Monolithic turbines the size of houses roar and vibrate like tethered beasts, shackled to the floor and imprisoned by muscular steel beams supporting overhead bridge cranes, pulleys, and chain hoists. The ravenous coal-eating turbines are fed day and night by barges arriving via the Providence River, delivering the pulverized fossil fuel via conveyor belts to interior rail cars, adding

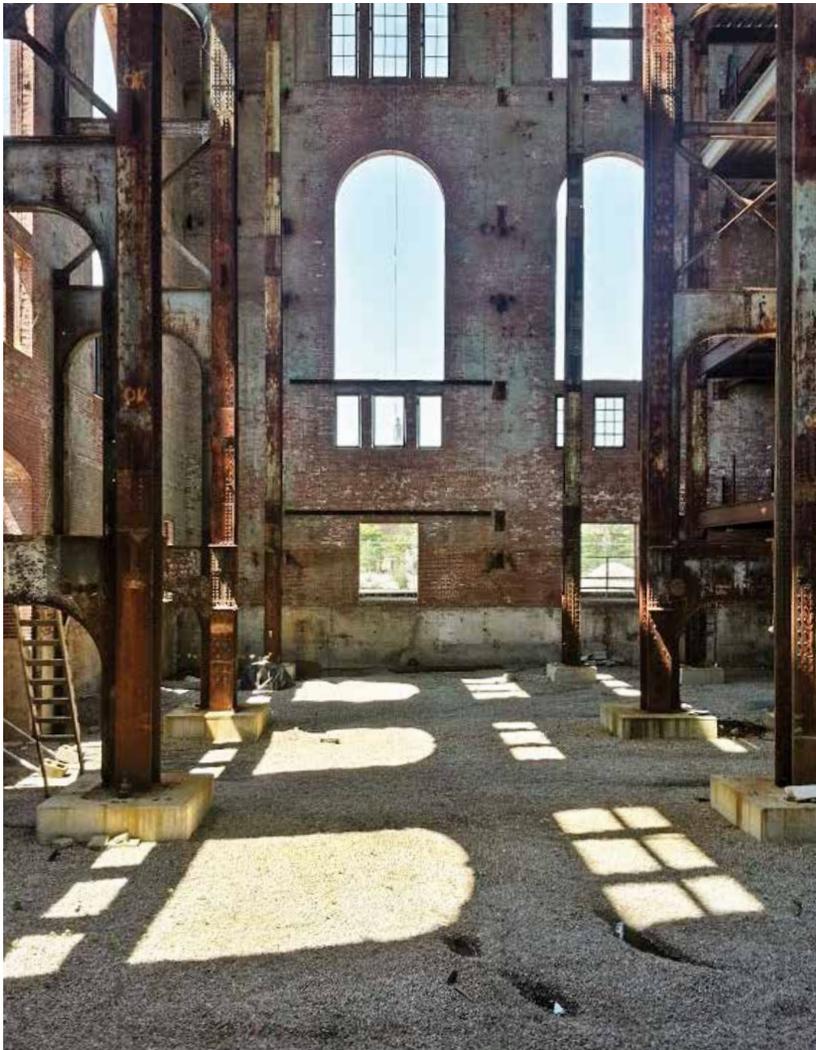
to the metal-on-metal clamor. Towering smokestacks loom over Providence and coat downwind homes in fine black powder, making them almost unlivable in summer. I'm reminded of one of the most gorgeous lines Bruce Springsteen ever wrote, painting a picture of a similar industrial landscape in Youngstown, Ohio, with "smokestacks reaching like the arms of God into a beautiful sky of soot and clay."

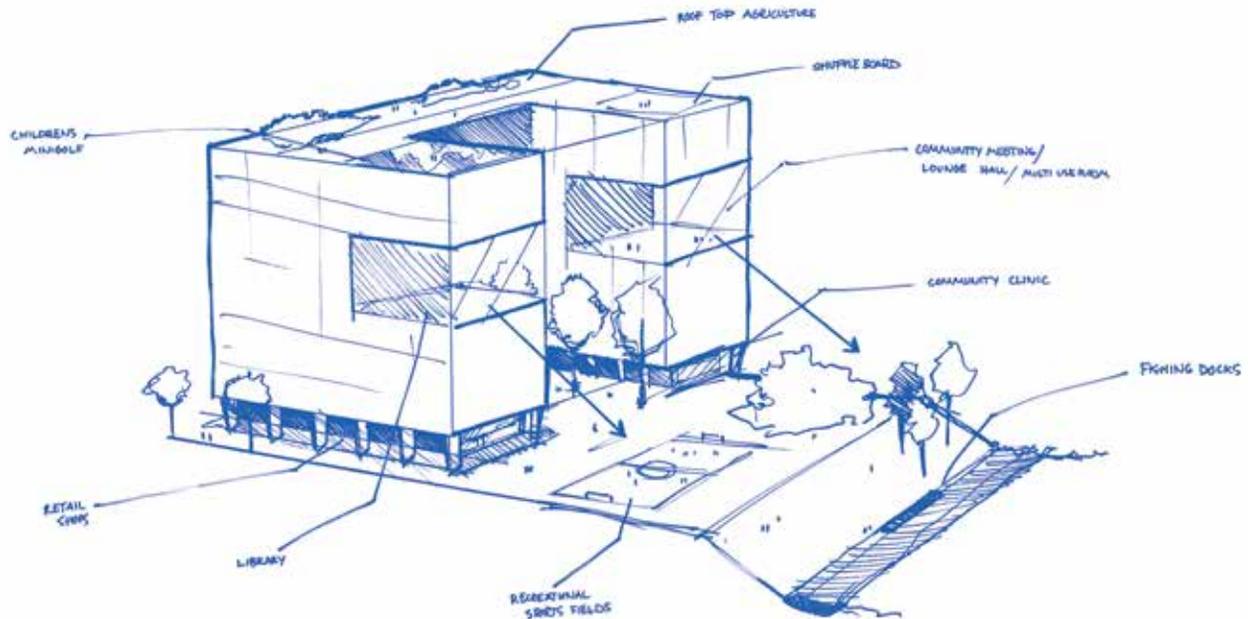
Thankfully, the turbines are gone, and the smokestacks have been felled like the industrial sequoias of a bygone era. After decommissioning in 1995, the hulking structure sat vacant for years, boarded up and slowly decaying, with an unseen interior urban forest thriving in the dim light of a fractured floor slab. Several unrealized adaptive reuse projects have been planned for South Street Station over the years, including a potential rebirth as a State Cultural Heritage and History Museum. Currently, Brown University, the University of Rhode Island, and Rhode Island College are developing space in the building, giving new hope for its civic future.

Similar cathedrals of electricity are easy to find, from the Mystic River in Somerville to the Connecticut River in Hartford. Skilled designers transform the lucky ones like the Tate Modern and Battersea museums, both on the Thames River in London. These brownfield brick behemoths are part of urban energy stories that are poised for happy endings. With some imagination, they can continue to power city life in new and creative ways.

JIM STANISLASKI AIA is an architect at Gensler in Boston, an environmentalist, and a painter of industrial landscapes.

LEFT
Interior of the South Street Station, 2013.
Photo: Michael Umbricht





MATTER OF COURSE

Rethinking Green Urbanism, and Architecture Studio: Reimagining Providence

Rhode Island School of Design

I had never visited the Rhode Island School of Design before. Why not, I now wonder? Whoosh down Route 95 or, more eco-appropriately, hop onto a train, and you land on its front door in less than an hour. Part of this is RISD's doing: The famous smoothing out of Providence's urban core supposedly harkens back to a drawing on the back of a napkin sketched by three professors at the city's old Blue Point Oyster Bar.

The two courses I looked in on, "Rethinking Green Urbanism" and the studio "Reimagining Providence," were meant to be twinned, but for scheduling reasons, few students could attend both. Never mind. I attended both—and had plenty of fun.

Professors Anne Tate and Damian White co-teach the urbanism class, which covered an immense amount of ground on the long afternoon I visited. For starters, we read Dolores Hayden's provocative 1980 essay, "What Would a Non-Sexist City Look Like?" and then broke into the proverbial small groups for discussion.

Hayden, now a professor at Yale,

offered up a prescription to lighten the lot of single mothers and women, called HOMES (Homemakers Organization for a More Egalitarian Society). Her utopian vision of an "experimental residential center" with shared kitchen and day-care services went over like a lead balloon in my small group of three women and one man. Hayden's idea that "family rooms are converted to community facilities such as a child's play areas" struck a nerve with one student, who was raised by a single mother whom she knew would loathe the forced togetherness imposed by Hayden's confected neighborhood.

Another woman hated the idea of someone else doing her laundry or her cooking. "It's like that novel *The Giver*," she complained, referencing Lois Lowry's young-adult best-seller about a dystopian society where "the Elders" control every element of citizens' supposedly wonderful lives. White jokingly commented, "They are so reactionary—kids these days!" To which I would add: And the sledgehammer of child-rearing reality has yet to smite them upside the head.

While we discussed Hayden's essay,

White asked the students to simultaneously work on a drawing. These kids can draw! Xavier Rumph's sketch of a multifamily, multigenerational housing block "took me about five minutes," he said.

Wait, there's more. Three students contributed Pecha Kucha-style presentations, the Japanese format where 20 slides are displayed in 20 seconds, and delivered mini-lectures on Iranian architecture, fusion power, and adaptive reuse. But the class was far from over. Tate finished up with an interesting lecture on the evolution of urban transportation. Takeaway fact: Los Angeles once had 1,100 miles of urban trolley lines. That was then, this is now.

For her studio, Tate invited two architects from Boston and RISD interior architecture professor Peter Yeadon to a midsemester crit. Students unpacked revisions of a badly flooded Providence and a "Fun City" Providence and re-designed entire neighborhoods and the transportation system. The visitors pushed back, politely and sometimes hard. The student who completely reinvented

the Renaissance City's transportation system encountered some stiff headwinds. Was the existing system, which relies mainly on buses, broken? How did he know?

I liked Tyler Mills' reprogramming of the city's Pleasant Valley neighborhood as an interconnected Fun City, interlaced with zip lines and rollerblade tracks. He got plenty of pushback, too. "We don't have Google here; this is a city that makes things," Yeadon commented. He also called downtown Providence "dreary" and possibly ill-suited to the kind of joyful reprogramming that Mills was suggesting.

Dreary, maybe. But submerged? Quite possibly. The Providence River is an inlet of Narragansett Bay, so it was easy for one student to imagine downtown's Kennedy Plaza as a marina after a half-century of rising sea levels. Another proposed reclaiming land parcels from the bay and building high-rise complexes for postglobal warming apartment towers.

The visiting critics offered some bracing rejoinders to these schemes, too. "I like the pessimism in your project," Yeadon said to one student who had abandoned downtown Providence to the climate ravages of the future. "You are not assuming that the city is dynamic. Leaving the downtown fallow is really smart." Boston architect Douglas Dolezal voiced some doubt that the Narragansett Bay reclamation project was the ideal response to global warming. "I'm not ready for that solution—the high-rise stuck in the water," he said. "Maybe people just need to think about moving to higher ground?"

Or evolve gills? There may not be enough time for that.

ALEX BEAM writes a column for *The Boston Globe* and is working on a book about Vladimir Nabokov. "Matter of course" visits exceptional architecture classes at New England schools.

ABOVE LEFT

A sketch of multifamily, multigenerational housing. Image: Courtesy of Xavier Rumph



SEEN

Somerville

Five years ago, I made a big change by moving to the United States, away from friends and family. Once immersed in a new culture, I was struck by the obvious differences between my homeland and my new surroundings. In order to find my sense of place, I picked up my camera and started exploring the area that I now call home, walking through the neighborhoods and diverse cityscapes. I turned my attention to matters overlooked, fragments of working-class suburbia—such as empty driveways and cluttered backyards—that were normal to Americans but seemed odd through my eyes.

Spaces in between houses are always interesting. People walk through driveways on their way to work, pile up their seasonal belongings to hide them in plain sight from passersby, display the relics of their lives for all to see. This territorial separation, though, also acts as an intersection, creating a connection between neighbors, bringing them closer together.

YORGOS EFTHYMIADIS, a fine art and architectural photographer from Greece, has exhibited at the Griffin Museum of Photography and the Danforth Art Museum, where he was presented with the 2015 Emerging Artist Award.



MORE ONLINE
yorgosphoto.com

Overgrowth

deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts
Through September 18

“Prolific expansion, growth, and mutation” in nature and the built environment is the subject of the deCordova’s summer exhibition. As a landscape architect, I was enticed by the prospect of immersion in uncontrolled organic abundance, decay, devastation—all that which begets new life.

Whether an intentional curatorial choice or an inherent condition of working with a permanent collection, the work is intensely diverse, both in aesthetic form and thematic content. It includes a number of striking artworks, such as Laura McPhee’s large-format photography recording the beauty and devastation of post-forest fire Idaho.

Across the gallery, prolific expansion of consumer culture is featured in Rachel Perry Welty’s self-portrait, meticulously staged within a decorated collection of Styrofoam dinner containers.

Other pieces combine the grotesque and the beautiful. Constance Jacobson’s highly detailed amorphic monotypes can be understood as a brain cross-section, a microbe, an ossified tree slice, or something else. One of the most awe-inspiring works—fascinating and terrifying—is Harold Edgerton’s photograph of an atomic bomb blast, taken with a 10-foot lens from a distance of 7 miles, the graininess of the bulbous image entirely out of proportion with

the enormity of the event.

I loved the visceral experience of many of the individual works but wished the show was half as large so it could have felt more thematically consistent. My initial experience was similar to scanning stations on the radio—a snippet of one piece of music and then off to something else. But perhaps that’s a fundamental subtext of this exhibition, with its starting point in overabundance. The image-ready culture of Google, Facebook, and Instagram trains us to edit out certain things and select others, skills that can be creatively employed to immerse oneself in the varied tendrils of *Overgrowth*.



SHAUNA GILLIES-SMITH ASLA is the principal of Ground, a design practice committed to the creation of exceptional, sustainable, and artful landscapes.

LEFT
Late Summer (Drifting Fireweed), Laura McPhee, 2007. Chromogenic print, 72" × 94". Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



Photo: Kai Nakamura

Kenzo Tange Lecture: Toyo Ito, "Tomorrow's Architecture"

Harvard University Graduate School of Design
March 7, 2016

Gathering with friends beneath the sakura trees each spring, just as the cherry blossoms begin to fall, is embedded in Japanese tradition. This instinctual sense of placemaking, of sitting below the wispy branches, was captured in Toyo Ito's subtle imagery of an encircling ring of fabric panels: "This is how I create 'Places,'" he said to an overflow audience at Gund Hall. Accordingly, Ito suggested, "Space is just void, an expanding and unlimited void."

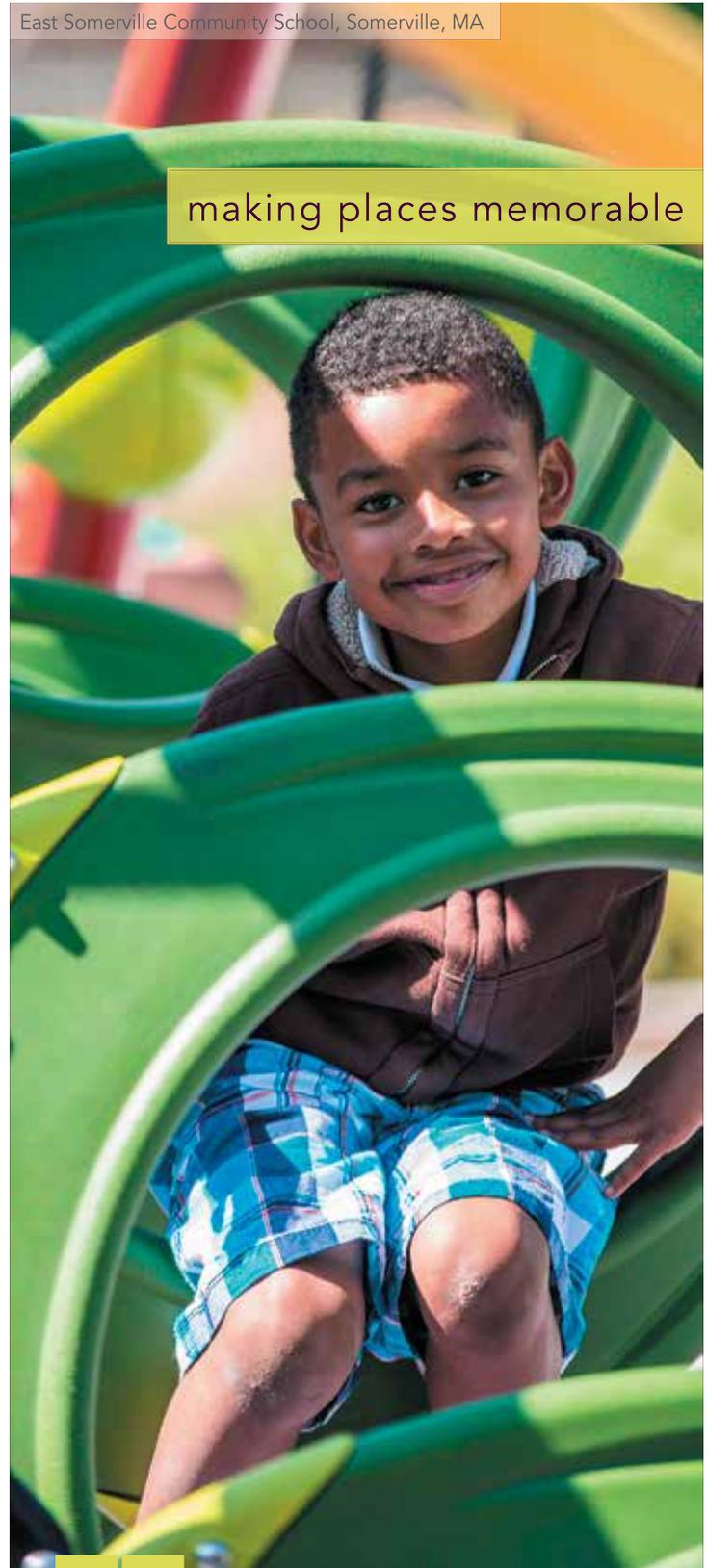
Introducing three projects, Ito drew connections from linguistic structure. "The way that Japanese language is positioned in space is similar to how a ripple dissipates into water." This sense of the relationship between key elements inspires flexibility in the designer's work.

Employing this principle in the Sendai Mediatheque, the 13 structural tubes in the plan act as free-floating elements, creating spaces between them. Similarly, in the design of Taiwan's National Taichung Theater, which will be completed this year, the elements intersect both vertically and horizontally to create a suspended network of places tucked within the amorphous reinforced concrete structure. In the recently completed "Minna no Mori" Gifu Media Cosmos, in central Japan, Ito expressed the façade as an exposed sectional cut—such that the "spaces can dissipate continuously" to the outside, emphasizing his belief that "there is never any confinement to the architecture."

Dean Mohsen Mostafavi and a student asked Ito about the disjunction between digitally driven design processes and labor-intensive fabrication methods. Highlighting the intricate steel reinforcement assemblies at the National Taichung Theater and the undulating laminated timber roof of the Gifu Media Cosmos (above), Ito emphasized an appreciation for handcraft. Perhaps more important, he voiced a preference for a human-centered construction process: "The more people who can say that they helped build this project, the better."

THOMAS SHERMAN is an architectural designer at Kao Design Group in Somerville, Massachusetts, and an instructor in sustainable building systems at the Boston Architectural College.

East Somerville Community School, Somerville, MA



making places memorable



Copley Wolff Design Group
Landscape Architects & Planners

www.copley-wolff.com • 617 654 9000