

Space as Art, Art as Space – Part I

George Suyama/Suyama Space

By Susan Kunimatsu

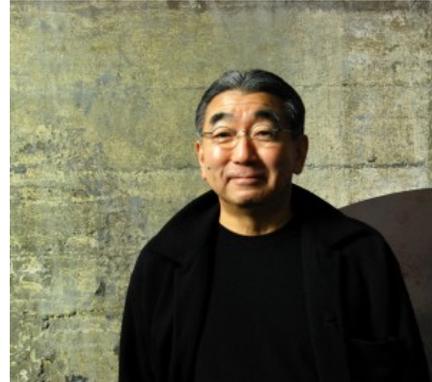
International Examiner

<http://www.iexaminer.org/arts/space-art-art-space/>

February 17th, 2010



Floating Mechanism (nightshade)
Claudia Fitch



George Suyama

Over a forty-year career, George Suyama has established himself as one of the masters of Northwest architecture. A Seattle native, his designs are deeply rooted in the culture and environment of this region. He has built a body of work, mostly exquisitely detailed residences that elevate space to art. To further explore that creative ideal, he founded and directs a gallery that presents space as art.

While Suyama is highly regarded in the architecture community and he and his firm have won a number of awards, he is not widely known outside the Northwest. The majority of his building designs are private homes, and his public and commercial projects are fairly small scale. Last year, the first book on his work was published. Unlike many books about architects, “3 x 3: The Architecture of Suyama Peterson Deguchi” is not a survey of a life’s work, but a tightly focused study of just three quintessential projects that exemplify Suyama’s design philosophy and practice: a small vacation house on Decatur Island and two residences in Seattle. All have strong, carefully considered relationships to their sites. Space flows from exterior to interior. Rooms expand through glass walls into courtyards and gardens. Outdoor reflecting pools disappear through slots and resurface indoors.

An array of boulders passes through a glass wall. At first glance, the simple rectangular forms that make up each house look spare, even severe, but the colors and textures of natural materials: wood, stone, and leather warm the

spaces. While contemporary in feeling, the houses are very traditionally centered on fireplaces and long communal tables. There is no trim and little decoration. Suyama's architecture is about inspirational spaces where nature provides the decor: soaring living rooms that embrace forest or view, intimate bedrooms and studies that open onto tiny private gardens, outdoor rooms delineated by water and plants.

To hear George Suyama tell it, he came to a career in architecture by chance. A senior without a major, he let a roommate who was studying architecture convince him that it would be "great fun." But he also recalls, "my first apartment during freshman year in college, I remember spending enough time to decorate it, to paint myself a mural for the wall, to arrange the furnishings, which were all hand-me-downs. I think it began then, that I felt the need to make whatever environment I lived in as beautiful as I could with the money I had."

Four years after graduating from the University of Washington, Suyama started his own firm. During that brief formative period, he worked for Gene Zema and later Ralph Anderson; both architects had a profound influence on him. Zema was a Renaissance man, a master of several art forms, and a traveler with an affinity for Japanese artifacts. He introduced Suyama to the Japanese aesthetic of simplicity and celebration of the irregularities in natural materials. Anderson is considered one of the fathers of Northwest architecture, a style that combines modern forms with native materials, using sweeping roofs and glass walls to bring the outdoors inside.

In 1996, after 25 years in practice, Suyama moved his office from an art-filled space off Eastlake Avenue into a building he renovated in Belltown. The move marked a shift in his design philosophy toward the minimalism, with an emphasis on volume and space that guides his current work. "For a long time there had been a sense of making places using artifact and decoration to create a sense of place," says Suyama, reflecting on the evolution of his design philosophy. "I find lately that decoration is less important and that in stripping away many of the things that we think are important today, the things that remain become more elemental." He speculates that his quest to reduce architecture to its essence may have roots in his formative years. At the age of six months, he and his family were sent to the Minidoka internment camp where they lived for three years. "I think the experience of the first three years of my life in camp altered everything I see," he says now.