

Fumihiko Maki's Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

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Any building can be understood within larger patterns of thinking about its purposes and form. With this in mind, this essay explores the design ideas behind the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum building at Washington University in St. Louis. Completed in 2006, it is the work of Fumihiko Maki, today one of East Asia's most revered design figures, who began his architectural career at Washington University with his first commission, Steinberg Hall, which opened in 1960.¹

The idea of a campus visual art and design center had been discussed since the 1980s, and Maki's long association with Washington University's School of Architecture made him a logical choice for the commission, which included both the campus of the newly formed Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts and its centerpiece, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum building. The Sam Fox School campus is a characteristic example of Maki's efforts to create pedestrian open spaces through the use of "group form," a concept he first put forward as a member of the Japanese Metabolists in 1960. His return to Washington University in 1997 to begin design of the new center at the invitation of then-Dean of Architecture Cynthia Weese gave Maki a chance to further develop the trajectory of these influential early ideas, resulting in a building that exemplifies the recent trend toward university museums as public education spaces.

Born in Tokyo in 1928, Maki studied architecture at the University of Tokyo, graduating in 1952, and was then given the rather unusual opportunity to continue his studies in the United States.² His American education put him close to the world center of postwar developments in architecture and urbanism, as he studied first at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, and then urban design under Dean Josep Lluís Sert at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Maki arrived to teach in St. Louis in 1956, a time when St. Louis was still one of the nation's largest industrial cities and the local cultural leadership was enthusiastically embracing modernism in art and architecture.³

In 1947, Washington University curator H. W. Janson had begun acquiring the modernist masterworks that still form the core of the Kemper Art Museum's permanent collection.⁴ That same year, the winning entry in the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial competition in the form of a 630' tall stainless steel arch by Eero Saarinen clearly indicated an official shift away from the classical tradition for large public monuments in the United States. Many significant

works of modern architecture in St. Louis then followed, including Minoru Yamasaki's new Lambert Airport and his Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex.

Within Washington University's School of Architecture, after 1956 under the leadership of Dean Joseph Passonneau (also a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design), Maki taught design with such influential future educators as Leslie Laskey, Roger Montgomery, George Anselevicius, and, after 1960, Constantine Michaelides. Maki received the commission for Steinberg Hall in 1958 from Buford Pickens, who was by then Director of Campus Planning after his brief and controversial Architecture Deanship.⁵ Enthusiastically supported by the donor, Etta Eiseman Steinberg, the building was dedicated May 15, 1960, and its innovative folded-plate concrete structure gave it a distinctive appearance. In line with the late-CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) ideas of the time then taught by Sert at Harvard, Maki also attempted with his design of Steinberg Hall to create dramatic exterior pedestrian spaces that would relate it to its two neoclassical neighbors, Bixby and Givens Halls.

Also significant as an early influence was Maki's participation in the World Design Conference in Tokyo, a huge event where 250 architects from twenty-seven countries met to discuss approaches to the emerging urbanization that was beginning to transform East Asia. Maki served as the translator for Louis Kahn's informal remarks to Japanese architects during this event. He also joined the Metabolist group at that time, a group of young Japanese architects, critics, and design teachers that had been formed around Kenzo Tange, a Japanese CIAM representative and a major figure in postwar Japanese architecture. Maki contributed an essay to the group's only publication, which also included innovative conceptual design work by other Metabolist architects.⁶

After two years of fellowship travel across Asia and Europe, Maki returned to Washington University to cofound the Master of Architecture and Urban Design program in 1962. He then went on to teach at Harvard in urban design in 1962–65, before opening his architectural practice in Tokyo. During this seminal period in his career, Maki wrote his *Investigations in Collective Form*, published by Washington University in 1964 and reprinted in 2004. In this still-widely read book, Maki called attention to the changed conditions for urbanism in the contemporary society of the early 1960s, where the social hierarchies that modern architects had attempted to reorganize were beginning to break down.⁷ He called for understanding "our urban society as a dynamic field of interrelated forces," where the urban designer's role was not to provide a fixed order but instead to attempt to contribute to a "state of dynamic equilibrium," which would inevitably change in character as time passes. This required the use of architect-generated "master forms" at a large scale, which could be modified and altered over time, allowing for many changes of use as needed.⁸ New large-scale forms were in fact

appearing at that time, in the construction of the American and Japanese interstate highway systems as well as in large new complexes such as airports, shopping malls, sports stadia, and suburban corporate and educational campuses.

In analyzing these changed postwar conditions, Maki suggested the avoidance of both the traditional “compositional form” found in classical planning and in Le Corbusier’s late works, such as for Chandigarh, as well as the “megastructures” (a term that Maki coined in this book) that were then beginning to be a source of fascination for architects. Instead, Maki offered the idea of group form, which consisted of repetitive urban elements that could be assembled into open-ended arrays, linked by pedestrian circulation routes and open air meeting places. He saw it as a way of organizing collective human spaces similar to vernacular villages of various kinds, such as those of the Greek Islands or North Africa. “Group form,” as Maki defined it, is “form which evolves from a system of generative elements in space.”⁹

Maki’s intention in advocating the idea of group form was to “express the vitality of our society” while still “retaining the identity of individual elements.” He saw such collective form as evolving “from the people of a society rather than from its powerful leadership,” and made a distinction between the classical compositional form of the palace complex, which is formally fixed, and the collective forms of “the village, the dwelling group, and the bazaar,” which are able to grow into open-ended systems of urban form.¹⁰

Maki also called attention to the role of geometry in group form, which he saw as a tool in the search for group form, not an end in itself. The vernacular villages he called attention to typically had very complex patterns of site organization, reflecting their gradual construction by many hands. In his own work, he abstracted such village patterns into simpler organizational patterns using rectangles and other geometric shapes. Maki also saw group form not as a formal end in itself, but instead as a tool for organizing human activities such as gathering, dispersal, or resting in one place. Like the parallel ideas of the Team 10 group of architects at this time, this was an influential revision of the prewar modernist focus on “air, green, and sun” in urbanism, and emerged from the extensive questioning of earlier modernist approaches by 1960. In an unpublished text from 1961, Maki also insisted that “the vital image of group form... derives from a dynamic equilibrium of generative elements—not a composition of stylized and finished objects,” and as such is different from static iconic buildings independent of other structures.¹¹

Although more complex examples of Maki’s notion of group form exist—most notably in the Hillside Terrace housing complex in Tokyo (1967–92), the Kumagaya campus of Risho University (1967–68), and at the Fujisawa campus of Keio University (1993)—and although the Sam Fox School campus is more classical in its geometrical simplicity, it is also a clear example

of this concept, one that builds on Maki's earlier Steinberg Hall and that also incorporates the unfinished classical composition begun by Bixby and Givens Halls. Each of its buildings retains its individuality, while at the same time each structure is joined with others to create a varied, pedestrian-friendly, and sociable campus environment. The plan is also an open-ended concept, one that can easily be extended on either side, implying that new buildings will be organized to continue its pattern of outdoor pedestrian spaces defined by their built surroundings.

Instead of expressive architectural gestures or contextual exterior imagery, Maki finds the components of his architecture in careful design attention to basic elements such as walls, floors, vertical shafts, cellular volumes, and pedestrian links, organized primarily in terms of their functions. These he designs in relation to the effects of regional climates and cultures. In the case of the Sam Fox School campus, Maki also made reference to urban theorist Kevin Lynch's 1954 concept of "urban grain," the general directional pattern of a particular city's block organization. In his earlier unpublished text on collective form, Maki suggested that this might perhaps be "the primary locus of regional character in urban landscape," the point where "both group form and megaform affect the urban milieu."¹²

The design results of these ideas are all evident in the Kemper Art Museum building. It is the central element of the Sam Fox School campus-within-a-campus, but it does not dominate the overall composition in a traditional way. Its site organization creates appealing exterior pedestrian open spaces within the strong east-west "urban grain" of St. Louis, and also introduces a new north-south pedestrian route through the Museum itself, emphasizing its role as a cultural link between the University and the larger community. Maki's use of simple industrial materials in the windows and metal exterior wall elements emphasize the primarily functional nature of the building's organization, making it a deliberate modern counterpoint to the existing historic and recent campus buildings adjacent to it.

The main Museum building façade that faces the plaza is clad with Indiana limestone panels, a similar material to that used on the exteriors of Givens and Bixby Halls. It both evokes a classical façade facing an urban square, and, at the same time, modifies this association by its use of a long horizontal strip window and an asymmetrically placed entry.¹³ The glazing around the entrance extends eastward to light the library below, and then turns the southeast corner of the exterior, creating a visual continuity with the smaller entrance plaza. On the north elevation, facing the historic, tree-lined entry to the University campus, the Museum asserts a strong cultural presence with its raised steps to the prominent sculpture terrace and high clerestory windows that light the temporary exhibition galleries within. Its relatively unadorned sides, topped to the west with the distinctive sculptural forms of a row of skylights, will allow new structures to be added on either side without disruption to the Museum's natural

daylighting and internal functioning. More pragmatically, the Kemper Art Museum also functions as a circulation link on the Sam Fox School campus, both through the streetlike main floor of the Museum and underground, where corridors, some with views out through the library, tie the Museum to the other campus buildings. Its finely finished, simple, rectangular internal volumes create exhibition spaces that allow the focus to remain on the artworks, making the Museum a focal point for the University's educational mission, as well as being a clear demonstration of Maki's urban design concepts of campus planning.

¹ For a good overview of Maki's career prior to his commission to design the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum building, see Jennifer Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999).

² As a result of the war, few Japanese nationals were allowed to leave the country until after 1969. Maki's relatively rare extensive educational, professional, and academic experiences in the United States in the 1950s ultimately made him an influential figure in Japanese architecture even before he returned to Tokyo permanently in 1967. After his graduation from Harvard in 1954, Maki worked briefly for SOM-New York and then for Sert Jackson and Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, before coming to teach at Washington University from 1956–58 and again in 1960–62. See Fumihiko Maki, "Memoir," in *Modern Architecture in St. Louis*, ed. Eric Mumford (St. Louis: Washington University School of Architecture, 2004), 90–97.

³ Maki has written about St. Louis at that time and then in 1981; see Fumihiko Maki, *Nurturing Dreams: Collected Essays on Architecture and the City*, ed. Mark Mulligan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 99–100.

⁴ See Sabine Eckmann, "Exilic Vision: H. W. Janson and the Legacy of Modern Art at Washington University," in her *H. W. Janson and the Legacy of Modern Art at Washington University in St. Louis* (St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 2002), 10–42.

⁵ Pickens was removed as Dean by Chancellor Ethan Shepley after Pickens fired a number of longtime faculty members who still taught and practiced in the classical tradition in 1955, most notably Erwin Carl Schmidt, architect of the Cheshire Inn on Clayton Road and the Landmark Building on Brentwood Boulevard opposite Shaw Park. See my *Modern Architecture in St. Louis*, 55–56.

⁶ During the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo, the Metabolist group presented their first declaration as a bilingual pamphlet called *Metabolism: The Proposals for New Urbanism*. Similar ideas were further developed by Fumihiko Maki and Masato Otaka in "Some Thoughts on Collective Form with an Introduction to Group Form" (unpublished manuscript, Washington University Art & Architecture Library, St. Louis, February 1961; I thank Heather Woofter for calling my attention to this document). Otaka was chief designer in the Tokyo office of another Japanese CIAM member, Kunio Maekawa. For more on both, see Zhongjie Lin, *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement: Urban Utopias of Modern Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁷ By the late 1950s, ambitious slum clearance and highrise public housing efforts such as Pruitt-Igoe were beginning to be questioned by figures such as Catherine Bauer Wurster, herself an early and influential advocate of modernist public housing; the sociologist Herbert J. Gans; and Jane Jacobs, whose *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) profoundly altered architects' ways of thinking about urban design.

⁸ Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form* (St. Louis: Washington University School of Architecture, 1964), 2–3.

⁹ Maki, *Investigations*, 11–14. Maki's idea of form draws directly from Louis Kahn's famous distinction, first made in a lecture at the 1960 World Design Conference, between a platonic "form," such as spoon, and a specific "design," with a particular shape, made in a certain way, out of particular materials. A published articulation of this idea can be found in Kahn's essay "Form and Design," in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 62–74.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Maki and Otaka, "Some Thoughts on Collective Form," 13.

¹² Ibid., 15, 17. See also Kevin Lynch, "The Form of Cities," *Scientific American* 190, no. 4 (April 1954): 55–63.

¹³ In their initial plans for what became the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Maki and Associates explored creating a variety of new urban spaces proportioned in the same way as canonical European urban plazas, such as the Place des Vosges in Paris and the Uffizi in Florence. The general proportions of the latter are the basis for the spatial relationships between the Kemper Art Museum building and the existing Steinberg, Bixby, and Givens Halls in the final design. See Fumihiko Maki and Associates, "Visual Arts and Design Center, Washington University in St. Louis, Pre-Design Final Report," unpublished manuscript, Washington University Art & Architecture Library, St. Louis, , October 1998, 79–81.