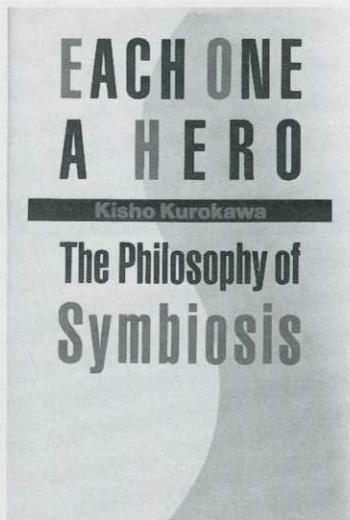


Each One A Hero: The Philosophy of Symbiosis

by Kisho Kurokawa
 Kodansha International, 543 pages,
 ¥4,800 (\$45)



Art and Ambition

Architects, like creative spirits everywhere, must be free to create the visions that beckon them. Were it only so for philosophers and historians! Kisho Kurokawa, who has become synonymous with “symbiosis,” his Buddhist-inspired vision of the wholistic relationships between ideologies, cultures, technologies, and just about everything else, aspires to more than just his richly deserved preeminence in the architectural world; he would like to be a philosopher-king, whose ideas he himself believes will “become the dominant philosophy of the twenty-first century, encompassing all fields of endeavor.”

Kurokawa’s monumental ambitions are unfortunate because they complicate the appreciation of his stunningly original and powerful art. Reading *Each One a Hero: The Philosophy of Symbiosis*, I was struck by the age-old question of whether it’s possi-

ble to separate the artist from the art. His art is beautiful. Building after building, on practically every continent, succeeds. Most are at least partially rooted in traditional Japanese culture, especially regarding the idea of intermediary space, or *ma*: he makes strenuous efforts to blend seamlessly the outer structure of his buildings with the outside space surrounding them, often with the use of lattice structures or other extensions that attempt to blur the clean separation of the building from the outside, in much the same way that a traditional *engawa*, the veranda-like platform built on stilts that encircles Japanese houses, does. Kurokawa puts it this way: The most important feature of the philosophy of symbiosis is the concept of intermediary spaces and sacred zones . . . the term refers to a zone tentatively established between two opposing elements; it is a third area which belongs to neither. When such a space is set between two opposing, rationalized extremes, the ambiguous elements purposefully excluded in the process of sharpening a two-term distinction can be recouped.

But it is unfortunate, to say the least, amid eloquent explications of his ideas on space, especially on the relationship between public and private space, to be interrupted—bombarded?—with almost rabid rants on the dichotomy of all things “Western” and “we Japanese.” Hardly a page goes by without a disparaging comment on something Western, much of it unrelated to architecture or the point at hand. Well-articulated views on what he calls “Rikyu gray,” an aesthetic based on subdued, natural shades of gray in materials that “create a detached, drifting sense, as in the streets of Kyoto at twilight” are followed, jarringly, by broadsides attacking contract-based American society, where “mutual trust is only possible within the rules of a contract, since the nation is a vast conglomeration of so many different ethnic and cultural groups.” Devastating criticism on late-Edo period and Meiji period

Japanese inferiority complexes regarding architecture (much of which, he says, still exists today) segues into how Western society, unlike Asian societies, considers nature “opposed to humanity.”

But does his muddled philosophy take away from the beauty of his designs, with their clean and inviting lines and marvelous materials? No. His Nishijin Labor Center in Kyoto, built in 1962, is reminiscent of Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute, in La Jolla, California, with its artful blend of concrete, wood, and simple lines. The National Ethnography Museum in Osaka captivated me for years—I used to admire it on an almost daily basis. The beauty of Ishikawa Pension Hall is almost irritating; because it’s such a tough act to follow, the buildings and environs surrounding it look pathetically sad and depressing. “Rikyu gray,” with its emphasis on blending darkness and light, is a highly appealing aesthetic—it is immediately apparent in most of Kurokawa’s buildings.

His thoughts on the creative process ought to be required reading for all aspiring artists: An artist who paints in a realist manner but whose work fails to move the spectator might be called at best an inspired sign painter. However, even among realists and superrealists, there are those, such as Andrew Wyeth, who by most are respected as artists—and those who aren’t. This is the difference between an artist able to endow his work with a capacity for multivalent reading, and another who cannot.

Each One a Hero is, unfortunately, not really a book about architecture or about art. It is mostly about the author’s gargantuan ego. It’s an abrasive book, partly as a result of choppy editing, partly as a result of Kurokawa’s style. The subchapters that divide each chapter are more often than not a hodgepodge of ideas, thrown together with no apparent thought to flow; an ironic outcome, considering the importance placed on flow throughout the book. In one chap-

ter, he makes the jump from explaining, persuasively, the culture of rice in Japan as a "sacred zone" to Japanese ODA, to the United States auto industry (in one astounding passage he actually advocates the donation of ¥1 trillion from the Japanese Government to the U.S. auto and entertainment industries, arguing that the infusion is necessary for them to "quickly rebound"), to a vision of helicopter commuting, and on to possible solutions to natural disasters. It all falls under the giant umbrella of symbiosis, but then again there's very little that doesn't. By trying to achieve everything, he achieves little.

This is a big problem. Because Kurokawa constantly swings for the fences in his pursuit of a wholistic theory that ties human behavior, religious proclivities, public policy, art, technology, and all things related to humans, he dooms himself to failure from the start.

Symbiosis, according to Kurokawa, bridges gaps and erases conflicting claims by declaring a *ma*, or a "cooling off" period. While the concept of *ma* (literally, "space") makes a great deal of sense in architecture—hence the beauty of many of Kurokawa's buildings—it is an empty philosophy to live by. Some conflicts simply cannot be ameliorated, and a moral choice becomes necessary. *Ma* as a philosophical pillar in one's moral life gives conflicting claims more or less equal weight; the idea is that both sides need to "step toward the middle" to work out their differences. It makes one wonder how, for example, Eastern European Jews could have "worked out" their differences with the Germans in the 1930s, or how intellectuals in Cambodia (and everybody else who was slaughtered) could have avoided their fate with Pol Pot by developing a more symbiotic relationship with him. *Ma* doesn't help when a moral stand must be taken.

And then there's *karakuri*, or his symbiosis between humanity and technology. His assertion that technology and humanity are thought of as

opposing one another is generally true. The mistake he makes is to call this phenomenon "Western." If anything, the merging of technology and humanity has never been more sophisticated in the West, especially in the western United States, home to an overwhelming majority of the world's leading technology companies and the vanguard of blending technology into contemporary lifestyles. "Technology in Japan was thus made pleasurable and attractive through humanization, in contrast to the brutally exposed mechanisms of the West," Kurokawa writes. The author, presumably writing that sentence sitting at his IBM computer in his beautiful *yuishikan* ("one consciousness room"), where machinery "needn't interrupt the flow of the room's harmony," somehow imagines it to be an original thought that a PC inside a gorgeous room is not an inherent contradiction.

Moving on to symbiosis in public policy, Kurokawa calls for the creation of a massive man-made island off Tokyo Bay where, he predicts, five million people will live, thus easing the problems caused by overpopulation in Tokyo. Of these five million new residents, he projects one million five hundred thousand will be foreigners. This is an amazing prediction, considering that the total number of foreigners living in Japan in 1996 was only 1.4 million, of whom 900,000 are of Korean and Chinese ancestry. We're not really to believe that Mr. Kurokawa would like to take all foreigners currently living in Japan and bring them to the new island in Tokyo Bay, are we? And how to pay for the island? By channeling funds that "today, float like disembodied spirits through the stock market and other foreign investment centers down to earth, within Japan."

Mr. Kurokawa does not suffer from excessive modesty. On a recent trip to Eastern Europe, his "intentions were merely to discuss the philosophy of symbiosis and to forecast the coming era, but the Eastern Europeans seemed anxious to interpret my words

as prophecy. Each of my lectures in Moscow and Eastern Europe intended for young students was, in fact, attended by crowds exceeding one thousand people, who surrounded me and made it difficult to move." He helpfully appends his 27-page CV to the back of the book for anyone who's interested. The back cover of the book is an image of his website. He devotes ten or so breathless pages to the ideals of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, to their close friendship, and to their distrust of the West. He even quotes Vice Premier Anwar (also Minister of Finance), who was so enamored of symbiosis theory that he thought that "The philosophy of symbiosis can become the future political slogan for Malaysia. Our target in the 21st century is symbiosis." "From that moment," Kurokawa writes, "the distance between us seemed to diminish. Indeed, I now have the privilege of advising him not only on architecture and urban planning, but also on overall national policy, such as an ecomed-ia-oriented society."

Why the need for such self-bluster? It would appear that praise and recognition the world over for his impressive architectural achievements is not enough; Mr. Kurokawa aspires to something more, but he's not likely get it from a simplistic split between the West, whose "societies currently demonstrate such unconcern over moral degeneration" and his beloved and sensible Asia, where "many ethnic groups . . . have continued to live in ways that value human sensibilities in the abstract, while actively cultivating a sensibility toward nature." Nor is he likely to find recognition as a philosopher whose central idea is to reduce conflicting claims by giving them equal weight in an effort to achieve a larger wholism. But the elegance and attraction of his buildings and designs remain, far above the fray.

Eric Gower
Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan