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## *The Veteran Photographer Making Stunning New Buildings*

By Bianca Booker (April 3, 2017)



Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Odawara Art Foundation's Enoura Observatory, about an hour outside of Tokyo. The complex, set to open in October, is the culmination of the artist's career, a series of structures he hopes will still exist hundreds of years from now. Photo Credit: Gen Aihara

Without warning, the Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto begins to sing. Moments before, he had been guiding me through his minimalist penthouse loft in a verdant neighborhood of Tokyo, explaining in a voice barely louder than a whisper why white Japanese shikkui plaster is the most beautiful surface on which to view shadows. Then, in a soaring tenor, he starts belting out Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga," his strong voice echoing off the bare walls.

Spend any time with Sugimoto, and such scenes will grow familiar: It is all but impossible to know what he will do next. Sugimoto built his name on photography; his meditative, black-and-white images of everything from drive-in movie theaters and eerily naturalistic wax figures to Rothko-esque seascapes are well represented in museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Centre Pompidou, Tate Modern and the J.Paul Getty Museum. Now, a full four decades into his career, there is architecture. At 69 years old, the artist is quietly making an ambitious transition, expanding his two-dimensional vision to one that captures the world in space.

A self-described "unlicensed architect" who splits his time between Tokyo and New York, Sugimoto has brought his monastic Modernist aesthetic to life through the firm New Material Research Laboratory, which he co-founded with the architect Tomoyuki Sakakida in

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2008. “Most of my ideas are illegal,” says Sugimoto, who considers it Sakakida’s job “to make it look like it’s legal.” As Sugimoto leads me from his penthouse to a second apartment below — both of which he designed — it becomes clear the firm’s name is intentionally ironic. “New materials means ancient materials. Forgotten,” he says, walking through a hallway paved with stone beams rescued from temples and past sliding doors with a traditional cedar-bark and bamboo surface. “The material usually comes first, and then I think about the design,” he says. The loft has the quality of a Mondrian: Bare white walls are set off against rectangular panels of intricately grained rare woods, a grid of tatami mats and cylindrical white calico-covered stools floating on clear legs (also designed by Sugimoto).



The foundation’s future offices. Sugimoto says the site has a “new Neolithic aesthetic.”  
Photo Credit: Benjamin Hosking

Over the past few years, his commissions have grown in stature, including upcoming works for the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., the Japan Society in New York City and a private residence in Manhattan. His most ambitious undertaking is his own Enoura Observatory, a complex in the Enoura district of Odawara, a city on the eastern coast of Japan, about an hour from Tokyo. The project boasts the first structures he has designed from scratch, inside and out. After more than 10 years, his architectural *pièce de résistance* — which includes exhibition spaces, two Noh stages, a teahouse and the offices of his Odawara Art Foundation — will finally open its doors this fall, uniting the myriad art forms Sugimoto has explored during his career in one place. He sees it as a kind of legacy. “I started thinking about my post-Sugimoto time,” he says. “I thought it was kind of negative to think about, but then I started enjoying it.”

He plans to host other artists for exhibitions and performances that “assist in the reconsideration of history,” according to the foundation’s mission statement, and the seaside

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retreat is poised to become to Japan what Donald Judd's desert sanctuary in Marfa, Tex. is to America — an artistic destination and a living monument to creative ambition.

The past and the passage of time have long informed Sugimoto's art. In his photo series "In Praise of Shadows," for example, he examines fire through hourslong exposures that capture the life span of a candle's flame as it flickers and burns out, yielding arrestingly haunting images. Sugimoto has described himself as an "anachronist" who feels "more at ease in the absent past," and he reprises the themes of time and history in his architecture. With Enoura, he aims to define a "new Neolithic aesthetic." Rather than designing architecture that looks its best new, he aims to create buildings that will "still look nice after civilization is gone," he says. "After it ends, my building will be the most beautiful building as a ruin."



Enoura's reception area. Credit Benjamin Hosking

The day after I visit his apartment, I join Sugimoto to travel by train to the Enoura site. In his black blazer, black glasses, white shirt, gray jeans and gray loafers, he looks as if he stepped out of one of his portraits. While Sugimoto's photos can provoke serious philosophical introspection, the man himself is constantly cracking jokes, and he has a soft spot for puns. The name of his New York studio, Door Floor, is a play on the Japanese word doaho, which, roughly translated, means "total idiot."

As our train heads toward Enoura — a sleepy community of citrus farmers now mostly occupied by retirees — we see views of modest wood homes nestled in the leafy slopes of the Hakone mountains and occasionally snatch glimpses of the soft blue of Sagami Bay. Sugimoto was born and raised in Tokyo, the son of parents who worked in the pharmaceutical industry; it was near here that he first saw the sea, while traveling by train on

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holiday. “I was only a boy, but felt as if I’d awakened from an age-old dream,” he wrote of that moment in a 2010 catalog essay.

His interest in design also took root in childhood, fostered by the family’s carpenter — “my best friend,” he says. When Sugimoto was 10, the handyman taught him how to build a chair. At 18, Sugimoto transformed the look of his bedroom from traditional Japanese to mock-English Tudor, complete with half-timbered walls. In the years since, he’s been uncompromising when it comes to his personal and work spaces; his studios are filled with furniture he crafted himself. And when museums exhibit his photographs, he usually requires free rein to design the gallery. For a recent Pace Gallery show, he built an ovoid viewing chamber with a light-diffusing muslin ceiling.

Sugimoto moved to New York in 1974 and worked as an antiques dealer, pursuing photography on the side. Success came swiftly: He earned acclaim for his “Dioramas,” photographs of creatures and early humans staged behind glass at the American Museum of Natural History, and within four years his work had been acquired and exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art. He received his first paid design commission in 2002 when he was hired to adapt a 15th-century Shinto shrine for the Benesse Art Site on the island of Naoshima. Since then, he’s taken on design projects that include the Izu Photo Museum near Mount Fuji and Christie’s Tokyo office. He describes himself as a “very young, coming-up architect.”

We disembark at a tiny station, too sleepy even to merit an attendant, then drive up switchback roads lined with bamboo groves until we reach a small clearing in the foliage. The Enoura site feels precariously perched on the steep sides of the mountains, as if its buildings were impervious to the laws of gravity. A single-story, 100-meter-long gallery oriented to frame the sun at dawn on the summer solstice balances over a vertiginous hill dotted with tangerine trees. Three of its four walls are made of glass, and a cantilevered roof seems to hover in space. Below it, a Noh stage with a platform of translucent optical glass appears to float over pale cypress legs that are jointed using traditional Japanese carpentry. Jutting out beside it and toward the sea is a rectangular, 70-meter-long underground chamber, open at both ends and angled to capture the winter solstice, made of Cor-Ten steel used for the hulls of ships. “It’s land art as well,” Sugimoto says. “Like James Turrell.” He smiles mischievously. “I like mine better.”

Despite the seeming weightlessness of the structures, virtually every surface and all the ornamentation has been created from stones in a dizzying array of shades and textures. One wall of the gallery is hewed from speckled Oya volcanic rock — the same material Frank Lloyd Wright used for the facade of the former Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Charcoal- and ocher-hued specimens, dug up while excavating the buildings’ foundations, are painstakingly stacked to form low walls using a 16th-century stone-piling technique borrowed from Japanese castles. At the entrance to the steel chamber, a dozen sarcophagus-size stones — originally quarried for Edo Castle, which is now the site of Tokyo’s Imperial Palace — are arranged in a circular formation Sugimoto says was inspired by Stonehenge. The chamber

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itself will eventually display Sugimoto's prized collection of fossils, which he refers to as "pre-photography time-recording devices."

Sugimoto talks excitedly about the origins, history and pedigree of each rock on the site. "I'm stoned," he says, cracking himself up.



Inside the underground chamber. Credit Benjamin Hosking

By relying on ancient building material and aligning his structures with the sun's movement through the seasons, Sugimoto aims to heighten an awareness of nature and environment. "People at the early stage of civilization had to understand where they are" by studying the sky, stars and sun, Sugimoto says. "I wanted to try to revive this sense of the early humans' mentality — to be present, through a structure."

"You know, this Zaha Hadid apartment doesn't look good. And as ruins, it's terrible," Sugimoto once told me, while taking in the late architect's soon-to-be-completed apartment building in Chelsea. Several years ago, he published a Michelin-style guide that rated different museums around the world where his work had been shown. He awarded only two stars or fewer to buildings by Philip Johnson, Cesar Pelli and Frank Gehry.

He is enraptured instead by medieval Japanese design. Like Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius before him, Sugimoto venerates the Katsura Imperial Villa, built in the 1600s. With its rectilinear forms and rustic simplicity, it can be thought of as an early manifestation of Modernism. "Before the Europeans discovered the Modernism concept, it was done in Japan," Sugimoto says, noting the era was pivotal for the development of the tea ceremony's

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natural, pared-down aesthetic. “I am a direct descendant from this period, so I carry this spirituality. All the others are gone. I’m the only species left.”

At the site, Sugimoto excuses himself to do more “stone hunting” at a nearby quarry, demurring when I ask to join. (“I have to concentrate.”) As I explore the buildings, I have the peculiar feeling of having entered a Sugimoto photograph. The inside of the gallery appears a monochrome mix of grays, and I watch how the light changes in the space — bright and white at the end of the walkway, softer coming in from the long wall of glass, and dark and flat along the wall made of stone. Gazing toward the end of the underground chamber facing the bay, I realize the rectangular opening has, like the lens of a camera, perfectly framed the horizon line of the sky and ocean, creating a living seascape.

Even Sugimoto’s obsession with time permeates the space. In its own way, the Enoura Observatory is a clock, albeit one that works on the order of months, not hours. I start to imagine it as a ruin — moss taking over, boats vanishing from the horizon, the glass of the gallery shattered. And part of me is sorry I will not be here to see it. “One hundred years is usual” — for the life span of a building — “but 1,000 years is my calendar,” Sugimoto had said earlier. “Wait another 1,000 years, and it will be much, much better looking.”