

# MENTOR PROTÉGÉ

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## AN ARTISTIC THE JOYS OF SHARING **exchange**

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*Mentors & Protégés*





# ZEN AND THE ART OF MENTORING

## KAZUYO SEJIMA & YANG ZHAO

Kazuyo Sejima's iconic buildings radiate a poetic sensibility, but the Japanese architect is deeply pragmatic about what it takes to ensure that a building serves its purpose. Instead of asking her protégé Yang Zhao to observe from the sidelines, she put him to work designing a gathering place for a Japanese village devastated by the 2011 tsunami.

BY NAOMI POLLOCK  
PHOTOGRAPHERS HIDEKI SHIOZAWA (JAPAN) AND  
SU CHEN (CHINA)



Architecture



The idea of a mentor is a rare concept in Japan. If that relationship is just about thinking and talking, I am not the right person. For architects, it is better to build something. Yang and I are making a type of mentor-protégé relationship by creating something together. But the project itself belongs to Yang. It is not my work. So I hesitate a little bit. Yang often asks my opinion but he understands that he must decide for himself. He is a very smart guy who can listen, react and bring new ideas from his point of view. Given their simplicity, his plans look similar to Japanese architecture. But actually the reality is completely different since he uses stone and other sorts of materials. I expect that he will bring his own sensibility to this project. I think he can make a nice project at this site in Kesenuma where there is now nothing.

## KAZUYO SEJIMA



### AFTER THE TSUNAMI

Kazuyo Sejima (above far right) considers that the only way to learn architecture is to be involved in real building projects, so she asked her protégé Yang Zhao to design a meeting place for the citizens of Kesenuma (pictured being consulted about their needs) whose village was destroyed in the tsunami of 2011.

Young Chinese architect Yang Zhao had his first encounter with Kazuyo Sejima in a lecture hall at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design in the United States, in 2010. Listening to Sejima and her business partner Ryue Nishizawa describe their work at their renowned architectural practice SANAA, Zhao had an epiphany. "When they design, they are really thinking about the environment they are creating, instead of the object itself," says Zhao, remembering the moment of inspiration that seemed to anticipate his mentor-protégé relationship with Sejima three years later. He immediately incorporated their philosophy into an important university project.

The cultivation of Sejima's architectural philosophy first began while she was a student at Japan Women's University. Immediately after graduating, Sejima entered the office of Toyo Ito, this year's winner of the Pritzker Prize, architecture's highest honour. "He is very open," says Sejima. "Even when I was a student, he often asked my opinion and discussed it with me." After six years under Ito's tutelage, she founded her own firm, Kazuyo Sejima & Associates, in 1987. Although Sejima's buildings





### SHAPING THE FUTURE

When architecture became a Rolex Arts Initiative discipline in its own right in 2012, Kazuyo Sejima agreed to be the inaugural mentor; she had experienced the value of mentoring herself at the beginning of her career.



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had their own distinct character right from the start, their lightness and fluidity bore Ito's imprint. In 1995, she launched SANAA with Nishizawa. Complementing their individual practices that focus on small projects, SANAA takes on large-scale commissions.

Supported by the slenderest of steel columns and barely enclosed with sheets of glass, SANAA buildings pare architecture down to its essence. A monument minus the monumentality, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa, which consists of a cluster of individual galleries contained by a transparent wrapping, is a case in point. Adopting a similar display strategy, New York City's New Museum consists of an unadorned stack of boxes that hold exhibition areas, while cleverly complying with the city's stringent building code. For the Rolex Learning Center on the Lausanne campus of the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale (EPFL) in Switzerland, SANAA unified a wide range of study areas with an undulating floor plane. In lieu of walls and doors, courtyards, slopes and level changes distinguish different spaces. More recently, the design duo completed the Louvre-Lens. This branch of Paris's most famous museum again features simple, rectilinear rooms. Arranged

in a chain-like sequence, the minimal gallery spaces maximize the spacious, green site. Given the elegance and intelligence of their buildings, it is no wonder that SANAA was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2010.

**F**or her mentoring year with Zhao, Sejima decided she could best support her protégé by guiding him through the design and construction of a building. "If we can make something together, it is better than just thinking or talking," she reasoned. What she had in mind was Home-for-All, a project in Tohoku, the region devastated on 11 March 2011 when an earthquake jolted the archipelago, triggering a tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

No strangers to the blighted area, Sejima and a group of like-minded architects had begun, shortly after the catastrophe, soliciting donations and designing buildings on a pro bono basis, in several, heavily damaged towns. "We could not just wait for the big, long-term projects," explains Sejima. "We had to do something, even a small thing, as soon as possible." Each building project was called a Home-for-All and offered local residents,

especially those relegated to temporary housing, a much-needed place to gather and get away from their tight living quarters.

Situated on Miyatojima, an island off the coast of north-eastern Miyagi Prefecture, the Home-for-All designed by Sejima and Nishizawa consists of a small, enclosed space, containing a kitchen and a sitting area, plus an open, oval terrace sheltered by a big, metal roof. "Since it is a simple structure, it did not take long to design, but figuring out how to realize it with the contractor required some effort," explains Sejima.

While working in the damaged area poses many logistical challenges, Sejima decided that a 30-square-metre Home-for-All was the perfect project for Zhao because it offered him the chance to learn through doing and could be completed within the mentoring year. With those goals in mind, she arranged for Zhao to design another Home-for-All in Kesennuma, a small, tsunami-ravaged town in Miyagi Prefecture.

Wrapped around Kesennuma Bay, the town was once home to a thriving commercial fishing industry. But that came to a screeching halt after the tsunami washed away the town centre and destroyed its port. Eighteen

months later, when Sejima and Zhao first went to the area in search of a possible site, gaping holes where shops and homes once stood had yet to be filled and many of its citizens were still without permanent homes. But the debris had been cleared, many of the fishermen were back at work and the placid water at the town's edge made the recent destruction seem almost unimaginable.

Sejima and Zhao got their first peek at Kesennuma on a blustery winter day. Escorted by local officials, the pair savoured the local ramen noodles and then saw several potential building sites. Since the project will be built on government-owned land, there were many options. But most did not sit quite right with either architect. An open plot adjacent to a large temporary housing complex had promise, yet the elementary school nearby contained plenty of places for people to assemble. A site on the hill was peaceful and idyllic, but too remote. When they arrived at a parcel of land above the beach, however, both the protégé and his mentor were immediately filled with excitement. "It is not too far from the school and you can see water in two directions," exclaims Sejima. Spacious and accessible from multiple directions, it was perfect.



Tramping across this sandy landscape together, the two architects shared observations and volleyed ideas back and forth, appreciating the view here, remarking on the proximity to the road there and delighting in the bells that chime hourly at the nearby fire station. "When you make a plan, it must speak to its surroundings," explains Zhao. As their enthusiasm grew, the divide between mentor and protégé seemed to close, their shared passion for the site surpassing differences in age, experience and culture.

Later that night, Zhao and Sejima convened back at SANAA headquarters in Tokyo to review the day's happenings, talk about the next steps and plan Zhao's trip with Sejima to the Seto Inland Sea island of Inujima where she is working on another undertaking, the Art House Project. Once destined to become a medical waste dump, the island is being reborn as an art destination, thanks to the efforts of the Benesse Art Site Naoshima.

The excursion offered Zhao a chance to see his mentor's work in progress and hear directly from her about the construction process. "I like Inujima's atmosphere and scale," says Sejima. "There are no roads, so they cannot bring in big materials, just small ones."

In keeping with this limitation, Sejima used recycled wood, Plexiglas and aluminium to turn abandoned houses into temporary exhibition spaces. Since Zhao was considering aluminium for his Home-for-All, this site visit was a chance not just to learn from Sejima's use of materials, but also to mould his own design decisions. "All the galleries are very transparent so you can see the fields through the building," she explains. As Sejima discussed her landscaping strategy with the workmen, Zhao looked on in admiration. "Watching them I could sense how contractors really contribute to the design process," he says.

Then Zhao returned to China, to his own architecture practice, Zhaoyang Studio, in Dali, which he set up in 2007. He settled into a comfortable pattern of working on his Home-for-All, bouncing ideas off his own staff and sending drawings or model photos via email to Sejima for feedback.

It comes quickly. "She just looks at my project and sends her immediate response – three points at most. It is kind of like how a Zen master might teach his disciple," says Zhao. "We never talk on the phone." Instead of explicitly directing Zhao, Sejima's comments encourage him to hone his thinking and come to his own design conclusions. "I consider Sejima's

short messages very precious," says Zhao. In response, the protégé answers not with words, but with revised visual information. "Yang Zhao is very receptive," remarks Sejima. "So he hears, reacts and brings new ideas from his point of view."

Based on these exchanges, Zhao readied models and drawings of his Home-for-All for the first meeting with the citizens of Kesennuma, the building's eventual users. With Sejima's help, Zhao presented three different ideas, providing plenty of fodder for discussion. But talk about his proposals was immediately eclipsed by the town's decision to switch to a different site closer to the water where the community used to congregate before the tsunami. "If you wanted to find out the village news, that's where you went," explains Sejima. Naturally, the new location called for a new design scheme. Unrattled, Zhao went back to the proverbial drawing board in search of a new, site-specific solution. "Mr Zhao always has a positive attitude and is very open to different ideas," explains Sejima. "Despite the fact that

**"It is kind of like how a Zen master might teach his disciple"**

YANG ZHAO



YANG ZHAO

**LIVES IN**

Dali

**MY GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT IS**

designing the Niyang River Visitor Center in Linchi, Tibet (photograph left)

**FAVOURITE ARTISTS**

**IN A DIFFERENT DISCIPLINE**

Paul Cézanne, Pier Paolo Pasolini

**MOST INSPIRED BY**

[Buddhist teacher] Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

**WANTS TO**

build his studio in a rice field

**LIKES**

literature and badminton

**RELAXES BY**

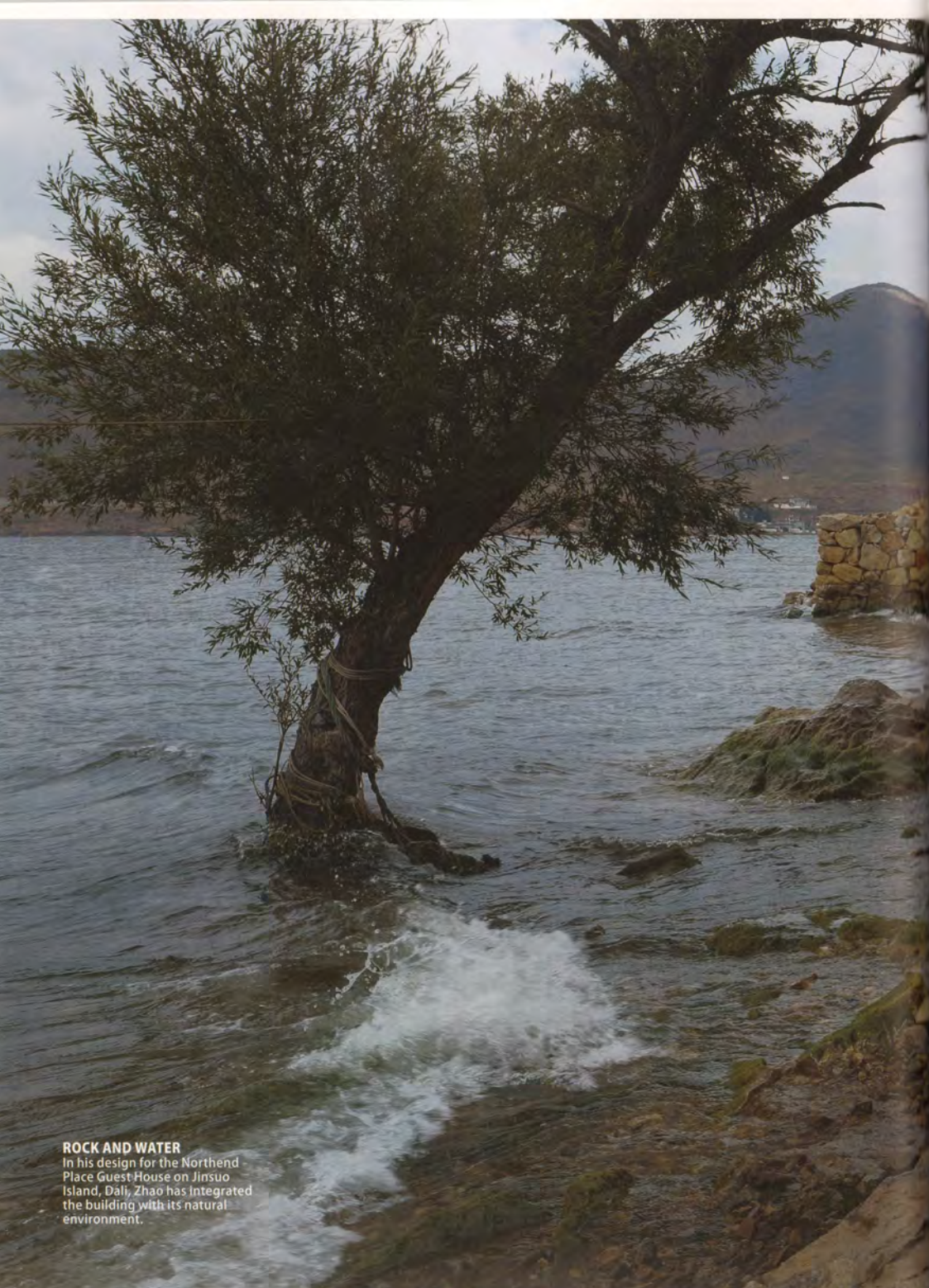
doing yoga



**ON SITE**

Zhao, who has established his own architectural practice in Dali, visits the Northend Place Guest House on Jinsuo Island, Dali, in southern China, to check that builders are staying faithful to his design.





#### ROCK AND WATER

In his design for the Northend Place Guest House on Jinsuo Island, Dali, Zhao has integrated the building with its natural environment.



he is a foreigner, he communicates well with everybody," she adds.

The next meeting with the community was more successful. Sejima pushed tables together to create a more informal setting and orchestrated the gathering by translating and adding explanation to Zhao's presentation. She then ferreted out questions from a line of fishermen seated in the front row. Instead of focusing on broad artistic or conceptual ideas, Sejima directed the conversation towards the building's function.

Shy at first, the fishermen gradually revealed their hopes and dreams for their Home-for-All. The building had to be closed enough to block the wind, but open enough to serve as an impromptu fish market where forklifts laden with the latest catch could drive directly inside. While the fishermen needed a place to repair their nets, they wanted a place where they could relax with a beer after stints on the open sea. "Before, we did not know how all of the spaces would be used, but now Yang has a more precise image," explains Sejima. Neither of Zhao's latest schemes was perfect, but both contained ideas that appealed to his audience. "I think it was the ideal result," says Zhao. "We helped them think about what they really need."

Instantly inspired by the discussion taking place in front of him, Zhao quietly picked up his pencil and began sketching in his black, bound notebook, while Sejima and the fishermen continued, in animated fashion, to bat ideas back and forth. Skittering across the

page, Zhao's pencil was like an extension of his arm. Darting here and there, it could hardly keep up with the fast pace of ideas germinating in his mind. Each pencil stroke generated a new possibility and, in the process, Zhao's design began to evolve, incorporating the new information coming directly from the mouths of the fisherman. Out of his confident, clear lines, a revised plan was starting to take shape. "When it becomes real architecture, I expect it will contain Yang's character," remarks Sejima. Now there is no time to lose if Kesennuma is to have its Home-for-All during the summer. Off and running, Zhao continues to perfect his scheme and meet consultants with help and guidance from Sejima and Masanori Watase, a former Sejima staff member who plays the critical role of helping Zhao communicate with local officials.

"It is like a child that is so loved. So many people want to nurture this project, even though it is so small," says Zhao.

In many respects, building design is never-ending: there is always room for adjustment or refinement. But every cycle of evaluation and revision, no matter how minute or practical, moves the concept one step closer to completion and strengthens the bond between the mentor and her protégé.

Naomi Pollock is a Tokyo-based architect and writer. She is the author of *Modern Japanese House* and *Made in Japan: 100 New Products*.