Exhibitions

Crafting a Modern World: The Architecture and Design of Antonin and Noémi Raymond
The Meyerson Galleries, University of Pennsylvania School of Design, Philadelphia
28 June to 24 September 2006

University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara
17 January to 8 April 2007

Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura, Japan
15 September to 21 October 2007

This pioneering retrospective on Antonin and Noémi Raymond has fueled ongoing debates on alternative trajectories of modernism. Paralleling Alvar Aalto and Bay Area regionalism, the Raymonds’ work opened new avenues in the combination of European, American, and Japanese approaches to modern architecture. But who were the Raymonds, and why has there been a dearth of critical attention focused on them?

Antonin Raymond was born in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), trained as a painter and an architect, and initially worked for Cass Gilbert. Noémi Pernessin Raymond was born in France, educated as a graphic designer, and inspired by the American artist and educator Arthur Wesley Dow. Antonin and Noémi married in 1914, establishing a design partnership that spanned over sixty years. In 1916, they apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright and coauthored an iconic aerial perspective drawing of Taliesin II in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The Raymonds subsequently accompanied Wright to Japan to oversee construction of the Imperial Hotel, but they left before completion to pursue an independent practice. Their work with Wright marked the first phase of their American careers and the first of two extended stays in Japan.

Antonin Raymond is one of the few international architects to be admonished by Wright and praised by Le Corbusier: Wright claimed his work was derivative, but Le Corbusier lauded him for reinterpreting the Errázuris House in the Summer Studio (Karuizawa, Japan, 1933), which received broad international attention through inclusion in Le Corbusier’s Oeuvre Complète. The Raymonds received sporadic journal coverage, were well connected to international architectural networks, and their studio was a training ground for esteemed designers such as Kunio Maekawa, Junzō Yoshimura, and George Nakashima. Yet, despite global connections and recognition, the Raymonds have remained under the radar mostly because a majority of their projects were in Japan, and few are extant.

This exhibition and its accompanying publication focus deserved attention on the Raymonds’ collaborative efforts to produce architecture as a total work of art, combining building, landscape, interiors, and furniture designs. The title Crafting a Modern World and the presentation of work reflects the Raymonds’ commitment to craftsmanship and developing minimalist aesthetics of modernism. As observed at its Santa Barbara venue, the exhibition included an impressive variety of archival documents, drawings, photos, furniture, and textiles as well as new models and videos of key projects. Organized chronologically, the narrative began with Wright and was followed by their independent work in Japan prior to the 1923 Kanto earthquake. The Reinanzaka House (1926), the Raymonds’ own residence in Tokyo, and the Tokyo Golf Club (1932) highlight the rebuilding period after the quake. Subsequently, the Raymonds became polyglot practitioners, translating European trends for Japanese industrialists and creating hybrid modern houses for foreign-educated Japanese elites as well as embassies and residences for foreign officials. The reinforced concrete Akaboshi Tetsuma House (Tokyo, 1935) and a series of timber projects in the Karuizawa mountain retreat represented prewar projects. Avoiding the war, the Raymonds relocated to America via India, establishing a Taliesin-inspired studio in a refurbished farmhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Returning to Japan soon after World War II, they contributed to reconstruction efforts with prefabricated housing solutions and foreign institutions such as the Readers Digest Building (Tokyo, 1951). The Raymonds continued to work on a wide range of projects in Japan until retiring to America in 1973.

Throughout their work, Euro-American modern design approaches were inflected by reverence for Japanese craft traditions, simplicity of expression, and a penchant for natural materials. Their projects maintained Arts and Crafts ideals and created alternatives to industrial modernism. Regardless of where they were working, they produced adaptive architecture sensitive to site and climate as well as available materials and techniques. To fully appreciate the Raymonds’ sensitive modernism requires awareness of the strands that they carefully synthe-
sized in their creations. While the work stands on its own, a lack of reference material made it difficult for audiences with limited knowledge of Japanese architecture, modern architecture, or both, to recognize and appreciate how adept the Raymonds were at integrating diverse architectural concepts and techniques.

The exhibition presented a vast array of materials with clear didactic explanations, demonstrating the architectural achievements of the Raymonds. Tableaux of furnishings and textiles, as well as videos created from architectural photographs, enlivened the presentation. These diverse media helped communicate how the Raymonds carefully constructed settings for modern life. Augmenting the architectural artifacts, paintings by Noémi Raymond characterized experiences with Wright and in India. Yet, despite their long engagement, little conveyed either their lives in or perceptions of Japan. The exhibition suggested that the Raymonds’ encounters with Japan inspired their projects, but the nature of their engagement begged for further exploration.

Japan holds a privileged role in the imagination of modern architecture, from art nouveau to the Deutsche Werkbund and from Wright’s interest in Japanese woodblock prints to Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius identifying seeds of modern architecture in the Katsura Palace. However, the exhibition shied away from addressing how the Raymonds conceptualized Japanese architecture. It merely suggested that their fondness for minka (vernacular farm dwellings), natural materials, and craftsmanship generated a tempered modern architecture.

Despite acknowledging that the Raymonds considered themselves outsiders, explanatory materials repeatedly claimed that they “forged a meaningful connection with ancient traditions of Japan.” However, the specific Japanese traditions and the nature of their transmission and reception remained ambiguous. The fact that the Raymonds’ time in Japan spanned several complex and tumultuous transitional periods both before and after the devastating 1923 Kantō earthquake and World War II presents a related challenge to singular conceptions of Japan. Keen attention to the details of the Raymonds’ projects masked the volatile urban landscapes they were situated in, ranging from preearthquake Taishō-era liberalism and postearthquake reconstruction to prewar nationalism and postwar recovery efforts. While sensitive to architectural legacies, the show detached projects from the complex social developments surrounding them. The exhibition clearly demonstrated the breadth and depth of the Raymonds’ work, but it would have been further strengthened by locating their developments in broader historical and cultural contexts, especially when presented to unfamiliar audiences.

Even though it focused primarily on design developments, the exhibition made strong contributions to ongoing evaluations of modernism and its international interpretations. The catalog, a valuable resource that extends conversations regarding the evolution of modern architecture, is a handsome and comprehensive compilation of projects and writings, reinforced with analytical essays from the international team of curators. An introductory essay and a selection of the Raymonds’ writings and letters compensate for the exhibition’s limited coverage of their relations with Japan. A detailed chronology also provides some additional context for their work. While drawing overdue attention to their achievements, this exhibition and publication enable the Raymonds’ legacy to inform contemporary struggles to create sensitive architecture capable of negotiating global and local developments.

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Publication related to the exhibition:

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