appreciation for the design process for a few projects, such as the Federal Reserve Board Garden. But privately owned sculpture such as Henry Moore’s Torso, from the Rosenberg Garden, and Oehme, van Sweden–designed furniture and planting containers were spatially out of scale and did not strengthen the key themes of the exhibition.

Sadly, nine of the twenty-one gardens featured in Bold Romantic Gardens were lost during Oehme’s and van Sweden’s lifetimes, through ownership changes, lack of maintenance, or real estate conflicts. The exhibition closed with a nod toward the stewardship of the firm’s built legacy. Oehme and van Sweden maintained ongoing collaborations with their patrons (often for decades), and because they wrote extensively, they left a deep appreciation for their design and stewardship philosophies. The successor firm, renamed OEHME, van SWEDEN | OvS, has moved forward with awareness of the tenuous and temporal nature of gardens. Landscapes are designed to change with time. The exhibition reinforced awareness of the bonds among architectural structure, horticulture, and stewardship that are essential to the Oehme, van Sweden vision.

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Related Website

Notes
3. H. Marc Cathey, foreword to Oehme and van Sweden, Bold Romantic Gardens, 16.

A Japanese Constellation: Toyo Ito, SANAA, and Beyond
Museum of Modern Art, New York
13 March–31 July 2016

The most significant artifact in the MoMA exhibition A Japanese Constellation: Toyo Ito, SANAA, and Beyond was not one of the sumptuous architectural models, or any of the precise orthographic drawings, but a small, hand-drawn sketch. The sketch—labeled “Toyo Ito and Surroundings,” signed by Ito himself and dated 9 September 2012—depicts a series of interesting circles, each containing the name of an architect or engineer (Figure 1). Ito places his own name in the largest circle, at the center. Around him orbit smaller circles with the names of figures who worked for or with him.

Placed prominently at the entrance of the exhibition, the sketch served as both a conceptual and a practical diagram of the show. Its overlapping circles suggest relationships and connections between the architects and engineers (the names of the latter appear in circles drawn with dashed lines), de-emphasizing individuals in favor of their adjacencies and commonalities. As the exhibition’s curators, Pedro Gadanho and Phoebe Springstubb, wrote in their introductory wall text, the show “maps a network of architects who gravitate around Toyo Ito (born 1941) and SANAA, the office founded in 1995 by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa.” These architects include Sou Fujimoto, Akihisa Hirata, and Junya Ishigami. The text stressed the “themes that link the architects’ careers,” their shared location in and around Tokyo, and, above all, “Ito’s influence as a mentor.”

The constellation is a provocative trope around which to organize an architectural exhibition and a suggestive modifier to the always slippery notion of influence. Solar constellations inscribe recognizable forms onto random arrays of stars; as the framework for the show, constellation promises that some kind of pattern will emerge, that connections will be made between the various figures. This is an admirable and unusual ambition for an installation of this type, and a shift from recent architectural exhibitions at MoMA that have focused either on geographic frameworks, such as the magisterial Latin America in Construction: 1955–1980 (2015), or a single architect, as in Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes (2013). In the exhibition catalogue, Gadanho writes that he brought the idea for the show with him when he was hired as the curator of contemporary architecture at MoMA in 2012. Gadanho has since left MoMA to become the inaugural director of the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology in Lisbon.

The exhibition gathered together work from almost all of the architects depicted in Ito’s sketch. The stated focus was on the twenty-first century, although projects from the 1990s were included as well. Each architect was given a “room” in the exhibition, demarcated by full-height screens of
translucent fabric, which defined spaces while also allowing partial views between them. The architects’ names appeared in simple black text on white walls, with brief biographies and slightly longer and more interpretive text appearing below. The first and largest space was given over to Ito. Following that, the exhibition moved roughly in a circle to each of the other five architects: Hirata, Fujimoto, Ishigami, Sejima, and Nishizawa. The final area was devoted to the joint work of Sejima and Nishizawa at SANAA.

No presentation drawings or renderings were displayed on the walls; instead, the curators relied almost exclusively on working drawings (mostly plans and sections), which were unmounted and adhered directly to the gallery walls. They looked as if they could have come straight from the printers in any of the offices that morning. A small selection of sketches and structural studies were presented, although none emphasized the design process. Photographs were included, but only as projections onto the screen walls. It was often difficult to tell whether the buildings were constructed or not, and it was also difficult to match up the various components of a given project: the model would be in one spot, the drawings on a wall nearby, while the unlabeled photographs appeared and then disappeared on the swaying fabric on the other side of the room. Perhaps this was intentional—the object too became disaggregated, a kind of networked idea—but it was often confusing.

The models were the stars of this show. They were enormous, although not immersive; they commanded the space and made evident the formal virtuosity and conceptual clarity of these projects. The show began with a model of Ito’s Sendai Mediatheque in Sendai, Japan (1995–2001), with its twisting column cages and paper-thin slabs. Lesser-known but equally spectacular models included Ishigami’s Kagawa Institute of Technology Workshop in Atsugi, Japan (2005–8), with its forest of rigorously yet irregularly spaced columns, and the adjacent Multipurpose Plaza (2009–ongoing), planned as a column-free counterpart; the profoundly simple stacked cardboard boxes of SANAA’s New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (2003–7); the curving mound of Nishizawa’s Teshima Art Museum, Teshima, Japan (2004–10); the spiraling library stacks of Fujimoto’s Musashino Art University Museum and Library, Tokyo (2007–10); and the urban spiral of Fujimoto’s Beton Hala Waterfront Center for Belgrade, Serbia (2011–12). Although models have historically occupied a predominant place in architectural exhibitions, given their accessibility to nonspecialized audiences, in this case the models were less explanatory than inspirational. The most successful were the least realistic, highlighting the conceptual strength of the work.

It is worth remembering that influence as a term shares astral roots with influenza, a passive, seemingly inevitable, and perhaps even malevolent force descending from the heavens. Influence is historically passive and one-way. The curators rightly suggested a more networked conception of influence. But how were visitors to locate the invisible lines connecting these figures into something greater? The short biographies for the architects typically included information about when they worked in either Ito’s or SANAA’s office, but this was not consistently rendered. Visitors learned, for example, that Sejima “spent several formative years” in Ito’s office during the “early 1980s,” but no specific dates were given. The text stated that Ito was an early supporter of Fujimoto, but no more details were provided. For the most part, there was no curatorial attempt to connect biographical dots; the exhibition asked the viewers to do the mapping on their own.

If biography was the most immediate frame of reference for influence, the curators also emphasized shared qualities within the work as a means to create connections. The most important of these qualities was a commitment to “social change,” which was mentioned repeatedly as a common thread among the featured architects. The focus on social change was made explicit in a section of the exhibition on Home for All, a project in which Ito, Sejima, Fujimoto, Hirata, and other architects responded to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake with a model for a simple rural structure, for which they won the Golden Lion at the 2012 Venice Biennale. Occupying a separate hallway, this section felt like an outlier and was never convincingly integrated with the overall exhibition.

A Japanese Constellation offered a powerful exhibition framework and a critique of the relentless focus on the individual within contemporary “starchitecture.” But to what degree can we critique this star system simply by highlighting multiple stars? The choice to organize the exhibition by individual architects naturally kept each figure separate and distinct, even as connections were at times suggested (as in the Home for All portion). Had the work been arranged according to building type, shared conceptual ideas, or...
even a mix of chronology and biography, the exhibition might have more effectively demonstrated the complex workings of influence. Nevertheless, the show succeeded in asking viewers to search for shared attributes and languages across this brilliant constellation of Japanese architects.

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Related Publication

Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture
Royal Academy of Arts, London
26 January–20 April 2016

In 1936, the leading British journal Architectural Review reconsidered its medium and its message by punching holes out of one of its thick interior sheets, displaying round sections of an image on the following page, to readers’ delight. Playfully revealing and concealing, and connecting word, image, and magazine design for a 1930s audience, these well-placed holes reminded readers that even a robust and established critical voice could have a little fun. Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture, at the Royal Academy, was also shaped by the spirited circle. The cover of its catalogue used the same circular trick as the 1930s AR issue. It was, too, an exhibition based on revealing and concealing, and it played fast and loose not only with the academy’s interior ground floor Architecture Space and café rooms but also with the idea of an exhibition itself.

This was an exhibition without any exhibits, but it was no mere display either. Curated by Owen Hopkins, who is also the author of the accompanying yet arguably stand-alone book, Mavericks pulled together the career highlights of twelve architects across three hundred years of building and designing in Britain. Four were eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century classicists, and seven were from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; there was only one woman. That woman was Zaha Hadid, and the chronological exhibition concluded with her work. In the wake of Hadid’s untimely death in March 2016, all corners of the architectural press have emphasized her gravity-defying designs, relentless ambition, and vision. Like many of her maverick companions in the Royal Academy’s exhibition, such as John Vanbrugh and James Wyatt, Hadid was occasionally at odds with authorities and critics owing to her tireless pursuit of a particular path.

The exhibition’s working definition of an architectural “maverick” was compelling: an individual who refuses to conform, who harnesses design (and perhaps more than a touch of personal) eccentricity to push stylistic and material boundaries, and thus runs the risk of having limited opportunities to build despite the wealth of paper architecture produced. Strong imagination and bold form did not, for Hopkins, necessarily indicate genius. The twelve architects in this exhibition might or might not fall into a “lone genius” mythology, but each was a risk taker who marshaled a unique type of architectural shock and awe in her or his own time. The principle of outré architecture that might oscillate between the margins and the mainstream center of architectural culture is reminiscent of the ideas recently published by Timothy Brittain-Catlin in Bleak Houses, a maverick book of its own that charts failure and architectural subcultures, setting out an architectural conflict across hundreds of years between the built environment’s “bullies” and “sissies.”

Mavericks at the Royal Academy took up this gauntlet to an extent, valuing design not wholly for its fame or commercial success but for its daring innovation.

There were notable pitfalls, however, to this approach. It was refreshing and stimulating to explore John Soane’s projects alongside FAT’s and Cedric Price’s utopian fantasies. The collaborative architecture firm FAT, which stands for Fashion Architecture Taste, is well known for its striking combinations of styles, ornament, and materials, riding the line between seriousness and fun without derailing into the territory of frivolity. The Royal Academy exhibition also highlighted the work of many architects outside the chosen twelve by including their names on colorful circles swirling throughout the building, perhaps prompting the curious to find out more (Figure 1). (Temple Moore’s name even appeared twice, perhaps as a double maverick for the early twentieth-century Gothic Revival.) Although there was acknowledgment of the maverick in relation to women in architecture, the Pritzker-winning Hadid was only one twelfth of the exhibition, and women’s names were few and far between on the accompanying circles. By the exhibition’s own definition, nearly any woman venturing into the lion’s den of British architecture across the past 150 years could be described as a maverick. The Women in Architecture Awards, founded by Christine Murray, will see many more designers justly lauded in

Figure 1 Installation view of Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2016 (copyright Francis Ware).