

# **Nara Convention Hall International Design Competition : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 20, 1992-March 7, 1993**

[organized by Terence Riley and Christopher Mount]

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index of participating artists.



**Nara**

**Convention Hall**

**International Design**

**Competition**

**The Museum of Modern Art  
New York**

**November 20, 1992–  
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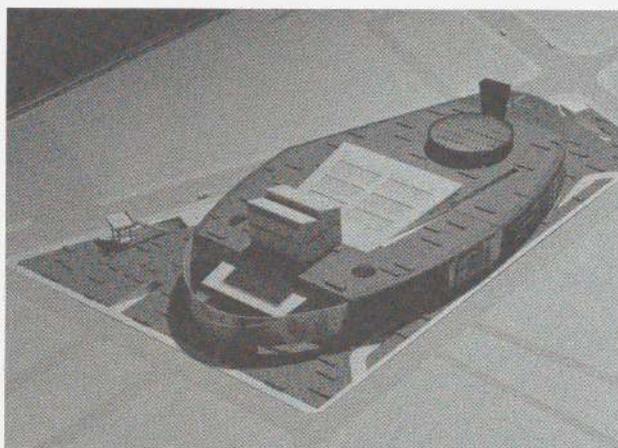
Architectural competitions have, for centuries, been organized to assure that important civic works benefit from both public and professional scrutiny. Certain competitions, such as the Chicago Tribune Tower competition of 1922, have been notable for unusually high levels of participation within the architectural community. More recently, the 1979 competition for counter-proposals to the government-sponsored Forum project in the historic Les Halles quarter of Paris became a *cause célèbre*, attracting more than 600 submissions.

Thirteen years later, a similarly high number of proposals were submitted to the Nara Convention Hall Competition in Nara, Japan. As with earlier competitions, an analysis of the results can provide a window on contemporary architectural thinking, both in terms of the finalists' work and the jury's deliberations. Compared to the Les Halles competition, the Nara Convention Hall represents a broad realignment of architectural thought. Shown here are nearly sixty prints and drawings and ten submission models describing each of the ten final proposals.

The ancient city of Nara, one of the principal production centers along the silk trade routes, became the capital of Japan thirteen hundred years ago. For more than seventy years, until the imperial government



**Hans Hollein** organized his proposal around an open plaza. The result is a decidedly introspective scheme, with the principal views from the building oriented toward the central space. References to traditional Japanese culture, such as the extensive patterning of two-dimensional surfaces, suggest that the building's configuration refers to the viewing garden in traditional Japanese houses. The design is a composition of heterogeneous elements. Analogous to the complex's inward orientation, the highly articulated formal qualities of the project are self-referential.



**Bojan Radonic & Goran Rako's** proposal invites comparison with the scheme submitted by Arata Isozaki. Both projects place all the programmatic elements within a single unifying form. Both employ an overall language of geometric abstraction. However, Radonic and Rako's scheme represents an attempt to sustain a recognizable language of abstraction which is, in part, derived from various twentieth-century precedents. Radonic and Rako are not alone in this effort: they have marked affinities with a number of European architects working along similar lines.

was moved, Nara experienced tremendous growth. The city's grid plan, with its interspersed temple and shrine precincts, originated during this period. Like Kyoto, Nara suffered little during the Second World War, and today much of the city's fabric dates from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nara is bounded to the east by the foothills of Mt. Kasuga and Mt. Wakakusa. Interrupting the continuity of its grid is the national railroad's trunk line, linking Nara with Osaka to the West and Kyoto to the North.

The fifty-seven acres surrounding the train station have been designated by the City Assembly as the site of an ambitious redevelopment plan entitled "Silk Road 21." The master plan, conceived by the architect Kisho Kurokawa, combines public and private development and includes hotel and retail facilities as well as a museum, a new train station, public housing, a health-care facility, and the Nara Convention Hall. Unlike the free-wheeling development of many Japanese cities, the Nara plan reflects local concerns: it includes reserved open areas, height limitations, and set-back guidelines, and has provisions for the preservation of historic buildings.

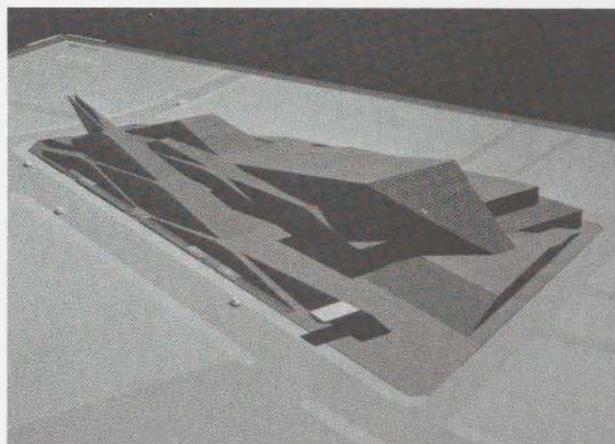
Of the public buildings proposed, the Convention Hall is the largest. The commission was awarded to

the renowned architect Arata Isozaki, following a two-stage competition co-sponsored by the City of Nara and Shinken-chiku-sha Co., Ltd., an architectural publishing house. Shinken-chiku-sha has long advocated architectural competitions to select architects for major public projects. In many European countries, public commissions are awarded exclusively by competition; in the United States, less than five percent of public commissions are determined through competition.

The Nara Convention Hall Competition was conducted in two stages. Nearly 3,000 architects from forty-five countries registered for the first stage of the competition, and 644 proposals were submitted to a jury consisting of chairman Kisho Kurokawa (Japan); architect Kazuo Shinohara (Japan); architect Hiroshi Hara (Japan); architect James Stirling (Great Britain); architect Richard Meier (United States); Vittorio Lampugnani, Director of the Deutsches Architekturmuseum (Germany); Makoto Ohgita, Chairman of the Urban Landscape Council of Nara; Eizo Nishida, Mayor of Nara; Kiyokazu Asakawa, Chairman of the Nara City Assembly; Akinori Kata, Associate Professor at Osaka University; architectural critic Shozo Baba; and event producer Nobuo Hayashi.



**Christian de Portzamparc's** design is composed of three distinct structures that house the principal programmatic elements. The administrative and service functions are housed in a linear structure which organizes the other elements along a grid plan derived from the urban plan of Nara. The three structures make direct formal references to pre-war modernism and episodic references to the enigmatic language of the surreal and the exuberance of postwar modernist invention. These structures are connected by a courtyard with greenery, stone sculpture, and pools borrowed from Japanese gardens.



**Yoshito Takahashi's** design parallels the topography of the area surrounding Nara. The folds and multiple surfaces of the Convention Hall simulate hills and valleys and are a man-made extension of the natural forces that form the malleable surface of Japan's island geography. Reminiscent of a huge work of origami, the building is folded and cut into segments corresponding to specific functions. The internal spaces are similarly formed; the enclosing walls shift and fold like tectonic plates.

Five proposals from the first stage were selected as finalists. They were those of Scott Marble & Karen Fairbanks (United States, b. 1960 and 1959, respectively); Ryuji Nakamura/Takenaka Corporation (Japan, b. 1943); Bojan Radonic & Goran Rako (Croatia, b. 1962 and 1952, respectively); Bahram Shirdel (United States, b. 1951); and Yoshito Takahashi (Japan, b. 1962). These finalists were given the opportunity to refine their proposals and resubmit them, in the second stage, along with five invited architects: Tadao Ando (Japan, b. 1941); Mario Botta, (Switzerland, b. 1943); Hans Hollein (Austria, b. 1934); Arata Isozaki (Japan, b. 1931); and Christian de Portzamparc (France, b. 1944).

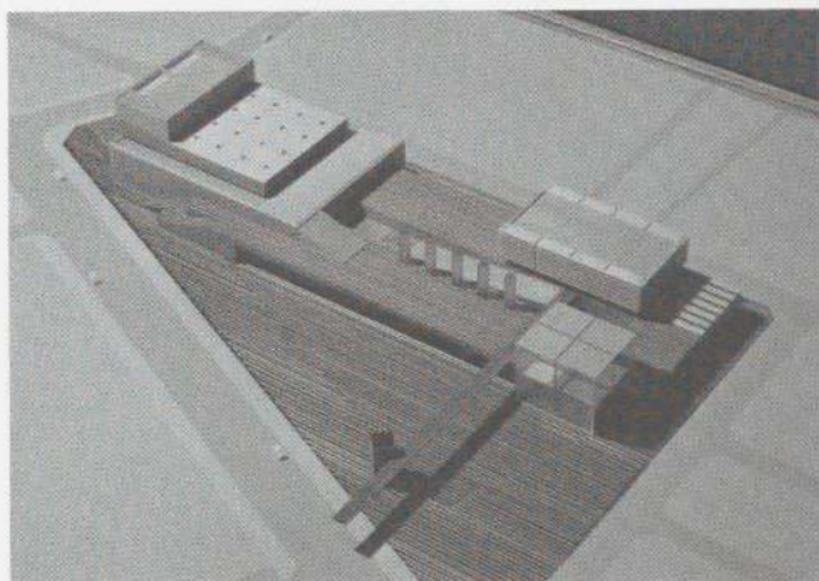
The program required three principal spaces accommodating 2,000, 500, and one hundred people, respectively. All of the principal spaces required enough flexibility to serve multiple purposes. The design of the large hall was to have complete theatrical facilities, the medium hall was designated as an auditorium, and the smallest hall was to be the most flexible, providing space for exhibitions, meetings, and experimental theater, among other things. The program also included reception and administrative spaces, parking, and other services, and the site required a pedestrian bridge to connect the

Conventional Hall to the rail station, which borders it on one side.

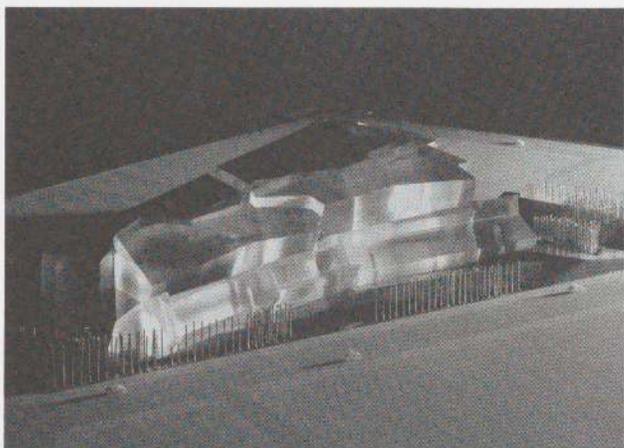
As mentioned earlier, the submissions to the Nara Convention Hall Competition represent a broad realignment of architectural thought among not only the younger architects who competed in the first stage but the more established architects as well. This realignment is clearly illustrated in the work of Christian de Portzamparc. The highly stylized composition he submitted for Nara—with references to both pre- and postwar modernism, and the seamless signature of the surreal—stands in stark contrast to his rationalized neo-classical scheme for Les Halles in 1979.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the historicist elements of postmodern thought often were posed as rhetorical counterpositions to seemingly static definitions of modernism. In the Nara competition results, there is no absolute consensus but a recasting of the debate: not only is there a renewed interest in exploring and expanding definitions of modernism, but the most serious counterposition is represented by an equally vibrant post-structuralism.

A number of the invited senior architects used the competition to explore positions not previously



**Ryuji Nakamura's** Convention Hall attempts to integrate universal images of technology and specific references to cultural traditions. The public enters the building from the east, emerging again on an exterior ramp in the center of the complex. The ramp leads to an elevated plaza on which the three principal theaters are located. Pools of water symbolizing the transience of time, *kekkaï*, are at the ends of the ramp, which is flanked by five "light columns" intended to represent the future. The small multipurpose space appears as a rationalized *tatami* room.



In **Bahram Shirdel's** project the pure geometry of modernism is folded, collapsed, and deformed in an attempt to compensate for its abstraction without resorting to the compositional strategies of traditional architectural language. The eastern portion of the Convention Hall is thus a continuous folded form with the three theaters suspended in its striated section. The folding is conceived as a sequence of deformations that alters the plan and section of the project as well as the three principal spaces.

associated with their work. Hans Hollein's project is reminiscent of the highly articulated formalism of his Haas Haus project in Vienna, yet the overall character is more distinctly fragmented and less hierarchical than that project. Tadao Ando's project is similarly fragmented, portraying a level of formal complexity at odds with the work for which he is most well known. Arata Isozaki's winning design represents not so much a departure but a return to the sleek abstraction that characterized his first internationally recognized works of the 1970s.

In contrast, Christian de Portzamparc's project is readily associated with his more recent work, such as the tower for O.M.A.'s EuroLille master plan. The solemnity of Mario Botta's classicized modernism seems nearly formulaic when compared to other recent projects such as his competition entry for the Palazzo del Cinema, completed for the 1991 Venice Biennale.

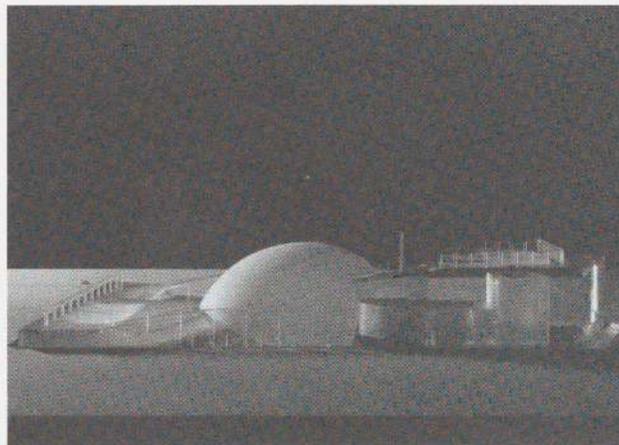
The younger architects' work can be seen as reflecting a range of issues of interest to their generation. The pervasiveness of the media within current architectural debates is evident in the proposals of both Scott Marble & Karen Fairbanks, and Bojan Radonic & Goran Rako. Bahram Shirdel's project, for which the critic and architect Jeffrey Kipnis was a consul-

tant, clearly articulates the influence of post-structuralist philosophy on contemporary architectural thought. This project, closely related to Shirdel's other work, such as the project for the Alexandria Library Competition (with Andrew Zago), presented the greatest challenge to the jury: although post-structuralism has for several years been debated in critical circles, it remains fairly unfamiliar to the profession at large.

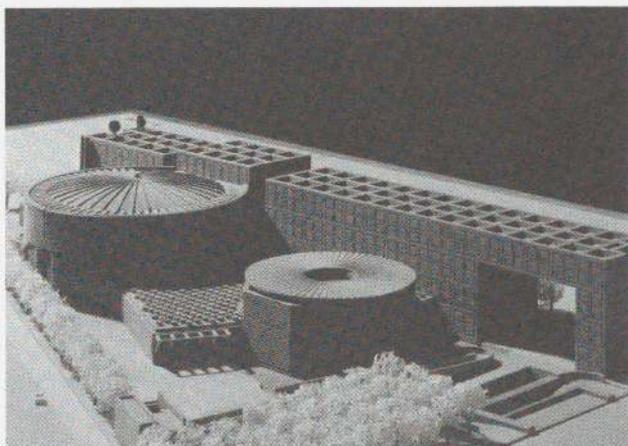
While the authors of these three projects all have some ties to academia, and the proposals of Yoshito Takahashi and Ryuji Nakamura/Takenaka Corporation were undertaken within large corporate offices, there is no clear division in the work along the lines of "professionalism." Ada Louise Huxtable, the noted architectural critic, lamented the rhetorical posturing of a vast number of projects submitted to the Les Halles Competition. In contrast, the Nara projects display a markedly engaged attitude, cutting clearly across ideological boundaries.

Terence Riley

Director, Department of Architecture and Design



**Tadao Ando's** project presents two immense stepped plazas, rising towards opposite ends of the site, intended as places for the public to meet and congregate. Spanning these two plazas is a gigantic canopy in the form of a cycloid. Beneath the larger stepped plaza are the three theaters. All of the theaters are designed using some variation of spherical geometry; the largest is in the seamless form of an eggshell. In this proposal the entire site is built-up setting itself apart from Nara's urban fabric in the manner of the many temple and shrine precincts throughout the city.



**Mario Botta's** design presents a classicized language of modernism: a rotunda (the large theater) and an octagon (the medium-sized theater) connected by a long rectangular volume containing the administrative and service functions as well as the multipurpose hall. A monumental gateway allows the public space to continue through the building. The three principal structures are distinguished not only by form but by rationalized treatments of their surfaces: a gridded lattice, alternating bands of light and dark material, and a rhythm of horizontal jointwork characterize the rectangular, octagonal, and cylindrical volumes.

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The exhibition was organized by Terence Riley and Christopher Mount.

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On the cover: **Arata Isozaki's** design proposal was selected by the jury as the winner of the Nara Convention Hall Competition. The plan of the main structure takes the form of a gigantic ellipse that extends the length of the site, along the axis of the city's historic grid plan. The plan of the ellipse is rotated 23° to form an entrance hall that is parallel to the rail station. The exterior walls, sheathed in zinc and gray ceramic tile, taper gently toward the roof, which is a vast field of solar collectors in the form of glass tubes.

Though apparently abstract, the form of the building is related to Nara's principal monuments. In terms of its color, curving profile, and ponderous presence, Isozaki's Convention Hall design recalls the monumental roof of the Todaiji Temple.

Despite the cool abstraction of the exterior, Isozaki's design calls for a highly articulated, machinelike interior. Nearly every aspect of the large theater is mechanized: floor levels, seating, and lighting are adjustable to allow both endstage and centerstage productions. Similarly the height of the multipurpose room can be manipulated to accommodate a variety of uses.

The medium hall, in Isozaki's scheme, is designed more specifically for musical performances. The hall is enclosed on three sides by double walls of glass, with a walkway in-between. For acoustical reasons, the glass is alternately perforated, corrugated, and of varying thicknesses, creating a crystalline box within the overall building.

All photographs appear courtesy of Shinkenchiu-Sha Company, Ltd.

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**Scott Marble & Karen Fairbanks's** project explores various aspects of performance and its relationship to public space. The two larger theaters are connected by an elevated proscenium strip that acts as a walkway; like the grand staircase of a traditional opera house, it is itself a piece of theater. The public plaza passes below the proscenium; above it are five large video monitors visible from both the walkway and from outside the Convention Hall. By projecting the performances into the public plaza, the video monitors redefine both the performance and the audience.