

The Chichu Art Museum

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Darkness rather than the light, below ground rather than above—the Chichu Art Museum is the most direct expression of this feeling rooted deep inside me.

In the forty years since I decided to become an architect, I have been looking for my own “matrix of space,” which in my imagination is an obscure place like a cave surrounded by thick, heavy walls of earth, or a space in the darkness lit only with a dim ray of light.

These images do not derive from the phenomenology of space, but rather from physical—and unconscious—inclinations of my own. In search of their origin, places from the past come to mind: such memories as dusky rooms of the house I lived in as a child; subterranean labyrinths of cave houses in Cappadocia I saw on a journey in my youth; a passage of descending steps leading to an underground well in Ahmadabad.

The Pantheon in Rome, for me, is a perfect example of spatial pureness. Passing through its inconspicuous façade among the city’s historical buildings, you suddenly find yourself in a timeless microcosm, a dark space of the same diameter and height that could hold a perfect sphere. Its only opening is an oculus at the zenith of the dome which steadily introduces a vital stream of light into the closed space and generates a sense of infinite depth.

I am deeply imbued with, and influenced by, the feeling of space embracing life, a feeling you might get looking up at the sky from the depths of the earth. This feeling always lingers, whether I am designing the smallest house, a large, urban commercial building, or a museum. The long history of Western architecture can be also described as striving toward this search for light. Yet after the early twentieth century, when we learned to introduce light into buildings without structural restrictions, its significance began to diminish. It has been my desire to return to the origin of architecture and contemplate light from the side of darkness. I have conceived a number of underground structures, some with only the slightest possibility of realization, that celebrate darkness rather than light—the underground rather than the ground itself. After many lengthy studies, I was confronted, at last, with an opportunity to realize an underground project: the Chichu Art Museum in Naoshima.

It is possible to create almost any form underground as there are no axes or directions as exist above ground, on earth. But this formal freedom made me all the more committed to primal geometrical forms. The outer expression of an underground building is invisible and, therefore, the obvious issues of form were not an issue. My challenge was to achieve a highly complex and varied sequence of “lightscares” within a configuration of simple, geometrical forms. Based on the geometry, I carved volumes into the earth and tried instill in them a sense of further depth, which inevitably resulted in less light and an intensified atmosphere. I examined every detail of the amount and quality of light penetrating the darkness and highlighting the individual spaces, making each distinctive. The museum was intended, holistically, to be visited with light as a guide.

An incredible amount of energy went into the creation of the Chichu Art Museum, and I am confident that the architecture will be as powerful as the effort put into it. And I will quietly keep my eye on the process of its growth.