

TURNING POINTS: GUEST ESSAY

A Complex for the End of Time

Planning a site of ruins that speaks to future civilizations.

By Hiroshi Sugimoto

Mr. Sugimoto is an artist, architect and writer.

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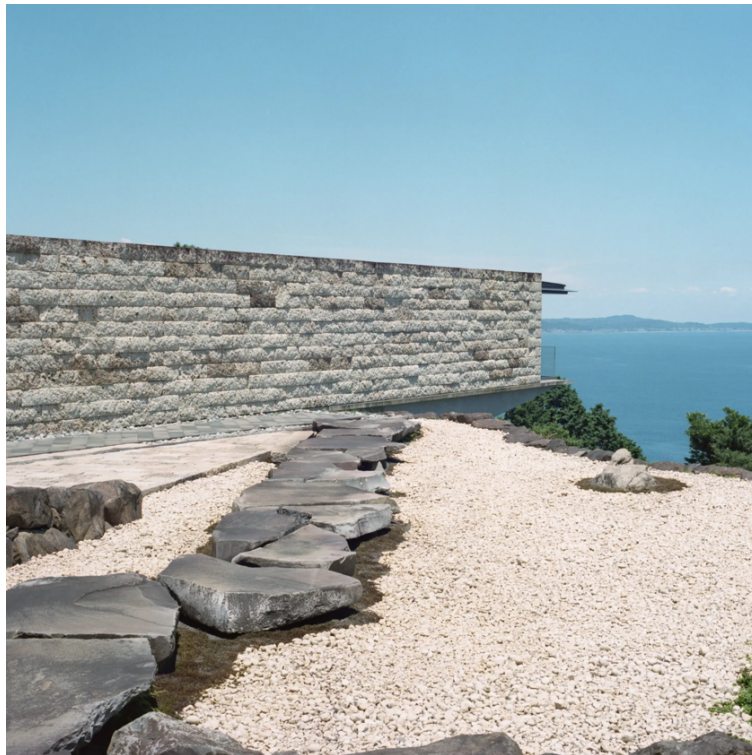
This personal reflection is part of a series called Turning Points, in which writers explore what critical moments from this year might mean for the year ahead. You can read more by visiting the Turning Points series page.

Turning Point: *For some stranded away from home, the seemingly endless months of the pandemic became a kind of sabbatical.*

In medieval times, people typically lived out their entire lives in the same community. It was only with the advent of modernity and the invention of trains, automobiles and airplanes that people started to broadly roam the surface of the earth. Even an artist like me can circle the earth two-and-a-half times, as I did in 2019. I'm usually based in New York, and my ever-expanding workload comprised solo exhibitions, lectures, theater productions and architectural projects. Then came Covid-19. I happened to be in Japan when the pandemic began. Because of the global shutdown, I have rediscovered the simple pleasure of living in the same community — in this case the Shirokane district of Tokyo — for more than a year and a half.

In 1665 London, the plague was rampant. Isaac Newton retreated to Woolsthorpe-by-Colsterworth, his native village in eastern England, for a year and a half to avoid the spread of infection. There he threw himself into his research. This was when he came up with the theory of gravity, after witnessing an apple fall. This was when, after setting up a prism on the second floor of his house, he discovered that daylight refracts into a spectrum of seven colors. This was when he developed his theory on infinitesimal calculus. This work laid the foundations of modern physics and mathematics. Some good can come out of a pandemic. My work as a photographer owes a debt of gratitude to Newton's prism experiments then.

I chose to follow Newton's example, treating these 18 months in Japan as a sabbatical and focusing intently on my work. In my case, that meant pushing my final work — the one that will be my legacy — closer to completion. I have called this project the Enoura Observatory, a multidisciplinary cultural complex that includes a gallery, two stages for the performing arts, a teahouse, shrine and numerous pavilions. It is set on 10 acres of hillside overlooking Sagami Bay in the Kataura district of Odawara, and the architecture hews to a style that the ancients once built for the observation of the heavens. Seven thousand years ago, humans began erecting structures to verify that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and that time progresses as the seasons change. I imagine this gave them a sense of place and purpose in the universe. These archaeoastronomical structures are now reduced to ruins in places like Egypt, Peru and Ireland.



At the Enoura Observatory, a 100-meter-long gallery space overlooking Sagami Bay. Shina Peng for The New York Times

Civilizations rise and fall. In a bid to prepare for the possible collapse of our modern civilization, I am making a garden that will devolve beautifully into ruins of stone. Perhaps someday a future society, with little knowledge of our time, will discover this site and will ponder its meaning.

Here at Enoura, where I toil every day, I have appointed myself master of a crew of stonemasons. For guidance I refer to “Sakuteiki,” or “Notes on Garden Design,” written by Tachibana Toshitsuna in the 11th century. In his book, Tachibana states that the most important thing is “to listen to the voices of the stones.” Each stone has its own unique character. By listening to the stone and recognizing this character, I can identify the purpose of each one and see how they need to come together to work in harmony.

While I have been unable to leave Japan, I have been working remotely on my next major project, in Washington, D.C. I have taken on the challenge of revitalizing the sculpture garden of the Hirshhorn Museum. Gordon Bunshaft, the architect of the Hirshhorn and designer of the original garden, was deeply influenced by the stone gardens of medieval Japan. Inspired by Bunshaft’s dream of a modernist stone garden, I decided that a Japanese dry stone wall could act as a symbolic link between the ancient and the modern, providing the perfect background for the museum’s modernist sculptures.

Just before the outbreak of Covid-19, I was visiting quarries on the East Coast of the United States, listening to the voices of their stones. Now as I work to build the Enoura Observatory, while listening to the voices of the stones, I think of the Hirshhorn sculpture garden. The stones that link these two sites, halfway around the world, existed long before the advent of humanity, and their voices will continue to endure long after the fall of our civilization.

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