

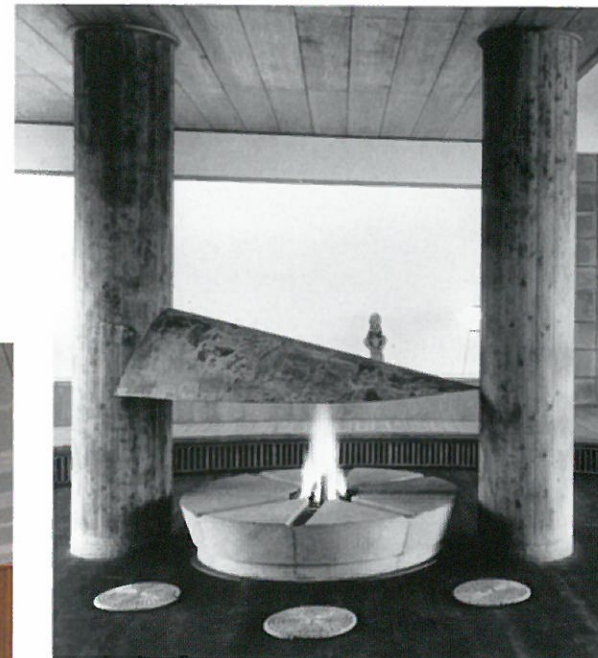
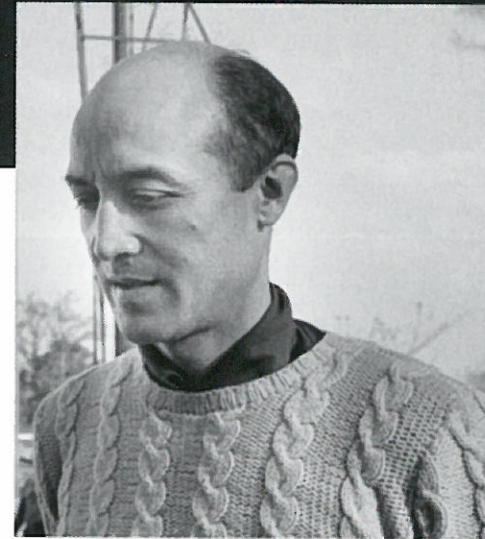
Fables of the Reconstruction

The divisive dismantling and recent re-installation of Isamu Noguchi's Shin Banraisha provides insights into the contentious issue of architectural preservation

Story TIFFANY JOW

In the '50s, Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi was hailed as a visionary; today, he reprises this role, providing a poignant reminder through the plight of his Shin Banraisha project. A site-specific room and garden completed in 1952, the environment was originally constructed at Japan's prestigious Keio University as a conversation forum, a space that embraced the progressive nature of the post-war era. In the midst of the school's renovation in 2003, however, the piece was completely dismantled. Shin Banraisha's controversial reconstruction, completed two years ago, inspired the current exhibit at the Noguchi Museum in New York, *Shin Banraisha: A Cultural Memory*. Comprised of approximately 40 photographic panels, the exhibit speaks to the importance of preserving architectural heritage and simultaneously examines the obligations and limitations associated with such preservation efforts.

Shin Banraisha ("Welcoming Space") was built by Noguchi in collaboration with architect Yoshiro Taniguchi and interior designer Isamu Kenmochi. The project, Noguchi's first realized interior, was an homage to Noguchi's father, a prominent Japanese poet and literature professor at Keio University. Neglected during the artist's lifetime, the space was slated for destruction to make way for a new law school building. Alarmed by the proposal, several organizations led an international protest. Because of the site-specific nature of Shin Banraisha, many believed that any alteration would destroy the piece, undermining the artist's original



FACES OF CHANGE: (Clockwise from top) Artist Isamu Noguchi stands in the garden of Shin Banraisha during construction at Keio University in 1951 (photo courtesy of the Noguchi Museum); A view of the hearth and fireplace hood in their original setting (photo courtesy of the Noguchi Museum); Freestanding columns positioned majestically alongside Noguchi's table and stools in the newly renovated space (photo by Michio Noguchi, courtesy of the Noguchi Museum)

intentions. Determined to move forward, the university offered a compromise by inviting architect Kengo Kuma to reconstruct Shin Banraisha on the same site. Incorporating most of the original elements in a manner that mimics the initial configuration, the renovated space exists in the form of an appointment-only room, in addition to other pieces scattered throughout the law center's foyer, student rest area and an adjacent patio.

Documenting the creation, destruction and reconstruction of the work through still photography, the exhibition questions the necessity of preserving significant works of art and architecture. Through panel discussions and community

events, the museum hopes to encourage the American public to acknowledge and discuss the issue, which is infrequently broached in the fields of architecture and real estate. "What we have been able to determine from the exhibit is that internationally, there isn't much conversation about preserving functional spaces," says Noguchi Museum curator Bonnie Rychlak. Given last summer's passionate debate regarding the renovation of the Woodberry Poetry Reading Room in Harvard University's Lamont Library and the current concerns regarding the Master Plan Update at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego, the exhibit seems timely. Perhaps by underscoring the Shin Banraisha predicament, the value of historical spaces will be better understood, and strides will be made toward clarifying exactly when and how architectural preservation can be successfully accomplished. **TJ**