

A treehouse of ideas

Raymond Moriyama spent his childhood watching the world from his treetop lookout. Now, as a renowned architect, he tries to create refuges for others.

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As an architect, Raymond Moriyama, 72, has always had a deep understanding of the importance of refuge.

It goes back to 1942, when he was a confused 12-year-old boy who built a treehouse in the woods near the Slocan River in the interior of British Columbia. During the Second World War all Japanese Canadians were confined in camps as enemy aliens.

But the boy, still recovering from a severe burn suffered when he was four years old, was an outsider even among his fellow internees. He recalled that painful period in a 1997 convocation address to the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

"My country was taking my father away from us to a PoW camp and turning its back on us," he said. "At the same time, I felt my own community had become an ever closer 'enemy.' Because I was recovering from a bad childhood burn, many Japanese Canadians in the camp, including adults, were taunting me in the public bath. 'Ugly, ugly! Disease, disease!'"...

"So my treehouse started as a secret lookout beside the river to see whether people were coming before I jumped into the river for a bath."

The lookout soon evolved into a treehouse. And that elevated hut built from scraps marked the beginning of an astonishing career.

"That treehouse was wonderful," he said in the speech.

"It became not a place of retreat but a place of discovery -- a place of wonder, peace, magic, a place to absorb nature: to see how the soft rain falls on leaves and flows over and around things, to listen to the whispers of the river and the sounds of the night, to learn about the stars and natural light, to watch the insects and animals move, eat and live together.

"When society turns its back, the individual needs a leaning post. Nature became my leaning post and solace."

Throughout his career, Mr. Moriyama's work has been widely praised. One critic observed that his architecture manages to instil a sense of quiet in the space it embraces.

Mr. Moriyama's most notable projects include the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto, Science North in Sudbury, and



The Ottawa Citizen Architect Raymond Moriyama, chosen to design the new Canadian War Museum, decided to be an architect while watching a building go up next to his childhood home in Vancouver. He noticed how workers would gather round and nod in agreement whenever a particular man would say something. 'So, of course, I decided to be him when I grew up. Much later, I found out that this man was an architect.'



the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto. He was named to the Order of Canada and has received the RAIC Gold Medal, the country's highest award for architecture.

His next project is the much-anticipated Canadian War Museum on LeBreton Flats.

The childhood accident that scarred Mr. Moriyama both physically and emotionally also cemented his decision to become an architect.

Severely burned and bed-ridden for eight months, he used to watch a construction project taking place across the street from his Vancouver home.

"Men were digging trenches for foundation, others were pouring concrete. ... Once in a while a man (smoking a pipe) came by with a big roll of drawings under his arm and unrolled them on a large rock on the site."

The boy noticed how workers would gather round and nod in agreement whenever the man would say something.

"I think it was the pipe and their nodding that intrigued me. So, of course, I decided to be him when I grew up. Much later, I found out that this man was an architect."

That early decision gave him a sense of direction, and a chance to dream. He recalled how the boy hidden away in the treehouse vowed to himself that things would be different when he grew up: "When I become an architect I will listen ... When I become an architect I will be sensitive to people's hurts like burns ... When I become an architect I will do wonderful designs and wonderful things."

Mr. Moriyama also told the audience that night how he turned away from hatred despite the injustices he experienced in the camps.

"Later, I started to learn that one cannot hate one's own community without rotting one's insides. This applies even more so to one's own country. Love and commitment to country, to Canada, became as essential as they are to architecture."

Mr. Moriyama embarked on his architecture career by obtaining a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Toronto and later, a Masters of Architecture degree in Civic and Town Planning from McGill University.

He opened a one-man office in 1958, with just \$392 in the bank. "I thought **that was a lot of money** until Mother Bell asked for one-sixth of it as a deposit on my one office telephone."

One of his first projects was a private three-hole golf course in Toronto. In 1964, **his firm was** commissioned to build a science and technology museum. It became the Ontario Science Centre, the first "hands-on" museum. The idea was derided at the time, but has since become the norm at museums around the world.

Mr. Moriyama has said that the concept for the Science Centre came from Confucius: 'When you hear you forget, When you see, you remember some; but when you touch and do, it becomes a part of you.'

There is also a whimsicality in Mr. Moriyama's work, a touch of the theatrical. His 1980 project Science North, a museum in Sudbury, is built in the shape of a snowflake. "It would be **outrageous and ridiculous** if built anywhere in the south," he said. "But in Sudbury it's accepted **with affection**."

Raymond Moriyama's designs have won critical acclaim in Canada and around the world. They include: the snowflake-shaped Science North in Sudbury;



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The Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, a seven-year project completed in 1993, is perhaps Mr. Moriyama's most innovative design. The architecture of the embassy incorporates the symbolism of the Oriental "Ten, Jin, Chi," or "Heaven, People and Earth."

The project was build in partnership with a Japanese developer. The lower portion of the building is leased to companies, which provided the financing for the building. Through this arrangement, Canada got a spectacular embassy at virtually no cost to the Canadian taxpayers. The chancery at the top signifies heaven; the leasable portion at the bottom is Earth.

The fourth floor of the structure, the Canada Garden, is devoted to people. It represents the country's geology from sea-to-sea and conveys the sense of Canada's vastness and open spaces, attributes much admired by the Japanese. The project was completed four days ahead of schedule, right on budget, and without one change order.

The structure's design, Mr. Moriyama has said, harkens back to the treehouse he built as a boy.

The hard lessons he absorbed as a child became the core of his personal philosophy. "For me, listening and learning became the essence of life and of architecture."

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