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GAGOSIAN

Could Architecture Help You Live Forever?

For a pair of avant-garde artists, eternal life wasn't just a dream — it was a possibility. As long, that is, as you were committed to an uncomfortable existence.

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The interior of the Reversible Destiny Office — Yoro, part of a four-acre park created by the artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins in Gifu Prefecture, Japan.CreditCreditArakawa and Madeline Gins, "Site of Reversible Destiny — Yoro Park," 1993-95, Japan © 1997 Estate of Madeline Gins, reproduced with permission of the Estate of Madeline Gins, photo courtesy of the Site of Reversible Destiny — Yoro Park

THE SEARCH FOR immortality has always been a subtext of architecture. From the pyramids, thought to have been designed as massive stairways so the soul of the deceased pharaoh could ascend to the heavens, to the aspirationally named New York Coliseum, the 1956 exhibition space, demolished in 2000, that was Robert Moses's bid to join the company of the Roman emperors, many structures are created with an eye toward a life everlasting.

But Madeline Gins and her husband, Shusaku Arakawa (who went only by his last name), 1960s New York conceptual artists and amateur architects who are regarded as a bridge between the

Dada and Fluxus movements, had a more literal, if whimsical, take on cheating death: The pair purported to believe that their structures could actually allow their inhabitants eternal life.

The interior of the Bioscleave House (Lifespan Extending Villa) in East Hampton, N.Y., built in 2008 by the artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins. The bumpy floors of compacted earth and the intensely colored walls were meant to be difficult to live with, thus prolonging life. © Matt Harrington

Their philosophy, which claimed a vast array of fans, from the Italian novelist Italo Calvino (who wrote text for their gallery shows) to the poet Robert Creeley, was called Reversible Destiny. Living too comfortably was catastrophic to the human condition, they argued. Instead, the Long Island-born Gins, who was also a poet, and Arakawa, who came to New York from Japan in 1961 and attended art school, thought humans should live in a perpetual state of instability. They posited that buildings could be designed to increase mental and physical stimulation, which would, in turn, prolong life indefinitely. An aversion to right angles, an absence of symmetry and a constant shifting of elevations would stimulate the immune system, sharpen the mind and lead to immortality.

The back of the Bioscleave House, with windows placed in purposefully disorienting spots. The only residential project Arakawa and Gins completed in the United States, it has never been occupied full time. © Matt Harrington

They built their handful of realized works in the 1990s and the aughts after a long stint in the downtown scene, where Arakawa was known for his friendship with Marcel Duchamp and for

once having lived in the TriBeCa loft of Yoko Ono, a Fluxus luminary. The couple first fully explored Reversible Destiny in what is regarded as their seminal gallery piece, “The Mechanism of Meaning,” an ever-evolving manifesto-cum-artwork begun in 1963, comprising 80 panels that they refined and added to over decades, many of them high-concept diagrams and puzzles with instructions and text (“A Mnemonic Device for Forgetting,” “Think One, Say Two”), made primarily of acrylic and mixed media on canvas. In an accompanying précis to the work, which was exhibited at the Guggenheim in 1997, they prescribed “no more irretrievable disappearances” and declared death “old-fashioned.” Critical opinion differs on how seriously the pair, whose work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and Paris’s Centre Pompidou, took the grandiose quest to end death. But if it was intended as metaphor, neither of them ever let on. Indeed, though Arakawa himself died at 73, in 2010, and Gins four years later, at the age of 72, defying death became the defining work of their lives.

The light switches are purposefully installed askew and windows are either above eye-level or near the floor. © Matt Harrington

ONE OF THE few places to actually experience the couple’s philosophy is their first residential work, the Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka — In Memory of Helen Keller, a nine-unit apartment building in a suburb 20 minutes west of Tokyo, completed in 2005. The building, a multicolored jumble of stacked cubes, spheres and tubes (soon after its completion, the Japanese novelist Setouchi Jakucho described it in a design magazine essay as “an ultrachromatic undying house”), is a defiant statement in an otherwise drab landscape of nondescript concrete apartment houses. The architects dedicated it to Helen Keller because, they reasoned, she lived the ultimate Reversible Destiny life: Her deafness and blindness required her to constantly re-evaluate the world.

Walking into apartment 302, available for rent on Airbnb and recognizable as the Tokyo flat where the character Shoshanna briefly lived on the television series “Girls,” is like entering a Surrealist playground. The living room floor, made of hardened soil and cement, is an undulating topography of bumps, some the size of tennis balls, others as large as grapefruits. There isn’t much traditional furniture; you are meant to splay your full form along the slopes and valleys of the floor, though like stretching out on a rocky beach, it takes a few tries to find just the right

angle. Electrical outlets dangle on retractable cords from the ceiling, which has an inaccessible door that leads nowhere. Some of the light switches are at shoulder-level, others only a foot or so from the floor. Instead of drawers or closets, there are hooks from which to hang your belongings, and among the other accouterments are a metal climbing pole, a floor-to-ceiling built-in ladder and gymnastic rings. Surfaces are painted in 14 crayon-bright shades, including cantaloupe, marigold and azure. Only the bedroom, with a flat floor and a futon, provides a respite from the constant visual and physical stimulation.

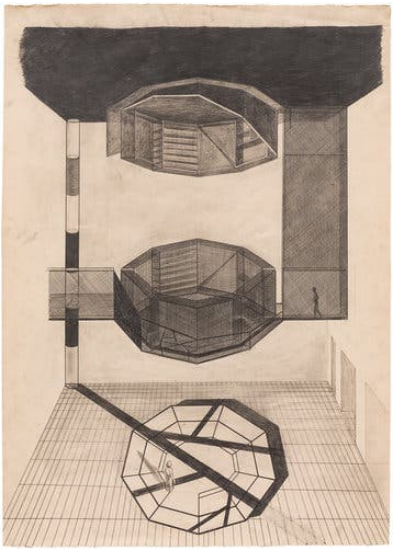
A round-bottomed study, with a swing meant to be used as a hanging table, in one of the Reversible Destiny Lofts, completed in 2005 in Mitaka, a Tokyo suburb.CreditArakawa and Madeline Gins, "Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka — In Memory of Helen Keller," 2005, Tokyo, Japan © 2005 Estate of Madeline Gins, reproduced with permission of the Estate of Madeline Gins, photo by Masataka Nakano

The "study room," a bright yellow sphere, has the reverberating acoustics of a concert hall. All the apartments consist of largely the same components, configured differently, and some residents have chosen to leave the study empty, naked in its novelty; others have decorated the ceiling with photographs to make a reclining gallery, and a few have lined the bowl-shaped floor with pillows, transforming the space into a '60s-style crash pad.

In the living area, a lone armchair. © Matt Harrington

The constant change in elevations can be disorienting, which is the point. Depending on where you are, the apartment can make you feel like a giant, or a child. From inside the circular sunken kitchen in the middle of the living room, the counter is level with your torso; on the other side of the counter, it only reaches your knees. The result is an exercise in a jarring sort of mindfulness, one that forces you to constantly recalibrate, adapt and adjust. Waking up in the middle of the night and moving around is a bit like negotiating the surface of the moon.

The apartments come with directions — 32 in all. The preface suggests a resident be "a biotopologist," defined as someone who "produces and lives within a multidimensional interactive diagram." Other directions include: "Go into this unit as someone who is at the same time both 2 or 3 years old and 100 years old" and "Every month move through your loft as a different animal (snake, deer, tortoise, elephant, giraffe, penguin, etc.)."



A 1987 drawing for an unrealized project by Arakawa and Gins.
CreditArakawa and Madeline Gins, "Reverse–Symmetry–Transverse Envelope Hall," 1987, graphite on paper © 2018 Estate of Madeline Gins, reproduced with permission of the Estate of Madeline Gins, photo by Nicholas Knight

Nobu Yamaoka, a filmmaker who lived in unit 201, a two-bedroom, between 2006 and 2010, with his wife and their two young children, took his mission as biotopologist seriously. During his time there, he worked on "Children Who Won't Die," a documentary released in 2010 that blends the intimacy of family life — the birth of his daughter, the death of his grandmother — with a philosophical exploration of Reversible Destiny. The film includes footage of Arakawa speaking at a conference, expressing his frustration with the status quo: "Even though we've been given these incredible organisms, we ignore them. We make fantastic highways for cars, leaving only a tiny space for people. We're profoundly wrong about the way humans live."

Yamaoka says Reversible Destiny forever changed him, both emotionally and physically. The constant stimulus of merely living in the space was like practicing yoga; in the first few months, he lost weight, felt more energetic and was no longer bothered by hay fever. The only reason the family gave up the loft was because the children began attending school in a different neighborhood. Moving into a conventional home with muted colors, level floors and flat walls after living in Gins and Arakawa's work was enervating. "It was so strange," he says, "and I was so tired."

As with the rest of the rooms, the bathroom has no door. It does, however, have two toilets positioned back to back to "promote tentativeness," says Joke Post, the manager for architectural projects at the Reversible Destiny Foundation. © Matt Harrington

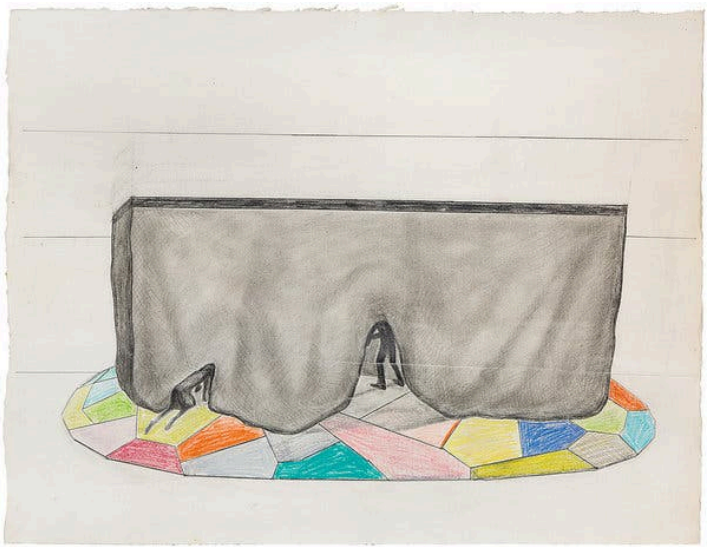
ALONG WITH PRIVATE residences, Arakawa and Gins also made public works, including the Site of Reversible Destiny Park in Yoro, about 30 miles northwest of Nagoya, which was completed in 1995. Part fun house, part obstacle course, the four-acre park, which is frequented as much by young couples as by families, has brightly colored buildings and labyrinths, undulating hills and sloping paths — the sharp inclines, unexpected craters and blind corners can be perilous (helmets and sneakers are available upon request). The architects strewed decaying relics of domesticity — sinks, desks, bed frames, couches, mattresses, toilets — throughout the space, some planted amid the mazelike structures, others, like subterranean artifacts, buried but visible beneath transparent walkways. The detritus seems to pose existential questions: How much of this stuff do we need, and what does it say about us that our things last longer than we do?

A perception-defying cylindrical room in a permanent installation created in 1994 by the couple at the Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art, in Okayama Prefecture, Japan.CreditArakawa and Madeline Gins, "Ubiquitous Site, Nagi's Ryoanji, Architectural Body," 1994, permanent installation, Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan © 1994 Estate of Madeline Gins, reproduced with permission of the Estate of Madeline Gins, photo by Katsuaki Furudate, courtesy of the Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art

In 2008, after more than 40 years of collaboration, the couple completed work on their only realized American residential project, which they named the Bioscleave House (Lifespan Extending Villa) in East Hampton, N.Y. Commissioned by the Italian art collector Angela Gallmann, it is a 2,700-square-foot addition to a 900-square-foot A-frame designed in the 1960s by Carl Koch, a pioneer of prefab construction.

Bioscleave takes the concepts of the Mitaka lofts to the extreme. Painted inside and out in about four dozen vibrant shades — aquamarine, bubble-gum pink and Kelly green among them — the house consists of four rectangular rooms around an open living area with a sunken kitchen in the middle. The hardened-soil floors of the main room are sloped at even sharper angles than in the Mitaka lofts, making the dozen candy-colored poles throughout the home not just decorative but necessary for balance. Windows are either above eye-level or near the floor, the light switches are installed askew and, as in the lofts, there are no internal doors.

As might be expected from artists with no architectural training and no experience building in America, the project ran wildly over budget; Gallmann, frustrated with delays and rising costs, halted construction before it was completed. In 2007, an anonymous group of investors bought the house and completed it a year later, but it has been occupied only sporadically since. It sits in a neighborhood of modest midcentury summer houses and newer, grander construction — a ray of radicalism in a locale where money can buy virtually anything, except, perhaps, eternal life.



The artists' "Drawing for a Ubiquitous Site X," from 1990.CreditGraphite and color pencil on paper © 2018 Estate of Madeline Gins, reproduced with permission of the Estate of Madeline Gins, photo by Nicholas Knight

Although the couple had, by all accounts, a symbiotic relationship, the quest for immortality did not end with Arakawa's death. Gins's final project, completed in 2013, was the "Biotopological Scale-Juggling Escalator," commissioned by the Comme des Garçons creator Rei Kawakubo for the Manhattan outpost of her Dover Street Market boutique.

The installation features a staircase enclosed in a pale yellow-and-green cavelike plaster tunnel, with walls of hot pink and bruised violet that lighten to a celestial white toward the ceiling. Four diorama installations, visible from the staircase, hold scaled-down scenes of classic Gins and Arakawa environments, complete with miniature figures exploring the alien-seeming topography. The work stands as a small but potent — and easily visited — reminder of what the

pair spent so much of their lives chasing. They may not have cracked the riddle of immortality, but like the pyramids, the staircase is a place, at least for now, where the spirit can take flight.

One must fight gravity even to reach the house's front door. © Matt Harrington