# Ottawa Letter No. 35

# The Legacy of Architect Raymond Moriyama

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## Introduction

In recent days in Ottawa—as I imagine is also the case in Tokyo—there has hardly been a day without news coverage of President Trump's remarks and actions. Television news and newspapers alike are filled daily with Trump-related topics: a 25 percent tariff, the idea of a "51st state," Panama, Greenland, Ukraine, the abolition of USAID, and many others. As Canada is a neighboring country sharing a border of more than 8,000 kilometers with the United States, it stands on the front line of the Trump administration's policies. Accordingly, the Embassy of Japan is kept busy on a daily basis gathering and analyzing information and reporting to headquarters in Tokyo.

At the same time, even under such circumstances, public relations and cultural diplomacy remain vitally important for the continued development and deepening of Japan–Canada relations across a wide range of fields. For this reason, the Embassy of Japan regularly organizes a variety of events. There are several pillars to these activities. One is the introduction of Japanese culture. As I have mentioned several times in these "Ottawa Letters," exhibitions of ikebana, sake tastings, and bonsai exhibitions have been extremely well received. Another important pillar is the strengthening of ties with Japanese Canadians and Japanese Canadian communities who are active in various fields across Canada. While Canadian society today places great emphasis on diversity and inclusion, there were darker and deeply painful periods in the past that cannot be justified. It is essential to remain future-oriented while fully acknowledging and reflecting on that history.

With this in mind, I would like in this issue to focus on Raymond Moriyama, an architect of whom Canada is justly proud.

## "Magical Imperfection: The Life and Architecture of Raymond Moriyama"

Some readers may not be familiar with Raymond Moriyama, but he is an architect whose name is firmly etched into architectural history. In recognition of his outstanding achievements, he was awarded one of Canada's highest honours by the Governor General. He designed numerous exceptional buildings, primarily in Canada, including the

Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. In Japan, the Embassy of Canada located in Aoyama, Tokyo, is one of his representative works. Moriyama passed away in September 2023 at the age of 93, and both his life and his architectural legacy are deeply instructive.

One important aspect is his life as a Japanese Canadian—a life in which he overcame a period filled with hardship and adversity to achieve success. Another is his career as an architect who pioneered innovative approaches, emphasizing sustainability and harmony with nature well ahead of his time. I believe his legacy should certainly be passed down to future generations.

From this perspective, the screening of a documentary film on Raymond Moriyama, held at the Embassy of Japan's auditorium on January 23, 2025 at 6:30 p.m., was highly meaningful. Approximately 150 members of the general public with an interest in Japan–Canada relations, Japanese culture, or the Japanese Canadian community attended. The film was titled *"Magical Imperfection: The Life and Architecture of Raymond Moriyama."* As the title suggests, it is a documentary centered on Moriyama's own words, drawn from interviews, and focuses on both his life and his architecture. It is dense in content, and every scene leaves a strong impression.

Raymond Moriyama was born in Vancouver in October 1929 to parents who were Japanese immigrants. Drawing on this documentary and related materials, I would like to introduce several key turning points in the course of his life.

## A Dream of Becoming an Architect

The event that directly inspired Moriyama's dream of becoming an architect occurred very early in his life—and it was neither beautiful nor pleasant. When he was four years old, Raymond overturned a pot of boiling stew in the kitchen and suffered severe burns over most of his body, leaving him near death. Although he survived, he spent eight months recuperating. For a four-year-old child, eight months must have felt like an eternity, especially when he was unable to move freely.

Young Raymond may not yet have known the word "despair," but he lived through days in which adversity itself was life. What gave him great courage during this time was the construction site he could see from the window of his room. From an empty lot, carpenters and construction workers would gather, materials would be brought in, and day by day—rain or shine, wind or calm—the building would gradually take shape. Eventually, its outline emerged, and at last it was completed. To a four-year-old boy suffering from

severe burns and watching this process, the architect directing it all may have appeared almost godlike.

That experience planted within young Raymond Moriyama a dream—to become an architect—which grew into an ideal to be pursued and a goal to be realized.

## The Magic That Dwells in Imperfection

Later, Raymond had the opportunity to visit Japan, his parents' homeland, and spent some time in Tokyo with his grandfather. Although his grandfather was a mining engineer, to the young Raymond he appeared as a wonderful samurai who composed haiku and was deeply moved by the beauty that exists within nature as it is.

One day, his grandfather asked him a question: "You saw the full moon, a perfect circle, two nights ago. Tonight, you see a slightly imperfect, waning moon. Which moon do you think is more beautiful?"

It was a question the young Raymond had never encountered before. He had never considered beauty from that perspective. What is beauty? It was the moment when the boy awakened to philosophical reflection.

From then on, Raymond began to think deeply about art and beauty, and he was drawn to the beauty hidden within nature as it truly is. This could be described as a magical power that dwells in imperfection rather than perfection. Indeed, the title of the documentary film about his life and architecture, *"Magical Imperfection,"* originates precisely from this insight.

Incidentally, Kanoko Okamoto—poet, writer, and mother of Taro Okamoto—left behind the words, "Beauty lies in irregularity," a way of thinking that resonates strongly with the idea of "magical imperfection." The same sensibility can also be felt in Yumi Arai's classic album *"The 14th Moon."*

## In the Internment Camps

Having written these "Ottawa Letters" each month, I must candidly admit that I always feel an inexpressible inner conflict when writing about the internment of Japanese Canadians following the outbreak of the Pacific War. It was an inexcusable and indefensible act. Japanese Canadians—Canadian citizens—suffered unspeakable

hardship. They lost their property and had their lives torn apart. Nevertheless, by overcoming adversity, the Japanese Canadian community achieved success, earned respect, and built its current standing. Through the Redress Agreement, an apology and compensation were eventually secured. For these reasons, determining how much detail to recount about the past is a difficult judgment. Given limited space, there is also the view that one should focus more on the future.

Against this backdrop, we turn again to Raymond Moriyama. His life changed dramatically from the moment of the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941. His father, a pacifist, was separated from his family and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Ontario. Twelve-year-old Raymond, together with his mother and two sisters, was interned at Hastings Park near Vancouver. Later in life, he recalled that life in the camp—with its cramped huts, poverty, bullying triggered by scars from his childhood burns, and the total loss of freedom—was "hell."

Even in such circumstances, Raymond sometimes slipped out of the camp to bathe in the icy waters of the nearby Slocan River, enjoying fleeting moments of freedom. Eventually, by collecting scraps of wood from a nearby sawmill, he built a "treehouse" high in the branches of a great tree along the riverbank. This treehouse—his first-ever architectural creation—became both a place of healing and a place of learning for the young Raymond. It was the first step toward the dream of becoming an architect that he had once glimpsed from the window of his sickroom.

## The Door of Destiny: Work and a Life Partner

One of the books that deeply impressed me when I was still a student was *"Novel Bank of Japan"* by Saburo Shiroyama. It argues that the essence of life lies in one's work and a good life partner. Raymond Moriyama's remarkable journey exemplifies precisely what Shiroyama articulated.

After the war, everyday life gradually returned. Even so, the family could not return to British Columbia. The emotional wounds were not easily healed. The Moriyama family instead moved to Hamilton, Ontario. Through tireless effort, Raymond entered the prestigious University of Toronto, majoring, of course, in architecture, where he studied under the renowned Professor Eric Arthur. Becoming an architect was no longer a dream, but a realistic goal, and a solid foundation for achieving it was taking shape.

Around the same time, Raymond reunited with Sachi, a childhood friend from his prewar days in Vancouver. In fact, it is said that eight-year-old Raymond had already decided he would one day marry her. It was a reunion of destiny. On their second date, Raymond proposed to Sachi, though she did not take him seriously at all. Still, the two continued dating.

In 1954, Raymond graduated from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Architecture and married Sachi in the same year. The two most important wheels of life—work and a life partner—began to turn together. Raymond was 25 years old. Their marriage lasted an extraordinary 69 years, until death parted them in 2023.

Raymond then pursued further mastery of architecture by entering the master's program at McGill University, earning a Master of Architecture in Urban Planning in 1957. From this point on, with the devoted support of his wife Sachi, his career as an architect accelerated.

**The Birth of Moriyama & Teshima Architects: Breaking Through Barriers**

In 1958, Raymond Moriyama established his own architectural firm. Founding a practice at the age of 29 reflected both confidence and determination. Nevertheless, business reality—then as now—is a fiercely competitive world.

In fact, his mentor, Professor Arthur, bluntly told him, "You will not succeed," citing four reasons: (1) his youth and lack of experience, (2) lack of capital, (3) an economic downturn, and (4) because he was a "Jap." Canadian society in 1958 was very different from today; discrimination against Indigenous peoples and minorities was firmly entrenched. Perhaps the professor intended to urge him to face reality squarely. It is worth noting that Canada's first law protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, the *Canadian Bill of Rights*, was adopted only in August 1960.

Under such social conditions, the young architect Raymond Moriyama forged his path through exceptional talent and unwavering dedication. Although he received ample commissions, he refused to take part in projects that did not align with his principles. Shaped by his experience in internment camps, he devoted himself to realizing a vision of making Canada a place where everyone could live with dignity.

From this point onward, it is no exaggeration to say that his work became synonymous with modern Canadian architectural history. His projects include the former Japanese

Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto (1963), the Ontario Science Centre, Ottawa City Hall, Scarborough Civic Centre, Toronto Reference Library, Science North in Sudbury, the Bata Shoe Museum, and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh among many others.

**Director Scott Calbeck's Talk**

This documentary film, which portrays the life and architecture of Raymond Moriyama, masterfully distills the essence of his 93 years and 11 months into a single hour. This achievement reflects the skill of Scott Calbeck, who served as both producer and director. A rising talent, he studied journalism and history at Indiana University and Carleton University and earned a master's degree in history from Western University.

Director Calbeck also attended the screening. After the film, he joined us on stage for a talk session moderated by Sachiko Okuda, former president of the Ottawa Japanese Canadian Association. Ms. Okuda is a leader in the Japanese Canadian community, a recipient of the Order of the Rising Sun, Silver Rays, and the founder of the television program *Contact Japan*. Drawing on audience reactions, she skillfully guided the discussion and brought out the director's insights.

Director Calbeck conducted extensive interviews with Moriyama when he was approaching 90 years of age, in addition to researching vast archival materials and interviewing many individuals connected to his life and work. The results of this effort are condensed into the documentary, making Calbeck one of the most qualified individuals to speak about Moriyama's character and legacy. He also shared stories about the challenges of producing the film.

Audience questions covered a wide range of topics, but particularly lively discussion arose around the preservation of Moriyama's early masterpiece, the Ontario Science Centre, completed in 1969. Redevelopment of the surrounding area has already been decided, and demolition of the centre appears to be the default course. The essential issue is whether any breakthrough can be found from the perspective of artistic and historical value in the face of decisions made by the Ontario provincial government. Ultimately, this is a matter of how public opinion is conveyed and, more realistically, whether sufficient funding for preservation can be secured. Future developments bear close watching.

## Conclusion

The process by which Raymond Moriyama realized his childhood dream of becoming an architect overlapped with the period of internment and subsequent discrimination faced by Japanese Canadians during the Pacific War. Through extraordinary talent and relentless effort, he forged a path as an architect and established a distinctive style that fused Japanese aesthetic sensibilities with Canadian modernism. This work was highly acclaimed and earned him his present stature.

Moriyama's environmentally conscious designs and open, public-oriented architecture are often seen as deriving from his experiences as a Japanese Canadian. His willingness to openly articulate his identity has given courage not only to Japanese Canadians, but to many other minority communities as well. We must not forget that the freedom, diversity, and respect for inclusion enjoyed today by people living in Canada—including immigrants—are the result of the talents, vision, and passion of courageous pioneers like Moriyama.

It is important to pass on to future generations the stories of great Japanese Canadians like Raymond Moriyama, who are so highly regarded in Canada. I also believe that he deserves to be much better known in Japan. In that sense, the documentary film *"Magical Imperfection: The Life and Architecture of Raymond Moriyama"* is of great significance, and I sincerely hope that it will be released in Japan as well.

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