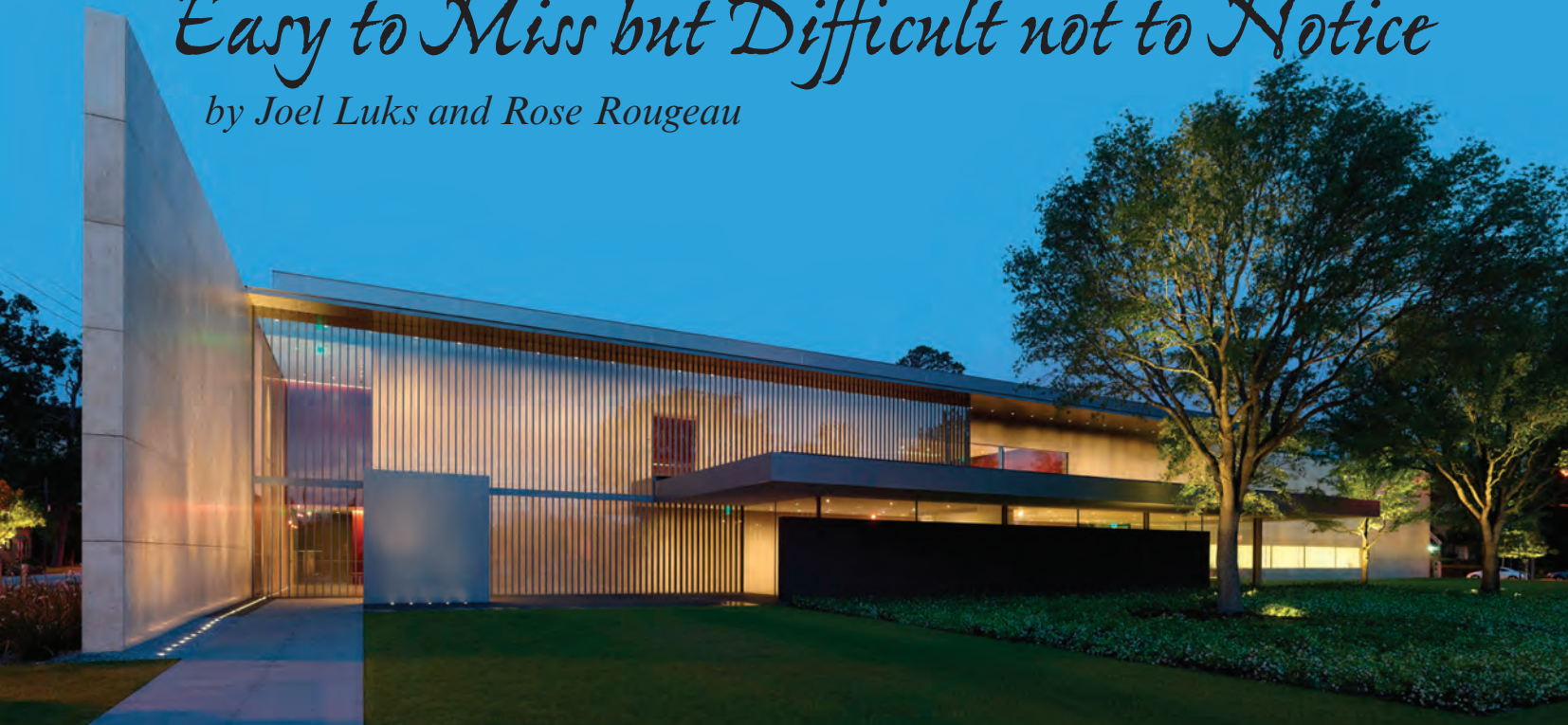


# Asia Society Texas Center: Easy to Miss but Difficult not to Notice

by Joel Luks and Rose Rougeau



*The Houston home of Asia Society Texas Center glows in the twilight.*

All photos courtesy of Asia Society Texas Center unless otherwise noted.

From some perspectives, Asia Society Texas's building of understated scale and even-tempered disposition, designed by world-renowned Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi, calmly melds into a tree-lined residential neighborhood within Houston's Museum District. Contrastingly, the modernist facade features walls of glass bisected by an infinity water garden terrace where steam vapors rise capriciously from its roofline.

"Taniguchi was refined," recalls Asia Society Texas supporter and chief patron Nancy C. Allen. "He was a perfectionist; every single detail was important to him from the preliminary drawings to the level of the Jura limestone imported from Germany that he and his assistant inspected with a magnifying glass. Every material had to be the best." Allen adds, the building "became a work of art."<sup>1</sup>

Authorities on architecture consider the 40,000-square-foot structure an unparalleled example of restrained poise and simple elegance. The \$50 million project, completed in the fall of 2011, echoes the provenance of the organization. For volunteers like Allen, Taniguchi's Houston masterpiece, the architect's first free-standing design in the United States, illuminates her inextinguishable passion for the Houston chapter.

Asia Society, an international educational pioneer founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller III, is headquartered in New York. In 1979 the Texas Center in Houston opened as the orga-

nization's third location. Now represented in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, Sydney, and Washington, DC, it creates an interchange between cultures that for much of modern history remained literally and metaphysically disconnected.

Nancy Allen's son Edward R. "Eddie" Allen III met his wife Chinhui Juhn while engaged in doctorate work at the University of Chicago. One studied macroeconomics, the other studied microeconomics; and together, he quips, they cover the world. As a family, the Allens' business and personal goals intrinsically identify with Asia Society Texas, which has grown from an organization that primarily addressed commerce and policy to one that also inclusively educates the public about Asian arts and culture.

In February 2015 the couple endowed a new curator position with a \$1.5 million gift in honor of Nancy Allen, who contributed \$15 million toward the capital campaign. Eddie Allen also funded the acquisition of a work by Korean artist Lee Ufan that is currently on display in the venue's Sculpture Garden.

The blossoming curiosity of the general public concerning Asia mirrors Houston's identity shift from being nicknamed both the "Oil Capital of the World" and "Space City" to one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminated immigration quotas that gave preference to Europeans



*Nancy C. Allen is a prominent volunteer and patron of the Asia Society who calls the Asia Society Texas Center "a work of art."*



An art installation, *Jiu Jin (Old Gold Mountain)* by *Hung Liu* from *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America* exhibit, offers commentary on the lives of Chinese immigrants who took difficult and sometimes deadly work building the Transcontinental Railroad. It features empty fortune cookies cascading over a railroad track.

over Asians, Latinos, and Africans; emphasis was placed on family relationships and skills, and as a result, Houston's immigration numbers reflected these changes. China rose in significance when reforms from the late 1970s to early 1980s ushered in unprecedented involvement from foreign investors. As Taiwan and South Korea transitioned from autocracies into vibrant democratic economies, the proliferation of trade activities meant Western societies could no longer turn a blind eye to the region's growth potential. Likewise the Asian financial crisis of 1997 that affected Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and the Philippines had fierce global repercussions as oil dipped to \$11 a barrel, its lowest level in twenty years.

When Eddie Allen, a senior partner at Eagle Global Advisors, first became involved with Asia Society's Houston location in the early 1990s, a staff of three members focused on developing programming for non-Asians to study Asian policy and its effects and pressures on the American way of life. But as Asia Society's network evolved, the scope needed some adjustments if it desired to reach beyond its inner circle. "We have to provide programs and services for our two main clientele," he explains. "Those interested in policy, and those with a penchant for cultural affairs." Sometimes those two cohorts overlap; but often, they do not.

Immigration lawyer Charles C. Foster, who is also the Honorary Consul General of the Kingdom of Thailand in Houston, concurs. The Galveston-born attorney served as chairman of Asia Society Texas Center for twenty-five years, in addition to serving as a trustee for the national division. In his modestly decorated office in downtown Houston hangs an article titled "Foster: A steady boat to China" from *China Daily*. The brief details Foster's role in shaping U.S.-China relations, which, Foster jokes, began with a song his babysitter used to croon when he was six years old – "On a Slow Boat to China." In the media, Foster is remembered

as the person who negotiated an international controversy between the Houston Ballet, Chinese ballet dancer Li Cunxin, and the Chinese government when Cunxin married an American and refused to return to China. The incident, publicized by hundreds of reporters and every television network, was the impetus behind the film *Mao's Last Dancer*.

"Asia Society has to more fully embrace the fastest growing part of our community – the Asian community," Foster notes. "That's going to be our strength." Foster speaks from personal experience and he cites his wife, acclaimed Chinese actress Chen Ye, as one of his biggest strengths.

The next real challenge, Foster explains, is to build a sustainable infrastructure to support the expanded operational capacity of the organization. Since his

involvement, the staff has grown from a handful to thirty employees, including executive director Bonna Kol.

"Although we recently celebrated our 35th anniversary, I still see Asia Society in its infancy years, as we recently gained a permanent home in the Museum District," Kol says. "We are continuing to evolve as an agency, enhancing our public offerings to the community beyond business and policy. We are adding new and exciting offerings, and we have a robust calendar of unique programs and events that help build global competency while celebrating the beauty of our diverse city." As such, the center's strategic plan consists of four programming pillars – Business and Policy, Education and Outreach, Exhibitions, and Performing Arts and Culture.

The Business and Policy pillar concentrates on fostering a platform to discuss timely and relevant foreign relations and their influence on local issues. As part of this content



Making sure young people of all backgrounds have an opportunity to learn about the depth of Asian culture is central to the mission of the Asia Society.

cornerstone, the center has hosted Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, China Vice Premier Madame Liu Yandong and her delegation, including Minister of Education Yuan Guiren and Minister of National Health Li Bin, and former Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

“My goal is that Asia Society be considered the premier cultural and education destination,” Kol explains. “Asia Society is the place where leaders convene in a non-partisan manner as it relates to closing the divide between East and West.” The Cambodian-born leader, the organization’s fourth executive director, believes it is critical that Asians and non-Asians engage in dialogue about universal similarities that create a common bond regardless of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

The Education and Outreach pillar enriches families, students, educators, adults, and communities with gallery tours and experiential offerings that nurture international awareness. The effort also aims to forge strong partnerships with schools to build global competency in Houston’s youth. ExploreAsia Culture Camps for Kids expose participants to Asian culture, food, games, languages, and art activities within a framework that surveys history and imagines the future.

Asia Society brings in creative and thoughtful leaders from around the globe in support of its Performing Arts and Culture pillar. Its first commissioned production, *Tsuru*, opened to a full house and was done in collaboration with the Houston Ballet, blending contemporary choreography with ballet and Japanese theatrical elements.

Each region of Asia has a unique historical context and is equally represented in the Exhibitions pillar, which highlights the distinctive fine art, craft, and folkloric traditions that have thrived and continue to flourish within the continent. Through the works of Andrea Bowers, Blane De St. Croix, Margarita Cabrera, Zhi Lin, Hung Liu, and Tony de los Reyes, the 2015 exhibition *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America* analyzed immigration, border relations, and labor practices through the lens of two seemingly contrasting origins and viewpoints. In collaboration with the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Asia Society Texas



Manjari Sharma portrays Vishnu, an important deity from the Indian subcontinent.

Center presented *Mel Chin: Rematch* as the most comprehensive retrospective of the Houston-born artist.

The exhibition *Traditions Transfigured: The Noh Masks of Bidou Yamaguchi* comprised a collection of masks inspired by Japanese Noh Theater, a time-honored practice from the fourteenth century, in which celestial beings and earthly creatures collide. The art, a reflection of the spirit of Asia Society past and present synergistically coming together, pays homage to, while reinventing, a storied convention.

“My hope is that all these efforts help diversify the city of Houston,” Nancy Allen states. “For Asian Americans, Asians, Americans, and people from all over to begin to get to know one another. Let’s hope this will be something for peace, a beacon for knowledge and understanding.”

Architect Taniguchi once said, “I hope they will enjoy not so much the teacup but the tea,” as a metaphor for architecture becoming a container for something. Having peace, knowledge, and understanding as the building’s thesis renders this ambitious venture a beautiful gift for anyone who devotes time to become acquainted with it.

**Joel Luks** is a freelance journalist and digital strategist with The CKP Group.

**Rose Rougeau** is senior director of communication for Asia Society Texas Center.



A dancer strikes a pose during the dress rehearsal of *Tsuru*, performed at the Houston Ballet. Photo by Lynn Lane.

Asia Society Texas Center is open to the public Tuesday to Friday from 11:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Admission to the building is free. Admission to the Sarofim Gallery is free for members and children 12 and under, \$5 for nonmembers. 1370 Southmore Boulevard, Houston 77004.