

DREAMWORLDS IN THE LIGHT OF DAY

HOW EUGENE TSUI FREED MY MIND



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At age eleven, I was blissfully divorced from reality. During lunch recess, while the popular kids did whatever popular kids do at lunchtime, my best friend, Leith, and I sat hidden in a clearing behind bushes and drew space creatures. Outer space held all kinds of interest for me, as did alternative, futuristic ways of living. I drew plans for an eight-story helix jam-packed with cars. The descending cars would rear-end each other forcefully (as bumper cars do), making the rest of the cars defy gravity and ascend.

I still drew like a first grader, but I barely noticed. I was immersed in the work before me, the alternative world that needed to be explored. Once when Leith and I mulled over careers, I said I might become a cartoonist. Leith expressed great interest, and as I fleshed out the idea, it dawned on me that I couldn't draw well and wasn't particularly known for my humor. Hmm. Shrugging, I told her I'd work it out, and we resumed our drawing, ignoring obstacles as only children can.

Two years later, Leith transferred to another school, and I tried as hard as I could to become an adult. I applied to boarding school, pondered the income potential of various careers, embraced atheism, and told myself I was too old to cry. I also decided, quite unreasonably, that I wanted nothing more to do with Leith or our silly pursuits. Childhood seemed an embarrassing state from which I needed to distance myself. I rarely smiled or laughed. By eleventh grade, my boarding school friends nicknamed me "Grim and Determined." And so I was, staying up at all hours to work and losing sight of the fact that life could be fun.

Fast-forward two decades to recent times, or more precisely August 2003. Quite a lot has changed since those early days. I'll soon be thirty-five. I've married and established a freelance writing career in Berkeley, California.

But perhaps I haven't changed so much after all. I'm still driven, still trying to use every moment well. And for that reason I'm somewhat regretting my decision to attend Eco Wave, a conference about environmentally conscious architecture. As I wander around the lobby before the first talk, I can't help but view the conference as a three-day hindrance to my work.



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I know little about architecture, so I clearly don't belong here among the architects and students huddled in serious discussions. Perusing the conference schedule, I feel utterly lost. "Empire Versus the Infrastructure of Sustainable Community." "Monster Houses, Cafes, and Dogs." "Vernacular Building—Wisdom and Ignorance." "Dirty Details of the Ecoroof." What is all this?

Aside from Dan Liebermann, I recognize just one other speaker's name: Eugene Tsui (pronounced Tsway). Back in 1996, the *San Francisco Examiner* ran a piece on his Fish House, a little Berkeley building that struck me as hideous both when I saw the photos and when I drove by, gaping in disbelief. (Image 02) In building the house for his parents, Tsui modeled it after the tardigrade, a crustacean he calls the world's most indestructible organism, as it can survive being boiled or frozen. The house, he reasoned, should be equally indestructible, staving off damage during earthquakes, fires, and the like. If an earthquake levels Berkeley, the one remaining building might well be a humpbacked house with green fins sprouting from its sides. Maybe Tsui is onto something, though; I must say that the house has lingered in my mind all these years, not least because I admire his originality and daring.

Ah, there he is! I spot him almost immediately (with help from his name tag). A youthful-looking Chinese-American, he wears a billowy white shirt that makes him look top-heavy (though he's a very muscular gymnast). And he sports an asymmetrical haircut, the earlocks sloping toward the chin. (Image 03) I wonder if he cuts his own hair. He sticks out from the conferencegoers just as his Fish House stands out from the surrounding, nondescript bungalows.

And if he didn't attract enough attention on his own, the posters he has hung in the lobby would certainly do the trick. The one called Eugene Tsui: Nature's Genius Architect features his profile with a yellow nautilus shell superimposed on his ear. Another says "Eugene Tsui: Seminal Architect of the 21st Century" in English and Chinese. Below the headline, Tsui poses before glittery blue outer space. Gazing past viewers, he smirks at something in the distance—at the twenty-first century, I presume. Arms akimbo under a massive black and red cape with amorphous sea-green patterns, he wears a white shirt, white trousers, and a Y-shaped black contraption that drapes over his shoulders and hooks onto his belt. Shot from below (perhaps to make him seem taller, though he's plenty tall), he's the image of confidence, concentration, and ... oddity. (Image 01)

But if I've got him pegged as an attention-seeker, I'm soon proven wrong. As the conference proceeds, he squats in the aisle near the video-camera he's operating, listening raptly to speeches and focusing intelligent eyes on the speakers. His attentiveness starkly contrasts with the way some architects catch taxis five minutes after their talks, as if they couldn't give a damn about anyone else's contribution. Tsui appears to take the whole event quite seriously.

His own lecture, "Nature as the Source of Architecture," falls on the third day, and he shows up in a blue cape over a butter-colored shirt with black lines. (He makes all this clothing himself, as he feels everyone

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should do.) The cape makes him look like Saint-Exupéry’s little prince, only Asian and taller.

“I’m not wearing this cape for spectacle,” he tells the audience. Instead, he benefits from its internal heating and cooling devices. I later hear architects ruminating about how he’s quite the “showman,” so clearly his claim hasn’t swayed the crowd.

However, all his showiness falls away as he discusses slides of sea creatures. Explaining that architects can copy the structural strength and efficiency of natural forms when designing buildings, he disappears into his topic and seems for all the world like a professor. My mind wanders, but I’m not deathly bored. It’s more like pleasantly daydreaming in front of a nature video.

In my haze, I miss a feature that will impress me greatly in our later conversations. As Tsui describes natural forms, whether the shingled scales of butterfly wings or the delicate but disproportionately strong bones of a bird wing, he’s as beautifully unself-conscious as Beatrix Potter. As her precise renderings of plants and animals reflect, she lost herself in mice, rabbits, and waterlilies to a degree that most humans won’t or can’t do. Blending scientific accuracy with a poet’s appreciation of unseen beauty, she allowed others to enter this hidden world. Tsui strikes me as the Beatrix Potter of the architectural world.

Soon he projects strange images onto the screen, both his built and unbuilt designs. There’s an unrealized concept for an office in Emeryville,

“Tsui strikes me as the Beatrix Potter of the architectural world.”



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California, with something like a massive eyeball over the door, only the eyeball has two antennae. Behind it, sprouting from the roof, there’s another bulbous, clawed structure, resembling a tulip crossed with a Venus flytrap. Then there’s the Oakland remodel where he added enormous, translucent dragonfly wings to an ordinary house in an effort to provide shade. Other works look even more futuristic, most memorably a two-mile-high Ultima Tower. (Image 04) Tsui modeled this parabola-shaped city on a termites’ nest. There’s also a Nexus Mobile Floating Sea City. (Image 05) All these rounded, wavy forms come across as whimsical, colorful, and unearthly. I’m simultaneously enchanted and disturbed.

And as I gaze at the amorphous forms, I feel the chill of recognition. Where have I seen pictures like this before? I’m stumped for a while, and then it comes back to me bit by bit. The space creatures I drew with Leith. My own spiraling city. The inventions and drawings of a child who knows no limits.

How long ago that was, and what a different time! I can barely reach back into that sealed-off part of my memory. It’s as if I’m reentering a dream and trying to grasp it with my conscious, rational mind. This is almost impossible. A dream wants to stay on its side of the door, just as the calculating and fussing of the waking day must stay contained on the other side. One can’t merge the two, or at least I can’t. I find my unconscious mind as embarrassing as my childhood doodles, so I push all that strangeness down and out of sight as best I can. I then try to convince people that I’m normal.

But here’s Tsui, bringing his dreamworld to the light of day—with no embarrassment whatsoever. In fact, he’s proud of being different, proud of his vision. Apparently, he doesn’t worry that people might scoff, calling his ideas unrealistic, idealistic, naive, and even ugly. He represses nothing but instead brings it forward for all to see, essentially saying to the world, “Here I am. Take me on my own terms.”

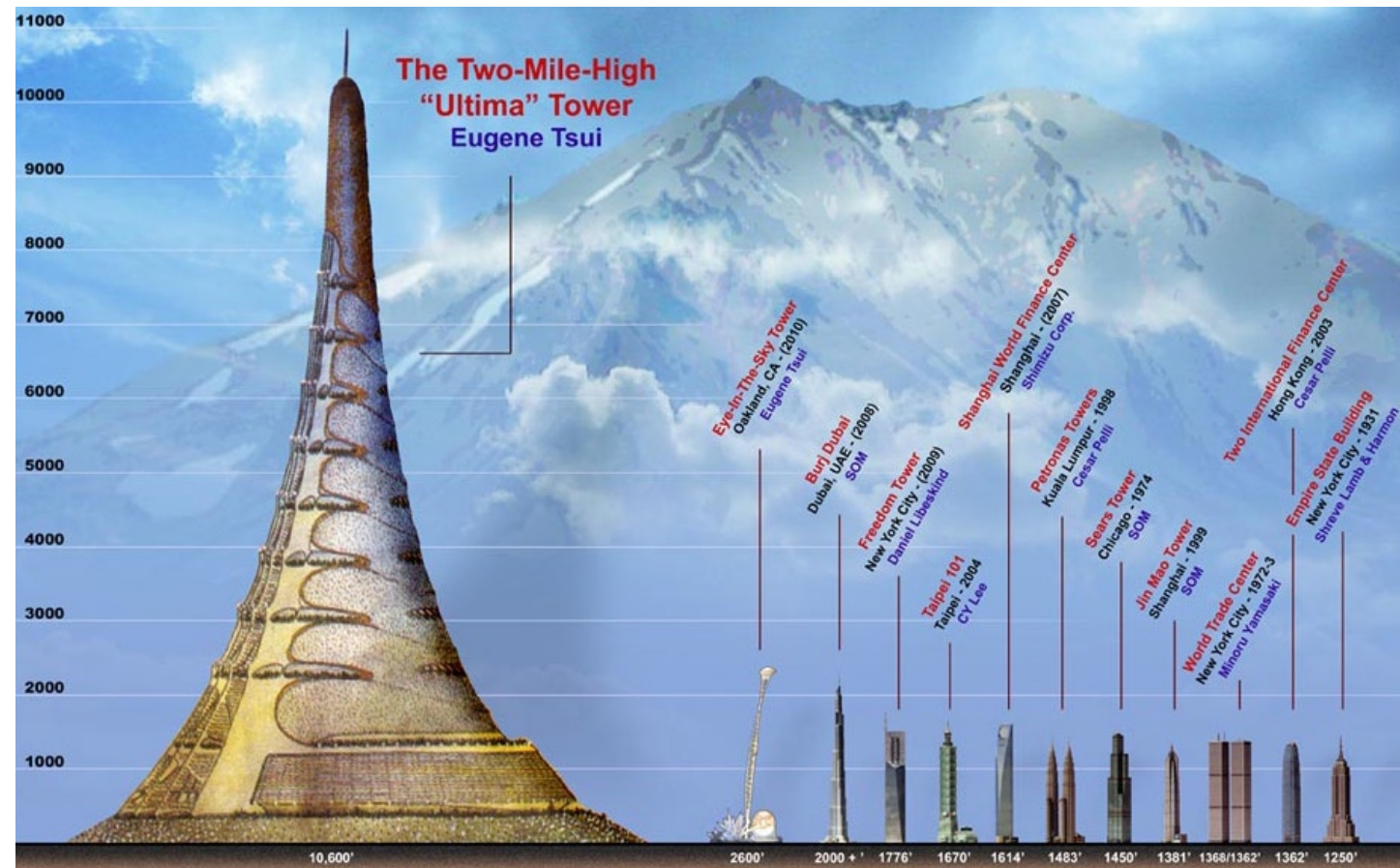
If you’re going to be a visionary, I suppose you can’t embarrass easily.

Some of his radiant shamelessness wafts over from the podium and settles on my shoulders. I sit up a little straighter, suddenly pleased with my all-but-forgotten childhood self. Look what I did way back when! Maybe I had untapped potential! Maybe if I’d kept at it, I could have ... done what? Been Tsui? Hmm. I know my childhood scribbles bore none of the genius some people attribute to Tsui (and that he occasionally attributes to himself). And I know that, for better and for worse, I am in no way, shape, or form Eugene Tsui. But his work makes me appreciate for the first time in decades the child inside, the one I tried to chuck out in a fascist fit of internal house-cleaning.

Clearly, he never rejected his own child-mind. It’s alive and well. But I can’t imagine how he has kept it intact in the adult world. How did he coast through adolescence with all the teasing and the enormous pressure to conform? How has he wooed women (three wives, as it turns out) with that haircut and his bizarre fashion sense? And on a more practical note, how has he ever attracted clients or supported himself and his three children?

Oh, and he doesn’t just design buildings. Now he’s showing slides

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of an infinite variety of Tsui Design and Research products: ceramic plates, clothes (Image 06), jewelry, furniture, and futuristic transportation. The clothing might have come from *The Jetsons*, and the rest I can't begin to categorize. His creativity and courage appear limitless.

"Dare to reveal the powers of your own genius, and triumph over the impossible," Tsui tells us, quoting the motto he wrote and painted on his office wall. "If we continue with the same conformist ways, we will surely destroy ourselves." He's on his soapbox, exhorting us to question the "truths" of history. He calls symbolism destructive and divisive, citing Jewish stars and Muslim moons as examples. And in a particularly impassioned segment, he assails our inadequate gestures at redressing environmental problems. "It is *not enough* to recycle papers in a box on the sidewalk," he says. "It is *not enough* to orient a house toward the south for maximum solar penetration," as many speakers have recommended. "We must reach higher to become aligned with the mind of nature!"

With manicured, high-flown sentences and a forceful delivery, he reminds me of leaders that no longer exist. As I will learn, he reveres Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Gandhi and Che Guevara. Clearly Tsui wants to follow their example, making his mark as one of the great orators of our times. The transparency of that desire makes me uncomfortable. At the same time, almost against my will, I'm riveted.

A strange, tingling energy runs through me until I can barely sit still. I think about a book I've been struggling to conceptualize. In the past few months, I've met with publishing experts three times, and though I began each meeting with a big, beautiful balloon of a vision about what the book could be, I always came out demoralized. "You'll have to sacrifice your vision, because that won't sell," the experts essentially said. In other words, I'd have to squeeze my buoyant vision into constricted, prefabricated slots that sales and marketing people could understand. These were valid points, but depressing and uninspiring nonetheless.

Now Tsui is giving me a different message: "You have to see yourself as an example of what you feel is right and true. You have to practice being yourself. It all comes down to individuality," he says. Suddenly, when I think of my book idea, I can breathe a little more freely. Maybe I don't have to listen to the "experts" after all. I consider the freeness in Tsui's designs, and I want that for myself. I long to break through to a place with no limits, a place where anything is possible.

"We must free ourselves of the weight of everything we've come to identify ourselves with," says Tsui. And a voice in my head says, "Hey, do what you want! Don't do what you think you *should* do!"

With one ear still attuned to Tsui, I jot down notes for a new approach to my book. Out with the experts' conservative marketing approach! In with a much more radical path! What about doing three complementary books at once, each containing an element of the beautiful vision I had? Wow, this is something! An hour ago, I felt too discouraged to write one book. Now I want to tackle three simultaneously! Though it's short on realism to think of selling three complementary books, I don't care. Right now I want to be



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"It is not enough to recycle papers in a box on the sidewalk... It is not enough to orient a house toward the south for maximum solar penetration... We must reach higher to become aligned with the mind of nature!"

thinking as expansively as Tsui does, staying true to a vision.

Isn't it strange that a speech about modeling buildings after natural forms should have any bearing on my state of mind! I watch Tsui throw himself headlong into his speech, and it occurs to me that his freedom is utterly contagious. The mood he sets means far more than the content of his sentences. He just happens to be talking about architecture, and that's because he needs to manifest his beliefs in some tangible way. But his words could be about anything—and so could his profession, I imagine.

To me, his buildings represent freedom. They are freedom made visible and tangible. Same with his clothing. Sure, that cape might be one big look-at-me gimmick, and sure, it makes a weird fashion statement. But if he dares to wear it, and if he has the words about nonconformity to back it up, then he's captured my interest and a bit of respect.

How exciting it is to be around someone who dreams up possibilities and then works to turn them into realities. How invigorating to meet someone who doesn't notice obstacles and limitations. How exhilarating to be around a person with total freedom of mind and spirit.

In this moment, Tsui strikes me as the freest person I've ever met. And I know intuitively that if I were that free, I could achieve a great deal of what has eluded me so far, particularly in creative endeavors. I could get out of my own way.

When you think about it, isn't that true for everybody?

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