

Still Waters Run Deep

Interview with Gina Pollara, Chief Operating Officer at Wrightwood 659



This month we meet Gina Pollara, architect and chief operating officer at Wrightwood 659 gallery. You'd be forgiven for thinking you had the wrong address as you search for Wrightwood 659 – nestled among the houses of a quiet residential street in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. Wrightwood 659 was designed by Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning Japanese architect, Tadao Ando, who turned the once residential building into a four-story monument that houses rotating exhibitions. From the outside, the warm brick walls and rows of windows lead you to believe the gallery is just another home along the street. Upon entering the space, however, you are transported to another world.

Magic Beneath the Surface

As you enter the gallery, you are greeted by an exposed staircase of reinforced concrete that snakes its way to top floors, leading the gaze upwards where lights spill in through windows in the repurposed brick outer walls of the building. The sheer amount of space left open in such a relatively small building to begin with creates an atmosphere that is downright monolithic.



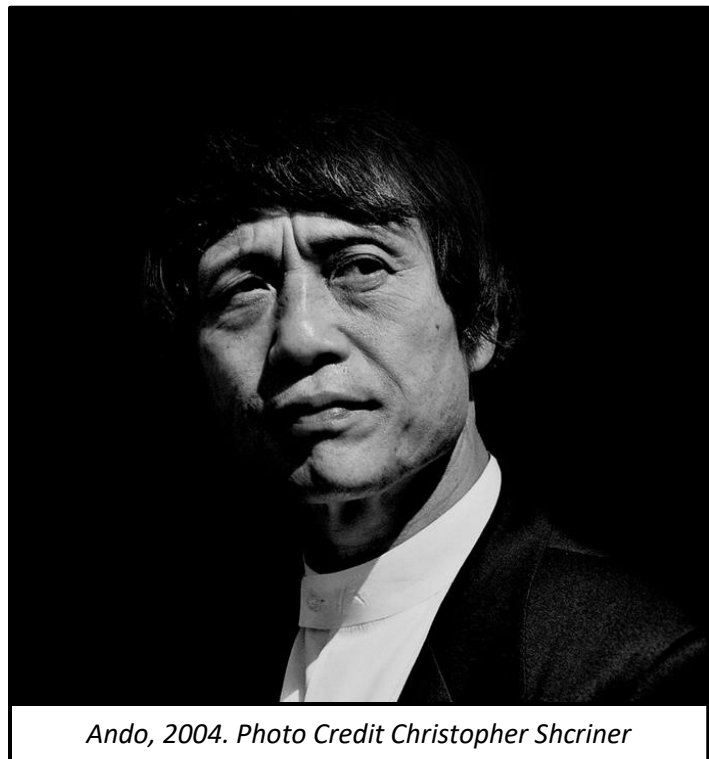
Facade (left) and front lobby (right). Photo credit Jeff Goldberg, courtesy of Wrightwood 659

“That’s something you notice immediately about anything designed by Ando. All of his works have this very mystical, numinous quality to them.” Gina explains to me. She warmly guides me around the building, beaming with excitement as she points out every detail of the space. It’s clear her admiration and enthusiasm for Ando are great. I mention that the exterior belies so much of the magic happening inside and we joke about how that seems to typify Ando himself. “He’s a fairly small man and pretty

quiet, but he has such an intensity to him. There's an energy underneath all of that stillness. I remember when he came to meet some of the students who built the models of his buildings that we have here in the gallery and he pulled out this blue magic marker and was scribbling all over everything while talking with them, it was like he came alive."

Power in Precision

Certainly no one would ever doubt Ando's passion. Born in Japan, he initially worked as a boxer before deciding to pursue architecture, despite having no formal training. As a self-taught architect, Ando uses Japanese aesthetics and culture as a powerful tool for inspiration in his own work. The attention to detail and use of negative space as an element of design are signature facets of both Japanese aesthetics and of Ando's works.



Ando, 2004. Photo Credit Christopher Shcriner

"He really does design every building down to the very last inch," Gina marvels. "Ando uses a lot of concrete, and as an architect I can tell you that when working with this kind of material it's not always that exact, which is what makes Ando's



Photo Jeff Goldberg, courtesy of Wrightwood 659

concrete so amazing. If you look around the space, you'll see every edge of every pillar is really clean and that is very hard to achieve. Even when you look at how the stones on the ground are laid, so that the joints are really consistent and the plane of the floor is really flat. Everything is so crisp. Everything is super precise." She explains to me how working with concrete is a bit like baking a cake. Every ingredient matters, and every measurement must be exact

or the final product will change. The color, strength, finish, and consistency are all determined by the process of mixing. Even where and how he uses the tie backs when mixing the concrete has to be very intentional. "You'll notice when you look at the walls here, every hole from the tie backs is perfect, it's lined up exactly and it forms a pattern—it becomes a part of the space."

Outer and Inner Metamorphosis

Tasked with designing the interior of Wrightwood 659, Ando took great pains to implement his unique ideals in an entirely different original space. "You have to really marvel at how, on top of this super complicated

process of essentially creating an entirely new building on the inside, we're also talking about a kind of logistical staging issue because in the construction you're moving around in what is essentially a very tight site," she tells me. "The whole building was completely transformed." Gina details the process of designing and reconstructing the space, which took five years, wherein the entire interior of the building was removed to make room for its new structure.

"He really believes in the transformative power of architecture," Gina says with a smile as she glances towards the staircase, now bathed in natural light from outside the building. "He really understands how architecture can change your emotional state." Ando himself has said before that "to change the dwelling is to change the city and reform society."

Perhaps this is what made Ando the perfect choice to design Wrightwood 659, which is dedicated to showcasing both architecture and socially engaged art. We were lucky enough to visit the gallery while an exhibition by Japanese contemporary artist Testuya Ishida was ongoing.

"This whole collection is in such perfect dialogue with the building – both aesthetically and spiritually. And I love that we have this other Japanese artist whose

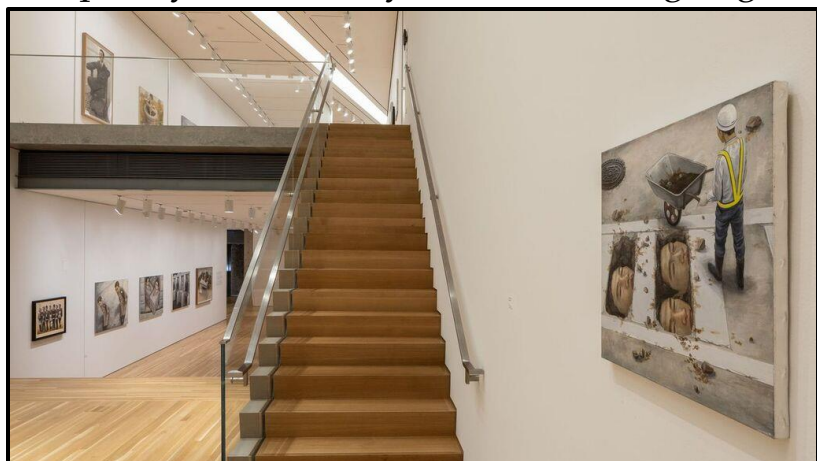


Photo credit Michael Tropea, courtesy of Wrightwood 659

works are dealing with some very big changes in society that affected his generation. And that's what we look for here – the focus for us is about socially engaged art, and we're fortunate that we can bring in collections that other spaces might shy away from because they make such bold statements."

Whether you come to Wrightwood to see the amazing exhibits or Ando's design of the building itself, you won't leave disappointed. Stop by to experience the space for yourself and experience the magic and mystery beneath the surface.



Photo credit Jeff Goldberg, courtesy of Wrightwood 659

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