



Aomori Nebuta House
(ねぶたの家 ワ・ラッセ)

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Nebuta House (ねぶたの家 ワ・ラッセ) is a museum and cultural centre dedicated to the rich creative tradition of the Nebuta Festival in Aomori, a city situated in northern Japan.

In 2002, Stephanie Forsythe + Todd MacAllen won an international architecture competition, judged by Tadao Ando and Jean Nouvel and sponsored by the City of Aomori, for a housing and community project in the region. However, what began as a plan for residential and communal spaces transformed into a new typology: a cultural institution shaped by the spirit and craftsmanship of the Nebuta Festival.

In 2007, Forsythe + MacAllen (molo design) invited ddt/Arch and Frank la Rivière Architects Inc. to collaborate on the design, alongside Kanebako Structural Engineers and PT Morimura & Associates Ltd., who led the structural and services engineering. Together, the team developed construction documents and oversaw the building process of what would become the Aomori Nebuta House Museum.

One of Japan's three grand festivals, Nebuta Matsuri is a vivid form of storytelling, where heroes, demons and mythical creatures are reimagined as monumental illuminated lanterns reaching heights as large as 9 x 7 x 5.5 metres. Illuminated from within, these Nebuta are paraded through the city in a theatrical celebration of memory and tradition. Nebuta House offers these ephemeral beings a place to dwell. Each year, the five most compelling Nebuta, chosen for craftsmanship and creativity, are selected to be housed within, replacing the previous year's selection.

Functioning as both archive and atelier, the museum would preserve history, showcase unique whimsical artistry, and nurture the future of cultural expression. Located at the threshold of land and sea, just in front of Aomori Station, Nebuta House opened its doors on January 5, 2011.

Intended to be more than a building that hosts a collection, the design considers what might occur if the museum participated in the mythology of the festival itself. Inspired by the traditional Japanese spatial design concept engawa, a ribbon screen facade encases the building. This semi-outdoor perimeter allows visitors to pass through a permeable threshold that serves as a fluid boundary between a contemporary world and a mystical realm, gradually preparing them to exit a homogenous world of box-like buildings, vending machines, and responsibilities into a world of spirits and imagination. A vivid, theatrical presence, it stands at the street's end like a crimson curtain on a stage about to be drawn. Every mundane movement and object subsequently acquires a performative quality as children in the snow, bicycles in motion, and workers on break all become part of the performance.

The ribbons are constructed of steel, but were first conceived as strips of paper in a 1:50 scale model. Through the skilled craftsmanship of steelworkers, this vision was translated into 12-meter-high bands of 9mm-thick steel, each 300mm wide. This skin of twisted steel ribbons is a deep and vibrant red, enamel-coated to withstand the elements. Serving as more than facade, the steel becomes an active part of the architecture, shaping light, shadow, and the experience of this passage. Openings are carved to welcome sunlight, frame glimpses outward, while gently guiding the pedestrian through. →

The top of each ribbon stays flush and parallel to the building, whereas the bottom of each steel ribbon was cut to a unique and specific angle, with consideration to how light would permeate the ribbons as the sun shifted throughout the day. Between these fixed points, the ribbons arc and bend – some following a natural curve while others are manipulated to create wider openings, as if embodying the natural abstractions of wind. The fabrication was entirely manual, human hands and eyes alone animated and interpreted the material during prefabrication and again on-site during installation.

Once inside, volumes of ancillary rooms and layers of screens gradually lead into a shadowed interior where the Nebuta reside. This volumetric juxtaposition accommodates many possible uses and perspectives. A black interior, absent of colour and ornament, creates the feeling of a black box theatre where the story becomes a singular focal point. In the darkness, the luminous Nebuta appear suspended in the darkness of the hall, their vibrant colours reflected in the rippled, water-like floor. It is a dreamlike reflection of the festival's final night, when some of the Nebuta are released to drift out to sea just beyond the grounds.

A set of monumental sliding doors allows the grand space of the Nebuta Hall to flow seamlessly into the upper-level theatre and the multipurpose rooms below — spaces designed for music, exhibitions and workshops. This spatial choreography fosters a powerful visual and acoustic dialogue between performances and the Nebuta themselves, encouraging unexpected juxtapositions and a flexibility of use that mirrors the festival's theatrical spirit.

During major events, the towering Nebuta figures enter and exit the hall through another massive sliding door. When both doors are open, the experience expands outward: from the illuminated floats in the hall, to the theatre above, and further still to Aomori Harbour and the distant silhouette of the Hakkōda Mountains. In this way, the architecture continues to perform and become an analogy for the merging of worlds. It stages a layered view — past, present, mythic, and real — all visible in a single, fluid panorama.

Designing a significant cultural centre within the parameters of a modest budget presented a rare and exciting challenge. By merging purpose, imagination and respect for tradition, the final result is a multi-dimensional building that bridges the past and present. The evolution from an initial community program into a layered cultural venue also reflects the adaptability and creative spirit at the heart of the Nebuta tradition itself, and has already become a site for workshops, conferences and modern cultural expressions.

In this way, Nebuta House does more than preserve a world; it extends it. A meeting place for ideas, the site offers a place where traditional stories find a place in a contemporary conversation. By inviting imagination and whimsy to the city's everyday rhythms, Nebuta House opens the door to new expressions yet to come.

dimensions

The Nebuta House site occupies 13,012 m² on the waterfront of Aomori Harbour. The total building area is 4,340 m² with a gross floor area of 6,708 m² which includes the engawa (covered outdoor walkway enclosed by steel ribbon screen), utility basement, two levels to accommodate the program of exhibit hall, theatre, multi-purpose / music rooms, restaurant and gift shop. At the highest point the building stands at 15.4 m, the first level is 4.5 m floor-to-floor, the second level is 5.9 m; both entrance and exhibit halls are double-height at 8.5 m.

materials

820 steel ribbons, 12 m tall, encircle the glass-and-steel structure. The prefabricated ribbons are enamel-coated deep red (inspired by the traditional local lacquer ware) and have been installed using a four-point connection system, manually adjusted on-site. The building sits on 177 piles that go 27 m deep through fill to reach solid ground. In consideration of the soft sea side soil, the lightness of the steel structure was important and adopted early into the design process. The exposed round steel columns are as slender as possible — this also helps give the structure a feeling of physical lightness. The floor to ceiling window mullions are black, galvanized solid steel and fasten to the steel structure of slender columns to contribute structural support to the steel ribbon screen of the façade (horizontal wind load). Segments of the exterior wall are made up of prefabricated lightweight concrete panels. The interior is partitioned by a series of black, galvanized steel screens and panels, physically enclosing the space while maintaining visual connection beyond at certain angles. The galvanized steel used in the interior is treated with a patination process that blackens the metal while retaining the crystalline pattern of zinc galvanization.

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(ねぶたの家 ワ・ラッセ) · project team

Architectural Design and Site Supervision

- molo (Stephanie Forsythe + Todd MacAllen)
- d&dt Arch (Yasuo Nakata)
- Frank la Rivière Architects Inc (Frank la Rivière)

Structural Engineering

- Kanebako Structural Engineers

MEP

- PT Morimura & Associates, Ltd

Construction

- Kajima - Fujimoto - Kurahashi Construction JV





The engawa, a dramatic
backdrop to the performance
of every day city life.

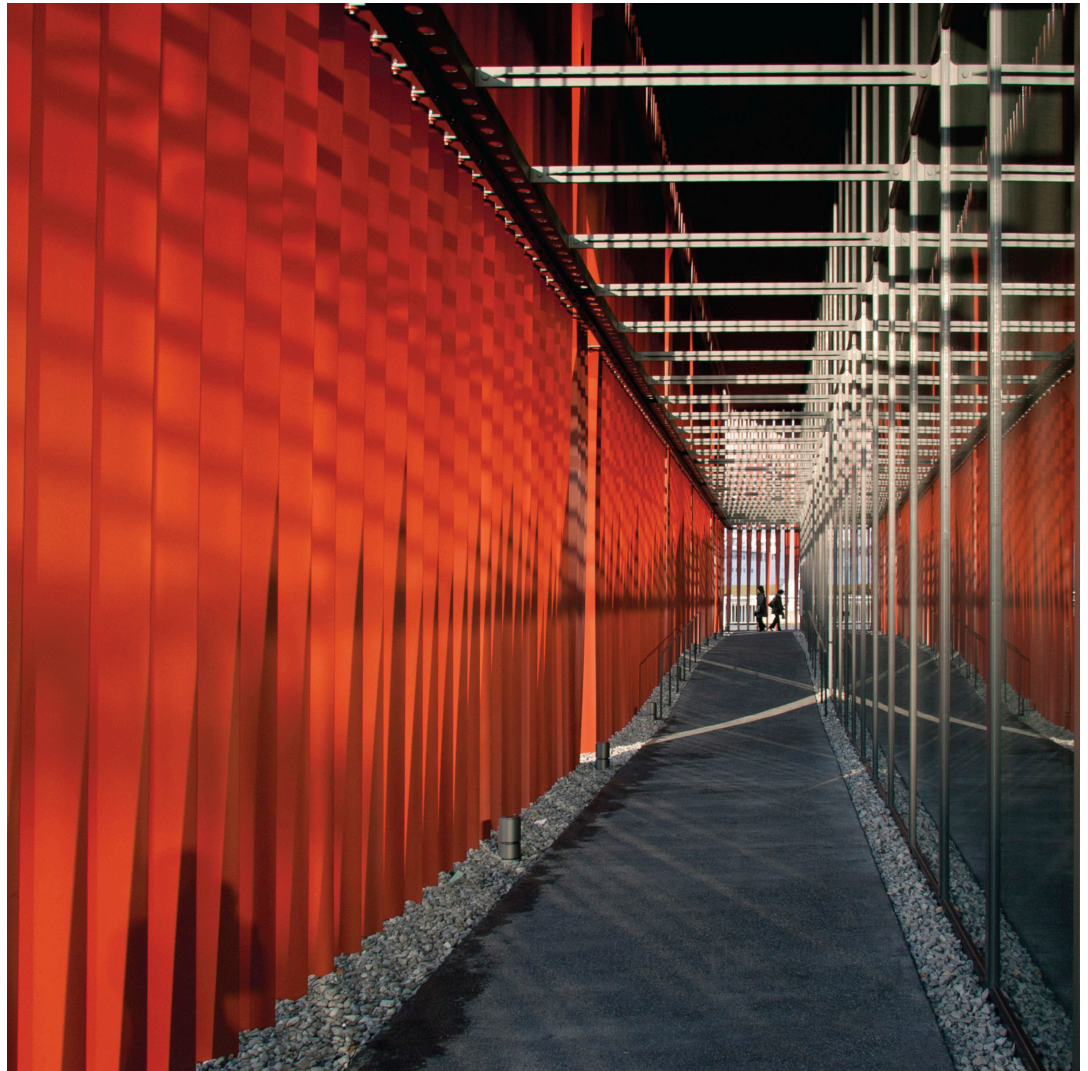


Children run and play throughout the subtle openings between the massive steel ribbons.





A view within the covered walkway that surrounds the museum.



The floats themselves,
shining with otherworldly light
within the dark realm of the
museum's interior.



