

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Tadao Ando 1995 Laureate Biography

Tadao Ando of Osaka, Japan is a man who is at the pinnacle of success in his own country. In the last few years, he has emerged as a cultural force in the world as well. In 1995, the Pritzker Architecture Prize was formally presented to him within the walls of the Grand Trianon Palace at Versailles, France. There is little doubt that anyone in the world of architecture will not be aware of his work. That work, primarily in reinforced concrete, defines spaces in unique new ways that allow constantly changing patterns of light and wind in all his structures, from homes and apartment complexes to places of worship, public museums and commercial shopping centers.

"In all my works, light is an important controlling factor," says Ando. "I create enclosed spaces mainly by means of thick concrete walls. The primary reason is to create a place for the individual, a zone for oneself within society. When the external factors of a city's environment require the wall to be without openings, the interior must be especially full and satisfying."

And further on the subject of walls, Ando writes, "At times walls manifest a power that borders on the violent. They have the power to divide space, transfigure place, and create new domains. Walls are the most basic elements of architecture, but they can also be the most enriching."

Ando continues, "Such things as light and wind only have meaning when they are introduced inside a house in a form cut off from the outside world. I create architectural order on the basis of geometry squares, circles, triangles and rectangles. I try to use forces in the area where I am building, to restore the unity between house and nature (light and wind) that was lost in the process of modernizing Japanese houses during the rapid growth of the fifties and sixties."

John Morris Dixon of *Progressive Architecture* wrote in 1990: "The geometry of Ando's interior plans, typically involving rectangular systems cut through by curved or angled walls, can look at first glance rather arbitrary and abstract. What one finds in the actual buildings are spaces carefully adjusted to human occupancy." Further, he describes Ando's work as reductivist, but "... the effect is not to deprive us of sensory richness. Far from it. All of his restraint seems aimed at focusing our attention on the relationships of his ample volumes, the play of light on his walls, and the processional sequences he develops."

In his childhood, he spent his time mostly in the fields and streets. From ages 10 to 17, he also spent time making wood models of ships, airplanes, and moulds, learning the craft from a carpenter whose shop was across the street from his home. After a brief stint at being a boxer, Ando began his self-education by apprenticing to several relevant persons such as designers and city planners for short periods. "I was never a good student. I always preferred learning things on my own outside of class. When I was about 18, I started to visit temples, shrines, and tea houses in Kyoto and Nara, there's a lot of great traditional architecture in the area. I was studying architecture by going to see actual buildings, and reading books about them." He made study trips to Europe and the United States in the sixties to view and analyze great buildings of western civilization, keeping a detailed sketch book which he does even to this day when he travels.

About that same time, Ando relates that he discovered a book about Le Corbusier in a secondhand bookstore in Osaka. It took several weeks to save enough money to buy it. Once in his possession, Ando says, "I traced the drawings of his early period so many times that all the pages turned black. In my mind, I quite often wonder how Le Corbusier would have thought about this project or that." When he visited Marseilles, Ando recalls visiting Corbu's *Unité d'Habitation*, and being intrigued by the dynamic use of concrete. Although concrete (along with steel and glass) is Ando's favorite material, he has used wood in a few rare projects, including the Japan Pavilion for Expo '92 in Spain.

Ando's concrete is often referred to as "smooth-as-silk." He explains that the quality of construction does not depend on the mix itself, but rather on the form work into which the concrete is cast. Because of the tradition of wooden architecture" in Japan, the craft level of carpentry is very high.

Tadao Ando, 1995 Laureate (continued)

Wooden form work, where not a single drop of water will escape from the seams of the forms depends on this. Watertight forms are essential. Otherwise, holes can appear and the surface can crack.

His form moulds, or wooden shuttering (as it is called in Japan), are even varnished to achieve smooth-as-silk finish to the concrete. The evenly spaced holes in the concrete, that have become almost an Ando trademark, are the result of bolts that hold the shuttering together. Ando's concrete is both structure and surface, never camouflaged or plastered over.

Although Ando has a preference for concrete, it is not part of the Japanese building tradition. "Most Japanese houses are built with wood and paper," he explains, "including my own. I have lived there since I was a child. It is like my cave, I'm very comfortable there." He explained that he was the firstborn of twin boys. When he was two, it was decided that his maternal grandmother would raise him, and he was given her name, Ando. They first lived near the port of Osaka before moving to where he lives today.

Ando's appreciation of the carpenter's craft comes partially because as he describes, "I spent a lot of time as a child observing in a woodworking shop across" the street from the house where I grew up. I became interested in trying to make shapes out of wood. With young eyes and sensitivities, I watched how trees grew, altered by how the sun hit it, changing the qualities of the lumber produced. I came to understand the absolute balance between a form and the material from which it is made. I experienced the inner struggle inherent in the human act of applying will to give birth to a form."

Ando continues, "Later my interest gradually concentrated on architecture, which makes possible the consideration of intimate relations between material and form, and between volume and human life. The aim of my design is, while embodying my own architectural theories, to impart rich meaning to spaces through natural elements and the many aspects of daily life. In other words, I try to relate the fixed form and compositional method to the kind of life that will be lived in the given space and to local regional society. My mainstay in selecting the solutions to these problems, is my independent architectural theory ordered on the basis of a geometry of simple forms, my own ideas of life, and my emotions as a Japanese."

As he celebrated his fifty-fourth birthday on September 13, his portfolio boasted not only the Pritzker Architecture Prize, considered the profession's highest honor, but also the gold medal of the French Academy, plus numerous other medals and honorary fellow designations from Finland, the United States, and Great Britain. In addition, he has virtually every art and architecture prize his own country can bestow, as well as Denmark's Carlsberg Architectural Prize.

In addition to these prestigious honors, Ando, in spite of no architectural degree, has been a visiting professor in the United States at such institutions as Yale, Harvard, and Columbia. In addition, he has given many lectures at other schools including Princeton, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of California at Berkeley, Rice, and University of Pennsylvania, as well as the leading colleges of England, France, and many other countries.

"I was born and raised in Japan. I do my work here," says Ando (although he is rapidly going global), and extensive work it is. In 1969, he set up his practice in his home town of Osaka, in contrast to the prevailing thought that an office in Tokyo was necessary to success.

As he explains, "My first attempts at designs were of small wooden houses, some interiors and furniture. I did not apprentice to another architect because every time I tried, I was fired for my stubbornness and temper." His first commission was for a young couple with a child who wanted their old tenement redesigned. After it was accomplished, they had twins so the house for three was no longer sufficient for a family of five. They jokingly said that Ando should be responsible, so he bought the house and made it his office. After changing that structure many times, it was finally replaced by his current concrete building.

Tadao Ando, 1995 Laureate (continued)

Located not far from Osaka Station, Ando's studio has two floors below ground and five above. He describes it as follows: "An atrium pierces the upper five floors broadening as it rises. The stepped ranks of floors, accessed by means of a winding staircase, doubles as a kind of lecture hall, the speaker using the staircase as a podium to address an audience assembled on the tiers of floors. Each level also has a narrow balcony for access to bookshelves. The second level is primarily for drawing boards, and the ground floor is my office and conference space." The office is managed by his wife, Yumiko Ando, who also acts as his translator. A four-footed friend is also in residence there most of time, their dog named "Le Corbusier."

In addition to Corbusier, Ando mentions Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn of importance in his development. He described a visit to Wright's original Imperial Hotel when he was only seventeen. "I had never heard of him, nor did I know anything about the building. But the Imperial Hotel fascinated me and my curiosity took me inside. I remember a dark, narrow corridor with an extremely low ceiling leading into a huge hall. It was like walking through a cave. I think Wright learned the most important aspect of architecture, the treatment of space, from Japanese architecture. When I visited Falling Water in Pennsylvania, I found that same sensibility of space. But there was the additional natural sounds of nature that appealed to me."

It was in 1975 that Ando's work burst on the scene with the completion of a small row house in Osaka, called Row House, Sumiyoshi (Azuma). In his own words, "This small house was the point of origin for my subsequent work. It is a memorable building for me, one of which I am very fond. This house replaced the middle portion of three row houses in an older section of central Osaka. My intention was to insert a concrete box in this center section and to create a microcosm within it, a simple composition with diverse spaces and dramatized by light. The house completely closes itself from the street. An indentation on the front wall serves as entry. A courtyard is the center of the space, flanked on one side on the first floor by the living room on one side, and on the other: the kitchen, dining room and bath. The second floor is a master bedroom on one side, and the children's on the other."

Koji Taki, one of the Japan's leading writers, thinks of Tadao Ando as "a builder rather than an architect," adding immediately that he does not intend any negative nuance in the term, as he says, "quite the contrary ... the appellation 'builder' may be read as a term of praise." He praised Ando's Azuma residence saying, "The value of (this house) as architecture does not necessarily come from some stylistic method or abstract concept aimed at making Architecture out of a commission for a house in Osaka; it comes instead from a fundamental way of thinking about building a house for an inhabitant. Ando's approach is to connect the art of building to the art of living." Most of Ando's peers and architectural critics agreed, as evidenced by the Japanese Architectural Institute's annual award for the house.

Ando says he quite often asks himself if he is happy being an architect. "I truly enjoy making things with my hands," he says, "but I can't build a house on my own. When I give my drawings to the carpenters and craftsmen, I begin worrying because I'm not participating in the process of actually building." An artist, as much as a builder or architect, Ando's sketches and drawings included in his numerous exhibitions have received praise from many critics around the world.

In terms of building projects outside of Japan, in 1991, he was asked to design the gallery to display Japanese folding screens at The Art Institute of Chicago. In 1992, his Japan Pavilion for Expo in Seville, Spain attracted favorable attention. Catherine Slessor writing in *The Architectural Review*, called it a supreme embodiment of the traditional Japanese aesthetic of elevating "inherent natural and unadorned beauty as the purest manifestation of Japanese cultural identity."

His first commission in a totally foreign setting was to build an art school in northern Italy for Benetton at Treviso, which is still under construction. He also completed a Seminar House adjacent to, and for, the Vitra furniture manufacturers in Germany.

Tadao Ando, 1995 Laureate (continued)

An exhibition of Ando's work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1991 for which he received critical praise was his auspicious U.S. debut. The New York Times' Paul Goldberger, in reviewing the exhibit, called his work "an extraordinary" and profound meditation on abstract form, physical space and light ... his buildings are at once powerful and restrained ... sensual and reserved."

Benjamin Forgey in the Washington Post wrote that the exhibit "firmly establishes Ando as one of the preeminent living architects in the world" And further, that Ando, "demonstrates an uncanny ability to conjoin East and West in buildings and plans of resonant purity and complex symbolism ... Ando is a very Japanese architect and yet (his works) possess an indelible timelessness and universality."

Ando explains, "The industrial revolution made possible the production of standardized building materials, including concrete, steel and glass, and techniques for using these materials are found in architecture worldwide, thus transcending nationality to produce a Modernism that is international, an open principle. I am applying this vocabulary in an enclosed realm of life styles and regional differences. Many attempts have been made before to link this open vocabulary to the indigenous Japanese tradition of aesthetics and forms. For a number of reasons, including the vastly different life styles of the past to today, most of these attempts failed. My effort is to preserve Japanese residential architecture's intimate connection with nature and the openness to the natural world, what I call enclosed Modern Architecture, a restoration of the unity between house and nature."

In addition to light and shadow, concrete and steel, views, and complete enclosure, another common theme to his work is the use of underground space. A number of his houses, including Koshino House, Iwasa House, the atelier Yoshie Inaba, the Water Temple, and several of his museums, all make extensive use of space underground. Another recurring feature of Ando's buildings is his use of stairs. The Children's Museum at Hyogo provides a long broad stepped ramp, accompanied by cascading pools of water as the entrance; in Chikatsu Asuka Historical Museum, the entire roof is a stepped plaza providing an artificial hill from which the actual burial mounds can be viewed. His Water Temple is entered through a stairway that parts the water of a lotus filled pool that is actually the roof of the ceremonial rooms, the latter being painted bright vermilion, a rare departure from Ando's usual monochromatic pallet.

Approximately half of Koshino house is underground. Comprised of two rectangular volumes of different size, they are arranged in parallel, connected by a corridor, and flank a courtyard. Four years after the original house was completed, an atelier was added, completely underground, and defined by a by a quarter-circle wall. Light comes in through narrow slits in walls and ceilings, in addition to some large windows in the living room facing the outdoor court.

One of his most praised projects is the Church of the Light in Osaka. It's simplicity is that it is no more than a concrete box with glazed slits piercing and intersecting the wall behind the altar, allowing sunlight to form a bright cross in the otherwise darkened interior. Ando says of the Church on the Water, "By placing a cross in a body of flowing water, I wanted to express the idea of God as existing in one's heart and mind. I also wanted to create a space where one can sit and meditate."

Time's, a complex of fashion shops in Kyoto, was conceived to take advantage of the site on the Takase River, not a large stream but fondly regarded by the town's people. Approaches to the shops are channeled past the river by the use of a water level plaza and a bridge-like deck above the plaza.

Rokko Housing, an apartment complex which is embedded in a hillside with a spectacular view of Osaka Bay, is considered by Ando as best representing many of his ideas. Each apartment module is unique but of uniform size, 18' X 18'. The first phase was 20 units, and then the second phase ten years later and on a site adjacent to the first, 50 units. "I think this is one of my most important works," says Ando. Plans are already in the formative stage for another third phase of the project.

Tadao Ando, 1995 Laureate (continued)

Ando's work methods involve his original concept sketches being drawn up as plans by his staff members, that can number as high as twenty at any one time. "Each project is executed by one person from my staff and myself," he explains, "working as a team of two. When we have eight projects, we have eight people on staff, and once we start we don't have any rest until it is finished. There are also some part time students working in the office always."

Thom Mayne, a California architect, who visited Japan and many of Ando's buildings wrote in *Graphis* in 1991, "I am struck by his relentless single mindedness, a focus so outwardly directed from a powerful inner vision that it seems quite literally to take no account whatsoever of other 'schools' or 'movements' which may be currently under discussion."

Asked once to define "architecture" Ando's response was "Chohatsu suru hako," translated as "the box that provokes." Elaborating on that phrase, Ando says, "I have the somewhat arrogant belief that the way people lead lives can be directed, even if by a little, by means of architecture." He has also said on other occasions, "I do not believe architecture should speak too much. It should remain silent and let nature in the guise of sunlight and wind speak."

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