# Tadao Ando
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## Essay

**Thoughts on Tadao Ando**

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After an informal apprenticeship to a Japanese carpenter and a number of independent study tours in Asia, Europe and the Americas, Tadao Ando first came to public notice with his diminutive Azuma house realized in Sumiyoshi in 1976 for which he received the Japanese Architectural Association prize for architecture. This two-story dwelling, conceived as a megaron inserted within a row of traditional terrace houses, already established the essential principles of Ando's architecture; his basic concept of creating introspective microcosms to stand against the urban chaos of the late modern world. This was a strategy as he put it, of "using walls to defeat walls."[1] Thereafter this approach manifested itself in a series of reinforced concrete houses each of which was focused in one way or another about an atrium, in particular his Matsumoto and Ishihara houses of the late seventies built in the suburbs of Osaka. Where the first of these focused about a terrace, opening onto a forest reserve, the second number of features in this small three story house established Ando's basic syntax, comprising in the first instance his habitual use of fair-faced in-situ concrete, inside and out, either as a bounding wall or as a free-standing frame, combined with large areas of plate glass or glass block, framed in steel and painted grey.

Evidently influenced to an equal degree by Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier Ando evoked the Japanese tradition through subtle associations as one may judge from the way in which the proportions of the shoji screens in the Ishihara tatami room in the house were echoed by the steel framed, plate glass windows opening on to the atrium, not to mention the affinity obtaining between the shoji and the glass block in-fill above.

Where his houses were situated in the midst of nature as in the two-story Koshino House built in the pine woods of Ashiya above Kobe in 1981, Ando arranged for the atrium to flow out into the surrounding landscape. This gesture was given a cross-cultural inflection, through a broad flight of stairs, linking the atrium to the entry and the garden, situated on either side of a narrow, steeply sloping site. This feature, combined with vertical slot windows in the flanking concrete walls, was seemingly derived from the architecture of Luis Barragan, as was the use of zenithal light in the living room. This canonical house was further enriched by other transcultural gestures, such as the built-in dining table that by virtue of a change in floor level permitted one to adopt an oriental or occidental sitting posture at the same table. Of more decisively Japanese provenance however was the exposed skeleton frame of the bedroom wing. This flat roof was capped by a steel rail in such a way as to suggest a traditional dry garden, just as the dimly lit corridors within, evoked the traditional dark interiors, evinced by Jun 'ichiro Tanizaki's in his seminal book, In Praise of Shadows of 1933.[2]

Notwithstanding his focus upon nature as the essential counterform to his architecture, Ando's concept of the natural has always been oriented towards an ineffable manifestation, bordering on the animistic. Of this he wrote in 1982:

"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. The isolated fragments of light and air suggest the entire natural world. The forms I have created have altered and acquired meaning through elementary nature (light and air) that give indications of the passage of time and the changing of the seasons…"[3]

The range and scale of Ando's architecture began to expand in the mid-eighties with two relatively large urban works; his Rokko Housing built on a previously unbuildable hillside site overlooking Kobe Harbor and an eight story commercial complex, known as the Festival, completed in downtown Naha, Okinawa in 1984. While the first of these works clearly derived from Le Corbusier's Roq et Rob

terrace housing of 1949, the second was rendered as an introspective seven story cube protected by perforated screen walls from the chaotic metropolis surrounding it on every side. Within this seven by seven bay concrete skeleton Ando stacked a number of open-planned, commercial floors, fed by a narrow light-court housing the necessary vertical circulation, stairs, escalators, etc. As in all of Ando's buildings everything depended on the way in which light and air were filtered through the enclosing membrane; light entering in this instance through a continuously perforated skin, thereby creating a changing chiaroscuro within the interior of the structure.

Between 1985 and 1988 Ando realized four buildings that established him definitively as a public architect of world stature; three of these structures were ecclesiastical—the so called Rokko Chapel and the churches of the Light and the Water, while the fourth, the Children's Museum in Hyogo, was rendered, together with its spectacular site, as a generic monument. Of the utmost simplicity each of these buildings posited a different theme by treating light, water, wind and topography in a different way.

While the first in the series, the Rokko Chapel, transformed the type-form of an early Christian basilica by the addition of a glazed loggia, that subtly reinterpreted the traditional torii approach to a Japanese shrine, the second a wedding chapel, was a minimalist reworking of Kaja and Heikki Siren's Otaniemi church of 1968. However, unlike this minimalist Nordic essay in brick and timber, the Church-on-the-Water was able to engender images of symbolic power through extremely simple means; above all through an ambiguous three-dimensional use of the cross motif clustered about the four sides of a glazed belvedere so as to suggest the four quarters of an archaic world. Ando set this iconic construction together with the chapel against an expanse of water slowly descending through a set of shallow weips across a carefully contoured landfall. Ando would adopt the same device in his Children's Museum, wherein sheets of shallow water cascade down the side of the museum, towards the broad panorama of a reservoir backed by mountains. This last, serving as borrowed scenery in the Shakkei tradition, became part of the overall waterscape. The grandeur of this aquatic vista was matched by a promenade architecturale articulating an undulating verdant site with a cranked causeway linking the museum to a metaphysical meditation place and a distant crafts center. Here the allusion was as much indebted to archaic Crete as to the Shinto sites of Japan.

Finally at the other end of the scale entirely, the Chapel of the Light at Ibaraki was an exemplary exercise in modesty and discretion. Comprising a simple basilica this diminutive concrete prism was deftly added to an existing religious compound. One single gesture namely an incision in the shape of a cross, spanning the entire plane of the altar wall, converted the symbolic cruciform into an abstract icon of unparalleled intensity by virtue of the fact that the aperture introduced a constantly changing play of light into the interior.

When one looks back over the last twenty years of Ando's prolific practice—some sixty works realized in less than two decades—it becomes clear that his architecture is nothing less than a critically poetic, yet realistic stand against the technological nihilism of the epoch. Like Auguste Perret before him, but in a totally different spirit, Ando has adopted concrete as though it were the tectonic demiurge of our time. With very few exceptions he has treated it as the one substance from which everything must be made; in order to guarantee the ontological presence of his work. It is this, plus the geometrical counterpoint of the volume that assures the phenomenological existentia of the subject within his architecture; the sensual self-awareness of the body-being of which he has written:

"The body articulates the world. At the same time, the body is articulated by the world. When "I" perceive the concrete to be something cold and hard, "I" recognize the body as something warm and soft. In this way the body in its dynamic relationship with the world becomes the Shintai. It is only the Shintai in this sense that builds or understands architecture. The Shintai is a sentient being that responds to the world."[4]



For all its seemingly universality the particular character of Ando's concrete depends not only on

the spacing of the reinforcement and the extreme care with which it is laid and vibrated but also on the precision of the timber formwork from which it is cast. This, in turn, derives from the Japanese carpentry tradition in which Ando was partially trained and in which he is still steeped, as we may judge from the sublime structure of the all-timber Japanese pavilion that he realized for the Seville World Exhibition of 1992. It is just this tectonic probity plus the poetic strength of his topographic vision that puts Ando's work into a class apart. This landscapist aspect has never been more clearly demonstrated than in his recent Chikatsu-Asuka Tumuli Museum built in the southern part of the Osaka prefecture.

Ando is at once both an unequivocally modern architect and a figure whose values lie embedded in some archaic moment; in a world that while it is divested of every nostalgia, lies nonetheless committed to some other time before the machinations of progress had turned into an ever present nemesis. Like Brancusi he aspires to a transcendent modernity, to a dematerialization under light, to a concrete that paralleling Brancusi's polished steel, turns momentarily into silk. It is a sense of lexes that resists all spectacular apparatus of techno-scientific display, in order to testify to a moment that lies outside the constant threat of commodification.

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[1] Tadao Ando, "The Wall as Territorial Delineation," *The Japan Architect,* June 1978, pp 12 & 13.

[2] *Jinichiro Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows,* translated by Thomas J. Harper & Edward G. Sidensticker, Leete's Island Books, New Haven, CT 1977.

[3] Tadao Ando, "From Self Enclosed Modern Architecture Towards Universality," *The Japan Architect,* May 1992, p 9.

[4] Tadao Ando, "Shintai and Space," *Precis 7.* The Journal of the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Rizzoli 1986, sec. 16.</p>



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