

A Passage through Modernism: The Art of Architecture Reimagined by Tadeo Ando

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Abstract

In the art of Tadeo Ando's (b. 1941) architecture Eastern thought meets Western Modernism (especially Le Corbusier and Louis I. Kahn). Ando's use of simple modern materials such as concrete, glass, and steel contributes a balanced and humanizing dimension to these media where each building must be "of" the place where it is built. Ando is acutely aware of the need of humanity for buildings which compliment nature and peaceful contemplation. His use of light and water compliment his overall philosophy of architecture. The paper concludes that Ando's work is both poetic and inspiring and bodes well for the near future explorations of modernism and what it is becoming.

Keywords: Art, Architecture, Modernism, Contemporary, Japan, Global, Harmony, Environment

1. Introduction

"...nature is being destroyed by humans. There should be a harmony between the artificial world, the natural environment, and human beings" (Ando, 2009).

"Architecture as we know is frozen music, light and water add to its poetry. It is important for architecture to touch the spirit" (Ando and Rose, 2004).

In a world where a small number of global stars dominate contemporary architecture (not without good reason in most cases), Tadeo Ando (b. 1941) has quietly emerged as one of the preeminent architects of our time by innovating and carefully elaborating Modernist architectural form and materials. During the 1960s Ando taught himself to be an architect while devising his core values which have remained firm against kitsch, trends, and some of the excesses of the postmodern architectural scene. In 1995 he received architecture's highest honour: The Pritzker Prize. Important to his approach has been a successful effort to humanize the use of modern materials (especially concrete, glass, and steel). Ando comes from a philosophical tradition in which it is understood that objects bear an expressive power and that we must consider what power we will bestow upon the object of architecture. He is also an idealist to the extent that he accepts that the world can be changed by architecture and his work reminds us that most architecture operates against its surroundings including the very site where it is built.

Ando's buildings, which are deeply influenced by Western Modernist approaches (Le Corbusier and Louis I. Kahn in particular), also draws on rich currents of Japanese philosophy. Ando said he traced the drawings of Le Corbusier's early period in a book so many times that the pages turned black (Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995). It was probably Le Corbusier's use of concrete which played the most formative role in Ando's architectural trajectory. Like Japanese philosophy his architecture was attracted to Western (Modernist) ideas but as is so often the case in Japan these elements surface in his work in a manner adapted to a Japanese way of seeing. In Ando's hands a material like bare concrete (which can be deployed with great brutality), becomes an object to encourage contemplation and introspection and plays a central role in his works which aim at psychic balance and spiritual peace – highly valued in Japanese philosophy.

Water and the incorporation of the natural environment of the space also play a fundamental role in completing many of his works. His blend of Eastern and Western ideas is careful and complex and is woven into his understanding that mind and body are not separate entities. The results are not architectural monsters which appear as if they have arrived from another world, but extremely artistic, minimalist (even if very large), works which consider carefully the human spirits which will occupy them.

2. Of the Space

“You cannot simply put something new into a place. You have to absorb what you see around you, what exists on the land, and then use that knowledge along with contemporary thinking to interpret what you see” (Ando, 2002b).

Ando’s *Chikatsu-Asuka Historical Museum* (Osaka, Japan) makes the user of the structure aware, at almost every moment, of the presence of the natural environment into which the large (6,000 square meter floor area) museum has been carefully constructed. Even when fulfilling more mundane contracts such as his four series of houses (Rokko Project I, II, III, IV) it is trees, grass and the green space generally which are empathized by the buildings. Rokko I, for example [Kobe, Japan], used a sixty degree slope surrounded by dense forest to build a housing complex [20 units] where traditional housing could not be accomplished. The result is a series of minimalist spaces of peace for living within a complex which offers a panoramic view of the Bay of Osaka. Ando’s *Museum of Wood*, (Hyogo, Japan [1994]; *Nariwa Museum* (Okayama [1994], *Oyamazaki Villa Museum* (Kyoto [1995]; *Awaji-Yumebutai Complex and Gardens* (Hyogo [1999]); *Studio Karl Lagerfeld* (Biarritz [2001]); and the *Chikatsu Asuka Historical museum*, are masterworks of building where it is clearly understood that the structure is “of” rather than “on” a significant natural space. It is impossible to experience most of his works without being made highly aware of the connectivity between mind and body and the mutual longing great architecture and a sumptuous setting have for each other. Louis Kahn referred to this a seeking to understand what the space wants to be (Kahn in Latour, 1991:344, see also Coulter, 2008). For Ando the architect has failed unless s/he fully considers the possibilities of the land/water scape and its role in the experience of the building.

Ando’s desire for the building to be “of” the space often takes him into a subterranean architecture as in the *Chikatsu-Asuka Museum* where about one-half of the building is underground. Ando’s use of subterranean space is a natural outcome of his delight with Louis Kahn’s architecture especially the use of light. Working under the surface allows Ando to preserve the maximum amount of impact of the natural green space surrounding the building while drawing on Kahn’s ability to bring light underground. Kahn’s mastery of the use of concrete surfaces to reflect light and his use of light shafts reached its apex at his *Salk Institute* (1965) which Ando visited during his own formative period in the 1960s.

Often Ando has designed his projects in such a way as to have the light play on the surface of the most modern of surfaces (bare concrete) to lend to them a humanizing and softening quality as in his *Koshino House II* (1986). Ando’s concrete functions as both structure and surface and the softness he achieves has to do with his demand for watertight wooden forms during the pouring of the concrete. He leaves all the bolt holes and marking of the forms on the finished walls which he prefers not to be plastered, polished or disguised in any way. This also reflects Ando’s admiration for carpentry and wood working, even at the lowly level of making forms for concrete walls. His smaller buildings are not particularly expensive to make but they provide their users (by design) with a deep richness of character (Ando, 2009).

In *Koshino House II* Ando’s ability to lend to the house its own expressive power comes to the fore in the use of light at night. At *Koshino House I* we are reminded that, in the poetic sense, objects not only receive but give off their own light.

At *Koshino House* the inner world of the house becomes part of the experience of its exterior (and grounds) and vice-versa through the interplay of light and green space. Kenneth Frampton has appositely noted that Ando’s buildings “flow out into the surrounding landscape” (Frampton, 1995). This has to do, says Ando, with the architectural traditions of Japan: “...you have to look at Japanese culture and its relationship with nature ... this is the reason you have a very high degree of connection between the inside and outside in architecture” (2002b). Ando speaks to the importance of “engawa” a Japanese word which refers to the “ambiguous space which exists between the inside and the outside” (Ando in Curtis, 2000).

Ando’s rigorously geometric approach to architecture allows him to work with light with the mastery which Kahn achieved. This is especially the case in Ando’s library of the *ShibaRyotaro Memorial Museum* (Osaka, 2001) where the windows above ground direct natural light to the sunken part of the library. At Ando’s *Water Temple “Hompuku-Ji”* (Hyogo, 1991) the architect places the source of light behind the altar (as in his famous Church of the Light) in allowing it to lend a warm glow to the red interior. “*Hompuku-Ji*” is also one of his more successful endeavors into subterranean architecture.

Ando's *Church of the Light* is a remarkable combination of traditional Christian iconography with Ando's minimalist inclinations. According to Christian mythology Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the light". Here Ando deploys the most significant symbol of Christianity to illuminate the dark spaces of the church. It is, in my mind, the finest example of a Christian church to be built since Le Corbusier's *Church at Ronchamp*, France. Of his *Church of the Light* Ando has said: "in it the light is the essence of the building" (Ando and Rose, 2004). As for the minimalist nature of the church Ando remarked; "if you give people nothingness, they can ponder what can be achieved from that nothingness" (2002b).

Ando also worked masterfully to bring light down and into his *Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum* (1992, Kagawa). This museum, along with Chikatsu-Asuka, represents the apogee of Ando's subterranean environmental Modernism as adapted to a particular natural space. Ando came dangerously close to perfection in this building which incorporates the natural environment at seemingly every turn while offering dramatic places of contemplation on the ocean and surrounding green space into which the bulk of the museum is submerged. Here as elsewhere inside and outside of the building are woven together through the use of extensive walkways which deepen the experience of the building in/on the site. Light shafts and carefully planned solar reflection through windows just above ground level serve to deliver light to the exhibition spaces. A hotel, which is also mostly underground, accompanies the museum and offers marvelous ocean and mountain vistas from its rooms.

Ando sees it as one of his roles to get past the Modernist logic of function in order to deal with the needs of people: "people always relate to the spirit of a place, or to the spirit of the time. Without this spirit Modernist architecture cannot fully exist. Since there is often a mismatch between the logic and the spirit of Modernism, I use architecture to reconcile the two" (2002b).

3. Water

"For me, water adds to the relaxation effect of the building – architecture should promote comfortable movement through the building" (Ando and Rose, 2004).

"There is a role and function for beauty in our time. In Japan it may be translated into the concept of "Uskuji", which also means beautiful life, that is, how a person lives – his or her innermost life. It's something beyond appearance or what meets the eye ... there has to be an overlap between beauty and intellect" (2002b).

Water is often important to Ando's architecture in one of two ways. When the site is alongside (or above) a large body of water (as at Naoshima or his *Toto Seminar House*) Ando incorporates the sea into his building. When working inland Ando often uses water to add to the peacefulness and contemplation of the site. This is especially evident at his *Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art* located near Kahn's *Kimball Art Museum*. Ando's sense of precision and balance combined with a commitment to the human use of the space is very evident at Fort Worth where the pond completes the building. Even when working abroad Ando's adaptations of Western Modernism are situated within Japanese philosophy and each of his works is the outcome of his own complex process of adaptation given what the site most desires to be – in the case of Fort Worth there is also an attempt to deal with one of the more complex problems of the contemporary – the relation of the real and the virtual: "The Museum at Fort Worth appears to float on the water – the reflection is where the virtual and the real building meet" (Ando and Rose, 2004). Ando, like many contemporary thinkers, prefers the meeting place of the real and the virtual building to remain enigmatic and his use of water here serves his goal well. Ando says of his museum at Fort Worth: "I envision this building as a swan floating on water" (Ando in Auping, 2002).

In his Naoshima Museum Ando managed to combine these effects as this museum on the inland Sea of Japan also contains a waterfall and a central pond at the hotel complex. Even when Ando is working with a site well above the water (as in his *Toto Seminar House*) the building is sunken into its environment as much as it operates on top of the site.

Toto, like Naoshima ranks highly among not only Ando's larger masterworks but those of recent contemporary architecture. When working with smaller building sites Ando has also proven himself to be a master of the incorporation of the sea into his houses as in his *4 x 4 House*.

I can think of no better example of the use of architectural restraint in order to focus attention on light and water than *4 x 4 House*. The four story construction maximizes the potential of a small space near a road and railway line and the beautiful ocean vista. On the ocean-side of the top floor (dining room) the wall facing the sea is entirely made of glass (four separate sections).

Ando says of his architecture that it is the result of two colliding forces: 1) the part that comes from logical reasoning and, 2) the part that is created by and for the senses (Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995). Logical reasoning deals with the real while the senses demand the architects imagination (Ando, 1995). *4 x 4 House* is a striking example of the rigorous use of geometry in the interest of an architecture which focuses attention on the view to the extent that the building becomes part of the sea. In other works: *House in Chicago*, the *Komyo-Ji Temple*; the *Nariwa Museum*; the *Sayamaike Historical Museum*; the *Water Temple Hompuku-Ji*; the *Awaji-Yumebutai Complex and Gardens*; *Suntory Seminar House*; *Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art*; and his *Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum*, Ando draws on not only the effect of water but of sound in planning his works. As he has said:

“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 the forces in an area to restore the unity between house and nature (light and wind) that was lost in modernizing houses in the 1950s and 1960s” (Ando cited in Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995).

An important part of the experience of *4 x 4 House* is not only the light and water but also the sound of the wind which is almost constant and often quite strong in this location.

4. Light

“In all my works light is an important controlling factor” (Ando cited in Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995).

It is important to stress that Ando’s concern for light informs all of his works and has done so since his first work – his *Row House* at Azuma (1976). Ando is again indebted to the architecture of Louis Kahn for his understanding of light.: “Louis Kahn used light as the architect’s best material, his buildings are like oasis... What I learned from Louis Kahn is a sense of order in the use of light” (Ando and Rose, 2004) [for more on Louis Kahn’s use of light see Coulter, 2008].

In his work Ando often uses water to reflect light in order to encourage a sense of tranquility (see Ando in Peltason and Ong-Yan, 2010:182 ff.).

In his *Row House at Azuma* Ando also drew on Kahn’s ability to make a building of stark contradictions. The front of the house at street level is very plain and non-descript – yet when one enters the light pours into the sumptuous interior from above. From in front of the house, looking upon its concrete face and lone tall doorway one cannot fathom what lies in wait on the other side of the door. The building is so different from its facade and from the street that passage inside its front door is akin to entering a secret contemplative space.

5. Ando After 2000

“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 ... the interior must be especially full and satisfying” (Ando cited in Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995).

Tadeo Ando has spent the past four decades adapting some of the better ideas and harsh materials of Western Modernism to his unique practice of Japanese architecture and philosophy. The bulk of his work (with its deep respect for both the human user of his buildings and the natural spaces they occupy) has led him to develop what may be best characterized as Japanese environmental Modernism. Usually he succeeds in placing a significant portion of a building under the earth while taking care to deliver natural light to these subterranean spaces. His use of concrete, the most ubiquitous element of Modernism is masterful. When we consider the harshness and brutality of the application of concrete and steel and glass in 20th century architecture Ando points to the possibility of more widespread gentle applications in the future. As he told an interviewer: “concrete is the most representative material of the 20th century” (Ando and Rose, 2004).

The thickness of his concrete walls (an important defense against earth-quakes in Japan) contributes the materiality of his buildings: “At times walls manifest a power that borders on the violent. They have a power to divide space, transfigure space, and create new domains. Walls are the most basic elements of architecture, but they can also be the most enriching” (Ando cited in Pritzker Prize Committee, 1995).

Ando’s work under the surface of the earth has continued with his many projects in the new millennium perhaps nowhere more artfully than in his *Bernes House* (Japan, 2006). Here and elsewhere (such as his *21-21 Design Building*) he continues to integrate the natural environment into the finished work.

Finally, Ando's practical theorizations on light in offices, museums and in houses sets him apart from many architects today. He is happy to be in Louis Kahn's debt for this aspect of his work as he is Le Corbusier's explicitly modern ideas concerning interior space and materiality, solidity, and tactility. He has often combined these with the positive Japanese notion of emptiness even when working in the object oriented West. Ando's rich and varied works are often amazingly complex yet exude a quality of simplicity in a way which points to a particularly Japanese philosophical take on the dual nature of architecture. Ando continues to pursue the enigmatic points of contact between the human spirits who occupy his works, their natural surroundings, and the buildings themselves. His work is one of psychic balance as it is one of equilibrium with nature.

Among Ando's recent gifts to architecture, theory and philosophy have been his unique solution to the question of what to do with "Ground Zero" in New York. Against the terrorist action and the military response to it Ando proposed that a small section of a massive subterranean globe sit on the site. This project, which will never be built, would also have spoken softly against the wild and callous architecture of downtown Manhattan – precisely the kind which now actually stands in this location. From the site the entire globe could not be seen but could be understood by thought from the exposed surface (a park for contemplation).

Ando proposed a singularity for the very site of what had been the world's greatest experiment in clone architecture – the lapse of architectural reason that was the World Trade Centre (Baudrillard and Nouvel [2000] 2002:4). Ando's proposal for the site forces us to wonder how it is that architecture exists beyond the real. Ando's project also provided a place for people to consider how the world's peoples were going to live together in the age of terrorism. He feels that another building on this site would contribute nothing to that necessity. "I think that what we need now is the courage to construct nothing more" (Ando, 2002a).

As has long been the case with Ando his solution to the problem of architecture at ground zero has been unique. He seems to have never believed in universal principles being applicable to all situations given his respect for the environment, light and those who will use his buildings. Against those who sought a military response to the events of September 11, 2001 Ando wanted to provide a park, which the exposed part of his globe was to be, to remind people that New York and America are part of the world.

6. Conclusion

"I want the surface to disappear and become a space – a space that stimulates thinking. If the surface does not speak too loudly, then the people will begin to think about themselves. They bring the meaning to the space" (Ando in Auping, 2002).

Adaptations of Western Modernism have been an integral part of the work of many leading contemporary Japanese architects (including Arata Isozaki, Kenzo Tange, Kunio Maekawa). Each of these architects developed his own strong style of the adaptation of Modernism to Japanese philosophy. Among these Ando stands out for his rejection of brutalism and kitsch. Ando's is an architecture which stands alone among all leading contemporary architects for its sensitivity to the natural environment of the site and the need for the spiritual well-being of the humans who will interact with the site and the building. In an age given over to architectural unreason (city after city dominated by office towers) Ando has so far not designed a monster. Perhaps it is because Ando is an autodidact that he was able to abandon so much of architectural history (save some key insights from the best of Modernism) and to offer up such a consistent and strong series of works. The most important thing he incorporates into his architecture has been his own intellectual sensitivities to place and space.

Tadeo Ando's architecture deserves the praise and numerous awards it receives as well as its growing influence on younger architects because it is poetically inspiring despite the very prosaic times in which he has worked. It is an architecture which seems to flow from its human source in the same way as does thought itself.

He has succeeded through his ability to mediate between the real and the imagination as his thoughts on the future of Japanese architecture indicate:

"Cites in Japan or Asia are different from those in Europe, particularly in climate and culture. I think about the possibility of building an Asian city or buildings which have the style of the West, but suitable to Asian climate and culture. What I came up with was a big forest over Tokyo Bay – a forest on the sea. There is reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay... I'd like people in Japan to recall the importance of nature. I'd also like to change the way of thinking among Japanese people by connecting the Imperial Palace and the Ministerial District by using a forest.

I'm expecting it would create a breeze running through the forest. This would make Tokyo a unique city with distinctly Asian features" (Ando, 2009).

Ando has been working on this project for over a decade. It is no surprise to see that Ando is at work today in many places around the world including Japan. Since 2005 he has won competitions in New York and Massachusetts in the USA, Mexico, Hungary, Italy and France.

"As an architect this is all I can do – to create a dialogue among diverse cultures, histories, and values. We can learn so much from each other and our past" (Ando in Auping, 2002).

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