

## Virgin Islands in the Urban Chaos

The serene, austere, ascetic, thick-walled, geometrical buildings of Tadao Ando won the first Carlsberg prize for architecture in 1992 – the largest culture prize in the world, the 'Nobel prize' of architecture. Confronted by concrete hardness, starkness and colourlessness, the brewery jury could hardly fail to pause for a closer look. A pause for contemplation in the ceaseless flux of the metropolis. A pause for reflection on the eternal, amid the volatile images of here and now.

Tadao Ando tries to evoke a fundamental spiritual experience in the users of his buildings. 'The immaterial and formless elements, like the wind, the sun, the sky and the landscape, are transected and appropriated by the walls, which are the powers of the world inside. (...) Organic and continually changing nature must be captured by geometric forms that give it a spiritual dimension.' ★ 'I hope my spaces will put down sturdy roots in a real earth of human life, and that they will embrace human existence in its utmost diversity.' ★ His architecture manifests itself as a stubborn attempt to cool off the overheated machinery of the city. Thus it provides everyone, from the apologist of progress to the apocalyptician, with explosive material for discussion. One could almost see Tadao Ando as an envoy of the Virgin Islands, visiting the high-tech cyberindustrial world to attest to the charms of his homeland.

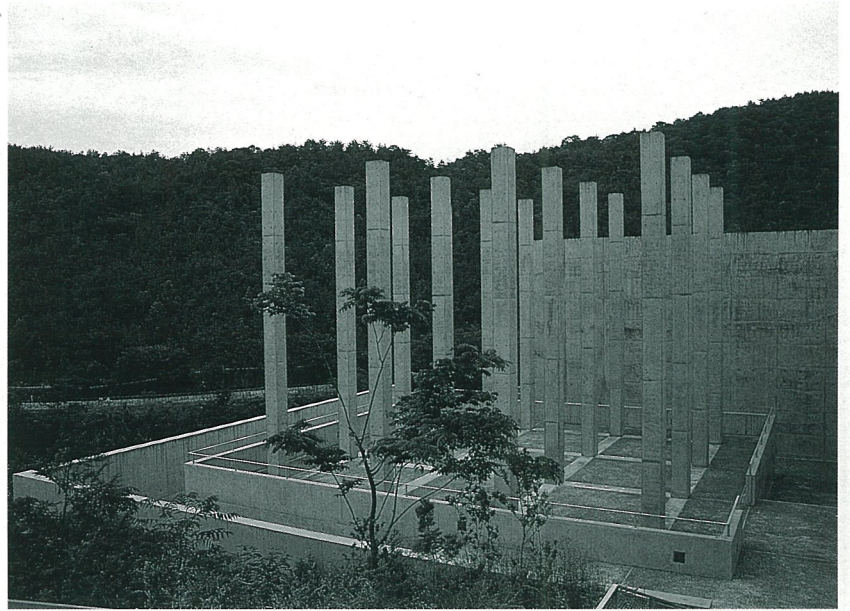
As a self-taught noble savage, he reaches an unequalled mastery in the architecture of serenity. His buildings are sanctuaries in which one can silently rediscover the inner truths of existence, immaculate islands of calm in the tortured agglomeration of screaming haste. Through his fusion of organic nature, monastic asceticism, pantheistic imagery and existentialist pondering, Tadao Ando enriches architecture with work that can be interpreted as a *testimonium paupertatis*, in several senses. Ando's buildings lay a finger on the spiritual poverty of the chaotic metropolitan pulse. But the buildings are themselves parsimonious, naked and ascetic in appearance. And nature, which plays such a prominent role in this architecture, attracts concern nowadays on account of its straitened circumstances. The best way to combat poverty, according to Ando, is with poverty.

### Laconic Architecture

The essential thing about poverty is that you have to experience it *physically*. And Ando's architecture offers ample opportunity for that physical experience. The space, *ma* in Japanese, is physically and spiritually interpreted in this work, and obtains its character though a subtle game of continually changing incident light and geometrical proportions. It is not just the emptiness between the walls, but also that between successive events. Hence the space always forms a bridge between the Actual and the Possible. In the Row House (Osaka, 1976) this is made completely clear by the alternation of inside-outside-inside in a single house. When you wish to go from one part to the other, you have to go through the open air, with its associated experiential verities.

★ Ando, Tadao, quoted in Bertrand, Pascal, 'Ruimtelijke Strategie', *Archis* 11 (1991), p. 21.

★ Ando, Tadao, quoted in Bertrand, Pascal, op. cit. p. 22.



Children's Museum, Himeji, 1990

Besides being a bridge, a space is also a place. Ando creates a hermetic microcosm, circumscribed by massive walls. Often you can only access it via a long passageway which prepares you, as it were, for the atmosphere you are about to encounter. This *rite of passage* is meant as purification, and is accompanied by a little physical discomfort: you have to stay outside for a bit longer than you would like.

Ando's use of materials is also fundamental. His concrete, made using the latest technological methods, is generally strong and pure. Sometimes it is like silk, rough and soft at the same time. In the city, the bunker-like walls function as ramparts against the metropolitan chaos. Inside the building, the elementary predominates. The walls cast you back on yourself. In country locations, Ando assimilates features of the natural landscape (or what is left of it) into the building by making interior and exterior intersect, and by creating a long *promenade architecturale*. The elements of light, wind, water, sky and earth are written into the experiential scenario. The total impression made by Ando's work, which has shown considerable consistency throughout his career, is one of a supremely laconic architecture where silence and meditation go hand in hand. He offers a physical framework in which this can take place – a matrix for people, their movements and their gaze.

Tadao Ando hopes to offer us something more than an artificial solace. He aims to rediscover the essential elements of the 'human sojourn' that have been left behind in the pell-mell economic growth. These elements are, in his view, as follows: the primary relation with nature and with materials; the minor discoveries people make in their daily living environment; the pleasure that can be introduced into a simple lifestyle by a creative intervention. He reduces space, material and light to a naked essence, a union that coincides with emptiness. This emptiness must not be dismissed as nihilistic, according to Ando, but should be understood as the core of existence to which everything in life is related. This can only be reached through a spiritual experience.

These works, with their intangible qualities and poetic images generated in actual experience, eventually transcend the level of visual or verbal communication and reach the deeper subconscious regions of perception whereby we are compelled to approach them through an internal or intuitive understanding while being immersed in them. At this deepest level they do not stand for anything; they are only themselves hermetically closed within ourselves. This is a primordial ontological condition, a point where architec-

ture steps out of space and time, and the 'terror of history' is suspended. Here the past as much as the future is real and permanently exists. At its best, the new Japanese architecture is the result of poetic inspiration and sentiment rather than a merely problem-solving or scientific analysis; its unique qualities defy quantitative measurement and evaluation.

Botond Bogнар

Whereas Western thought is hinged on individual consciousness, the Japanese have traditionally held a pantheistic view of nature and entrusted consciousness to God, who is seen to dwell in all things of the universe. Accordingly, within an architecture's form a spiritual and invisible something is felt to lie concealed.

Tadao Ando

Like a fortress built in the desert, a wall is not only a protective barrier but a spiritual bridgehead, clearly asserting its presence in the changing flow of the city and rejecting any preconceived notion of community.

Tadao Ando



Literary Museum, Himeji, 1990



Row House, Osaka, 1976.

### Reticence and Charisma

There are many ways towards an understanding of the spirituality that Tadao Ando wishes to serve in his work. Thus we could concentrate exclusively on the typically Japanese references. For example, the paradoxically prominent visual sobriety of Ando's architecture can easily be seen in the light of Zen philosophy. The outsider might expect this sobriety to arouse an experience of 'nothingness', but its real intention is a sense of totality. Zen aims to bring man into a state where he feels united with reality. Zen art thus never aspires to represent, but to present nature as it is. The artistic medium must remain as invisible as possible in order to maximise the pure experience. Or, as Ando himself formulates these ideas in relation to his bare walls, 'they become abstract (...) and approach the ultimate limit of space. Their actuality is lost, and only the space they enclose gives a sense of really existing'. ★

Another Japanese reference: isn't Ando's architecture a petrified *haiku*, the art of omission, poetry in concrete, the expression of an *unmediated* relation with the universe? From a slightly greater distance, the work also seems to be inspired by Shintoism. That is not altogether surprising since there is no clear boundary between Zen and Shintoism. Shinto is a religion that exalts Nature. Because the concepts of good and bad are not really recognised in Shinto, all things in Nature are given the status of *the sublime*. Not only are natural objects deified in this way, but also objects that represent nature. Shinto does not involve anthropomorphism, however – it does not ascribe a human identity to the things it worships. There is no metaphor intended. The holy Mount Fuji always remains the mountain Fuji. Shinto architecture, in line with this thinking, does not attempt to adorn nature but to become one with it. Rather than imposing itself on its surroundings, it conducts itself in sublime harmony with them.

This traditional reticence can also be recognised in Ando's architecture. Therefore it is

★ Ando, Tadao, 'From Self-enclosed Modern Architecture Toward Universality', *The Japan Architect*, May 1982, p. 9.

all the more remarkable that his work is now the focus of so much attention. Ando claims no more than a wish to restore the 'sense of light, wind and rain that is being lost in Japanese cities'. But amid the hectic modernity and rampant chaos of the urban environment, this introversion has acquired the charisma of heroic resistance. Hence the Carlsberg prize.

### Mineralisation of the Soul

Ando recognises his inevitable role as critic. He stresses his wish to support cultural resistance to the juggernaut of modernity. 'I believe that, however anachronistic it may sound, it is important to ask the fundamental question "What is architecture?". The creation of architecture must be a criticism of problems of today. It must resist existing conditions. It is only when one faces up to today's problems that one can really begin to deal with architecture.' ★

Ando's architecture aims, in fact, to enhance the experience of the phenomena of time, place and space; and it pursues this goal by excluding everything that could distract from those phenomena. By taking this approach, he engenders an existential (i.e., in these times, critical) experience whose import is clearly and comprehensively embraced in the Heideggerian *Fundamentalontologie* paradigm, which was introduced into philosophy as a way of taking the criticism of Western civilisation to its extreme. This brings us to a way of comprehending Ando's work that is more familiar to Western thinking. In *The Concept of Time* (1924), a finger exercise for his principle work, *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger proposes that the true nature of *Dasein*, namely the *Sein* part of it, is *Temporality*, which Heidegger interpreted principally as being our capacity to form an image of our own future 'being in the past', i.e. of our own mortality. This image is characterised by a large measure of certainty and a total unsettledness. Heidegger refers

★ Ando, Tadao, quoted in Bretagnolle, Alain, 'The Timeless Message of Nature', *El Croquis* 44, (1990), p. 193.

The real object and the substance of Tadao Ando's architecture is the search for the true essentials through their prototypes or spatial modalities; in other words, the ritual process through which architecture rediscovers and recreates the world from time immemorial. What Ando describes in these three chapels is the ontological and metaphysical relationship which links man to the divine principle; the crystallisation of space proceeding from its transformation through the action of light provokes, in echo of the 'step beyond form', a real, internal transformation. The force of his work resides in both the universality of his objective and the permanence of his object.

Alain Bretagnolle

By introducing nature and changing light into simple geometric forms that are closed off from their urban contexts, I create complex spaces. I inject the extraordinary into what is the most ordinary and familiar of environments, the house, and thereby encourage people to reconsider what is ordinary.

Tadao Ando

Light is the key and the light lights up the forms. And these forms have a power of emotion due to the play of the proportions, the interplay of unexpected, startling relations, but also by the intellectual play of the underlying reasoning – their authentic birth, their ability to last, structure, know-how, hardihood, even temerity, play – of real things that are essential things, the constituent elements of architecture.

Le Corbusier

In being futural in running ahead, the *Dasein* (...) becomes itself; in running ahead it becomes visible as this one singular uniqueness of its singular fate in the possibility of its singular past. What is properly peculiar about this individuation is that it does not let things get as far as any individuation in the sense of the fantastical of exceptional existences; it strikes down all becoming – exceptional. It individuates in such a way that it makes everyone equal. In being together with death everyone is brought into the 'how' that each can be in equal measure; into a possibility with respect to which no one is distinguished; into the 'how' in which all 'what' dissolves into dust.

Martin Heidegger

to 'die Unbestimmtheit der Gewißheit des Vorbei', and resists the rationalist 'bestimmung' of the 'unbestimmte Zeit'. His principal aim is to rescue the authentic moment of certain transience and unsettledness in a universe that is ever further strictured. Heidegger's essay ends with the words: 'Then *Dasein* would be: being questionable'. Only the authentic experience can evince the vulnerability and openness that the present-day city dweller has so lamentably sacrificed.

We can also view Ando's architecture as being an appeal to this kind of stable and the durable experience, as invoking a profounder, almost unchanging existential layer beneath the giddy onrush of historic events that seems to dominate our notion of time. 'My approach to the person who will use these spaces', he says, 'amounts to acting as an intermediary in a deep dialogue between him and architecture, because my spaces transcend theory and appeal to the deepest levels. In other words, my spaces

Sloterdijk, 'healing the wound of time with eternal stone, by mineralisation of the soul'. That is where the unique existential experience enters the public domain, and it is this that gives Ando's architecture its social significance.

#### Reptilism

Admirers claim Ando's work has indisputable social significance. All the same, this architecture is intrinsically rooted in a strategy of rising above social concerns. Society is a temporal matter, whereas man is only capable of rediscovering himself in the universe when forced into introspection, detached from daily concerns. Ando's work is aimed at that individual anchoring in the domain of the presocial. The work remains noncommittal about what has to be achieved beyond that, after reintroduction of a social context. It does not lay itself open to a further explanation because it lacks a nar-



Forest of Tombs, Kumamoto, 1992



Japan Pavilion, Sevilla Expo, 1992

relate to the fundamental aspects of humanity'. ★ Amid the suffocating strictures of Japanese conformism, and at the same time confined by the straightjacket of Western conventionality, Ando thus highlights a fundamental uncertainty of being that in principle leaves room for

★ Ando, Tadao, quoted in Bretagnolle, Alain, op. cit. p. 193.

a different way of doing things. His architecture seems to propose a change of course towards (in the words of Peter Sloterdijk) a world of the still present, away from the world that is still to open. It involves a relaxation of the cramp of modernity, a transition from a resolute vision to an acquiescent vision, allowing oneself to be overtaken by the unreachably nearby instead of chasing after the unreachably far away. His buildings stand for authenticity and durability. They seem to be capable of, referring to Peter

rative quality that can be discussed. It offers no stimulus to take a specific subjective standpoint, and hence no invitation to a dialogue. Representation is rigorously excluded so as to arouse, in its total serenity, something that can best be described as a deep-freeze ontology. The work does not attempt to activate this quiescent, perpetual, deathly conception of existence simply by presenting us with a sign. That would split the world unnecessarily along linguistic lines and thereby plunge us deeper into the ubiquitous entropy of meaning. The architecture of Ando aims to arouse the senses only at a non-linguistic, almost *reptilian* level. It is humourless, cold-blooded, acortical. The message imparts itself and we have no need of a cerebral language centre.

You may well wonder what this strategy has to offer in the public domain. Even though

I think the task for architects is to provide environments that in some way confront the sensibility in which we live.

Peter Eisenman

To gaze at the river made of time and water. And recall that time itself is another river.

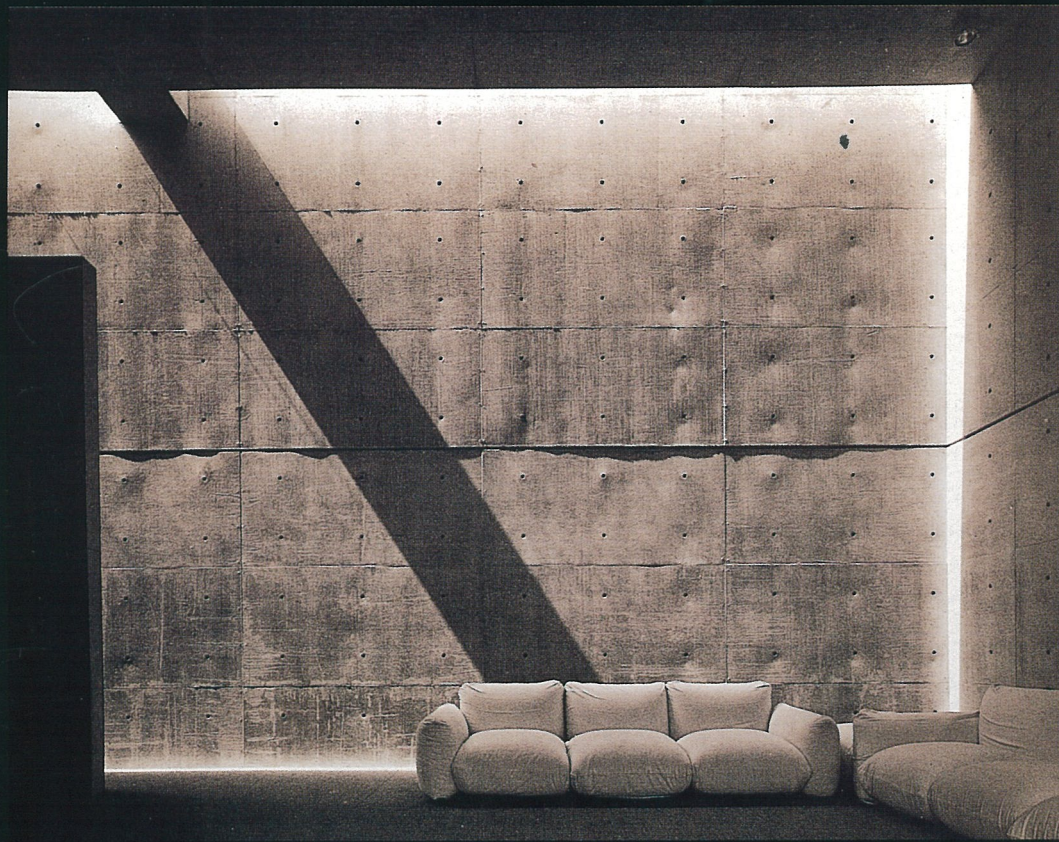
Jorge Luis Borges

The concrete covering vanishes under the action of the light and the space then oscillates between the visible and the invisible, the opaque and the transparent, it leads from shadows to light, i.e., in a spiritual sense from the sensible to the intelligible, from imperfection to perfection. This negation of constructed space aimed at replacing it with the simple idea of space modifies the perception of duration and operates a fixation on time in space, i.e., a spatialisation of time.

Alain Bretagnolle

In you, my spirit, I measure time; you I measure, as I measure time. Do not cross my path with the question: How is that? Do not mislead me into looking away from you through a false question. Do not obstruct your own path with the confusion of what may concern you yourself. In you, I say repeatedly, I measure time; the transitory things encountered bring you into a disposition which remains, while those things disappear. The disposition I measure in present existence, not the things that pass by in order that this disposition first arise. My very finding myself disposed, I repeat, is what I measure when I measure time.

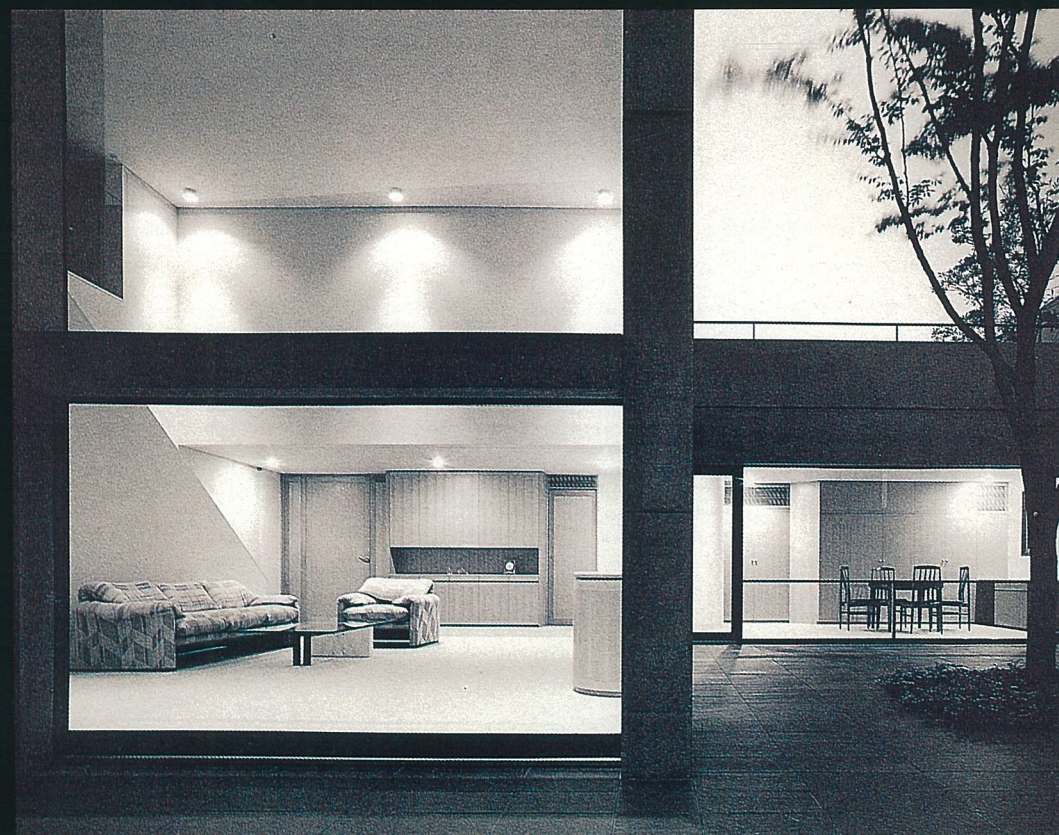
St. Augustine



Kidosaki House, single family house,  
Tokyo, 1986



Zen Garden



Koshino House, single family house,  
Ashiya, 1984

Ando's architecture succeeds in staging – and sometimes actually invoking – a spiritual experience, its minimalism threatens to succumb to deaf-mutism. Architecture must naturally generalise in order to answer to the needs of society at large. It can only express itself in broad terms and can never be as subtle as writing or speech. But perhaps the deliberate degradation of its expressive capacities to a level of bare tectonic substantialism constitutes all too small a contribution to a critical counter-culture. Ando's architecture continually runs the danger of losing contact with the object of criticism, the madness of modernity. Unfortunately, architecture that says no more than enough is liable to say too little.

The main requirement that the nature of the message here places on the architecture, viewed as a medium, is simply that it must be a thing in the world, subject to experience. The signified and the signifier may merge here into a (literally) material basis; but the basis is so primitive that nobody could conceivably object to it or be inspired by it to even the faintest stirrings of a political programme. Admittedly, the architecture's geometry, its terseness and the brutalist use of materials, generate a sense of absolute conviction, but at the same time you are thrown into total confusion over the question of 'What next?' It is concerned with *being* and not with *doing*, with non-historic time as a modality of being but not with time as a historic material you can do something with. Ando's durable contents are minimal in the programmatic sense. Perhaps that is why they are so perfectly at home in the atavistic medium that architecture, in its tactile guise, has always been.

#### Time-out

Just as we breathe without thinking, Ando seems to wish us to undergo his architecture without mental reflection. In the full spirit of the Shinto and Zen traditions, immersion in the architecture must be total and not distracted by contemplation of the experience itself. By the same token, we are not expected to muse on matters such as wealth or poverty. We are only truly poor when we no longer realise that we are so. At that point, a remarkable Zen paradox comes into operation, one which is clearly visible in Ando's portfolio of clients. For if we no longer realise that we are grindingly poor, it is equally possible for us to be oblivious to the fact that we are nauseatingly rich. The monastic asceticism of Ando's work is paradoxical in relation to the wealth of its occupants. In Zen, experiencing the fullness of life may be preferred above self-awareness, and sometimes there can be a good reason for it. So should we fail to forget our wealth and continue to feel pangs of guilt, Ando's architecture may offer a useful remedy: a means for daily penance, as we are forced to endure the cold and rain on our way from one space to another. These ideas will surely not be foreign to Ando, considering the background of some of his clients, including the Church. It is noticeable how, as Japan's economy prospers, Ando's entry rituals increase in length.

Marx's observation that 'all that is solid melts into air', Baudrillard's 'death struggle of reality' – Ando can only be commended for distancing himself from such scenarios. He aims to offer mankind an authentic experience, a benchmark in a world where things are all too fuzzy. This attempt to pin humanity down to a fundamental experience, with



Henny van der Steen-Schakenraad, *With money you can be everywhere*, 1989.

the intention of offering a shield against the dehumanising logic of its own culture, has developed into something of a tradition for a certain critical tendency that operates from the periphery of the modern world. There are countless intellectual heavyweights in that fringe who have sought and still seek a way out of that predicament described by Max Weber as a 'disenchantment of the world' – a predicament where practically anything can be achieved by rational operation while not even a fragmentary moral basis apparently remains to help answer questions such as Tolstoy's 'What shall we do and how shall we live?' Culture's efforts to make life easier have become a burden too heavy to be borne.

But perhaps Ando's paradigm shift, confined as it is to an impressive series of architectural accomplishments, does not have enough to offer the world at large. It would be far from fanciful to suggest that the serenity of Ando's architecture is ultimately not so much creative as recreative: that it offers a brief and refreshing time-out from the headlong pursuit of higher corporate profits, no more than a sanctuary for the status quo. Here, in fact, Ando's architecture touches on questions that are outside the competence of the architect. What, with the wisdom of the Virgin Islands, can he teach us about the space we should reserve for peace and quiet, about the cultural options that will cultivate that tranquillity and give it meaning? Is there really any prospect of the re-enchantment not just of architecture, but of the world?

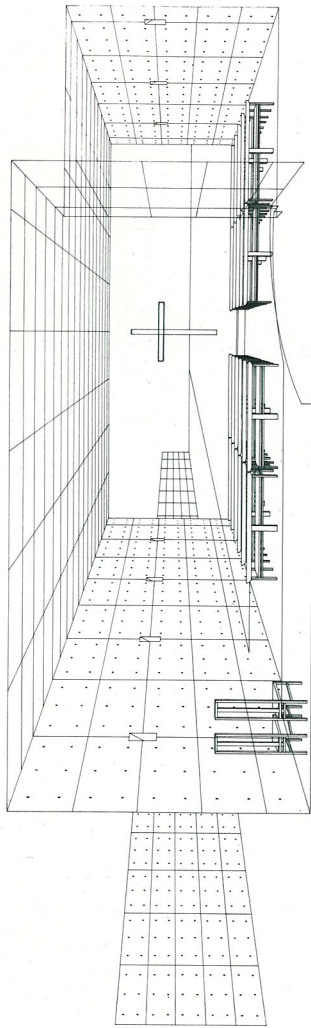
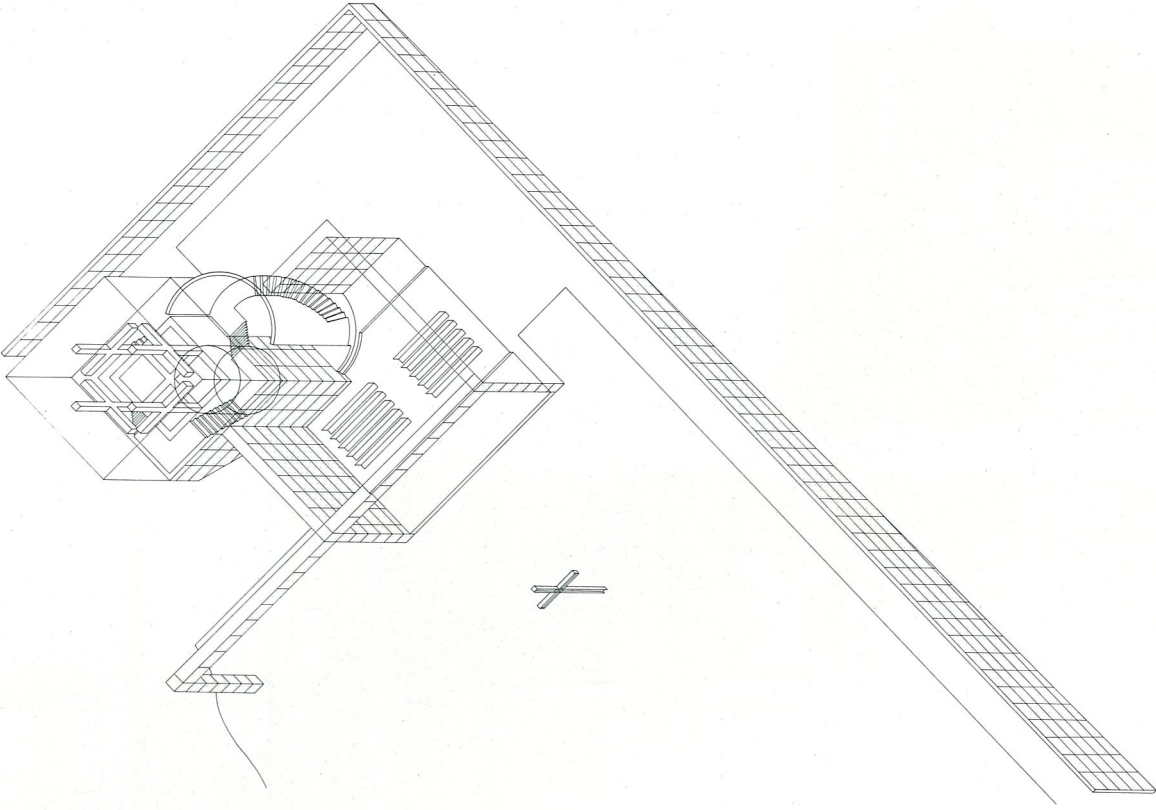
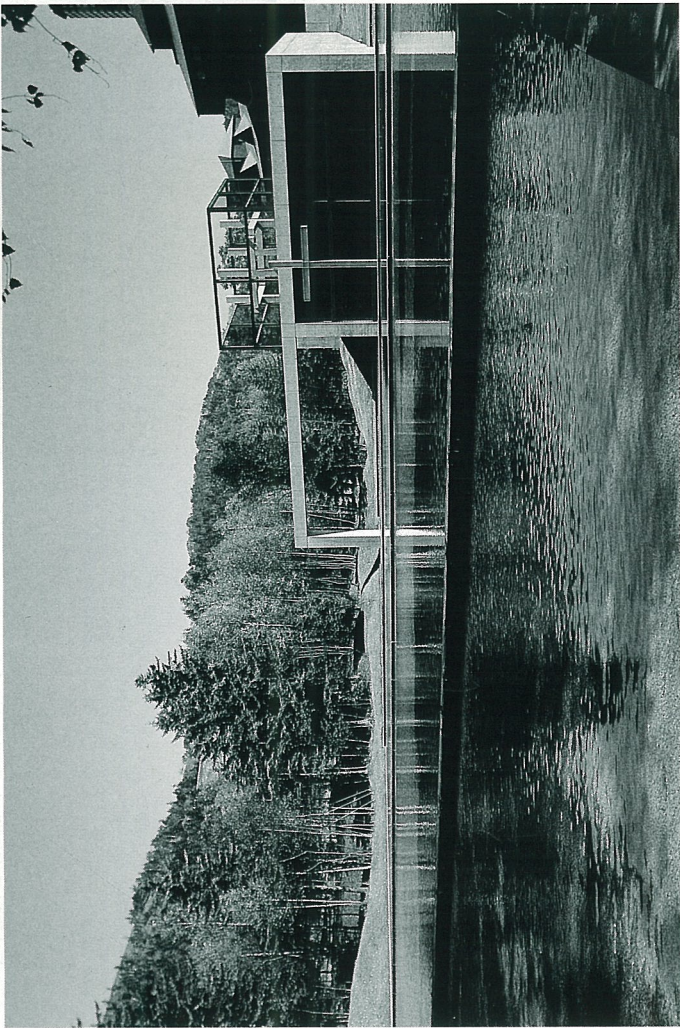
Although the impact of Modernism has declined at the cultural level, its essential functions still remain valid in contemporary society. We have yet to see the end of it. Based on this assumption, I apply Modernist vocabulary and technology to my architecture, overlaid with distinct contextual elements such as regional identity and lifestyles of the users.

Tadao Ando

Regionalists advocate minimalists like Ando, Botta, Siza, etcetera. But minimalism can't articulate regionalism. That's the paradox. To be truly regionalist you have to use enough codes of the region so that the people in the region understand the language you are using. Siza, Ando, they do the reverse. They use international architecture, concrete architecture, abstract architecture, which is decontextualising, deregionalising and which no one in the region can understand. That's why it's anti-regionalism.

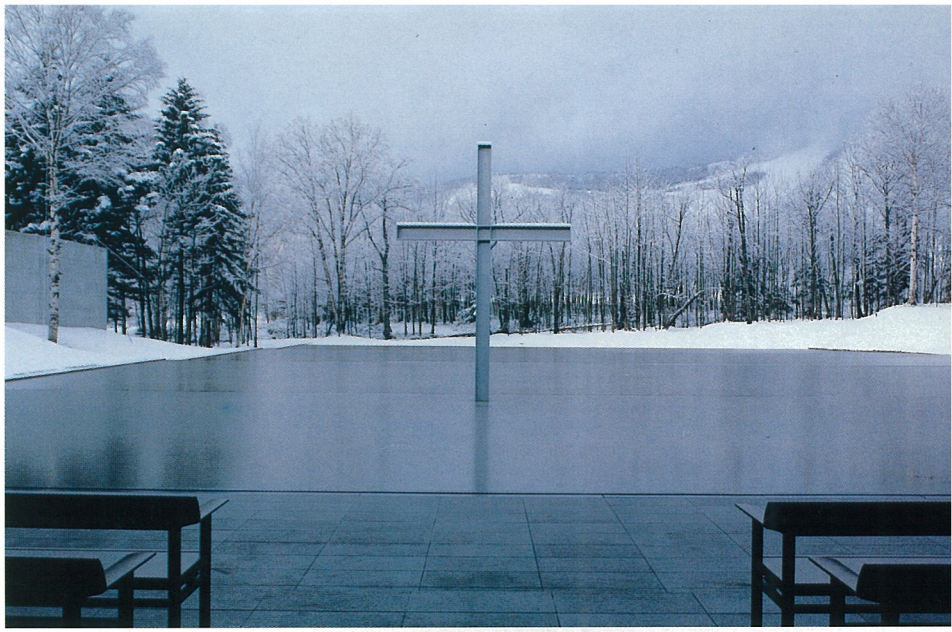
Charles Jencks





The building is situated on a plain in the central mountains north-west of Yubari Range in Hokkaido. The site is surrounded with wild trees, and covered with green foliage in the spring and the summer and with silvery snow in the winter. An artificial lake was built by channelling the water from a nearby stream. In this project, I tried to contemplate in what way the water, as an element of Nature, relates to architecture and human beings. The whole layout comprises two squares having sides of ten metres and fifteen metres respectively which are overlapped and face the artificial lake. Elevated walls extend to surround them in the shape of the letter L. When one approaches from behind the building along the long wall, one only hears the stream but does not see the water. With expectation swelling, one goes through an opening in the wall and turns around by 180 degrees to confront the water. One is directed to an approach encircled by glass walls on all four sides as one climbs up a gentle slope listening to the sound of the stream. One finds oneself within the box of light. The top is open, and four crosses are standing facing each other under the vaults of heaven. Here one communicates with Nature as one

listens to the sound of water, wind and chirping birds. I wished to build an architecture which would appeal not only to the eyes of viewers but to all the five senses of man. One is not oriented in any particular direction when going around the four crosses, and therefore the effect one feels when starting towards the church is intense. One appreciates the surrounding Nature while descending the spiral stairway. Climbing down a dark arc-like passage, one suddenly finds a church, and the sight abruptly opens out toward the lake to reveal another cross. The church houses nine inscribing spheres of five metres in diameter, and is defined with a glass door in front and a lobby in the rear. The lake starts under one's feet and joins a stream ninety metres ahead. The water surface extends in the great Nature in front of the chapel as if it were a mirror surface in the abstract. The scenery which is cut by the frame of the door changes with time and is reflected on the water. In the changes one feels Nature and the sacred at the same time. *Tadao Ando*



Skeet McAuley, Portage Glacier, Alaska, 1990

