

On the Work of Kisho Kurokawa
The Winning Coach is Always Right

Dear Coach,

There is nothing we could possibly say against you. Inclusion in a book about architecture is a mere incident in a career such as yours. You are a *homo universalis* with guaranteed success in everything you do. Your buildings are being built all over the world. Your order portfolio is worth billions. Your media coverage is overwhelming. Yet these are no more than minor details in an oeuvre that stretches much wider than building alone. You are also a town and country planner, a philosopher, an engaged intellectual, a politician and a media personality. Moreover you are a prophet, guiding us towards a future that only you have glimpsed in all its glory. Your work is one great prefiguration of a world that will come some day. We, poor sublunaries, can only follow that road. We can only submit to the visions of Kurokawa the seer, who possesses knowledge of the spirit of the age to come. You are our leader, our omniscient coach. And as we all know, the winning coach is always right. Gainsay is foreign to you. Not only are you God in the deepest of your thoughts, but also in your office, where a perfectly oiled machine hums away to spread your message.

Anyone who wishes to portray you can count on the full cooperation of your disciples. When we contacted your office about material for this chapter, we received everything we asked for literally by return of post. It included a packet of press cuttings about the Kurokawa phenomenon, carefully selected with an eye to our local interests. Later, when we phoned to ask for additional pictorial material, we were treated to unsolicited advice about replacing our fax and computer equipment. Your office is not only faultless in protecting the interests of its master, but it is impeccable in promoting the kind of world he favours: a world in which the machine is totally at the service of a society which is itself so thoroughly perfected that it resembles... a machine. We cannot challenge you with counter-arguments, only with paradoxes in your thinking. We already know the historic price we shall have to pay for that: the eternal reserve bench. As reserves on your winning team, not much else remains to us but to splutter a few remarks about your symbiotic programme. We know that these words will cost us a place in the next match. But we can no longer stay silent; we too want to enjoy a bit of action, while our will is still unbroken.

You call your work 'the most representative expression of the spirit of the twenty-first century'. Who are we to question that?

Symbiosis

What will the next century, the next millennium, bring us? In your opinion, 'symbiosis', a concept which you see as suffusing the world of tomorrow. Hierarchy and discrimination will no longer dominate that world, but a fundamental equality of all cultures of all times, in all places. In this, you have laid the emphasis on the semi-public space, the intermediate zone, as the perfect vehicle for expressing your symbiosis theory. Bringing the street into the confines of your buildings can, in your view, add an 'Asiatic'

There was a need to deconstruct time in order to reconstruct it in a new way that permitted the symbiosis of history with the present and future: in the same way, space had to be deconstructed, too. When the pyramid that placed Western civilisation at the top was dismantled, the cultures of different locales became freefloating units or particles that possessed their own independent values. Once this was achieved, it became possible to assemble or group the many different cultures of the world in any variety of forms.

Kisho Kurokawa

Science in its totality is built upon the distinction between the contingent and the necessary, this being also what distinguishes

between accident and structure. The qualities required for its birth are precisely those that do not form part of vital experience, that remain exterior as if they were independent of phenomena. The characteristic distinctive trait of mythic thought, like a bricolage over the practical plane, is that it builds structures not directly based on other structures, but rather using the residues and debris of phenomena; in English, odd and ends, in French, *des bribes et des morceaux*, the fossil testimony of the history of an individual or a society. Consequently, the relation between diachronic and the synchronic is in a certain sense inverted (...) mythic thought, a bricoleur, builds structures on the basis of phenomena, or better said, the residues of

phenomena, while science, functioning simply in virtue of its own being, creates its own form of phenomena, its own means and results, thanks to structures that it elaborates constantly, and which are its theories and hypotheses.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Diachronicity is, of course, the symbiosis of past, present, and future. One of the basic methods of Metabolism is to overlap and overlay time that is quite clearly and definitely past with the present and the future. (...) I came to strongly advocate the need for Modern Architecture to make contact with the culture and history of its region. Our identity would be obtained not by creating a

false, Western-skewed 'International Style' but by incorporating our history - and our respective histories - into the most advanced contemporary technology, into life in modern society.

Kisho Kurokawa

The second principle of Metabolism is the synchronicity of space. Before the advent of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structuralism, the various cultures of the world were regarded as occupying different levels of development... If culture is viewed in a similar fashion, gradually developing until it approaches that of the West, modernisation must be interpreted by the developing nations as Westernisation, or adopting the culture of the



Disneyland Japan, 1991

principle to Western Modernism. This will help the world regain a 'human' and 'organic' integrity. You have said, 'I seek a new symbiotic architectural space, to reintroduce symbiotic spaces *between* exterior and interior, symbiotic ambivalences between nature and architecture, symbiotic multivalences *between* contradictory elements.'★

In this, you would be breaking with the modernist 'paradigm of clear divisions of space - interior from exterior, environment from building, private from public, historic from contemporary - a strict order based on dichotomy'. The purpose of all this is 'to contain in the self the absolute Other that has hitherto ruled it'. You are engaged in decoding an oppressive society. From this point of view, your work is not only a reflection of a certain cultural configuration, but a prefiguration of a new culture. In the culture of the next century, logocentrism, eurocentrism and phallogocentrism will be things of the past. The political and cultural domination of the Occident will be passé, and an ideologically indifferent 'intercultural' network will embrace the earth. From an 'age of power', whose chief motif has been the economy, we are on the way to an 'age of authority' in which moral principles count again.

Your architecture gives us a foretaste of how this new world will look in practical terms:

★ Kurokawa, Kisho, *Rediscovering Japanese Space*, New York 1988, p. 30.

like a barrel full of contradictions being self-confidently emptied over us. Your work, for instance, is inclusivist only in an iconographic sense. It has no tactility, and the buildings remain hard. Intuitively, we are told to keep out. We also recall the frequent use of Rikyu Grey, a greyish green that in twilight can be perceived as any colour. We recall the Japanese garden on the roof of the Pacific Tower at La Défense, Paris; your own house that conceals a traditional Japanese tearoom in its capsule forms; your building in Melbourne's City Centre, where you placed a gigantic glass dome over an existing brick building; and your Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, with its brick-work base, tiled middle layer and metal top layer as references to the integration of past, present and future. If we are to believe Charles Jencks, the empty central zone of that museum points to 'a functional entrance, a mushroom cloud, a sign of community and a conventional view of the heavens'. Figuration, ornament and mimesis have been granted a new lease of life only now that abstraction has achieved its definitive triumph. As you once said yourself, 'When attempting to transmit history through material objects, first history must be deconstructed into symbols and signs, and these fragments, endowed with a new meaning, must be incorporated into the work as bits of memory.' ★

We can thus extend your theory about temporal diachronicity and cultural simultaneity by an overall semantic anarchy. You have taken Roland Barthes' analysis of Japan as *The Empire of Signs* as your new point of departure – and that in a worldwide practice. Now that the clickety-clack of Japanese shutters has echoed countless times through the universe, substance has disappeared altogether. All that remains is pure image. It is precisely through this lack of substance that syncretism becomes possible. Once again, the winning coach is always right.

Are You Right or Are You Right?

To start with, you have some criticisms of the Modernist-rationalist system of which you yourself make willing intellectual and moral use. Moreover, that system has itself always held the promise of that symbiosis which you now propose as the alternative. In other words, by stripping Modernism of its dream and attacking only the instrumentality of the Modern, and on top of that reserving exactly that dream to figure as your alternative, you leave your argument open to the suspicion of fraud. Perhaps this thought lends a colour to the following argument. Our apologies in advance.

What we so admire in you is your readiness to interpret the profession of architect in such a broad way that your built work represents only a small part of your programme. You have been unwilling to restrict your visions to an institutional discipline. Your work comprises far more than building alone. Your *ars combinatoria* brings you, and hence us too, into contact with politics, philosophy and the mass media. You are trying to take us somewhere ...

To you, the holistic cultural condition of the twenty-first century is inevitable. We are heading irrevocably towards a new, inclusivist culture in which the 'Asiatic' component will be at least as important as the Cartesian thinking that you spurn. Better still, Kurokawa will take over from Descartes. At the same time you see it as your duty to help bring about this age of humanity and mutual respect. Thus you see yourself in the midwife role that we already know so well from the gospel of progress. Thus you are both prophet and redeemer. You predict things and you make them happen too. You herald a new age, and meanwhile you have already made a start on it.

For us, the heirs of rationalism, it is either one or the other. Either you uphold a historicist view of history in which we shall live according to your predictions whether we like it or not; or we listen to your advice and get down to work. Thus we either have free will or we don't.

You have said, 'Modern Architecture's pretensions to universality were little more than a global scheme of Western cultural conquest in disguise.' But exactly the same argument could apply to your own Japanism. Heterogeneity can also be described as a mask for the homogenising processes of Modernism. Hence the ostensibly a-historical is actually as historical as it could possibly be. Just like Fukuyama. Everything is solved within the paradigm of liberalism.

You will no doubt say that objections like these are precisely the kind of weakness you have been fighting for so long, and that the symbiosis concept leaves all that behind it. But then we fail to understand why you still find it necessary to articulate any legitimisa-

Honjin Memorial Museum of Art, Komatsu, 1989



West, and this is in fact the route that many developing countries, including Japan, began to march along.

Kisho Kurokawa

Technology and humanity may have been at odds in the West, but in Japan technology became an extension of humanity to be integrated and internalised, just as material things were considered extensions of the spirit and part of the same undifferentiated existence. In Edo-period Japan, the 'workings' (Karakuri) of technology were not set apart from humanity, but rather humanised as something intrinsically mystical.

Kisho Kurokawa

The search for possible exits from the alienating abstraction and reductionist strategy of Modernism has generally resulted in an even more alienating superficial variety and in the ideologically manipulated yet finally empty rhetoric of largely commercially oriented Post-Modern architecture. This reactionary neo-conservative movement repudiates not only the faults and mistakes, but also the achievements and originally critical attitude of avant-garde Modernism. Instead it propagates pastiche, pop or pseudohistorical forms, often only as dress over optimised and utilitarian structures that have been engineered strictly according to the dictates of efficient production and operation.

Botond Bogнар

We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in an ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene.

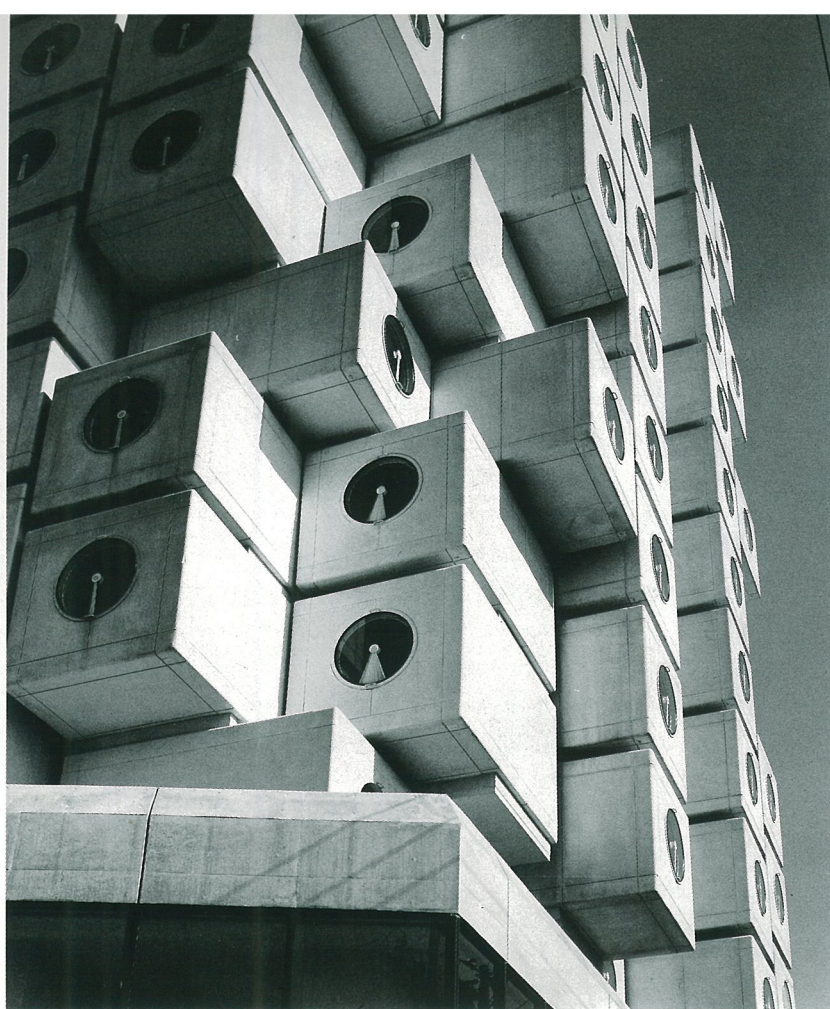
Jean Baudrillard

Architecture and urban planning must serve to facilitate not only function, but meaning, too. (...) Clusters of signifiers divorced from meaning now produce *simulacres* of meaning or pseudo-meanings, which colour and humanise spaces with humour, wit, speculation, and conviviality. The metamorphosis of free-floating signifiers and *simulacres* creates realms of 'atmosphere' or 'mood'. These poetic spaces open up not through the recombination of signs, but in stretching ambiguities to the very periphery of sign systems, to

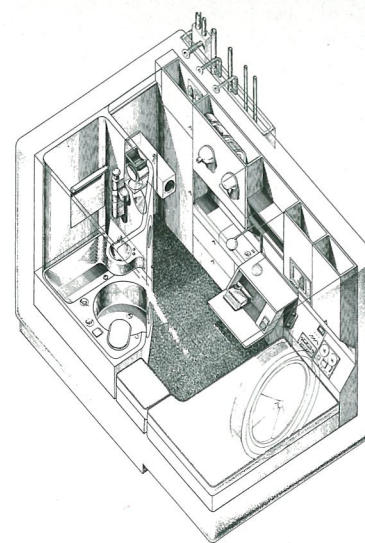
the ambivalent interplay of diverse *simulacres*.

Kisho Kurokawa

The discrepancy between theory and practice, between the way people say to have structured their life and their actual practice, belongs to the human deficiency. Japan stands out in this common practice, not only because of the huge width of this discrepancy, but also because it doesn't seem to bother the people. A certain contradistinction between formal and substantial reality exists everywhere, but the contrast in Japan is so much bigger than in the West, that we can postulate a fundamental difference. In Japan things hardly ever are what they appear to



Nakagin Capsule Tower, Tokyo, 1970



Tradition and innovation in Japan

tion for your work at all. There is actually no need for you to convince anyone, yet your built, written and spoken achievements all amount to one huge effort to convince. So it seems you have a will, after all, although it wants something we can not oppose with the best will in the world. That way anyone could will something and always be right too. There is nothing we could possibly say against you.

As though you were a devout Modernist, you also believe that the architect's duty is to express the 'spirit of the age'. Just as the Modern Movement gave expression to the machine age, you wish to do so for the coming 'age of life', the era of symbiosis between man and machine. One thing never changes: supporters of the idea of a *Zeitgeist* with a style of its own, are invariably optimists. There is no room in your vocabulary for a critical attitude towards the spirit of the times. Affirmation is the watchword.

At the same time, you make it look as though a radical move from a Modernist to a symbiotic paradigm must take place if we are to cope with the twenty-first century. That will be quite an undertaking, considering the world-wide dominance of Western ideas which you yourself recognize. In short, you now affirm what there *must be* tomorrow.

You criticise today on the grounds of what there *will be* tomorrow. To us, this looks like a case of category confusion.

Moreover, you are a revolutionary with a theory that excludes revolution by definition. You predict, or alternatively call for, a radical change. But in symbiosis theory as you apply it, every kind of radicalism is anathema. Are we to interpret your historical perspective as the final convulsion of a world view that thereafter will no longer exist? Must we accept your view of history *ex negativo*?

We found a similar kind of paradox in your implicit claim that you are capable of representing a holistic world. Here, too, we detect your presence simultaneously in and out of your own world view. There is a respectable, holistic world view. But that view, once achieved, resists all further deliberate representation. Propaganda for holism is a self-contradiction. As long as there is some pro-holist visual programme, there is no holism. The same objection could be applied in an even more extreme form to the symbiosis idea. One cannot be a proponent of universal symbiosis and part of it at the same time. Supporting an idea demands a certain analytical capacity, which you undoubtedly possess, but it cannot be reconciled with an organic, 'immediate' world. Abstract thinking,

be. Moreover, the gap between formal and substantial reality became institutionalised for the wielding of power in Japan.

K. G. van Wollenen

My aim to create an architecture that is philosophy, is literature, is not unrelated to the Japanese cultural tradition, which has always valued the invisible, the imagination. From that point of view, I do not regard the design of architecture - the realisation of material objects - as my sole task. Writing is also an extremely important part of my work.

Kisho Kurokawa

In a world which no longer consists of distinct domains and traditions, language becomes our rescue.

Christian Norberg-Schulz

When attempting to transmit history through material objects, first history must be deconstructed into symbols and signs, and these fragments, endowed with a new meaning, must be incorporated into the work as bits of memory. (...) Another method of achieving symbiosis between past and present is to incorporate the atmosphere or mood of the past - Japanese Buddhist thought or traditional Japanese aesthetics, or philosophy, or patterns of living, or arrangements of space - into Modern Architecture. In this case, the

past that we are trying to incorporate is invisible, a spiritual legacy, and our intellectual task is to discover a way to make this spirit come alive in Modern Architecture in a sophisticated form.

Kisho Kurokawa

Pluralism acknowledges the multiplicity of human experience and in so doing - as opposed both to the culturally destructive universalisation and uniformity of the International Style and also to the senseless fragmentation and superficial variety (the illusion of individuality) of the reactionary Post-Modernism - favours meaningful and liberating diversification; diversification without mutual exclusion and heterogeneity

without deterministic hierarchy. In its best examples it achieves this by aiming at the cultivation and reproduction of sensitively differentiated yet commonly shared value systems within a given culture. In architecture, these value systems are rooted in and represented by the quality and spirit of actual human places.

Botond Bognar

Modern Architecture's pretensions to universality were little more than a global scheme of Western cultural conquest in disguise. And with what thoroughness was that successfully achieved in Japan! Even today, these assumptions unconsciously colour the vision of Japanese architects young and old, so

Fukuoka Seaside Momocha, commercial centre, 1988



which is necessary for your cultural programme, is simultaneously a stumbling block for the effectuation of that very programme. One cannot abstract in order to get rid of abstraction, or think in order to get rid of thinking.

Thus this is the origin of your ambiguity when it comes to the question of whether the world of the twenty-first century will exist in spite of us or thanks to us. On the one hand, we are supposed to put our weight actively behind it; on the other hand, we must transcend our own capacity for abstraction so as to become part and parcel of it. You give us the impression that we must make an active contribution to the abolition of our own activism. You won't be offended if we decline, will you?

This brings us once again to the legitimacy question. Who is served by symbiotic homilies such as those of Zen master Suzuki Daisetz, who wrote 'A is not A, that is why it is called A'? Who is served by the idea that we can save ourselves as a society by capitulating as individuals? The individual or the society? Perhaps the society. But what you propose as being an epistemological liberation from a rationalist and dualist straitjacket, can just as easily pass for the attempt to smooth over the enormous gap between formal and substantial reality which is so characteristic of Japan. It looks as though you deliberately plead the retention of that gap as a way of prolonging the exertion of power by those who have it.

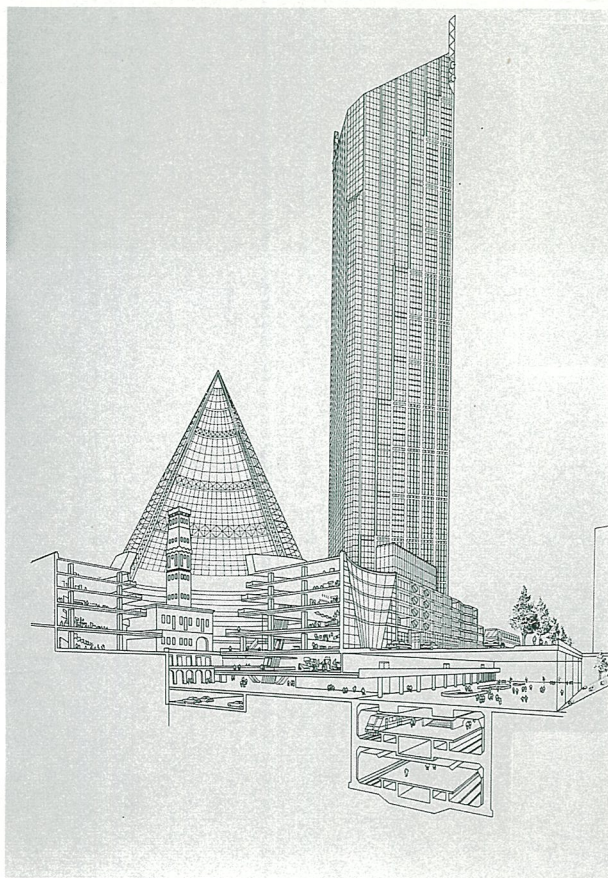
So one more thing, Coach. When you announce to us the departure of the machine as such, and the start of a renewed respect for life in a symbiotic bond between man and machine, it remains very much a question whether that state of grace will really be so liberating and emancipating. You are right when you say that the machine was an oppressive metaphor of Modernism. Your criticism in this area affects us all. But when you propose replacing it by the new metaphor of 'life', we ourselves become metaphor. And this 'life' has all the features of a machine! It is easy enough to make that kind of link between man and technology. In this symbiosis, all our individual hopes of social improvement lapse, and we can do no more than accept the history of the future as laid out for us, with you as its advocate.

True, you succeed in creating an immense moral space with your views. But, in your biomatic universe, that space is filled only with impotent cogs. Your symbiosis is the symbiosis of the global village, the community of world nomads. People no longer communicate with one another there, but have become a function of communication.

Nostra Culpa

We look forward to the remedial training sessions you undoubtedly have in mind for us.

We remain at your disposal, naturally, even if you relegate us to the reserve team.



Melbourne Central, commercial centre, 1986



Kyoju-so villa and Ritsumei-an tea ceremony house, Tokyo, 1979

much that their own tradition of architecture has faded, grown obscure and even opaque to them. (...) In the modernisation-cum-Westernisation scheme of things, in which the standard conception of Westernisation was universal industrialisation, technological and economic assistance to developing countries were build-in adjuncts to industrialisation. From the very outset, Western cultural values stood matter-of-factly as the only valid paradigm for modernisation.

Kisho Kurokawa

Another nature will come into being when ideas of the global environment, traditional modes of thought and the 'feminine' concept are married to today's technology.

Itsuko Hasegawa

Metabolism is a philosophy of symbiosis between humankind and technology. In Western philosophy, which is the basis on which Modern Architecture is built, humanity and technology, religion and technology, art and science are regarded as fundamentally opposed to each other. (...) The philosophy of Metabolism, in contrast, sought to transcend the Western opposition between man and technology and to do that began from the assumption that man and machine could live in symbiosis.

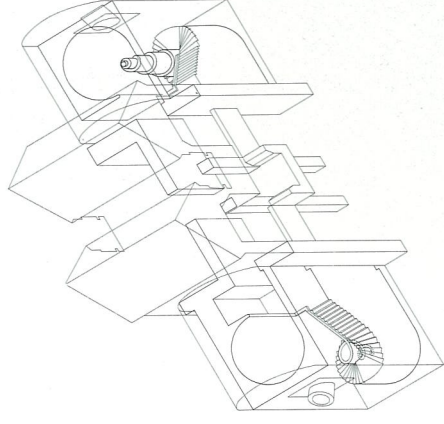
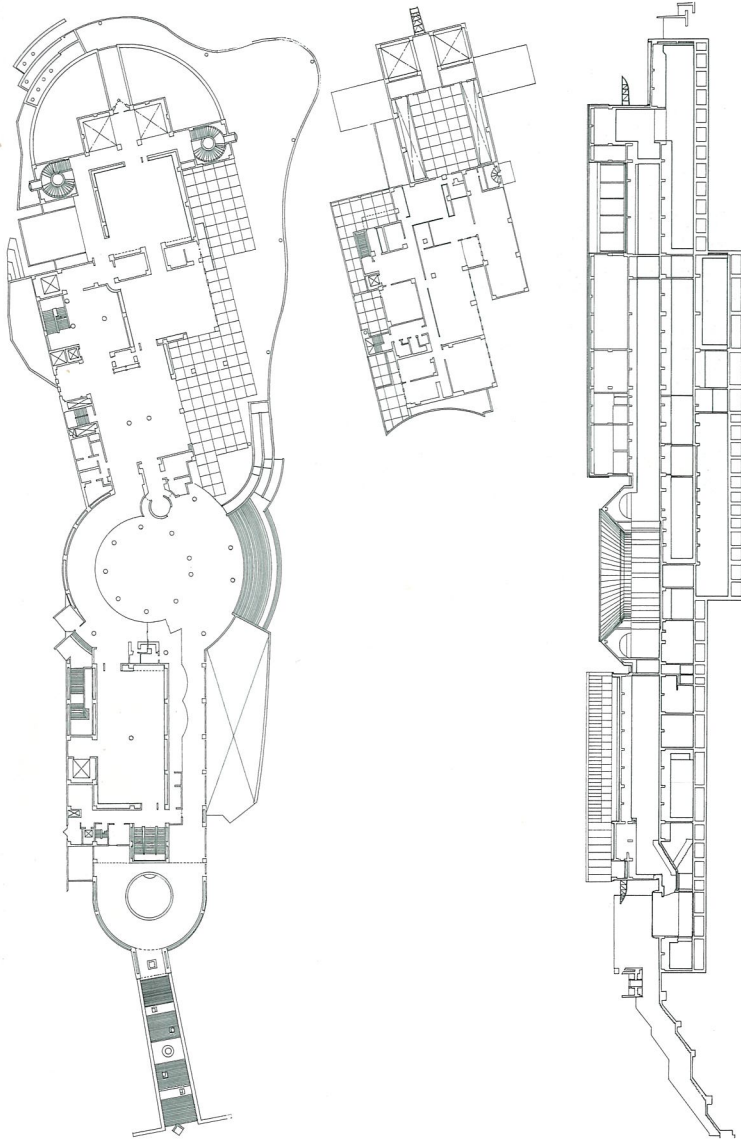
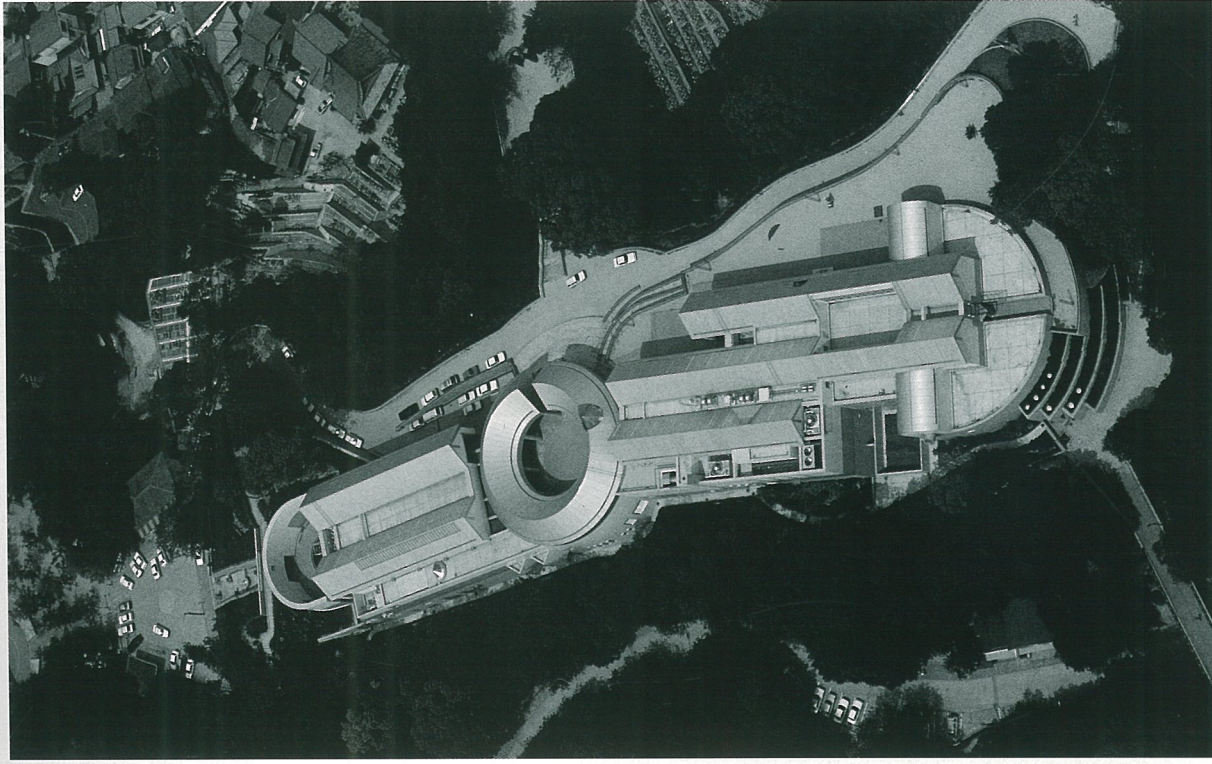
Kisho Kurokawa

Modern Architecture and urban planning ended up exchanging success in achieving a certain type of industrial and administrative efficiency by isolating the various sectors of society according to function for a critical loss of organic integrity and humanity. Peripheral areas and intermediating zones, places where no clear divisions can be drawn between opposing elements or distinct functions - such ambiguous spaces are ultimately the most human. Sometimes such spaces may act as catalysts to meld and harmonise opposites, whether personal, social, or economic. Modern Architecture gives them no importance; in fact, they are anathema to its fundamental principles of function and efficiency.

Kisho Kurokawa

Since human beings live in contradictory ways, it is only natural that societies and cities too should contain mutually contradictory, opposing elements. As might be expected, however, the analytical approach strives to eliminate from architecture and cities the intermediate spaces and vagueness that formerly existed harmoniously there. In doing away with these things, they decrease ambiguity and diversity in human beings as well. I do think we should glean and pick up again the things - intermediary zones and vagueness - that the functionalists have cast away. Oriental philosophy and Japanese culture provide an excellent groundwork on which to do this gleaning.

Kisho Kurokawa

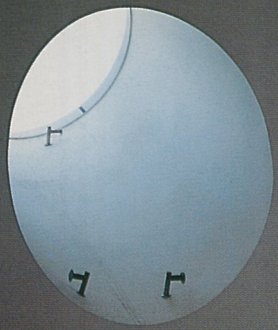


This museum officially announced to advocate 'contemporary age' as the first public museum in Japan. The word implies the wish of having a city identity after devastation by the atomic bomb. The master plan of Hijiyama Art Park, the site of the museum, was done by Kurokawa. A library had already been completed, and a natural museum was also scheduled. The 29-hectare hill of was to be transformed into a park with an artistic atmosphere. The Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art was carefully situated on the ridge of the hill to preserve as much of the wooden areas on the slopes of the hill as possible. Some sixty per cent of the total floor space is below ground level. Many intermediary zones between the work of architecture and its natural setting have been incorporated into the building's exterior – a central approach plaza, a patio, a corridor, a stone garden, a stairway – facilitating the symbiosis of architecture and nature, interior and exterior. The materials used on the exterior also evolve gradually, from the natural stone foundation upward to roughly finished stone, polished stone, tile and aluminium; from earth to sky, from ground to universe, from the past to the future – all are in symbiosis. The overall shape of the museum is a linked series of gable roofs. It is segmented, a village, a group of dwellings.

This has permitted the museum to achieve a scale that does not dominate its natural setting. The gable roofs are a quotation of Edo-period storehouses, but the use of the contemporary material aluminium transforms that historical sign and imbues it with ambiguity. The approach plaza is a quotation of a Western city, yet there is no fountain or work of sculpture, indicating an empty centre. The roof of the colonnade that rings the central plaza is cut away at the front, in the direction that faces the city centre, connoting the site of the atomic bombing, and the pillars of the colonnade rise from stone exposed by the blast. Like the *roji* entrance-way garden leading to a tea room, this approach plaza has no particular function, yet it is an important area in the evocation of the meanings of the symbiosis of history and the present, and of heterogeneous cultures. A Henry Moore arch is set in the outdoor sculpture garden opposite the approach plaza, and from the cut-away section of the plaza, it suggests a gun sight that automatically leads the eye to the site of the atomic blast. *Based on: Kisho Kurokawa 1978-1989, Japan 1989, pp. 34-35; and: Kisho Kurokawa, Intercultural Architecture. The Philosophy of Symbiosis, London 1991, pp. 170-172.*

Location Hiroshima, Japan **Assistants** N. Abe, T. Ohta **Client** City of Hiroshima **Design** 1984-86 **Completion** 1988

Kisho Kurokawa Architect & Associates **Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art**





Erro, Gemini Twins, 1976