

## TADAO ANDO'S ARCHITECTURE IN THE LIGHT OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

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Received: 18. 07. 2003

**Keywords:** Japanese aesthetics; Tadao Ando; experience and architecture; Zen garden.

1. I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Haruhiko Fujita for helping me in pursuing my research in Japan; to Tadao Ando's Architectural Office for making some visual material available, and to Chikako Matsutomo from Aesthetics Department of Osaka University for assisting me in my visits of Tadao Ando's buildings.

In Japan, aesthetics is sovereign in every realm, quotidian or exceptional. Every expression of Japanese culture seems to be unique and no matter how much one gets to know Japan, this sense of uniqueness does not fade (1). All that is historically and culturally Japanese is kept alive and revitalized. Some of these cultural aspects like Japanese food continue naturally in the everyday, some, like the Bunraku theatre or Noh or Kabuki are still enjoyed with the awareness that they belong to a distant aesthetic. Japan is a country of museums, and no matter how huge the museum, it is always bound to be full of visitors, of every walk of life. There are also other aesthetic realities, like the mediatic, the *kitsch*, the banal; but there is ever a very confrontational contemporary artistic expression which is influential on the young art scene as well as on the international art market.

How would it be possible to understand Japanese culture, and sense its continuities in the present? How can it be possible to join the common memory of its social realm and not feel excluded? What is the key to its difference? I feel that many foreigners gave too easy answers to these, and were simply content to accept the difference as something almost racial.

In this distinction my tendency has been rather to find something that is common to all humanity. One could say that this difference comes from a quality that Japan has preferred to preserve. It is a quality of relationships and perceptions, or rather of apprehensions. Tadao Ando's architecture which is extremely modern and in that sense transcultural, is also deeply rooted in Japanese sensitivities. It was one of the keys to my understanding Japanese aesthetics.

Before embarking on Tadao Ando's architecture, it would not be misplaced to start with a simple comparison. We can generalize that there are cultures or people who treat the 'other' or the object of perception as passive. They impose upon it their own cognition which is usually formed by pre-suppositions. Once they define or label the 'object' as being

'this' or 'that', they leave it; the object of perception is something that is to be manipulated. There are also perceptions which look upon the object or upon the 'other' as infinitely unknowable and full of powers; whatever they see is the effect of the object; the object is alive and has personality. For perception and artistic expression which sees reality as the relationship between object and subject, it is this relationship which is the valuable reality, where both have equal power and effect upon each other. This creates an endless process of interaction becoming the creative source of life.

Most explicitly Chinese and Japanese art have shown such a goal. In Japanese art, it is the relationship of the artist to what he is looking at or what he is writing about, that is to be conveyed. Landscapes, *haiku* and architecture are immediate examples of this. The art work, the perception, and intuition of the object and its expression depend also on the context where and when perception and the interaction between the object and the subject take place. The relationship to the context or the environment has an active effect. The process of perception, or creativity is the result of ongoing interactions and plays amongst the active elements of an event or experience. In such an approach it would be impossible to exercise definite and set rules on the expression. In other words, such music is not recorded by notes, such painting cannot be ruled by rigid rules of spacial arrangement, (e.g. linear perspective). The whole relationship of perception, expression and creativity and its result depend on experiential movement and the procedural rhythm of interactions. This is lived theatre and it is the event and the movement that create the space of the experience. One can say that the performative aspect of such art is extremely vital because it is during the experience that meaning is created.

Whatever is conveyed or expressed relates also to space and time in a certain way. Time and space are composed or organized in complex ways of movement which relate to the process of relationships. In a symbolic way one can talk about a spiral arrangement or about the labyrinth. We do not approach our goal immediately, we search for it, we travel for it; it is this search and this travel and the distance it takes and the infinite time of experience that make the experience, which is important, but not the arriving at the goal itself. One can also refer to the fact that, as Haruhiko Fujita has written, rather than art and aesthetics, 'way', 'doing' 'dao' was emphasized in the Japanese artistic and everyday realm (Fujita 2003). This aesthetic is infinite in terms of how manifold perceptions can open up as we search. In my understanding, the traces on the ground of the Zen garden also represent this idea of time and space, and the experience of search.

These traces that represent the search or the travel towards the goal remind us that space is not a surface and that beneath our feet the earth continues. We feel the movement of the earth, the cosmic revolution around the light, we feel the gravity that means power that binds us to life. Japanese architecture is articulated around these motifs.

Another important aspect of Japanese aesthetics is its participatory quality. This is also one of the ways that movement in space, in spirals or in labyrinthian mazes makes us participate in space and in time; by moving with it, we contribute to the becoming, to the creation of space and time, and of architectural form. This participatory aspect is evident in the language. The way sentences are not always completed, something is left to 'the other' to complete. As the verbal grammar does not always

denote the 'subject', its intransitiveness makes people guess or join the activity that is not claimed by a certain person. This creates an open structure where one can join.

'Participatory' can imply many things. The fact that there is little dialectical thinking means that there is no fragmentation and polarization of roles or actors, or of the world into different categories or opposing parts. It may be for this reason that in Japan the conversation is not dialectical or argumentative, it is supportive and participatory. In many non-western cultures, criticism in art is practiced as an artistic response. In fact in many oriental cultures, this kind of play was fashionable; people used to gather to say poetry in response to each other. The non-western synthetic approach, which tends to look at the thing (experience, etc) as a whole, is also manifest in the way in Japan opposites are considered to belong together. This may be one of the most striking differences between Japan and the West. For example, for the art of gardening, naturalness and artificiality are both valuable. Opposites contribute to each other.

In summary Japanese aesthetics can be defined as having the qualities of apprehension, participation, search, and *aisthesis*, in general contrast to western aesthetics which can be generally characterized as being analytical, critical, goal oriented (pragmatic), and claiming objective representation.

Upon these general observations, with which I hoped to create a context for the architecture of Tadao Ando, I would like to show how Tadao Ando's architecture, which seems to represent universal qualities, is actually immersed in traditional Japanese values.

As I experienced some of Tadao Ando's works, I felt them to be the most explicit examples of how modernization does not have to mean westernization. If one tries to understand Japanese culture as it is manifested in the traditional architecture of the Japanese house, in the temple, or the Japanese garden, then Tadao Ando's architecture is a contemporary interpretation of Japanese aesthetics, and it continues the same sensitivities that we find in the Zen garden, or in the tea house, or even in Japanese music.

Yet, to define Tadao Ando's work as a simple continuation would be to reduce it to a simple interpretation of a cultural motif. His architecture is basically modernist and in that sense also confronts tradition and reformulates memory in a way that points to the future. Of course Tadao Ando's architecture brings together some traditional aesthetic qualities in totally new and surprising ways and leads to a philosophy of time and place and of being in the world. Furthermore, its reviving traditional Japanese qualities are important not in a nostalgic way or even from a limited culturalistic view, but it is important because Ando is able to point and to bring about universal archetypal qualities every sensitive person will enjoy. His architecture gives one a dynamic energy that his spaces are invested with.

One of the important aspects of Ando's architecture is that it is not simply an object to be viewed. Whatever constitutes the focus of his architectural organization, it is formed by its relationship to everything that surrounds it, everything which constitutes its context in both a very physical, environmental and significant way. This relationship creates a spiritual connection both with its place and with the people who enter that realm.



Figure 1. Awaji Yumebutai; the Hotel and Landscape. (J.N. Erzen, 2003)

The physical nature or form of the final space to which we are directed emerges from the kind of circulation through which we are led to it. It is really our movement in space which anticipates the form of the building. This is one of the most important particularities of Ando's architecture and it would be too simplistic to call it 'circulation'. This complex movement of approaching the core building and which also incorporates a certain relationship with the already existing surrounding geography or urbanity, in a way continues in the interior programme of his buildings. One could assess that the architect first feels or has empathy about the energy of the site and how this energy creates a certain movement and rhythm. I believe that Tadao Ando begins to draw this into a gestural line which continues into the building that he designs. Therefore the building becomes the culmination of the rhythms and energy patterns that exist already on the site. This happens not only horizontally but involves a three dimensional movement which also activates the way he feels about the under-ground and the skyward direction. Therefore in his architecture, height and depth are not just dimensions defining the one or two storeys, they are ways we penetrate into the earth and feel its embrace around our body and the way we aspire towards the heavens.

First, I would like to try and explicate how Tadao Ando's architecture continues the Japanese aesthetics of traditional architecture and garden. As we experience his buildings and the way they are situated, we are made aware of certain specific qualities. These are, the way many of his small buildings are raised above ground, the way spaces are connected often by bridges, the way water plays an important role and how our approach to the building is, like the way we find the tea-pavillion in the

garden, by going around and around. It is this approach which is often labyrinthian that constitutes the basic aesthetic experience. This also creates a spiritual apprehension, as when we circumbulate certain sacred buildings or spaces in Medieval architecture.

Even with very small buildings, Tadao Ando emphasizes the approach to the building by creating an environmental quality. We go through a long gallery, or corridor, go up or down, cross a bridge; we are made to experience different ways of relating to the earth and to its gravity. We are made to experience distance and proximity as aesthetic qualities; thus Tadao Ando makes possible the apprehension of an *aura*. (**Figure 1**) Here, I am reminded of Paul Virilio's critique of movement in modern times and how it destroys any sense of distance or closeness. I would say that Tadao Ando's architecture is after re-capturing the natural sense of going from one place to another and feeling certain magnetic or spiritual forces on the way. I have seen that several of his buildings are in neighborhoods of temples, shrines or castles, or just woods. We are made to go around them and stop at a boundary where we are directed towards one of these. This movement, which becomes a major aesthetic quality, and through which we begin to sense the spatial quality of his building even from a distance, is intensely three dimensional.

In the Literature Museum at Himeji we are made to go up and up and then stop at a dead end to view infinite space towards the horizon, or to look down. (**Figure 2**) As we move around the building we are also made aware of the castle in the distance and the temple in the neighborhood. His buildings, although they are so different in form, create a spiritual connection with historical sites. They create unconscious links for us in

**Figure 2.** Museum of Literature, Himeji.  
(J.N. Erzen, 2003)





Figure 3. Awaji Yumebutai; the Hotel and Landscape. (J.N. Erzen, 2003)

space. The relationship with the landscape is also a most important case with the hotel landscaping at Awaji Island, the Awaji Yumebutai. (Figure 3)

The quality of space makes one constantly aware of one's own physical being. As we move, we embody the circulatory pattern. We are bodily aware of the way a wall or a corridor confronts us or how we are surrounded by space. Thus we are placed in a theatrical context. We watch ourselves act and move, and as we move the spaces unfold in front of us. What is very pure form, such as a circle or a right angle, becomes a dynamic dramatic configuration as we move and as these forms begin to flow into each other. We feel that we are always in the middle. I believe this is also a continuation of a non-western and cultural sense of space. It is like the inverted perspective. It is like the way a child draws.

Everything radiates outwardly from him. (Figure 4) Thus he is the focus, the protagonist at all times; the whole drama is around him and he is being watched. This may be a religious stance, but it can also mean that we are surrounded by the invisible. Rather than always pointing to a goal on the horizon to which we are impelled to go as fast as possible, the space and directionality in Tadao Ando's architecture often make us feel in the middle of space. We move in zigzags, in spirals. The sense of space which is also a sense of time is radial, from the center out. It is like oriental music, or Japanese traditional music. The space grows and grows around it, it expands, it is cyclactic rather than climactic.

Tadao Ando is aware of this quality of space in the oriental context and he repeats it and gives it body in some of his buildings: In the Suntory Museum this experience of centrality is realized by emphasizing a core



Figure 4. Zen Water Monument, Island of Awaji. (J.N. Erzen, 2003)

which is created by three encircling shells at the center of which is the escalator, the tool to go deep down or up. (Figure 5) However, this is then contrasted with the long rectangular form that is jutting out in a dramatic cantilever towards the Osaka port. Mr. Ando transforms a traditional aesthetic into a contemporary one by creating such dramatic contrasts that complement each other and that keep us constantly at the brink of something new and unexpected. Otherwise, just repeating the cyclical, or the concentric, as we would find in medieval architecture would make the whole thing ordinary and only nostalgic.

The way Tadao Ando's specific works relate to their specific place is made to work in architectural, visual, and formal terms. For example, this may