



Tadao Ando: Conversations with Students

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Tadao Ando: Conversations with Students. Translated and edited by Matthew Hunter. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012. 96 pp. \$19.95.

Since the 1960s, the Japanese architect Tadao Ando has established his reputation as one of the most interesting and provocative urban designers not only in Japan, where he has an office in Osaka, but internationally. Although he is not a professional academician, having never graduated from a university, he has lectured at Tokyo University. The book under review compiles his lectures to architecture students in 1998 at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Architecture. It is published in an elegantly useful new series of "Conversations with Students" by Princeton Architectural Press. Other architects in the series include Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Mies van der Rohe, Rem Koolhaas, and Paolo Soleri.

Tadao Ando was in the news following the catastrophic Fukushima tsunami and ensuing reactor meltdown in March, 2011. He mobilized his staff and, in consultation with civil authorities, initiated a collaborative project called *Chinkon no Mori*, or "Forest for the Repose of People's Souls." Together with the March 11th survivors of the tsunami, Ando-san is planting trees and cultivating a forest grove within the disaster-struck area. This northern project follows Ando's participation in the "Hyogo Green Network," a tree-planting movement (approx. 250,000 trees) that was initiated in response to the Kobe earthquake in 1995. Of the *Chinkon no Mori* project Ando says, "This forest is designed to provide repose for the souls who have passed, and so to restore, little by little, the memories of a lost region by raising new life in a wounded land. My hope is that the creation of this forest will not only heal people's hearts and minds, but also regenerate the urban landscape. It is precisely because our aim is a spiritual recovery that we must first plant trees before building any type of structure" (10).

It is not the least remarkable that Ando-san has been involved as an architect in ecological recovery projects. His architectural philosophy has consistently integrated natural landscapes in engineered enclosures of exposed concrete that provide spaces for the expression of emotions, thinking, and communication. As the Princeton Architectural Press web site says, Ando has crafted "serenely austere structures that fuse Japanese building traditions with Western modernism. His minimalist masterworks, geometric forms clad in silky-smooth exposed concrete, are suffused with natural light and set in perfect harmony with the landscape." Although his designs often seem abstract, they presuppose grassroots concepts that can be traced to the ecological and revolutionary tendencies from the 1960s, such as the "Limits to Growth" movement. Neighborhoods and cities are conceived as environments for human dwelling that stimulate and shelter, not dampen, spiritual feelings and aspirations. The outward abstraction of

Ando's designs is deceptive; the five senses of the *embodied inhabitant* are carefully weighed in the construction of his buildings. One of the themes of Ando's lectures is "the social responsibility" of the architect. He conceives architectural design as "crystallized philosophy," and says that a book by the Kyoto philosopher Testuro Watsuji, titled *Fudo (Climate and Culture)*, "fascinated me to the point that I read it several times over" (18). He continues: "As I reread Watsuji's *Fudo*, I became deeply wary of the gap between a modernity that symbolized uniformity and homogeneity and the reality of place, climate, and history" (20).

It follows that Ando-san speaks highly of the era in which he grew up, the 1960s, and considers himself lucky to have been born in 1941. This chronology situated him inescapably at the center of revolutionary activities in Tokyo, Europe, and the United States. Although he admits to not fully comprehending the ideological conflicts of the street protests back then, he absorbed their willful, rebellious spirit into his professional work ethic. This willfulness manifests itself in his determination to resist compromising his designs in the face of the difficulties often encountered by architects, such as client demands, legal restrictions, the inherent limitations of extant construction technologies, and budgeting. In one of his lectures, Ando-san distinguishes the architect from the artist based on these restraints that are the conditions for creation. The artist has more freedom. Ando says that the collaborative nature of the architect's work allows many designers to make excuses for their final creations: "The client was dreadful"; "The budget fell short" (57). The artist, on the other hand, rarely makes such excuses. It is his respect for artists that motivates Ando-san to insist architects adopt a committed artistic ethos in developing a career and producing designs:

However, it's important for the architect to adopt an aggressive posture and not to allow practical issues to override his or her own ideology and aesthetic. This requires a commitment to one's dreams, an exploration of all the opportunities, and the wisdom, courage, and determination to overcome real-life obstacles. Since the early 1960s, I've had the opportunity to interact with a number of radical artists. It was direct contact with these people—with their self-awareness, keen understanding of the *zeitgeist* of their times, unremitting thoughtfulness, and tremendous commitment to self-expression—that educated me, beyond any inspiration I obtained from their work (57).

There are some noteworthy points made here that are relevant to students regardless of their major or technical expertise. It is uncharacteristic of Ando-san as a Japanese citizen to insist on personal defiance or obduracy—"aggressive posture"—in the ethos of the professional architect. It is also refreshing in our era of practical curricular reforms with a vocational focus to hear Ando-san advise his students to resist practical issues so as to sustain their own aesthetic ideals and dreams. He is not making this stuff up to sound "cool"; these are the principles on which his own success has been based. In this regard, we cannot ignore the fact that Ando's role models have been radical artists.

Although he did not graduate from a university, he interacted with and learned from radical artists in Japan, France, New York, Holland, and elsewhere. Some of the richest material in *Conversation with Students* is Ando's recollections of the times he spent with other masters. He observed them intently, absorbing their particular cognitive styles, sociality, and ways of dealing with adversity. This habit of close observation is something he shares with the masters. After spending a brief time with the conductor Seiji Ozawa, he realized that conductors work as hard as their musicians and are by no means aloof. "I could tell by listening to Seiji Ozawa speak that he creates his music through an extremely dynamic exchange with musicians. I got the impression that he conducts each performance as if it were his last" (64).

The story of Tadao Ando's education outside of school receives a substantial amount of time in his conversations with students. Of what, exactly, did his informal education consist? How did it unfold intellectually and geographically? When he was fifteen, living in Osaka, he helped remodel his family home, his first experience of construction and design work. At this time, Ando began traveling locally to Kyoto and Nara to study traditional homes, famous temples, and gardens. He also traveled widely by train all over Japan, from Kyushu to the Tohoku region, to experience first-hand the various architectural styles both modern and traditional. As he says, he absorbed a rich and detailed sense of the earth tones and materials, the pervasive beige, the reds and greens, the wood, thatch, and ceramic tile, used in Japanese construction. He developed an understanding of the way the Japanese incorporate natural colors and materials into architecture, which "fosters the inhabitants' sensitivity to environmental phenomena," and connects "to both the aesthetic and body sense of the Japanese people." Ando says, "Light—or specifically, as Junichiro Tanizaki describes in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, the nuance of delicate light amid a certain gossamer darkness—has always been a cherished element of the Japanese home" (41).

During his travels in Japan, Ando discovered Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. It had been the only structure to survive the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and its integrity of design and construction became respected throughout Japan. While in Tokyo, Ando found a book about Le Corbusier's architecture in a used bookstore, and became enthralled with his designs: "His images captivated me so greatly that I began tracing their forms tirelessly" (14). Ando also read that Le Corbusier had traveled extensively while in his twenties to learn about architecture; this motivated his own voyage to Paris by ship and rail, including a segment on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Although he wanted to meet Le Corbusier in person, the great architect had passed away shortly before Ando's arrival in Paris. But Ando visited all of Le Corbusier's buildings, and studied them with sustained intensity. Later he would also visit the buildings designed by Rem Koolhaas in Holland. Upon reading Ando's lectures about these "site" or installation visits, one is reminded of the process of close reading favored by literary critics when they interpret a novel or poem. His detailed, philosophically cogent observations are a sort of architectural exegesis, and fascinating for this reason alone.

In one of the most candid passages of *Conversations with Students*, Ando-san confesses the phase in his career when success and fame were by no means assured. "I educated myself, and so, when I first started working, I was constantly troubled by the gap between my own opinions and those of society. I experienced many lonely days in which I asked myself over and over again whether this really was the road I was meant to take. It was an extremely difficult time"(76). In spite of unforeseeable adversity, he urges his students to use their twenties as a time for world travel to study cultural forms, meet inspiring artists, and develop a vigilant selfhood based on passionate ideals. Ando's sense of lived time (in phenomenology, *Lebenszeit*) encompasses spiritual yearning and cosmopolitanism at odds with the fast-paced, myopic careerism of students who desire to complete their education as soon as possible. In addition to offering such personal revelations, Ando warns students to resist becoming spellbound by new technologies, which, like modernity itself in his opinion, tends to homogenize experience globally and dissolve regional distinctions of sensibility and place. Ando has recourse to a concept of *intuition* that reappears in his conversations. He argues that human intuition is akin to analog, not digital processing, and that architecture must rely on both approaches or invite rampant homogeneity. Such a viewpoint is unapologetically romantic; Ando speaks of intuition and inspiration as transcendental powers indispensable to the imagination of the architect.

Those who have seen Ando's architectural designs in Japan, Switzerland, and elsewhere know that his starkly consistent use of exposed concrete is, at first glance, seemingly devoid of traditional Japanese features. When you see his office in Osaka from the outside, for example, the last thing that comes to mind is traditional Japanese architecture. But this is where the subtle creativity of his work is not going to meet expectations, nor conform to stereotypes of temples and gardens. Yet his interiors provide space and light that function as spiritual "temples" and "gardens," work spaces and public facilities for communal life. Ando's design efforts on his professional headquarters in Osaka have extended over decades in continual modifications of the original structure. The book under review contains a series of striking photographs that show the evolution of his office building. He learned much from his mistakes, and grew more adept as he mastered how to integrate his materials with the function of the building. His professional experience has gradually incorporated such refurbishments as a main activity equaling in importance to newer projects designed and built from scratch. In this regard, the tendency of developing nations in Asia to entirely raze older structures to make room for new ones has disappointed Ando. As he concludes his lectures, he says the Japanese are not immune to this heedlessly destructive behavior. "It seems that the Japanese are fond of demolition, or rather, razing to rebuild. I feel that the inclination of the Italian people to preserve their architecture, thereby cherishing their cultural inheritance, is the more fitting approach"(82).

Such thoughts are surely of value to the people of Guam as exigencies of expansion and development press them into an unforeseeable future. Malls and condominiums continue to be built in seeming disregard of the landscape and the spiritual lives of Guamanians. Ando's original interventions, blending nature and spiritual concepts with contemporary architectural designs, are worthy of our attention. What are the natural colors and materials of this island, and how can they be integrated into an architectural style that is true to past and future, the heritage and dreams of Guam's people? In regard to this urgent matter, the University of Guam has thus far demonstrated more thoughtfulness and taste in its development than many other institutions; but the future is already here, providing new opportunities and challenges for the university to distinguish itself and not merely rest on its laurels (or plumeria blossoms).