

Jörg H. Gleiter

## **The architect's eye**

Interview with the Japanese architect Toyo Ito

Toyo Ito is a trailblazer. Incessantly and playfully, for 30 years now he has been constantly opening up new territory for architecture. Some years ago – wrongly and prematurely – an attempt was made to label him as a techno-futurist. Attention was too firmly fixed on the formal aspects of his architecture. This is particularly characterised, it must be said, by the fact that it is constantly changing, making visible the spirit of the contemporary age. If nevertheless we wish to try to sum up Ito's architecture, it is best described as being pervaded by air and light. It is this characteristic that is common to each different manifestation of his

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buildings. Thus his house *Silver Hut* (1984), with its feather-light construction, dissolves the separation between inside and outside, between bearing and being borne. Ito's architecture in fact does not make use of the mystical darkness and strict formalism of traditional Japanese architecture, yet its lightness and airiness makes it still more Japanese. Characteristic of the attitude to life of the 1980s, the project *Pao For the Tokyo Nomad Woman* (1985) transforms architecture into an ephemeral, fleeting event, dissolving the boundary between architecture and design. Fifteen years later this was continued on the larger scale, as a public building, in the *Mediatheque* (2001) in Sendai. In the *Serpentine Gallery* (2002) in London and the opera house in Taipei (under construction), Ito shows how he absorbs the culturally unconscious into his architecture and brings it into view and the general consciousness. Ito has so far retained his intellectual independence and creativity, making him a seismograph of the contemporary attitude to life.

J. Gleiter: Mr Ito, you have now twice won the most important Italian design prize, the *compasso d'oro*. Once for *Ripples*, a bench, and once for your *Sendai 2005* shelving. What does this design prize mean to you as an architect, and what does it mean to you to stand alongside such exalted designers as Bruno Munari, Konstantin Krcic or even Philippe Starck?

T. Ito: I feel honoured to be mentioned in the same breath as the best designers, although I would straightaway point out that I do not consider myself to be a designer in the true sense. I always feel somewhat uneasy being called a designer.

J. Gleiter: Where then do you see the difference between design and architecture?

T. Ito: Architectural projects like the Sendai mediatheque or now the Taipei opera house are a major challenge. As an architect you have to deal with all of the clients' various wishes. With large projects, the clients are public bodies. That makes things complex, but also exciting. You have to work on the solutions to many problems and be ready to compromise. This appears to me in this regard to be less so for the work of the designer. One other important difference is that the architect is always up against a strict framework in architecture. Design seems to me here freer, more mobile and also quicker. This is not however just a question of the larger scale involved, but also a question of the various social forces that I as an architect have to withstand.

J. Gleiter: The question then arises of what role the architect and his intuition play in this process, where the architect not only has to withstand the pressure of the various social forces but architecture also always acts as a mirror to culture.

T. Ito: Intuition and inspiration above all concern the eyes and the lenses through which the architect sees everyday life, for example the family, the society and the city. It is a crucial matter whether the view of the architect can be also be understood by other people. As an architect I see a great many things. You have just mentioned the concept of the mirror. If by that you mean reflecting something new, then I must immediately ask myself whether what is being reflected is also of importance for others. To do this I try to meet as many people as possible and sharpen the way I see.

J. Gleiter: His sensibility thus makes the architect not just a mirror, but also something like a translator who through architecture makes visible the invisible aspects of a society. Would you agree?

T. Ito: Yes: if I was not wearing an architect's spectacles, I would fail to see a great many things. Only through the spectacles of the architect can I recognise certain things. This is perhaps because I as an architect have spent many years intensively engaged with everyday culture, and perhaps also because it is part of my abilities and my disposition to observe the world and the changes in it.

Let me give you a concrete example. If I design a house, it is nowadays no longer the case that there is an ideal family image consisting of father, mother and children, who all eat their evening meal together at a table. This is no longer necessarily the case in cities such as Tokyo. It may be that the father does not work in Tokyo at all and comes home only at the weekend, or that the children have to do extra evening classes at different times and the mother will eat alone. The architect has two possibilities in this case. He can plan a room for a far larger dining table than will be used, or he can provide for different, smaller dining tables, for example one in each room. One would be a practical solution, the other a symbolic one. As an architect I must thus decide which strategy I want to pursue. It is very interesting to think about this as an architect because, if I did not put on my architectural spectacles, I would neither notice these things nor translate them into architecture. It is a social phenomenon that I can only better perceive such phenomena through my architectural spectacles and recognise the problems more sharply.

J. Gleiter: It is nevertheless interesting that your architecture – for example in the 1980s and 1990s – was actually not part of the architectural mainstream. At that time you had nothing to do with the then standard postmodern images and metaphorical processes: rather, you developed a completely different, independent vocabulary. Interestingly enough you captured the spirit of the age better than the postmodern. In other words, the architect not only reflects the spirit of the age, but seeks it out so that he is characterised by a sensibility that anticipates this spirit. When I think of the *Silver Hut* from 1984, this is a house that is to a large extent dematerialised. The relationship between design and architecture is dissolved, just like the relationship between inside and outside. You had thus formulated an idea that was only captured in architecture in the 1990s using the new digital procedures.

T. Ito: I do not know whether I deserve this honour... (laughs)

J. Gleiter: At any rate, we can generally speaking divide up your architecture into three phases. In the first, the architecture was distinguished by a clear geometry to the outside, whereas inside it works with strong atmospheric elements and broken geometries, as for example in the famous house *White U*. In the second phase, the strict separation between inside and outside spaces dissolves. The formalism is eliminated and the formal aspects are dissolved in favour of the structure. The buildings now consist of an area that can be permeated from all directions and which is only defined by means of structural elements. Then there is the third phase, which manifests itself in the pavilion of the *Serpentine Gallery* and in the first design for an opera house in Ghent where, under the influence of the digital technologies, structure and form merge seamlessly to form a unit. On each occasion

you have implemented ideas that have only later, with some delay, managed to penetrate the consciousness of architects and into architecture.

T. Ito: Yes, I believe it is possible to see things in such a way.

J. Gleiter: A difficult question then arises: your architecture is highly thought of and admired and yet you are never copied, indeed you cannot be copied. Why do you think this is?

T. Ito: Perhaps because I am not looking for a means of expression. That is not my aim. Perhaps it also has to do with the fact that I am always concerned with the non-formal aspects of the design, rather, as we have previously discussed, with the architect as a medium. I do not work towards a certain formal shape: there is no definite conception of the form at the beginning of the design. There are architects who have a clear image and who pass on their ideas as sketches to their staff, who then prepare these. I am not one of these architects. First, I always have my own ideas, but these are formless and can only be described with words. The image then matures in discussions with my colleagues. And if they come up with a counter-proposal, we will also discuss that. Designing is a continuous process in which there are no conceptions of form that could simply be transferred. Perhaps that is an answer to your question; perhaps that is the reason why my architecture is so difficult to copy.

J. Gleiter: Zona #6 is dedicated to the *Knowledge of Design*. We have spoken of the eye and the spectacles of the architect, the mirror function of the built environment and also the role of the architect as a translator of the invisible cultural logic in material and space. But there

is also history, as the architect does not just position today's appearances in relation to one another and make them visible. He also positions the contemporary era in relation to the past. I ask this question given that you, as a young architect, worked with Kiyonori Kikutake, the great architect of Japanese metabolism. What role does history play for you?

T. Ito: During my time as a student and employee of Kiyonori Kikutake, modernity was still in full swing. At that time I was also studying architectural history at university. But this did not consciously enter my designs; I did not invoke history. Of course, Kikutake's architecture contains something traditionally Japanese, but, if you will, what entered his architecture was the traditional Japanese spirit rather than the formal laws of Japanese architecture. I have gradually come to understand that the particularly Japanese spirit of his architecture did not come from his knowledge, but from his application of culture. It was important that history was indirectly present. That is I what I too attempt.

Many Japanese architects on the other hand refer formally to Japanese architectural history, the Japanese house, the classical temple architecture, etc. I however do not wish to, I do not even try that. If my architecture is different from western architecture, then I now believe, even more than previously, that this has to do with the Japanese language, particularly with the Japanese linguistic area. It is the special structure of the Japanese language that I have internalised and that allows my architecture to come to fruition. The structure of the language and the structure of architecture have a great deal to do with one another. You yourself understand Japanese and can understand what I

mean. It is the structure of the language that enters the knowledge of architecture.

J. Gleiter: The Japanese language does indeed have an open, loosely determined structure, like your architecture. The non-verbal portion is very significant when compared to the Indo-Germanic and Romance languages. It is necessary to read between the lines. And so to my last question: which project are you working on at the moment, and which of your projects is closest to your heart?

T. Ito: That would be the opera house in Taipei. Work began at the end of last year and will I hope be completed in three years. I designed the opera house as a kind of further development of the concept used in the Sendai *Mediatheque*. The project is very difficult to realise, but it will be ready to view in three years.

J. Gleiter: Mr Ito, many thanks for the interview.

The interview took place on 16 February 2010 in the office of Toyo Ito in Tokyo. *zona* wishes to thank the interpreter, Yoko Jumi-Gleiter. Additional images at: <http://www.toyo-ito.co.jp/>