

# Anyone

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Addition by Subtraction

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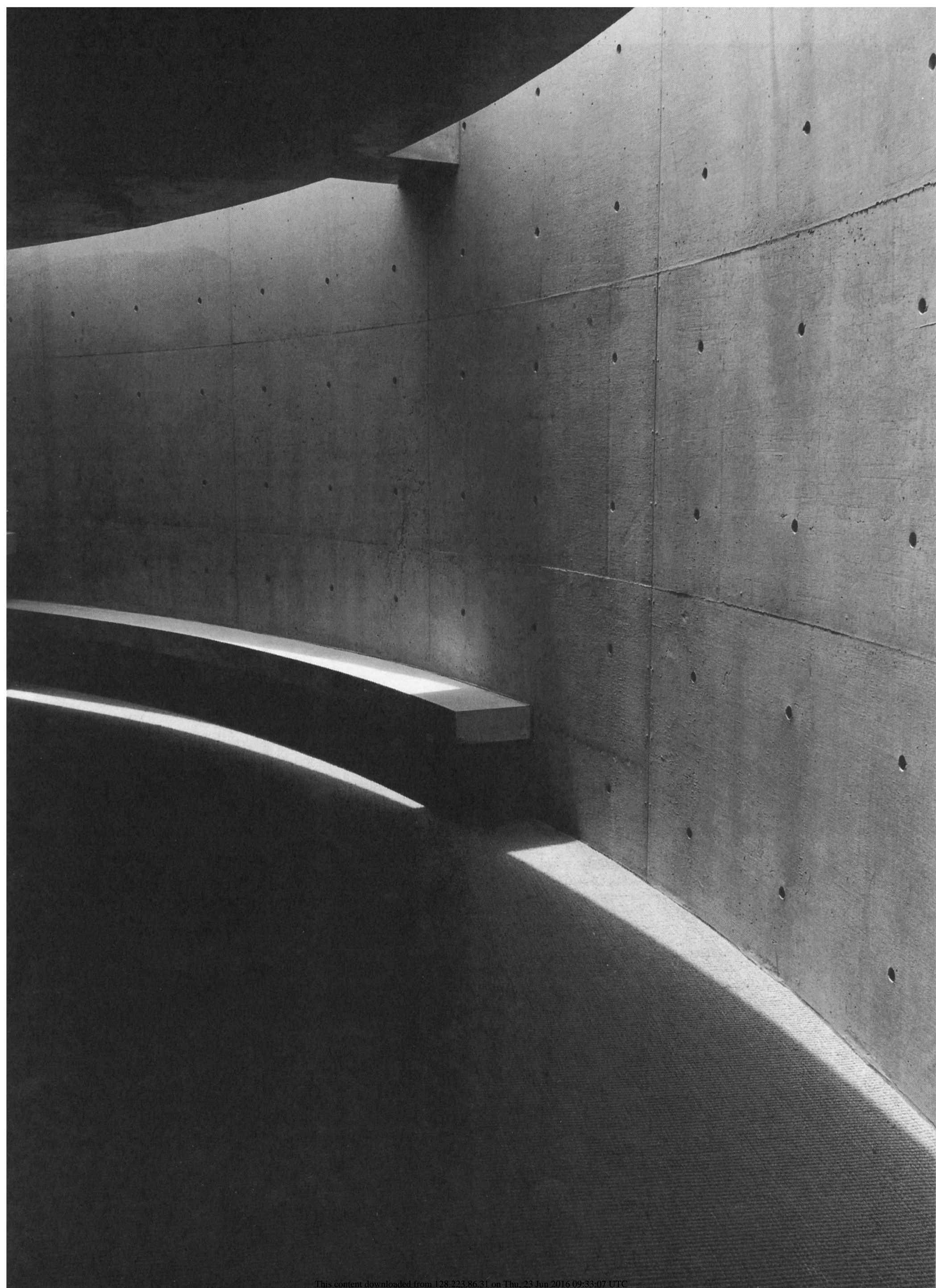
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# FRÉDÉRIC LEVRAT: ADDITION BY SUBTRACTION

## Media technology

*Only space has the power to intensify our emotions.*

— Tadao Ando

In a world fascinated by the potential of new technologies to collapse space and time through speed, it is surprising that so many people are interested in an architect who uses a single material to produce the simplest possible geometries. The invasion of the virtual world — through television, telephone, and fax — proposes a new architectural interest in the accumulation and juxtaposition of an infinite number of layers of images and meanings. By contrast, Tadao Ando's architecture always proposes the same image — a ray of light on a rough concrete surface with a few round recesses. And yet, Ando's is one of the most celebrated architectures at the end of our century.

Does our fascination with Ando's architecture underlie our desire to oppose — or react to — the nonmaterialist/nonanthropomorphic current in architecture? Is it the contrast between these two approaches to architecture that interests us, or their possible convergence? I would like to propose that Ando's pure concrete boxes and the concept of "electroarchitecture" offer two extremes that somehow meet in their extreme opposition. The fascination with Ando's architecture is perhaps not unlike the fantasies of the New Age dreamers. The dream — in the digital paradise — resides mostly in the possibility to access a dimension of space beyond the usual boundaries of our bodies and at such an accelerated speed that time and space are questioned at a fundamental level.

## Subject-Object in context

*I believe that order is necessary to provide dignity to life.*

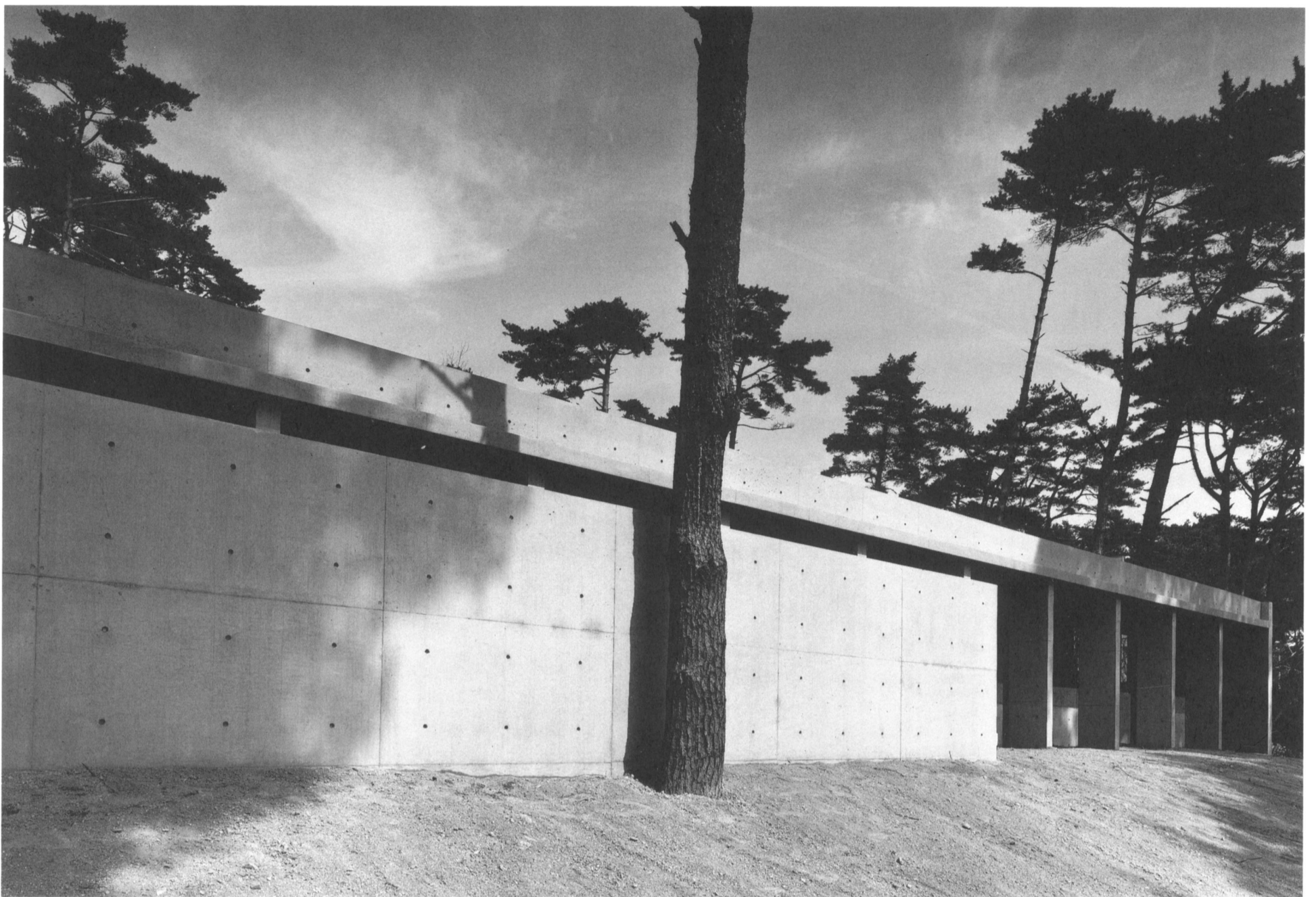
— Tadao Ando

Rather than an accumulation of layers brought about through digital technology, Ando's architecture proposes a rarefaction of information, a subtraction of the number of layers. A subtraction of the layers of information allows the initiated mind access to a new, Buddhist-inspired level of understanding. How does one explain to a Western reader the relationship between modern Japanese thinking and traditional Zen philosophy? Probably

one does not. The primary difference between Western and Zen philosophy lies with their differing views of subject-object relations. Phenomenological experience and related topics have been elaborated at length by Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and by their Eastern counterparts. Insisting on a clear-cut distinction between subject and object, Western thought — from the secular notion of monotheism to contemporary philosophy — has always tried to extract the human subject from its surroundings. If one wants to enter Ando's architectural world, this distinction needs to be put aside.

To begin, let's look at what Japanese society has in common with the West. Since they have cars like us (or we like them), traffic jams, and yellow stripes in the middle of streets bounded by tall buildings topped with giant billboards, living in Osaka or Tokyo must be very much like living in New York or Paris. Japanese cities share with the Western capitalist world the urban chaos of industrial cities. Indeed, in that regard, Osaka is much worse than New York or Los Angeles. Its urban structure is organized around independent elements that are superposed and juxtaposed vertically and horizontally and that form an unstable structure that is in constant transformation. Highways pass one on top of another, crossing a bullet train line and an elevated subway, all on *pilotis* over a river; each functions independently of the other. Here a strong, concerted urban intervention would only compromise the quality of each of the elements.

This structure of independently articulated elements has produced a kind of nonurbanism, exacerbated in Tokyo and Osaka, and the chaotic result is difficult even to describe without using some surrealist metaphors. Even an experimental urbanist such as Rem Koolhaas, whom I met on his first trip to Japan, was disconcerted and positively frightened by what he saw. This understanding of the environment as a composite of independent layers is also clearly expressed in traditional Zen architecture. Wood and stone assemblages are never physically touched by an intermediary or impure element such as nails, glue, or mortar. Respectful of that tradition and thinking, it is impossible to find a roll of tape in Ando's office — I was quite embarrassed on my first day of work there when I tried to secure the trace on my drafting board without the use of such "impure" elements.



*Koshino House. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.*

### **Beyond the wall**

*The wall is the edge where the logic of the city meets the logic of the site. It is the smallest and the most fundamental element of the urban structure.*

— Tadao Ando

To hide from this urban chaos, Ando adopts a simple strategy. The main elevation of most of his urban buildings is a plain concrete wall, with no other openings than the entrance door, or perhaps a ventilation grid. Hiding from the sensorially polluted capitalist city, Ando attempts to find a sensorial rarefaction, a concentration. In traditional Zen garden constructions such a wall exists — it disconnects the sacred place from the everyday overcharged exteriors. This process, more than any of Ando's other architectural expressions, is an interpretation of traditional Zen garden architecture.

We should very quickly explore the traditional model, keeping in mind that those spatial concepts are almost directly applicable to Ando's work. Perhaps the most pertinent example is the 16th-century Ryoan-ji garden in Kyoto. Based on a contemplative and meditative condition, the Ryoan-ji garden builds up a system of filters and frames in order to separate itself from the unmeasurable environment. By excluding its surrounding environment, it allows only a few selected layers to enter. This subtraction process provides a fundamental design strategy for the appropriation of natural elements.

The framing device is a thick, simple, abstract surrounding wall. Inside, the number of elements to be contemplated is reduced to a carpet of gravel and seven stone assemblages. The garden is organized in such a way that a frontal perception progresses constantly, insisting on the independence of each layer. Each element is distinguished from the other by carefully arranged spaces, or voids, that allow each object to contain in itself its own definition. The relationship between different elements is expressed in the distance between them.

### **An infinity within each layer**

*When a human being puts himself into a small enclosed space, his thoughts lead toward infinity. In the deepest of his meditations he can hear the voice of nature and reach the cosmos.*

— Tadao Ando

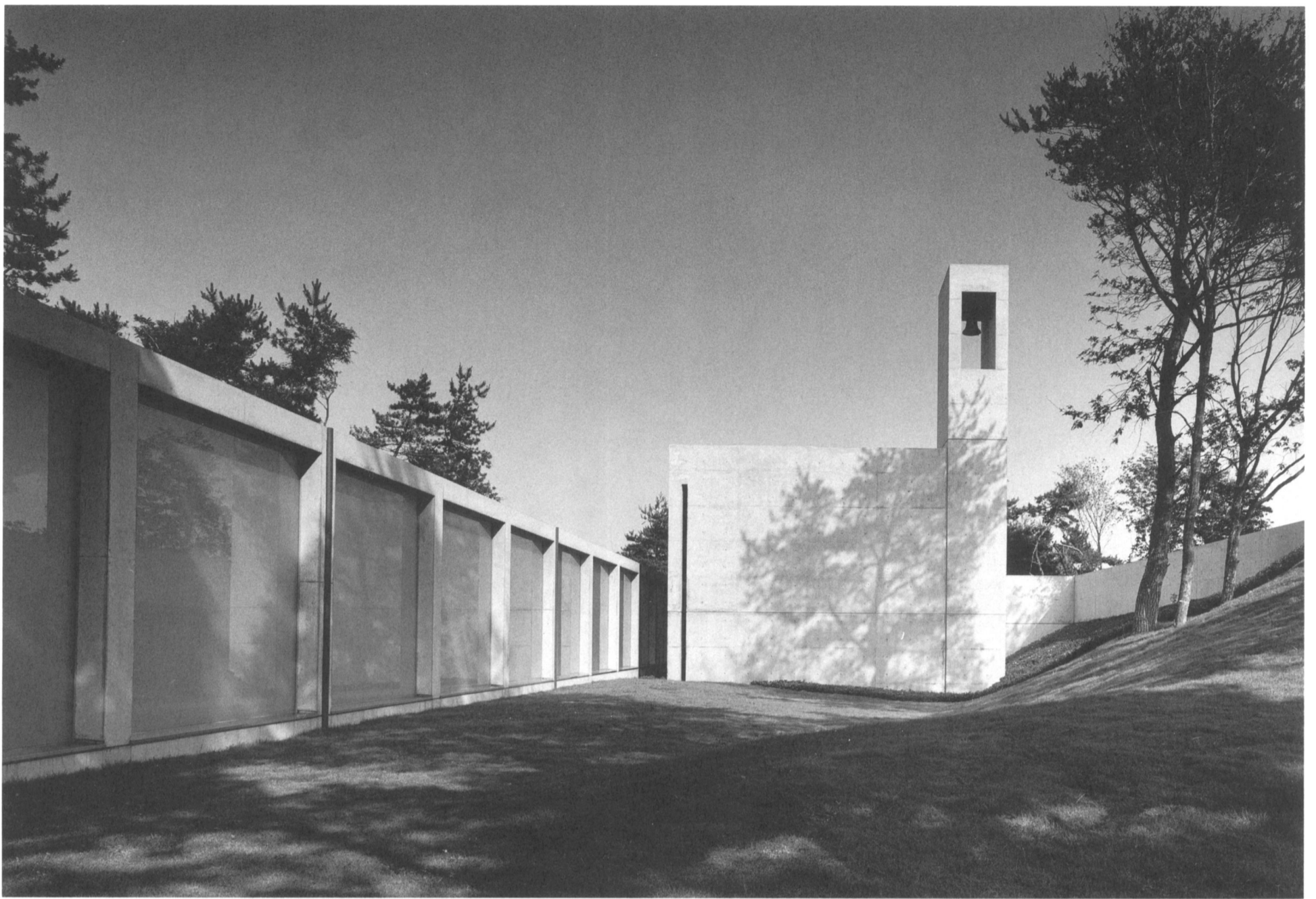
The observer is placed in a rarefied environment where his/her attention can concentrate on only one element at a time. By employing this kind of mechanism, the observer is able to perceive the presence of the entire cosmos in each one of these elements. The rarefaction expresses the complexity of each single layer — sun, wind, and observer — and is expressed in relation to a larger context. In Ando's work nature becomes an infinity contained in the smallest pebble — scale disappears altogether. A spiritual understanding of what is considered natural elements is essential. This is because everything that constitutes our environment begins to take on its own character, its own life, its own time of evolution and dimension. For Ando a stone or a tree has a presence, a spirit, animated by a form of life.

Zen Buddhist philosophy is also interesting for architecture because all of us are obviously part of nature — our bodies, just as a pebble or a stone, are natural. In Japanese thought not only the human body but also the human soul is a natural element. The rarefaction of layers of information allows us to recognize the immensity of the cosmos in the smallest arrangement of inorganic elements. It also allows the observer to question his or her own anthropomorphism. Part of a larger, ever-shifting environment, the observer's boundaries, contexts, time, and scale is no longer clearly defined. All the discussion about the collapse of time, space, and materiality in the electronic age is not new for people who have always considered that there were many different speeds of life, many different types of space. This is why Ando's architecture and the electronic paradigm and its digital compression of the "space of information" are correlative. The difference between them, of course, is that there is no way to escape this complex environment, there is no remote control or "game over." For Ando architecture thus becomes a magnifier in this game of inescapable presence. Once this is understood, everything else about Ando's architecture becomes clearer. The simple geometries, the reduced material palette, and the large framing elements all derive from his concern for a simplification and rarefaction of information layers, which allow the inhabitant to reach a level of consciousness and understanding of its own nature.

### **Concrete, steel, glass**

*All the envelopes, other than the openings, are made of only one material, because I wanted to discover what would happen when the meaning of space was pushed all the way until it is impossible to ask any other questions.*

— Tadao Ando



Chapel, bell tower, and covered colonnade, Chapel on Mt. Rokko, Kobe, 1985–86. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.

Ando's reduction of architectural expression is impressive. The same concrete detail is used over and over, not so much for its expressive quality, but for its ability to disappear, to allow only the contained space, and not the container, to exist. Similarly the simple geometric shapes, such as the rectangle, the sphere, and, more recently, the ellipse, are used not so much for their compositional quality, but for the ease with which they are understood as a first level of architectural layering. Following the ancient maxim "The more you understand, the less you understand," Ando is not afraid to produce what might at first be considered an obvious gesture.

Ando's architecture is like an instrument that reveals something other than its solid surface — the light, the air, and the movement of the body itself in space. This indirect knowledge of the "potential of materials" emerges from a long-term study of the effects produced at different times of the day and season. Ando's office is located in one of his early houses built for a client. Working and studying inside his own construction, Ando and his collaborators learn in real time and space the effect of different material presences. No insulation — not even the indoor path from the living room to the bedroom in the Azuma house — is provided to protect the user from the reality of the physical surroundings. Comfort — in the Western architectural sense — is the last quality Ando attempts to provide for his client. The walls and the ceiling are made to disappear, allowing the silence, the air, and the sun to breathe.

One of the most frequently published images of Ando's architecture is of the Koshino House wall. In the quietness of the room the slow motion of the shadow cutting across the wall suddenly informs us of the pressure brought to bear on the unusually thick wall, which bends slightly as if laboring to retain the hillside. The surroundings of the house forcefully reenter this minimalist monastic interior: from the grain of the pebbles pushing from under the surface one understands the slope of the mountains, the large pine trees outside, and the strong wind. In such a rarefied environment the smallest input is amplified.

The omniscient framed view is an essential reading tool in Ando's work: from the Jun Port Island Building, where he frames portions of the sky and the grass, to the Church of the Light, where the framing inverts itself and allows

the light to become both filter and essence, to the subtraction of layers of information through framing which again contradicts our Western approach to architecture. Ironically, these large concrete frames are also antiseismic devices that most other Japanese architects try desperately to hide in their work. Ando has also found a way to abstract and dematerialize our understanding of architecture without the literal antigravitation/antimaterialization that dominates so much of recent Western architectural iconography.

For Ando the role of architecture is to provide an education in perception. The framing of the view, the purity of the material, and mostly the processional utilization of the space are all components in this education. Ando is not afraid of the dictatorial position he assumes as an architect of such rigor. For him the user should accept his architecture as a revealing machine that instructs the inhabitant in how to see what is hidden in the complexity of our natural surroundings.

#### Implication of the subject into the object

*The meaning of architecture lies in the distance that resides between it and its functionality.*

—Tadao Ando

Many of Ando's architectural elements are not assigned precise functions. They are contemplative spaces, pathways leading the observer through an apperceptual modification. This procession of the observer into the sacred space is present in all his projects; it is an initiatory journey in which the observer is slowly implicated and blended into the context. The most articulated "promenade architecturale" is to be found in the Mount Rokko Chapel. The body is introduced and dissolved into the space — sequence after sequence of precise progression transports us from the society of consumption to a contemplation of nature.

Ando attempts to offer a spiritual presence to this Christian wedding chapel, but its true spirituality resides in the initiatory journey that leads to self-discovery. The journey begins on an elevated point that gives an overall view of the site. A path leading down a small set of steps places the observer in direct contact with the landscape and its natural slope. A wall parallel to the contour lines is passed in a 180-degree turn. By abandoning visual contact with our controlled references, a new view of the landscape is introduced. The steps land on a small paved place that circles a small pine tree. This allows the



observer to rest and become acclimated to this new condition. It is also the threshold for a new sequence in the initiatory journey.

A long translucent tunnel — of no use other than as a sensorial transformer — swallows us and takes us away from the exterior surroundings. By excluding the exterior environment, this translucent tunnel/cannon hurls the observer into a new emotive state of nature. The rarefaction of the senses takes away the sound and color; only a gray green translucent light filters through. Subtracted from our usual sensorial capacities, a new sensibility emerges, and the passing of a cloud or the wind on the ground cover becomes readable and almost palpable. Our eyes begin to read the motion of the grass as it slowly licks the translucent glass, changing in intensity with the relative humidity as each blade touches the filter. All sense of reference is lost in this new space.

This initiatory journey is common in traditional Japanese religious architecture, where a path of red torii, or gates, leads a way through the landscape. As in the torii journey, the translucent glass tube leads to nowhere in particular — only to a view, a framing of nature — leaving the door of the chapel somewhere on the right. From the milky light of the tunnel we enter a very dark intermediary space where we rest before entering the main space. In the chapel nature reappears — idealized and controlled — contained by a wall defining a space the exact same size as the interior. Here the space of nature equals the space of the individual, one worshipping the other, in a clearly expressed refusal of hierarchy — one feels as if nature is seated on the other side of the window, observing us.

#### **Spirituality**

*I am convinced that mental serenity and spiritual qualities are predominant in the nature of a house.*

— Tadao Ando

The journey at the Mount Rokko Chapel is to be found with varying levels of intensity in all of Ando's projects — from the elliptical progression of the Koshino House to the framing grass room of the Jun Port Island Building, and even the obliged change of elevator in the Rokko Housing apartment. Ando's

architecture provides a space of contemplation in which an entire universe becomes readable in a single rarefied number of information layers. The presence of natural elements is always revealed, sometimes beyond the usual comfort condition, insisting on the irreducible presence of nature and our belonging to this global environment. The human subject is reduced to a humble participant; but by accepting this role, he/she can achieve a much greater understanding of space.

Using brutal and minimal techniques of composition and construction, Ando is able to provide an architectural condition in which time, space, and centered subject are dissolved in ways similar to those suggested by electroarchitecture. Instead of searching for ways for outside technology to allow us to escape our perceptual limits, Ando provides a place for the soul and the body to concentrate and to find new spaces within.

*Frédéric Levrat is an architect in New York. He has taught at the Cooper Union in New York, and has published in French, English, Japanese, and Portuguese publications.*

*Chapel on Mt. Rokko. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.*

