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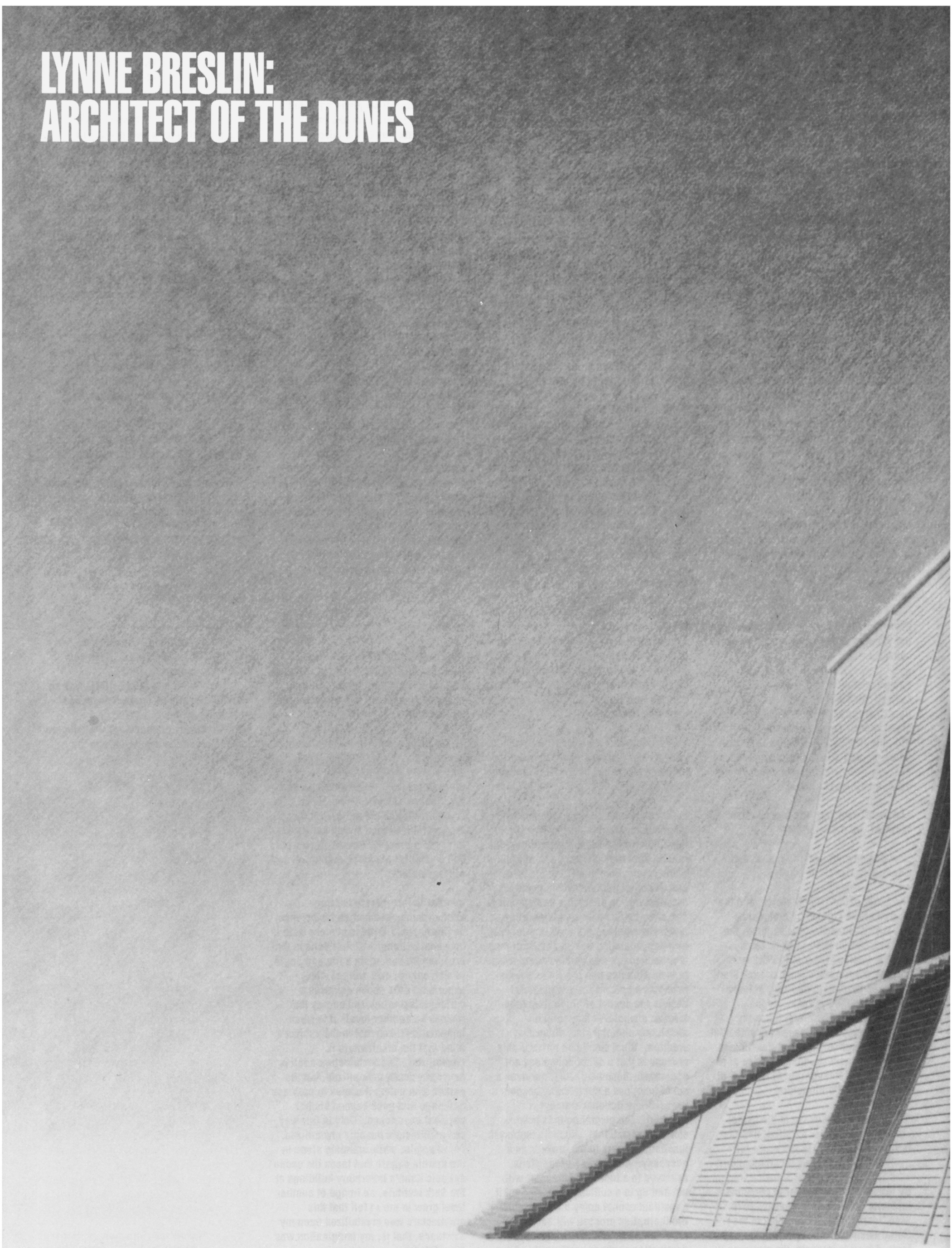
LYNNE BRESLIN: ARCHITECT OF THE DUNES



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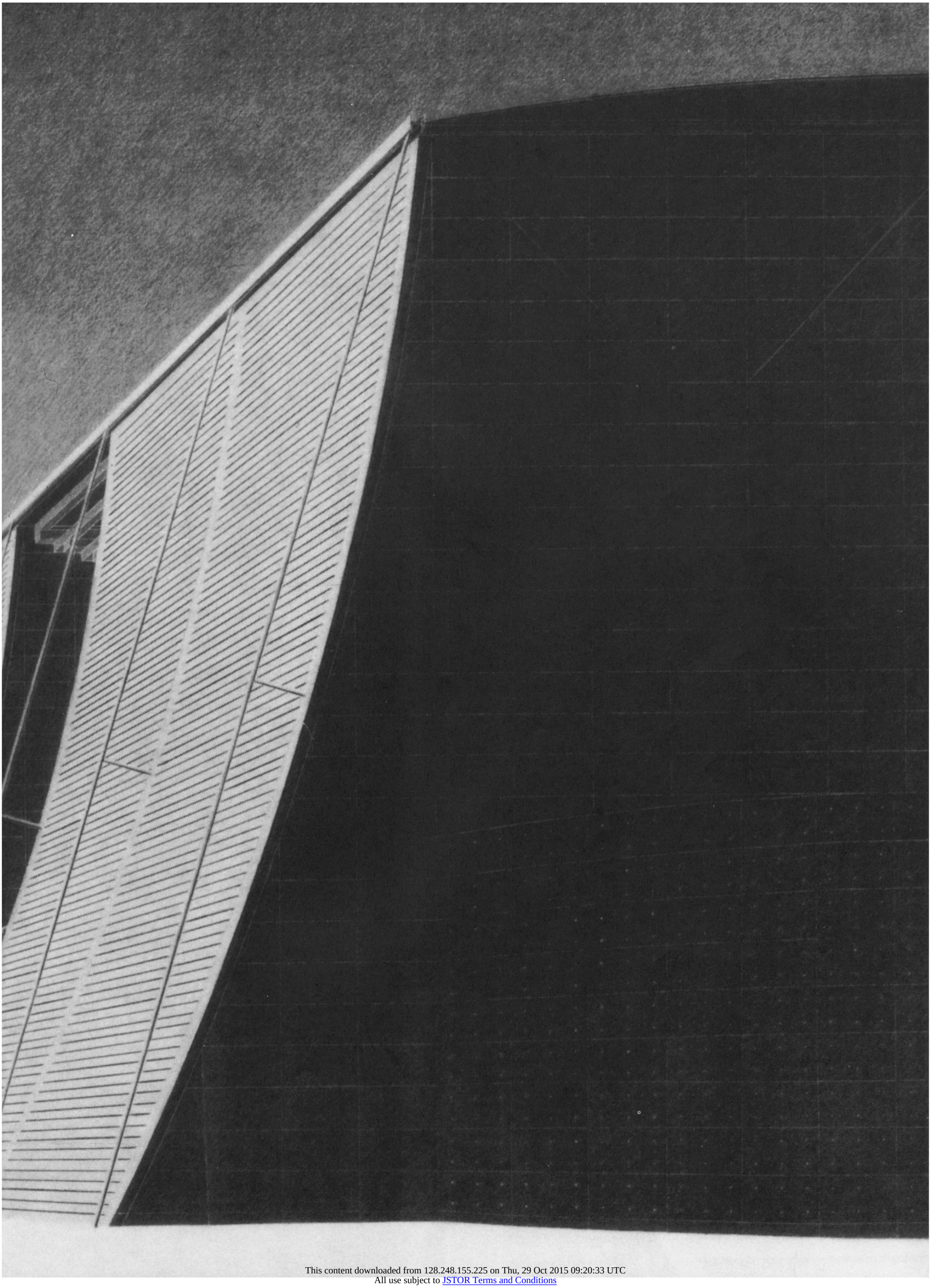

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In Kobo Abé's *The Woman in the Dunes*, a schoolteacher takes a holiday to collect insects that inhabit the sands along the shore. He hopes to discover a new type of bug. Abé writes: "When this happens, the discoverer's name appears in the illustrated encyclopedias of entomology appended to the technical Latin name of the newly found insect." But instead of discovering a new insect, the collector unwittingly becomes the captive of a seaside village threatened with extinction by the ever-shifting sands, and he is forced to shovel sand simply to survive. Enlightenment and science fail to counter the essential, shifting, and chaotic forces of nature. So too *enlightenment* and *civilization*, the bywords of the Meiji era (1868–1912) that signal westernization and progress, are intentionally buried by the Japanese project of culture.

The confrontation of science and technology, or the modern and Western, with traditional Japanese notions of space and time circumscribes architectural theory, as well as most intellectual history, in 20th-century Japan. Junichiro Tanizaki, the preeminent novelist, laments in his book-length essay *In Praise of Shadows* the passing of traditions and the sweeping inroads modernity has made in Japanese culture and in architecture specifically. Tadao Ando's ambivalent and thoroughly articulated reaction to modernism has often been at the center of any critical review of his work. In his seminal essay "Critical Regionalism," Kenneth Frampton introduced Ando to a Western audience searching for another response to the classically focused, historically based postmodern architecture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ando's minimalist moves, cryptic concrete monoliths, and lyrical light siphons offered an alternative to both functionalist, high-tech modernism and postmodern pastiche. An architect of silence, shadow, and power, Ando was seen to create a unique synthesis of traditional sensibilities, modern technology, and formal authenticity that overcomes tradition and modernity while retaining the most salient features of both.

Modernity and Japanese Identity

The Japanese ambivalence toward modernism and a technologically determinist (i.e., Western) architecture emerged in the 20th century. As early as 1910 the Architectural Institute of Japan issued a prospectus demanding an answer to the question "What Should Be the Future Architectural Style of Our Nation?" At the time the Architectural Institute and the university system that produced the island nation's architects were entirely based on European classical models, and the teaching staffs were dominated by British teachers. All public buildings were "Western" constructions that required architects, in contrast to the domestic projects that were created by craftsmen and built in traditional formats.

While modernism made great inroads in the 1920s, spearheaded by students of the Bauhaus and disciples of Le Corbusier's atelier, the search for an authentic, new national architecture in Japan was actively debated. This was first addressed by the *teikan yoshiki*, or Imperial Crown style, in which a synthesis of East and West assimilated traditional decorative features and the most modern Western tectonics. The first Imperial Crown style building was the concrete Hobutsu-den (1921) at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo by Keiji Goto and Shintaro Oe. This style, often featuring a Japanese-style roof like that on Hobutsu-den, was, by the late 1930s, adopted as the symbol of the fascist period and actively encouraged as politically correct. The projects of Kenzo Tange and Kunio Maekawa (who was trained by Le Corbusier) submitted for the Japanese Cultural Center in Bangkok (1943) illustrate the propagation of the Imperial Crown style with Western techniques and materials.

In 1942, six months after the outbreak of the Pacific War (known as World War II in the West), a symposium was convened by the Literary Society in Kyoto to consider the idea of "overcoming the modern" and thus to determine the world historical impact of the war. Though the conference focused on literature, the issues reflected the greater intellectual debates about modernity. As H.D. Harootunian writes in his essay "Visible Discourses/Invisible Ideologies" (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 87 no. 3, 1988), it was a meeting at which "the real was effaced in order to make society appear without history." Intellectuals, academics, and critics were summoned by the Literary Society to debate the end of "modern" civilization in Japan and to generate the outline for a new and glorious future age. Tetsutaro Kawakami, an organizer of the conference, reflected on the underlying theme of the discussions: the struggle between "the blood of the Japanese, which truly motivated our intellectual life," and "Western knowledge, which has been superimposed upon Japan in modern times." The war, it was surmised, could finally contain the modern and overcome the contradictions of Japanese society. The modern meant Western science, which eschewed traditional Japanese knowledge and culture.

Critic Hideo Kobayashi challenged this proposition, claiming that Japan was already modern. He warned that "conceptions of progressive history inevitably misled modern men and created false expectations by deluding them with a 'poetry of the future.' " Overcoming the modern was not necessarily an advancement to a new period, Kobayashi argued, but rather a reunion, outside of history, with the timeless essences. He feared that Japan would be remade in the image of the West, whose own modernization he characterized as a "tragedy," while Japan's, if it occurred, would be a "comedy." The question, ultimately, was how Japan could retain its technical advantages without compromising its culture. How could modernity be reconceptualized for Japan?

While tradition continued to influence domestic architecture in Japan, modernism was central to rebuilding postwar Japan. Public architecture was conveniently severed from its past, and the Imperial Crown style, singed by its prior association with monumental traditionalism, was rejected. The need to identify a nationalist style persisted, however. In his article "Of City, Nation, and Style" (*Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian [Durham: Duke University Press, 1989]) Arata Isozaki examines the crisis of representation and style in Japan. He points out that the distinction between the national and the commercial had been established in the 17th century, when Kyoto was the national capital and Tokyo the commercial capital. Commerce and state engendered distinct forms of representation and identification. During the Meiji era the state recognized the importance of managing economic affairs, a tendency that was extended during the fascist period and the economic recovery following the Pacific War. The introduction of Western modernism coincided with the superpositioning of nationalism and capitalism. During the American occupation the state, empowered primarily with the task of economic recovery, assimilated the forms of economic management and lost its central symbol of nationalism when the emperor renounced any claim of divinity and the military was disbanded.

Preceding pages: Japan Pavilion, Expo '92, Seville, Spain.
Left: Stair detail, Japan Pavilion. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.

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Modernism dominated the commercial school of design, where capitalist philosophy was embraced. Tange and Togo Murano were major advocates of this style, in which all buildings were treated like commodities. This commodification, crass materialism, and visible marketing of mass culture was associated with Americanism. As Isozaki suggests, Metabolism (a movement of the 1960s) was successful in effecting the union "between architecture as commercial merchandise and architecture as representative of the national state," in effect reflecting the political-social reality (*Postmodernism and Japan*, 52). The state, Isozaki argues, was so dominated by economic concerns and management techniques that it withered away. In explaining his concept for the design of Tsukuba Civic Center (1979–83), the first new planned town in postwar Japan, Isozaki recognizes the "absence" of the state. His emptied center is also an inverted Capitoline Hill that should be read, with its layers of historical allusions, as "so much historical refuse crammed together." From that friction of forms and styles a new statement and insight into the visualization of order and absence would emerge.

The ambivalence toward modernism continued in postwar Japan. Modernism could be reduced to a style and, Harootunian writes, "consigned to a moment in history, a moment which has now been 'conquered' and condemned as a 'cultural mistake.' " Defining the scene and role of architecture in Japan's postmodern era depended on the "retracing of the meaning of the modern" as the Japanese have confronted it since the Meiji period (*Postmodernism and Japan*, 17). In 1980 the government of Ohira conducted a conference on the conquest of the modern, where the ambition to displace or get outside history was conceded. Ostensibly, the conference attempted to derive a plan for the 21st century and a "new age of culture." A narrative was proclaimed in which premodern and modern elements commingled in a newly constituted natural and timeless coupling. Harootunian asserts that the frantic search for forms expressive of the future was often combined with a prehistorical naturalism. No longer was there any consideration of eliminating modernity and technology from Japan, but rather of the need for fostering a uniquely Japanese acceptance of those practices as opposed to the West. In contrast to the Kyoto symposium 38 years before, there was a thorough commitment to materialism and commodification and a recognition that technology would be central to any future.

With the Metabolist movement the Japanese presented an approach to technology and architecture that produced a unique synthesis. At the Tokyo World Design Conference in 1960 Tange presented a paper entitled "Technology and Man," and 26-year-old Kisho Kurokawa presented his manifesto "Metabolism 1960: Proposal for a New Urbanism." An outgrowth of the work begun in England by CIAM and Team X, Metabolism incorporated many of the facets of the Western megastructure movement in its concepts for controlling urban expansion with large-scale architecture. Its deviation from that Western movement, however, was more revealing. In Japan the centrality of the machine for modernism was displaced by technology; thus the technological process, rather than the machine of production, was the key to the nation's economic recovery. In addition, the almost biological life force of Metabolism recast and reintegrated the traditional importance of nature and the timeless essences with contemporary society. Nature was no longer framed, analogized, or contemplated by architecture. In his essay "Birth of Tragedy," Tange discusses the West's overestimation of Japanese tradition and comments on the "essentially passive appreciation of natural phenomena viewed always as something to be contemplated." Instead, nature as a process or structure became the basis for the new course of architecture. Nature was distanced from the natural, and natural attributes such as change were isolated, examined, and then incorporated in a metabolized urbanism. While Metabolism can be related to the religious doctrines and ideas of renewal of both Buddhism and Taoism, the translation of the traditional is occluded in the realization of space and form during this movement.

Ando: Architect of Resistance

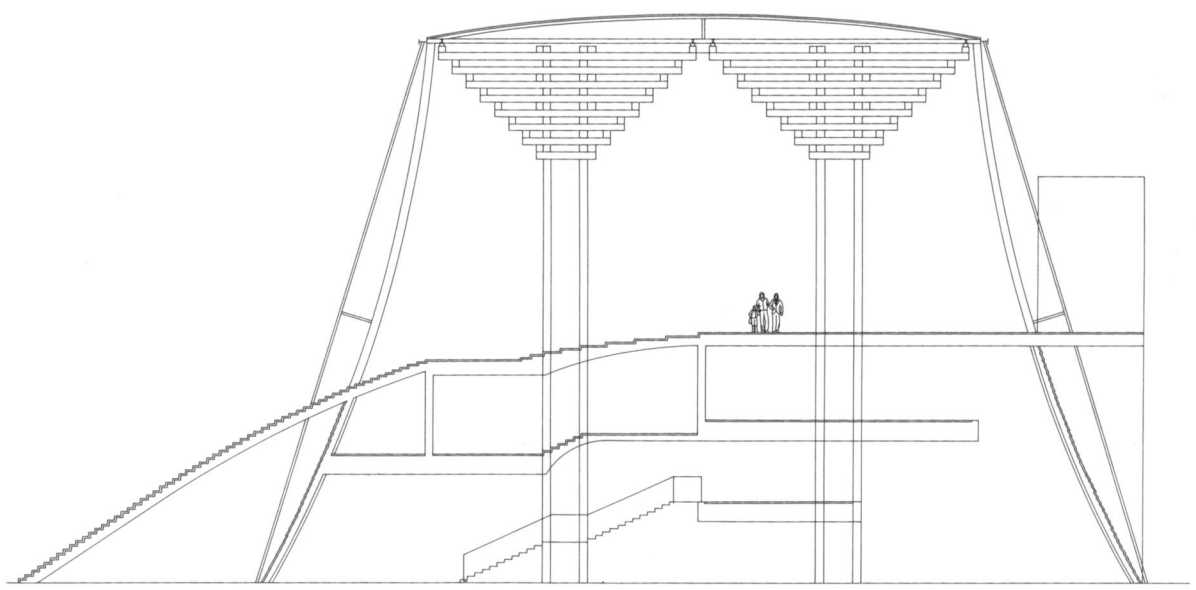
Tadao Ando began his career as the Metabolist era began to wane and as the postmodern era began. Though affected by the Metabolist failure, Ando nevertheless adopted several of its tenets, most notably the desire for a unique Japanese space and form informed by the natural and the Eastern.

Ando is championed by Kenneth Frampton, as well as by such diverse critics as Hajime Yatsuka and Jackie Kestenbaum, as the architect of resistance in Japan. Despite his early career as an architect of boutiques and houses for leaders of the fashion industry, and as a collaborator in developing a specifically Japanese version of what Marilyn Ivy has identified as the advanced postmodern mode of an advertising based culture that favors image making over content (Marilyn Ivy, "Consumption of Knowledge," in *Postmodernism and Japan*), Ando has been isolated from both the source of his commissions and the resulting contribution he makes to their success. His austere, esoteric forms house retail ventures, augmenting those fashionable icons of what Ivy calls the "ruptured, counterfeit and displaced communication" of that industry. From the late 1970s advertising has progressively distanced itself from the specific qualities of the product hawked. Instead, advertisers and architects offer an image, a style, and a stance that can be acquired with the right accessories and buildings. Unwittingly perhaps, though very little of Ando's work lacks conscious direction, Ando's architecture has furthered the fashionable posturing of the fashion industry, the arts, and religion.

As a self-trained architect from Osaka, working first in Kobe and Osaka rather than in Tokyo, Ando's success is without precedent in Japanese architecture. He is suspended beyond the vertical cleavages of the past — the distinctions between high culture and mass culture, dominant culture and subculture, the correctly educated and the casually graduated. Ando is the first successful architect truly representative of a culture that is becoming increasingly dispersed, fragmented, and decentered.

Ando's trajectory follows that of writer Yukio Mishima. In "Culture and Technology" Najita Tetsuo suggests that Mishima's quest was "to situate culture as prior to and decisive in establishing individual authenticity in relation to technology and bureaucracy, which were mechanical and artificial and homogenizing and dehumanizing." Ando attempts the same with his architecture. The authority and sheer materiality of his concrete forms question modernist architecture rule making.

From the early 1980s Ando's boutiques, from TIME'S in Kyoto to the Tokyo BIGI Ateliers to the Akka Gallery in Osaka to Collezione in Tokyo, perpetuate a heroic refusal to acknowledge the function they accommodate. In Ando's



Japan Pavilion section.

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hands the boutique, the house, and the church are almost undifferentiated. The sublime, historically reserved for religious experience, is common to almost every boutique. In the Akka Gallery, as in the BIGI Ateliers and the Tokyo Collezione, Ando achieves a Piranesi-like gesture in the compressing of vertical canyons of space and stairs. Always entered at street level, these boutiques disclose a vertigo of depth and shadow. But it is the use of the datum of the ground plane that undermines a rule of modernity, and shifts any prior convictions of place. Ando endows the discarded basement of modernism with a discovery of place. The dramatic climax of most of his buildings is not the penthouse and its opening to the sky or the city, but the deepest space below and its retaining of the earth. At the Chapel at Mt. Rokko in Kobe, for example, the sudden recognition of the ground's displacement enhances the spirituality of the austere chapel, which is decorated only by shadows and relieved by the view through the below-grade light well.

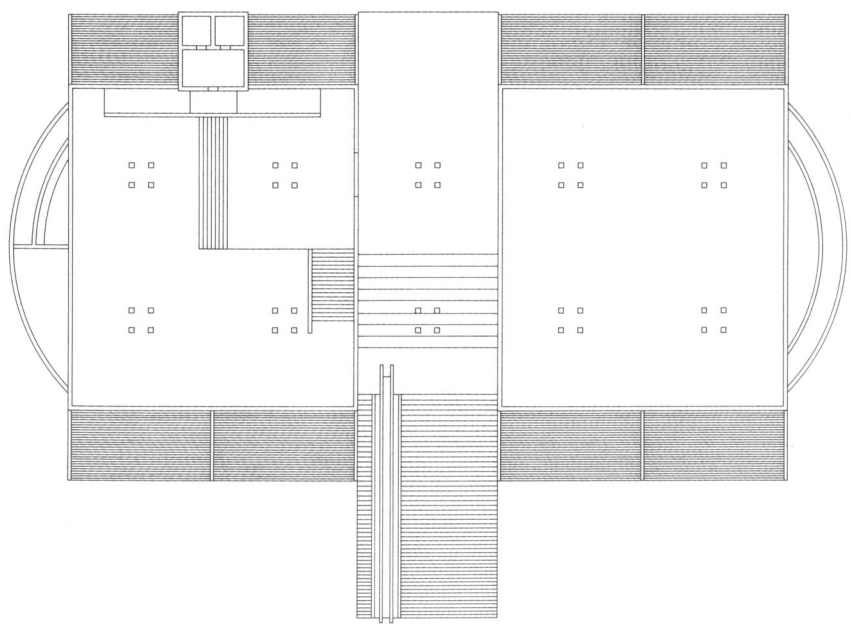
Hajime Yatsuka points out in his essay "The Spirit of Hospitality" (*El Croquis* 58, 1993) that Ando's repertoire of forms has remained consistent from his first houses to the housing projects to boutiques for the fashion industry. In the end, Ando's work is always radical chic. This consistency can be explained by his attitude toward architecture. As in America, the social/political agenda of modernism in Japan was long ago buried. Ando traces the loss of meaning in modernism: "In its hurry to be applicable to dramatic social change, Modernist architecture converted the problems of the real world into measurable numerical value and degenerated, therefore, into a labor of logically apportioning that value. Subsequently, a universalism predicated on numerical value overtook the real world and leveled to flat uniformity its richness. Neither rational or fictional" (Tadao Ando, "Thinking in Ma, Opening Ma," *El Croquis*). Today Ando finds the challenge of postmodern society in the need to inject inquiry into all forms; to instill the fictional in the rational. For example, Ando believes it is necessary to overcome inertia in man's dwelling by thwarting the functional and opening some path to nature. In the TIME'S building in downtown Kyoto, a commercial venture, he creates an opening into nature. The building sits beside a canal. The stagnant canal is far from picturesque, yet the building frames the water with haiku-like rigor. This pause, this interjection of the superfluous in the choreography of shopping, challenges the "continuous fabric woven of urban space by economic efficiency." By these means Ando claims to resist an "architecture that serves as a mooring for capital." Ando identifies this contradiction as *Ma* — a place peculiar in the Japanese aesthetic — a place of in-betweenness, a place that could harbor the harshest conflict to provoke the human spirit. Yet in the final analysis this bonus of nature recommends TIME'S, and most of Ando's boutiques, as a chosen destination, spoiling the customers, enhancing their self-esteem, contributing to the gratification of buying, and providing a temporary relief for the emptiness of their postmodern, commercially saturated lives. Such glimpses of nature become a viable amenity. (See *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*, ed. Rob Shields. Discussions by Lauren Langman, "Neon Cases: Shopping for Subjectivity," and Rob Shields, "The Individual, Consumption Cultures and the Fate of Community," point out the psychological role shopping offers to societies deprived of any substantive channels for expression or knowledge of authentic experience.)

In his 1982 essay "From Self-Enclosed Modern Architecture Towards Universality," Ando insists on the importance for the Japanese of even the most reduced forms of nature. He writes: "After World War II, when Japan launched on a course of rapid economic growth, the people's value criteria changed. The old, fundamentally feudal family system collapsed. Such social alterations as concentration of information and places of work in cities led to the over-population of urban centers. . . . Overly dense urban and suburban populations made it impossible to preserve a feature that was formerly most characteristic of Japanese residential architecture; intimate connection with nature and openness to the natural world. . . . [Today] the isolated fragments of light and air suggest the entire natural world. The forms I have created have altered and acquired meaning through elements of nature (light and air) that give indications of the passing of time and the changing of the seasons, and through connections with the affairs of human life . . ." (quoted in Kenneth Frampton, "The Work of Tadao Ando," *GA Architect* 8).

During the 1980s Ando's enlistment of nature provided his more public commissions with a distinctive realm. In the Children's Museum in Hyogo, the Museum of Literature in Himeji, and the Forest of Tombs Museum in Kumamoto, as well as in his temples and churches, the combination of increased size and scale of forms and the incorporation of natural precincts signals the public realm. Nature is more than a foil for built form. As Hajime Yatsuka writes, these commissions create strikingly "lucid defined public territory," and that territory results from the positioning of both the built and the natural. In his merging of nature and architecture Ando achieves an almost classic, though thoroughly contemporary, balance between the two. The most classic feature of Ando's use of nature and architecture is his insistence on the presence of nature. And while the borrowed scenery of the hillside and adjacent lake are dramatic, the traditional enjoyment of such "gardens" for viewing or strolling is maintained. Framed by stoic forms — concrete rectangles, half circles, and columns — the Children's Museum presents a dramatic realm of buildings and very real land and water cascades.

The public realm, where the spirit meets not only other spirits (community) but also nature, is given its most robust conviction. The architecture takes on an essential, timeless presence, the land seems to swell and surpass that architecture, as palpable as the geology and topography that abounds. The harmony and symbiosis of nature and spirit, concrete and terrain, light and water create a new awareness and appreciation of both architecture and landscape. For once, the surroundings, the backdrop to Ando's architecture, are equal to the buildings, and in turn the buildings frame the surroundings. This act epitomizes an acceptance and grafting of nature that is at once ancient and an epiphany.

Ando's use of nature, his offering of nature to the polis, contrasts radically with the modern project. Modernism considered nature and lobbied for its preservation and inclusion in urban design, but its interface with architecture was limited. Le Corbusier minimized further the footprint of a building by putting it on *pilotis*. Such modernist moves enabled modern man to exercise and enjoy clean air and light. What exactly happened to the unbuilt land did not seem important to modernism's clinical mission. Furthermore, the use of natural land to constitute a public realm was never considered. Individuals



Japan Pavilion plan.

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alone would inhabit that realm. Only architecture — its built plaza or the promenade — could provide an appropriate meeting ground for the public. A Shinto-like respect for nature and connection to community had been long erased by established religions in the West.

In the Museum of Literature at Himeji, Ando furthers his convictions about the role of nature in the architectural by consulting the local cultural historian Watsuji and his anthropological theories on the effect of nature on various cultures. Jackie Kestenbaum, in her essay "Tadao Ando: Modernism and Its Discontents" (*El Croquis*), explains that Watsuji delineates theories about the effect of climate on culture and national character: Asian countries experiencing annual monsoons learn to passively accept (religiously mollify) nature rather than attempt to conquer it. This theory, Kestenbaum asserts, is compatible with Ando's view of nature. Ando has written: "From ancient times, nature in Japan was not something to be confronted and subordinated as in Western Europe, but was intimately cherished." The museum, set close to the castle in central Himeji, achieves a remote quality in its gardenlike setting, where the succeeding plazas and landings allow for the true meeting or congregation of people and nature.

Perhaps the Japanese exhibition hall for the 1992 Seville Expo is the most explicit example of Ando's resistance to modernism and the West. His text on the Japanese pavilion champions traditional craft practice and identification of the natural as the literal material of his architecture. This direct engagement of the past and the Eastern, of intensity and precise technology, is appropriated specifically to symbolize Japan to the West in a world's fair. In "Thinking in Ma, Opening Ma" Ando explains, "To possess powerful originality, but also the delicacy fostered by tradition. To give expression to soaring imagination through superior technique. I want to nurture space into being with care, attentive to craftsmanship. That same space, however, I am resolved to pry open using the harshest force. The delicacy that is distinctive of Japanese, and of Eastern, sensibility I seek to infuse with intense originality." He continues, "Japan's traditional architecture is marked by subtle coloring, obtained in the vertical and horizontal lines of its wood structure; by assiduous handling of fragile substances, like natural wood, paper, and earth; and by the depth achieved through artful arrangement of sequence." Later he asks, "Is it contradictory to handle the whole with boldness and the details with delicacy, while treating the whole carefully and details harshly? . . . For it is such conflicts as these that promise to liberate Japanese sensibility from its imprisonment in the museum of tradition and temper it anew. Through them one might take Eastern and Western modes beyond the appearance of stable confrontation to where their spatial sensibilities collide harshly, and a new place, resounding with potential, emerges."

When Ando directly addresses the design of the Japanese pavilion he situates his relationship to tradition and modernity. "For example," he writes, "the Japan Pavilion at the Seville Exposition was such an endeavor made within actual architectural practice. As a project, it made exhaustive use of the precise technology of Japan's traditional wood architecture. This was not simply in order to re-create Japan's traditional mode of architecture. . . . Rather, with this concise collection of technology I hoped to create a structure that would transcend tradition and stand powerfully as an architecture of immense and totally new space. Conversely, what I have always pursued with the modern material concrete — while handling this material of dynamic plasticity with the care deserved by paper — is to instill it with such intensity as to provoke and startle the human spirit."

In the 1950s Kenzo Tange began his modernist experiment by translating traditional Japanese post and beam construction into reinforced concrete in his prefecture halls, Tokyo City Hall, and Peace Center at Hiroshima. These often bulky East/West composites were surpassed by his more expressive, primal, concrete designs like the Tokyo municipal gymnasium and St. Mary's Cathedral. In the Seville exhibition hall Ando seems to have rewritten Japan's venture into modernism. Infused with the singularity of expression of those ancient Japanese halls such as the Diabutsu-in or Kiyomizu temple, the Seville exhibition hall reestablishes the impact of wood detailing and joinery in a technologically challenging structure. As Ando claims, he is moving beyond Eastern traditionalism and the straightjacket of Western modernism by creating a building that makes use of technology, standardization, and dynamic plasticity. He seems increasingly to embrace the past, the East, in order to move forward.

Thus, Ando emerges as the romantic hero of his own making. He stars in a play distinguished by what is often billed as a tragic and futile exercise. Ando resists the modern — an emptied nature, a function-coded landscape, a commercially saturated society. His architecture, at once austere, frugal, minimal, seems to renounce easy comfort and market success. But, in reality, Ando's architecture is a resounding popular success, the mark of true presence in a Japanese city. His very rejection of the Western and modern is the expression of the emergent Japanese postmodern, postindustrial culture. The dissimulation of image (architecture) and content (contradicting folds of fact and fiction) is accommodated in the form and text of Ando's works.

Buried by a Mad Max present, the Japanese city approaches the future as a wasteland, a dumping ground of technological infestation and discarded Western ideas. Holding back the forces not of nature but of commercialism and success, Ando seeks to recover the essential that was contained in the past and convey it to the future. His task could only be construed by the tender of the dunes, a goal seemingly futile and ephemeral, but central to the present. The forces of civilization and enlightenment have been replaced by the acceptance of a vacuum of authenticity and conviction. Ando's project, finding the authentic in a sandstorm of mirages, has never seemed more appropriate.

Lynne Breslin is an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University and a practicing architect. Her most recent projects are exhibitions at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the traveling exhibition "The Art of Memory: Memorialization of the Holocaust."

The Japan Pavilion showcases traditional Japanese craft practice. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.

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