

Kara-za, A Movable Theater

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Kara-za, A Movable Theater

an interview with Tadao Ando

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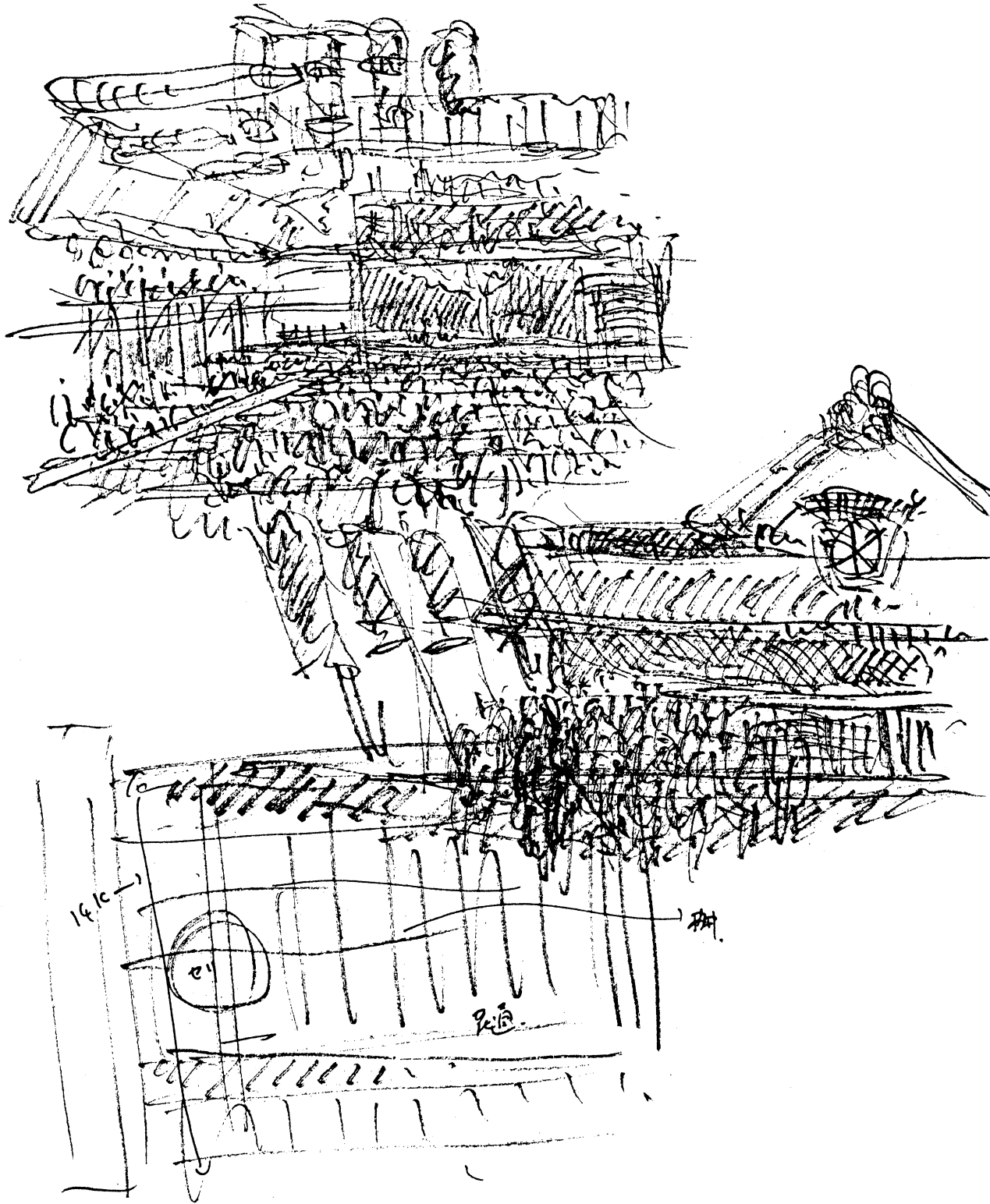
In July 1985, I was asked to create a theater in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. As I began to design, Kanamaru-za, a theater I had seen on Shikoku Island, was in the back of my mind. It is a kabuki playhouse built at the end of the Edo era (Kyoho period, c. 1800). Located in Takamatsu city, it is part of Konpira Shrine, the first stop on the praying route of eighty-eight temples. To reach the theater/temple complex, one must climb to the mountain's summit, through the town in front of the temple gates. The experience of this difficult climb heightens the feeling that one is approaching an unusual place, and enhances one's sense of pleasure upon arrival. Kanamaru-za may be the oldest surviving wooden kabuki theater and is an interesting wooden structure for me.

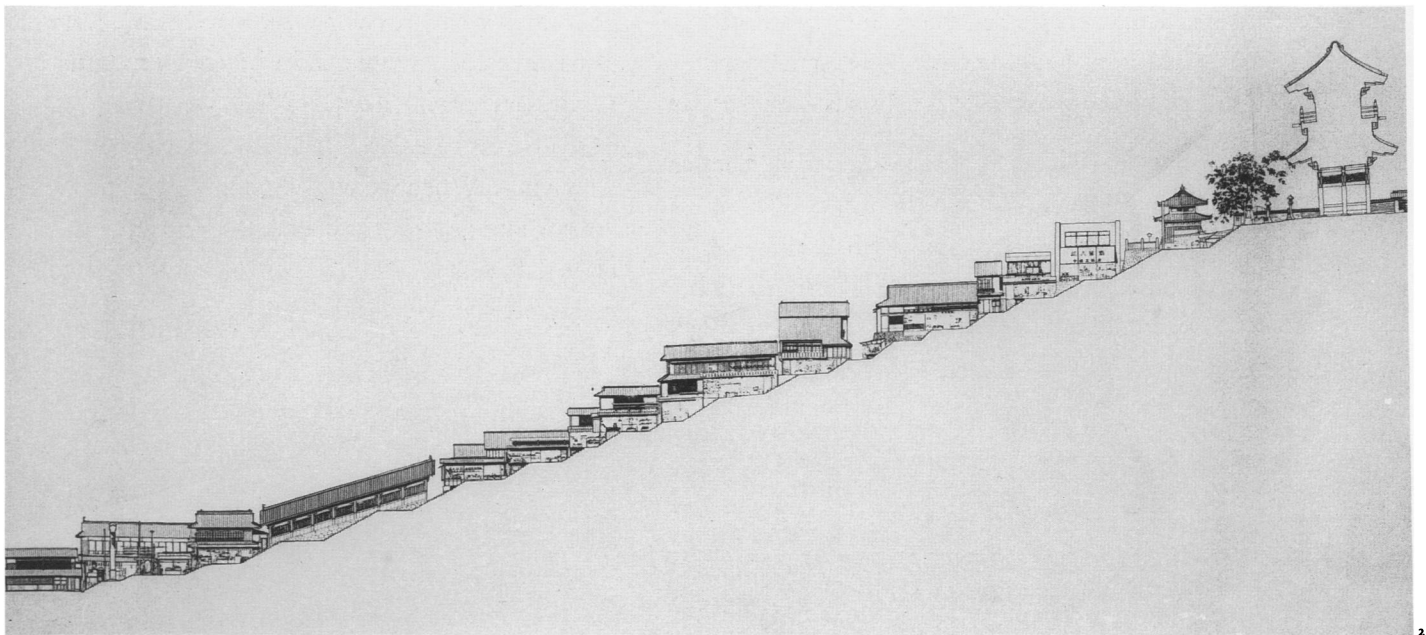
Theaters nowadays are fully equipped with up-to-date technology in order to provide the best possible environment for actors and audiences. Audiences watch the acting while seated in com-

fortable chairs as if in their own living rooms. The place is air-conditioned, needless to say. The use of technology superficially manipulates even the acting itself. If an actor's voice is not audible, sound effects can amplify it. Because of all this comfort and technical manipulation, I find there is no real excitement for the actor or for the audience.

I found Kanamaru-za very interesting because of the poor condition of its lighting and acoustics. When an actor is not in good shape, you feel it. In a modern theater, you never know what the actor's condition and feelings are because there are too many layers of manipulation between the actor and audience. To me, that's not real acting. Acting becomes interesting when we, as an audience, can feel the actors themselves. When *that* is communicated, then for the first time excitement emerges. Actors challenge their own capabilities and the audience responds to their humanistic content. Thus, I think that the ideal

This interview was conducted by the editors in the fall of 1987, in New Haven. We are grateful to George Kunihiro for acting as interpreter and to Kazumi Futagawa for translating the interview.





2. Konpira-san, site section,
route to Kanamaru-za.

3. *Taiko-bashi*, Japan.

4. *Taiko-bashi*, Japan.

I believe that people who don't use their minds and bodies in their daily lives cannot actually create anything. I think a living space should generate these opportunities for us even if it means a little inefficiency. In my opinion, efficiency and convenience are not the ultimate goals of architectural design. In principle, whatever the environmental conditions are, we should be able to control our lives with our own bodies and minds. That is where I started to conceive this project.

Is there any formal influence from Kanamaru-za?

No, there isn't. Kanamaru-za and Kara-za are about the same size but are very different in form. I was interested in the *concept* of Kanamaru-za. The formal arrangement of my theater, especially the relationship between the stage and the seating area, comes from the Greek outdoor theater. Kara-za is an outdoor theater covered by a roof.

In Europe, operas and plays were originally performed in the private homes of royalty and aristocrats. The size of these houses was perfect for the scale of the entertainment. Then, when they grew larger and larger, in order to house the general public, such conveniences as opera glasses were invented. The nobility still had the best seats, closest to the stage. You really can't see any-

size of a theater is one in which the audience can see with their natural vision, hear with their own ears and feel with their own senses. I believe that there exists an ideal size for a theater where the actors and the audience can still communicate without technological manipulation.

This applies not only to theatrical space but also to living space. As technology improves, a person will have to do less and less on his/her own. For instance, pushing a remote control button can change TV channels, adjust room temperatures, and even control the opening and closing of a garage door. We really don't have to do anything anymore. When things become more convenient, we become lazier, we don't challenge our own physical or mental capability in order to develop ourselves. I worry that human beings will regress by dismissing their own possibilities and won't even think any more simply because machines will be able to do everything for them.

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thing with opera glasses, you know. In any case, these theaters, growing more commercialized, became big business. Well, that's our theater today.

In principle, since we live in a society that relies on mass communication, theaters must be able to house as large an audience as possible. However, I wanted to question what theater is really all about. I am not saying that all theaters should be designed this way; this is my response to modern theater in general. My feeling of what theater might have originally been or meant motivated me to design this theater.



Does Kara-za relate to the tradition and culture of Japanese theater?

I think so. As a playhouse, like kabuki, I guess. The word "kabuki" originally referred to something original or new. Kabuki is a form of theater generated by public culture. For instance, we call someone who dresses or acts outlandishly *kabuki-mono* (*mono* means person). I think this theater gives an impression of modern *kabuki-mono*, when seen from both inside and outside because it is formally and conceptually unusual.

The Kara-za project developed as a result of your response to Kara Juro's theater troupe. What was your relationship with him and his actual involvement in the design process?

Kara Juro is a person who is always interested in creating something new. His plays are not written for a large theater. He and his actors used to

perform in what we call *aka-tento* (red tent). Kara Juro is an actor, a writer, and a director. I recently saw his new play in Tokyo. When we arrived, he guided me to a seat. Then he acted in his play for a while. When we were leaving the theater, we saw him again at the door still selling tickets. He is that kind of person. There is no one like him in this day and age. He is a very versatile, yet down-to-earth man.

You can probably say that these factors had some influence on my design but nothing really specific.

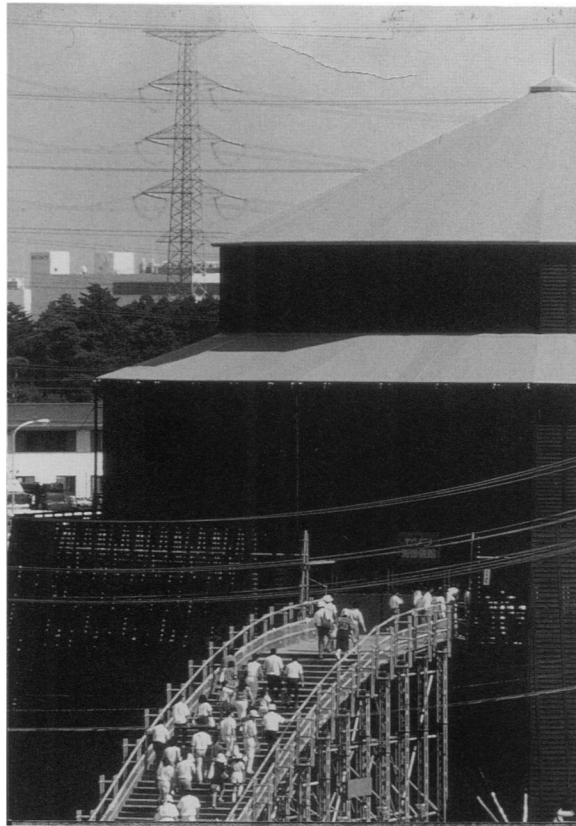
Did Mr. Kara participate in the actual design process?

No, not in the design process itself, and in fact the project wasn't just for Mr. Kara's theater group. This really is my concept of what a theater should be. Although Kara Juro was involved from the beginning, the actual client was the district leader of Asakusa, Tokyo. I thought there was little possibility that the project would be realized, and so resolved to enjoy myself and design something fantastic. In fact, the district could not raise sufficient funds. Eventually the design was constructed for a well-known company and used as a pavilion at a trade exposition in Sendai, in northern Japan. It will be used as a temporary theater in Asakusa and then at a drama festival in the Kansai district. It may be used by Issey Miyake in New York as well.



The theater is reached by an arched bridge. What is the role of the bridge in the design?

The approach to Kara-za is by a *taiko-bashi* (a half-drum shaped bridge) symbolizing one's departure from the world of reality. In the Edo period, a bridge was usually situated on the approach to a theater district, to mark the dividing point between this world and *higan* (the other world). People crossing the bridge become conscious of entering an extraordinary fictional place.

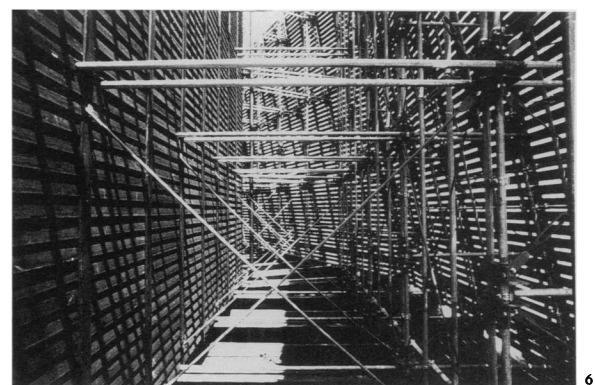


This *taiko-bashi* is similar in form to the one in Itskushima, at Miyajima Shrine. *Taiko-bashi* function as thresholds, as do the *torii* (gates) at shrines like Ise or Heian. In a Japanese house, you have a *shiki* (threshold) at the entrance to signify a separation of worlds. Without this, you would walk into a different world, but one which has not been distinguished from regular public space. I had planned to surround the theater with a bamboo enclosure to increase the other-worldly quality of the space.

The bridge and the theater building are constructed from the same material. What is the relationship between the two forms?

The form of the theater is a dodecagon. It is structurally independent of the bridge which pierces the dodecagon volume. I think that a dodecagon represents the world. The number twelve is symbolic of the cosmos. In Japan, there are twelve animals corresponding to the twelve-year cycle of the calendar. In the West there are twelve months to a year and so forth.

The dodecagon is composed of a layered column structure that forms two concentric rings around the central space. The inner ring, covered by its

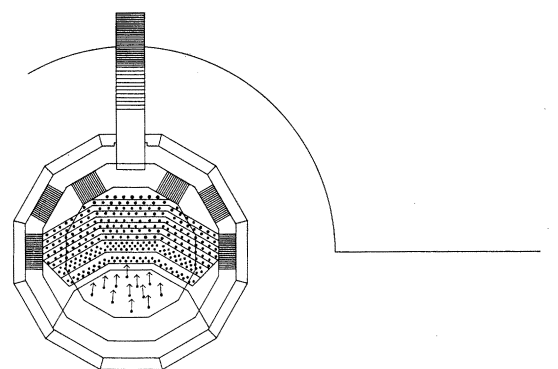
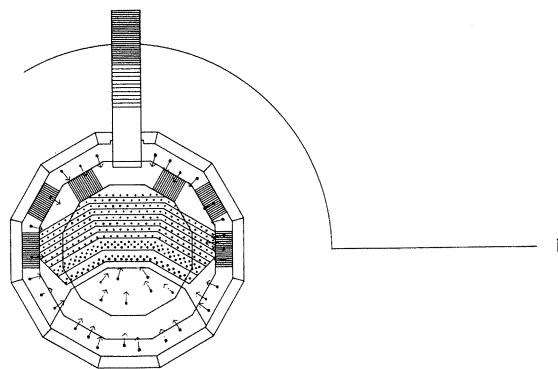
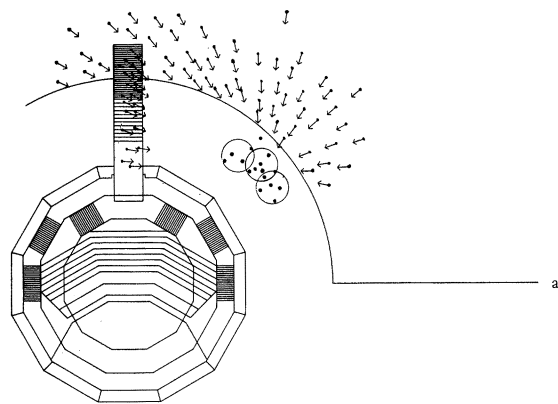


own roof, is integrated with the central space by the extension of the arc of the seating. The unroofed outer ring serves as a passageway for the actors. If it rains, the plays are still performed. Rain comes in but there is no problem. When the actors finish and exit through this passage, the audience cannot see them, only hear their voices. They hear them singing. They often sing at the end. You know how Buddhist monks read prayers at temples? It sounds better when you hear it from outside the building, doesn't it? It's better just to hear the sound without watching the prayers.

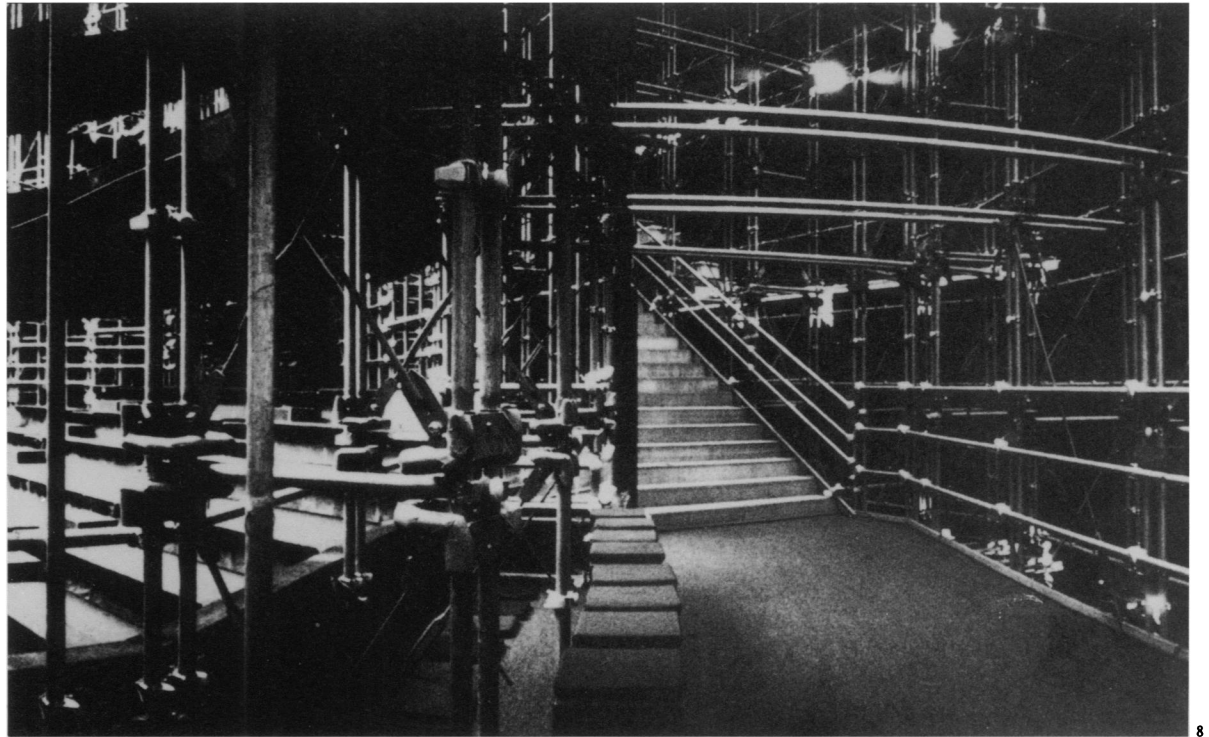
Can you explain why you overlap the structural system and the seating layout of the theater?

These seats are located in between pipes so people can sit within the structure. The structural system of the building and the seating don't align perfectly, but I think that's fine. My concept is to contain something that is not perfect in a perfect world.

You know the typical way in which the audience is seated to watch actors perform "properly" on a stage? I don't call that a real form of theater. A theater should be a place where audience and actors get emotionally involved through the many possibilities that are generated: actors can appear on stage from different directions, the audience can physically surround actors and vice versa. As in the *hana-michi* of traditional kabuki, actors sometimes emerge from the back of the theater and run through the audience to the stage.



5. Kara-za, theater entrance.
6. Outer layers of structure sheathed in black wood panels.
7. Circulation/use diagrams:
 - a. audience gathered on bridge prior to and after performance while actors greet them from grade level.
 - b. actors surrounding audience during performance, entering and exiting within inner ring.
 - c. typical performance arrangement.



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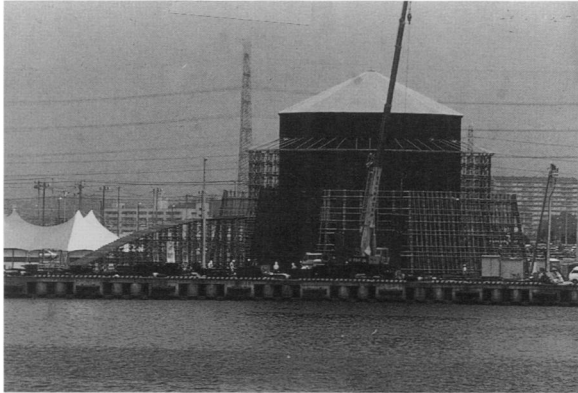
Can you elaborate on the functions of the subsidiary areas, such as the backstage?

The backstage is all underneath, so there are always actors beneath the audience. There is one large room that serves for both dressing and set storage. We left some sheets of the plywood floor unattached so that the actors could raise them to come out. We have to prepare many interesting things such as unexpected openings to the stage, having actors come out from here and there.

Formally, this theater is quite different from Japanese traditional theater. Hearing voices from underneath or elsewhere without seeing them makes the audience feel that they are surrounded by the actors' world. Plays on a small scale such as one-man theater or *kami-shibai* (shows featuring paper illustrations and dramatic readings to tell adventure stories) were originally performed

outside without a playhouse. In Europe, a piazza could become a theater and in Japan, a small side street or temple courtyard could do the same. This small and simple form of theater eventually became large enough to be our modern theater. So, in principle, we should assume that stages exist everywhere in a city. What I have done here was to cover one part of the city with a roof.

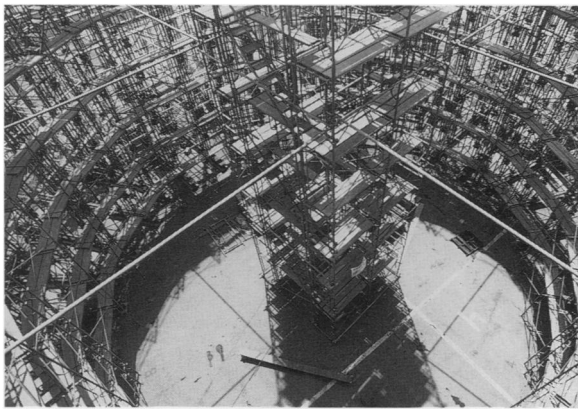
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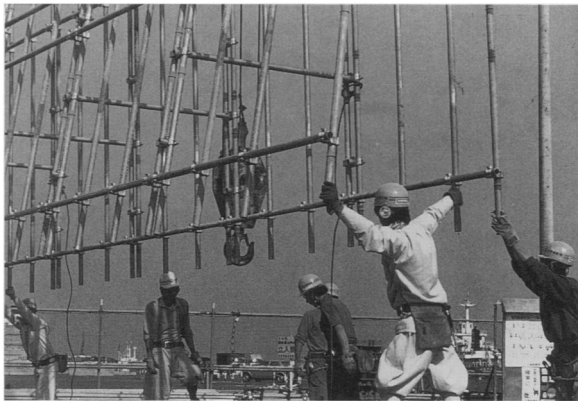
8. Interior view of seating/
structure intersection.

9-12. Photographs during
construction.

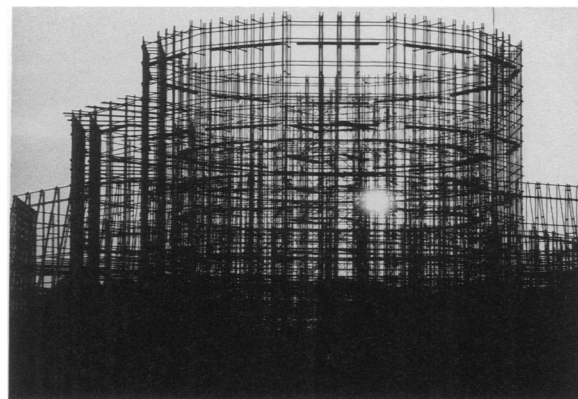
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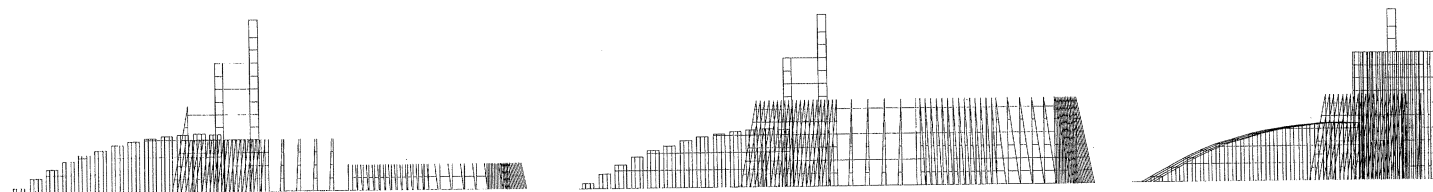
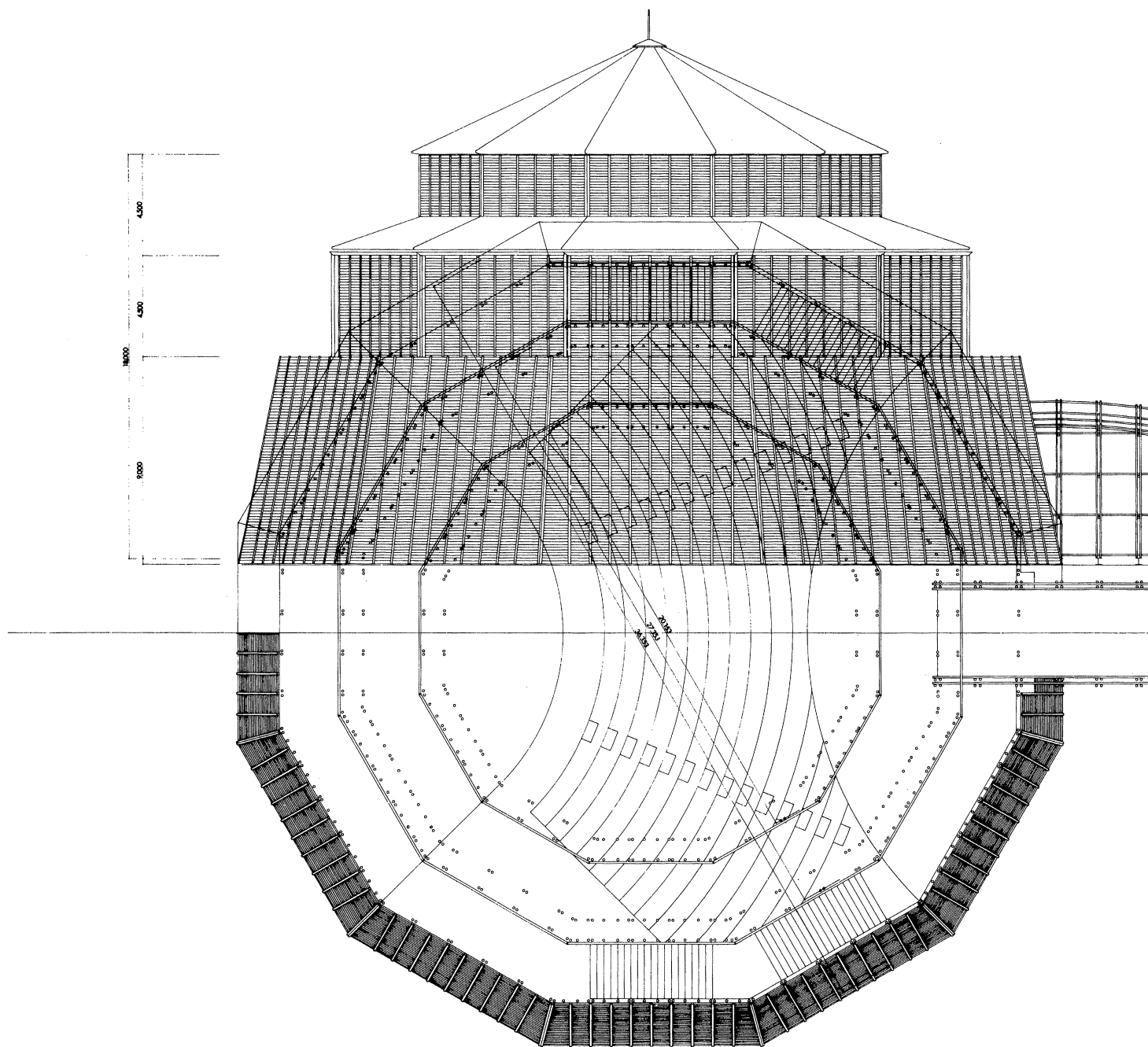
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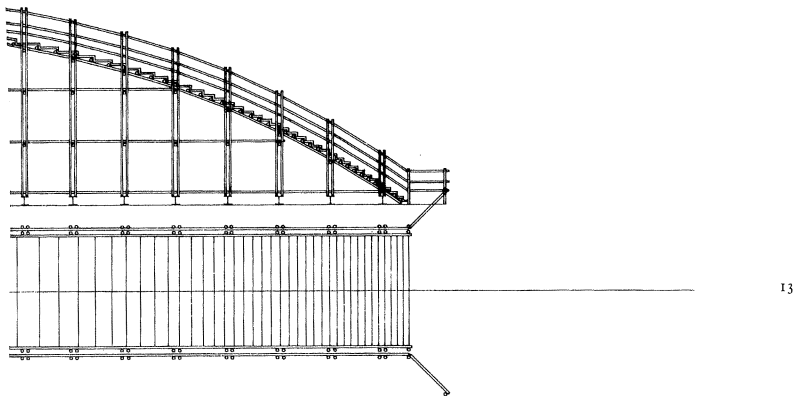


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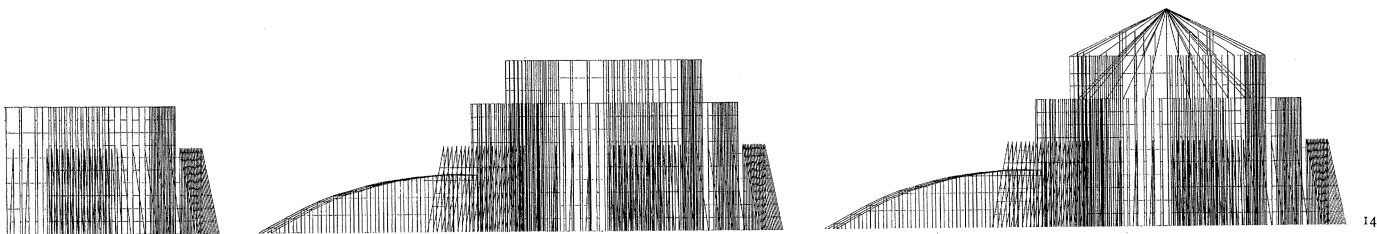


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- 13. Theater elevation and plan.
- 14. Scaffolding erection sequence.



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Can you describe the material components of the building?

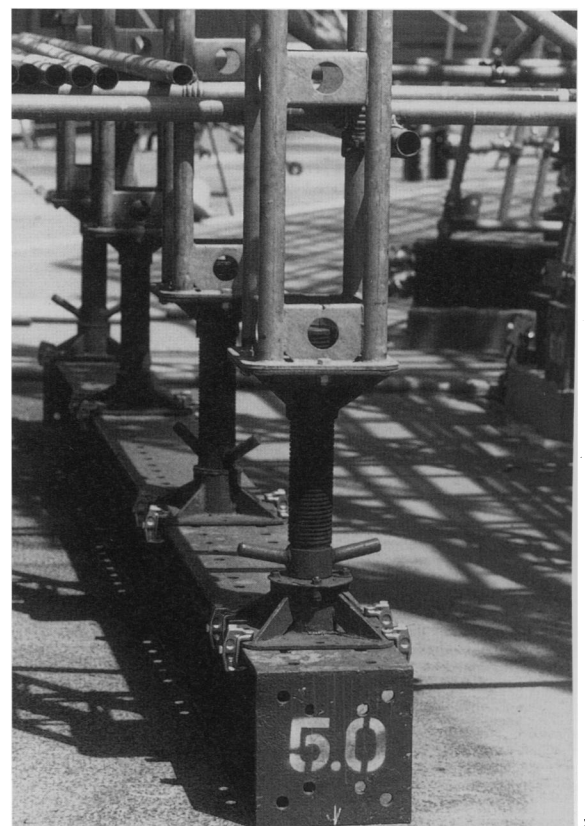
Because the theater was to be moveable, the main structure is an assemblage of pipes used in scaffolding. I think that scaffolding is very functional. The shape of its individual members is dictated by its functionality and efficiency; anyone can put it together. The basic structure is a truss, but analysis according to existing programs proved impossible because there are so many joints. Consequently, each member had to be considered in section.

The members are pipes 48.6 mm in diameter and 2 mm thick. The longest are 9 meters long. Twenty-five thousand ready-made clamps are used. The members are held together solely by frictional force. The analysis of the joints was difficult to substantiate. In order to concentrate as much of the stress as possible in the joints we ordered special brackets and 20 mm diameter braces. There are twenty types of joints in all.

The pipes can be assembled in fifteen days. Moreover, there is no need to transport building materials, with the exception of certain special parts. Practically everything is available locally. If one faxes drawings and instructions, the building can be easily put together anywhere. By reducing architecture to information, it is possible to transmit a building anywhere in the world.

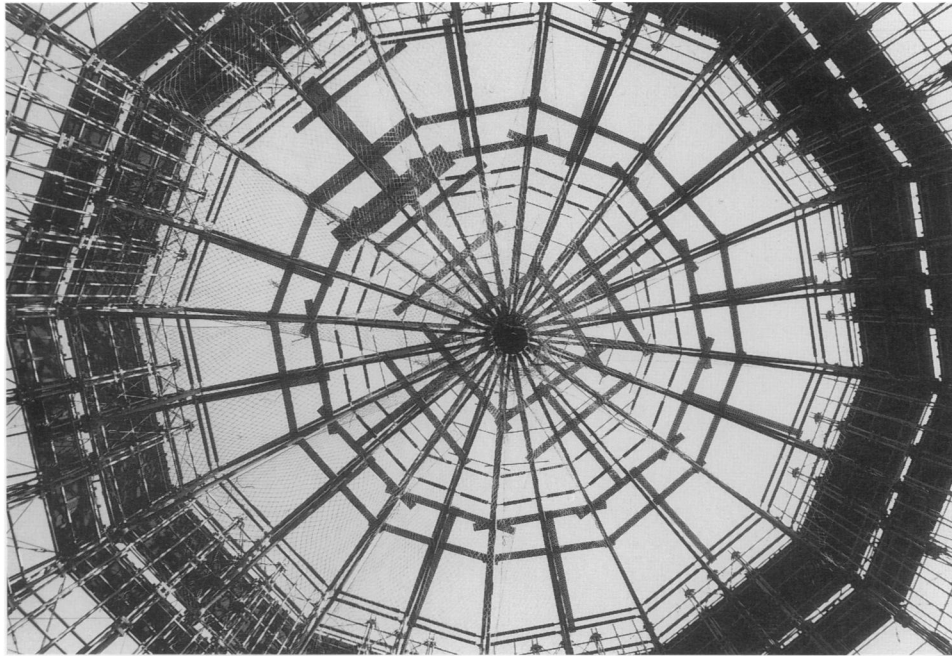
15. Detail of scaffolding clamp at base of the theater.

16-17. Working drawing details of pipe connections.



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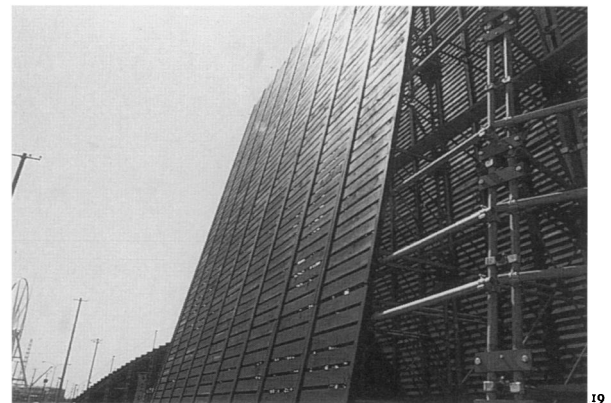
18. Umbrella roof structure.
19. Detail, black skin panels.
20. Site plan, Asakusa, Tokyo, showing processional route to the theater.

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The shape of the roof is like a large open umbrella. It is made of the same scaffolding as the main structure, covered by a red fabric skin. This skin is not required for the structural integrity of the building; it just lightly sits on it. I think that the theater without this roof would be its ideal form, but of course that's not possible because of the weather. At the end of some performances the tent is peeled back. Each of the three pieces of fabric can be pulled back by ropes. It's up to the theater troupe—if it's appropriate for them, they open up the roof.

The material of the outer skin is a plywood panel used for concrete construction. The plywood panels are attached to larger frames which make up the sides of the dodecagon. The panels are painted black. Old Japanese fences are often oil-stained black like this. Spaces left between each panel allow light to filter through. During the day, natural light filters in through these slits. At night, the red glow of the interior is visible from outside.

The overall colors are red and black. Red is the color used for celebratory occasions in Japan.



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What is your attitude toward artificial light in the theater?

Of course, you can't do without it. An entrance lobby is usually very bright, isn't it? But I keep the lobby very dark. So, you come into the lobby and it is pitch black. In the house of the theater, light filters up from underneath the seating.

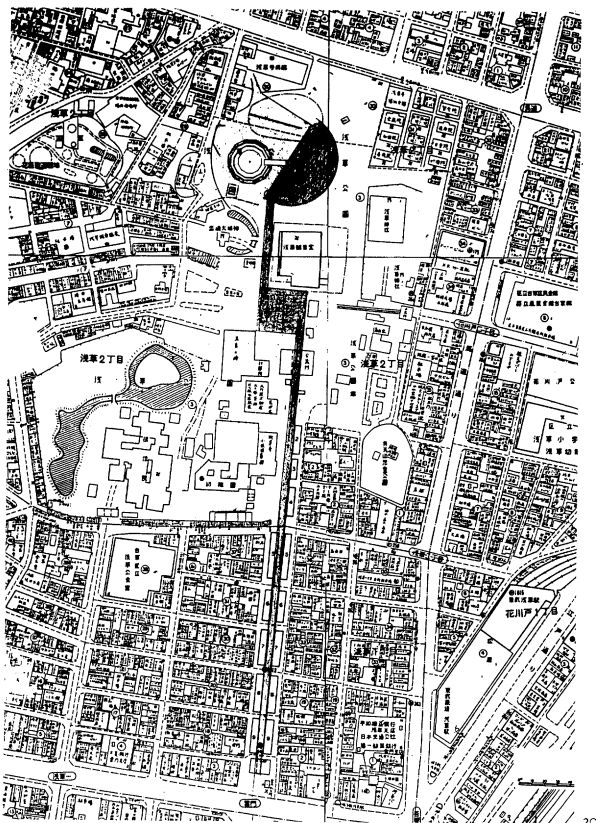
What is the relationship between this theater and the city where it is located?

It depends on the place. I have to look at the location in order to come up with an idea. I can't develop an idea by talking about it. I just have to

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see. . . It so happened that when I went to see the Tokyo site, I came up with the idea of lighting candles along a procession route. The idea of everyone in the Asakusa neighborhood lighting candles is appropriate because there are many shrine festivals and street fairs there. All of the city participates in the making of the theater. It doesn't get interesting unless the people participate.



How do your commercial buildings provide places for public participation?

For me, the most important aspect of commercial architecture is to provide the space that functions as a meeting place for the public. In Japanese commercial architecture I feel there is too much emphasis given to the function of selling. When I design, I don't overemphasize the features of the store itself. Instead, I first create a dramatic space in the middle of the store which can serve various purposes. It can function as a piazza, a little passageway, or an improvised outdoor theater space. Then I add the store features. Many retail/commercial spaces are just a bunch of stores lined up. I don't think they serve the proper

function of commercial architecture. There are, however, good examples of commercial architecture in the United States, such as Rockefeller Center. There, many stores and restaurants surround a central space where people can eat in summer and skate in winter. The stores there actually have secondary roles. It is a shame that new shopping centers do not follow such a great example. I think that the main function of commercial space is to generate a central place where people can come and enjoy a city.

I find many possibilities in commercial space. However, I think that developers and architects should be more brave about building such spaces.

My commercial works are not really featured anywhere, there are only a few in *GA* publications. They mainly feature my concrete ones. Do you know Kitano-Cho? It is a small town about one square kilometer. I have built many buildings there, one every year or so. . . in twenty years I will have twenty buildings there, plus plazas and extras.

In general, architects can predict only fifty percent of the end result when they are designing. The other half is something that they subconsciously create. This they can figure out only once it is built. Basically, architects as creators have to get excited about going to see their completed buildings. You really cannot lose that spirit. You know how children make toys? When they are making a toy they don't know what it will look like. But when it is built they get very excited. When you become older, you enter a society where economic constraints and other elements often interfere with your creative freedom. You become an architect while forgetting all that excitement you had when you were a child.