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FREDRIC JAMESON: TADAO ANDO AND THE ENCLOSURE OF MODERNISM

At about this time [460 B.C.] the Athenians began to build their two long walls down to the sea, one to Phalerum and one to Piraeus. . . .

— Thucydides

Those who scan the streets of Tokyo or Osaka, let alone the Japanese countryside, for the buildings of Tadao Ando know those telltale slabs of poured concrete, marked at regular intervals by round indentations (like the tracings left by fabric on your skin during a brief nap), that unerringly spell your approach and peremptorily demand your attention. “Brutalism” may not be the most exact technical or historical term for these massive surfaces: but they have nothing of the exquisite polish of Louis Kahn’s Yale Center for British Art (where concrete is transformed into a type of precious metal), and they certainly shoulder aside the characteristically formless agglomeration of Japanese urban structures with a decisive ruthlessness.

Infallible signatures — recognizable at a glance anywhere in the world — such walls are also preeminently misleading. We will wish to retain their gesture of radical disjunction, a significant index in the light of that primal modern or modernist act whereby the space of the new building is wrenched free of its fallen context and isolated, sculpturelike, on *pilotis* that reject the formlessness of the former streets and sites from which they rise. On the comparability to this inaugural gesture of Ando’s act of disjunction then turns the question of some putative modernism to which his work is to be assigned or not.

But the reader, like the observer in the street outside, needs to be disabused of the idea that these materials signal the monumental, let alone some gigantism or elemental primitivism, the Titanic or the primordial normally associated with stone as such and sometimes with its successor substances. Ando’s is on the contrary an art of the miniature: constructions of extraordinary delicacy whose effects of absence more richly merit comparison with Stéphane Mallarmé than the standard referencing of Mies and glass. It is a paradox I can think of clarifying only by recalling Jean Cocteau’s clarification of his mannered habit of redistributing all the genres he practiced as subforms of poetry (“poetry of the novel, poetry of the theater”): “this lace,” he said of the play form as such, “made of rope.” Concrete is the rope from which Ando’s intricate designs are also woven, and it seems just possible that, as such, it functions less as a positive raw material, as a matter with specific sensory properties, to be brought forth, as Martin Heidegger says, “into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and flexibility of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the light and shade of color, into the clang of tone and into the naming power of the word”;¹ than as a non- or anti-material, as fungible as plastic without any of the connotations of this last as a simulation of matter, rather than primary matter itself.

This reading of the paradox — namely that these massive walls come to be understood as immaterial, when grasped from the inside of the work or the experience, rather than from the outside — is reinforced by Ando’s own remarks about the value of the wall in traditional Japanese houses, where, he tells us, “the wall does not actually exist. Of course walls were used. But their main aim was not to express the simplicity of the wood, paper, earth and straw of which they were made. . . .”² Whether it is appropriate to raise issues of cultural difference and distinctiveness on the occasion of this architecture — whether, above all, it is necessary or desirable to evoke some Japanese essentialism in order to characterize and understand Ando’s work — will also be a very crucial issue here, and indeed the question constitutes something like the obverse and inseparable concomitant of that of Ando’s modernism, mentioned above. For the moment it seems enough to retain this extraordinary moment in which the massive impenetrability of concrete unexpectedly fades into the luminous opacity of rice paper over scaffolding.

Indeed, if, as Adolf Loos noted, “wall plaster is a skin; stone is structural,”³ then the ambiguous significance of concrete can be traced out, its capacity to pass from surface to solid, and from the most extraordinary polish to the very signifier of weight and mass without refinement. Concrete is a kind of plaster that has become stone: engaged in a kind of Bachelardian “psychoanalysis of the elements,” it is a nonnatural substance that, unlike its nearest competitor, plastic, has succeeded in naturalizing itself and passing for some traditional element in its own right. Whence the mediatory uses to which Ando is able to put this material, as an outside radically different from its interior function.

*I attempt to use a modern material — concrete and specifically concrete walls — in simplified forms to realize a kind of space that is possible because I am Japanese and that rests on a simple aesthetic awareness cultivated in me as a Japanese. It seems to me that, at present, concrete is the most suitable material for realizing spaces created by rays of light. But the concrete I employ does not have plastic rigidity or weight. Instead, it must be homogeneous and light and must create surfaces. When they agree with my aesthetic image, walls become abstract, are negated, and approach the ultimate limit of space. Their actuality is lost, and only the space they enclose gives a sense of really existing.*⁴

This moment is also that of the passage from the outside, the street or context (“as lifeless buildings fill our cities, I have become acutely conscious of the deadly, oppressive nature of the environment in which I live”),⁵ to an interior in which a very different kind of experience is vouchsafed: it is therefore a moment of ambivalence in which the very categories we deploy to grasp this work become modified, and it is necessary to discuss those categories themselves for a moment. Not only do I not think that “modern” and “postmodern” constitute general concepts with properties and attributes of the precision required to organize and reorder empirical perceptions and observable features; I also think that it is fruitless to attempt to make them over into such general concepts (and/or to fight about these definitions in the first place, to invest one’s energies in struggling to secure some correct or proper description of the modern or the postmodern that secures for the one or the other those qualities to which you happen to be personally attached). If one likes the terminology, then it must be admitted that these are very much supplementary concepts, and indeed, in the case of the postmodern, doubly so: for if the modern (like the sublime) comes as a supplement to a poorly identified first term, which it ends up marginalizing in its triumphant progress, then the postmodern is the supplement of a supplement, open to waves of confusion or gestalt alternation in which it now looks like more of the same, now like a fundamental break and turn in some radically new direction. The consequence to be drawn is not particularly that of some indeterminability on which (like Montaigne’s soft pillow of doubt) we come to rest; but rather that we have to do here with mental operations which must be judged on their own terms and in their own contexts.

Thus, that particular mental operation which consists in sorting out the attributes of a given phenomenon with a view toward classifying it once and for all in this or that category — an operation that depends on the preexistence of typologies and classification schemes, permutational mechanisms and *combinatoires*, and which in literary criticism, having exhausted itself in genre criticism, knew a miraculous renewal with the various structuralisms — is surely never very interesting in its own right; nor is it generally deployed “in its own right” but for other, less well-identified or covert purposes which it is always crucial to unmask and identify and which sometimes amount to little more than the attempt to validate this or that preexistent academic aesthetic (“what is tragedy? tragedy is . . .”). Only if the exercise in definition and classification bears on “the current situation,” on trends in the present and stakes for the future, does the decision to classify Ando’s buildings as modern rather than postmodern take on concrete content and become interesting. To be more precise, it is in the context of a more general ideological return to certain aesthetic values often associated with modernism that the discussion about Ando acquires cultural-political significance.

It is a discussion that must begin with what I think of as Ando’s quintessential spaces, in the Church of the Light (in Ibaraki, outside Osaka) and the Water Temple at Hyogo (Tsunagun), where to be sure the otherworldly function of both buildings already authorizes a certain aesthetic regression. Both, however, allow us to articulate and specify the precise value and significance of Ando’s gesture of disjunction, and thereby to compare it more accurately with the classic high modernist one. What one observes, then, is that it is an incomplete disjunction; or rather that the act of separation and the sealing off of the interior from the exterior is a structurally complex or even dialectical one, since it systematically includes the filtering and transmission of certain features from the outside world.

Light is the primordial form of all such features in which externality has been extraordinarily concentrated and purified so as to be admitted in the form of an element in its own right, rather than as what allows other objects to be visible. In the Church of the Light itself, indeed, the symbolic cross is displayed before the worshippers in the form of two transversal slits in the concrete wall through which light passes; while light seeps down into the Water Temple through the immense lotus pool under this sacred space — a traditional wooden construction within the concrete substructure, to which one descends by a narrow concrete stairway that leads down through the middle of the pool itself.

Both are, in addition, miniature spaces; yet it must also be said that the shock one would expect to feel in such a reversal, as we pass from the massive concrete exterior, is quickly dissipated and forgotten. This is indeed, surely, like the sleep cure in Shakespearean tragedy, the desired therapeutic effect of these extraordinary spaces, which allow withdrawal from the outside world in



Water Temple, Awaji Island, 1989–91. Photo: Hiroshi Ueda.

some other mode than repression: and the nature of that mode is clearly another occasion for the issue of cultural difference to reimpose itself, here in the strong form of religion as such, always the most inaccessible version of sheer otherness. Is it indeed Japanese Buddhism — or Japanese Christianity for that matter — that, utterly alien to anything we can imagine under the category of religion in the West, enables so thoroughgoing a withdrawal from the worldly spaces of an overcrowded sociality and a tendentially overpowering commodification? The question contains within itself the coiled yet unavoidable issue of the ascription of Ando's unique spaces to some putatively unique Japanese culture, to a Japanese exceptionalism apparently far more difficult to dispel than any equivalents elsewhere (from the well-known American kind to that of the "Russian soul," from the sempiternal Chinese negotiation of the historical millennia to Indian "spirituality," or even simply from the eccentricities of the English to Gallic reason and "civilization"). I have bought into this ideological ambush by choosing the religious buildings as the most characteristic forms of Ando's production; but attention to the private dwellings (I was privileged to visit the Ito House in Setagaya-ku, Tokyo) would end up having the same effect, in the form of questions about the unique cultural status of Japanese daily life as such. The cultural issues are then slowly dispelled or dispersed as one moves to Ando's larger public buildings (among which I include the monumental Rokko housing project in Kobe and the enormous Children's Museum in Hyogo). On the other hand, I must also register my feeling that with them are also slowly dispersed the intensity of one's perception of Ando's unique style and space; and that may be too great a price to pay.

What is lost in the larger public spaces is essentially the aesthetic *experience* of the smaller ones; and it is this above all that marks Ando's relationship to the modernist tradition, for the very conception of experience as such, as a closed and intelligible phenomenon that can be abstracted from the random stream of life, is itself very much a modern development, from Georg Simmel to Raymond Williams, or even from Wordsworth's "spots of time" to Marcel Proust. I'm not at all convinced that such conceptions of experience necessarily demand and produce or are accompanied by full or centered subjects (the latter might, indeed, itself be intermittent); but it is certain that the bourgeois conception of aesthetic experience, of the autonomy of the aesthetic as such, from Kant on, is a symbolic or ceremonial reenactment of this more fundamental organization of subjectivity, which is to be distinguished sharply from ancient or classical notions of fate or destiny on the one hand, and also from the space of the postmodern on the other, which no longer allows for such separation and such isolated specificities; which is an impure and mixed space and time in which former experiences dissolve into the environment, just as formally bounded subjects, now internally conflicted and multiple, spill out into a heterogeneous world in which painfully conquered distinctions and dualities between subject and object have been frittered away beyond recognition.

The autonomy of Ando's spaces is far from a matter of mere material closure, nor does the notion of the "windowless monad" really come to mind at their encounter, since this last, in Leibniz and in its aesthetic version in Adorno, was also the world itself, the totality of being (that thereby needed no windows); whereas the semidarkness of Ando's rooms is certainly felt as a withdrawal and an experience of sanctuary.

It will also be a question of walls in the description of this process of autonomization, but walls as movement and trajectory, rather than as limit or frame. In the Forbidden City, in Beijing, one can have a peculiar experience of passing between two such interminable stone boundaries (the limits of two distinct precincts in this enormous palace complex?), in which empty cobblestones stretch out in an unidentified path, used perhaps by unauthorized persons convoked to this or that distant gate without the right to cross the grounds themselves. It is a strangely abstract experience in which the length and time of sheer walking is somehow positioned outside the world, and in which the narrow confine of the walls on either side is peculiarly reassuring. Here at any rate walls become the index of a temporal experience rather than of a spatial form, and it is also in this sense I believe that Ando makes his most productive use of these components, whose slow curve inflects the eye and marks the unfolding in time of our apprenticeship to the work.

But there are even more subtle ways in which the wall is deprived of its substantial or thinglike character and made over into a vector or an operator of mobility: indeed the procedure I have in mind is by way of being something like a synthesis between the space of the parallel evoked above and precisely this shift into curvilinear movement, for in it two walls keep company with each other for a brief period only, breaking off at unequal intervals. Thus what the one ceases to screen out the other takes up sequentially; an outside is conjured up by the termination of each wall, only to be annulled by the persistence of the other; openness is held out and suspended all at once, closure is lifted at the same time that it is imposed. It is a matter of exquisite timing, of a tact that is spatial and temporal all at once, and the building has at this point and in these outer intersections become a gesture, of a sculptural

type, or even of a theatrical one (if one wants to lapse into culturalism and invoke the precise and minute gestural language system of the various Japanese acting traditions). Here we confront what Ando himself calls the "wall beyond the wall of the daily-life part of the building."

And indeed, it is this peculiar and characteristic way of opening an outside and holding it simultaneously at a distance that can serve as the key to the specific nature of Ando's aesthetic autonomy. For not the sealing off from a press of worldly features and demands characterizes this closure or containment, but rather the selective admission of a few such features in their most purified form: "such things as light and wind," says Ando, "only have meaning when they are introduced inside a house in a form cut off from the outside world."⁶ It is as though the disjunctions of modernity were recognized as impossible and inhuman, like asking the organism to survive without breathing in some new non-space; even more than that, like asking the organism to do without its formal category of context or site, of "being-in-the-world" — for one can after all hold one's breath for a time, but one cannot think at all except in situation (no matter how rarefied and abstract that situation may be). We have become accustomed to thinking of, say, the few rare objects of Mallarmé's late poetry as object-survivals, remnants and last survivors or stand-ins for things that have undergone a breather-taking process of sublimation, so that only these final objectual watermarks or afterimages of a formerly tangible external reality persist like a memory of reference so faint it can scarcely be comprehended any longer. Ando offers a new perspective for thinking such Bataille-like remnants and detritus as rather the sop and gauntlet thrown down to an oppressive outside world in order precisely to keep it at bay, and to satisfy whatever cravings for reference still remain in a beleaguered situation hemmed in by pollution, overpopulation, consumerism, workaholicism, and conformity.

This also sheds new light on Ando's formulation of his relationship to modernity itself, which with his accustomed poetic lucidity he describes as a process of enveloping or enclosing it: modernism would thus persist in Ando's work, but it would itself be the object of a new operation, which is neither the refusal inherent in the postmodern gesture nor the unveiling of various alternatives proposed by this or that theory of countermodernity, but rather — like the wall beyond a wall — the enclosure of what is already formally a closure, the limiting of those former limits, the strategic localization of what wished to be transaesthetic and somehow absolute. Here experience as such remains and persists, as has been suggested above: the autonomy of the aesthetic, that claim of the individual work to its self-sufficiency and to a mode of subjective reception radically different from the other practical or epistemological forms of intentionality, survives, over against the sheer textualization of former works of art in the culture of the postmodern.

What, then, of the classification of Ando's work? Do any of the current categories — modernist, late modern, or postmodern — seem appropriate for this unique construction of space? One is certainly tempted to think of his work as a belated modernism, reinvented under adverse conditions and sheltered against a degraded urban environment (one of whose degradations is clearly, in his own opinion, a cheap and omnipresent postmodernism itself): this characterization would serve perhaps as one kind of gloss on Ando's own expression, "an enclosed modern architecture," a "self-enclosed" modernism. And it is certain that if the Moebius strip, always external to itself and infinite in its very finitude, is the emblem of the postmodern generally, the monad, always interior to itself and finite in its very boundlessness, is that of modernism proper. Ando's inner spaces are clearly monadic rather than Moebian, and reinvent categories of inside and outside that we thought were tabooed and abolished by a poststructural and postmodern age.

But it would be a mistake to think of this modernism as late or belated in Jencks's sense. In his influential statement, indeed, Charles Jencks distinguishes what he calls the late modern from the postmodern in a variety of ways which seem to me reducible to the general opposition between technology and historicism: the postmodern is a matter of signs and allusions, and ultimately of a proliferation of historicist references; late modern is not semiotically oriented in that sense but rather hooked on the technological aspects of modernism, which it reiterates, multiplies, enlarges, and replicates. It seems perfectly plausible to adduce this definition by way of the buildings of Norman Foster; but Arata Isozaki is already problematical and the inclusion in this category of the Centre Pompidou will probably strike many as perverse, since, although it certainly fits the description abstractly, it has surely come for many to seem prototypical of a certain postmodernism. This speaks against Jencks's effort to see the late modern celebration of technology as

somehow playful; but I think there are also potential confusions inherent in the radical disjunction of technology from historicism proposed here, and I would like to suggest a somewhat different way of doing the job.

Technology can itself be a feature of historicism insofar as its stages are historical, something we are probably far more conscious of in late capitalism than in its second or modern stage. In that period technology seemed both timeless and essentially Western and to embody a classical moment of production as such — a moment then appropriately rebaptised modernization. We can now see however that this particular technology, that of electricity and the internal combustion engine, and of so-called heavy industry generally, was a historical stage in social evolution and a stage that has been revealed to be obsolescent precisely by the emergence of radically new cybernetic and informational technologies (along with nuclear energy), a technology we now think of as characteristically postmodern and contemporary (or postcontemporary) in ways in which the older streamlined technological forms of the modern are not. The relationship of technological change to the stages of capitalism itself has been accounted for by the long or Kondratiev waves of this system, which knows vast 60-year cycles in which an initial boom gives way to a saturated market, endemic stagnation, and the other more general social consequences of the falling rate of profit. The solution to this systemic crisis is a fundamental technological revolution, which permits an expansion of the market and a technological retooling of the system as a whole: something which defines the moments or stages of capitalism and in particular authorizes the theorization of postmodernity as a new or third stage in this process of expansion and relatively discontinuous mutation.

Thus, while I would agree that the late modern fetishization of technology is a fundamental feature of this mode, I believe that this characterization earns its credentials precisely on account of the historicist impulse at work within the technological obsession, namely the reference to an essentially modernist technology, an older kind of technology than the one currently predominant. It follows that I think one needs to redefine postmodernist historicism — clearly an equally fundamental feature of this kind of cultural production — in such a way as to make its technological component visible as well, and in particular to foreground its relationship to postmodern or informational technology.

But at this point perhaps another set of distinctions may be in order. Marx suggests indeed that economic systems can be grasped according to three related yet distinct dimensions: production, distribution, and consumption. It is then clear that an approach to any given system by way of a single one of these dimensions, or a model in which one dimension is seen as predominant over the other two subordinate ones, will also yield a kind of social ideology. Marxism, for example, presupposes the centrality of production over the other two dimensions — whence the well-known critiques in terms of productivism or economism and of a privileging of class over other social indicators (and, in a related bias, of working or productive classes over other classes).

What has been much less discussed — in a situation in which this circle cannot be squared conceptually, and in which all social models necessarily end up privileging one of the three dimensions over another one and thus producing an alternate model which remains as fundamentally ideological as Marxism is here criticized for being — is the structural bias of the postmodern projection of the social in terms of communication as such, an ideologeme we are now in a position to grasp as a confusion, a conflation, or an identification of the two opposing dimensions of distribution and consumption with one another. The richness of the ideology of communication lies indeed in this very ambiguity, which allows slippage between the two dimensions and at the same time suggests that the communicational model is somehow less monolithic or monologic, less univocally causal and thus dogmatic, than the Marxian model based on the single dimension of production. Meanwhile, the semiotic organization of the alternate model — also underscored by Jencks in his theory of postmodern architecture — authorizes political ideologies in which social differences — race, gender, ethnicity — are coded as communicational elements and features, as opposed to class distinctions, which equally clearly derive from the production model. I believe that historicist allusions are to be grasped in the same way, as the rehearsal and performance of a certain postmodern ideology of communication, in which moments of the past and present speak to each other by way of images. (Meanwhile, I have elsewhere suggested that the ideology of the market today offers yet another powerful variant of the dual structure of the postmodern insofar as its deepest and most vibrant promise is something like the consumption of communication itself by way of information high technology.)

To put it this way is to understand why Ando, in whose work technological motifs as such seem to play little part, cannot be considered a late modern, even though the emphasis in his work on the production of a unique aesthetic space may certainly be considered modernist. But we have not yet raised the other insistent question about this work which has to do with its relationship to Japanese culture as such — which is generally ideologized in terms of its radical difference from modernity insofar as this last is identified with the West. In a key article on the subject, Harry Harootunian has described the famous Kyoto 1942 symposium on “overcoming the modern” in precisely this way, as an attempt to imagine a radically different culture from that of Western modernity or modernization;⁷ while later reprises of the debate change the valences on the subject — Takeuchi’s postwar discussion calling for an alternate to Western modernization based on the mobilization of popular masses, while the later governmental program of 1980 proclaims the “conquest of the modern,” that is, the definitive identification of modernization with Japanese exceptionalism as such. This evolution puts us on the track of a crucial shift in the postmodern whereby the traditional, the antimodern, has ceased to exist as a social reality and a political option in most of the countries of the Third World, which for better or for worse, have already been modernized beyond the point of return insofar as modernization in that sense is simply another designation for machine culture, electrification, and the like. In some fundamental sense, therefore, antimodernism, the traditionalist position, is no longer available: what looks like traditionalism — religious fundamentalism — does not correspond to the persistence of older ways of life but is rather a constructed and invented set of practices in the present, and is thereby to be considered as postmodern rather than premodern.

Thus, the classical Japanese way of life is today available only by way of image and pastiche, historicist allusion. But so today is modernism itself, whose aesthetic and conceptuality have been driven into obsolescence by changes in the infrastructure fully as much as by new fashions and intellectual and cultural fads and doxa. This homology between the Japanese and the modern — two things hitherto radically opposed in the polemics that reached their climax in the “overcoming the modern” debate — now puts us in a position to grasp the originality of Ando’s work, for in effect his spaces operate a profound identification between the two antithetical terms and offer to recapture the lost secret of the Japanese aesthetic by reinventing the lost spaces of the modern.

Just as it has been argued that the force of a literary narrative springs from the sharpness of the deeper contradiction it attempts to resolve, so here too I am tempted to suggest that the aesthetic power and beauty of Ando’s work springs largely from this metaphorical operation, and that experiencing these buildings involves, even if only unconsciously, an act whereby the modernity of this space is grasped as its essential Japaneseness. The metaphorical operation is a Lévi-Straussian one: for, as the founder of structuralism taught us, what is compared here is not two things, but rather two relationships and two gaps or absences. It is thus not affirmed in these buildings that modernism is Japanese (although this will be the ideological conclusion one draws illicitly from their aesthetic effect); rather what is affirmed is that the distance of the truly Japanese from contemporary life and its absence from it is somehow the same as the distance of the truly modern from contemporary life (and *its* absence from it).

Both of them are then enabled by the strategy of envelopment or self-enclosure; they reinforce each other ideologically and aesthetically at the same time that they ward off questions as to the relevance of either principle in and of itself for Ando’s work, which thereby wins an aesthetic density beyond all such labels and classifications. It is a double-coding that would then, paradoxically enough, qualify Ando for inclusion in Jencks’s postmodern category; but that is a complicated second-degree argument whose finer points do not need to be rehearsed here and may be saved for some future seminar on “overcoming the postmodern.”

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Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
2. Tadao Ando, “From Self-Enclosed Modern Architecture Towards Universality,” *The Japan Architect* (May 1982).
3. Adolph Loos, from L. Münz and G. Kunstler, *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of Modern Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 111.
4. Ando, “From Self-Enclosed.”
5. Tadao Ando, “A Wedge in Circumstances,” *The Japan Architect* (June 1977).
6. Ando, “From Self-Enclosed.”
7. Harry Harootunian, “Visible Discourses/Invisible Ideologies,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), 63–92.



*Above: Water Temple, below-grade interior. Photo: Hiroshi Ueda.
Right: Water Temple interior plan.*

