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Akira Suzuki

Gaudí Meets Mediatheque?

As work progresses on his new project in Barcelona's Montjuic, could Toyo Ito be coming under the spell of Gaudí? Oslo, Torre Vieja, TOD's, Parque de la Gavia ... Ito's various projects since the Sendai Mediatheque all seem to draw upon naturalistic metaphors: ripples, sea grasses, shells, trees. Ito has established a distinctive stance in the currents of contemporary Japanese architecture through his continual pursuit of 'transparency' and 'lightness'. But what is he thinking now?

Over the six years from his first concept sketches for Sendai Mediatheque, to his tackling of actual plans, to the 2001 unveiling, Ito concentrated primarily on the insides of the building. The 'contents', not the interior design. For despite the competition's call to architects for proposals, there was never any provision to draw up a fixed programme between the client – the City of Sendai – and the community at large. Thus all the while the unprecedented Domino system of plates and tubes was going up at the Sendai municipal site, the competition committee – chaired by Arata Isozaki – kept debating just what and how things should be done, coming up with an 'under construction' concept that threw the programme wide open: never to be finished, forever changing and becoming.

In marked contrast to any 'less is more' universal space, the wavering sea grass space of the Sendai Mediatheque was – and is – expected to keep positing frames and formations of one kind or another upon activities to take place there. Even so, admits Ito, 'The consensus was that the competition was a *fait accompli*, so no one was going to reject the plate-and-tube idea. If we'd rejected that, we'd have been down to nothing at all.'

Architects inevitably foresee difficulties in realising any structure this complicated, yet structural engineer Mutsuro Sasaki succeeded in analysing the requirements precisely enough to create a plan of action completed nearly perfectly on schedule.

What did Ito get out of the Sendai experience? A very real grasp on things,

it would seem. A dialectic of architectural shell and content. Up to this point, Ito's architectural shells – indeed all his structural elements – were the locus of his stylistic expression. Much like any architect since the modernist invention of the curtain wall, he has applied himself to dematerialising that stronghold.

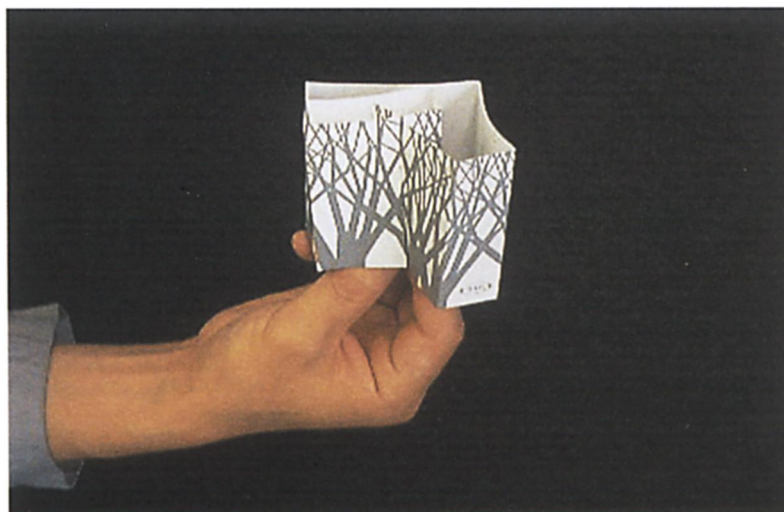
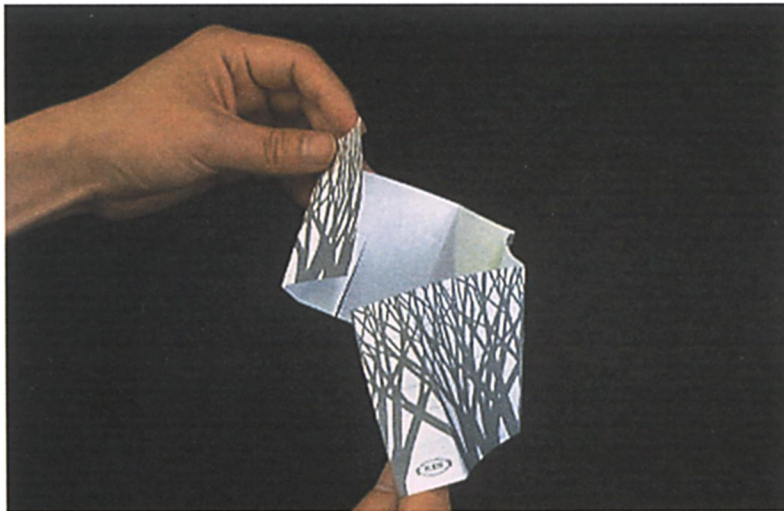
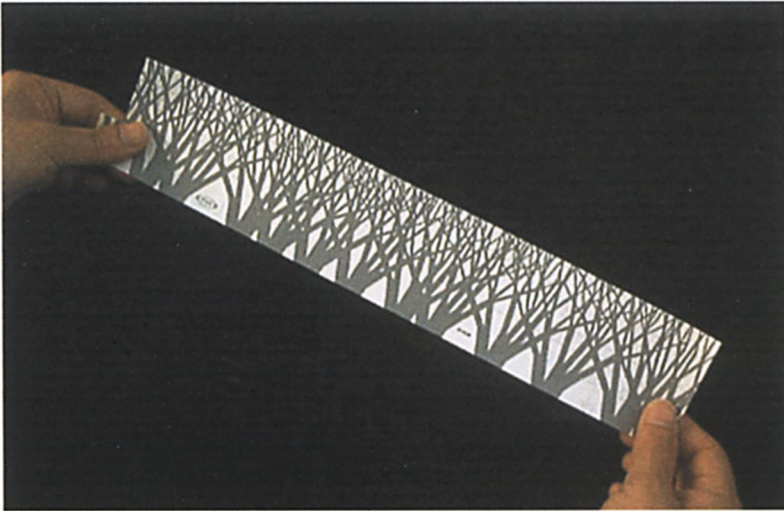
If one takes the 'less is more' aphorism literally, logic says that as the shell becomes thinner, less present, what's inside ought to become richer. Nonetheless, Ito's experience with Sendai clearly proved the opposite: not only did a more complicated shell (and structure) not weaken or straitjacket the interior, it actually served to stimulate activity. Indeed, users are still intrigued by Sendai's landscape of tubes, seeking ever new ways to dramatically engage as yet unexplored possibilities. Sendai's 'ripples' are thus emblematic of the chain reaction of users' experiences, one splash stirring up the next wave. The natural forms have succeeded in creating a living natural forest.

Human vibrations tossed into such environments are the key to reading Ito's latest architectural endeavours. Ito's current collaborating structural engineers, Cecil Balmond and Masahiro Ikeda, have gone beyond the view of architectural structure and membranes as mere shells; they have come to create very delicate conditions that will transmit the ripples and vibrations of all human activities within.

But was this dialectic shift latent in Ito's architecture all along? The living that takes place inside houses and buildings has always been fluid and ambiguous. Like water or wine, it only takes shape once contained in a vessel. Hence, these past millennia, the focus of involvement for architects' efforts to structure their ideas in space and form has been the container, not the contents. What, then, has contributed to making Ito's architectural shells so vibrant inside? Let us look for clues to this dialectic development in a reassessment of his early residential works.

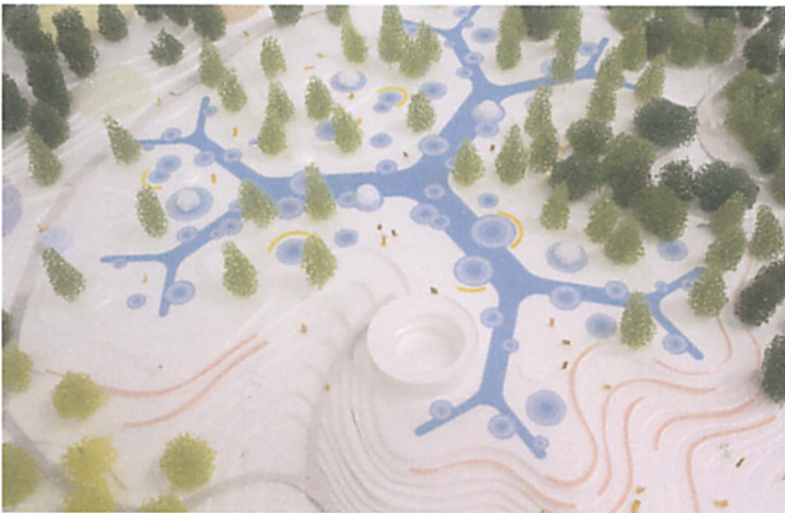
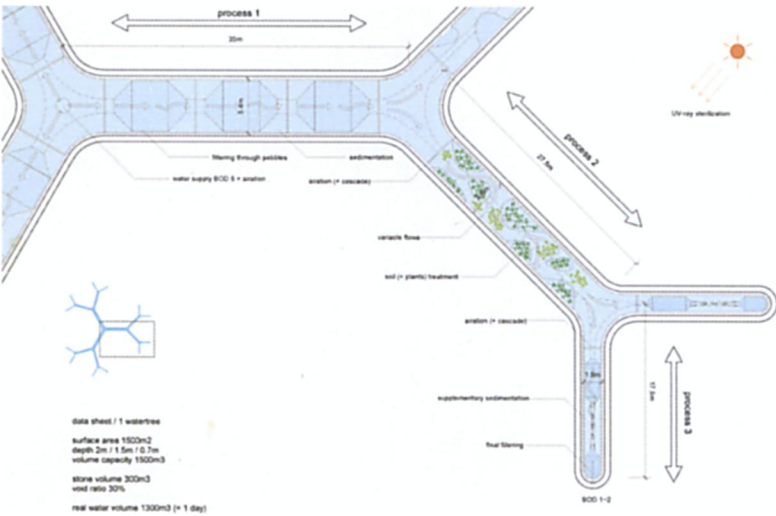
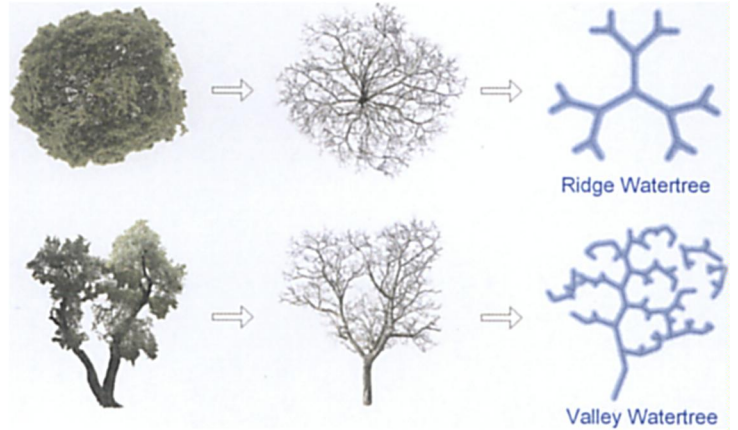
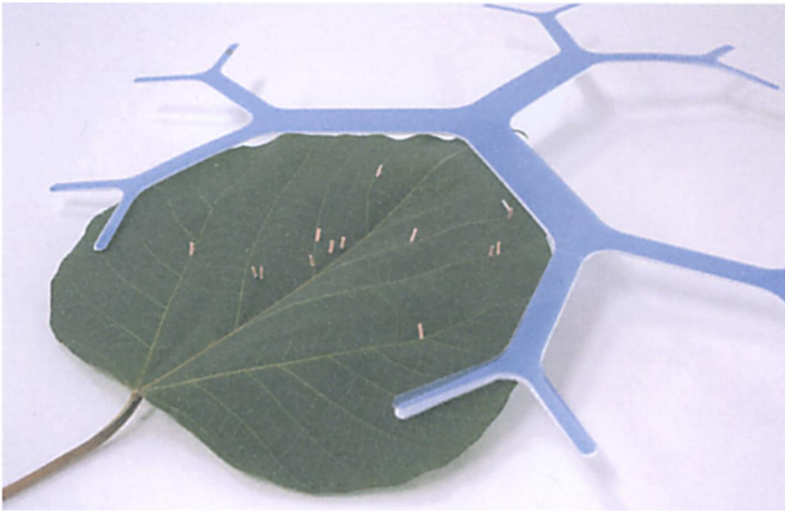
Spiral tube, photographed by Ramón Prat in
Toyo Ito: *Sendai Mediatheque* (Actar 2003)



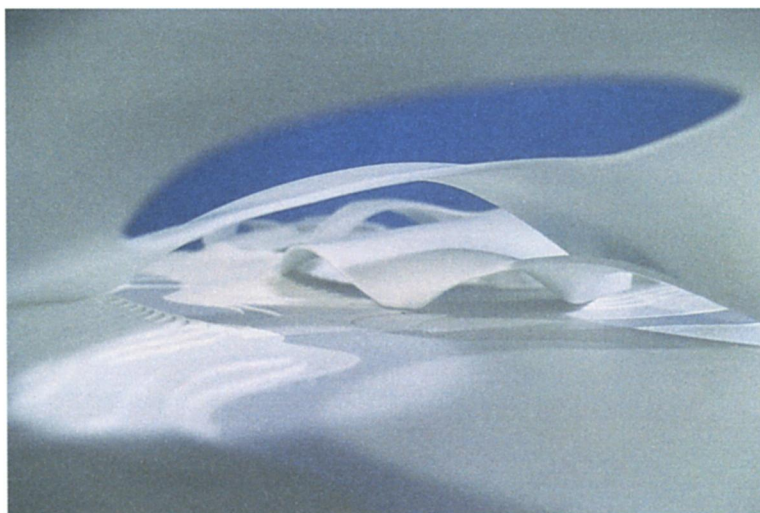
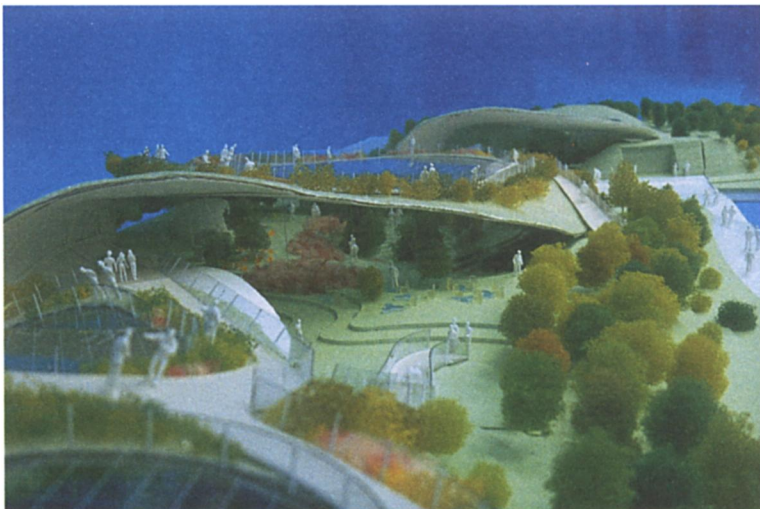
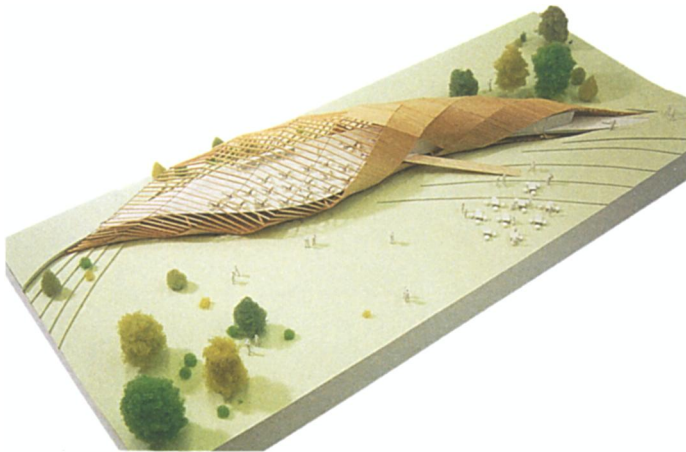


Opposite page, from top: Serpentine Pavilion; Sendai Mediatheque, photographed by Nacàsa & Partners

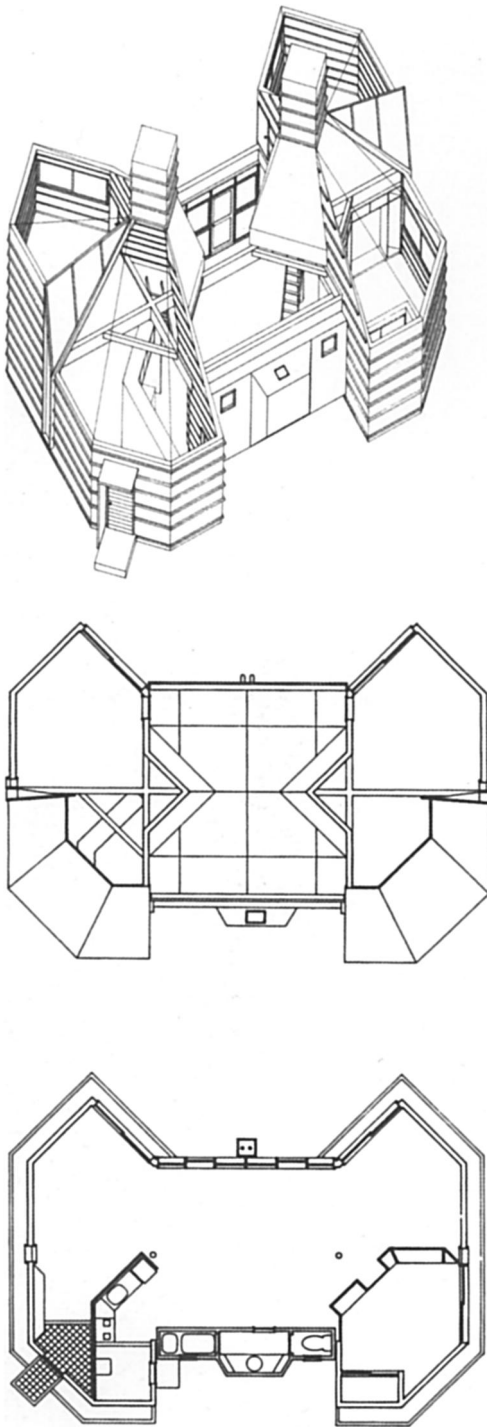
This page: Superimposed images of zelkova trees provide an early concept for TOD's Omotesando Building, a Tokyo headquarters for the Italian shoemaker



Parque de la Gavia, a water purification plant and public park for a rapidly growing residential area in southeastern Madrid. Each filtering system (of which there will be ten) is shaped by combining the plan and elevation of a tree. Water travels out from the centre to the branches in a three-day cycle, filtering through sand and water plants.



Clockwise from top left: Torrevieja Spa;
Montjuic Trade Fair Complex; Fukuoka Island
City Central Park



From top: Axonometric projection and plans of ground and first floor, Aluminium House

Out from Under Corbu's Wing

Some 50 years after Le Corbusier, and half a world away, Toyo Ito entered into architectural design with his Aluminium House (1971). Though educated in the modernist tradition, he had this first work turn its back on well-lit 'healthy' rooms on vertical stanchions (pilotis) with elongated windows and rooftop terraces; instead he created a sealed, bottle-like shell, scantily illuminated by twin skylights. Moreover, these shafts of light did not serve to clearly articulate any open interior layout or 'healthy' lifestyle, but rather permeated vaguely throughout the interior. Thereafter, in his White U (Nakano House, 1976), he radically extended the scale of the modernist shell that stipulates the contents, extruding and rounding the Platonic solid (in Le Corbusier's somewhat overblown phrase) into an extraordinary house shape, to say the least.

'The moment I undid the axial orientation and moved the entrance to one end, the interior of the building ceased to be a hard linear space. The U-shape became a white loop, slowly winding its way around inside me, giving me hints of the developments to follow.'¹

'By dispensing with those insidious fixed concepts of everyday functions, by conversely querying what seemed so utterly routine about the act of dwelling',² Ito discovered what he called *ryuiki*, or 'flux zones', a more subtly ambiguous, fluid vision of interior space. While Arata Isozaki, Kazuo Shinohara and the next generation of architects such as Tadao Ando all pursued rhetorics of minimalist refinement, achieving a uniquely Japanese expression that remained nonetheless wholly confined to designing the shell, Ito immersed himself in the study of what everyone in the architectural orthodoxy had 'left over' inside their buildings: the ambient, fluid, shapeless stuff of living.

Characteristic of all his buildings, not just his residential architecture, is a lack of frontality or façade; instead he designs a transparent (albeit hard) 'PET bottle' shell whose contents show through. Yet even before he really perfected this method, his White U did not in any way overlook

the entities within. The client (Ito's sister, Nobuko Goto), who lived in it for 20 years, until it was torn down, has this to say about his special treatment of the interior:

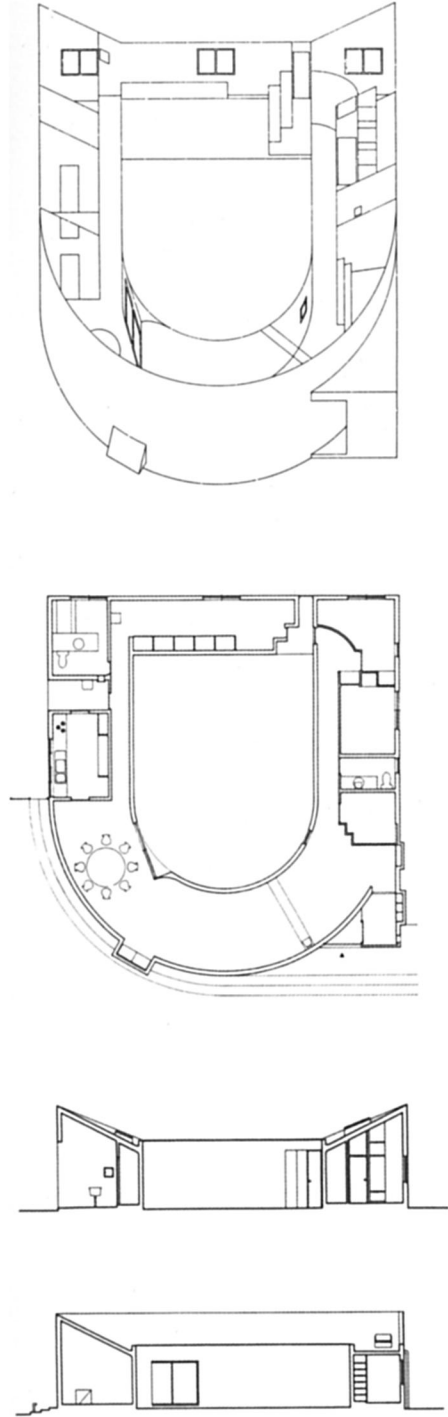
'The walls were white, the carpeting white. An all-white interior that made for a curiously heightened awareness of shapes. The shapes of furniture, the shape of people ... what people were wearing, the colours, even their expressions, I became aware of each little thing. Everything stood out, or rather, I became conscious of what impinges upon the eye.'³

Doing away with such everyday details as windows, walls and floors, even dispensing with the volumetric concept of rooms, the house not only liquefied the floorplan and spatial flow; as if by inverse ratio, according to Goto, it actually reinforced the subtleties of family and home life, bringing them into clearer focus. A curious development indeed: erasing the shell of a building, the container, served to foreground individual expressions and gestures.

'The form of the building constantly acted upon my life through the visual conditions and bodily sensations it elicited', Goto says. 'At first, these so perfectly matched my mental state that I didn't even notice, but over time, as I slowly overcame my initial dark, introspective confusion, each day I grew more and more acutely aware of the shape of the house in which I lived.'⁴

In the Sendai Mediatheque, Ito sought to overcome mere architectural style; his challenge was the hard shell of architecture, whose very form has always tried to seal in user-occupants and define their various activities. Trimming excess decoration down to a naked architecture like that of Le Corbusier or Ando was easily done. Once stripped naked, however, the hard shell would take on an even more emblematic presence and shape. It would seem that the 1997 demolition of the White U – arguably Ito's real debut – made him more convinced of his chosen path, as did resident-client-sister Goto's testimony.

In Ito's first real public architecture project, the Yatsushiro Museum (1991),



From top: Axonometric section, ground floor plan, longitudinal section and cross-section of White U; interior of White U, photographed by Koji Taki.





he experimented with covering a very loose interior programme with a light, almost floating, shell. Yet however fluid and open the layout under the roof, it soon became apparent that the inflexibly rigid museum administration was not going to let people be so free in their activities.

From his Taisha Hall (1999) on through Sendai Mediatheque, Ito's approach to architectural structure had nothing to do with the 'open shell' form-generating systems typically followed by his architect contemporaries Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Frank O Gehry and others the world over. Rather, he struggled to find ways to directly link the structure with how people use the architecture. The structure broke away from the simple rational design utilised in Ito's own house – the Silver Hut (1984), built right next door to the White U – becoming an almost irregular configuration. This, however, raised an even bigger question: why must structure necessarily interrelate directly with people?

Ever since Sendai succeeded in accommodating a multiplicity of different functions, the answer has been apparent in his architectural plans:

'Formal aspects, good or bad, are really beside the point; altering the shape or position of any one tube would only upset the overall balance, and require repositioning the rest until another equilibrium was reached.'⁵

Yet Sendai's plate-and-tube 'post-Le Corbusier Domino' construction was not the end of it. In his TOD's Omotesando Building (2004) and Torre Vieja Spa (2004), the outward tree motif and spiralling seashell forms are no mere structural exercises but actually seem to derive from life-forms dwelling within, just as the bark is fed by the flow of sap or the whelk shell spirals in response to inner growth.

Of Flux and Fractals

Having come this far, Ito's vision of a *ryuiki* 'flux zone' interior space finally takes on a palpable reality. The building shell now informs a truly subtle corpus, albeit codependently. Having pursued various discrepancies between the shell,

the interior spaces and the activities therein from his earliest houses on, Ito has reached a level where the life embraced by his buildings is truly 'fluid', 'ever-changing' and 'continually vibrant', the structure directly reflecting that flux.

Or perhaps it's the other way around? Via computer analysis, the shell of the building achieves so tenuous a shape that it almost merges with the surrounding environment and topography, a complex form whose 'ripples' – as Ito now calls them – aim to motivate and mobilise the people inside into activity.

'Light and wind', 'flow', 'ripples' and 'trees' are all metaphors of transient natural phenomena and irreducible fractal structures. But they are no mere decorative 'styles', nor are they superficial gestures at shutting the menacing urban environment out of our lives, as if that were possible or even desirable. No, only when architecture offers shelter this flexible, this diversified, this profound, will our lives flow freely forth, filtering out from the framework.

1. Toyo Ito, 'Shiroi Wa' ('White Loop'), *Shinkenchiku*, November 1976
2. Ibid.
3. Nobuko Goto et al., *Nakano Honmachi no Ie (White U Nakano House)* (Tokyo, 1998), p. 41
4. Ibid., p. 38
5. *Toyo Ito: Conversation with Students* (Barcelona 2004) (in preparation)

This page: Ripples at Sendai Mediatheque.
Opposite page: Bruges Pavilion, photographed by Stefaan Ysenbrandt.

