



The Fugitive

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Source: *AA Files*, No. 62 (2011), pp. 78–81

Published by: [Architectural Association School of Architecture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41378389>

Accessed: 22/06/2014 15:31

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From the beginning, Toyo Ito has had a plan, a theory, a vision. His extraordinary work as an architect is paralleled by his equally prolific work as an author.

One of the most influential Japanese architects of his, or any, generation, Ito has always written in order to build and built in order to write.

Even so, he has never treated his essays as self-absorbed, self-justifying design manifestos, but as opportunities to comment on wider, tangential issues. Literary and anecdotal in approach, he tells stories about his experiences with people, places and times. Ito is admittedly not a neutral observer, more of an editorial commentator prone to exaggeration, alternately seduced and repelled by his surroundings. The implication is always that his architecture, for all its radical creativity, is somehow a considered personal response to a given situation. Comprising an ongoing attempt to elucidate his own thinking, Ito's writings have made permanent impressions on the thinking of his peers and the younger generation of architects in Japan, as well as in the wider architectural world. In 2000, the preceding three decades of Ito's essays were compiled into a two-volume hardcover anthology, *Kaze no henyoutai* and *Toosou suru architecture* (both titles contain multiple nuances and allusions, but they might be roughly translated as 'Transfiguration of the Wind' and 'Transparently Layered Architecture'). While most famous Japanese architects publish anthologies like this late in their careers, Ito's is modest compared with, for example, the 18-volume hardcover set of Kisho Kurokawa's writings published in 2006. Nonetheless, the pace of Ito's writing has only accelerated in recent years. Each new design provides the opportunity for an essay, or series of essays – preliminary concepts, construction processes, post-occupancy evaluations – and each essay sets the stage for new designs.

Ito's first published essay, 'The Logic of Uselessness', appeared in 1971, the same year that he founded his office, URBOT ('urban robot'). Theoretical statement, practical manifesto, cultural diagnosis, science-fiction homage, satirical short story and implicit critique of his peers and predecessors, it set the tone for the 40 years of ceaselessly innovative architectural experiments that have followed. Perhaps the essay's most striking aspect is its attitude toward authorship. Ito writes about his new office as if he is an outside observer, anthropomorphising (but that's not quite right; perhaps 'animating') it as an autonomous entity, out of his control, not even of his creation: an agency with agency. He describes URBOT as having been spawned by 'the city' after two years of gestation and mute observation, a reference to the interlude between his departure from the office of Kiyonori Kikutake in 1969 and the official beginning of his own practice. The essay presents Ito's first three

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Thomas Daniell



*Now he slept in the cheapest coffins,
the ones nearest the port,
beneath the quartz-halogen floods
that lit the docks all night like
vast stages; where you couldn't see
the lights of Tokyo for the glare of
the television sky, not even the towering
hologram logo of the Fuji Electric
Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black
expanse where gulls wheeled above
drifting shoals of white styrofoam.
Behind the port lay the city,
factory domes dominated by the vast
cubes of corporate arcologies.
Port and city were divided by a narrow
borderland of older streets, an area
with no official name. Night City,
with Ninsei at its heart. By day, the
bars down Ninsei were shuttered
and featureless, the neon dead,
the holograms inert, waiting, under
the poisoned silver sky.*

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 1984

Toyo Ito as the King of Diamonds,
from a Japanese set of architectural playing cards
© Hiroshi Miyazawa/Nanyodo Bookshop

designs (URBOT-001, URBOT-002 and URBOT-003, the first already built, the other two destined to remain on paper) as if they are literally the offspring of the office. Yet rather than siblings, they are children of each other: not discrete designs, but three succeeding generations of evolution, each one an enigmatic aluminium shell that is smaller and more hermetic than its predecessor. Ito describes them as if he were an architectural botanist or entomologist, emphasising that evolution is not a process of progressive improvement but only constant recalibration in response to environmental pressures, and one that can go awry as positive feedback loops run out of control. Making an analogy with stag antlers that have gradually evolved from weapons into cumbersome symbols of their original purpose, he describes the tubes that project from URBOT-001 to bring in natural light as having, by URBOT-003, become so distended that they provide only the faintest illumination. His design argument – presented in the guise of disinterested observation – is that only overt dysfunctionality can have any impact in a society that has become so rationalised. Here, then, is the logic of uselessness, a parody of the obstinate pursuit of functionalism so pervasive in the architectural profession of the time. Yet URBOT was not presented as a polemical antithesis of the prevailing ideology, but rather as its ineradicable, repressed counterpart. Drawing on the same cultural heritage, gendered as male, described as a malformed 'bastard' with 'recessive heredity' (one imagines an innocuous, retarded nephew of the mechanical monsters in Japanese manga and movies), URBOT was a manifestation of the always present, rarely expressed aspects of the genome of modern architecture.

However vivid his imagery, Ito's rhetoric (like that of many Japanese writers) also conveys its meaning via implication and suggestion, and sometimes even omission. The written words cumulatively form a template around other, conspicuously absent, statements and intentions. There is, for example, no mention of the influence of Japanese architecture, whether traditional or modern, in this first essay. According to Ito, the spark that brought URBOT to life was ignited by a mix of the laconic Californian cool exemplified by Charles Moore's Sea Ranch and the eccentric English escapism exemplified by Archigram's Instant City. Yet Ito's depiction of innumerable capsules clinging to every surface and infiltrating every crevice of the city, the wreckage of abandoned capsules lying amid the rubble on the ground below, is surely a crazed extrapolation of the visionary city proposals of his former employer Kikutake and other members of the Metabolist group. The capsule-as-dwelling was a key theme in Metabolism, best articulated by Kisho Kurokawa's 'Capsule Declaration' of 1969, in which he proposed a mobile 'cyborg

architecture' that would supposedly suit contemporary lifestyles – compact, efficient living pods outfitted with the most advanced technologies of the time. The emblematic realisation of these principles was Kurokawa's own Nakagin Capsule Tower, which was under construction in 1971, its stylised profile already a distinctive, radical addition to the Tokyo skyline. In tacit response, like a Metabolist experiment that has escaped from the lab and turned feral, *URBOT* is described as evolving into an independent, mobile capsule that expels any trace of information technology from inside itself – a futile rejection of his, and architecture's, inescapable destiny, inefficiency presented as a valorisation of architectural space for its own sake.

A bizarre polemic to be sure, the essay was in large part a reaction to the four years Ito had spent working in Kikutake's office. Ito's growing sense of doubt and disillusionment during that time was not due to the buildings, which he continued to deeply admire, but the methodology. The supposedly logical design processes that had initially attracted Ito to Kikutake were revealed as a sham, maintained for external publicity but abandoned within the office whenever expedient. Ito had quit (against Kikutake's wishes), intending to further his education but prevented from doing so by the widespread student rioting that shut down Japan's universities at the end of the 1960s. Instead, he began work on his first solo commission, *URBOT-001*, otherwise known as the Aluminium House. Ito had by then come under the influence of two slightly older architects who were to become the key theorists of their generation: Arata Isozaki, an erstwhile associate of the Metabolists whose contributions to the movement were fraught with implicit criticism of its ambitions, and the charismatic fringe-figure Kazuo Shinohara, an outspoken opponent of Metabolist technophilia and megalomania, known for his iconoclastic house projects and aphoristic theoretical manifestos. Politically active, artistically aware and historically literate, Isozaki has adeptly kept pace with the temper of the times, constantly adjusting his approach and audience. Shinohara, too, changed course several times across his career, but always within the self-imposed limits of his own hermetic discourse. Ito was deeply influenced by Shinohara's essays from the late 1960s and early 1970s, wherein he insisted that architects simply turn their backs on the city and focus on the creation of personal, miniature utopias, a stance that Isozaki was then tending toward. But if Ito admired the content, he was surely also inspired by the form in which it was being presented: the architect as writer, as public intellectual, a perceptive and severe critic of the existing order who could present both diagnoses and remedies through words as much as buildings – and who could achieve wide

popular appeal precisely through a pretence of indifference toward popular appeal.

The end of Japan's postwar period of visionary urban projects had been signalled, ironically, by their partial realisation at the phenomenally ambitious 1970 Osaka Expo. The planning of the Expo was dominated by the Metabolist group under the direction of architect Kenzo Tange and urbanist Uzo Nishiyama, who set the theme of a 'model core of a future city'. Isozaki and Kurokawa were key contributors, and Ito himself had been deeply immersed in the design as Kikutake's staff representative at the weekly project meetings. Intended to represent the promise of emancipated, technology-enabled urban lifestyles, the Expo was widely seen as having only highlighted the blighted environmental conditions under which most Japanese were then living. The cities were incoherent, ugly palimpsests of pre-modern towns, wartime devastation, hastily built new housing and brutally implanted infrastructure. The countryside was being steadily and thoughtlessly polluted in tragic counterpoint to the industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation that had so rapidly brought Japan from physical and psychological ruin to First World levels of wealth. During the 1950s and 60s provincial governments had tried to attract industrial investment (mining, chemical production, wood pulp treatment) to rural areas, resulting in a series of notorious ecological disasters that contaminated traditional fishing and farming communities with industrial waste and caused outbreaks of birth defects and incurable diseases. With the wider population content in their rising prosperity, protests were initially suppressed or ignored, but media coverage and successful compensation claims finally forced the Japanese government to act: 1971 was also the year that an Environmental Agency was established in order to enforce new strict pollution laws.

Ito was thus part of a generation that could no longer see technology as Japan's unproblematic salvation from wartime destruction, but as potentially destructive itself. His architectural response to environmental pollution (light and sound as much as air and earth) is adumbrated in the 1976 essay 'White Ring', which describes the design of White U, the house that he considers to be the real start of his solo career. While its striking physical form and conceptual isolation from the city clearly reflect the influence of Shinohara, Ito was not, of course, the only architect of the time to have opted to overtly seal his houses against what was generally regarded as an unsalvageable context. Yet while many of the fortress-like houses built by others – the blank concrete facade of Tadao Ando's Row House in Sumiyoshi, also completed in 1976, was the iconic image for Japanese residential architecture of the period – were,

metaphorically speaking, bubbles of pure air inflated within a contaminated atmosphere, Ito described his architecture as containers for samples of that same atmosphere, their interior spaces conceived as fields excised from the ambient light of the city. In the 1977 essay 'Signs of Light' Ito quotes Le Corbusier's canonical definition of architecture as the 'play of masses brought together in light' while redefining the qualities of the light itself. He describes Tokyo's atmosphere as a dull haze without real highlights or shadows, a combination of innumerable artificial sources and tepid sunlight filtered through permanent smog. This wasn't a unique observation. Among his contemporaries, Ando was saying much the same thing, but where Ando saw a problem to be overcome, Ito saw a condition to be optimised. The surfaces, orifices and objects that comprise White U are literally and conceptually bleached: painted pure white and detached from practical function, described as compositional 'morphemes' for the manipulation of lighting effects and the creation of a vague sense of spatial turbulence throughout a serene, introverted interior. Whether flat, stepping or gently curved, the surfaces appear smooth, insubstantial, unarticulated – architecture without relief, so to speak. Sequestered in the centre of the house was a bleak 'garden', an expanse of black soil that unavoidably evoked the scorched earth left by the firestorms that devastated Tokyo in the closing months of the war.

This consummate and, needless to say, exceptionally beautiful implementation of principles drawn from Shinohara also contained the first hints of Ito's impending shift away. By the late 1970s Ito was considered to be a key figure in an unofficial 'Shinohara School' of contemporary Japanese architecture, for which Shinohara himself was busy claiming a range of members that extended far beyond his actual students, often without their knowledge or consent. Yet in the first published mention of the Shinohara School (a 1979 magazine feature that included profiles of Shinohara, Ito, Kazunari Sakamoto and Itsuko Hasegawa) Ito is already described as a 'failed student', an adept who had diverged from, if not transcended, the master. In 1979 *URBOT* vanished; Ito renamed his office Toyo Ito & Associates. He also left the orbit of Shinohara, even temporarily forming an 'anti-Shinohara' group with colleagues such as critic Koji Taki. Avoiding explicit references to architectural precedent in his writing of the 1980s, Ito's focus turned toward the city, encompassing a range of intellectual and sensual, even erotic – sight, sound, smell, touch – interpretations of the contemporary urban experience. The 1984 essay 'Silver Hut' was written to accompany the publication of Ito's own house, also called Silver Hut, yet instead of describing the architecture, Ito

expresses his desire to create images of futuristic cities, inspired by science-fiction movies (or more accurately, by his disappointment with the set designs of most science-fiction movies of the period). Here is an unashamed admission of Ito's proto-*otaku* tendencies. Enthusiasm for the liberating fantasies of futuristic comics and movies suffuses his work, like the toy-laden shelves of an obsessive science-fiction fan – from the heavy metal articulations of robots to the ephemeral cinematic effects of light and motion, along with a perverse pleasure in the dystopian gloom latent within every vision of a gleaming technological utopia. We can imagine Ito growing up in the neon-lit *favela* of Tokyo after the war. The trauma of firebombing, defeat and occupation was being sublimated by artists (the 'anti-art' and 'non-art' movements, the Gutai Art Association and Butoh Dance Group). The massive reconstruction efforts were seen as an opportunity for Japan to implement future cities of unprecedented technological sophistication and social mobility – topics debated by serious intellectuals and depicted in popular culture. Japanese society was permeated by an avant-garde sensibility, a dissatisfaction with the present and a sense of urgency and optimism with regard to the future. The seeds of Ito's desire to create pristine, weightless spaces for immaculately garbed, perfectly formed androids, as well as his fascination with dynamic, incoherent urban environments, may be found here.

Silver Hut was completed at the beginning of the most extreme period of Japan's postwar economic growth, the so-called 'bubble'. For Ito, the superficiality of the lifestyles being engendered by Japan's incredible new wealth was matched by the superficiality of its urban environment. The commercial districts of Tokyo were being demolished and rebuilt at an astonishing rate. New buildings were intended from the outset as temporary fashion statements, their electronic signage dominating their physical substance. Ito wanted to distil the city's ever-intensifying nervous energy into a visual rhetoric for architectural design. Rather than the creation of iconic objects anchored within an amorphous, volatile context, his new ambition was to develop an iconography of the context itself – even, perhaps, to define a new vernacular for contemporary Tokyo. Where Isozaki's architecture, for example, aspired to some kind of intellectualised ideal, Ito's was conceived as a description of the actual world he saw around him. No longer interested in precious, opaque volumes penetrated by tubes and slots that bring in controlled shafts or washes of exterior light, Ito began to explore the poetic potentials of new materials – diaphanous artificial fabrics, transparent acrylic sheets, flexible steel meshes, perforated aluminium panels – in order to contrive entire buildings as porous, translucent shells that appear to be condensed

from the ambient light itself. Prefigured by the lifestyles of the comparatively wealthy, as yet unmarried, young women of Tokyo, endlessly pursuing fashion and sensation yet unable to escape their ennui, the hypothetical inhabitant of this architecture was the urban 'nomad', a fugitive individual in a world of fugitive phenomena.

Ito's writing of this period was not an unqualified celebration of the unstable, artificial, 'simulated' qualities of lifestyles in bubble-era Tokyo. If the notion of the urban nomad seems to echo Kurokawa's earlier celebration of the emergence of *homo movens* ('mobile man'), Ito is scathing about the environment from which the urban nomad emerges, then perpetuates and exacerbates. In the 1988 essay 'What is the Reality of Architecture in a Futuristic City?' Ito suggested that the citizens of Tokyo were unwittingly becoming 'android-like', then in the seminal 1991 essay 'Architecture for a Simulated City', he asserts that contemporary urban life is depriving them of the ability to even discriminate between fake and real. Even so, he refuses to make a quixotic retreat into an archaic and ostensibly 'authentic' treatment of architectural materials and spaces. Ito launched himself into the emerging urban conditions, encapsulating his objectives in the phrase 'design of atmosphere': the invention of a type of architecture that might register and visualise in real time all the invisible qualities of its surroundings. While this included variations in temperatures, breezes, odours, sounds – properties inseparable from their physical substrate – Ito also contended that the city's atmosphere is permeated with insubstantial flows of information, which we may subconsciously perceive and architecture should consciously represent.

The idea that Japanese urban spaces are somehow shrouded in a flickering electronic haze had first appeared in Isozaki's writings of the early 1960s, in which he makes an analogy between the information flows generated by new media and the immanent *hi* (spirit) of Shinto cosmology. If Isozaki is rigorous in his historiography, he is all too often mystical in his use of historical concepts. Isozaki's invocation of *hi* may have been intended as an evocative cultural curiosity, but Ito's description of an invisible parallel world permeating the tangible one was not merely metaphorical. He intended the notion of information to be understood in the strictly materialist sense of electromagnetic fields: visible light, video transmissions, radio waves and so on. While our increasingly ubiquitous wireless communication networks might be thoughtlessly envisaged as cartoon lightning bolts leaping between mobile phones or personal computers, the reality is a kind of informational ether – an unthinkable complex interference pattern of overlapping spherical ripples propagating from innumerable sources

at the speed of light. Ito's architecture of the 1980s, exemplified by the Tower of Winds in Yokohama, was an attempt to represent all of these flows poetically. Knowingly or not, Ito recalls the Tower of Winds as described by Vitruvius – an octagonal form symbolising the direction of the 'eight winds', incorporating a wind vane, sundial and water clock – but whereas Vitruvius's tower was to be a focal point for laying out a new city, Ito's coalesces from an existing one. Built form is here conceived as a filter or sensor that somehow intercepts the flux of information, slowing and condensing it, making it momentarily perceptible, even palpable: architecture that flickers and buzzes like faulty neon, that is washed with intermittent static like a weak video signal. His metaphor is architecture as a kind of 'spray' that coats and thereby reveals the spectral outlines of the informational field, like water droplets modelling air turbulence or metal filings tracing a magnetic field. Ito again implies that he is not an author but an instrument, a medium – not imposing designs on the world, but manifesting its existing, unseen patterns.

Largely a reaction to Japan's phenomenal economic strength and the concomitant destabilising effects on architectural and urban form, Ito's diagnosis of built substance attenuating into transient imagery culminated in his contribution to the exhibition 'Visions of Japan' at London's Victoria & Albert Museum 1991. Ironically, this was held just as Japan's economic strength was vanishing: its bubble burst at the beginning of the 1990s. Not a sudden collapse, it was an erratic, flatulent deflation that took years. The relative sobriety of the ensuing decade saw a second significant shift in Ito's interests, from the contemporary urban environment to the embodied experience of its inhabitants. Refusing the nostalgic notion of some sort of 'natural' human physiological and perceptual core to which architecture should always respond, Ito instead asserted that the human body must adapt to its artificial habitat (or has already done so). In the 1997 essay 'Tarzans in the Media Forest' he introduced one of his most radical concepts, that of the 'virtual body': not a replacement for flesh and blood but a parallel, phantom existence, a doppelganger embedded in the electronic realm, a newly liberated noble savage roaming the fluid world of information. The role of architecture, then, was to act as an intermediary between the physical body and the virtual body, as exemplified by Ito's design for the Sendai Mediatheque – a pivotal project in the evolution of his own work and, indeed, the discipline of architecture as a whole.

Initially designed in 1995 and finally completed in 2001, the intervening years of public debates over the Mediatheque and its gruelling construction process triggered a further, decisive shift in Ito's theoretical focus. Listening to the

protests of the local citizens and witnessing the infernal sights and sounds on site caused him to fundamentally re-evaluate the stance he had developed over the preceding decades. Ito was no stranger to building sites – indeed, in ‘White Ring’ he says that the inspiration for the lighting design of White U came from observing the temporary lights used by the builders – but as his work increased in scale and ambition, it was clear that the closer he came to achieving the ethereal, cerebral spaces of a ‘virtual’ architecture, the longer and harsher were his collisions with the brute, visceral materiality of construction. To the extent that it had been inspired by science-fiction movies, his architecture was less about modelling futuristic stage sets than implementing the types of perceptual effects – transience, luminescence, instantaneity, insubstantiality – that are specific to cinema. The realisation of the Mediatheque was a conclusive demonstration that he was undertaking a Sisyphean task: the lighter he was able to float, the heavier the weight dragging him back down. In a retroactive repudiation of his own early intuitions, Ito stopped attempting to escape the limitations of physical architecture, and instead embraced them. Unhappily aware of the extent of his influence on the pallid, skeletal work of younger Japanese architects (raising his concerns in 1998’s ‘Shedding the Modern Body Image’ and again in 2002’s ‘Ichiro-like Architects’), in the first decade of the new millennium Ito’s thought and work turned toward weight, opacity, texture and, above all, nature. Architecture was no longer to be designed for the virtual body but for the primitive body, and built form was to acknowledge its origins in the natural, material world.

Not – at least, not solely – a visual mimicry of natural forms, this was rather an attempt to emulate natural processes through architecture: in the expressive qualities of structures and spaces and in their integration with wider flows of energy and matter through permeable outer membranes. Nor was this a retreat from technology. Particularly in the work undertaken together with leading structural engineers Mutsuro Sasaki (an ongoing collaboration that began with the Mediatheque) and Cecil Balmond, Ito has used the computer as a gateway to a fluid world of emergent shapes that mimic the evolution and growth of natural structures. Here, Ito comes full circle with *URBOT*, again implying that he is no more than an observer of a self-organising architecture out of his control – and again, this is a ruse. Ito is not ceding decisions about architectural form to parametric software, sitting entranced by intricate, pointless patterns unfurling on a computer monitor or emerging from a CNC mill. While the computer allows embryonic design concepts to be iteratively evolved toward optimal functional and

structural configurations within the field of forces at work – internal ergonomic and programmatic demands, external legal and climatic demands – this takes place under Ito’s direct supervision and input, departing as little as possible from his intended spatial and aesthetic effects.

The four distinct stages of Ito’s theoretical development so far – robot, city, body, nature – almost exactly coincide with his four decades of practice. It is a trajectory that suggests a telescoped reversal of the history of human civilisation, propelled towards its origin by the most advanced technologies. Programmatically, there is an almost classical sequence from his ‘primitive’ Silver Hut through the iconic Tower of Winds to the Sendai Mediatheque as agora or forum, the users shifting from isolated individuals to freely interacting collectives. Thematically, there is a progressive zoom in from the planetary city to the cellular level of organic life. We might tentatively predict that the fifth phase of Ito’s theoretical concepts will reflect a state prior to the emergence of life itself: the formation of autocatalytic molecular structures in the primeval soup of our planet’s prebiotic oceans. Indeed, something similar is already hinted at in the crystalline, modular forms of Ito’s recent designs.

Throughout his writings, Ito presents himself with an admirable, if odd humility, insisting that he is merely observing, following, tracing, visualising or manifesting forces already at work (he is also famous for disingenuously insisting that it is his staff who produce the ideas and his structural engineers who produce the forms). This affected and affecting self-effacement is, perhaps, no more than a strategy that allows him to pursue the most extreme architectural experiments without triggering the kind of public backlash against perceived megalomania that makes so many architects their own worst enemy. He makes it all seem natural, even inevitable.

Making Ito’s essays available in English is an ongoing, collective task occurring piecemeal around the world. The translations now available form only a small fraction of his steadily increasing body of writing, and no doubt have been selected as much for their literary interest as for their theoretical significance. Even if they manage to suggest the breadth of Ito’s thought, it is, of course, impossible to fully convey the subtleties of his voice. Often conversational and colloquial in tone, Ito’s essays tend to recall the work of contemporary novelists rather than architectural theorists. He evokes the deadpan surrealism of Haruki Murakami’s postmodern detective stories, for example, or the persistent attention to everyday phenomena found in novels such as Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen*. While Ito has moments of hyperbole, he avoids the

manifesto-like assertions of Kurokawa and the obscure, archaic kanji favoured by Isozaki. His most extreme speculations are presented without pretention, characterised by a restrained wit and an understated, yet undeniable, love of the world in which he finds himself.

Unlike translating between European languages, in which precise analogues for individual words may be found and differences in grammatical structure may be almost mechanically resolved, translating Japanese into English is never without irreducible ambiguities. Direct translations of all but the simplest Japanese sentences will usually be unintelligible, but overly mellifluous translations must be regarded as suspect – the effect of rhetorical liberties that may have obscured original intents. In the process of deciphering the literal meaning, nudging the result into grammatically correct English and then polishing it smooth, the translator is forced to make judgement calls on the precision of the assertions and the preservation of the metaphors. While any author may sometimes intend to be obscure or allusive, there is a licence for ambiguous assertion in non-fiction writing in Japan that is appreciated and indulged far more than in the west, and may be found at a surprisingly scholarly level. In many cases the cultural background of Japanese readers will allow them to be automatically cued by the choices between almost synonymous kanji characters, which may subtly evoke archaism, exoticism, religiosity, canonic literary works and so on. At best, the translator can attempt to structure each sentence to lean toward a similar range of possible interpretations, if only by analogy. Much of the poetry of Ito’s prose is unavoidably lost, but the mood is retained.

Of course, the written discourse of any architect is usually less a rigorous argument than it is a special pleading for a particular aesthetic agenda. A theory is never disinterested, always a justification for a style, a way to hone and crystallise one’s intuitions about form and space. Ito incessantly reacts to the times and places he passes through, with the sensibility of a novelist who occasionally veers into magical realism or new journalism. Telling stories that explain, enable, inspire or validate his architectural experiments, he often absents himself from the picture, or depicts himself as a passive observer of events. In this sense, ‘Toyo Ito’ can be understood as that favourite trope of modernist literature, the unreliable narrator. Ito invites us to share in the way he sees the world, the texts and buildings alike providing clues to his ever-changing moods. Through them, we may temporarily, sympathetically inhabit Toyo Ito’s mind and body, tracing his evolving narrative of the last four decades as he enters a fifth, always one step ahead of his pursuers.