



Toyo

Ito

White U, a



20.10

a private residence completed

was designed for three inhabitants: my elder sister and her two daughters. It is an early work, what I consider the starting point of my career. After 20 years of occupancy, the house was slated to be demolished, and on February 28, 1997, the house became “space where nothing exists.”

White U is a one-story concrete house with a U-shaped plan. It is located in a residential area near Shinjuku, Tokyo’s largest center. Here small apartments built by private companies, shops, and free-standing houses are scattered about, offering an average Tokyo landscape. However, Shinjuku is being redeveloped, and skyscrapers are beginning to appear.

The windowless exterior wall of White U is made of curved concrete and shields the interior from the outside environment. This differs markedly from the other residences in the neighborhood. This closedness was not dictated by the architect but by the emotions of the client at the time the house was built.

Just before planning the house, my sister lost her husband, the center of the family, to cancer. At that time she was 38 years old, and their two little daughters were still in elementary school. Although they were living in a high-rise apartment in the center of Tokyo, they spent most of the last year and a half at the nursing hospital. When they returned home, they could not help but feel the emptiness. Facing the death of a family member, they became keenly conscious of “family” by sharing that emptiness. To reinforce this awareness, they searched for a new house. With this in mind, White U had to be a strong place, the spiritual anchor of the saddened family. In other words, the house had to be an isolated utopia.

This house is not only closed off from the outside world, it embraces a space entirely isolated from the inside as well: a courtyard within the U. This garden, with its naked ground of black soil, had been abandoned for two years. As time passed, migrating birds and seasonal winds brought seed, and soon the ground was covered with weeds. The exterior wall was also fully concealed by ivy, veiled in green.

The roof angles in toward the courtyard and up toward the center of the U. It does not ascend but descends toward a “negative center.” Although the house contains the intense nucleus of the family, inhabitants can only wander around the outskirts along the two walls. The negative space expresses the void that the family was feeling.

Inside White U, floor, ceiling, and walls are all pure white with no distinction among them. The light, the sound, the air, and the people circulate along the walls, articulating the soft, closed, tubelike space. The natural light that passes through the back of a Mackintosh chair creates an ever-changing pattern on the wall. At night, the lighting fixtures on the floor cast shadows of the people and objects on the wall. For the three members of the family, the space was a monument that symbolized sorrow and solitude – a “white darkness,” a container of life.

in 1976,

For my sister, who studies music history, this house was a space of sounds. Within the flow of the circulating sounds, she talked with her friends and meditated on the music. At first it was a place of play for the two daughters, who enjoyed the shadows and ran around in the tube. As they grew, for the older daughter it became a place to study cooking, and for the younger to study the paintings of Paul Klee. Each loved and depended on this intense white space in her own way, but at the same time they grew repulsed by its closedness.

Some years ago the older daughter left the house to train as a chef. Then a year ago, their mother (my sister) also decided to leave, opting instead for an apartment with a music studio. She was tired of being bound to this place. The younger daughter, who started to work at the national museum, was the most intimate with the house. She lived there alone but found it a burden. Last fall, after a long discussion, the three decided to sell the house, to be independent, free from restraint. After 20 years, the house had finished its task. After further discussion, they decided that they did not want others to live there, so they chose to demolish it. I felt the same and agreed with their decision.

During these 20 years the living environment has transformed dramatically, and the lifestyles of the occupants have changed. Near White U, 24-hour convenience shops, coin laundries, and video-rental shops were built. All of life's necessities are provided not only inside the house but outside as well. In search of independence, people leave their families for one-person apartments. The home has become fragmented, and the functions of a family stand in a row just like the merchandise in a convenience store.

What is the "house" for these three who began fragmented lives in Tokyo's fragmented spaces? They no longer need a house to keep them together; yet the more fragmented life gets, the more they want to share a sense of family. Can I, as an architect, design this Virtual House? I cannot. I can only imagine that a Virtual House is that which is shared in the consciousness of the three. This continues to be a white, soft, circular space, yet it is no longer a ring that is tightly closed off from the environment. It doesn't make one feel gravity or the thickness of the walls anymore. It is neither fixed nor firm but exists in the water or in the air. The family can access this white ring from wherever they are and share the space. On the ring their memories overlap with realities.

Looking back over these 20 years, they did not search for a house as a container of life but needed a house where they could share the sense of being a family. From this point of view it could have been a Virtual House from the very beginning. The great contradiction of this house lies in the duality of being virtual while trying to contain life. Now that it is gone, the Virtual House, the house where they share the sense of being a family, can exist as a pure and free space.

The three flew away from the tube, but as an architect I still remain within it. I repeat and will repeat the experience of the tube. I also wish to leave, not by cutting or destroying it but by eliminating the sheer skin that separates inside and outside. When there is no longer a concept of boundary between the inside and the outside of architecture or between the artificial and the natural, on the day I succeed in extinguishing it, I will also leave the tube.



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