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Wing and Wing

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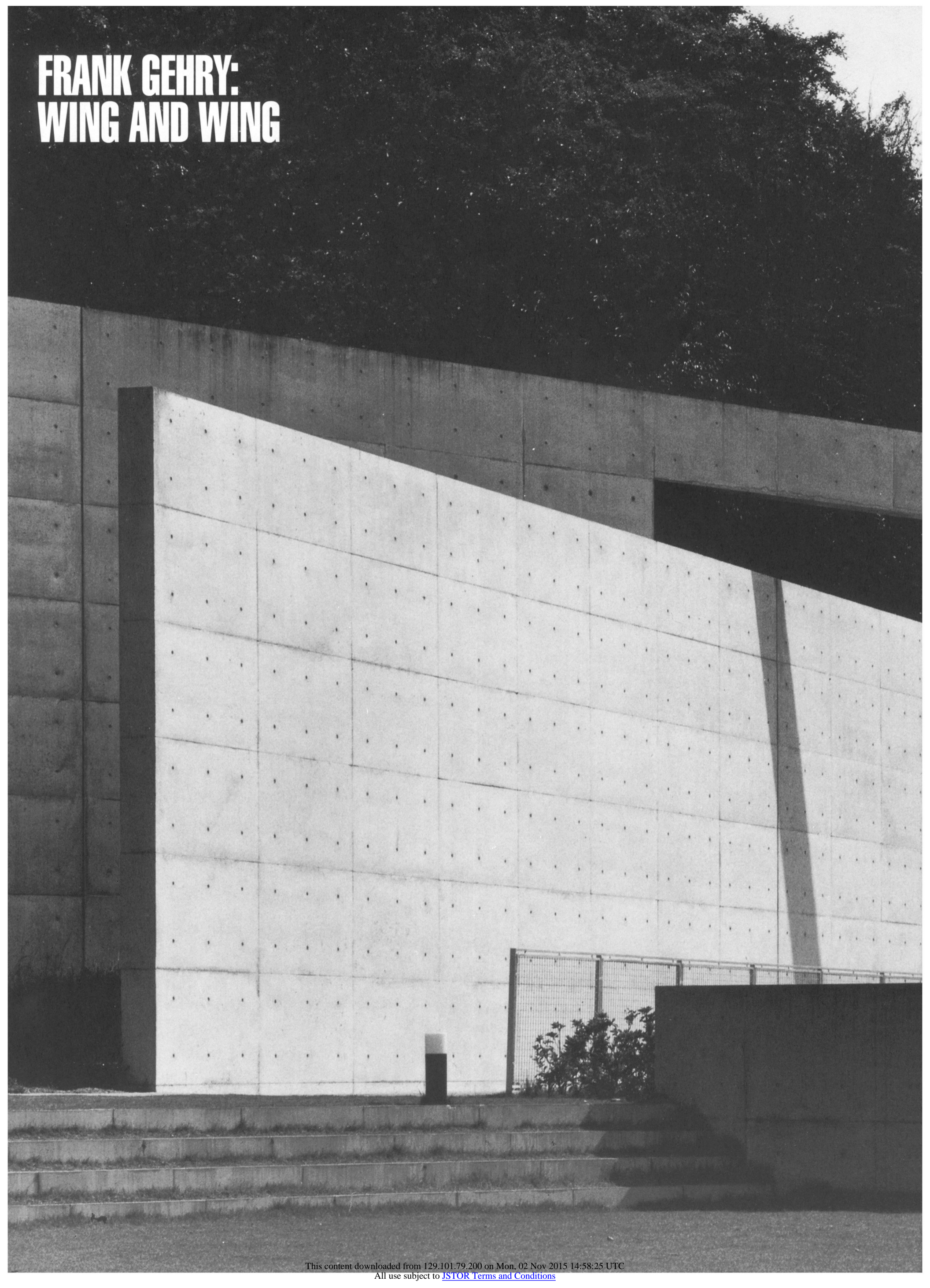
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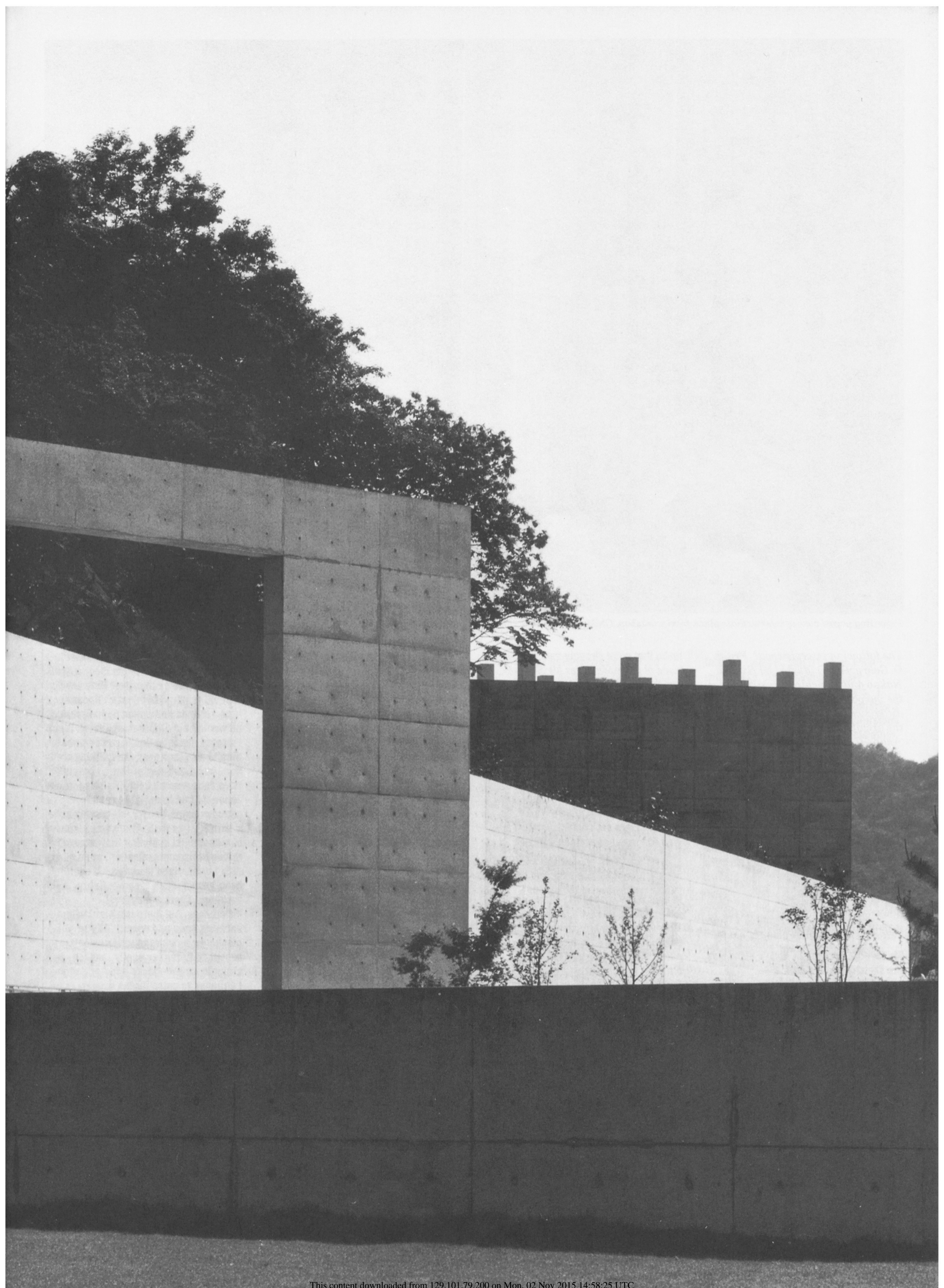


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FRANK GEHRY: WING AND WING







Preceding pages: view of intermediate plaza from workshop, Children's Museum, Hyogo, 1987–89. Above: Children's Museum, Hyogo. Photos: Mitsuo Matsuoka.

The following interview with Frank O. Gehry was conducted by Hiroshi Nakao and Heiichiro Tsukamoto for the purpose of distinguishing the differences and similarities between the architecture of Gehry and Tadao Ando. It was first published as "East East Meets West West" in Tadao Ando — Beyond Horizons in Architecture, a catalogue for an exhibition at the Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, in 1992.

What were your impressions of Tadao Ando's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1991? You have had similar exhibitions in the United States that showed the historical progression of your projects, and the installations were architectural as well.

My favorite drawing in Ando's show was the sketch he made on the wall. The one continuous line was so beautiful. I have some of Ando's sketches, which he gave to me a long time ago. I love the way he draws.

I don't think you can compare his show to what I did. I had a bigger budget and more freedom to make structures. It was unfortunate that the wall in his show, which was supposed to be concrete, was painted paper, because it lost the strength of his work. Even though Ando's language of architecture is a very consistent one, there is a lot of variety in his work, and the show didn't

make that point strongly enough. The scale of the models was all the same, and the subtlety of his ideas was lost in the small models and drawings. It wasn't as powerful as the real work.

Obviously there are big differences between your architecture and Ando's. Among the various styles in modern architecture, you are poles apart. Admitting the differences in style, how would you evaluate Ando's work? Do you feel there are conflicts? What are your impressions of Ando's recent projects, such as the Water Temple and Chikatsu-Asuka Historical Museum?

In both these cases the buildings are not buildings, they are landscapes. They engage the ground and define the public realm as a landscape, as a public space or plaza. They are different from the projects we build in America. Even though we have more land than the Japanese, projects here tend to have boundaries. My buildings, for example, are confined by property lines and height requirements.

In Japan there is a stronger landscape tradition than in America. In the last 20 or 30 years landscape architecture in America has become servile to the architects who build the buildings. The world of sculpture has preempted the landscape, with artists like Mary Miss,

Siah Armajani, Robert Irwin, Richard Serra, and Robert Morris doing the artful landscape that is equivalent to what Ando does. Landscape architecture is now trying to win back this position. Ando comes from a tradition where buildings are treated differently. Buildings have a life, like the Ise shrine that is periodically rebuilt and looked after. This doesn't exist in America or in the Western tradition. Public buildings in America are permanent and finished, made, in theory, to last forever. I thought of some of my early work as transitional, not as something that would last forever. It was built with cheap materials and it wasn't precious. My philosophy relates to my context, an environment of confusion and chaos where architectural values are very rare. Most buildings in America are just buildings, whereas the Japanese tradition is different. You also have a tradition of craft, which America seems to have lost.

For example, when I did the Fish Dance Restaurant at Kobe it was built in six months, and it was well crafted compared to the American building process. All of my work has been an effort to connect with the craftsman. Is it possible for an architect to connect with the craftsman more directly, like artists do? In such a partnership it is possible to make something that the craftsman takes more pride in. When I make a sketch, it has a certain quality, but how do I achieve that quality in a building through working drawings and

legal documents and superficial field representations? In Japan the architects live on the site. They are part of the job. That doesn't happen here. If Ando had grown up in America he would be a different architect. When I went to Japan to do the restaurant I didn't know how good the building craft was, so I didn't design for it. I could have done a much better building in Japan if I had been able to communicate. I never intended to build a building like that. There was a kind of circumstantial evolution that occurred through miscommunication, and we didn't understand the costs. It could have been a much different Gehry building. There are cultural differences, but there is a similarity between Ando and myself. We're macho guys, we're tough, we don't accept compromise easily, and we struggle for excellence and perfection. I struggle as much for the casual building as Ando strives for perfection. We make models of every detail and I work hard at making those details look like sketches. It's a very precise and endless process and it drives people nuts. In that sense I'm obsessed, like Ando, with detail. We can respect each other, because I feel his commitment, and he probably feels mine. Although you know we don't completely understand each other, we know we're not resting on the job.



View from the court, Vitra Seminar House, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1989–93. Photo: Hiroshi Ueda.

Occasionally you use figurative shapes, such as the fish motif at the restaurant in Japan and in the Barcelona project. You appear to be preoccupied with the fish shape, but rather than being a Frank Gehry trademark, this preoccupation or obsession gives your work a poetic quality. On the other hand, Ando appears to be preoccupied with the use of abstract shapes, which he pursues through the use of very limited materials. Are these obsessions anything more than the architect's preference for a certain kind of form?

Oddly enough, I come from the same minimalist roots as Ando. My models and heroes in art are minimalists — Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Ellsworth Kelly. I feel Ando likes the same artists. The reason that I don't continue along that line has to do with context, and this is where Ando and I differ. The same language doesn't apply to every condition. I can see differences in the programs, clients, and conditions, and I like the idea of the situation pushing me in a different way. I like becoming something else. I look for a oneness in a building, even though you don't see that in all my buildings. My ultimate goal is to find a oneness, like I did with

the furniture, which is all one idea and one structure. What I'm trying to do with the Disney Concert Hall is to make it all one. In order to understand that, I spent time trying to understand the essence of architecture in one-room buildings. For example, at the Winton Guest House I started with the idea of separate pieces, like a still life, because I was trying to get a richness in the landscape and break down the scale with these one-room buildings in which the walls and roofs were all one material.

In my early Davis House corrugated metal was used for both wall and roof, which reinforced the sculptural qualities of the building. When I got to Vitra, I wanted to get the sculptural interest within the tradition of building, which requires that the roof is made of one material and the wall of another. In Vitra, where the wall is vertical it is plaster, and when the wall is sloped to the weather or becomes a roof, it is made of metal. The Vitra building is just a box with a skylight, an elevator, and a stairway, with skylights in the corners. Those pieces are the sculpture. The composition is seemingly loose, but inside it's much more serene and much more like Ando. So my obsessions with shapes have to do with exploring. I don't like or dislike fish any more than anybody else. I like Hiroshige's drawings of fish; I always loved the carp, which I studied a lot.

The carp has been interesting to me because it has an architectural quality; it has taken on an architectural persona. I began to use fish when my colleagues started making Greek temples. If we had to go back in time I was going to go further back than Greek temples, which are anthropomorphic. I went to fish, which existed 300 million years before humans. I started to draw the fish and then it began to have a life of its own.

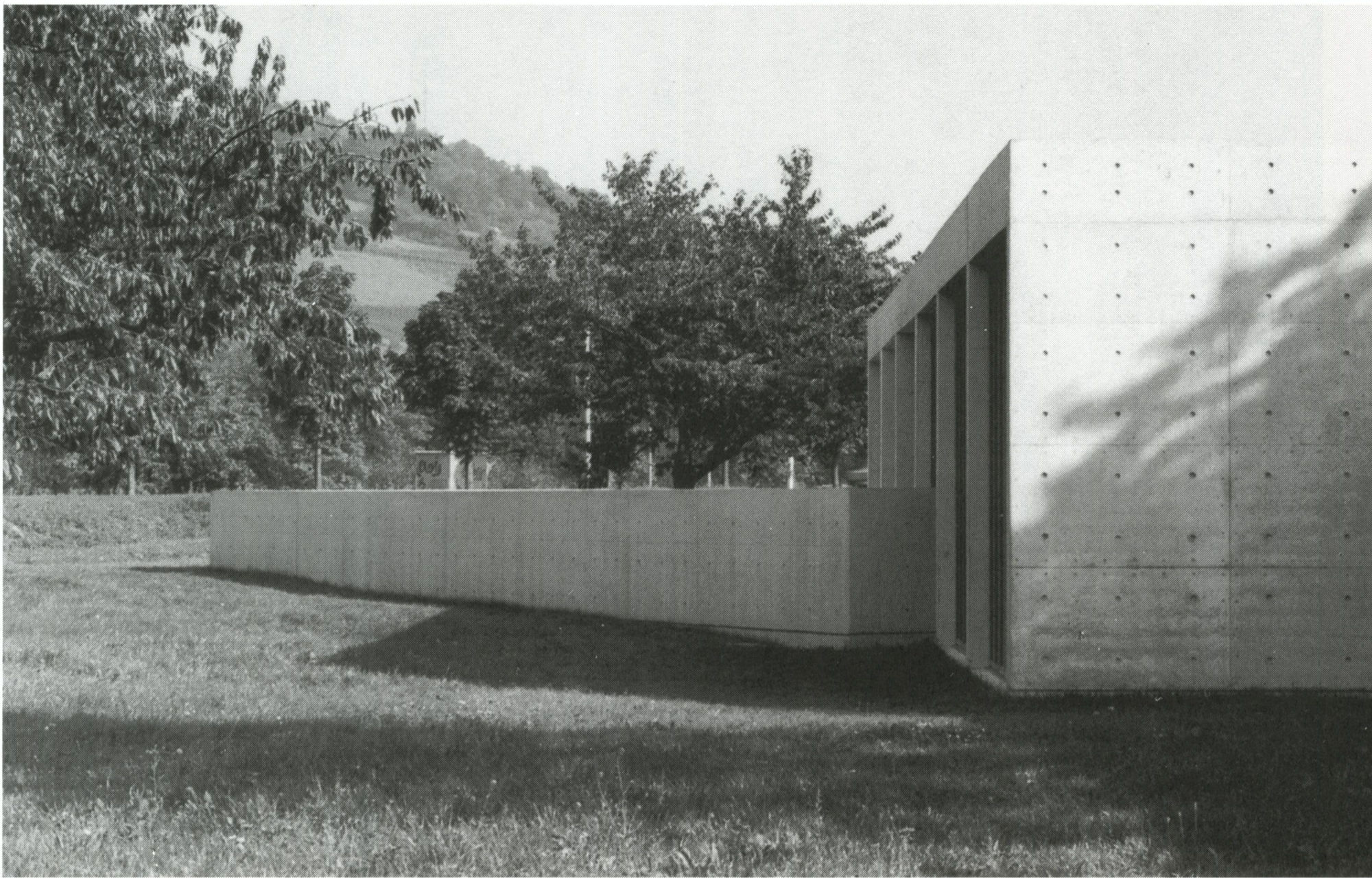
People started to ask for fish drawings and I made fish lamps. I worked with Richard Serra on a building project with a fish. And I began to realize that when you look at carp in the pond, the sense of movement is beautiful. I did a 35-foot-long fish building for a fashion exhibit in Florence, Italy. We made it in wood and when I stood beside it I felt its power and the feeling of movement. I didn't like the tail and fins, but the curve was very beautiful to me. I realized that I could get the movement of koi in a building, so I started to explore fish as building. The best one I ever made was in my show at the Walker Museum: this was just a piece of fish — no head, no tail. It was lead and you could walk into it, but it was more powerful as an abstraction.

When I got to Kobe I didn't intend to do a fish, but they asked for fish drawings and I won the competition. I was hooked. I do not like the idea of making the tail in building scale because it is very difficult, but I do like the idea of the curves. If you look at the Disney

Concert Hall you see it comes from wind, sails, and movement. My approach is different from Ando's. I was very surprised to see his Children's Museum in Hyogo. I did not understand how it could look like some of his other buildings — the same language and very stark. In fact, I took my boys there; they heard they were going to a children's museum and they were very excited. But when they arrived they were very disappointed (from an American point of view). I had dinner with Ando that night and I asked him what his philosophy of children was and he said they should be treated like adults. I said, "Now I understand your design for the Children's Museum." For me, the Children's Museum should have represented something that grows out of children, and the whole idea should have had more fantasy.

Do you think that the differences between your work and Ando's are due to the conflict between the abstract and representational that still exists in modern art? You both have strong interests in modern art. How can we avoid the dead end into which minimalism has fallen? Could you give us your impression of Ando's architecture by using examples of modern art?

The change in the economy and the change in politics is what changes



Exterior view, Vitra Seminar House. Photo: Hiroshi Ueda.

architecture. The only issue is to keep responding with one's talents to the changing present that we live in. Ando is a traditionalist. He is very much a product of Japan. He has not been diverted by international conditions like others have been.

I keep trying to change, so I do not think of pop art or minimalism or abstract expressionism per se. I am emotionally rooted in minimalism, but I have moved into other areas. We live and work in different times, and the world is changing rapidly. What we thought was meaningful last year is no longer meaningful. The change in the economy, the forces of the world, the global warming, and the change in politics all change architecture. If you hang on to ideas like minimalism that become obsolete in a changing world, you lose contact with what's going on around you. I like Tokyo because of the shifts in scale among prewar, postwar, and contemporary buildings, and the shifts with the traffic are very exciting sculpturally. It's that condition that makes the city very interesting. As it becomes more like Shinjuku, it becomes more like New York, less exciting.

A historian in Istanbul said, "Mr. Gehry, your work is very sculptural and animated and exciting, but what would

you do if you were given a site next to one of Sinan's mosques?" I wouldn't copy the mosque because it was built in the 16th century, and if I were to duplicate it in his language, I would fail. I would try to engage it in some way, to be myself with 20th-century expression, with conditions and uses that are different. That's what changes my work. But I would be respectful of Sinan's work. For example, I would never build a white building like Vitra in Los Angeles because the sun is too bright — I would soften the colors. If I build in Germany, however, white is quite beautiful, because there are a lot of green fields.

I think Ando uses a more consistent vocabulary because there is chaos in Japan; in Tokyo and Osaka there are so many mixed designs. He continues to use the same language as opposition to the chaos. Traditionally, Japanese architecture is made of paper and wood, which are temporary materials and which conform to change. But because there is chaos, Ando felt he should use more consistent materials. The ultimate phenomenon of change is today's Japanese city — Tokyo or Osaka. What impact does your architecture and that of Ando have on society? How do you and Ando differ in this regard?

I approach society optimistically and tenderly, and I try to be generous. Politically, I am very liberal and I try to

make my work luminous, engaging, and accessible to people so that they feel comfortable. When I design a house, I don't design all the furniture and I don't insist on doing everything. The clients must feel comfortable. They can bring in a funny couch that they like or a sculpture or whatever. I like to make the building strong so the users can have their own life. They can also engage, interact with, change, and accommodate the building. It's continuous and confrontational, but the room is more relaxed.

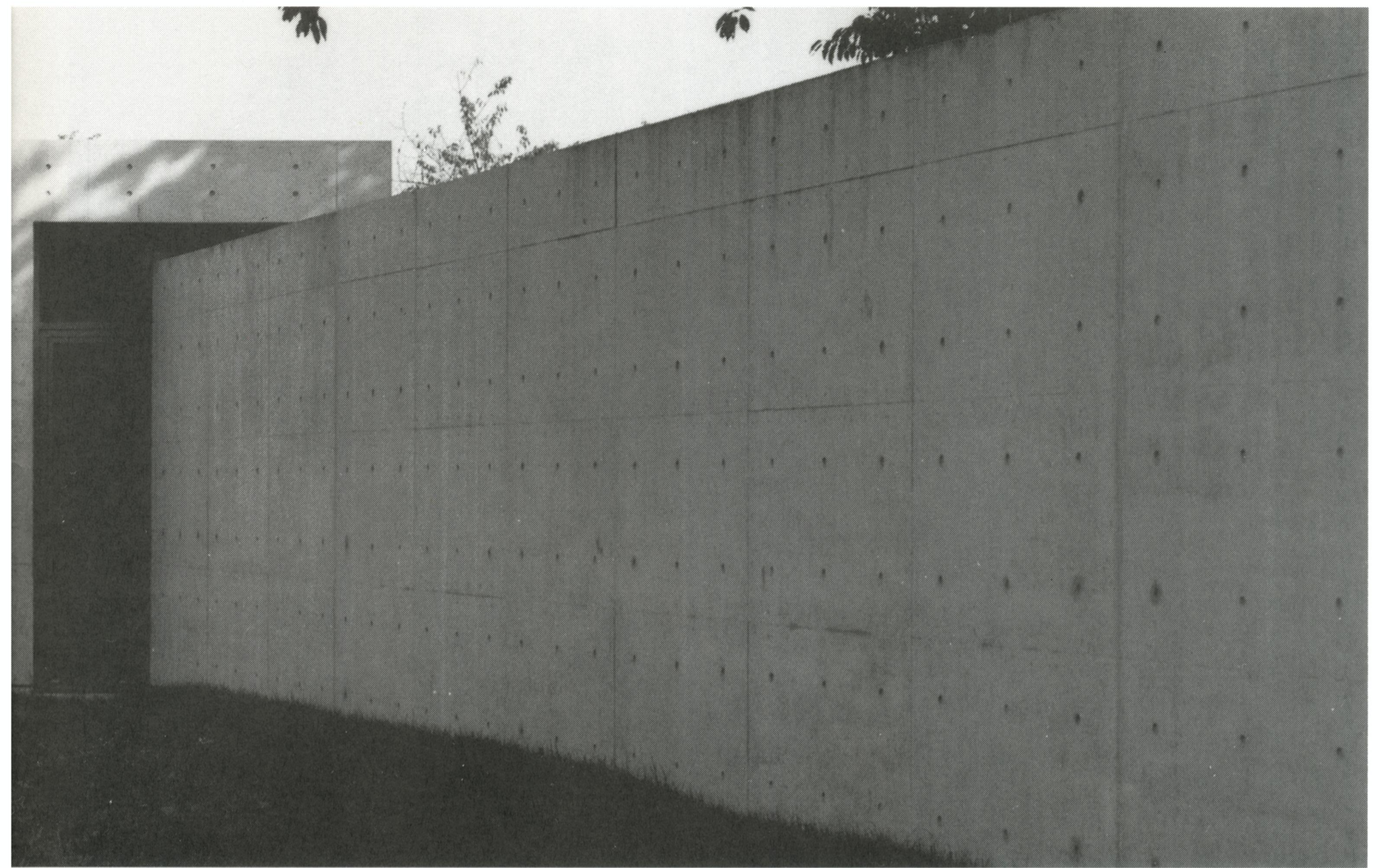
There's continuation of the classical tradition in Japan — in both landscape and architecture — and I think Ando is a traditionalist in that sense. He is very much a product of Japan. I don't know where to go for tradition in my life. I wish we could make a building that I could ask a client to resurface every 10 years. I wish we had a craft tradition here.

There is an American architecture, an acquired tradition. It's beautiful, but the new American city is mostly chaotic. So how to tame it? In the martial arts, when somebody comes to attack you, you use their power to deflect the move. I approach architecture a little bit like that. I take the power or force of the American context, the city as it's thrown at me, and I try to use that power to defuse it and make it work.

You have always displayed a sense of humor in your work. Is this humor a

means of criticizing society or modern architecture? Is a sense of humor necessary in architecture? Can you comment on Ando's work in this sense?

Ando is very serious, too serious. It's important to be serious about your work, but there's a difference between being serious about your work and taking yourself too seriously. I once had a student at Harvard who talked about line and plane as though it were a religious artifact. He placed the line and plane on such a pedestal that he could not use them. We are human beings, we're on earth, we eat, we have eliminations, we have all those things that are human and aren't so pretty and precious. We are in a life that doesn't have the kind of ritualized behavior that existed in Japan or in Western classicism. How can you make a space that relies on a ritualized existence if people do not live that way and it's not in their consciousness? You have to define what is serious and what is not. I've been reading Salman Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus*. The only way to read it is to just start reading and not try to understand it. If you try to understand it word by word you never will. Once you read it, it's like floating in the clouds. It's so ephemeral and it's such a beautiful use of language. Japanese writers have the same feeling



— Kobo Abé, for one. You just start reading and you trust, like trusting the next step or trusting in the future.

You often use inexpensive materials in your projects. Can you comment on the materials you use? How do you feel about Ando's attitude toward materials and his use of only concrete, glass, and steel?

My use of cheaper materials at the beginning of my work had to do with circumstances of budget, but it also had to do with my liberal attitude that architecture should not be precious, that it should be accessible. Also, when I first started to make buildings I was trained by Viennese architects to be perfect, like I.M. Pei and Richard Meier. In southern California my first projects were very cheap. My friends and my favorite artists, like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre, were doing things with cheap materials and no workmanship. I thought that if they could make beauty with those kinds of materials then maybe I could make architecture with them.

Ando's use of materials is strict compared to the variety in your architecture. How do you feel about the difference in the concept of materials between you and Ando?

Actually, I think there is a similarity there because I think Ando also uses

concrete because of populist notions. I've heard him talk about concrete as the people's material. We don't use concrete here — the tradition of not preserving the materials makes it difficult to use.

One of the reasons Ando does not receive commissions in the United States is that he builds in concrete. I thought he should have gotten the contemporary art museum project in Chicago, but they were afraid of concrete. Isozaki is more open to other materials so he is assimilated here. Ando's work in concrete is not acceptable because the concrete buildings that have been built here by Paul Rudolph and others are not buildings that people like after a few years because they turn green. They are not maintained as Ando requires.

You often use a tilted line not only in plan but also in elevation, and it appears you are attempting to free yourself from any vertical and horizontal lines. Today we can find many kinds of inclined lines in various architectural styles connected with mannerism. What is the difference between your line and other lines? How do you feel about Ando's lines?

To change from orthogonal architecture is not something you just do in a minute. It's not something you would plan — it grew out of a history of work.

For me it started when I did the Ron Davis House. I was very interested in understanding the art of Ron Davis. For the house I tried to make a sculptural manifestation that came from his paintings. I wanted to teach him how to use real perspective in an object, because he could only do it in paintings. When he wanted to make a three-dimensional frame of the painting he didn't know how so he asked me to help him. That's when I discovered his blind spot, and it fascinated me that he couldn't see it. So I started to make a building that used perspectives. I had used the tilted plane before in the Haybarn in Orange County. At the time I liked the idea of tilting the metal plane to reflect the sky. You then have a profile against the sky and the plane disappears; the roof disappears into the sun. It's incredible. The reflection of the sky on the roof made the roof disappear.

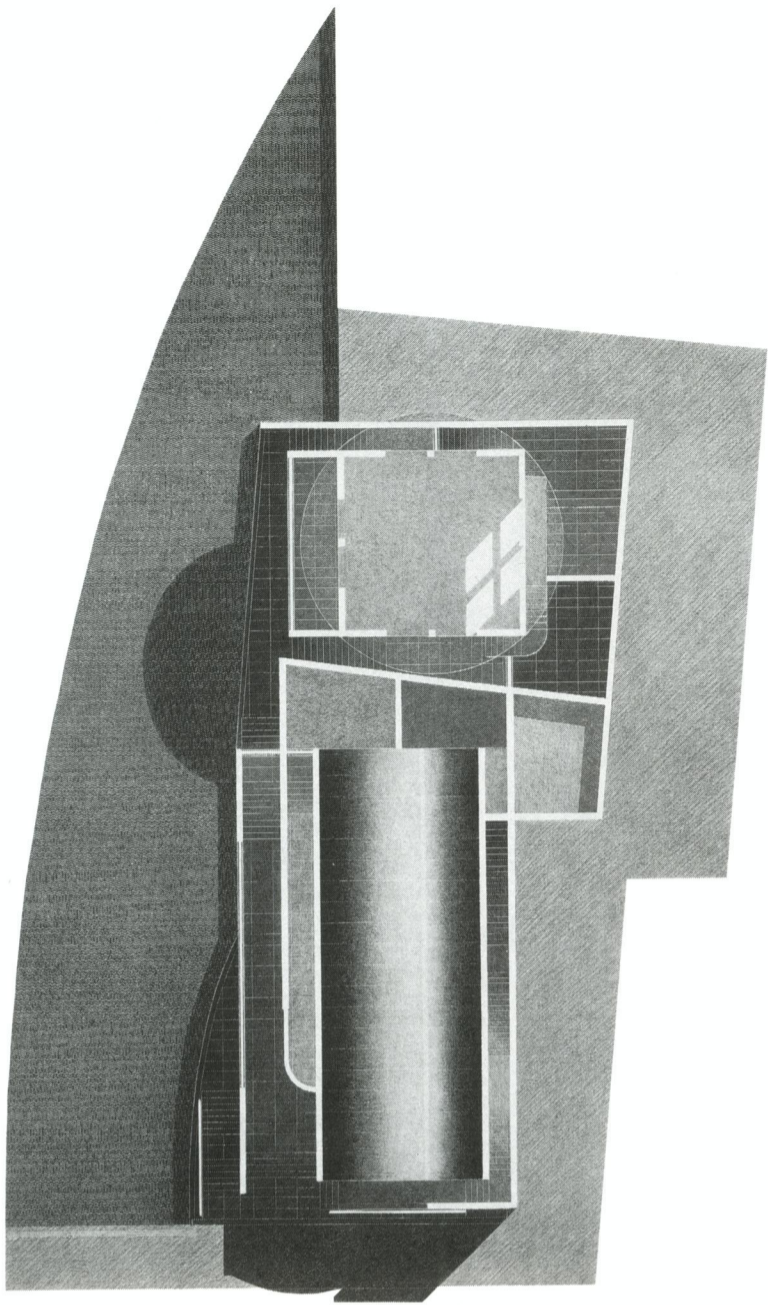
From that idea, and in combination with the Ron Davis perspectives, I started using angles. After I finished Ron Davis's house I used to sit in it and feel the movement of natural light in the space. It was an endless richness of experience. I continued to explore this idea, and over time I started to introduce the sense of movement because of the fish experience. It took me a long time to build this part of my vocabulary.

So it's not just a tilted line. There is more to it when you find that richness. Did you feel a revolutionary change or freedom?

Yes, I did. I felt free from the restrictions, but I had to make some choices and it goes back to the use of cheaper materials. If you have a budget of x dollars for a building, a certain proportion of that budget is for detail or ornament. I made a choice to go with the total experience and less precious details. I accepted the lack of craft in order to achieve the spatial experience. It fits in with my politics, with my sense of humanism.

Ando conveys a very strong design conviction to his clients. What is your secret in convincing your client of your style?

It's not a secret, it just takes time. You have to make clear what you want to do. Twenty years ago I had two clients, 10 years ago I had four clients, and now I have eight — if you create nice work and somebody likes it, those people hire you. When I did my own house I lost all my clients. The most experimental pieces of work I've done were with my own money. The clients thought what I wanted was very cold and industrial and uncomfortable. My house is very comfortable, compared to other modern architecture. I think that you build up strength and position. It takes a long time — it doesn't just happen one morning.



Left: *TIME'S II*, Kyoto, 1986–91. Right: view from the river of *TIME'S I*, Kyoto, 1983–84. Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka.

For 20 years Ando's clients have been willing to allow him to design anything, because they trust him and know what to expect. He surely has responded to them, because he does not want to change his style.

Actually you have to change; you can't do the same thing over and over again. I think Ando will have to make a change now. I would advise him to try other things than concrete, to understand angle, to use curve. He is a young man, he has time and his work is only going to get richer. He's got talent, but Ando has spoken the same language throughout his career. That's not my point of view. I can't accept the same thing over and over again. I have to keep changing. Maybe I am restless. It would take a whole lifetime to refine an idea to its essence. That's the Japanese tradition.

That is a very interesting viewpoint.

I grew up in a different kind of moving, changing environment. It is easy for me to say "Ando, change!" because I can't understand why he doesn't.

He is a little more conservative in his way, compared to Isozaki. Isozaki changes his ways sometimes, but Ando is very conservative and keeps his own way.

Isozaki does interest me because of his willingness to change. But I don't mean to imply that I like Isozaki better than Ando. I like them both for different reasons.

You have not abandoned geometric forms but use them freely in your work. Ando uses geometric forms in very strict ways. He has not always been as popular as he is now, and there were some clients who were dissatisfied with his work. Gradually he has become popular, and he has many fans.

Any forms are reasonable to try to use in architecture. Take Borromini's work, in the curved facade of S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome or in S. Ivo della Sapienza. The forms suggest movement in the baroque style — they have a kind of vitality and beauty. In a different way, Gaudí has curved forms, but I don't think of myself in relation to Gaudí. I think of myself more in relation to the tradition of Borromini, because Gaudí is soft, unlike my concert hall, which suggests movement because it is more geometric than naturalistic.

What about 1920s German architecture? There was some movement suggested in the architecture, for example, of Mendelsohn.

Mendelsohn's work is more architectural and involved with the sense of movement. My concert hall is

about the feeling of sails. I have a sailboat and I love it when the sails are filled with air from the wind. They are very strong and very precise. When you head into the wind, the wind is coming straight at you and you raise the sails. As you turn, the wind catches the sails. The space between the spinnaker and main sail or between the main sail and jib is a beautiful cathedral. When the sail is full and the jib and boom are out in opposite directions, a downwind position called wing and wing, the architectural space is extraordinarily beautiful, like a church. There is a festivity that makes a relationship with music for me. When Dr. Nagata directed me to his fluid shape for the interior of the concert hall, it suggested sails, so I wanted the outside of the building to be unified with the inside. I started to look at the sail in relation to movement and music by using the computer. If you asked Ando the same question about me, he would say, "I wish Frank would straighten everything out and make it simpler because it would be more powerful," because it is his point of view, which comes from classical language. He wants everything to be perfect. He would say, "Frank, too many things, too much." I don't understand that. My feeling about Ando is "Ando-san, I wish you would relax a bit and take some chances and explore the wind, clouds, life."

Can you give your evaluation of the 1980 Venice Biennale and the 1988 Deconstructivist show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York?

In the 1980 Venice Biennale I felt a little bit out of place. Most of the work was very decorative. I was interested in wood framing and I didn't want to be symmetrical. Everybody else did symmetrical work except Isozaki. In the 1988 Decon show they took my earlier projects from the 1970s — the Familiar House and my house. The word *deconstructivism* suggested images that my house fit conveniently and probably accidentally. I didn't think about Derrida when I did the work.

You predicted it eight or 10 years before then.

I didn't predict anything. I'm just saying that for convenience when Peter Eisenman started deconstructivism as a dialogue with architecture, he and Philip Johnson selected two images of mine from 1976 and 1978 for the show. I don't think they would have picked my house for the Wintons.

Historically, most avant-garde movements have occurred in smaller cities and away from central cultural areas. Ando had his beginnings in Osaka, while you began and continue working in Los Angeles. Since both of you have started in the second most popular city in its respective country, what does L.A. represent to you? Is



Is there any special meaning to living and working in L.A.? What is the significance of the distance between New York and L.A., physically or culturally?

There is more freedom being in the second city. There is more freedom to explore ideas than in New York. In New York everybody looks at everybody all day long. It is so claustrophobic. If you're an architect in New York, in one day you will see Eisenman, Gwathmey, Meier, Stern, Philip Johnson. Everyday there is interaction. In Los Angeles I never see anybody. I talk on the phone to Philip Johnson and Eisenman but I don't see anybody. Occasionally, I see Iso because he comes to the Museum of Contemporary Art, but mostly it is quiet and I find freedom. Historically, there is not much architecture. We don't have a Notre Dame cathedral or Borromini monuments. We don't have solid architectural styles like in the 19th century. We have to invent ideas from the context. Most of the sights are very intense and compact, not as intense as Tokyo, but with similar characteristics. From my point of view, they look the same. I imagine that Ando has pressures from Iso, Tange, Maki, and all the big generals of architecture, but Ando is a very self-reliant person. He has his own ideas. He is not afraid of saying who he is and doing his work. I think if he lived in Tokyo he would still be the same.

Do you feel that your designs would be influenced in any way if you were to work in New York?

I did design a building for New York. The discipline of skyscrapers is a very simple discipline. I am more like Ando in New York because good skyscrapers have so few moves. I find myself constantly searching for the essence of the idea of skyscraper. I want this to be a very "one" idea, very simple. Art Deco doesn't grow out of my time; it came from the Southwest Indians. I would like to do a fish skyscraper.

Standing on the shore of Western culture, could you comment on Japan, a Far Eastern country? What things seem most Japanese to you?

I would question what you said, that Ando is a global architect, not a regionalist. I think he is more regional than he understands, because the material he uses is not easily translated into other places. If he intends to work more globally, he is going to have to expand his language. I agree that he is a global thinker, but I think he has global limitations in the way he builds.

I think he is doing his first project outside of Japan at Vitra now.

A small project.

To the Japanese, an international style is equivalent to concrete architecture.

Not true. Concrete architecture is not prevalent internationally. It's been used but it's covered. My building at Vitra is concrete but covered with plaster.

Your recent project, the museum at Versel in Switzerland, is famous for its collection of modern chairs from all over the world. Ando's Vitra guest house will be nearby, across from a statue by Claes Oldenburg. Ando has a great interest in this opportunity to have competitive designs by famous architects. He has referred to this dynamic place as a battlefield, a concentration of impressive architecture in a confined area. What is your impression of this unusual opportunity?

I don't see it as a battlefield but I understand that perception. I am more interested in building cities, and cities are built by many different people. Cities are a de facto collaboration between good and bad architects if they don't work together. Good architects, people who respect each other, who work together to make buildings next to each other, is an ideal situation. Can they collaborate without compromising their strength? I think the ideal at Vitra would be for all the architects to work on the master plan together, for Zaha Hadid, Alvaro Siza, Ando, and Oldenburg to meet first and plan together.

So you don't think of it as a battle then?

It could still be a battlefield in the sense that you need the competition to make the pieces better. I don't think you can eliminate that, but it is impossible to do cities. I recently met Rem Koolhaas, and he is working very closely with Christian de Portzamparc and Jean Nouvel to make a city. I would like to work with Ando in that way.

Since you have known Tadao Ando for a long time, how would you describe him as an architect?

I certainly have great respect for him as an architect. His obsession and dedication to his language interests me. I trust that he won't give up. I need him to be strong so I can be strong.

Frank O. Gehry is an architect in Los Angeles. His American Center in Paris has just been completed and his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, is in design. In 1989, he won the Pritzker Prize.