

Words: IVO GOETZ

THE CHANGING FACE OF JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

Modern Japanese architecture is not for privacy fanatics and space wasters

Strictly speaking this isn't a house. It seems as if it no longer has any walls. It is completely transparent and consists of lightweight glass cubes, arranged on top of and next to one another on different levels. The whole construction is held together with a filigree steel structure. House NA by the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto, born in 1971, has just been completed in Tokyo and represents the deconstruction of our accustomed idea of what a house should look like.

All areas flow into one another; the levels are connected by short ladder-style staircases, or can be negotiated with one large step. The different platforms are in part arranged to create seating and work surfaces. The inhabitants live more in a kind of complex shelving system than in a house; almost like a computer game in which one has to navigate between levels.

An older design by Sou Fujimoto, House N, presciently combined interior with exterior in an all-encompassing structure with many openings, and now in the new House NA it seems no barriers remain.

The innate desire of urban dwellers to shield themselves from their environment in a private area, their home, is not to be found in this radically open design of House NA. The philosophy of the permeable quality into the inner area of the house, a communal family life with an almost complete absence of privacy afforded by separate rooms, is expanded upon into the surroundings by the inhabitants of the House NA, into the public sphere. Only at night thin translucent curtains are pulled across the glass as minimal protection from the gaze of others, reminiscent of the traditional filigree Japanese partitions found in many homes.

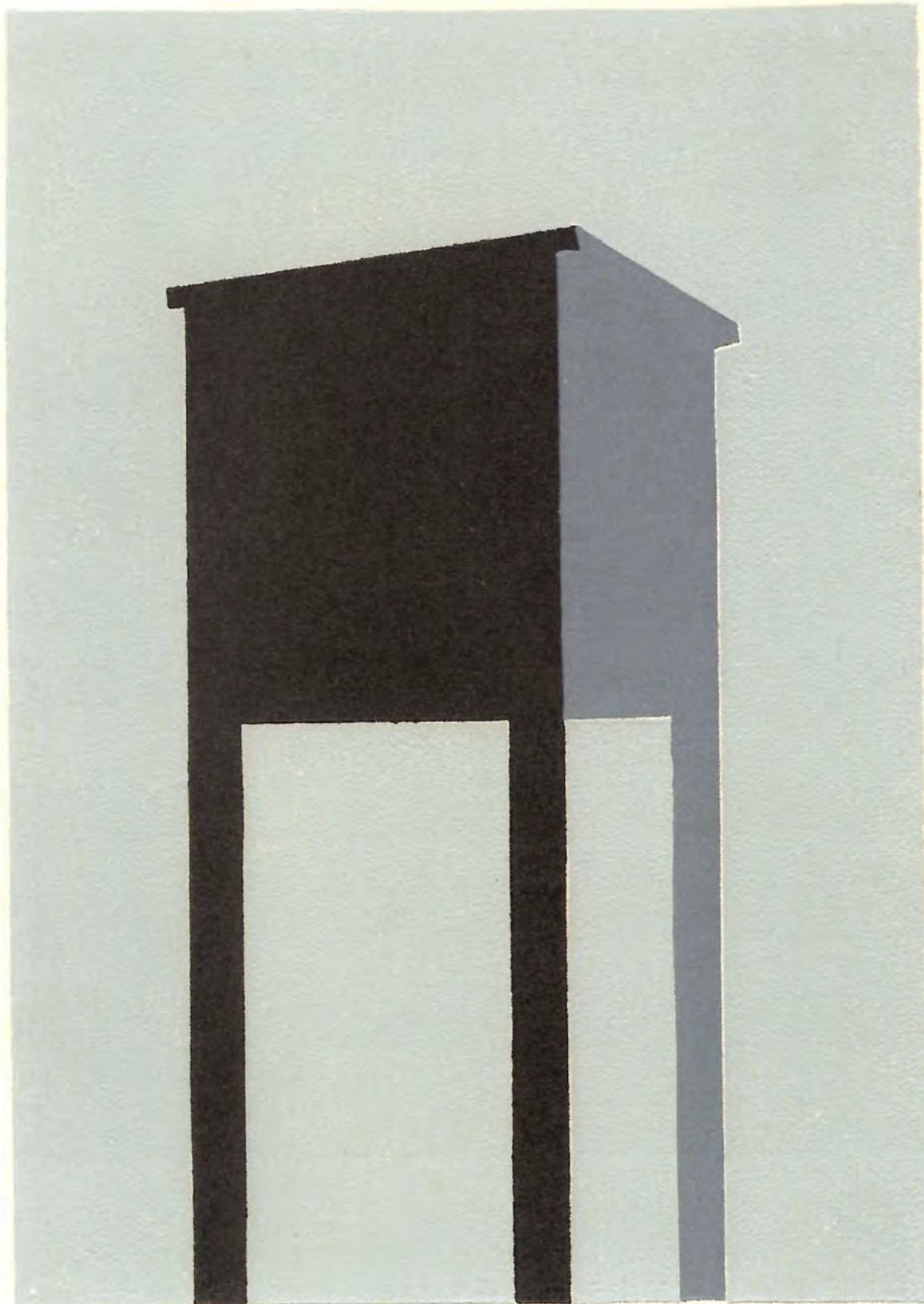
The development, illustrated on the sketch pads of a burgeoning young generation of Japanese architects, is a direct result of the phenomenal density of people living in the Japanese megacities. The design of new living concepts is the aim: where possible with the least surface spaces used, often squeezed between neighbouring buildings, utilising the space in the most effective

way, as well as neutralising boundaries of space. The plots are often only two or three metres wide and wind their way between neighbouring buildings like spineless sea creatures up to twenty metres deep. Some of the carports of houses in western suburbs are bigger than these!

The architects Kaijima and Tsukamoto from Bow Wow have put together a book, a kind of architectural guide to these mini houses, in which many examples of the so-called Pet Architecture in Tokyo are documented. So how did these new concepts of Japanese architecture come about? In Tokyo, the prime motivation was a lack of space; in the city centre more than 20 thousand people live in an area of one square mile! As a comparison, in Berlin the same area houses 4000 people. A new Japanese housing block has an average of 65 m² living space. More is often not possible on the narrow plots of land. House builders in Europe building homes for families on the outskirts of towns expect at least 100 m² to play with and when the Americans build their new suburban villas with pool and carport and garden they average 240 m² of living space.

But despite population growth being almost at a standstill in Europe, as well as in Japan, increasing numbers of people will continue to be drawn to the metropolises because the price of hour-long commuting from the suburbs to work in the cities will soon be unaffordable in the face of increasing petrol prices. And the demographics in the western industrialised nations bring new challenges for living solutions, because the ageing population, as well as a larger proportion of one-person households, need smaller, cheaper living accommodation in the cities.

What is now necessary in Tokyo, but also in cities like Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Mumbai and Beijing will soon be in demand in European cities; by the middle of this century around 70 percent of the world's population will be living in megacities.



Henrich Förster, 'IX', silkscreen print on paper, 1 of 4, 10,8 x 15,1 cm

So if we want to restrain the endless relocation beyond suburbia and the senseless commuter traffic, Japanese architects are offering interesting solutions that are applicable conceptionally to all future megacity structures. These smart designs condense city living space and offer space for more people. After all, there are enough vacant spaces and unused roofs available!

For European privacy fanatics and American space wasters indulging in private house building on spacious plots of land behind kilometre-long hedges, this is all probably a little hard to imagine. But the time will come when we will all have to rethink.

The rediscovery of public space, which is currently the case in Japan with the new open house concepts, is a knock-on effect and a further interesting step towards a new way of thinking about shared living in urban areas. People's living quarters are small and flexible, their modules permeable for the public, nevertheless offering minimal but crucial areas for retreat. After all, do we really actually need that much distance from our neighbours in the city? Do we really need so many walls, doors and small rooms for every specific function in our houses? Do we really need to constrain the surfaces of our homes with furniture and cupboards to this extent?

A possible answer to these questions is demonstrated by the spectacular design of the Moriyama House by Ryue Nishizawa, one of the partners of the SANAA architectural firm. The traditional Japanese concept of space, with its innate connectivity between interior and exterior, is shaped into a pioneering conceptual building by Nishizawa. He has built a kind of mini city within the city. Each room constitutes a house. The houses make up the city. The plot is deconstructed into cubes, with public pathways running between them. Inhabitants can withdraw into small individual spaces or meet at the landscaped spaces in between.

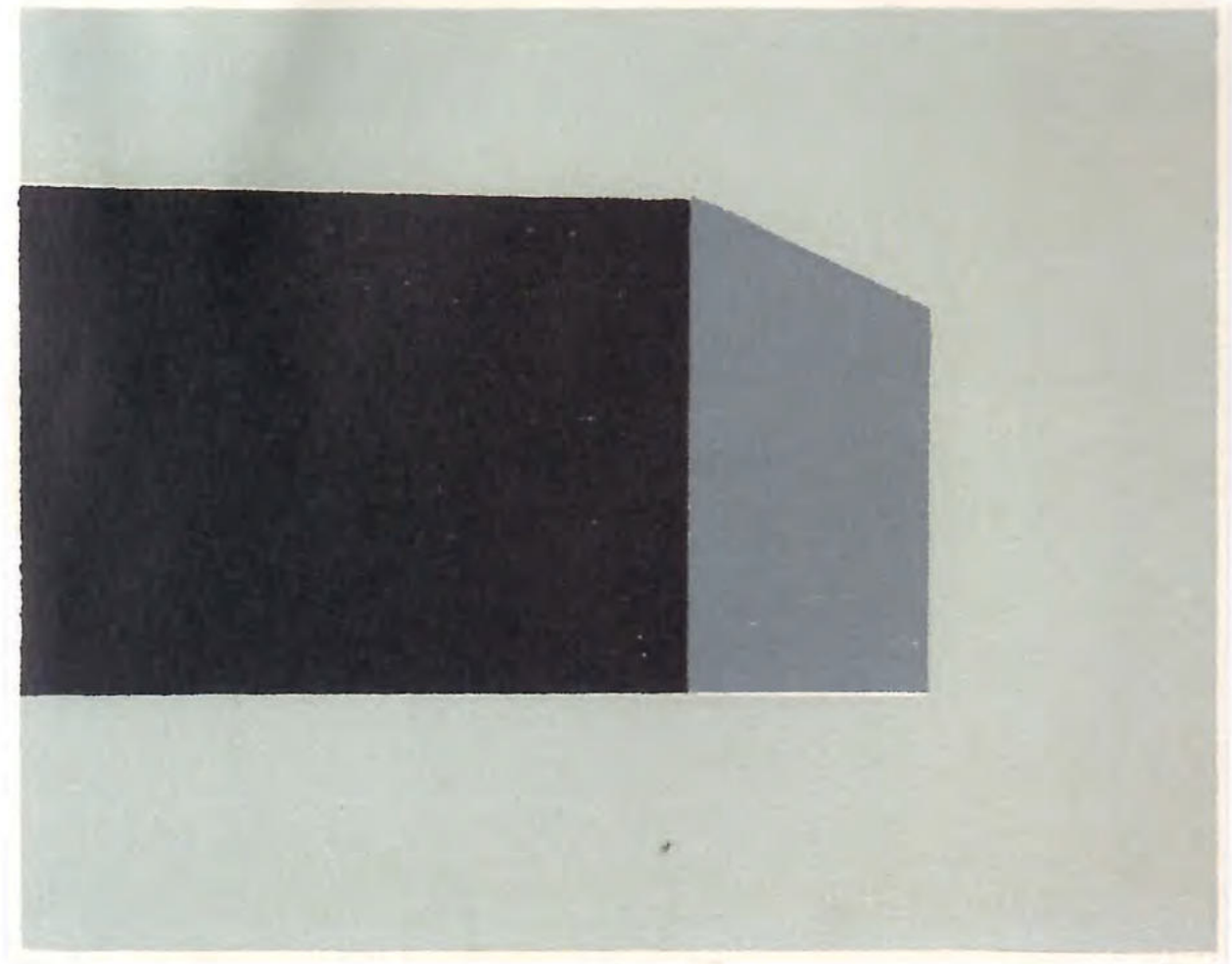
The interiors of the minimal houses by Nishizawa, Fujimoto, Tsukamoto and the other spatial wizards, also integrate concepts for reduction and maximum exploitation of the available space, which wholly question our need for boxes, cupboards and furniture. Storage space is already built into the house under staircases, in the flooring and in the outer walls. There are hidden panels and alcoves everywhere, for hiding belongings that could disrupt the minimalist aesthetic of the spatial sculpture. Entire kitchen units can be hidden away after use. The concepts are reminiscent of storage solutions below deck on a boat or even in space stations.

In Sou Fujimoto's Final Wooden House the traditional idea of furnished living space is rendered completely obsolete. The entire house consists of solid wooden beams, arranged into right angles where the interior is created by the space that occurs in between. Everything is wall, ceiling, staircase and opening, all in one. Tables and surfaces for sitting and lying down all merge into one another.

In order to understand where the roots of these new Japanese designers' ability to invent new radical concepts for architecture come from, we have to look back to the period around 1960. It was a time when Japan had recovered from the war and western architectural schools of thought began to play a role. The international style was adapted in housing design, with Brutalism as an option. The Tokyo Design Conference took place and developments in independent architectonic theory in Japan appeared in the form of Metabolism. Its founders, the young architects Kenzo Tange, Kisho Kurokawa and Kiyonori Kikutake, were searching for ideas for the cities of the future. Flexible buildings that could be built from prefabricated modules and added together to create mega-structures were part of the Metabolic concept. The rapid growth of urban centres, the changing usage of the buildings and the fast reaction to urban change are all manifested in this theory. The most well-known building of this time is no doubt the Nagakin Capsule Tower by Kisho Kurokawa from 1972. The genetics of the current mini house concepts are already nascent in the tower.

Today the grand masters and leading figures of the new architectural generation are Tadao Ando and Toyo Ito, who are both meanwhile over 70 years old. With their strongly individual architecture they have been seminal in influencing the experimental skills and flexibility of the young architects. In the space between these two very different teachers, the concepts of current modern Japanese architecture were able to evolve.

In general there seems to be a lot more movement in the realm of architecture in Japan than for example in Europe. Fundamentally, houses are not built for several generations as they are for us, but rather mirror a state of permanent flux and the needs of the inhabitants. Many buildings are simply torn down after twenty-five years. The plot of land is the actual value and not the house. A new one can be built that better suits the needs and the times of the current inhabitants. Destruction caused by earthquakes accelerates this process; there isn't much room left for nostalgia where buildings are concerned. At the moment the houses are appearing to once again



Henrich Förster, 'II', silkscreen print on paper, 1 of 4, 13,8 x 11 cm

open up to the cities, as they once did in the 19th century, as the examples show. The somewhat older, smarter mini houses from the young architect generation were often a lot more closed off, protected from the outside world and opened onto an atrium on the inside. The current designs shown in the brand new book "Garden & House" by Ryue Nishizawa highlight this change toward transparent buildings and represent the fast-thinning nature of the designers.

Whilst architects in other countries, apart from a few exceptions, are slaves to the international investor-dominated style and the same monotonous rows of flats and mirrored office blocks are sprouting up everywhere, young Japanese architects have continued to consistently follow their own ideas and turn them into reality. The design and building of small housing blocks is the exit point for their ideas and often the only way of becoming well known. The most fascinating examples

of such new buildings by these architects were designed outside Japan over the past years. For example the New Museum in New York, designed by the architectural firm SANAA, the new building on the Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen and the university campus of the École Polytechnique near Lausanne in Switzerland. Architect Shigeru Ban designed the Pompidou Centre in Metz.

The grand old man of Japanese architecture, Toyo Ito recently said that his younger colleague Sou Fujimoto would change the face of architecture in the 21st century. It seems that this has already started to happen. With his idea for the "Huaxi Urban Nature" Fujimoto has managed to transform the connection between public and private spheres of living and take it to the next level: futuristic living in a crystalline, sublime mega-structure without vertically or horizontally-defined spatial order.