

KENGO KUMA

2007-2008

Plym Distinguished

Professor School of

Architecture

University of Illinois

at Urbana-Champaign

PREFACE

Dear Readers,

This volume is the twelfth in a series of monographs what our School of Architecture has been publishing to document the work of the growing number of Plym Distinguished Professors we invited, and with whom we have had the privilege to collaborate throughout the years. Disseminating vast knowledge, expertise, and artistry in design, all have invariably contributed greatly to the curriculum and academic life in our School.

The current issue introduces the practice and achievements of Kengo Kuma, the internationally renowned Japanese architect, our most recent Plym Professor. His involvement in the School, just like his longstanding and innovative architecture, has focused on projects that are in tune with our times of more limited resources, and which, using materials and technologies creatively, as well as with great care and economy, show respect to both their environments and the most relevant strains of traditions. Forwarding the cause of such ecologically responsible design, Kuma's imprint in the studio work was timely and significant.

It is our hope that this issue, as all previous ones, beyond introducing the work of Kengo Kuma, that is to say, our resident Plym Professor, will also demonstrate our School's commitment to excellence in architecture and architectural education. This monograph has also been published with the purpose to serve as a supplement to Kengo Kuma's first American exhibition in the University of Illinois I Space Gallery in Chicago and a major lecture in the Chicago Art Institute in the fall of 2008, what events we in the School organize, the latter jointly with the Art Institute. With that in mind, Director Chasco and I would like to express our sincere appreciation, first of all to Kengo Kuma, and then to all the other authors, who contributed to this monograph with their eloquent comments and profound insights into Kuma's architecture.

Botond Bogнар

Professor and Edgar A. Tafel Chair in Architecture
Author of *Kengo Kuma: Selected Works* (2005)

THE PLYM DISTINGUISHED PROFESSORSHIP

The Plym Distinguished Professorship is a very special position within the School of Architecture. It was made possible by a gift to the School in 1981 by the late Lawrence J. Plym of Niles, Michigan. Mr. Plym was past president of the Kawneer Corporation and the director of a number of companies before he retired. As many know, Plym is a very prominent name in our School. Mr. Plym and his family have a very warm association with the University of Illinois and the School of Architecture.

The Plym Professorship is conferred on an architect who has a distinguished record of achievement and can make a positive contribution to the enrichment of the professional education of students in the School. Our past Plym Professors have included Gunnar Birkerts, Paul Rudolph, Joseph Esherick, Minoru Takeyama, Edmund Bacon, Thom Mayne, Carme Pinos, Dominique Parrault, Frances Halsband, Norman Crowe and Ken Yeang.

The School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was delighted to appoint Kengo Kuma, currently one of Japan's most significant internationally practicing architects, as the Distinguished Endowed Plym Professor in Architecture for the 2007-08 academic school year.

During the fall and spring semesters, Kengo Kuma collaborated with students and faculty in the Master of Architecture 5th-year and 6th-year Thesis program. In the spring, he specifically collaborated in the 5th-year graduate studios with Professors Botond Bogner, Paul Armstrong, Kathryn Anthony and Robert Selby, where students conducted design research for a new campus museum.

Kengo Kuma was born in Kanagawa, Japan in 1954. He completed his master's degree at the University of Tokyo in 1979. From 1985 to 1986, he studied at Columbia University as a Visiting Scholar. He established Kengo Kuma & Associates in 1990 in Aoyama, Tokyo. Since 2001 he has been a professor at the Faculty of Science and Technology at Keio University.

Among Kuma's major works are the Kiroso Observatory (1995),



Water/Glass (1995, for which he received the AIA Benedictus Award), Venice Biennale/Space Design of Japanese Pavilion (1995), Stage in Forest, Toyoma Center for Performance Arts (1997, for which he received the 1997 Architectural Institute of Japan Annual Award), Stone Museum (2000, for which he received the International Stone Architecture Award 2001), and Bato-machi Hiroshige Museum (2001, for which he received the Murano Prize). Recent works include Great Bamboo Wall (2002, Beijing, China), Nagasaki Prefectural Museum (2005, Nagasaki, Japan) and the Suntory Museum of Art (2007, Tokyo, Japan). A number of large-scale projects are now going on in Europe and China, such as an arts centre in Besancon City, France, and the development of the Sunlitun District in Beijing, China.

He was awarded the International Spirit of Nature Wood Architecture Award in 2002 (Finland), International Architecture Awards for the Best New Global Design for “Chokkura Plaza and Shelter” in 2007, and the Energy Performance + Architecture Award in 2008 (France).

The School of Architecture was fortunate to have Kengo Kuma enrich our program. Rather than a typical semester, Kengo imparted his belief in the significance of materiality and minimalist outcomes over the course of an academic year, through multiple visits each semester, and over the breadth of the graduate design program. He lectured on his built beliefs, conducted faculty colloquiums, and sponsored an intense 5-week graduate conceptual design competition. He entertained a student seminar in Tokyo to see not only the best of his work, but that of Japan’s other significant architects as well. He collaborated with faculty and students to investigate the design of a new campus museum. Kengo’s efforts in embracing the teaching mission of the School exemplifies the basic principle of “engagement” in harmonizing the design process. As with his minimalist architecture, where his deftness of touch creates timeless elegance, Kuma’s quiet yet unrelenting presence in the School will leave a lasting philosophical impression long after his time with us is past.



Kengo Kuma

Professor David M. Chasco

Director, School of Architecture







MY YEAR WITH ILLINOIS

Kengo Kuma

The year in Illinois was a most stimulating cultural exchange both for me and my students. “Cultural exchange” has always played a significant role in my practice. It started when I was a child, with a small wooden box designed by Bruno Taut, which my father proudly took out from the chest to show me. Taut stayed in Japan from 1933 to 1936 and designed one small house, Hyuga Villa (1935) and a few products. The texture of wood and minimalist form in his works left me with a striking impression. I later designed *Water/Glass* (1995) next to Hyuga Villa. By using water, I translated the idea of “engawa”—the idea of the veranda—one of Taut’s favorites about Japanese architecture.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Imperial Hotel (1922) in Japan. Wright was a collector of the works of Ando Hiroshige, and is often said to have learned his concept of “transparency.” I came to know this link between Wright and Hiroshige when I designed the Museum of Ando Hiroshige (2000). When Wright worked on the Imperial Hotel, he used soft porous stone named *Oya-ishi* (*Oya* tuff stone). Then, the town of Takanezawa, where there is a quarry of *Oya-ishi*, came and asked me to refurbish an antiquated warehouse. So I redesigned it, borrowing the idea of “porosity.” I imagine that Wright gained the notion of “transparency” and “porosity” through his cultural exchange with Japan, and that was exactly the notion which brought forth the modernist architecture of the 20th century.

Cultural exchange in various forms has contributed greatly to architecture in generating new things, and will continue to do so in the future. I expect that my experience at Illinois also will help me and my colleagues give birth to something new.



THE MATERIAL AS A CONSTRUCTION STRATEGY

Prof. arch. Luigi Alini

Università di Catania - Facoltà di Architettura di Siracusa

“Poets translate the enchantment of the material in images”
(Gaston Bachelard, *Causeries, Il Melangolo*, Milano, 2007, p.10)

The form is a view of the wit ... until it lives in the material
(Henri Focillon, *Vita delle forme*, Einaudi, p.51)

The patient intense activity which Kuma achieves on material revealing its hidden genealogy, is part of a paradoxical proposition: ‘to dissolve the architectonic object’ in the habitat, and the place which has generated it in any manner. The ‘root project’ of this position is Kiro-san Observatory in Ehime, work with which Kuma pursues a ‘harmonic connection’ between architecture and nature, form and material, material and habitat. According to Kuma it is in the relationship with the habitat that the material reveals its process of transformation. The material complies with the space and receives the light which wraps it, works on it and shapes it. The

material through a sort of transmuted alchemical modification, full of intention, grants the light and returns it back to us. The light slips on its scriptural surface, expands, hesitates, stops, and reveals the granularity, and its porosity. It is in the light-material relationship that it produces the metamorphosis. Consequently the technical dimension of the make, a “marvelous practical intelligence,” is only a generative process through which the form lives in the material. The architectures of Kuma incarnate a dream in the material, they appertain to the physical substance and in the same time reveal the spirit from which it irradiates. Kuma “feels the material,” gathering fate through a technical action which exposes a different aspect of the material, a hidden identity. The technique is not solely attributed and reducible to a process of physical transformation of material, but it also is creative activity, sensible knowledge, instinctive and intuitive.

Kuma “imagines the material” : ‘listening to’ the



Translated from Italian by Architect Fabio Manda Licensed in Italy

sound of materials is very important to me ... When you have a material in front of your eyes many things are defined ... My purpose is 'to reveal' through the architecture 'that place' which is the result of nature and time, what nature has done and what man has done. Architecture is the only instrument through which I try to 'reveal' some characters of 'that place'. I do it based on the relationship with architecture and nature, material and light.¹

The images which Kuma refers have an explosive potency, a power which transcends their meanings. They embody the remembrance of the future. They are carriers of a wider reality. To discover it, one needs to push the vision farther, besides what appears on the surface in order to catch the meanings which are involved in the 'construction of the forms'. It needs to transfer the vision from the imagine to its 'print', until the revelation of wider interpretation of meanings attributed to creation, to the technique, to the material until to

rendering evident the dialectic between the 'already been' and 'not yet'. Kuma overturns a criterion, he imagines the material which shapes and influences his figurative research, he delves into the imagine, he reveals its 'prehistory'. Consequently to decode the meanings which participate in 'the construction of the forms' I believe we can refer to the invitation that Klee expressed to his students of Nauhaus. He proclaimed that in front of a piece of art one should gaze in order to decode it, revealing, the genesis: "if the look of the artist is a 'swarming look', the look of the user has to be an incisive 'look', a look that is able to go back to what precedes the form," to its 'prehistory'. Clear wit and sensitive imagination, intuition and sentiment are the parameter with which it operates so that the material, 'achronologically stratified', allows to glimpse the weft of a possible new destiny.

1. Declaration rendered by myself of a recent conversation with Kuma in Verona



KENGO KUMA: AN ARCHITECT FOR OUR GLOBAL POST-BUBBLE ERA

Botond Bogнар

Professor and Edgar A. Tafel Chair in Architecture

Since the mid 1990s Kengo Kuma has emerged as one of the most significant Japanese representatives of our post-bubble era architecture. Recognizing the new realities and their more limited conditions in Japan, and now also beyond, Kuma's work is minimalist, but one that richly rewards the users as well as the careful and patient observers. What repeatedly struck me when visiting many of his built projects was the extreme simplicity of architectural form or volume, although the term volume can only be used here with some clarification. His Hiroshige Museum for example is a simple, long-extended, one-story pitched-roof building, covered completely by dense wooden slats. In a similar way, the Plastic House, the LVMH Shinsaibashi, and even the larger Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum and Asahi Broadcasting Corporation buildings are shaped as straightforward geometric compositions.

Kuma's approach is a clear rejection of the overly flamboyant and excessively decorative formal designs that characterized much, if not all, the architectures of the bubble era in Japan during the 1980s and early 1990s; it also testifies to his refusal to participate in the now widespread trend that, following Gehry's "Bilbao effect," produces a growing number of twisted, contorted, and largely seductive and empty architectural images. Recently the architectural historian William Curtis commented: "Architecture today is in danger of degenerating into a game played with over-complicated forms and computer generated images ... [which reveals] an obsession with willful imagery, excessive visual rhetoric and vapid form-making for its own sake."¹ Such tendency has now invaded even structurally inspired designs, as this is well illustrated, unfortunately, also by many of Calatrava's recent work.

Kuma's intentions are not related to architectural form per se, and especially not as a visual spectacle; they are equally devoid of exploiting arbitrary structural or technological bravura. He unfailingly concentrates on the totality of architectural experience, which though involves the visual attributes of the built work, it transcends them by extending that experience into the realm of all faculties of human perception, most especially tactility and movement. Kuma's buildings of sensory design release their attractive qualities gradually, in time, and almost by stealth. Unveiling the serenity and quiet beauty "hidden" in them necessitates human involvement or participation. In our accelerated age of commodification and instant

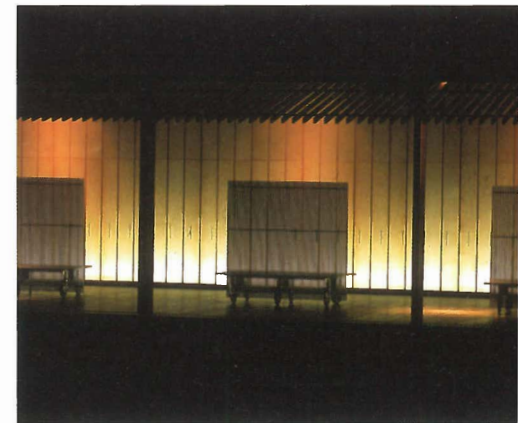
gratification this architecture invites us to slow down and take our time with and within it. Only this way can we discover the value and richness invested in these buildings.

Much of this is derivative of Kuma's particular use of materials, his emphasis on the significance of materiality. However, rather than relying on the bulk and heaviness of materials, as Ando is, Kuma employs wood, bamboo, plastic, paper, and even stone as "particles," or as the matrices of small, but "infinitely" repetitive elements, which then help him attain the "dissolution of the object," or the unambiguously determined shape and volume of architecture.² Whatever the material, Kuma is intent to find a way to turn it into screens and textures that lightly envelope rather than clearly demarcate the boundaries of his buildings: their forms and spaces, while filtering the environment into the realm of architecture.

Although Kuma's designs are patently contemporary, one might even say "modern" in the best denotation of the word, such sensibilities bring his work into close relation to the attributes of traditional Japanese architecture. In addition to the examples of the Lotus House, the Ginzan Onsen Fujiya Ryokan, and the Yien East / Archipelago in Kyoto, among many others, the growing number of his teahouse projects also testify to this relationship; all constructed with a different material, in them Kuma is set to redefine the essence of this long-time historic type of architecture.³

Kuma and many of his contemporaries in Japan share several concerns about the role and nature of architecture today. Among these architects are Tadao Ando, Toyo Ito, Yoshio Taniguchi, SANAA, Atelier Bow Wow, Tezuka Architects, and Tele-Design, to mention but a few, in whose designs one can variously identify preferences for minimalism, novel use of materials, respect for the environment, and others, yet differences remain. For example SANAA's increasingly severe minimalism can be contrasted to Kuma's, which is restrained and serene. With great reverence for nature, and promoting the ecology of architecture, Kuma, like Ando, is also a staunch environmentalist. Yet, while Ando's architecture, cast, as almost always in heavy concrete, is dramatic in its use of light, strong presence, and powerful relationship to nature, Kuma's works, rendered in softly filtered light, tend to be light and fragile as they appear to gently "dissolve" into their surrounding landscapes, urban or natural. In such intended qualities then lies perhaps the explanation of Kuma's early declaration: "I want to erase architecture."⁴

Kuma's evolving and increasingly busy international design enterprise can be described much more in detail and according to a variety of criteria, but in the brevity of a final analysis this much needs to be emphasized; the architecture he advances proves to be particularly well attuned to the spirit: the possibilities and aspirations of the prevailing global post-bubble era in Japan and elsewhere.





1. William Curtis, on the poster of a public lecture entitled "Gestures Without Meaning: The Crisis of the Star-system," delivered within the University of Illinois Study Abroad Program in Versailles, France, on April 7, 2008.

2. Kengo Kuma, "Dissolution of the Object and Flight from the City," *The Japan Architect*, 38 Summer 2000.

3. Kuma has designed and built another teahouse, the Casa Umbrella, for his exhibition in the University of Illinois' I Space Gallery, Chicago, held between October 10 and November 15, 2008.

4. Kengo Kuma, "Digital Gardening," *Space Design*, November 1997; p.6; and Kengo Kuma, "Introduction" in B. Bogner *Kengo Kuma: Selected Works*. New York, 2005.





ON KENGO KUMA

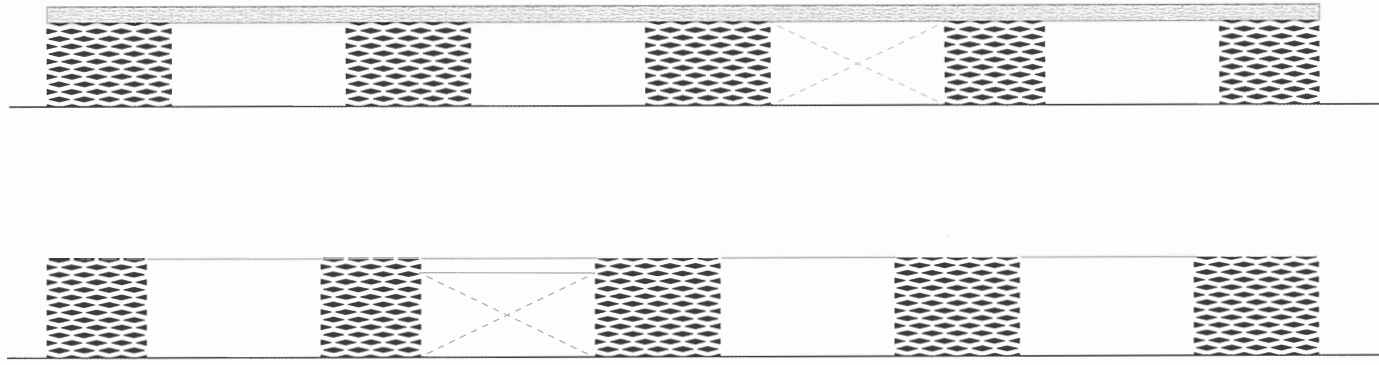
Kenneth Frampton

Ware Professor at the Graduate School of Architecture and Planning
Columbia University, New York

Kengo Kuma's output over the last decade has been so prolific that one hardly knows where to begin an appraisal of his work. Like other late modern Japanese architects Kuma's architecture is primarily based on the heightened expressive presence of material. The crucial role that this plays in his architecture is immediately evident from his so-called Forest/Floor House, built on a wooded site near Karuizawa, in Nagano Prefecture in 2004. It is clear that the intention here was to create an elevated, single-story, weekend house, floating amid a sea of trees. What is easily overlooked here is the fact that the overhanging roof is supported by two fat, cylindrical columns largely concealed by partitions in the center of the first-floor even though the perimeter is also partially carried on thin steel tubes. The deep eaves serve to shade the sliding glass walls of the living room, thereby yielding a perception of the façade that is free from incidental reflections. As in much of Kuma's work, the interior is additionally shielded by a vertically slatted timber screen; a device which has virtually become his signature as we may judge from the façade of the Luis Vuitton headquarters built in Omotesando, Tokyo in 2005.

We will encounter a bamboo variation on the same theme in his so-called Great Bamboo Wall, a Guest House completed in 2002, in the Commune by the Great Wall, near Beijing, and in the dense wooden slats of his Hiroshige Museum built at Bato, Nasu-gun in the Tochigi Prefecture in 2000. A poetic aspect of this last is the fact that Kuma sees the rhythm of this screen as approximating to the broken linear graphic pattern used by Hiroshige for the representation of rain. Needless to say this screening necessitates a plate-glass lining in order to protect the interior from the weather.

From time to time Kuma departs from his favored image of a reiterative lattice to engender works having distinctly different tectonic qualities by virtue of emphasizing a different range of materials, including works that are mostly subterranean, as in his project for the Kirosoan Observatory on a hill overlooking the Inland Sea. Apart from the Stone Museums built at Nasu, Nasu-gun in the Tochigi Prefecture in 2000, where appropriately enough the perforated walls are made of stone. Two other works come to mind for the way in which they each exemplify the phenomenological presence of a specific material. The first is Kuma's



addition to the Shibuya Station in Tokyo wherein we encounter a subtly ambiguous curtain wall on the northern elevation of the building, its glazed presence being emphasized by shiny metal corner clips. The superimposition of cloud images on this façade gives the work a highly ambiguous character, one that is all too appropriate, given the kaleidoscopic interplay between illusion and reality that occurs at every level within the confines of Shibuya. To this end Kuma has printed onto the glass random photographs of clouds, taken from the same spot, so that one looking at the façade finds it difficult to distinguish between the fixed image of a cloud and the reflected images of real clouds as they pass across the sky.

The second building is a single-story soba restaurant, built along a ritual route up Mt. Togakushi towards the most sacred Shinto shrine in Japan. The iconic motif here stems from triple-width flat wooden battens that are alternated with vertical panels of transparent and opalescent ribbed glazing. The whole is rendered as a rather dark, somber experience covered by a shallow, double-pitched metal roof carried on timber trusses reinforced with steel. Like the aforementioned weekend house, this long timber-lined volume floating above the ground focuses the diners on the forest and on the moody dark and archaic spirit of the place.

The measure of an architect must always turn to some extent on imagery regardless of whether this identity emerges through from character of the detailing or the overall form. Irrespective of the material that Kuma uses, his work always displays a particular identity. This last invariably arises from his reiterative lattices and from the fluctuating light that comes into being as a result. It also stems from a certain floating character in which the elements, while composed, never seem to be entirely stable. It is as though they are always on the verge of moving into a slightly different position. This effect is in marked contrast to the tactile and tectonic precision of the material from which it is made. Nevertheless, it guarantees the impressively ambiguous mood that is unfailingly present in his architecture, and defines a trope that assumes him a rather unique place within the contemporary international architectural scene.

KENGO KUMA IN FRANCE

Serge Lemoine

Professor of History of Contemporary Art,
University of Paris IV-Sorbonne

Born in 1954, Kengo Kuma is today a renowned architect, an important representative of a generation—that includes the Sanaa Office, Toyo Ito, Shigeru Ban, and others—and which followed that of Fumihiko Maki, Arata Isozaki, and Tadao Ando, themselves followers of the great creators of the 1950s and 1960s such as Kunio Maekawa, Junzo Sakakura, and Kenzo Tange.

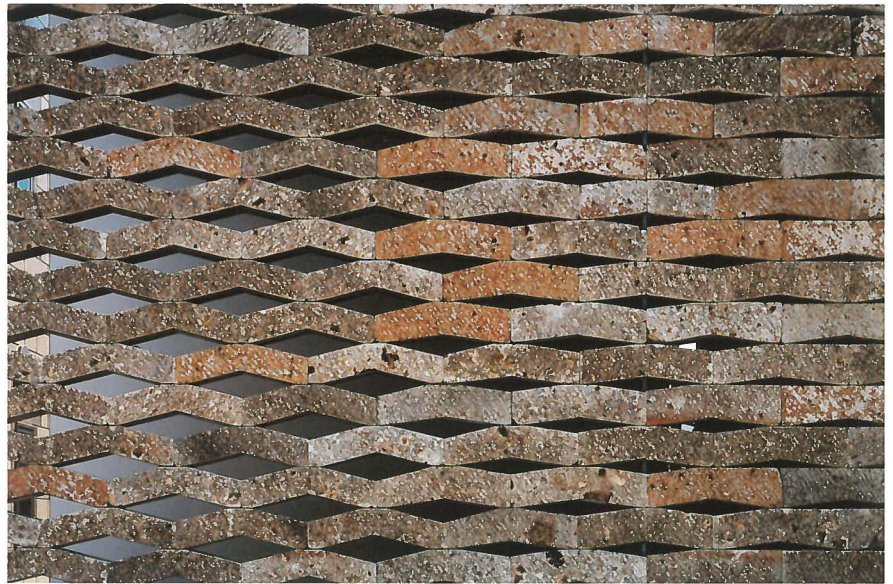
In the past fifteen years, Kengo Kuma has authored important works realised in Japan, including different types of buildings: company headquarters, residential buildings, individual houses, religious buildings and a museum.

The work of Kengo Kuma exhibits some common characteristics: the interpenetration of spaces, a volumetric simplicity, structural finesse, compositional principles relying on horizontal and vertical lines, a great attention to the use of materials - amongst which wood is often preferred - and a treatment of the skin through interwoven layers. Further, the integration of the work into the site allows most importantly the landscape to enter into the building through framed views. All of these elements are always linked to his constant intention of dematerialising the work of architecture.

These characteristics of course belong to classic

Japanese architecture, as it is perfectly shown in the Katsura Villa in Kyoto, in which Kengo Kuma fully reinterprets them. Yet they can also be found in twentieth century architecture, notably in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, who, as we know, was directly influenced by Japanese architecture, and can mostly be seen in the works of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose Barcelona pavilion (1929) and the Farnsworth House in Plano (1945-50) constitute the archetypes of his art, and are also identifiable in the works of Richard Neutra, particularly in the manner in which he has achieved the integration of his buildings into the site, as shown in the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs (1946).

Kengo Kuma's constructions thus blend the forms of traditional Japanese architecture with those of classic twentieth century international architecture achieving original works of high technical and environmental quality, recognized not only in his own country, but also worldwide. This recognition is seen throughout Europe, and particularly in France, where Kengo Kuma has won many competitions that prompted the opening of an office in Paris. His projects for the Cité des Arts at Besançon and for the headquarters of the Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur region's (France's southeast region) Fonds



Translated from French by Andrea Lapunzina Veronelli

Régional d'art contemporain (Regional Fund of contemporary art) in Marseille are eagerly awaited and expected to be completed in 2012.

Moreover, in 2007, Kengo Kuma was short-listed for the competition of the Soulages Museum in Rodez, in the south-west of France. His project was not chosen, probably due to its high cost, but was nonetheless beautiful, a perfect response to the demands of the program which asked to present the works of the most important contemporary French painter as an exemplification of both his approach and style.

The building, oriented east-west, would have had two stories, one of them located underground and lit through an English-court. Protected by an overextended and prominent horizontal roof, a reference to Mies van der Rohe's Berlin Nationalgalerie—the whole building was very open and composed only of horizontal and vertical planes - opaque, smooth or dull, and transparent—that both structured the space and distributed the different functions. The exhibition rooms, of which some would have had double-height, allowed an active relationship between the exterior and the interior; thus, the linear path leading to the building cut through it to transform itself as an interior hallway and serve the different parts of the

building. The latter was to be completed, on the eastern and western wings, by reflecting pools from which water would have poured in vertical waterfalls into basins located in rooms on the underground level.

One of these rooms, intended for the presentation of Pierre Soulages's paintings - which, at the artist's request, had to be hung by strings tightened between the roof and the floor - would have enjoyed natural lighting, the movement of water falling vertically on the opposite wall, and the reflections from the basin. This device would have constituted an unforgettable moment, as when you find yourself in the room containing the works of Giacometti and Sam Francis in the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, Denmark, which has a view upon the sea through a full-height opening - a principle that also inspired Renzo Piano for his Beyeler Foundation in Basel.

By its relationship to the site, its adaptation to the program, the quality of its spaces, its play of lights and reflections and by the economy of means (which did not weaken the strength of his proposal), Kengo Kuma's project for the Soulages Museum in Rodez will remain as an accomplished example of his art.

VEILS OF LIGHT

- Kengo Kuma's filters of perception

Juhani Pallasmaa

Architect, Professor (Helsinki)

In a conversation a few months before his death in 2001, Balthus, one of the greatest figurative painters of the twentieth century, makes a surprising and thought-provoking argument about the mental ground of artistic quality: “[G]reat painting has to have universal meaning. This is sadly no longer so today and this is why I want to give painting back its lost universality and anonymity, because the more anonymous painting is, the more real it is.”¹

Today's architectural world is obsessed with the uniqueness of form, immediately identifiable as the hand of its designer. In our age of consumerism and the seductive visual image, buildings are judged by their power to surprise and provoke rather than their capacity to make sense of the human existential reality. Aspirations for universality and anonymity have been discarded, and these objectives are regarded as signs of artistic conservatism.

Kengo Kuma can certainly be seen as part of today's minimalist avant-garde, but his architecture projects a rare sensuality, intimacy, and hapticity. His architecture arises from

a modernist understanding of abstraction and condensation, fused with the age-old Japanese tradition of sensuous reduction and restraint. His buildings are authoritative and gentle, quiet and vibrant, at the same time. In fact, Kuma's works are examples of the true essence of abstraction that implies compression and distillation of imagery and meaning instead of mere elimination and subtraction. As Constantin Brancusi states: “Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, in approaching the real essence of things. Simplicity is at bottom complexity and one must be nourished on its essence to understand its significance.”²

Kengo Kuma is an architect who aims at a distinct quietness, a disciplined understatement in his architectural expression, and the disengagement of his architect's persona. His recent buildings reveal an aspiration for anonymity, and the suppression of idiosyncratic form. This suppression of form has led him to emphasize materiality. In fact, he is deliberately separating form and matter. “I don't know whether an architecture in which form and silhouette disappear, leaving



only materiality, is possible, but it is something I want to pursue. From the point of view of the conventional dichotomy, this is a contradiction. Until now architecture, form and materials have been connected, but I want to separate them,” he confesses.³

Kuma’s architecture is based on repetitiousness and the absence of specific focal points, or self-sufficient details. His design approach turns buildings into backgrounds, horizons, or filters instead of projecting active foreground figures. It would not do Kuma’s architecture justice, however, to call it “neutral,” as his buildings give rise to an alert and sensuous feeling that enables us to become actively aware of the subtleties of the seasons, weather, light and human activities. Through repetitious patterns he creates hypnotizingly monotonous surfaces that highlight materiality, and evoke subtle and changing sensations of transparency, reflection, and levitation. Instead of making formal statements, he creates atmospheres that condition perceptions and feelings. The world is seen through a veil of light, or a transparent and

vibrating filter of buoyant matter.

Kuma’s architecture questions reality as a self-evident and given condition. One of the mysterious qualities of art is that the transformed artistic reality actually helps to strengthen the viewer’s/listener’s/occupant’s sense of the world and self. The poetic logic of artistic works does not obey causalities of the physical world. Artistic works are miracles that make us see the world and ourselves with combined perceptiveness and innocence.

1. Balthus in His Own Words: A Conversation with Christina Carrillo de Albornoz (New York: Assouline, 2001), 6.

2. Catalogue of Brancusi exhibition, Brummer Gallery, New York, 1926. As quoted in Eric Shanes, Brancusi. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 105.

3. “A return to materials”, Hiroyuki Suzuki and Kengo Kuma (The Japan Architect: JA 38, Summer 2000) 5.



POSITION OF KENGO KUMA

Hiroyuki Suzuki

Professor of Architectural History, Graduate School of Architecture,
University of Tokyo

Kengo Kuma is one of the most prolific contemporary architects in Japan. Naturally, if you just make a comparison based on the number of works that he has completed, there are various other architects that have more projects to their name. However, he draws attention from many as being extremely prolific due to the fact that each of his works has opened up a new horizon of expression. I think that he is one of the best examples of the creativity of contemporary Japanese architecture. Modern architectural structures are being built all over the world, and even if an architect has a unique character, the nationality of the architect or the unique character of the cultural sphere to which the architect belongs is often lost to a great degree. And while Kengo Kuma is very prolific, he has consistently pursued the potential of architectural expression with a unique Japanese character. I would like to explain this.

Kengo Kuma has penned a book entitled “*Makeru Kenchiku*,” which can be roughly translated as “Architecture that does not overpower its surroundings.” I think he is trying to say that architecture should blend in and be easy on the environment and culture in which it is situated, rather than loudly beating its own drum. In the same sense, he places a certain value on “Weak Architecture.” One technique that he uses in his structures is slicing materials very thinly and separating them into fragments which are arranged in a certain manner. This results in a structure that has a conglomeration of non-physical slits or is covered by a thin membrane. Through his works, he has provided a direction for Japanese architecture.

There is one episode that is related to this. In the 1950s, Le Corbusier came to Japan to design the Museum of Western Art. When he was taken to Kyoto and shown around, he complained that Japanese architecture had too many lines. He probably said this after seeing the latticed windows or the structure of delicate fittings that are often found in traditional houses in Kyoto. Le Corbusier, who was focused on creating structures consisting of planes and sculptured surfaces, thought

that Japanese architecture was a collection of complicated linear elements.

Conversely, Kengo Kuma integrates modernism and a Japanese character into a collection of linear elements and membranes. In the structure he created called LVMH Osaka, he achieved a stone - wall surface that allows light to permeate by thinly slicing onyx and placing glass panes between these slices. This is the form that stone architecture should take interpreted from a Japanese perspective. Wood is the only material that has been traditionally used in Japanese architecture, but Kengo Kuma has shown how this style can be adopted in buildings where stone materials are used. While Kuma has an international outlook, he is always conscious of issues and elements that contemporary Japanese architects should feature in their works. His critical nature is quite apparent.

I think that Japanese architects who are slightly older than him, such as Tadao Ando and Toyo Ito, do not consciously focus on this type of expression of a Japanese character. The works of Ando and Ito have only turned out to have a Japanese character in a happenstance type of way. However, all of the works of Kengo Kuma have a Japanese character because of a conscious critique that takes place during the process.

Kengo Kuma became a guest professor of the Department of Architecture in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Tokyo in 2008. He is scheduled to formally become a professor at the University of Tokyo in 2009. The process is proceeding in this manner and will take a certain amount of time since he is currently a professor at Keio University. Kengo Kuma’s clear recognition of the issues and vision of the proper direction for Japanese architecture makes him the ideal person to teach young students as an architect. Many people will pay attention to see how his works evolve in the future, but I am also extremely interested to see how he teaches and nurtures architects.

Translated from Japanese by Gary Dyck





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