

# KENGO KUMA COMPLETE WORKS

KENNETH FRAMPTON

# KENGO KUMMA

complete works

kenneth frampton

with 390 illustrations, 222 in colour



Kengo Kuma is an architect, and the author of several works on architecture, including the text-based books *Anti-Object* and *Kyokai: A Japanese Technique for Articulating Space*. His work has been featured in numerous publications, such as *XS Extreme* (Thames & Hudson).

Kenneth Frampton is professor of architecture at Columbia University in New York. He is the author of many books on architectural theory and history, including *Modern Architecture* and *American Masterworks*, both published by Thames & Hudson.

This book is dedicated to the victims and survivors of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, 11 March 2011.

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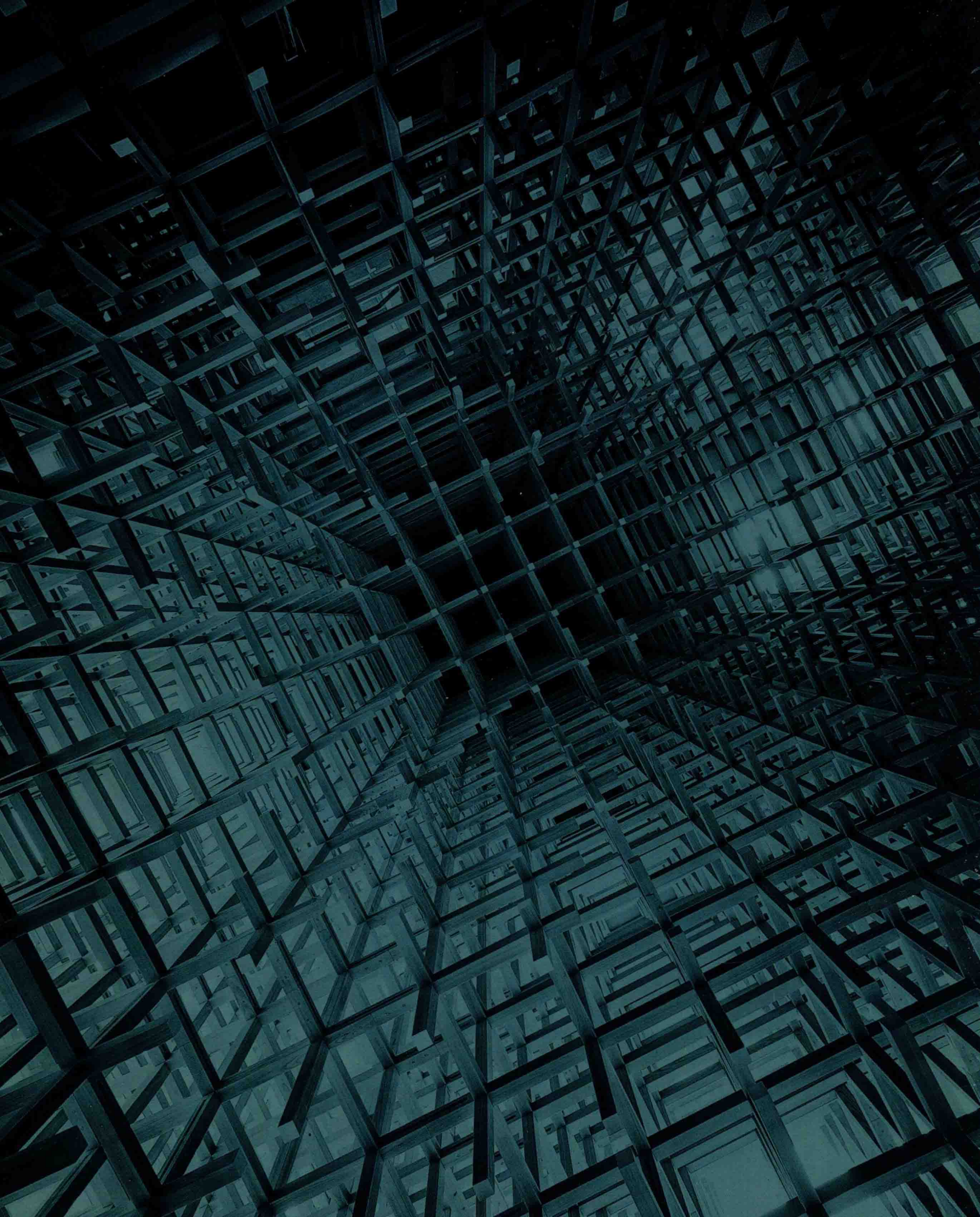


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# PREFACE

*by Kengo Kuma*

What I am most interested in now is inverting the structure of a culture that is centred around the city. The twentieth century was an age of industry, and an age in which everything from material goods, information and culture flowed from the cities to local towns and villages. Following the same vector, architecture, too, flowed out from the centre to the periphery. Concrete, steel and glass produced in the cities were transported to the country, and buildings throughout the world came to be constructed of the same materials with the same details. Trends in design also flowed outward from the metropolitan centres. The flow of information followed a familiar pattern: trends that emerged in New York, London or Paris were exported to Tokyo, reaching the towns and villages of Japan several years or decades later. Buildings were once constructed of locally produced wood, stone, clay and paper, but such materials fell into disuse. Craftsmen skilled in the use of these materials lost their livelihoods and disappeared, and no one was there to follow in their footsteps. Local economies and cultures were destroyed through this process.

I am convinced that the earthquake and tsunami that struck the Tohoku region of Japan on 11 March 2011 provided an opportunity to redress the balance of this social and cultural decline. Tohoku has the richest natural resources in Japan, and was the place where many craftsmen with skills that utilized that natural environment lived and worked. But the Tohoku we saw destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami was not the old Tohoku with which we were familiar. It was not the Tohoku that had been a paradise for craftsmen. Row after row of prefabricated housing units had been assembled from parts made in factories, and the people living in those units commuted to work in the cities by car. A lifestyle similar to that of the American suburbs had destroyed the rich and distinctive culture of the region. When I saw the tsunami washing away those American-style houses and cars, Noah's flood came to mind. God had sent the biblical flood to punish an arrogant, corrupt society. The earthquake and tsunami seemed to me an expression of the anger of the gods at the way all of us had forgotten or ignored the fearsome power of nature.

The Tohoku region, located at the northeastern portion of Honshu, the largest island of Japan, is a special place for me personally. I opened my office in 1986, but the bursting of the economic bubble seven years later began a decade of recession in Japan. During those ten years, I received no commissions in Tokyo. My office managed to survive by doing small, local projects in Tohoku and Shikoku (one of the four main islands of Japan, located south of Honshu), which are among the most underdeveloped and impoverished regions in the country. One reason for this is their distance from Tokyo, but another has to do with topography. Both areas are essentially collections of countless small valleys, with steep mountains rising all the way to the coastline; as a result, large plains do not exist, and areas are cut off from one another. The topography hindered the dissemination of a central culture transmitted from Tokyo, and Tohoku and Shikoku lagged behind other areas with respect to twentieth-century trends. Conversely, it was thanks to those valleys that the regions retained the rich culture so characteristic of small places.

The richness and strength of that culture cannot be understood until one has worked with the people who live there – until one has eaten their food, drunk their sake, talked together with the craftsmen and made things with them. In the decade after the bubble burst, I had an opportunity to learn from these areas about the richness of small places. I probably would not have been able to change had I not had those ten years of experience, and would not be designing the kind of buildings I am designing now. I continually tell students that a recession is the best of times for an architect, and that having no projects lined up is one of the most fortunate things that can happen. One tends to repeat one's past, and rarely attempts to change or try to learn from the changed circumstances of a new era. The most important thing I learned from Tohoku and Shikoku was that relationships are what makes a place culturally rich. A place is not rich simply because it has a beautiful natural environment, or because it is blessed with natural resources, or because many skilled craftsmen live there, but because of the relationships that tie these things together. Places that were rich in that sense once existed in countless number in Japan.

The German architect Bruno Taut recognized that Japanese architecture was an architecture of relationships, rather than form. He declared that European architecture, by contrast, was an architecture of form, and that European architects, including Le Corbusier, were formalists. Having fled from Germany in 1933 when the Nazis assumed power, Taut travelled by the Siberian Railway, took a boat across the Sea of Japan, and arrived on 4 May – his birthday – in Tsuruga, whereupon he was taken by Japanese architects to visit Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto. Taut, who had no background knowledge of the place, stopped in front of a fence (of a type known as *Katsura-gaki*), and his eyes filled with tears. The other architects were astonished by this unexpected reaction. This world-famous architect whom they respected, the avant-garde architect and leader of the Modernist movement who had designed the Steel Industry Pavilion (1913), in Leipzig, and the Glass Pavilion (1914), in Cologne, had suddenly begun to cry in front of a shabby, seventeenth-century bamboo fence in an old garden. What had happened? Who was this man?

Taut later wrote a book entitled *The Rediscovery of Japanese Beauty* (1939), and devoted many of its pages to the palace. He explained that from the standpoint of European formalism, the Katsura buildings were nothing more than shabby huts. In fact, when Le Corbusier visited the palace in 1955, he commented only that 'there are too many lines' – a reaction that was the polar opposite of Taut's. What Taut had discovered in front of that fence at Katsura was

a 'relationship' he had never seen before. The fence was made of bamboo, but the bamboo had not been cut and detached from the earth. Instead, the culms, still rooted in the soil, were bent and woven into a fence. Taut had never seen such a thing before: it was architectural yet natural, natural yet artificial. Moreover, this miracle was achieved thanks to the amazing skill of craftsmen. There was indeed a relationship here, one that had been established between a landscape, its natural resources and craftsmen who coexisted with nature. If one looks at just the resulting form, it is nothing but bamboo leaves. But Taut was suddenly moved to tears because he realized that there was an underlying relationship here as well.

Countless such relationships also existed in Tohoku and Shikoku. Different trees would give each valley its own unique texture, colour and fragrance (unfortunately, conveying to the reader any sense of that fragrance is beyond the capabilities of this book). Fragrance has played an important role in Japanese culture, and was traditionally deemed more important than appearance in the selection of a tree. In making use of the rich resources yielded by the valley, the local craftsmen were very much like mothers giving birth. It was through the act of production that the valley and humans were connected. Cultural anthropologists have pointed out that this relationship – the production of things using place as material – is the most important relationship for humankind. The father principle is universality and objectivity, the drive to dominate and govern the world according to one rule. The child, on the other hand, rebels against the father and opposes him with an individual's subjectivity. It is the mother who mediates in this opposition between father and child. Post-structuralist philosophers (such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva) have pointed out that acts of production by the mother are the essence of the concept of *chora* (place), which Plato stated at the beginning of his Socratic dialogue, *Timaeus* (c. 360 BC). Universal principles exist in the world, but at the same time the world is a collection of countless heterogeneous places. Plato noted that acts of production by the mother resolve this seeming contradiction. His interpretation of *chora* closely resembles the Japanese concept of spirits as the guardians of places, a belief that dates back to ancient times. The world is saved from opposition and schism between father and child through continued production by guardian spirits. Similar beliefs and ideas existed in many places in the Neolithic period, and Plato's concept is said to be an extension of those beliefs and ideas.

Architecture is an act of producing a thing from a place; it is production by those who live in the place. Such acts of production connect place and human beings, and it is that great truth that I learned from Tohoku and Shikoku. I decided then to engage in architecture once more in earnest, and in that sense Tohoku and Shikoku are for me a mother – indeed, more a mother than my own mother.



# THE ANTI-OBJECTIVE ARCHITECTURE OF KENGO KUMA

*by Kenneth Frampton*

The ambiguity which truly matters, the sense-giving ambivalence, the genuine foundation on which the cognitive usefulness of conceiving human habitat as the 'world of culture' rests, is the ambivalence between 'creativity' and 'normative regulation'. The two ideas could not be further apart, yet both are – and must remain – present in the composite idea of culture.

*Zygmunt Bauman, Culture as Praxis, 1999<sup>1</sup>*

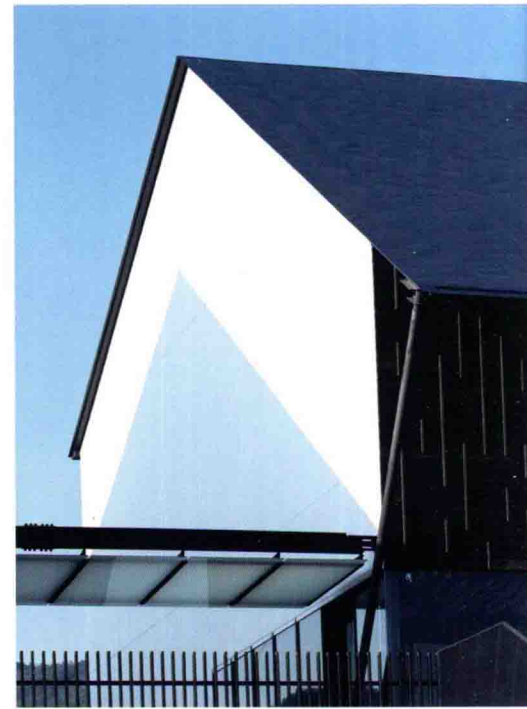
Within the generation of architects who are now in their mid-fifties, it would be hard to find one more quintessentially Japanese than Kengo Kuma, even though he now seems to be building as much outside of Japan as within it. Something similar could have been previously claimed with respect to Tadao Ando, who, while only thirteen years Kuma's senior, now seems to belong to a totally different generation. This much is reflected in the antipathy between their respective approaches, which with few exceptions could hardly be more different, with Ando invariably building in reinforced concrete and Kuma finding the material itself to be an anathema. This schism dates back to Kuma's negative reaction as a student to Ando's Row House in Sumiyoshi (1976), for which Ando was awarded the much-coveted Japan Architectural Prize in the year of its completion. Kuma's response to the introspective character of this concrete house was psycho-physiological, in as much as he felt that he would literally suffocate in its presence. It is telling that he would later account for the intensity of this reaction in terms of his origins, in that from an early age he had been brought up to appreciate the virtues of living in buildings made entirely of wood. Thus in his essay 'Material is Not a Finish' (2004), he writes:

I do not know what brought about such reactions. It may have had something to do with the fact that I was born and raised in a pre-war Japanese wood-frame residence. This house was originally constructed for my grandfather, who was a doctor in Ohi, Tokyo, as a weekend farming residence. It was simple, with plenty of ventilation. Moreover, both my grandfather and my father abhorred the inhuman texture of aluminium window frames so much that when the houses was added onto or renovated, only wooden window frames allowing draughts to flow in were permitted.<sup>2</sup>

Although Kuma has by no means eschewed the use of concrete in his practice, as his Kiro-san Observatory (1994) makes all too evident, he has nonetheless tended to favour works in which wood plays the primary expressive role, however much the underlying structure may be made of steel, concrete or a mixture of both. Irrespective of this, it is ironic that Kuma's partisanship as a mature architect would turn on a paradoxical combination of glass and water, rather than either the wood of 'tradition' or the concrete of 'modernity', although it is hard to imagine a more quintessentially modern material than the ubiquitous use of large areas of frameless plate glass. As Kuma makes clear, his so-called Water/Glass project (1995; p. 28), added to a villa overlooking Atami Bay, remains for him a canonical work, one that has almost mythical dimensions. It is hardly insignificant that he begins every public lecture with this work as if it were the crystallization of a unique synthetic concept that has a comparable status for him as Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House (1924) or Le Corbusier's Maison Cook (1926). While the Water/Glass project does not literally demonstrate the interactive elements of 'another' architecture, it is nonetheless connected to the genesis of modern architecture in Japan, in as much as it was profoundly inspired by Bruno Taut's re-evaluation of Katsura Detached Palace, made during his three-year stay in Japan from 1933 to 1936.<sup>3</sup> Kuma would envisage his Water/Glass project as a reinterpretation of Taut's reading of the Katsura aesthetic, above all for the way in which the palace frames nature in much the same way as moving water frames the outriding panorama of the sea in his Water/Glass assembly, the whole fusing imperceptibly with the ocean in accordance with the fluctuations of light and air. As Kuma writes:

The boundary conditions of this installation shift from moment to moment, responding to the changing moods of nature. At particular times, you perceive the upper and lower planes of water as a single, continuous surface, and you have the sensation of floating on the sea. In that moment, the subject is directly connected to the world by the medium of water. Inclement weather can reinforce this impression. On rainy days, the boundaries between world and architecture melt: sea, sky and pool are transformed into a mass of blue-grey particles that envelop the subject. Even the distinctions between solid, liquid and gas disappear. In such moments, the building expands infinitely and becomes identical with the world. At the same time, everything in the world is compressed into and embedded within the building.<sup>4</sup>

Kuma's 'anti-objective' architecture is anti-perspectival in that it is categorically antithetical to the subject/object split of the occidental tradition. As such, it opposes the hyper-individualistic optic of the *frons scenae*, dating back to the Renaissance and the ideal stage of Sebastiano Serlio (1474–1554). The asymmetrical projection of the Water/Glass volume, derived from the diagonal platform of the Noh stage, makes it explicit that there is no single ideal point from which this waterborne scene may be experienced. This is partially due to the fact that the subject is compelled to focus momentary attention upon the floor, before raising one's eyes to take in the louvred ceiling and the reflections and refractions of the glass, combined with the animated surface of the water constantly running out, beneath the floor, prior to merging with the infinite expanse of the sea. We are uncannily close here to the apocalyptic final frames of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in that the sonic/tactile antipathy of the floor, plus the dematerialized phantom character of the transparent furniture, makes it evident that the absent subject can never be redeemed, and that our passing potential



Ondo Civic Centre,  
Kure, Hiroshima, Japan



presence is forever confined to a voyeuristic fate. Thus we are destined to remain offstage, behind the camera, never to penetrate into the forbidden dematerialized lens of the room that lies crystallized in front of us, perpetually frozen before the oceanic panorama.

Ironically, the sea is also the ultimate referent in the Kiro-san Observatory, located on top of a small mountain on Yoshiumi Island in Ehime Prefecture. Here, Kuma's anti-objective architecture stems from the partial reconstruction of a decapitated peak, and the provision of a concrete earthwork-cum-pedestrian promenade that penetrates into the body of the peak, only to culminate at its crest in two concrete viewing platforms, facing in different directions. These vantage points, linked by a *passerelle* made of cypress wood and a system of ascending and descending concrete stairs; the former wide and theatrical (à la Swiss architect Adolphe Appia), and the latter narrow and doubling back on itself in order to conduct the visitor down to the car park without repeating the itinerary of the approach. One may remark that Ando is the inadvertent reference here by virtue of the way in which the concrete is used to carve out the space and retain the earth. Despite Kuma's conception of Kiro-san as a non-corporeal architecture, the two observation decks are nonetheless treated as honorific belvederes from which one may view the vast expanse of the Inland Sea. It is typical of Kuma that he would see this situation as harbouring a potential for a reversal, in which the dominant becomes voyeuristically dominated, as in Akira Kurosawa's film *High and Low* (1963). Kuma is thus able to advance his 'anti-object' polemic through this deft reference to Kurosawa:

Kurosawa is pointing out the danger inherent not just in seeing, but in objects. The hilltop residence is a typical object. Set on high ground, as if on a pedestal, it is a product of bourgeois desire. Looking through its enormous picture windows, the occupants come to believe that they dominate not just nature, but the world as a whole. At the same time, the bourgeoisie wants the world to see the manifestations of their sensibility and wealth. The suburban house has enabled them to satisfy this dual desire – to see and be seen. As a result, the twentieth century was the century of suburban houses, which proliferated at an extraordinary rate until they dominated the landscape.

Eventually, however, it was realized that these objects were not as ideal a form as had been supposed. Success was assured only when an object stood alone on a hill, dominating and being seen by the rest of the world. When there were multiple objects, those conditions no longer applied. The view from the object was no longer of the natural landscape or the world at large, but of objects built by others – other people's houses. The subject was overwhelmed by these unwelcome sights. Moreover, every object was continually observed, inside and out, by its neighbours.<sup>5</sup>



Kuma's frequent evocation of the cinematic testifies to his anti-static, anti-monumental vision. He points out that the dynamic temporality of the cinema depends on the use of different camera angles; the play that is between shot and counter-shot. Strangely enough, he does not stress the 'particized' character of film as a medium; an inherent quality that was perhaps first expressively exploited in Hiroshi Teshigahara's film *Woman in the Dunes* (1964). Apart from the existential protagonists of the film, the world is depicted by Teshigahara as being largely comprised of particles of sand. In a similar vein, Kuma will further his principle of 'particization' as an aesthetic strategy by focusing on the gravel particles that make up the itinerary of the Ise shrine, in Mie Prefecture.