

Super Potato Design

The Complete Works of Takashi Sugimoto
Japan's Leading Interior Designer

by Mira Locher
foreword by Tadao Ando
photographs by Yoshio Shiratori

TUTTLE



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Tel: 1 (802) 773-8930
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Japan
Tuttle Publishing
Yaekari Building, 3rd Floor
5-4-12 Osaki
Shinagawa-ku
Tokyo 141-0032
Tel: (81) 3 5437-0171
Fax: (81) 3 5437-0755
sales@tuttle.co.jp
www.tuttle.co.jp

Asia Pacific
Berkeley Books Pte. Ltd.
61 Tai Seng Avenue, #02-12
Singapore 534167
Tel: (65) 6280-1330
Fax: (65) 6280-6290
inquiries@periplus.com.sg
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Beyond Layered Discontinuity



Rooms enclosed by massive blocks of *aji* granite,¹ enormous tables of granite and thick wooden planks, the sudden appearance of vast screens of bamboo and wood – such was the latest project I saw by Takashi Sugimoto of Super Potato inside a massive high-rise building in Tokyo. There, amidst works of other radical designers, each striving to develop magnificent futuristic spaces competing to achieve the greatest sense of lightness, Sugimoto's creation stood alone, as it formed a completely different atmosphere.

The materials Super Potato uses with an emphasis on stone, steel, and wood, impart scale and form beyond the customary. In the nonchalant ease of arrangement, logical harmony is unintended – the materials collide with each other, and in doing so each secures its respective place. The energy generated from that violent impact seizes the attention of people casually passing by and does not let go. Within the brilliant, fragile, artificial contemporary city overflowing with light, only Sugimoto can create a layered discontinuity that seems to summon an ancient spirit. Yet Sugimoto does not succumb to the conventional experience of old designs, and this is the result of his super power.

I cannot recall exactly when and where I first met Takashi Sugimoto. However, ours has been a very long friendship. I think perhaps we were introduced toward the end of the 1960s by the late Shiro Kuramata.² It was probably at Judd in Nogizaka, or some such place that Kuramata had designed. I was in my twenties and had not yet become an established architect. I still had not discovered my correct place in society, and all I had was courage and conviction, but I believed it was a time when society felt the hope and possibility that a path for the future would be revealed. I spent each day searching for creative stimulus, and was fortunate to meet many different people who influenced my path in life.

At that time, Kuramata had already acquired a reputation as a cutting-edge designer. When I occasionally visited from Osaka, he would always introduce me to someone interesting, such as Tadanori Yokoo³ and the avant-garde artist Jiro Takamatsu.⁴ Among the people I became acquainted with, Takashi Sugimoto stood out as an extremely idiosyncratic individual. Although he had only recently graduated from the Crafts Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, he already had a strong presence and made a significant impression on all he met. He was a man who drank *saké* animatedly and ate well. His expression of friendly innocence, mixed with a stubborn refusal to accept others' opinions, remains strongly etched in my mind. Since then, whenever I hear that a project has been completed by this man, four years my junior, I make a point of going to see it.

I think the first project I saw was the pub Maruhachi. Half of the ceiling and walls had been left as exposed concrete; the other half was covered with squares of steel, like louvers. From Sugimoto's personality, I expected a potent design, but the rusticity and power of this work was greater than I had imagined. Contrasting materials each transmitted a message, yet at the same time the space felt complete, and it had the persuasive power to put visitors at ease. Subsequently, I often visited another of Sugimoto's masterpieces, the bar Radio, originally made in 1971. I recall the attraction of the powerful space, which seemed to be generated from the dynamic immensity of industrial creation, but yet brought forth by human hands. There, rusted metal wall surfaces and a counter fashioned of thick boards of gnarly cherry wood created a mysterious harmony.

For people, including myself, who were more concerned with the expression of the time, the

ABOVE

World renowned for his concrete and glass buildings, Osaka native Tadao Ando established his architectural practice in 1970 and is the recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious Pritzker Prize in 1995 and the AIA Gold Medal in 2002.

RIGHT

The bar Radio, with its sculptural wood counter and metal walls, shocked the Tokyo design world when it opened in 1971, but quickly became a favorite haunt of artists and designers.

OVERLEAF

Contrasting materials merge in many of Super Potato's projects, including the entrance to Brasserie-EX. Welded metal panels of varied shapes create a unique entry door.





central focus was the modern design that flourished in the West. In my mind, we set forth from that place to discover our own self-expression. However, from there Sugimoto's work developed in an entirely different dimension, as if he were cultivating a novel world.

In direct opposition to this, Kuramata's work revealed exacting aesthetic considerations brought about by a keen design sensibility. Compared with the intense light which radiated from Kuramata's work – an abounding sense of transparency completely liberated from the force of gravity which seemed to negate the design's existence – Sugimoto's work was completely other, as though a creeping profound blackness was released. To speak without fear of being misunderstood, I believe it was just like comparing the refinement of the Yayoi culture⁵ and that which takes root from the primeval life force of the Jōmon man.⁶

Of course, the essence of a composition is based on the formative language of the time. When reduced to line and plane, there emerges a design composition filled with an extreme feeling of tension. However, the essence starts from abstract existence, passes through Takashi Sugimoto's corporeal thinking and sensibility, and at the moment it is given tangible materiality and scale, a kind of discord is created. Each part of the composition has its own existence, at times in opposition to another, thereby uniting unstable atmospheres which begin to control place. Such primordial space can only be produced by Super Potato's Sugimoto from his own natural design approach. The industrial process is restrained to the utmost, materials are used in their natural state wherever possible, and the properties of diverse materials are exploited. Abutting stone, one very thick wood plank has its cross-section exposed. A bar counter is formed from one plank of roughly cut wood, its knots remaining. Sugimoto's eye for choosing materials is superb.

Abounding with contradiction, and in what could be called a fragmented state, the substance of such space is difficult to explain with recent design logic. Communication of the ideas through photographs, drawings, and other such media is similarly problematic. For more than thirty years, Sugimoto has continued this work, seemingly simple at first glance but yet difficult to understand. What amazes me, having seen his projects from the early days, is the consistency of thought that carries through his work. Of course, that expression

changes freely according to the mood of the times, but always, in some way, an incongruous feeling of discontinuity emanates from it.

Logical evaluation is difficult: the world based on Sugimoto's individual physical sensibility is far removed from the so-called concept of universality. And as for today's society, in general, it can be called a closed existence. However, in that closed universe, Sugimoto alone is struggling to produce spaces which force us to consider the consciousness of existence, spaces which are rarely found in the present age. Materials one by one breathe, as though beginning a narrative of life phenomena throughout the entire space. That this life force can still be created is, I think, a miracle.

Recently, after a long time, I had the chance to speak with Sugimoto. His characteristic energy was as always: abruptly he began to describe the exciting festivals he happened upon during a visit to Bali. As I watched Sugimoto animatedly relate the rituals which expressed and reaffirmed the island people's traditional lifestyle – something which has become nearly lost in today's society – I was convinced that this "life force" is what Sugimoto himself reflected and wants to create through his work. In contrast to architecture, in interior design there is often a susceptibility to the fashion of the moment; and due to the swift cycle of the profession, interior design holds the power to end traditional life. Within this, Sugimoto contemplates the essential questions: What is existence? What is creation? What does it mean to give life to materials?

Through the subtle construction of suitable form and the skillful manipulation of scale and composition, new life is infused into his materials. Since his start in the late 1960s, Takashi Sugimoto has pursued this path – a world of his own – which has continuously evolved. While placing his body and soul in defiance to the continual flow and trends of the times, Sugimoto continues to make layered discontinuous spaces with an enduring force and tension that merits admiration. I want to continue to admire that quality forever.



Tadao Ando

¹ The *aji* stone, a type of granite used by Takashi Sugimoto, is quarried in Shikoku Island at the same quarry used by the late Japanese-American sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi and his Japanese collaborator Masatoshi Izumi.

² Shiro Kuramata (1934–91) was one of the most influential avant-garde designers in twentieth-century Japan. Best known for his designs of furniture and interiors, Kuramata embodied the concepts of lightness and transparency in his carefully detailed and technically outstanding work.

³ Tadanori Yokoo (b. 1936) is a vanguard graphic designer and painter based in Tokyo. Having first become known for his poster designs, which were influenced by the Japanese counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, Yokoo continues to have a strong impact on Japanese visual arts.

⁴ Jiro Takamatsu (1936–98) was active in the contemporary art scene in Japan from the 1960s and explored existential and metaphysical questions in his writing and mixed-media conceptual art and installations.

⁵ The Yayoi culture flourished in Japan from 300 BC to AD 300. Greatly influenced by the civilizations of Korea and China, the era is distinguished by the advent of agriculture (wet-rice cultivation), advancements in ceramic work (hand-formed and decorated pottery), and the use of metal implements (iron and bronze tools and objects, presumably brought to Japan from the Asian mainland).

⁶ The Jōmon culture in Japan (10000–300 BC) is characterized by nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes and pottery made from coils of clay and decorated with rope impressions. Based on the primitive yet bold and often highly sculptural forms of the Jōmon ceramics, the people of the era are considered to have embodied a robust primitive energy and an intrepid and audacious nature.