Abstraction and Transcendence:
Nature, Shintai, and Geometry
in the Architecture of Tadao Ando

by
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ABSTRACTION AND TRANSCENDENCE:
NATURE, SHINTAI, AND GEOMETRY
IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF TADAO ANDO

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ABSTRACT

This thesis introduces Tadao Ando, a well-known Japanese architect, who is currently working on an emerging concept in the discourse of architecture, and is opening an approach of high sensibility (sensual, reflective, flexible, and complex, sensitively matching with every moment of life) and conceptualism (rational, logically approaching truth) that is widely considered one of the most important ways of thinking and designing architecture.

In the introduction chapter, Tadao Ando's is introduced as a master of architecture and as a critic. Secondly, his goals, objectives, concepts and strategies are outlined. These aspects are grouped and developed into major themes. Those themes will later be interpreted in Chapter Four.

In the second chapter of the thesis, the architecture of Tadao Ando is examined more closely, through critics' studies and his writings. This part aims to open further discussions on the most substantial and important grounds and sources of his architecture, which are interpreted in further detail in Chapter Four: the key themes of his works and theories.

Being aware that Ando's architecture cannot be understood without grasping "Japoneseness", or the historical cultural and regional contexts of Japan, the third chapter will be devoted to briefly introducing the origins, philosophy, traditions, and culture of the country, as well as major points of new waves of Japanese architecture, both of which tangibly and intangibly serve as the foundation for Ando's architectural themes: nature, shintai, and geometry as both abstract construct and substance. This chapter is essential for understanding the foundation and context of Ando's thoughts that always determine his architecture.
Chapter Four is the key part of the thesis. It focuses on two aspects: Ando's philosophically-based theoretical concepts, and his major themes which have been introduced in the previous sections. This chapter provides a general and coherent understanding of his work.

The concluding chapter summarizes the crucial points from among Ando's visions, moving from origins and philosophical grounds through concepts, strategies and theories, to the unique solutions which he advances for problems of the age. Thematically, Tadao Ando's works may be shown to reveal: Dialogue with Nature and Tradition (cosmologies, culture); Shintai and Space (mutual independence and penetration); and Geometry (spatial compositions, minimalist form, material and texture). Among these three over riding themes, there are many interrelated sub-themes are also examined.
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FOREWORD

The aim of this thesis is less centered on synthesizing and analyzing the theoretical and design works of Ando's architecture. Rather, it is more concerned with philosophical problems: reasoning behind Ando's vision, approach, and design. Without the fundamental knowledge of the philosophical ground, it is impossible to study Ando's architecture.

The desire to go one step further than architecture, space, and form to the realm of philosophical and cultural preconditions, and to feel comfortable returning back to a true understanding of architecture with its internal problems, is what decisively influences the contents and program of this thesis, which keeps a balance of both parts: ground and Ando's theories, which are reflected through the major themes in his works.

This thesis will also focus on present Ando's definitions and his concepts of architecture as a discipline, his concerns about the potentiality of architecture, the responsibility of the field and main concerns of architecture. It also tries to locate Ando's system of thought among different directions in architecture. Finally Ando's works and writings will be analyzed. All in all, the thesis aims to highlight the overall hypothesis: Buddhist philosophy and the patterns of regions, and the architect's sensitivities (poetics, crafts, skills) are the decisive conditions for Ando's architectural success.

Tadao Ando believes that architecture should achieve goals other than sustaining its regional origins. An architecture contains a plurality of meaning and expression, including many contradictions and multiplicities of meaning: indigenous
and novel, civic and private, sensual and formal at the same time. It should be
opened both to eclectic vision, and convention, and use both Western and Eastern
philosophical spirits and strategies. His works and writings affirm these inclusive
conditions.

One of the most controversial questions in the field today is how to define and
balance both the authenticity and richness of expression in architecture. However,
there are many different conceptions for such words as truth, and authenticity.
They often have different meanings according to different schools of thought or
stances. These questions have remained ambiguous, unsolved and offered much
room for debate. Yet in the field of architecture they are often polarized into two
major opposite positions. The first considers that identity is a vernacular or
traditional architecture which unchangingly reflects a particular time or place,
devoid of much concern for innovation. The second position advances instead the
concept of subjectivity and exclusiveness. There are also eclectic positions, however,
each of these eclectic architects usually will finally cling more to one of these than
the other.

From the outlook of the East, the truth is divided into two types: the relative
truth (conceptual) and the absolute truth (non-conceptual description). The relative
truth enclosed both positions. All truths are generated by conceptions, and
analytical reasoning belongs to the relative truth. The truth that we should follow
is the absolute truth, which is found by the middle-way: the transcendence of
opposed relative truths but not the synthesis of different positions.

Following Eastern philosophy, the Middle-way position may be the best
answer. This transcendence means including elements of each position, containing
their opposition in ways which give birth to new elements, not a new position,
because it belongs to both of them. It is the yin of first yang, or the yang of second yin. It appears because the World, or Being (to use Heidegger’s term) cannot exist with only yang or yin, the aggressive or passive parts. The third part is the catalyst to enhance a dialogue and keep the two opposite poles in their coexistence, with a high and fecund tension. This exists in the stage of the void, the imperceptible, and the abstract, assisting to create an intermediate condition. It is entirely neither subjective nor objective, but exists in a flexibly balanced relations and interactions: architecture-man, architecture-nature, and nature-man. Man’s element here is the sum of the architect's sensibility, the inhabitant’s everyday life, activities, communication, policy and power.

The middle-way is the outcome of continuous process of grabbing different positions in order to attain non-conceptualized ones where all concepts have been absorbed, transcended. This presents the most important characteristics of Ando's themes. He uses nature (void, site, light, air) as an intermediate medium and uses shintai as an unfixed intermediary and catalyst for space formation. Therefore his space, besides being articulated with abstract geometry is always changing, moving and renewing with the participation of nature and people. Nature and shintai are two things that make his geometry subtle, delicate, moving instead of being fixed. The status of weightless and moving walls, the spatial effect of light, air, and moving shadows, are only a few examples of his living spaces, which evoke responses in us.

Ando's architecture transcends middle-way philosophy in a utmost plane of abstraction via its most sensitive concreteness. In the article "The wedge and circumstances", Ando wrote that there were two features that crystallize his works, the limitation in using material, and the ambiguity of space. Ambiguous space,
according to Ando, aims for neither the void nor the figural Western form nor the Eastern silence and emptiness, and space is not stepped from light to dark, rather it is between form and text. Limitation of expression, such as Eastern nothingness, emptiness in fact creates condition for unlimited meaningful expressions. Ambiguous time and space are middle-way expressions of time and space. More concretely, in time, and space, the expressions of the middle-way are the silent intervals, empty spaces, and abstract nature that inserts itself into his buildings. These features will always be the central focus during all sections of my thesis.

The reason why Tadao Ando’s architecture is chosen to be a thesis topic comes from a fact that his architecture and philosophy are striking examples of this middle-way, and, for many architects, it represents a hope for a new solution in architecture for the end of this century. I believe that Ando’s approach makes an invaluable contribution for discourse in terms of both ideology and practice. Through Ando’s middle-way of expression, it is understood that the theoretical principle that condition architecture is always based on the twofold. First, it is based on philosophical grounds—most fundamental aspects of life: existence, meanings and intentions. These grounds are born from the origins, context and place, therefore explain human visions, will, experience, concepts and ideas. Secondly, the craft-based profession as genuine artistic individuality guarantees possibilities of the discipline, such as its strength as an independent aspect of concern (as a creation, and synthetic work of art, through which man aims to reflect himself as an integral part of nature, memory, and culture, and also to create, affect and challenge them, etc.)

As to that, architecture is sensual, reflective, flexible, and complex, sensitively matching with every moment of life. As Daniel Friedman mentions in his new
writing "Boyer’s remorse," is that our profession’s real “public” is to live more fully in the moment, emancipated from idle, wishful futures, in this lies the value of architecture. The architect can never stop stepping, searching in his road through life's unknown multi facets. The architect will always feel unsatisfied, when his work is still not cultivated enough from the ground and challenged enough the profession, or is still imposed or dependent upon any preconceptions, such as form, style, doctrine or law.

Today, for many architects, Tadao Ando’s work is the answer for the following questions: Can architecture become the deep combination and integration of changing realities (objective) and original subjectivity? Can architecture be a way of thought, a principle of establishment, a prime suggestion, in order to help users transform them later, depend on the changing of cosmos, nature, technology and other influential factors? If life is a magic balance, in order to enchant life, how can an unbalance approach come to be dominated?
Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

1. The process of Ando's architecture

Tadao Ando is a self-taught architect. He was born and grown in Osaka, Hanshin area, Japan, which is one of the oldest sections of Japan and recognized for its deep and distinguished architectural tradition.

Architecture reached him by a very particular manner, and from a young age. In his childhood, he said his house was located opposite a workshop's garden, where he spent days observing and playing. He remembers how he watched the growth of trees, perceived the influence of sunlight and rain on these growths, and became fascinated in the nature-being relation (Ando, 1993).

He did not go to college after finishing high school but worked as a craftsman. He learned as an disciple to Japanese carpenters, assisting them build houses, and made interior work in several architectural offices. He started learning architecture since then, saying that he discovered the gap between what is conceived at a drawing table and what is actually built at the site. He came to understand that an architect could not bring into being a good building without learning how material and structure worked, as well as having an awareness for the unities and totalities of existing living systems. He said that he believed it was difficult to produce a new living organism from an already existing being (Ando, 1993).

Although he approached architecture without academic education, he thoughtfully learned architecture by his own manner. This placed his mind and body very near to things that originated life and architecture from very abstract
points of view, such as thinking, philosophy and an ethical attitude, as well as very practical and concrete means: precise use of material, craft, composition of geometrical forms, field work, and speculation the sites. The real world decisively shaped his visions.

This self-education was especially invaluable, because it allowed Ando to develop and strengthen his independent thoughts, his natural sensitiveness to the life of materials, the natural beauty of texture, and the impermanence of nature and human beings. These great concerns helped him surpass and avoid the interference of side concerns when the Modernist orthodoxy was still powerful, which narrowly focused toward single objects, efficiency, and standardization. Therefore, in addition to his innate talent, his self-education allowed him to create his own ways of looking at architecture with the utmost creativity of vision, and with the most existential, conceptual thinking. These were connected to the essential background of long-lasting Japanese culture, and answered the simple, but no less complicated need for a dwelling where people can live.

Given his background, it is striking that the most difficult professional questions in the field can be answered with such a clear vision by Tadao Ando. He has his own way of thinking, isolated from Western architects, as well as from other Japanese architects. He has clearly stated his position, which, avoiding more formalism and expressionalistic styles, pursues the Modern tradition, but according to Japanese sensibility. He said, "It seems to me that my work has long had as its objective the integration of the Western and the Eastern spatial concepts" (Ando, 1995).

This self-educational approach gave him the ability to make his works a deeply moving architecture. Maybe this process of independent thinking, and his
innate potentialities that leaves him free of contamination and untouched by various movements, schools of thought and styles, and have helped to create his clear vision of the problem of architecture in this century.

Besides learning from practice, another part of his learning process is traveling. Ando desires to see new things and to discover things that no one else examined before. What he saw through traveling and visiting famous monuments in the world became very fruitful for his architecture. He visited the Parthenon in Greece, the Pantheon in Rome, the Louvre in Paris; the other works of Palladio, Loos, Aalto, Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier; and other famous sites, especially the traditional indigenous ensembles and temples in Japan (Ando, 1993). The insights he draws from places and monuments are always crucial, fundamental discoveries. Their originality stems not from any external fixed concepts, but because they are crystallized through Ando’s subjective, humanistic and rational visions. This learning influences Ando’s concepts, and is exemplified in his buildings.

From his study tours, he learned to contrast Western and Japanese architecture. For example, he visited Loos’ houses and discovered that space can be made infinitely diversified through simple manipulations, and that a simple form can extensively enrich space. These inspire him very much. He said that one of his main concepts, therefore, is making richness in simplicity (Ando, 1993).

Among Modern architects, Ando most influenced by Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier. He learned from them the modernist abstract aesthetic of function, material and form. The abstraction and geometry on which primary modern architecture was based are inherent and developed with Ando. He understood that Modernism after 1960 had lost the sense of continuity, abandoned along with the
direct link between function and mass production. He found the answer for these mistakes in continuity, which is a quality inherent in Japanese architecture. He called this continuity the mysterious relationships between architecture and nature, between light and shadow, which make space change. The farther he was distant from home, he said, the more he recognized and felt attached to his Japanese traditional culture, philosophy and architecture. He came to understand that even though he wanted to design Western buildings, he could not detach his intuitive thinking from traditional Japanese architecture, which he called mysterious, ambiguous in its tranquility. Space was constantly changing in its relationship to nature (Ando, 1993).

2. Visions and concepts

a. Visions

From the wisdom of thinking and learning, which provided him with a sensitivity for both craft and critical thinking, he invented his principles and theories of architecture. He grounded his work on the three principles of architecture directed by Vitruvius: utilitas, venustas, and firmitas, but using them in combination with Eastern sensations. From modern architecture he retains abstract geometry; the other part comes from the Japanese tradition from which he learns the middle-way of transcendence. As a result, he proposed with the following principles: (clear) function, (exposed) structure, and (raw) material (Ando, 1993). This architecture is seen only from a realistic dimension and it seems lacking in fictional imagination. However, as Vitruvius emphasized, venustas (beauty) is a beauty as necessity along with strength and function, Ando considers that the fictional dimension, combined with the realistic dimension, would create the necessity for synthesizing the deep effect in human spirituality.
"The creation of architecture should be a criticism of today's problems," Ando said. The most serious problems, in his opinion, are the outcome of civilization -- universalization, generalization and standardization. These are advantageous to civilization but antagonistic to culture. Universalization does not allow individuality; buildings become mass produced.

Architecture, Ando believes, is individualistic, crafted as a production of a unique individual. Architecture is not an from within activity, meant to answer outside problems. Instead, it is an autonomous set of ideas, an imagination based on the individual. Architecture requires from the architect the utmost serious care, avoiding all superficial everyday tasks and not treating architecture as just an economic activity.

Ando is very clear about the genuine task of architecture: to avoid the organization of society in order to focus on an architecture of discovery. By discovery, Ando does not mean the free choice and spontaneous free will or any arbitrary fantasia but rather a thoughtful view of dwelling and feeling of life. This gives rise to a distinguished architecture. Keywords such as life, feeling, and dwelling are products of his philosophy on the question of being, the meaning of life, and the human ideal. The key word "feeling" asks for the art of imagination and creative will.

These questions, therefore, draw a focus of this thesis on philosophical bases and the art of creation through the use of nature, material, geometry and Shintai. The question of architecture is the question of philosophy (humanistic and rational) and the art of doing and crafting. This question is rooted deeply in Japanese tradition, which will be discussed in Chapter Three.
b. Concepts.

Tadao Ando's architecture is formed by many ideas that he claims "concepts." Ando conceptualizes architecture as thinking. It should link ideals and reality, remain between the fictive and the substantive. His architecture contributes to perfect human value; it evokes feeling, thinking and memory. It is philosophical and examines the resistance. It should be highly symbolic and abstract. The abstraction here is in no way to refute humanism. It combines the dream and the practical precision of using techniques and material. It combines the symbolic quality which makes a small building express the ideal.

His strategies aim to create a spatiality for stimulating the human spirit, for awakening the sensibility and communicating with the deepest human soul. In order to construct this fantasy of architecture, Ando said he has to engage both reason and intuition together to seek a space that is a distinct discovery, a space that accommodates both the notion of time as a production of the new epoch and the specificity of the region and history (Ando, 1995). He engages his whole body to incorporate fantasy and the actual into a creation of space.


Nature is the mean that helps Ando attain his goal of stimulating the human spirit. Nature, in his architecture, is architecturalized nature, or abstract nature. He believes that only this state of nature can generate true emotion to attain its highest value. In his buildings, nature is never used as a secondary element.

Nature is revealed in two stances in Ando's architecture. First, if the building is encircled by a beautiful landscape, architecture can serve as a frame for the nature, the forest, or the dominant natural element. On a monumental scale, architecture can interpret the Tori tradition, where nature is speculating. If the
building is surrounded by the disorder of the contemporary settlement areas, architecture becomes a shield, usually closed to the exterior with a windowless facade, and tends to turn to its inner courtyard where nature appears on the abstract plane: a piece of sky, a sun beam, etc. Invisible nature is the most evocative element, only felt through structural elements or appearing on the abstract and intended planes.

Japanese architecture develops from the fusion of man-made and natural elements. As the means for this end, the reading of topography and an awareness of nature are the most important factors. Architecture alone cannot create a favorable environment, Ando confirms. He said architecture tries to dominate nature, but it is dominated by the emptiness; therefore, not only the building, but the emptiness, should obtain characteristics (Ando, 1995). By emptiness, Ando means the inside and outside unbuilt area as well as the abstract nature. (Abstract nature is discussed separately in Chapter Four). The emptiness, inherited from Eastern philosophy serves as a ground for the spatial emptiness. This concept will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Light is used as the medium to introduce life (livability) and soul into the building. Its subtle changes support the complexity of space. The use of zenithal light, contrasting light and shadow for focal interiors, moving lights in the raw concrete walls, or composed reflected light help to attain the highest artistic level. We can clearly see this in all Ando's works. In the Church of the Light, for example, the theme of emptiness dominates, because in both sections of the building, emptiness enlists as the principal goal. The box of light is an area encircled by glass, where the four separated crosses set, and the dominant element is the framed blue sky, natural light which impresses the viewer with the solemn, transparent
ideal. On the other hand, the chapel, the second principal area, is determined by the theme of nature: horizontal earth represented with the pond is spread quietly before one's eyes. Heaven and earth are joined through a unique line: the symbolic cross.

2. Concept of geometry (space, material, texture).

Space is the second aspect for exhilarating human spirit. He reveals a richness of spatial expression within a use of simple form and limited space. He has said that his architecture is the architecture of betrayal. He meant that his space performs the tensions of order and disorder as unpredictable. He produces this type of space by using continuous, free, angular, and unexpected configurations; or through subtle changes of light, dark, open, closed. The intermediate space, for example, acts as an incentive for metamorphosis: unexpected drama which moves people.

Spaces and structural elements are always experienced together with nature. In the architecture of Tadao Ando, detail, decorative elements, and colors are intentionally escaped in order to magnify the potentiality of geometry and space, in combination with natural abstract elements. In his buildings, we repeatedly meet the long and narrow passage, the gate, the flight of stairs, the descending and sunken walls, which help to produce his complex space.

Ando's employment of the natural textures and colors of the material is inherited from traditional Japanese architecture. Materials were intentionally selected and carefully produced (natural materials such as earth, sand, paper, wood or concrete). Artificial colors were avoided. Painting the wood was avoided too. The traditional attitude, which gives emphasis to materials, is vital in Tadao Ando's buildings. The raw concrete wall is an example. The use of other materials such as
glass and metal in his current buildings reflects the Japanese tradition in using material with utmost natural spirits.

3. Summary

On the whole, Japanese tradition, and beyond that Eastern philosophy, appear as the background of Tadao Ando's architecture, which is a symbiosis of logic and feeling, technology and artistic freedom of expression, East and West. It includes religion, philosophy, aesthetics, lifestyles, customs, emotional sensitivity, and a sense of order. Tadao Ando's architecture is the architecture of both modernity and tradition. His architecture comes from the contradiction between them and shows a middle-way or symbiotic relationship between both. It means that although his buildings appear to be formal or static, they underlie an invisible hidden traditional and natural awareness. In the article, "Tadao Ando, the Heir of Tradition," Kiyoshi Takeyama writes, "Tadao Ando is the man who inherits tradition on its spiritual plane." Takeyama proposes that, although there is no resemblance in terms of style or actual forms, there is much in common between the Rikyu tradition (tea ceremony house) and the designs of Tadao Ando in terms of conceptual planes and principles of spatial design. Further, Ando's architecture is considered critically modern because it successfully applies the ideal of Modernity: abstraction and representation along with complexity and simplicity, an architecture that faces the problems of the age and reflects the hope and belief of mankind with human values. By saying "I have an arrogant belief that architecture can change the way people lead life," Ando works to bring a positive answer for the world today and leading to a refined and responsive architecture.

In order to convey back the highest meaning for architecture, a mean for transferring knowledge or spiritual and physical awareness about the world, he
starts to define the key variables which help him to act. He believes that metaphysics or Western rational and logical ways of reasoning bring the unlivable to architecture. Abstract geometry is a necessary tool to create only isotropic, abstract and homogeneous space, it does not help to merge the body with the created space, and destroys the relation between people and architecture.

The keys for the dilemma, which he imbues in his architecture, are a dialogue between nature, geometry, and body; however, he has his own definitions which increase and deepen the meaning of each part, thereby answering inner life requirements about novelty and symbolic meaning. His architecture is opening to East to learn the ideals of life, and West to master powerful expression and creative determination. His searching works echo the combination of both worlds, Eastern and Western.
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW: CRITICS ON ANDO’S ARCHITECTURE

1. General comments

Ando is largely acknowledged as one of the most important architects in the new waves of contemporary Japanese architecture. He is ranked with other famous Japanese architects, such as Kurokawa, Isozaki, Takamatsu, Ito, Takeyama, Hiroshi Hara, and Fuhimiko Maki. Ando, however, according to many critics, is the most successful architect facing the problems of the tremendous contradictions of contemporary Japan. The professional and public recognitions can be seen in the fact that despite his very strict "anti-consumerism," he is the most fecund architect in Japan with an enormous number of realized buildings: more than one hundred and fifty buildings in the eightieths and ninetieths. The speed of his realized projects surpasses the reach of any contemporary accounts in the field.

Many critics attempt to analyze Ando’s works and writings. Although the topics of critics are varied, they mainly are concentrated on the following issues: 1. The meaning and distinctiveness of architecture; 2. Intentions, philosophy, concepts, principles; 3. Heirs of traditions (Symbolic and realistic); 4. Geometry (ambiguousness and emptiness of space, raw concrete texture, non-formal architecture); 5. Nature (modulation of light, shadow, Haiku architecture, sense of urbanism, and place relations); 6. The Shintai (body and spirit); 7. The art of drawing lines, the craft and the process of creation. What follows is an overview of these critical discussion.
2. The meaning of life and distinctive architecture

Francesco Dal Co says, "(Ando) reveals the inadequacies of Western criticism and encourages us to carry on believing that full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on the Earth" (Ando, 1995). Indeed, Ando believes that anyone incapable of feeling and dreaming would not survive in the twenty-first century. He worries about the loss of meaning, of diversity, which is caused by the designs by computers and logical patterns. Meaning is the whole aim of Ando's architecture. Ando's works not only extend the conceptual philosophical framework in revising ideologies and practices of Modernism into the twenty-first century, but are also critical on the grounds of a culturally oppositional stance to the instrumentality of megalopolitan development, which is valid for both the West and the East. His architecture firmly shows a possibility and a promising answer for the dilemmas of the discipline (Wayne, 1995). Giordano Tironi said, "In the case of Ando, the response to the barely controlled chaos is the icy silence of the pure sound untouched by their urban panic, which makes a few tightly controlled gestures as brief as Haiku: clear, decisive, definitive."

Dal Co, in "The Architecture of Betrayal" said, "Those distinctive features are the keys of Ando's success and make him one of the finest architects of the twentieth century." It is for this that "Ando has been recognized as an architect who is flourishing in the development of heritage, and is advancing Modernism in a valuable manner, while proceeding with his own guiding principles. Therefore, he deserves to be rated as a member of an architectural discourse in this century."

In 1995, Ando was awarded the Pritzker prize, but his name and reputation became world renowned since his first Azuma house, which is regarded as his
manifesto on architecture. A critic, Martin Filler says, "In my view, architecture's most prestigious award, the Pritzker Prize has never had a more deserving recipient than this year's laureate. Since Louis Kahn died two decades ago, no architect has imbued form, volume, and light with such compelling physicality and palpable spirituality."

Kenneth Frampton, in his article, "Tadao Ando’s Critical Modernism" writes: "Ando's work is critical on two interrelated counts. It criticizes universal modernity from within by establishing new goals and limits for modern architectural practice without at the same time denying its continuing validity as a vital cultural force" (Ando, 1995).

In Hiroshi Maruyama’s opinion, what Tadao Ando shows us is that architecture can reflect an epoch with its plurality, its fusion of order and chaos (complexity), its humanistic grounds (context and culture), its human interest in the returning of the human-nature bond, as well as maintain and deepen its institutions: formal expression, aesthetics, and other conventional concerns. Ando also says that his guiding principles which come from the contradiction between humanism and realism (Ando, 1994).

3. Intentions, principles and concepts

a. Critics on Ando’s design goals and intentions

Mirko Zardini said, "What makes Ando so different from European and American architects, as well as from all other Japanese architects, what makes his architecture so alien to our sensibility, so different from our way of thinking as to lead us to explain it exclusively in terms of the Japanese tradition. It may be due to his firm belief in the meaningful architecture that guides his intention: to use the
language of modern Western architecture, but in accordance with a different sensibility in order to create the authentic architecture" (Ando, 1993).

This intention comes from his deep philosophy about the age. Similar to Kurokawa and other Japanese critics, Ando is deeply concerned with reestablishing a meaning, an essence for architecture. As he projects the unavoidable destruction brought by universality, its monotonous products and lifestyles, and its large-scale standardization, he is fully committed to finding the medicament for the situation. He believes that, by pursuing the reestablishment of architecture on the basis of its fundamental and primary elements, architecture can preserve the age. He sees architecture in its goals, not in its use. He states that his aim is to separate the form of architecture from its function, because, only in the distance, can architecture find its meaning, which helps to raise it to the absolute presence.

b. Design concepts

Tadao Ando generates his own concepts and design principles based on Japanese traditions and the Modern canon that have been mentioned above. Following Zardini, Ando's architecture is without a doubt conceptual: the understanding, thinking and idea are the ground for his design. His process of design or methodology is different from the traditional procedure, in that it is not broken down into stages. Ando does not first decide on a plan through functional analysis, then move to the spatial configurations of the parts, and eventually determine the overall composition. A clear visual and spatial concept determines everything down to the final stage of design. Neither he nor members of his staff spend time fixing that concept in drawings. The work of preparing the drawing is only a physical task (Ando, 1993).
Other authors, such as Frampton, or Tirroni mention that this general process of conception comes from the desire to create functional architecture. Function here is not limited to the efficient and economic angles, but refers to the space where people could live, in an ever changing urban environment. In Ando’s case, the traditional row house of the past was the prototype for this function, where he saw a clear equivalency between aesthetics and the way one lives.

He demands that his architecture, first of all, be a conceptual dwelling before being manipulated into the compositional solution. Therefore, his architecture is valued on the plane of the spiritual much more than the physical. His Azuma house, as Lampugnani observes, like Maison Domino, gives expression to the philosophical principles and design themes. Although extremes, even some how extravagant, it is effective. Zardini wrote, "Tadao Ando architecture is not limited to the boundary of discourse. It potentially can fill what city and architecture lack in the civilized world today by generating life into urban form" (Zardini, 1995). Ando also says, "I want to realize my vision of architecture by selecting what is harmony with life today--in other words, something like the essence of place--from among such things" (Ando, 1993).

In terms of the concept of dwelling, Karamukai mentions that Ando sees that the most important thing is to integrate physical architecture with eternal nature, so people can perceive nature in their process of dwelling, such as the motions of the sun, the moon, the earth and meteorological changes. One experiences not the ordinary joy of seeing a tree in a conventional garden, but a deeper emotion, the sense that one is encountering an eternal nature (Karamukai, 1991).

The above critics indeed reveal some very crucial concepts of Ando’s works:
the concept of design within context (history, place, culture, way of life), and the concept of inserting deep nature and human motion into dwelling.

c. Design principles

"The two most important principles of Ando's architecture are simplicity and geometrical compositions, which stress on asymmetry. Simplicity may come from both Japanese tradition and architectural canons, both having a fondness for reason, truth, logic and beauty" (Takeyama, 1995). Rikyu, master of Japanese architecture gives a striking example of maintaining close spiritual connections through simplicity, the excluding of all surplus things, following the fundamental Zen attitude. This principle gives reason for the use of natural materials, making them look as natural as possible, and employing muted color schemes. In his buildings, Ando uses unfinished concrete, which is a natural material with no artificial colors. His attitude, like Rikyu's, aims at focusing the concern on the materials themselves and on spatial composition (Kurokawa, 1997, Dal Co, 1995). Geometrical compositions come from his belief that only geometry can transcend the complexity of life and can symbolize its various meanings. By means of these principles, and in accordance with his design intentions, Ando selects places and relates physical things to the overall composition.

4. Architecture and Eastern--Western traditions

Kiyoshi Takeyama, a Japanese critic, has described Ando's architecture as the heir to Japanese traditions: occupying a spiritual plane, and rooted in Eastern traditions: obtaining the aesthetic ideals of purity, beauty, authenticity and impermanence (enclosure, concentrated nature, spiritual abundance, lightness, symbolic richness; and disdaining comfort) (Ando, 1995).
Dal Co, in other hand, thinks that due to Ando’s determination to link up with the modern tradition, he found his masters in Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn and was strongly influenced by precedents whose works he admired the most, such as Carl Andre, Richard Serra, and especially Japanese masters like Rikyu, a thinker and architect who lived in the fifteenth century and Watanabe Kazan, who was a painter in the late Edo period, as well as masters of Zen Buddhism (Ando, 1995). Among current working architects, Ando expresses deep sympathies to the architecture of Carlo Scarpa, Mario Botta, Alvaro Siza, and Emilio Ambasz (Ando, 1993).

Ando attempts to combine the modern and Japanese tradition, East and West, in order to answer the crisis of the age and reach sophisticated and completely new approaches, modes of expression. He stresses the contrast between the modern and the past, at the same dialogue with the past. Therefore, his architecture is not at all for the sake of architecture. It becomes a medicament, a hope for the recovery of lost spiritual values and meaning. About that, different critics such as Lampugnani and Jamerson wrote, “The architecture of Tadao Ando is to be included among those physical elements of which some kind of future might be conceivably built. They have thus silently become the architecture of hope" and “His spaces operate a profound identification between the two antithetical terms and offer to recapture the lost secret of Japanese aesthetic by reinventing the lost spaces of modern” (Ando, 1995).

In Frampton’s opinion, Ando is trying to recover a language and essence for architecture, giving a symbolic meaning to his language through the manipulation of a sophisticated transformation of expression. To do that he returned to the beginning. It is not the beginning of architecture, which is represented as a
primordial condition, but to the volume zero to which Louis Kahn referred, to the origin deep in Eastern philosophy, history and culture. Ando's works are firmly pursuing the reestablishment of architecture on the basis of its fundamental and primary element. At the same time, he travels extensively and learns the most essential aspects of Modern Architecture, which is founded in the rich networks of the Western historical architectural experiences. His architecture is crystallized from the austere existentialism of both canons: Inclusive Eastern, and Exclusive Western spatial formations, reserved through the medium of nature and human spirit (Frampton, 1993).

Frampton states that this meta-canon, essentially includes the contrasting symbioses between visible geometry and nature, geometry and shintai (body as flesh + spirit), functional logic and contextual inclusiveness with a high level of imagination. Frampton considers Ando's works to be at the same time austerely existential and powerfully emotional.

In his works, however, we do not see the contradiction of these two canons. His architecture reflects in one way the ambition of a more powerful approach to architecture, although with emphasis still upon place specific practices such as the crafted works and products, the attention and love of nature, which is strongly influenced by human subjective emotions, and life experiences. The reason or philosophical base is originated from Zen Buddhism.

In short, according to Frampton, Tadao Ando belongs to a list of architects, committed both to advancing modernism in a worthwhile manner and to a flourishing traditional heritage. These architects base their works on the canon of early-modern design. They stand on the belief that vital and fruitful reformation of the early-modern should help to revitalize and upgrade popularized modernism. In
this way, one encounters a sensibility to concrete context and history and a rough transcendence to the spatial language of architecture. Ando chose to take from modernism the austere and lucid abstraction, for he finds in it the most suitable tools to express the modern age.

Abstraction is not the sole belonging of the modern period however. In historical buildings and architecture, we easily observe this. Modern artists consciously perceive things abstractly to be able to distinguish man's creation with nature, and to establish the notion of an explicit style of expression. Abstraction is recognized as the instrument for making disordered things orderly, through non-representation, apart from mere simplification.

The works of Tadao Ando, in Masao's opinion, mark a new trend in Japanese architecture; it does not belong to any specific school, but is instead uniquely his own. The general image is of Ando is as a monk, disregarding the surrounding world and keeping a steady pace. His abstraction preserves life's complexities, readjusting them with deeper layers. He attaches an order to the complexities using the strength of abstractions. This approach results in the unique fertility of his non-representational expression.

5. Critics on the theme Geometry

Kobawashi said that Ando's architecture is based on a rigid composition of geometrical forms. Among contemporary architects, he shows the strongest preference toward rationalism. Kobawashi called Ando's works "an architectural play with geometrical forms." Ando explains why he works with simple geometry, and why geometry can help to grasp the essence of architecture. The essence of architecture is the making of space, and the constituting of place, not just the manipulation of form. He said that human beings had used geometry for that
purpose throughout history. It is a symbol of reason as contrary to nature. Geometry is therefore a stamp that shows architecture as the expression of human choice and not a product of nature. He believes that geometry can express pure truth, the truth of the logic of nature. Nature gives reason and meaning to architecture. In order to reveal and make evident the invisible logic of nature, one must oppose it with the logic of architecture. The logic of architecture cannot be made without the use of geometry, which is a tool of logical reasoning. It is a symbol of human will which transcends nature. Only through simple geometry can the setting of the whole and the fragments of the scenes be revealed more efficiently. Ando confirms that architecture becomes oriented only through geometry, which not only serves at the detail level, but as a whole. This detail and whole as geometry not only can serve as architectural elements, and to make people walk, stop, ascend or descend but also to create the experience when people move through, making them think, feel, and communicate--especially when it is combined with other perceptions and abstract nature.

Following Kobawashi, Ando uses geometry as the means to produce intellectual and logical order from the relationships of form with form and form with space. Ando himself recognized, "I believe that the pure geometry is one of the most important factors that crystallizes architecture." Pure geometry is the framework that endows architecture with presence. Kobawachi stresses that Ando's works use concepts of Eastern philosophy, which has a tradition of believing in the truth of uncontaminated nature as the root of every existence. Ando always wants to return to the beginning, to question things and find a firm basis for his architecture. He also uses the primary and utmost simple forms of geometry: the circle, rectangle and square. Depending on the forces embedded in each region, he