

The Churches of Tadao Ando

By Michael K. Chung

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Introduction

Among the over 150 designs of architect Tadao Ando, only three exist as Christian places of worship and one as a Buddhist temple. And yet, this sparse segment of his work has captured my attention and appreciation similarly to the ways in which the topics of my two earlier papers this quarter, a painting by Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko and the ink landscapes of Ch'an Buddhism, have also draw me towards those works. Along the way, I have discovered that a formula is evolving within me that has bound up what I consider to be some commonalities found within those three areas or art and, more openly, much of all visual art I have had the opportunity to interact more deeply and have found resonates with my sensibilities - especially that area of my experience I would label as being *spiritual*.

So what is it about Tadao Ando's designs that so grabs my attention? Perhaps a general, broad stroke summation would be that beneath the aesthetic lies an intentional, thoughtful attitude of honesty without compromise. Compromise is a deep concern for Tadao Ando who views the wall as not only the physical foundation of his buildings but also as the key semiotic component¹ through which his designs comment on their role in life - a role, as we shall see, that Ando refuses to approach with any ambiguity and forms the true base for his design aesthetic.

¹ Here meaning, as will be discussed below, Ando approaches the concept of the word/idea of the wall with a desire to understand the wall as a pure object in order to first extract its meaning in our experience and then to apply it with explicit intention to space.

Minimalism or Nudity?

In his book *Tadao Ando*, Masao Furuyama sorts the designs of Tadao Ando's churches into a generalized category called *monistic*:

"Ando's monistic architecture is characterized by pure form, lucid outline, and strong space."²

Ando's monistic works are the most simple and boxlike of all his works and often the basis for forming a definition of his aesthetic. So it is possible, at least on a first read, to find parallels, and quite literal ones at that, between Ando's "boxes" and the "boxes" of intentional minimalists such as Donald Judd.



image 01 - [http://worldart.sjsu.edu/Obj19474\\$857*66710](http://worldart.sjsu.edu/Obj19474$857*66710)

² Masao Furuyama, *Tadao Ando*. Germany, 1993. Artemis. Pg. 12



image 02 - <http://www.andotadao.org/chlight9.htm>

But did Ando share an intent similar to that of the minimalists? In one perspective we could agree here. Again, in Furuyama's words "We may define Ando's works of monistic architecture as pure space enveloped in concrete rectangular forms - pure space and simple form."³ Furuyama's use of the word "pure" here I think could be interchanged with "objective" within the context of minimalist dialogue. Ando, then, shared a purist approach his designs. But in Furuyama's wonderfully concise assessment, we also see a concept that moves Ando along a different tangent than minimalist artists and painters. This would be the concept of *space*. To better understand this, we need to contrast the concept of *space* to that of the *form*.

For most minimalists, the end product is invariably form, be it the objectified painting or the simple sculpture and how it might withstand its purity despite the space or context within which the object is situated. On the other hand *form*, to Ando, is a sort of foe or enemy of the object of his purist goal - that of *space*⁴. As form and space are inextricably tied together, his simplification of the form, which represents a negation of form which is seen as external, is not minimalist for its own sake but a means to reduce the tension form exerts on the space inside - a tension that is understandably pronounced to someone whose goal is to purify space.

Could we say that Ando's spaces, then, are minimalist? Upon a first read that might be entirely possible. But Ando's philosophy of space tells us there is more. Furuyama informs us that because form is so readily discernable, Ando

³ Ibid. 12

⁴ Ibid. 14

attempts to negate our fascination with it in order that we might become more fascinated with the space it encompasses because space is where the architect artist could most passionately address his or her sensibilities.⁵ And what typifies Ando's notion of space? If he were a minimalist, his intent would be to remove the subjective and the emotion in an attempt to present a pure product. Ando, on the other hand, wants to remove the context of emotional imposition and manipulation that form and subsequent space often exert in order to allow individuals within the space to have the deepest, purest and most honest emotional encounters.⁶

This is entirely why the word/concept of the *wall* takes on a deep significance for Ando as walls define his spaces. Firstly, what was once the role of the pure column has been engineered to become the wall in a modern context. Interestingly, this innovation is first found in the vision of Abbot Suger and his gothic vision of the cathedral and how his desire to bathe the spiritual experience in the symbolism of light led to innovations in engineering such as the vaulted ceiling and flying buttress which minimized the need for the column. With contemporary engineering, the column has become merely a symbol that addresses culture and history to Ando. It is the wall that functions as the column did in generations past. And so it is important for Ando to employ the simplified wall, as it remains a more pure and functional sign of the constructed space.⁷ And in being simplified, Ando means more than unbroken or smooth. He also warns against the temptation to dress and paint continuous walls like the ones he

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tadao Ando, Tadao Ando. New York, 1984. Rizzoli International. Pg.6,7 from an introduction by Kenneth Frampton)

employs in order to retain both a purer function and purer role as sign and symbol.⁸

In this way his purified spaces can be more intentionally and honestly designated for symbolic function through its less adulterated experience of the individual within. This is not to say Ando completely abandons secondary symbolism in a search for purity. What it does indicate is that Ando chooses to employ symbolism that itself is essential and more or less universal in discernment. Hence, as we shall see, the actual presence of wind, water, light and, in the cases of his churches the cross, play an important role in the designated space. Hence, while Ando's *forms* may seem minimal, his *spaces* certainly are not.⁹ So, a better way to describe Ando's spaces is to say that they are naked, and not in the sense that they need dressing but that they do little to impede or color the experience of the individual that interacts within his spaces.

Elementals in Ando's Churches

Tadao Ando has no intention of masking the obvious - that his building are man made, modern structures even when set against nature. In his perspective, a building is a building (is a building!). To try and mask or lessen the impact of this sometimes abrupt fact (especially when viewed against nature) through aesthetic or design found within the building would be dishonest.¹⁰ And yet, when viewing images of his building, especially those of his churches, I cannot help but feel that there is something organic and spiritual about his building despite their

⁸ Ibid. 129

⁹ Ibid. 134, 135

¹⁰ Ibid. 24, 25

simplified, rectilinear forms and bare, naked concrete walls that define the spaces within. Comfort, obviously, is not the driving force behind his designs. And yet, I find that in viewing them I feel I could be very comfortable within their spaces.



church of light



church on the water



water temple

image 03 - http://www.arcspace.com/architects/ando/Ando_Exhibition/
image 04 - http://www.arcspace.com/architects/ando/Ando_Exhibition/
image 05 - http://www.rhapsody.com/travel/image.php?water_temple/0003

As I kept looking at floor plans, and pictures and continue reading interpretations of his work and Ando's own words, I began to understand this strange tension and paradox of cold honesty and emotional warmth and how

Ando's work might have come about in being as such. Firstly, I think the idea of openness within relatively small spaces contributes much to the breathability of them. Ando's desire to present purer space is manifested as openness. And while I have yet step foot personally into one of his building, I am sure that other sensory aspects such as acoustics add to the experience of space.

His openness is not limited to just the characteristic of internal space. Ando believes in not only creating tension between the box and the world it sits in, but also of bridging the normally separating function of his meta-typical walls to nature.¹¹ So another element we will find is that the thoughtful placement of his walls are often arranged to create sizeable openings to the outside. This might be reflect in a wall that is entirely a window, or of large sections of ceiling that are open or reflective of openings. In this way, Ando addresses three very important elementals that are part of his buildings and the design of the grounds they reside in.

The first is that of light. Everything Ando does is meant to harness the natural properties of light and provide interplay with the natural nakedness of the materials he uses in his walls. Again, as Ando is a church builder, I cannot help but to be reminded of Abbot Suger and his attitude about the symbol(s) of light. In a recently aired interview with Charlie Rose, Ando responded to the observation that even his concrete was special while remaining naked. Ando takes special care in the composition, pouring and mold making of his concrete walls to achieve walls that are reflective - an attribute not usually associated with

¹¹ Ibid

concrete.¹² Hence, not only is light introduced into his cold, concrete spaces in warm ways - it is also reflected by them. This is most apparent to me in his *Church of Light*.



image 06 - <http://www.andotadao.org/chlight62.htm>

¹² From an airing of the Charlie Rose Show. KCET, Los Angeles (date not documented)



image 07 - http://www.arcspace.com/architects/ando/Ando_Exhibition/

The second elemental is that of water. In the *Church on the Water*, we see that the large reflective pool harnesses one of water's most profound effects - that of reflection. In the usage here, we see intense drama as the large cross that sits on the water is reflected and so is the expanse of sky above it. In Fort Worth, Texas there is another building, although this time it is not a church. But Ando has spent a good deal of space and money to bring water right up to the large wall windows that border the space of the *Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth*.¹³ Here, not only is electiveness a big part of the experience, but also the transparency of the water, as played off of the glass windows, as we view the floor of stones underneath.

¹³ <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/texas/ftworth/ando/ando.html> - March 19, 2003, 12:00pm PST



image 08 - <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/texas/ftworth/ando/distantfromback.jpg>

With the Ft. Worth Museum and a look back at the *Church on the Water*, we see that glass is also a recurring theme in Ando's work. At the front of the church, the long wall behind the altar is a moving wall made of giant glass panes that can be completely opened.

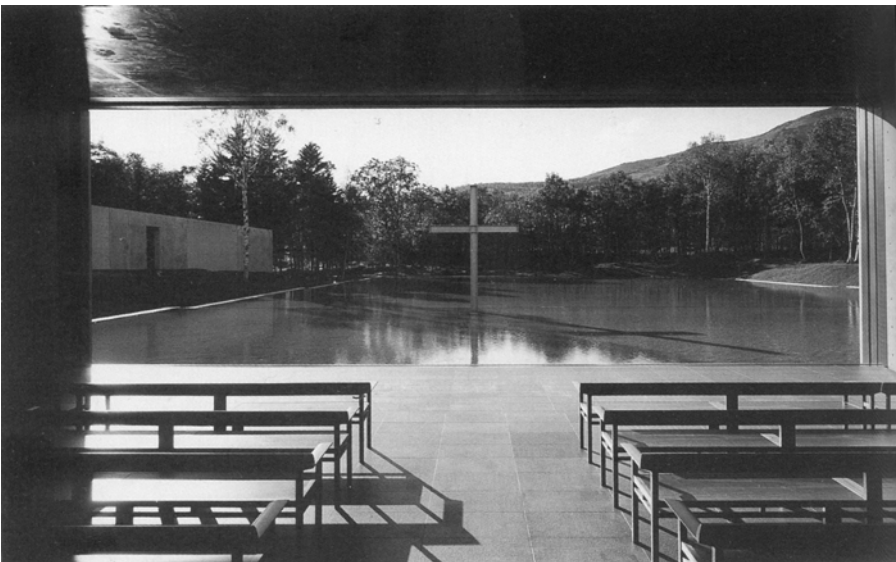


image 09 - Furuyama, pg. 136

This is most interesting because one would wonder why one would take the time and money to construct such a glass wall, only to complicate the function and cost by making it concealable. One reason might be to introduce the aural into the space. Not only is his concrete reflective of light, it is also reflective of sound. But perhaps another important reason is to introduce the important elemental of wind. Furuyama has noticed that the stirring of breeze along the highly temperature reactive concrete interior of the *Church of Light* has brought complexity to such a simplified space.¹⁴ So, I can only imagine the effect and mini-climate created by the large pool of water and the concrete walls found juxtaposed in the Church on the Water and how wind might play an important role in the experience of worshipping there.

But aren't Ando's views and inlets of nature somewhat inorganic at the same time? The pool on the church on the water is rectilinear and obviously designed. The light comes in via rectilinear openings or perfect circles. How does Ando justify the tension of his simplified form against the organics of nature? One way is by treating these inroads of nature as being interstitial. Ando is not out to capture nature but to bring us to confront the relationship between earthly existence and earth - about our invasion into nature and how nature can creep back in.¹⁵ Here, I find a quote by John Constable to resonate very deeply with Ando's thinking:

"There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may, — light, shade, and perspective will always make it

¹⁴ Fujyama.15,16

¹⁵ Ando. 25

beautiful."

I think this is reflected most obviously in the *Church on the Water*. The large transparency behind the altar immediately reminds me of a home theatre - it feels like I am looking at the ultimate widescreen tv. But this time, I am not looking at a representation but the real thing. Hence, there is no hiding that the experience is found within the church space and yet the experience is real.



Another is through his honesty about this relationship. We do not own nature. It is universal. Instead, architecture, which is classically about enclosure, becomes a medium by which man can be confronted by nature. As a medium, its function is important if not more important than aesthetics alone.¹⁶ Hence, enclosure and designed form do not take away from the symbolic role of real nature in his aesthetic. We can see the impact again in his Buddhist *Water Temple* (Awaji Island).

¹⁶ Ibid

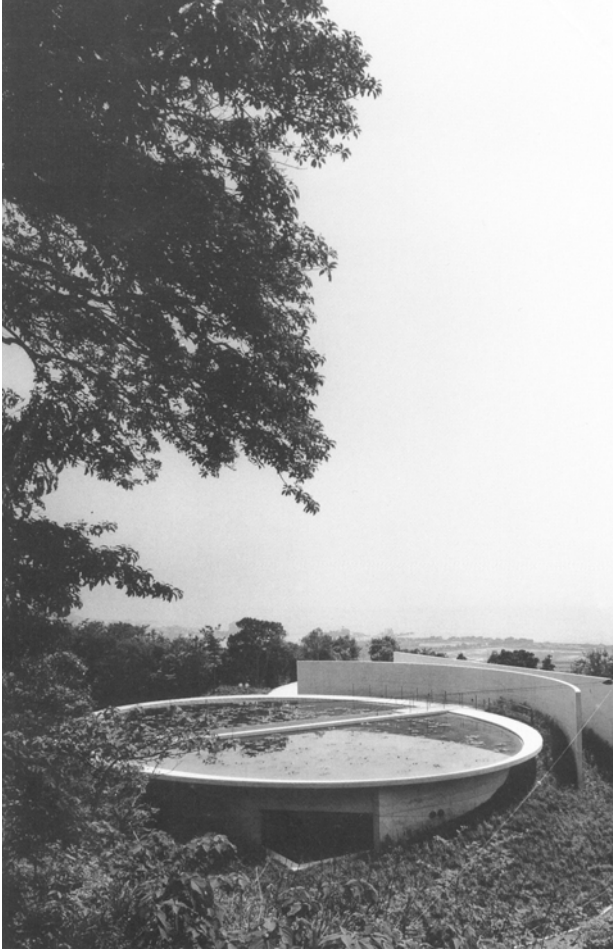


image 10 - Furuyama, pg. 145

Here I am reminded of large separation tanks found in sewage treatment plants that have the rotating catwalks above them. But this is not an industrial location. The water is serene and the lilies are real as is the reflective sky. So once again, there is no hiding of the fact we are interacting through a designate space and that frees us to truly confront real nature through Ando's portals.

Ando's Enabling of the Spiritual

A theme that I have addressed in all of my papers is the idea of the immanence of God in the world - a presence felt not only in nature as it confronts

man, but also in the *imago dei* by which we were formed. It is because God is immanent that I feel Ando has provided worship spaces that are both powerful and unique. Kenneth Frampton has summed up most concisely and accurately what I feel when I look at Ando's spaces:

For Ando, as for the Shakers, whose culture he has long admired, the abstract, purified form is merely an agent for the realization of being."¹⁷

Ando strives for truth telling. His truth is that we can truly confront what it means to be man by spending time in pure spaces. In this way, I am deeply reminded of the experience of the prophet Elijah as he confronts his own doubts in a cave. God does not come through pomp and circumstance but in a whisper to Elijah. For Ando, whispers are heard best in pure space with intentional portals to real nature.

Hence, there is more room in Ando's spaces than perhaps many other worship spaces to be confronted with the real presence of God for God is not hidden in applied aesthetics or fabrics or banners or fonts. He is present because he always has been. Ando's spaces, then, have the potential to be among the least manipulative or worship spaces and provides at least one approach to the tension within myself regarding truth of experience and the manipulation of the senses in worship.

For sure, one thing that is achieved by the "nakedness" of Ando's spaces in regards to that tension of the worship space is that they allow me the freedom to have an intensely personal encounter uncolored by familiar aesthetics. I am not forced to be or behave in a certain way via the mnemonic elements that can

¹⁷ Ibid. 9 (from and introduction by Kenneth Frampton)

overburden our mind set the moment we walk into highly stylized worship settings. Perhaps this is why I feel comfortable viewing Ando's spaces.

In regards to Ando's commitment to honesty it is interesting, then, that Ando embraces the symbolism of the Cross even as he strives to strip away what might color the experience. If Ando is indeed honest, then a powerful statement emerges about the elemental aspect of the Cross and in his spaces this common sentiment is even more deeply pronounced. All three of his Christian places of worship employ the Cross. His usage becomes a bold witness in the arena of human reason and philosophy. The Cross as sign takes on a universal validity, as they are part of an intention to create a universally embracable style.

Resulting Paradoxes

There is an unfortunate price to such a purist approach to space and that is of cost. As related to me by my cousin who is also an architect, it is unfortunate that Ando's space is largely unaffordable. Not only is the craftsmanship involved in precision use of concrete expensive it also requires that his buildings be essentially built twice. For in the desire to create pure space and abandon the now purely symbolic and aesthetically driven column, all his walls require precise mold making and so the result is that his walls are negatively built of wood first, and then filled with concrete.

This is no fault of Ando as I don't perceive profit is what drives his designs. But in addressing his church spaces, I am again reminded of the tension encountered by Suger in terms of the money invested in the Gothic vision -

money that could be used to also feed the hungry and help the poor. But for Suger, deciding to invest fiscally was not in denial of such important ministry but in celebration of the God who loves us all. In a sense, then, both Suger and Ando understand worship in a pure sense - worship as *response*.

Another interesting paradox found in Ando's work is over space itself. In the desire to define pure space, space has become distinctively finite in Ando's vision. His space is organized through division and not through addition. Does this mean that evangelism is not part of Ando's concerns? We could speculate that this is so. But then we could also consider that important questions regarding the function and effectiveness of localized congregations are raised, as mega churches become part of the normal Christian landscape. The only drawback here - the smaller the congregation the less is its ability to afford Ando's designs.