# The Thinking and Philosophy behind Tadao Ando through the Benesse House Naoshima

## Abstract

While Tadao Ando is not shown to make explicit references to phenomenology, his works show a consistency in his thought and philosophical pattern in architecture, implying essential themes. Such themes include concepts of union of object and subject, multi-sensory perception, body space and movement. Ando does not establish a systematic approach or phenomenology to architecture; rather, his attention to place, Genius Loci, body and direct experience on one side and on the side, resistance to standardisation and superficial post-modernism situate him in the domain of architecture’s phenomenological discourse. His thinking and philosophy is essentially manifested through his designs, which portray the concept of place and spirit and effectively establish the soul and nature of architecture. It is also acknowledged that he believed in enlightening the audience to contextualise the implications of architecture and create awareness, which was the facilitation of the creation of a situation. Using the Benesse House as a case study, this paper is intended to analyse the thinking and philosophy behind the architect’s works in the context of architectural representation.

Tadao Ando’s thinking and philosophy is manifested through his designs that portray the concept of place and spirit, establishing the soul and nature of architecture. His belief was that enlightening the audience to understand potential implications of architecture and create awareness was the facilitation of the creation of a situation. Effectively, he enables the audience to connect with his emotional design that is a reflection of the Zen state of mind, described by Hsu et al (2015, p. 457) as the inherent traditional Japanese culture that is poetic, quiet and clear. From this description, his architectural designs are seen to feature sheer simplicity and clear lines achieved through the significance of materiality and simple geometric forms that strip the bare essentials of volume and shape. Describing walls as the most basic yet enriching elements of architecture, Ando uses them to create aesthetically dynamic spaces, whereby it is evident that he is set apart from his contemporaries through his honesty of materials (Shirazi 2012, p. 21). For instance, he uses the bare aesthetic beauty of concrete rather than veneer to texture the exteriors and interiors of his buildings. Using the Benesse House in Naoshima as a case study, this paper will discuss the thinking and philosophy behind Tadao Ando in the analysis of architectural representation. It will also be shown that despite representing modern universal qualities, Ando’s architecture is rooted in traditional Japanese values.

According to the emotional design theory by Donald Norman, designs must focus on the emotional experiences of people to give way to contextual interactions between people and design (Wang et al 2011, p. 4). Such focus on emotional experience has the potential to create emotional design that makes it possible for people to appreciate both aesthetic beauty and emotional experience. As Norman had earlier argued, most people base their perception on visual inputs, whereby they experience their environment through the eye and disregard the significance of the spatial experiences that other senses provide Hsu et al (2015, p. 457). In realisation of such missed experiences, Ando uses his thinking and philosophy of spatial experience to convey the message that mutual sensory experiences can be enjoyed with the environment. Such environment could be light environment, social environment, sound environment or warm environment through the use of psychological and physiological senses.

Ando’s philosophy can largely be broken down into four characteristics and traced to Charles Jencks’ postmodernism theory that proposes allusionism and contextualism (Botz-Bornstein 2013, p. 86). First, he emphasises on the relationship between the environment, architecture and history and, second, he places focus on the symbolic importance of architecture. Third, he pursues the metaphorisation of buildings. Fourth and most importantly, he relates the exterior images of his buildings to the psychological feelings of people and the effects they induce. Therefore, his detail design mode can be described through the characteristics of spirit of place and composition situation; composition syntax with the element of light; composition syntax with the element of water; and composition syntax of detail aesthetics and material characteristics (Tianjiao 2012, p. 9). With regards to the Benesse House, Ando essentially communicated the notion of merging the local Naoshima architecture and natural beauty with modern art.

Designed by Ando and opened in 1992, The Benesse House Museum is a facility that integrates a hotel with a museum. Consisting of four buildings, it is built on high ground and overlooks the Seto Inland Sea. Among its outstanding features are the large apertures designed to specifically open up the building’s interior and capture the magnificent natural surroundings (Ando 2004, p. 69). Benesse House represents Ando’s typical philosophy of the concept of the coexistence of architecture, nature and art whereby he communicates a phenomenal articulation of space. It is immediately apparent that light is a dramatically soothing element in the architectural design of Benesse House, whereby it is artistically captured and held in a spatially tangible manner. His Japanese cultural and religious backgrounds have greatly influenced his architectural philosophy despite being extremely modern, which scholars describe as creating a “haiku” effect (Baek 2009, p. 74). Basically, that is the placing of emphasis on empty space and nothingness to communicate the visual beauty of simplicity. This concept is evident throughout the Benesse House, whose design features a complex but beautifully simple spatial circulation. The influences of Zen are evident in Ando’s architecture, which significantly distinguishes him from his contemporaries. For instance, a critical analysis of the architecture of the Benesse House reveals connections to the religious concept of Zen, which concentrates on simplicity and inner feelings as opposed to exterior appearance. Further, he uses concrete as his architectural media to facilitate his practice of simplicity (Ando & Hunter 2012, p. 53). Ideally, the concrete provides a sense of cleanliness and, simultaneously, a sense of weightlessness despite being a heavy material.

Through the Benesse House, Ando’s thinking and philosophy can be seen to be that of the application of geometric design language and architectural characteristics of building materials (Nute 2006, p. 104). Effectively, such thinking and philosophy was used to incorporate natural elements such as light into the Benesse House, stimulating poetic detail aesthetic attributes that interweave light, shadows, fine concrete, iron and smooth glass. Thus, the Benesse House architecture can be viewed as an integration of modern and post-modern overtones informed by comprehensively considering spatial themes. For example, its relationship with its landscape has been used to create an unconscious link with space, which communicates the Japanese culture of relationships and perceptions (Veal 2002, p. 350). Therefore, despite its extreme modernity, Ando’s art especially as seen through the Benesse House is deeply embedded in Japanese sensitivities. It may be generalised that there are architects and cultures that treat their objects of perception as passive, upon which they impose their own usually pre-supposed cognitions, and leave them to be manipulated by their audiences. Others also treat their objects of perception as having life and personality; ideally, whatever is perceived by the viewer is the objects’ effect (Kening 2010, p. 6). However, for artistic expression and perception that considers reality to be the relationship between subject and object, the relationship becomes the valuable reality in which both have power to impact upon each other. For Ando’s architecture, this relationship is used to give rise to a continuous interaction process that becomes the creative source of life.

In Ando’s architecture, it is his relationship to what he is creating that is communicated to his audience. In his work, the intuition and expression of the object are determined by the context (when and where) and interaction between the subjects and object. In the specific case of the Benesse House, the relation of the object (Benesse House) and the environment possesses an active effect whereby the perception process is the result of ongoing interactions among the active elements of an experience. In explanation, Hsu et al (2015, p. 457) compare it to live theater where the events and movements create the spatial experience. Just like performing art’s aspect of creating meaning during the experience, Ando’s architecture creates meaning during the experience of perception as aided by his use of spatial features. This is also another aspect of Ando’s style in the Benesse House that roots his aesthetics in the participatory quality of Japanese aesthetics. The movement in space inspires his audiences or subjects to participate on spatial experiences and by doing so, they also contribute to the creation and communication of spatial experiences in architectural form. Hsu et al (2015, p. 457) again make a comparison and observe that such participatory aspects exist in language in the way sentences are left incomplete for the “other” to complete. Therefore, the thinking and philosophy behind Ando as communicated by the Benesse House is one of participation and apprehension rather than claiming objective representation through goal-oriented critical analysis (Ando 2004, p. 27).

Through the Benesse House, it is apparent that Ando communicates the philosophy that modernisation does not necessarily translate into westernisation. Comparison with the Japanese culture manifested in traditional Japanese architecture shows that the Benesse House is a contemporary interpretation of the traditional Japanese house, temple and garden and carries on similar sensitivities found in the Zen garden. However, it would be extremely simplistic to define Ando’s philosophy simply as a continuation since that would reduce to the interpretation of cultural themes. Rather, the post-modernist nature of his architecture can also be viewed as confronting tradition and reformulating memory in such manner that is orientated to the future (Ando & Hunter 2012, p. 44). As seen through the Benesse House, his architecture incorporates traditional aesthetic qualities in not only entirely new but also surprising ways, leading to a spatial philosophy. Ideally, he uses a detailed design language to make his subjects experience the unique atmosphere of aesthetic attributes and space (Kening 2010, p. 8). From his earlier experiences in Rome, he developed the understanding that people draw their significance from architecture through the feeling and affection it stimulates in them. Through the experiences, he adopted an architectural language that defies conventional limitations and opts for originality as his medium, where he asserts that people should experience architecture through their senses as opposed to through the media (Botz-Bornstein 2013, p. 23).

As the modern world is getting more immersed into the information age, designs are gravitating towards the emotional age. According to Hsu et al (2015, p. 458), designs that emphasise on functional aspects at the expense of aesthetical aspects will compromise their appeal in the emotional age. They equate Ando’s Benesse House to a persuasive argument presented by someone with great storytelling ability (Shirazi 2012, p. 22). In that sense, Ando emphasises the feeling of consonances in design by integrating rational inspiration with art to his architecture, effectively endowing the architectural space with authentic feelings. In that sense, Ando believes that the concept of place combines man-made and natural environments to create a meaningful sense of space through which people can derive meaning and significance. From his experiences in Rome, Ando also learned that the concept of spirit of place expresses a place as having a unique character and spirit (Wang et al 2011, p. 7). Thus, from Ando’s perspective, place does not only possess form in terms of architectural entities; it also has a spiritual meaning through which people can perceive a meaningful sense of space. Further, he believes that his role as an architect is to bring out the abstract space and convert it into human emotional space, thereby creating a place for people to inhabit (Shirazi 2012, p. 23).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that a good space design must have the capacity to instill acknowledgeable sensory experiences by creating space situations in people. In Ando’s case, he has developed remarkable space language through the skillful merging of modern minimalist elements and traditional Japanese Zen. Effectively, he has created overpowering space objects through the application of the “Genius Loci” connotation, enabling people to acknowledge their emotional design experiences in five senses in terms of the compositions’ details (Shirazi 2012, p. 22). His work, as demonstrated by the Benesse House, makes it possible for people to experience a journey that involves thinking, gestation and awareness through the arrangement of path sequences. Ando’s architecture is acknowledged for creatively using natural light and structures that assume the natural forms of the surrounding landscape (Wang et al 2011, p. 5). This is as opposed to disturbing the natural landscape by forcing to match the constructed space of the building. The Benesse House is a case in point. Since it is located in an impressive national park, over half of the structure’s footprint is below ground level (Shirazi 2012, p. 25). This concept serves exceptionally well to keep the visual impact of the building on its surrounding terrain at a minimum. Equally importantly, his architecture is characterised by three dimensional paths as has already been described by the Benesse House.

Other works by Ando that can be used to emphasise the same philosophy that informed the Benesse House include his Japanese religious architecture as well as Christian churches such as the Church in Tarumi and the Church of Light (Wang et al 2011, p. 5). Notably, Christian and Japanese churches feature largely distinct attributes, but Ando’s architecture approaches them in a similar way. That is as a result of his belief that spiritual places and dwelling places should not be designed differently from each other. Essentially, he argues that living in a dwelling place is more than a simple functional issue but also entails spiritual aspects. As Ando further explains, the mind is the locus of god in a similar way as the house is the locus of mind. Therefore, living in a house is essentially in quest of the mind as the locus of god, in much the same way people go to church in the quest for god (Veal 2002, p. 350). Therefore, a critical role of the place refered to as church is to augment the sense of the spiritual because in such spiritual places, people will realise peace of mind in the same way they would in places they refer to as home. Through this philosophy, he emphasises the association between architecture, nature and spirituality and, through the Benesse House, he intended for people to experience the beauty and spirit of nature through nature (Shirazi 2012, p. 30). Thus, his architectural designs are further informed by the philosophy that architecture is responsible for communicating the attitude of a place by performing it and making it visible.

As Ando explained, he intends for people to value their own inquisitiveness about everyday things in life when they look at architecture and experience it without dwelling so much on preconceived notions (Tianjiao 2012, p. 11). While he acknowledges that people will easily hold biases against modern architecture because of difficulties in understanding it, he also acknowledges that such difficulty is what renders architecture interesting. Equally importantly, Ando believes that people are not comfortable with architectural concepts that they do not understand or those with meanings they can neither derive nor relate to, which is why they search for explanations (Tianjiao 2012, p. 11). However, he also explains that the problem with the architectural approach in which the architect explains every detail is that the people will only perceive such work from the architects’ perspective and fail to engage their own appreciation of art. Therefore, another factor that informs his thinking and philosophy is that people must be presented with architecture that not only teaches but enables them to enjoy the bewilderment of not understanding the mysterious aspects of art (Shirazi 2012, p. 31).

It is thus concluded that Ando’s thinking and philosophy arises from the concept of the coexistence of architecture, nature and art as articulated through the media of spirit of place to establish the soul and nature of architecture. Therefore, according to Ando, the purpose of creating situations is to inform and enable people to understand, identify with and appreciate the potential meaning which reveals a state of awareness. His poetic space entails a comprehensive meaning of Zen that provides people with reflective experiences. For instance, the Benesse House simplifies complex elements rather than leave them to the manipulations of the people, effectively expressing multiple meanings using fewer composition elements. According to Ando, this ensures that the experiences of the people are not diminished. Spatial experience is therefore the key concept in Ando’s thinking and philosophy whereby concrete is also used to communicate his philosophy. Finally, despite the post-modernistic nature of Ando’s architecture, his work is also deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

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