

Architect Kuma Kengo: 'a product of place' [場所] が生み出した建築家 隈研吾

Roger Pulvers

The renowned architect's life work and his new book, *My Place*, reflects an awareness of humanity's close affinity to the world around us

"I wanted to go to a place that wasn't neat and tidy, somewhere dangerous. I was bored, and it had something to do with the era and something to do with myself too."



Making a connection: Kuma Kengo's 'Water/Glass' structure in Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture, attempts to connect architecture with the sea by means of a veranda of water. | MITSUMASA FUJITSUKA

In a recent letter to fellow architect Sejima Kazuyo, Kuma Kengo expressed in the above words the tenor of his mood and the disarray of his esprit during his student days.

"The end of the 1970s was a time when the mood was very much that everything had been already expressed," he wrote. "We had been

through the passions of the student movement of the '60s, and it looked very much like there was nothing new to be done, be it in architecture, literature or thought.

"A feeling of powerless fell upon us, particularly upon us young people. ... I felt utterly helpless over my own roughness, my own sloppiness, and was repelled by what was 'nice' and at a total loss of what to do about it."

It was this feeling of being repelled by what he saw around him in Japan that sent him off to Africa, inspired as well by the poetry and travels of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud.

In reading his letters to Sejima, which are being serialized in the architecture magazine LIXIL eye, I came away with an understanding not only of what motivated Kuma to embark on his journey in search of values that might wisely inform a future lifestyle for himself, but also of what just might rescue young people in Japan today who are finding themselves at sea with no one or nothing to point the way home.

Kuma had — and still has — a deep-seated sense of rebellion that manifests itself in his prolific writing and his work around the world. It is a rebellion against what most people generally consider "modern."

For instance, Kuma has, on many occasions, expressed his disdain for the featureless concrete that fronts up so many buildings in Japan.

Tadao Ando, an architect known for employing this tool, was at first none too pleased with such criticism.

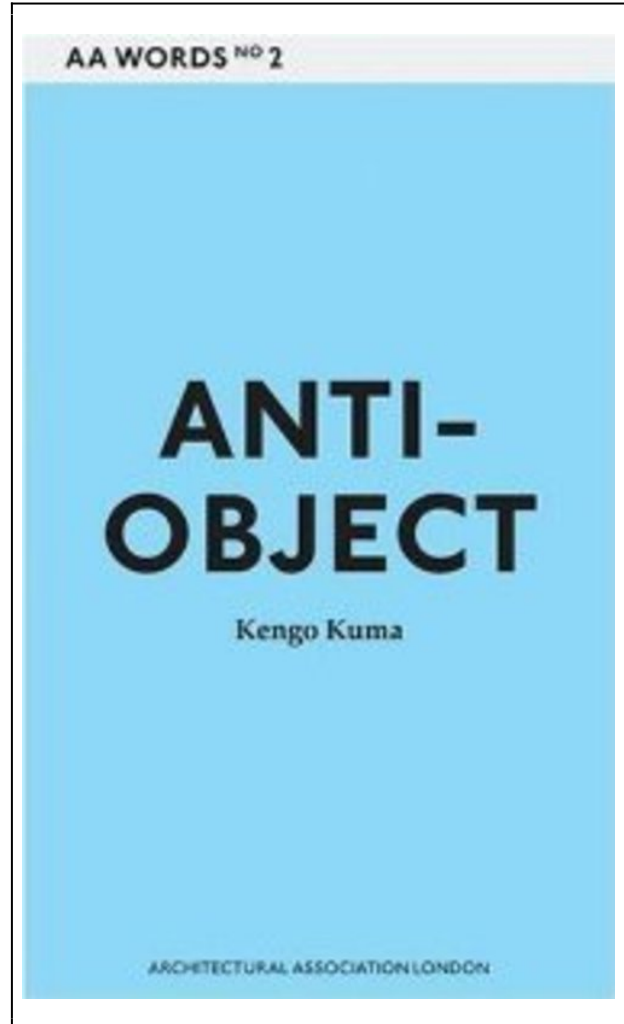
“I’m well aware of what Kuma says about me and all my concrete,” Ando remarked. “I got all hot under the collar when I first heard it, but after some thought I realized that he may have a point. Unlike us, Kuma lives in a totally new age.”

Kuma is now expressing, at a prodigious pace, that new age for us to experience and live in. But what exactly does that new age purport to create? More crucially for Japanese people today, what are the roots of his passions and how can they guide us to recreate the dynamism that this culture once had?

Luckily, Kuma is a brilliant advocate of his aesthetic. As such, he is doing for Japanese architecture what Masaoka Shiki did for poetry and Kitaoji Rosanjin did for the design of cuisine: He is expanding the scope of Japanese culture by articulately redefining its traditional messages in a future context.

Over the past century, we have come to view our place among our surroundings, willy nilly, in terms of our individual isolation from each other. “Alienation” has been our hapless buzzword, with we ourselves embodying the aliens in our formidable cities. Architecture — especially the new-empire architecture of the century’s most modern culture, the American one — imposed itself on us. Buildings were monumental objects, and we scurried about in their awesome shadows.

Kuma calls his architecture “anti-object,” and he has, in fact, written a book with that very title. “Anti-Object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture,” brilliantly translated by Hiroshi Watanabe and published by Architectural Association Publications, London, in 2008, is a must-read for anyone interested in Japanese aesthetics. In it, Kuma is attempting to relocate us in the midst of a more human scale.



He harks back to German architect Bruno Taut, who visited Japan in the mid-1930s and was inspired by the proportions and principles of Japanese architecture.

“Taut abhorred objects, believing that architecture was more a matter of relationships,” Kuma writes. “Strolling through a garden (at Kyoto’s Katsura Detached Palace) in a Far Eastern country he had come to almost by chance, Taut unexpectedly encountered a beautiful form of connection between consciousness and matter.”

This connection between consciousness and matter is the very thing that Kuma himself has pursued in each and every work. And it was a chance encounter with Taut’s spirit that set Kuma off in pursuit of this connection that

permits people to feel unintimidated and at home in a location.

Taut had designed the interior of a house at Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture, and Kuma happened upon it when, in the mid-1990s, he was making plans to build a small guesthouse overlooking the sea, coincidentally, just above it. The guesthouse, called “Water/Glass,” links the land with the sea, virtually erasing the distinction between them. The unique veranda is composed of water, not wood, allowing the consciousness of the viewer there to defy the physical by seemingly being in two places at once.

In this way, through water and light and sound (the sound of the flowing water is a constant reminder of its presence), Kuma’s architecture creates connections and encounters between people and nature. As such, it negates isolation and hinders the engendering of alienation. His spaces allow us to feel that we are an integral part of things. While being sharp, clear and often stark, they have a particular kind of *nukumori*, or warmth, about them.

From the writings of Kuma Kengo:

“Architecture can never be closed off completely. That is the premise of my work. One may enclose space with walls and bury it underground, but architecture is always situated in — and connected to — the world. More precisely, architecture is a device mediating between the subject (that is, mankind) and the world.”

“It’s not bamboo as a material (that I am on about), it is the state of the bamboo grove. More than the feel of the bamboo, it’s the light and the sound and the touch of the grove.”

“Just as countless birds in flight form a flock, the large whole of a structure is made up of the coming together of small fragments, and

this is my ideal. The pliability of a flock of birds changing shape moment by moment is incredibly appealing to me as an architect looking toward an architecture that is supple and democratic.”

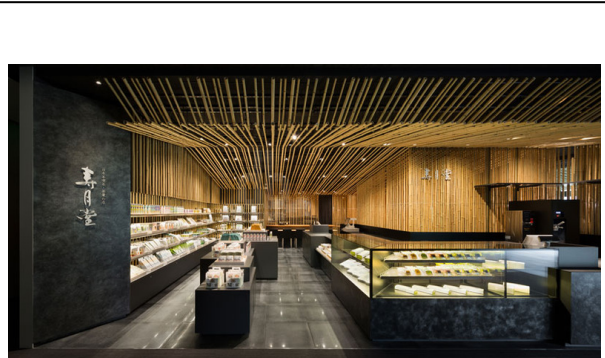
“(My philosophy) is not about erasing a structure, nor, of course, is it about causing it to stand out. It strives to resolve the connection between the structure and the place it sits in.”

“The world of the 20th century was a world, it seems to me, when the pursuit of size mattered. ... In contrast to that, I feel as though I am going in the direction of the small. ... The ‘small thing’ adrift, that’s me.”

I have gone to the Nezu Museum in Tokyo several times just to walk from the street alongside the building toward its entrance. Kuma redesigned the building that reopened in 2009. The approach to the entrance is through what becomes a tunnel of wood, stones and light. To the right is a wall of bamboo that filters in slivers of light. Kuma is, in fact, a sculptor of light; the passage to the entrance takes you in and out the borders of his spatial sculpture.

His spaces are inviting. He stresses in his writing that there should be a “flatness” to architecture, and by this he means that structures and spaces should be democratic and accessible in scale. The working metaphor in his Iiyama Plaza in Nagano Prefecture, set for completion in February 2015, is the roofed *nakamichi*, or passageway, through the middle. This cultural and community complex will not dwarf the individual. There is nothing alienating about Kuma’s spaces. They may stun with their sheer aesthetic beauty, but they invite us to participate. In his writing, Kuma speaks of “holes,” that is, openings in things, as being a kind of bridge. In this way his spaces transport us from one place to another while

being a shaft between one realm of light and another.



Jugetsudo Cafe

The overriding metaphor in Jugetsudo Cafe in Tokyo’s Kabuki-za, which he redesigned for the theater’s new opening in April 2013, is the bamboo grove with its pitched bamboo ceiling, creating a transition space — again a kind of passageway of access and motion — between the theater and the garden.

There is a porousness in Kuma’s structures that enhances the qualities of his materials. This is even true of some stone in his work. He laid volcanic rubble over the low sloping roofs of the buildings of the Jeju Ball hotel on South Korea’s largest island of Jeju. (The island boasts more than 300 lava cones.) The roofs and the ground are linked in texture, and light from skylights scatters shadows. There is a randomness to the way the light falls and fragments. The connection here, between the natural and the artificial, is produced in the eye of the beholder.



Jeju Ball Hotel

Where does this profound affinity with the natural in Kuma’s work come from? His latest book, *Boku no Basho (My Place)*, which was published in April by Daiwa Shobo, provides many insights into the man and his work.

Born in Yokohama in 1954, Kuma was greatly influenced by his grandfather.

“My grandfather built a shed by a field that he rented and went to on weekends,” he wrote in a letter to Sejima. “Its mud walls used to fall to pieces on the tatami, and I would roll about all over the tatami.”

When reading his letters and books, particularly, *My Place* and *Basho Genron (The Principles of Place)*, the latter published in 2012 by Ichigaya Shuppansha, I was constantly struck by his affinities with nature nurtured in childhood, affinities that many children today are deprived of experiencing due to an ardor for the virtual world that surpasses that for the natural.

Kuma’s grandfather hardly spoke to him, except when they were growing vegetables

together on their little plot. It was as if communication and the liberation of inhibitions were made possible through the cultivation of nature. This stuck with Kuma and continues to inspire his drive toward what he calls “the miracle of living things.” His work reminds us that, in Japan, communication with people and communing with the natural world are one.

“The motivation of writing this book,” he writes in “My Place,” “is to attempt to recall what soil, water, light and wind mean to me. ... The key to that process of recalling is place. ... The person that I am is a product of place. ... I am keenly aware of the fact that my way of looking at things, the form that my actions take and the formulation of my thoughts, all exist in and depend upon the depths of the places that I have been. In that sense I came to realize that I am like the tree that grows in the forest.”

Kuma is ever conscious of the borders of the incongruous. When looking at his Stone Museum in Tochigi Prefecture, I am reminded of Basho’s famous haiku about the nature of stone. (In fact, Basho did visit Nasu-cho, where the museum is located.)

It is still and quiet / As the sounds of the cicada / Sink into stone

Slimming down stone — making it light, or, as Kuma says, “particlizing” it — gives it a softness and ambiguity that may not generally be associated with it as a material. Again, he is concerned not with the feel of the material itself, but rather with the touch and appearance of it when taken as a whole that connects it to the place and to us who happen to find ourselves there.

“The theme of the Stone Museum is particlizing stone so that it can be used to generate sounds,” he writes in “Anti-Object.” “My aim was to create several layers between the preexisting objects so that a free ambiguous field — a wilderness — would gradually emerge.”

This last sentence perhaps provides us, in a single word, with a clue to his outlook on nature: wilderness. Nothing in art can be natural; there is only art that looks natural and art that doesn’t. However, the aspiration of an artist wishing to re-create nature and find a place for human beings to exist in harmony with it is to fashion what is *sono mama*, or “just as things are,” to re-fashion nature in its untouched state into something that not only looks natural but enhances the natural.

By creating “anti-objects,” Kuma strives toward crating structures that do not dominate the basic lay of the land, structures that do not call attention to themselves but rather allow the location to shine in its own light.

Within all this there is a downright playfulness in much of his work. He likens the construction of a building to stacking up little wooden blocks. His Kids Academy Taiyogaoka Kindergarten in Ishikawa Prefecture has little niches and “caves” in the walls where children can hide while still being in the view of others.

Another on-going project that speaks to Kuma's desire to create spaces where humans can encounter each other and communicate is the UR Yokodai regeneration of a housing complex in Yokohama due for completion in December 2016. Kuma is transforming the 2,000 square-meter plaza at this large complex into a kind of village meeting place by adding *hisashi* (eaves) and *engawa* (Japanese-style verandahs). This is how he explains it ...

“In this project we aim to transform the place to a ‘relaxed village’ by adding ‘the third space,’ which is neither public nor private.... The eaves create an ‘engawa=semi-outdoor corridor’ and around there ‘the third functions,’ not shops or housing, can be concentrated. By designing that way, warmth and gentleness are introduced to the ‘village.’”

What is at work here?

Kuma is using architecture as a medium of *tsunagari*, or interconnections, between people. This typical high-rise housing complex in Japan's second biggest city suddenly offers intimacy. This is a demonstration of his philosophy of architecture as relationship and anti-object. He negates isolation, and by doing so combines warmth in a space with a clean and uncluttered Japanese aesthetic. (I would say that the combination of the two superficially incongruous qualities of stark minimal beauty on the one hand and comforting warmth on the other is *the* unique feature of Japanese aesthetics.)

A similar result is achieved in his recent design of a public relations space at Osaka Station. Here he builds up layers of wood, like dynamic planes in a constructivist painting, where people can congregate and rest, intermingling comfortably and freely.

A coziness is aimed for in the buildings at the Tomioka City Hall in Gunma Prefecture, scheduled for completion in July 2017. He wishes to create “a small gathering of roofs” with so-called bent-key pathways. The result should be a local government center where people come on business and feel at home. The mood of the space is the antithesis of the forbidding.

Another quality of Kuma's work is what at times seems like a randomness of composition. This mirrors the randomness in nature; and far from making us feel lost, it actually has a soothing effect. The interior of the Shato Hanten, a Chinese restaurant in Osaka, features 3,500 wooden louvres hung from the ceiling, like branches. The stated effect is one of a forest. But to me they evoke long drops of water. Whichever, the atmosphere is organic and genuinely natural.



Shato Hanten

I used to live not far from Futago Tamagawa in Tokyo and often went to the Takashimaya Department Store there, visits which I found daunting, due to the “modern” but severely dated enormous glass facade. The whole feeling was one of precipitous squareness, and not at all welcoming. Kuma has redesigned the facade with an enormous white flowing cloud-like sculpture. He has renewed the store's image into something that speaks in an organic way to us now.

Other recent or on-going projects are his school complex in Paris, a warehouse in Shanghai and the stunning Green Innovation Factory Progetto Manifattura in northern Italy. The factory is located in Trentino in the Vallagarina Valley. The building itself is down in the valley, and to mark its impact, Kuma has rejected the perpendicular monument for the horizontal and flat. Is this paradoxical? Not at all. The key is

visibility from vantage points above the valley. This project, lasting nearly a decade from its conception, is scheduled for completion in 2018.

Kuma is a visionary who wrote in 2008 (in his book, *Shizen na Kenchiku*, or *A Natural Architecture*) that his goal is “to express concretely in architecture the continuities between nature and that which is artificial.”

There is a technique of seeing faint objects in the lens of a telescope, one that I have used since childhood. (Astronomy has been my hobby for nearly 60 years.) It is peripheral viewing. If you want to see a faint asteroid or nebula or cluster or galaxy, you put it in the center of the lens and look to the edge. The object will appear brighter than if you stared directly at it.

I came to see this as a metaphor for the creations of Kuma Kengo. Kuma, it seems to me, is fascinated by the edges and borders of things and the discoveries we can make if we look there. It is where forest comes to an end at a field in a *satoyama*, a place where farmers can cultivate their crops in harmony with the natural woodland beside it. Thus, he creates buildings as borderzones. We all live in borderzones with nature. And if we forget that, we lose not only our links with the natural but our affinities with each other. By looking to these edges, we allow the center to radiate with a greater, warmer and and more lasting brilliance.

At the crux of all of Kuma’s architecture is the interplay between people and nature. His work spawns and generates incessant dialogues with people, eliciting their reactions.

“Since childhood,” wrote Kuma in a letter to Sejima on Dec. 4, 2013, “I have been the type of person drawn not to fixed dead architecture but to soft living plants and animals, and not just in a visual way but to discover how they are alive and how they react and respond to me.”

This is the very thing that Japanese society is calling out for today: a way of conversing intelligently with the environment — the “my place” that we all inhabit — to enhance our humanity while leaving things, as much as is humanly possible, just as they are.

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