Kengo Kuma

Entrevista realizada por el equipo de redacción (AP, LA)

Kuma san, thank you very much for your attention. We're recently from the admiration we have for your work, your thoughts and your career, please feel free, as a chess insight, to answer, jump, move, complete or modify our proposals.

What made you decide to become an architect?

I grew up in an old wooden house in the suburbs of Tokyo which was built during the pre-war period, unlike my friends’ houses, all of them built after the war with new materials such as alumínium and plastic. I was ashamed of the dark and dirty aspect of my house, and I looked up at the sky from the top of my house and the sky was so blue, I wondered why it was so blue.

Who was the first architect or which was the first building that called your attention?

In 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics and the first space in Japan, that such heavenly lighting from the above shocked me. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen until then.

Would you consider any architect as your master?

Bruno Taut and Frank Lloyd Wright. Both of them loved traditional architecture in Japan and their work became a bridge between modernism and traditional Japanese architecture.

Do you align yourself with a particular way of doing things in Japan? I dare say that one of your first projects, the Kino-san observatory, shows some influence from Taoda Ando: the use of concrete, the geometry. In fact, recently, your work seems to embrace a certain lightness, which is also characteristic of other Japanese architects such as Toyo Ito. Would you agree with this?

For Kino-san, concrete is used only to support the earth and not the theme itself, which is completely different from the way Ando treats it. The lightness of my architecture aims at the warmth and gentleness that comes from natural materials, which differs from the works by Toyo Ito. I do not see any architects in Japan adopting a style similar to mine.

Could we also guess a certain continuit with the idea of the end of the building as an object that Japanese architectures from Metabolism, an international movement in the 60’s, announced through breaking the volume?

I feel close to the architects from Metabolism in the way they tried to disassemble large volumes into small elements. However, they also assumed the existence of a shaft which small capsules could parade. I would like to remove such industrial relic from the 20th century as much as possible. In this sense I am totally opposite to metabolists.

Could your strategy of breaking the matter down to particles be understood as a continuation of this goal but oriented to the human scale?

I began to seek ways to disassemble things, as I observed how concrete, a scale-less and inhuman material, destroyed the world in the 20th century.

Nature

We heard from you that the specific duty of architects in the 21st century is to provide the union between nature and man, while in the 20th century the task was actually different. How can architecture face this challenge?

Imitating, no matter how well, shapes from nature with concrete or steel does not mean connecting the human being with nature. First of all, you must consider how you put natural materials such as water, earth or stone back in the hands of architects.

Besides the industrial challenges of the 20th century, what do have architects to say about social needs, like social housing, that we still have?

Many people mistakenly believe that architecture is leading the industrialized society, but the true mission of architecture is leading the industrialized society. Social housing and other welfare-related architecture problems will become even more important in the future. We are today trying to get actively involved in such projects.

You almost do not have collective housing projects, is this casual? Does the budget play an important role in your practice?

Our project for Shinnomé, for example, is a social housing project. Even if they are low-cost projects, we would like to become more engaged with them. However, in Japan there are design firms specialized in social housing, which makes our involvement a little difficult.

How can buildings be designed as gardens? And how would a garden then be designed as an exercise of just landscaping?

In Japan, architecture was traditionally considered as a belonging or part of the garden and there was no such specialized profession as architect. I would like to redefine architecture as part of the garden. Even if the garden is small, I like to design it as the place from which you can feel the universe. But we are hardly asked for designing solely a garden.

Which would be your favorite place in nature?

Near the water, the ocean or a river.

In European cities like Barcelona, could the architecture as a device connecting man and nature -as you propose- be transformed into a device between man and the city, at the end between man and man?

It makes no sense any longer to differentiate Asian cities and European cities, as every city in the world more or less faces the same problems. Architecture has potential not only for connecting cities and nature but also for mediating between lots of other things, not to mention people, as was the case in the past.

City

How does your architecture relate to the public space in Japan? In Chokkura, does the material take advantage of the configuration of the space?
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Tradition and technology

Is Bruno Taut the architect who opened the Western modern style to this new relationship between subject and world?

Frank Lloyd Wright discovered something about the relationship between the subject and the world. Both the names of Taut and Wright should be cited.

Which would be the other Western modern architects that were open to this conception? You frequently talk about Frank Lloyd Wright as someone who discarded the image as a perspective once he learnt about Ukiyo-e paintings. How do you think this conception can be applied to architecture?

By arranging several thin walls in parallel, layers of spaces can be realized in a space without depth. This designing method is Wright’s translation of Ukiyo-e into architectural language.

The L-shaped house in Connecticut shows a way of improving modern architecture through life and tradition, battling for a new transparency model different from the 50’s isolated one.

The Connecticut house was an extension of a building that was typical from the 1950s, an independent glass box. We wanted to critically get over such isolated, up-to-then typified architecture of the 1950s as represented by Philip Johnson’s Glass House. We managed to express it by using the L-shape and a composite wood structure.

Your buildings have almost no windows, is the frame not needed anymore for interacting with nature?

Window can be set up so cross ventilation is possible. In this house, the terrace, larger than the window, is used as an important device that connects indoor and outdoor.

Kuma-san, we love your roofs, you rarely talk about volume, but their connection is somewhat weak now.

Could you say that at Momofuku Ando Center you are taking this goal to its highest level, by making the floor plan disappear and offering a roof to the landscape?

I am not 100% satisfied with the roof for Ando Momofuku. We wanted to erase the border between indoor and outdoor with a fluid space, which is created by inserting a slope under the roof, but that was not enough.

P Thoughts

Do your writings precede your buildings, or does your practice cast your thoughts?

Writing and practice influence each other, and I prioritize whichever. Both are crucial for me. Should an architect know about philosophy?

No need to learn philosophy, but you can get good clues for architecture from philosophy. Who would be the philosopher who has influenced you the most?

I got lots of clues from Deluze and Guattari, including the idea of relativism in the solidity of things. If you jump from a high cliff, the water impacts you as hard as a rock. Whether something is hard or soft, big or small, heavy or light, it is all a matter of relativity — this is where I obtained lots of ideas about architecture.

How important are movement and time in your architecture?

Time and movement are the most important elements for my architecture. Modernist architects had pointed out the importance of them, their works were like still pictures, as best represented by Le Corbusier.

We consider architecture not as a volume but as a combination of floor and roof. Floor determines human body and roof determines human mind.

Toyo Itos states that new technologies define a new relationship between man and nature, would you agree with that?

I agree, but technology for Itos means a new technology in structural design, while for me its meaning is extensive. Would you say that your work is inspired by art — sometimes land art — philosophy and construction?

I think that our mission is to connect art, philosophy and construction. In the past, art and philosophy functioned as connected, but their connection is somehow weak now.

Practice

Looking at your board of employees and collaborators it seems to be a very horizontal and democratic system with few hierarchies. How relevant is the experience for the work of an architect?

We aim to have an unrestricted, hierarchy-free organization as much as possible. I do not deny the significance of one’s experience. I just think that an atmosphere in which you can say things to the experienced ones is very important.

How is the design process? Do you start with a sketch, with a model, with a conversation with your staff?

I prefer not to draw a sketch in the beginning, as I fear it might restrict ideas from the staff members. So we usually start with a conversation. Each staff member must bring a model to me. By having it in front of us we make sure that our talk won’t go around in circles and will be more specific and productive. I sometimes cut some parts of the model or draw sketches from it.

What is the role of new computational tools in the design process of your projects? Do they participate in it or do they prescribe a new virtuality?

Computer tools are essential for us as we design to achieve new complexity with small elements. We used Rhino3D a lot when we were working on Starbucks project. It seems that you have reached a prolific level of production. How can you control this amount of work?

Although I keep traveling around the world, I continuously communicate with my staff members in person, making full use of the phone and the iPad. If you work in a hierarchy mode, the quality of your work would deteriorate, especially when you have to design many projects. I do not want to implement a pecking order.

How do you manage to keep a controlled scale in your new projects in Europe: Besançon, Granada, Dundee...?

My way of controlling does not change, wherever the project is, in Europe or in Asia. The number of times I visit the construction site is always the same. Discussion on the site is very important for me, and it is technically possible to do so at this time.

How do craftsmen participate in your projects? Do they improve it? Do your projects change through the building process?

I try to speak directly with craftsmen and manufacturers even during the design process, as I get lots of ideas from them. Interacting architecture cannot be realized without conversation and collaboration with such people.

Yusuhara museum is at the same time a structure, a bridge, a residence and it is traditional, contemporary, naturalistic, artificial... what a pleasure!

Yusuhara Museum was just a bridge in the beginning but in the course of designing we discovered other possibilities for its function. Contemporary architecture requires perhaps such variety, multiple performances.

P Matter

How is your collaboration with engineers? Has matter more presence in your thoughts than structure - as the physical support of space? Or is it, in your opinion, just a strategy to avoid considering material as cladding or decoration?

In the future, the 20th century will be defined as a poor age in architecture during which only steel and concrete were used for construction. Collaboration with engineers is crucial when seeing possibilities from structural materials. I would also like to get rid of the divergence between structure and cladding.

Could high technology be thick and wet, as traditionally?

Things will definitely go back to thick and wet.
Does the material have by itself a capacity of narrative? Is it responsible for the atmosphere? In that sense, do you feel close to the work of Peter Zumthor?

People from the 20th century forgot to communicate with materials. Materials can be narrative by themselves. In Zumthor’s architecture, material is certainly narrative, but the way it speaks sounds too well-behaved. I would like to do something to bring out unexpected aspects of materials.

Does your wood smell or do you aim perfection?

Aroma is very important for trees. It is said that Japanese people in the ancient times chose trees for construction not for their look but for the way they smell. I do not stick to perfection. I love trees with lots of burrs and uneven colors.

Is prefabrication an option to make a more rational division of the matter into particles?

Prefabrication can be helpful sometimes. If pre-fab industry used more wood, I would very much welcome that.

Does it allow you to go further on your research as an architect?

As for today I almost work like a director. If I was given the same responsibility for an architect in Tokyo or Barcelona?

For pavilion projects, I often work with students. It is part of their studies and they often build them themselves. It is a precious experience for them to do so, as they normally live attached to computers.

In Europe, and specifically in Spain, the housing bubble recently bursted and we fear for our future, especially architects. What would you say to an architecture student in this context?

After the burst of the so-called bubble economy in the 1980s, the 90s in Japan were called the lost decade, and I had no work at all in Tokyo. For 10 years, I visited provinces and spent a lot of time on low-cost projects with local craftsmen and professionals from whom I learned a lot in the end. I had the opportunity to learn how architecture could be harmonized with nature. Without this experience I would not have been able to achieve what I have done since then. When things go well people end up repeating their past and cannot break a new barrier. I am sure that the current condition of the Spanish economy will indicate a new direction to Spanish architecture.

How do you see education in Japanese architecture schools?

Very conservative and it has lots of problems. Conservative toward computational design, and not open to manufacturing as well. Architecture students in Japan can neither master computer skills nor work manually. At the University of Tokyo, where I teach, we started some new programs to deal with the situation, but there is still much room for improvement.

And finally, thank you again for your precious time, we keep repeating the last question in all our interviews: what would you do if you were the director of the school of architecture of Tokyo or Barcelona?

As for today I almost work like a director. If I was given the same responsibility for an architect in Barcelona, I would at first drink with students and discuss through the night what they want to learn.

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We would like to see your Granada Performing Arts Center built. Starting from a natural form, is your research on a complex geometry system also a structural research? This geometrical approach, is it maybe a potential future path for your work?

We have already gone through the stage of design development and submitted all the drawings. Our studies aimed to confirm that the geometry of the hexagon could work structurally as well. We will continue to work hard to connect new geometries, structure and material.

It makes sense to think that Alhambra Palace was also seeking for lightness, in this case through the contrast between the heavy fabric and the delicate lattices or even the thin and vibrant water surfaces. Is dematerialization an additional way for achieving lightness?

The Alhambra is one of my favorite architectures in the world, because it achieves an angelic lightness with its decoration, structure and light. I would like to see it happen also in our project for Granada.

Geometry is also a great mediator to link architecture and human beings. But I do not need common geometry any longer, and always seek for a new one.

Research

Do you believe that we will live a new revolution of materials in the 21st century? What should be the role of architects?

Architects should be the leaders of the new revolution.

Are your pavilions a laboratory for your architecture or are they independent research projects? Do they come from the same garden culture, from the tea ceremonies?

My pavilions are kind of laboratories, but also important art spaces. Japanese teahouses used to play such role in the past, but at some point its style was fixed and became boring. We try to rediscover an original teahouse and want it to be an inspiration for our architecture.

You usually name your buildings. You have a Plastic House -but also Steel, Bamboo, Mesh, Wood... Is not this need for communication a door to eclecticism?

Our vision is that even small size architecture can send a powerful message, as long as it is based on a strong theme.

Which role plays geometry in your architecture?

Geometry is also a great mediator to link architecture and human beings. But I do not need common geometry any longer, and always seek for a new one.

University

How important is teaching in your practice?

In the same way that I said that writing and practice were equally important, teaching also means a lot to me. Teaching is not at all a one-sided conduct. You are greatly inspired by young people.

Does it allow you to go further on your research as an architect?

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