



## Tokyo Jewel Box: A Surprising Modern Design Blends Ornament and Restraint

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Tadao Ando is one of Japan's most influential and celebrated architects. Known for his minimalist exposed-concrete structures, he has designed everything from small-scale houses and neighborhood schools to massive shopping complexes, residential units and museums. His 1976 Row House in Sumiyoshi, with its formidable raw concrete walls and stark geometric lines, was his first building to capture public attention, raising both his reputation and not a few eyebrows. In the 30 years since, his work has remained as distinctive as the man himself, a trained boxer with no formal education in architecture.

"Actually, I'm not so interested in using concrete per se—what I like is to express the space with concrete," Ando explains. "Within an empty concrete space, there's not just emptiness but a space that can be full of natural light and nature, sometimes with sensations of deepness and darkness, a variety of elements both physical and imagined."

Ando's Church of the Light in Osaka is a popular stop for tourists and architecture students, while projects like the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in Texas, the Palazzo Grassi renovation in Italy and the Langen Foundation museum in Germany stretch the boundaries of architecture and art. His recent 21\_21 Design Sight research center and exhibition space in Tokyo, created with fashion icon Issey Miyake, is part of a new collaborative trend, one that he continues in an unusual house in Tokyo for Takeo Obayashi, a businessman and an art collector.

"I hope that as guests enter the house they feel a sense of expectation and excitement," says Tadao Ando.

Housing has always been an important part of Ando's practice, with over 100 small and large residences worldwide. His childhood home, a typical nagaya, or Japanese row house, formed his first architectural impressions. "When I was 14 and our house was being rebuilt, a hole in the roof allowed a stream of light into a dark room," recalls Ando. "I thought this was really interesting and decided then that I wanted to learn about architecture. I started by helping the carpenter."

It was on the island of Naoshima, where Ando designed the Chichu Art Museum, that he overheard Obayashi—with whom the architect had already worked on numerous projects—talking about how he wanted to build a combination guesthouse and gallery to display his large collection of contemporary art. "Mr. Ando said to me, Takeo, I can do it for you," says Obayashi. "There was no way I could refuse him," he adds with a laugh. "I have been a friend of Mr. Ando's for a long time and collect his architectural drawings. I really wanted him to design my house."

For the name of the house, Obayashi chose Yu-un, a combination of two Japanese characters. "Yu means to enjoy or wonder, and un means a retreat or hermitage," explains Ando. "It has quite a deep meaning."

Situated on a quiet residential street of unremarkable homes, the private and public faces of Obayashi's house are clearly delineated not by Ando's usual concrete but by a wall of vertical laminated-glass panes. Though it has no visible doors, the wide entranceway beckons. Behind the wall is an enclosed corridor with doors at both ends. This is a critical space, an interlude between the inside and outside body of the house, like the pause between two heartbeats. "The entrance corridor is similar in concept to the *engawa*, or veranda, of a traditional Japanese home," says Ando. "It is like the divide between the inner world of the house and the outer world of nature. I realized that Japan is the only place where this link between exterior and interior spaces was developed into an important architectural feature."

Along the skylighted corridor, rhythmic, almost hypnotic, shadows form geometric patterns. "I hope that as guests enter the house they feel a sense of expectation and excitement," says Ando. "I heard from Issey Miyake that many people enjoy 21\_21 Design Sight because walking through it is like a constant discovery. What is behind the door? What is around that corner?"

The entrances open onto the two sections of the house. One door leads to the living quarters, and the other leads to a stairwell that descends to the art gallery. In order to fully separate the private and public spaces, the two do not cross. "We studied many options and finally decided to employ an N shape for the interior as a whole," says Ando. "This would create some open spaces and achieve a sufficient variety or diversity within the interior."

At the center of the N is a dramatic subterranean courtyard exposed to the elements, a signature Ando design. His houses favor centrally placed courtyards that pierce dark interiors with sculptural light. As the natural light changes throughout the day, night and seasons, the interior is painted with moving drama. "Nature is a crucial element of my residential designs," he says. "It's my intention to always introduce nature to its fullest extent." Ando's courtyards are often purposely placed in a way that requires inhabitants to walk through them between the main arteries of the house. Despite the inconvenience, residents say they enjoy the rain and snow falling within their home and don't mind carrying an umbrella or even getting wet.

Yu-un's courtyard, however, is different from any Ando has designed before, and it created challenges demanding the delicacy of a diplomat. "We had some struggles with so many designers and artists on board," says Ando. "We had many discussions with them, and it took time to find good solutions without compromising my design."

Obayashi had in mind a house that would be a collaborative effort between artists and architect, and he commissioned works by several talents, including Danish-born light artist Olafur Eliasson, Japanese designer Tokujin Yoshioka and Japanese lighting architect Shozo Toyohisa, who has designed lighting for exhibitions at MoMA in New York. "When Eliasson came up with the idea of working with the courtyard using ceramic tiles, I really liked it," says Obayashi, who was hesitant to propose the idea to Ando. "Many architects want minimal change within their design. They want to speak with their own language. In Mr. Ando's case, his language is glass, steel frames and concrete."

With over 6,800 platinum-glazed ceramic tiles attached to the concrete walls of the courtyard, Eliasson created an astonishing spectacle. "Small changes in light make the tiles appear different, and it changes the light in the interior as well," says Eliasson. "You really get the feeling of a temporal or ephemeral component to the house and the constitution of its space."

"Olaf's work has a very strong impact," says Ando. "You don't ever see anything like this in my work. In the beginning I thought the tiles were too drastic technically and aesthetically. They arrived late. We didn't know if they could be affixed properly. It's difficult to adhere things to the surface," he admits. "Of course, I work with a lot of artists. In Los Angeles, I'm making a guesthouse and exhibition space sort of like Yu-un, and we're doing things with Damien Hirst and other people with installations on the surfaces. So it may become common with this kind of project where one installs treatments on certain surfaces."

Contrasting with both concrete and platinum tiles are the cedar, *washi* paper and tatami of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony room. Tucked between two art galleries at the base of the courtyard, the space was based on Konnichian, an ancient tea room at the Urasenke School of Tea in Kyoto. As a place for meditative ritual, a tea room is normally located in a tranquil section of a house or as a separate small structure set within a garden on the property. In Yu-un it is at the center of activity, the symbolic heart of the house. "We had a lot of discussion about where to place the tea room," says Ando. "But of course this is a new era, isn't it? We wanted to try a new style." Placed within the contemporary theme of the house, the room confers a sense of traditional elegance.

Continuing this meditative theme is the courtyard with bare concrete walls on the second floor. "This is really a *mu* [nothing] or *yohaku* [blank] space," says Ando, "a kind of imaginary space that allows the owner or guest to quietly contemplate their life on a spiritual level. When I first started building this kind of space, I realized what a special culture we have in Japan, because my Japanese clients were open to the concept and grew to enjoy it. I learned later when I designed the Invisible House in Treviso, Italy, and a house in Chicago that my foreign clients reacted positively as well." He adds, "I've done a lot of thinking about what it means to live spiritually. I'm interested in how space can make deep, lasting impressions on the mind—how it clings to the psyche. If the experience of being in my architecture enables one to grow within oneself, then I am happy."

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