

Tadao Ando and the Abstraction of the Concrete

At the age of 17, Tadao Ando (b. 1940) decided on his career path: he would follow in the footsteps of his twin brother, and become a professional boxer. Within a year he was fighting in matches in Japan and Thailand. In Thailand he became fascinated with Buddhist architecture. The following year, back in Japan, he visited temples, shrines, and teahouses in Kyoto and Nara, near his home town of Osaka. He had already bought, second-hand, a book of architectural drawings by Le Corbusier and traced them over and over. Boxing, it turned out, was not his calling.

But Ando had no way to train formally as an architect. He had been a mediocre student: schools were closed to him now. Temperamentally, he was unsuited to the role of apprentice: he still had too much “fight” in him, emotionally and intellectually, and he tended to get fired. So he taught himself, partly by reading intensively, partly by traveling extensively in Europe, America, and Africa during the 1960s. In 1969 he established Tadao Ando Architect & Associates in Osaka. Since then he has received most of architecture’s top honors, such as the Pritzker Architecture Prize (1995).

As an architect, Ando still draws on his boxing experience. “My experiences as a boxer,” he says, “the intensity of leaping into the ring, the loneliness of having to fight utterly by oneself, relying on no one, became my creative touchstone.” Furthermore, it is tempting to think of Ando’s architecture as based on principles of dualistic conflict or opposition: light vs. dark, form vs. chaos, man vs. nature.

However, Ando has ultimately rejected all one-sided conceptual victories or defeats. Rather, his architectural ethos embraces something more like the paradoxes (and unity of opposites) in Zen Buddhism. Concrete is his ever-present medium; yet notionally, his concrete walls may “disappear,” revealing only the space they shape. Similarly, he says that “such things as light and wind only have meaning when they are introduced inside a house in a form cut off from the outside world.” One dramatic instance is the Church of the Light (Osaka, 1989). He has also paid great attention to water, as with the Water Temple (Awajishima, 1991). And as with the Water Temple, his structures have sometimes been built into the terrain: the Benesse House Annex and the Chichu Art Museum (Naoshima, 1995 and 2004) are two other examples.

Ando’s architecture has been called “topographical” for its propensity to conceive of a building, its landscaping, and their environment as an integral whole. He considers architecture and nature to be in a vital, reciprocal relationship. In the same way, he prefers not to think in terms of “East vs. West.” He surely owes much to Zen; but just as surely he has debts to Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn, and