

CALM BEAUTY

About the architecture of Tadao Ando

PUBLISHED IN

Arquitectos 134. Madrid, 1994

La Idea Construida. Ed. COAM. Madrid, 1996

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Tadao Ando's architecture has a special flavor. It would seem that a calm light, tempered by a silent architect capable of stopping the sun, is what illuminates the architectures of this master who is still capable of awakening our astonishment.

Serenity, understood as an attribute of classical beauty, reaches a very special degree in the spaces created by the Japanese architect. The emotion, the commotion produced by the enjoyment of architectural beauty, almost always leads us to a mode of suspension of time. In Tadao Ando's architecture, rather than suspension, we should speak of the stopping of time. And rather than emotion, then we should speak of ataraxia: that absolute stillness of the soul which, according to the Epicureans, is the quality of the gods and the ideal of the wise. A calm Beauty. The calm Beauty of Tadao Ando's architecture.

DAZZLING RETURN

In Madrid, twelve springs ago, the first European exhibition of Tadao Ando took place. And his first conference in the Western world. The bet made then seems to have been more than won, as he has returned with an impressive exhibition in the arcades of the Nuevos Ministerios. He who came as an unknown twelve years ago, is today a master recognized throughout the world, having built in this time a remarkable number of works, which have been widely disseminated. There are countless books and publications on his work, including the two splendid monographs dedicated to him by the publishing house El Croquis of Madrid. Tadao Ando's tenacity in the dissemination of his works is an unmistakable sign of his deep conviction about the validity of his architecture. And he is enormously effective at it. The recent exhibition in Madrid, coming from the Parisian Pompidou, corrected and enlarged, has been very complete. Although not as delightful as that small one that was made in the MEAC, then in the University City of Madrid. The latter has been dazzling, and clearly expresses both the very high quality of its architecture and its enormous capacity for work.

SPOILED BY FAME

Fame has cast its nets for him, or he has thrown himself into its arms. This condition of celebrity, of being pampered by Fame, has led him to build a large number of works in Japan. Still small in size, but all of the highest quality. Its culmination was the construction of the applauded pavilion of his country at the Expo in Seville. But it was still an ephemeral architecture, although already in Europe, and made by and for Japanese.

He has finally built his first project in Europe, by and for Europeans. He has put his "spade in Flanders": the Conference Center for VITRA in Weil am Rhein. And he is about to finish a building for Benetton in Treviso. A Japanese building in Germany for Germans. And in Italy for Italians. Never seen before. Prestige in spades.

And the drunkenness that comes with fame will lead him to build more and bigger works all over the world. And this could destroy him as it has already happened with so many prestigious names that we will not mention here. From Tadao Ando's serenity and control it can be expected that he will be able to stop. That, just as Joshua stopped the sun, the Japanese will be able to stop Fame. To resist it as the great creators of the world have always done.

MASTER OF PROPORTION

A master of proportions, impregnated with an oriental aroma, he manages to make his works, which are small in size, seem large. As did the Western masters, Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, whom he implicitly quotes so often.

Meticulous and perfectionist, rather than recreating himself in the prolific combination of a multitude of materials, as almost everyone does today, he focuses on proportions. And to accentuate this position he almost always uses one and the same material: exposed concrete. But with a perfection that would be unthinkable in our latitudes. His trademark.

This architecture, so stripped down, almost ascetic, can be difficult to understand for those who, imbued with the "horror vacui", fill their works with "blows of effect". Of course, with so many blows, the works are crushed. Or for those who have their houses as homothecia of overflowing museums. But it would be the most appropriate architecture for a future society that understands the deep enjoyment that provides sobriety.

MAGICIAN OF LIGHT

And, of course, Tadao Ando is a master of light. It seems that the light that bathes, almost soaking them, the exposed concrete walls of his works, is a different light than the one used by other architects. It slides down them with such morosity that it seems to have the golden consistency of honey. Its walls, so empty, are adorned with the naked beauty of light. The light roughness with which he wisely endows his concretes, seems to be able to stop the sunlight on them. More than slipping, one would say that the light walks through them as in a procession, in an unhurried ceremony.

And this calm light, without fuss, makes his concretes appear strongly expressive, as opposed to the coldness that the material shows on other occasions. More than tensing the spaces with light (as other architects try to do), one could say that he tenses with light the planes with which he shapes those spaces. In his architectures, light seems to want to show its corpuscular, material character. We can touch it in them. That light that rises with the sun every morning, it seems that in a special way for this architect of the rising sun.

UNIVERSAL ARCHITECT

In the catalog of that now distant Madrid exhibition, I dared to say that I was betting on Tadao Ando with the conviction that he would become a universal master. It seems that

these words are being more than fulfilled. I hope that in a few years we can repeat the situation in the light of a series of new works, some in Spain? that confirm the universality of this stupendous master of the architecture of light. Master of calm beauty.

P.S. The synthesis of this text served as an introduction to the lecture that Tadao Ando gave at the CEU Arquitectura in Madrid on April 14, 1994, on the occasion of the inauguration of his exhibition in the Arquerías de los Nuevos Ministerios. There he made reference to three photographs, which are accompanied here, of Tadao Ando's first trip to Spain in 1982.

In the first one, the Japanese master is seen ready to eat a succulent paella of which he praised the PROPORTION of its ingredients. It served as an image of the PROPORTION he has mastered.

The second shows Tadao Ando in El Escorial, in the courtyard of the Kings, after having obsessively photographed inside the temple, the spots of LIGHT from the sun on the stone. It served as an image of the LIGHT that he controls.

The third shows the architect, still unknown, at the opening of his first European exhibition in Madrid in 1982. It served as a testimony of the beginning of his brilliant career.