



Foto: Benedikt Kraft

The future of architecture is primitive

Sou Fujimoto Architects, Tokio/JP

Experts are at the feet of architect Sou Fujimoto. Why is it that one can read almost exclusively gushing reports of his work? Perhaps it is down to our desire to be able to start everything all over again, even architecture.

In Europe, it seems as though the debates on architecture are over. Whereas they could take on a thoroughly ideological orientation in the 20th century and created whole schools and produced generations of pupils with a maximum influence on the shape and design of architecture and urban development, the present period is not in the mood for it. The still relatively young 21st century is characterised by the pursuit of security in past (golden) history and on the other hand it is characterised by a pragmatism that looks on the debate around the finite nature of resources and the long overdue change in global energy use with indifference. Architecture in the 21st century is set to be sustainable and energy efficient and, in spite of everything, comfortable and with a "healthy living" atmosphere. This last claim sounds a

little as though all energetic, constructive and material-specific fine-tuning of new and old constructions cannot be that healthy when taken individually. In any case it now seems that architecture is becoming a highly complex affair linking all production areas, based on the future and of interest to the whole of society and even across the world.

Small wonder, then, that views tired of the fully certified and once again unique prize-winning construction process are wandering to other regions of the planet seeking help. This happens nowadays without much effort in a world that is getting smaller and somehow more and more personal (though on a very theoretical level) through social and cultural digital networks. And, as always, whenever bureaucratic standardised over-regulation threatens to ban a free view, those

protagonists come into focus who do something other than wasting time by flinging themselves into standard discourse. Their thought and their manner of proceeding are irrational per se and seem to those plagued by standards to be against any rules. However, in any case they are very liberating.

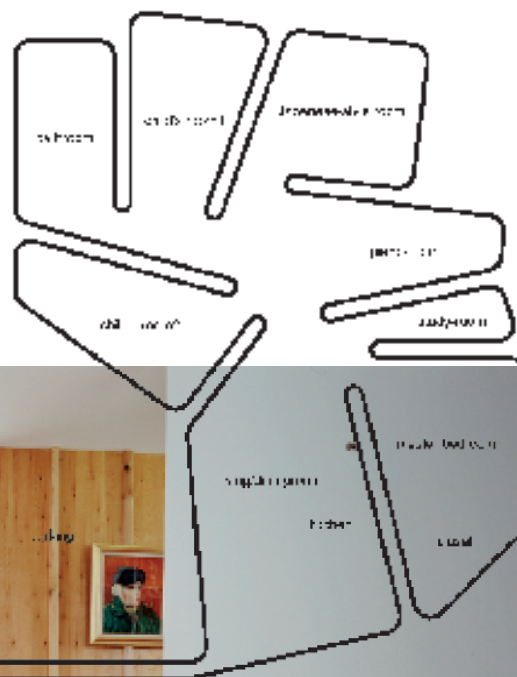
Desire for complex simplicity

The fact that we long for a way out of our uncomfortable and confusing situation, for simplicity, and for the global formula for good construction that brings happiness is clear. The fact that we also regularly look to Japan is also not surprising as this island, with its old, extremely elaborate cultural tradition that still penetrates all areas of life, is paradigmatic for an aesthetic of the imperfect (wabi-sabi), which paradoxically corre

Sou Fujimoto

Born in 1971 in Hokkaido, Japan. From 1990 to 1994 he studied architecture at the University of Tokyo. He first travelled to Europe in 1993. From 1994 to 1995 he worked in various architectural offices in Hokkaido. In 1995 he travelled to Europe (incl. Turkey) for a second time. Since 1996, Sou Fujimoto has lived in Tokyo. In 2000, he founded the office Sou Fujimoto Architects there. Numerous teaching posts in Japan, individual exhibitions there (most recently at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art) and in Europe (here in 2012 in the Kunsthalle Bielefeld). Participation and award at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2010 and 2012. Publications; in particular "Primitive Future", 2008, at INAX, Tokyo).

www.sou-fujimoto.net



House T, Gunma/JP (2005), with Groundplan

Photo: David Anso



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Children's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Hokkaido/JP (2006)

sponds to the Western notion of beauty. Finally, the architect, whom the managers of the Serpentine Gallery, London, were able to win over this year for their temporary exhibition project, comes into play here: the "multi award-winning Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto". Less than "multi" clearly does not work. One would think. Yet the gallery owners in London continue: "Generally recognised as one of the most important architects in the world", Fujimoto, born in Tokyo in 1971, is said to be the "leading light" in a very exciting generation of artists "who are rethinking our relationship with the built environment".

Indeed, the nomination of Sou Fujimoto for the pavilion project 2013 in Kensington Garden is a kind of earthly ascension of the Japanese architect into the pantheon of architecture. Before him, architects such as Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, Oscar Niemeyer, Peter Zumthor or SANAA were asked to do the draft, all heavyweights in the international construction scene of an established vanguard. And now the 41-year-old with a thoroughly straightforward but very personal piece. But what makes the ever obliging, generally very friendly and yet very self-confident architect perhaps a future icon of the international construction class? Probably



Photo: Daisi Aino

Group home for elderly with dementia, Noboribetsu, Hokkaido/JP (2006)

the irrationality, the construction seemingly contrary to all rules, his thoughts on standards and their reform, which Fujimoto is broadcasting around the world in books, journal articles and interviews. And most certainly our desire for complex simplicity which had recently found its anchor point with the architect duo and Pritzker prize winners Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA).

Heroes

The office of Sou Fujimoto in Tokyo still had 12 workers two years ago; nowadays this is the number of foreigners in the team. 29 mostly young architects work on the now narrow ground floor of a rundown commercial building in central Tokyo. And the number is set to increase; the job advertisement on the website has been online for some time now. You can see few computers and if there are any, they are mostly mobile devices. The tables bear a complex construct made from paper and polystyrene models. Drawings and sheets with soft sketches make the white working landscape even whiter. Fujimoto? You sometimes see him in the middle of it, but most of the time you find out that the architect is travelling somewhere. Where? To you in Europe! Or somewhere else.



Photo: Iwan Baan

House H, Tokio/JP (2008)



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House N, Oita/JP (2008), Section



Photo: Iwan Baan

House N, Oita/JP (2008)

In Europe, where else, when he is not in Japan. He was drawn here for long periods in the first few years of becoming an architect. However, he mostly built in Japan, especially flats which, as it would seem to me, were his first attempts at rethinking architecture in principle. His heroes in architecture are Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, then Mies van der Rohe and of course Le Corbusier. He speaks of them and their architecture with high esteem and deep respect, but says it is necessary to think further for today's applications. And before the question is even asked: his hero of the present, who has impressed and inspired the architect of the 21st century through to today and most emphatically, is a woman. Kazuyo Sejima, founding partner of SANAA. But even here, Sou Fujimoto notes the need to divest himself of her influence as he finds her style too clear, too organised. He interprets SANAA's architecture as consistent modernism; in contrast he prefers a more complex architecture, the basis of which he set out in his theoretical paper "Primitive Future" in 2008.

Primitive future

In the piece comprising ten chapters, Sou Fujimoto leads architecture back to point zero. In the beginning was the cave. He then



Tokio Apartment, Tokio/JP (2010)



Tokio Apartment, Tokio/JP (2010)

Photo: Iwan Baan



Photo: Benedikt Kraft

Final Wooden House. Replika, Bielefeld/DE (2008/2012)

investigates for what structures notation systems without line systems can potentially develop using a Bach aria (BW 988). He looks to see how connective things and disjunctive things work between natural things; he looks at a house that is a city – and vice versa. Then he uses a tree metaphor, entering into verbal nebulous matters, examining the helix as an exclusive and an inclusive thing, considering the garden as the origin of all architecture, looking for what must have been there before there were buildings; because a place to live is not necessarily architecture. He concludes with a consideration of material and space, which clearly springs from his scientific curiosity and which combines physical legalities with the issue of an (architectural) origin.

From his considerations of what architecture actually is, he develops the notion of resolving physical space. Indoors and outdoors, traditionally understood as opposites, whose dichotomy is often processed via visual axes, zoning or varying standards, is resolved and reconciled as it were for Sou Fujimoto as a whole (the architecture, the build-up place). In the draft, the exterior shells become the remains of a wall or ruins, behind which the actual unfolds, as it were, and develops inwards. The closing roof is a huge horizontal window that draws the sky

down to the ground floor. There are whirling vortices, almost unending spiral rooms which break through and irritate the established order and prompt exploration at every point. All of this bears witness to the architect's efforts to shatter classic spatial ideas (e.g. indoor/outdoor) and the creation of hierarchy. Then, to eliminate things that separate materially (walls, ceilings, etc.) as much as possible so that transparency, permeability and stubbornness become the first requirements for which architecture can become real.

The soft in (hard) architecture

In 2000, he founded Sou Fujimoto Architects in Tokyo. In the same year, just 29 years old, he took part in an important architecture competition in Japan. An unknown against greats like Kisho Kurokawa, Jun Aoki or Manabu Chiba. Toyo Ito, one of the spiritual mentors and friend of Fujimoto remembers when he witnessed the young architect, quiet and self-confident, as chairman of the jury in the last round of the competition. He had begun his explanations of the draft with the following sentence: "I wish to make soft architecture." He later explained that it is impossible to interpret a piece of architecture as an all-encompassing, static order; rather each order from the self-evident fuzziness



Photo: Iwan Baan

Musashino Art University Museum and Library, Tokio/JP (2010)

of reality, indeed from chaos must submit to a whole. The fact that Fujimoto had already pre-formulated his thoughts on the primitive in the architecture of the future by then is revealed today in retrospect. His proposal for the Aomori Museum of Art included irregularly composed exhibition rooms under pent roofs which are at various angles to each other without developing axes or fitting into a grid. Clearly derived from this is a larger project from 2006, the rehabilitation centre for mentally ill children in Hokkaido. Here numerous building cubes were placed next to each other in a seemingly irregular manner so that they provide children with a variety of places as a network of rooms inside. This principle of general fuzziness that Fujimoto was able to carry to extremes in some of his current residential buildings and thus frequently violated applicable draft rules has been re-implemented by Fujimoto in every draft of each project.

Architecture as a forest

Already in "Primitive Future," Sou Fujimoto speaks of the "treelike place," meaning a house. In a large exhibition in Bielefeld in 2012, he deepened this idea of city or house=tree or forest both literally and curatorially. His architecture model presented on stilts was the forest itself in which a large



Photo: Iwan Baan

House NA, Tokyo/JP (2010)

variety of things (like houses in a city with everything else) are in reciprocal relationships with each other: "If we manage to create an architecture in the form of a forest, it will exceed previous architecture and previous cities in complexity and variety. [...] The architecture presented here as a forest is the nature of the future, the architecture of the future. Based on the real forest, it sheds light on the architecture of the future." According to Sou Fujimoto, architecture, like a tree, should develop social complexity. An example of this is the "Final Wooden House" project that was built as a copy in the sculpture park of the Kunsthalle, a construction by Philip Johnson. Here, everything is interwoven organically, material, furniture, façade, applications. And the main feature is how the forest as an open system allows for more applications than it has rooms, the wood sculpture is open for any new view which discovers a new benefit. Like the forest it shows us horizontal and vertical layers (levels), provides protection and endless space for fantasy and diversified residence.

"Creative misconstruction" as a design strategy

At the beginning of each design, there are sketches and the office team's creative potential. Thus the initial ideas are discussed in the



Photo: Iwan Baan

House OM, Oita/JP (2010)

team and concretised using sketches. After this come volume models with which viewpoints, scale and transparency are checked. Once the idea and nucleus of the project have been worked out and laid out, the work is then reprocessed on the computer, but interrupted by changes and the effort to go off the beaten design track and to discover something that is actually new.

The architect sees the graphic work as something very physically direct, as something almost palpable. He compares the conversion of interior images with a preferably unbroken visualisation of thoughts, i.e. the concretisation of the intangible. The team discussions emerging from the images are very important to him in this respect because his colleagues have sometimes discovered something completely different in the images from what he has discovered himself. Sou Fujimoto calls this "creative misconstruction", which has sometimes even led to an unexpected turn of the project. In the design process, the architect views himself as a moderator, as *primus inter pares*. Not a genius whose great accomplishment in the end only needs to be set out in plans and models, creating the new thing in architecture, but first and foremost a community of intelligent minds.

Increasingly, the office is working together international with partners as well; most recently with the Danish office Adept. With them it won the competition for the design of a new library on the Dalarna University campus in Sweden and it is also collaborating with it for the Deichmanske Library competition 2010 in Oslo.

Building owners

In the meantime, Sou Fujimoto can take his pick of orders for residential buildings; the demand for a Fujimoto is increasing rapidly (a reason why the man, who is also an enthusiastic teacher, can hardly be reached in person). Building owners are always included in the design, in the planning from the beginning, though it can happen that they get something completely different at the end from what they had originally thought. For some, this is a self-evident game in the chaos of Tokyo where apparently anyone can play as they wish. For most, they are by now aware that their building which is visited and photographed daily is something different from classical Japanese architecture which is measured by the standard of the tatami mat.

However, they are also aware that their building is nevertheless in the tradition of



Photo: Iwan Baan

House OM, Oita/JP (2010)



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Beton Hala Waterfront Centre, Belgrad/RS (Competition 2011, realization?)

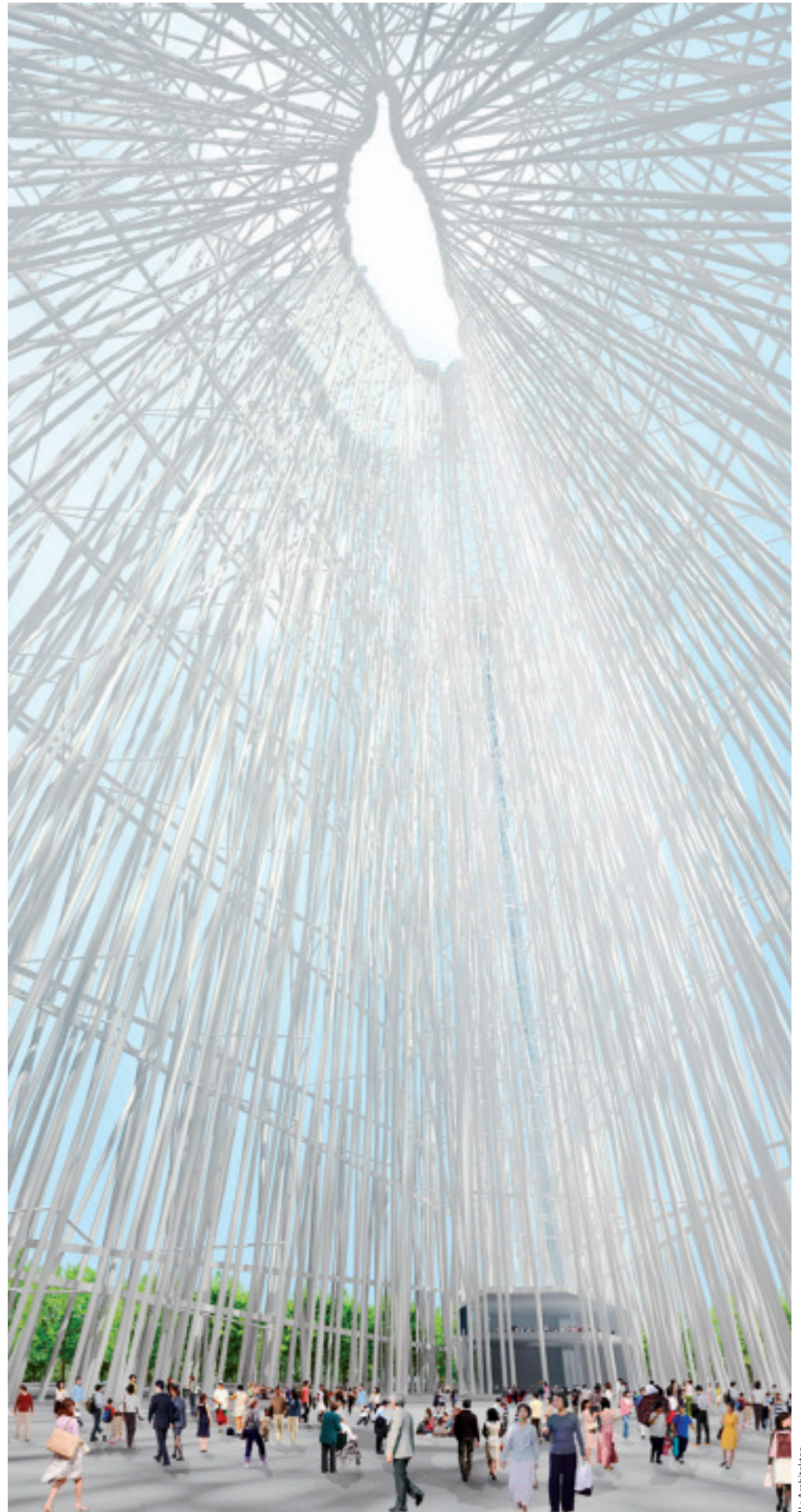


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Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London/UK (2013)

updated Japanese conventions which work with the play of openness and retreat, with paper-thin layers and the joining of volumes, which, for Fujimoto, does not comply with purely function requirements but also results from the flow of movement in the entire room.

Currently, Sou Fujimoto Architects has moved to transfer its ideas of space and spatial essence into constructed things across the world. We will have to wait patiently for a few more years until we can recognise whether what Sou Fujimoto now thinks in his building sketches also works on a larger scale. And whether his wish to renew architecture – whether as a tree or a forest, as a cloud or very primitively as a nest or cave – can be transferred into the implementation planning of projects such as Taiwan Tower or the Beton Hala Waterfront Centre in Belgrade. What he has so far achieved as exquisite contributions to the current architecture debate should be understood as preparation for what he and his team are yet to think up for us and for everyone. “Living in a house is like living in a tree”. Let’s see what that might turn out to be. *Benedikt Kraft, editor-DBZ*



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Taiwan Tower, Taichung/RC (Competition 2011, realization?)