

Satoshi Okada Architects

Satoshi Okada



For a start perhaps, could you introduce yourself?

I am not too sure how I should introduce myself.

(laughs)

I'm sure you have done some research about me, perhaps you can have a look at my website.¹

You established your own practice back in 1995, what inspired you to open your own practice?

It's a rather long story. My father used to be an architect, and he worked with the public authority and later began working independently. My father frequently took me to construction sites, mostly constructions involving traditional Japanese architecture, rather than modern Japanese architecture. My interests in architecture mostly stemmed from my father.

I was lucky enough to experience traditional Japanese architecture forty years ago. The buildings were traditional and beautiful, yet technologically advanced at the same time. I grew up in the Kansai area, in the western part of Japan. As you know, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, used to be the central hub of Japan before the Meiji era.²

The Meiji era was a big turning point for the modernisation of Japan. The word 'architecture' had an important meaning at the beginning of the Meiji era. Before, we did not have architects, only carpenters then would design. The samurai were a part of these people as well. In the western part of Japan, the craftsmen employed techniques that were refined and of high quality. I believe that these techniques were passed down and spread out throughout the western part of Japan, though we don't see much of it in the eastern regions of Japan.

Forty years ago, construction techniques were already very advanced, especially the use of timber in buildings. I often use traditional equipment that is used to dig out holes for timber construction. I was taught carpentry skills such as carving,

cutting, and anything related to architecture craftsmanship. At that time, I did not intend to become an architect, and I was just messing around playing with the tools. After opening my own practice, I realised that these lessons were very precious to me. I learned so many things beforehand. I smelled, touched, and worked with all kinds of materials. Based on what I've learned, I am able to teach others about the highest quality of timber and materials that are suitable for construction. When I observe works of poor craftsmanship, I would not hesitate to correct that person's technique.

As you can see, there are some wonderful buildings in Kyoto that were built before the Edo period.³ They possess intricate details in small parts of the building that continue to fascinate me until today. The most beautiful buildings here in Japan exhibit the most delicate of details.

Many times, Japanese publishers, editors, and critics would ask me about my ideas and what my goals are in architecture rather than the concept. My approach is to seek the beauty in architecture. Sometimes you would find the topic of concept to be more respected in the contemporary architectural education. I've had the opportunity to undergo this kind of education in Columbia University, where I studied architectural design and history. In architectural education here in Japan, we are often asked about what our idea is, and what are the key points to our design. These kinds of fundamental questions are undoubtedly important, but in practise, concept is concept, and the output quite often differs from ideas. As every client is different, each project has its own requirements, for example, finance, size and scale of the project, how many people are

¹ Have a look at Satoshi Okada's website here: www.okada-archi.com/

"Founder and director. Born in Hyogo, 1962, Satoshi Okada graduated at Waseda University, Tokyo and at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University, New York, in 1989; later on he conducted research as a visiting scholar under Kenneth Frampton's mentorship."

² Meiji Era was between October 23, 1868 to July 30, 1912

³ Edo Period was between 1603 and 1867

working on site, the conditions vary in each case. We could certainly come up with a concept to present to the client, and explain to them the building design because it is our goal to charm our clients with our concepts and ideas. But I believe that concept is concept, and building is building. They are two totally different elements. I'm a professor at Chiba University and I'm always lecturing about these two points. Ideas and concepts are very important but they are not the final outcome of your design. In practice, we have to pursue any form of beauty and aesthetics. The definition of beauty is a difficult topic to discuss, even amongst Japanese architects.

If you refer to my short essay, '*Intensity of Architecture*'⁴, it represents the core idea of my practice. Whenever I give lectures to my students, I always start with a story or question such as "Have you ever experienced goosebumps?" Last year I started off a lecture in Frankfurt, Germany with that question. Goosebumps in German is called '*die Gänsehaut*', which is the direct translation of geese skin, and in Japanese we say *torihada*.⁵ *Tori* is chicken, and *hada* is skin. These terms are often used to explain the experiences of emotions such as fear, shock, anxiety, being mesmerised, or even inspired. Of course, this is just a metaphor but everyone in the audience replied that they have experienced goosebumps before. Twenty years ago, I realised that this goosebump phenomenon is very interesting to us architects, and artists. It happens to everyone from different backgrounds, nationalities, and languages. It happens when there is an attraction, a momentum towards an object of interest. We tend to wonder why we have this sensation on our skin but as we are thinking about it, it disappears. It is very much like momentum. I find these phenomena related to the human body, contact, and senses to objects in general to be rather fascinating. Of course, buildings are one of the objects that we experience as well. My goal as an architect is to design a beautiful building that will make as many people as possible experience goosebumps. This is a simple goal that I believe to be my life long theme as a practising architect.

When it comes to fashion, I'm rather dubious of it because it is only temporary. I think that we should pursue a universality in beauty. A beautiful thing is something hard to define. During the 18th century in Germany, philosopher and leader, Immanuel Kant, sought to deduce what beauty means in the human senses. He was concerned about how an aesthetic judgement is possible and if there were any transcendental guarantees on the validity of such a judgement. Even for him, it was a really difficult subject to clarify.⁶

Naturally even today, the subject of beauty still remains an enigma to humans because our senses can't be defined with any technology. Technology comes from logos. I believe that it has become somewhat of an eternal struggle in human beings, but we must seek the truth. It is indeed a lifelong pursuit, our *raison d'être* as artists, architects, and practitioners. You might be asking the same question to six or seven other Japanese architects, and they will always talk about the building, the environment, and society. I'm not certain as to what kind of architectural ideas and philosophies are being extolled by the contemporaries in Japan these days, but most of them have the tendency to think about the environment, society, or community and their relationships with the building. They are constantly talking about whether the building is okay, or if they possess a certain activator for the community inside. But once you take a closer look into the building itself, you'll find that many aspects of the design are either lacking or simply inferior—the detailing, the poor realisation of space, and other important elements. It is vital to compose a building at the utmost highest of levels, a building befitting that of a national treasure. Once built, a well-made building can be succeeded from generation to generation, even a

⁴ Okada, Satoshi, *Intensity of Architecture*, Tokyo, PAOS, 2015

⁵ The kanji of this term is, '鳥肌'

⁶ To read more, do delve into Critique into Judgement (1790), Kant's 'third critique' following other tomes such as Critique of Pure Reason (1781) and Critique of Practical Reason (1788). The first half of the book digs into aesthetic judgements through four methods: The agreeable, the beautiful, the sublime and the good.

small building has the potential to stand strong for over 100 years old. Thus, we must carefully consider the quality of the design and how they are related to sustainability, as well as culture. In this sense, I'm very critical towards the younger contemporary Japanese architects because the work that they produce are often pop-up-like, commercially driven, fashionable, too taken by current trends. Most of these architects are too concerned with keeping up with current trends and being famous rather than producing a good building.

At times I ask these architects what their main purpose in life is, and their reply will always be to become a famous architect. As an architect myself, I don't think that is a good mindset that one should carry. I always tell myself that I have to be modest with my clients, to society, and to the environment. Managing myself to be a modest person is my priority in life. This is my basic philosophy and principle in life, not only as an architect, but also as a human being.

I think this philosophy is reflected in your practice and the architecture that you are doing.

That's my way of thinking. I don't want to be arrogant even if I happen to be a famous architect one day.

Just like almost everyone outside of Japan, I think my interest towards contemporary Japanese architecture might be the result of a misconception. You see several famous buildings defining what the Japanese aesthetic is, when in reality, it isn't. With the advent of modern technology, to a certain degree, the projects famous on the internet become the only well-known buildings to the rest of the world. As a result, these architects are thrust into the spotlight first.

Yes, that's a good point. For example, the Japanese architect, Kenzo Tange, was really different from the younger generation of architects. First of all, society is a lot different in the modern era. After World War II, Japan was defeated by The United States of America. For ten to fifteen years after the defeat, Japan was in a state of chaos. In the sixties to seventies, Japan

experienced a boom in the economy. It was during this period, Arata Isozaki and his contemporaries had the opportunity to build wonderful pieces of architecture. Social growth in Tokyo started gradually improving since then. During the late eighties to early nineties, we experienced another period of economic growth. Buildings were following the current trends and fashion of that time. Looking back, the buildings were garbage, but they were packed with ideas. From a design point of view, I fail to see its value and I feel that the initial idea and concept behind the building was lost during development.

But you see, these disputes on the validity of traditional and modern forms is not really a current issue. I used to be a historian for ten years, and I wrote a dissertation on Italian architecture from the 17th and 18th century. During the 18th century in Italy, the dispute between the old and new was rather compelling. For my PhD dissertation,⁷ my core research subject was on Giovanni Battista Piranesi. He was a very interesting architect, designer and copper engraver who was also passionate about ancient Roman antiquity. Because of the poor Italian economy, Giovanni was unable to find a placement in an architecture practice. Dubbing himself '*architetto Valenciano*', which means Valencian architect, he attempted to design wonderful buildings by himself.

⁷Satoshi Okada. *A study of architect activities by Giovanni Battista Piranesi: A debate over plans to extend the inner sanctuaries of Laterano Cathedral*. 1993. Waseda University [originally in Japanese]



Architectural models, Office of Satoshi Okada, 2019

From a historical point of view, I can say that this dispute is not an issue here as a contemporary architect. Old versus new is no longer a contentious topic for us anymore. Previously, I mentioned Immanuel Kant's pursuit of the meaning of beauty, and every day I find myself seeking the truth behind this beauty.

This is why I find myself doing considerably well compared to others at times, my colleagues, my contemporaries, as they age, they find themselves becoming bored of designing. I myself try to retain this youthful mindset of wanting to seek out more knowledge.

With regards to the various talks, symposiums, and workshops that you've held in Europe, do you feel that regional architecture in Asia is not on par with what's happening in Europe?

I'm absolutely interested in regional architecture around the world. But it is almost impossible to travel considering my busy schedule here in Tokyo. When I'm invited to teach, give a talk, or attend a conference, I find that I have little time to look around all the beautiful sites in each location, town, region, and country I visit. Unfortunately I'm not often invited by Asian countries except for Hong Kong, Beijing, and also South Korea.

The American architect, Louis Kahn was greatly influenced by the Italian townscapes and buildings despite them being classical buildings. But as I mentioned earlier, the essence of beauty is perpetual from the ancient times to the present day.

Oftentimes, when you want to study modern buildings, you tend to refer to the projects of Swiss-French architect, Le Corbusier, or German architect, Mies van de Rohe. But if you look at classical buildings of ancient Rome or ancient Greece, or any random location in Europe or any Asian countries, you will find something beautiful in each town. When you have acquired the insight or an eye for something beautiful, this is indeed possible.

In order to appreciate or judge the beauty of an object, proportion is the key to the human eyes. Proportion is quite

important when it comes to first impressions, and this is especially true in the architectural way of thinking. Simple architecture with minimal design must possess a good sense of proportion because we cannot simply add objects like ornaments to make it beautiful. My way of designing is to always reduce and eliminate things to the core rather than adding things.

It's similar to sculpting—there are two approaches to performing it. One is by using clay and placing a wet cloth which allows you to resume work the next day, taking out and adding the clay to adjust. The other type of sculpting involves using a model, and just carving. Carving means that you can't add anything to the sculpture. If I were to ask myself which kind of artist I am, I would say that I am the second type using a model and always reducing from the body, searching for the essence of its shape from this vague mass, stopping at the most suitable point and time, and finally releasing it to the public. As a practitioner, this pursuit is my passion, and very important to me.

I think the two most fascinating works from you that I admire are the Mount Fuji house and the gallery in Kiyosato. They are both located in a natural environment, yet the buildings are not visually imposing. Is that what you have always wanted to achieve when working with nature, in comparison with your other works that are mostly set in urban areas?

I think I should start sharing about my attitude towards nature, or even the environment. The activity of building inevitably disrupts the existing environment. As an architect, I don't want to incessantly preach about how architects should be environmentally friendly or sensitive towards nature. In order to maintain a healthy balance between the human connection and its surroundings, we must be able to envision a good design that complements the surroundings. As architects, when we are asked to design something, we are destined to disturb nature's beauty. But of course, there are many kinds of architects in this world. Some architects are very conscious towards nature and are very particular about

where they place the building on a site.

Some clients insist on log houses, to seemingly look like part of nature and to blend naturally with the surrounding. There is certainly nothing wrong with that, but fortunately for me, my clients are not like that. They look forward to interesting designs and have the highest expectations of me. I am always open to listening to and accepting what the client's needs are. I seek to understand their lifestyle, philosophy, and the many requirements that they lay out before me. I strive to integrate all the conditions into one building as much as possible. At times, some requests are not possible and I must honestly respond to them. Explaining that if a design cannot be realised due to budgetary constraints or because of existing architectural regulations, the building might be impossible to build.

When it comes to construction, we are constantly contending with many things: the architecture, regulations, client's budget, construction costs, and also conditions that are set by the contractors. This includes the level and quality of craftsmanship, and also the design and construction duration. After laying out all these conditions, my staff and I will discuss and conclude on the best possible way to make the design work. While a lot of research and investigation goes into any project, at the end of the day, 100% of the decision making is made by me.

MOUNT FUJI HOUSE⁸

In the Mount Fuji house project, the house has a very simple shape. One of the main features of the design was to use a diagonal wall, a minimal approach to obtain a huge space inside the building when a low budget is involved in the construction. If we had made a rectangular cuboid space, it would have been impossible to make a five metre beam from side to side. Of course, it is possible if the client had a bigger budget, but that wasn't the case at the time. So we put a diagonal wall which was quite effective in reducing the floor area, which in turn contributed to the reduction of the building costs as well. At the same time, after introducing the diagonal

wall, we realised the interior should be designed with drama. It is essentially a transitional space that offers a variety of viewpoints for the public to view from. I believe that a building's appearance within the community should be of human scale, which is the most comfortable for a person to perceive. But of course, if I'm required to make a 10 to 20 storey building, I'm sure that it will be difficult for me to realise this idea.

In your book, *Intensity of Architecture*, I think that the Kiyosato gallery is very striking.

This is actually a nine-storey building, which is larger than the scale of an object against the human figure. In this case, small scale ideas were built around the footprint of the building. This was made to distract the public eye from the high rise proportions of the building. Playing with human perception. It was actually fifteen years ago when I first visited the site, and I still remember the condition of the site with its large trees representing a strong verticality. It was an impressive sight to me.

The site was along a narrow path, probably 20-30 metres long. It created a scene where it would draw the attention of the public eye, forcing one to face the façade.

One of the limitations we faced at that time was the limited budget given for the project. Furthermore, we were also completely forbidden from performing any construction activities at the site during the summer, from July to August. Thus, we decided that the best possible construction method for this project was to use prefabrication construction. The shape of the Kiyosato gallery is rather unique, it resembles a leaf or a banana, if you like. We worked on conceiving beautiful spaces that provided a range of experiences as visitors walked within the space.

⁸ To learn more about the project do look at the image on p.67, feel free to read more here: https://www.okada-archi.com/en/works/house_in_mt_fuji.html

Many Japanese architects, older and younger generations, and also my colleagues asked me, "Why do your designs differ from one another? Are these your own designs?" I never bothered to answer them. Buildings should be for the clients, for society—not for me. If you understand this basic idea, you do not have to ask me such stupid questions.

I'm rather happy as of now because I have a stable income as a result of my work, but I'm not in pursuit of monetary gains. If I may humbly say so, I'm only a small servant to others, but I have the strongest of confidence in my talents.

After speaking to you, my overall view has changed quite a bit. I have interviewed three Japanese architects before you, and you are probably the most critical. Prior to this, I have never encountered or known any architects from Japan, so this is my first venture in getting to know and learning about them. I have this preconception that Japanese society always follows the rules, that everything goes by the book. So I'm surprised that there are people like you who are critical of their surroundings. I guess that's a good thing.

I sometimes feel like an outsider to society and regard myself as a stranger. The Japanese people try to make harmonious relationships with each other, and this is the result of a historical agenda since ancient times. In a society, criticism is a concept that is required in order to effectively progress. So, in this sense, whenever it is necessary to speak up, I do so. Occasionally there are times where not many people will be able to understand what I am trying to say. I am always critical of trendy scenes, and that is why I constantly find myself returning to a neutral position, to ponder on what I should be and what the building should be to the society. The work is important for the coming generations, not for the moment. As I mentioned before, a building's lifespan is much longer than that of humans. We must leave positive influences, preserve the traditions from the ancient times for the future. Humans resemble a small conveyor belt from the past that links the future, and I think that we should pay attention to those who are related to the field of architecture and illuminate those with great potential to become good architects.



Top: House in Mt. Fuji, 2000
Bottom: Pages from *Intensity of Architecture*



In the book "24 Architects in Japan" by Roland Hagenberg, Tadao Ando mentioned that and I quote "We have run out of physical and intellectual power and its not present in those who are now in their thirties and forties—the generation responsible for change. In the 1960's, we had young thinkers like Kikutake, Kurokawa and Maki. But where are the Kikutakes, the Kurokawas and Makis today?" Do you agree with this statement by Ando? Is there lack of intellectual/critical thinking in the current Japanese contemporary architecture? and how does this effect the Japanese architectural education?

You might already have your own impression about this, but the Japanese architecture education needs to be improved, so yes, I agree with what Tadao Ando said. Even the calibre of professors here in Japan leaves more to be desired. On paper, many architects appear to look rather intelligent and distinguished—graduated from prestigious universities or having teaching experiences at certain universities. But from an international standpoint, I think they do not meet the standards. First of all, in recent years, there aren't many younger architects who have actually studied abroad. Fumihiko Maki, who is now in his nineties, attended and graduated from Harvard almost seventy years ago, at the same time when Walter Gropius was teaching in Harvard as well. During my college days, twenty years back, the tendency to study abroad was still alive. There were wonderful professors who were also practising architects, people who have experienced Harvard and other wonderful design schools. We were greatly influenced by their diverse ways of thinking, their approach to tackling things as an architect, design techniques, and how architects should be. But in recent years, the younger generations do not want to study abroad. The number of Japanese students going abroad has significantly dropped.

No doubt that computer technology is wonderful, as it is really convenient to make presentations to major clients, but on the other hand, the younger generation of today have no hands-on experiences with one-to-one scale elements. As architects, it is our calling to construct reality. This is a pity, because as

I mentioned before, during my childhood I was very hands-on with crafting tools. If you don't have these experiences, you cannot employ craftsmanship at the construction site, nor can you convey your ideas to others effectively. I feel that the lack of hands-on education is also very damaging to the Japanese architecture design scene right now. Artistry and craftsmanship that requires intricacy and high levels of technique, and people who possess knowledge of traditional craft, of producing remarkable and exceptional work, are slowly dying out. That is why the Japanese government is importing craftsmen from Southeast Asian countries. I am very anxious about our future, wondering if we are able to maintain the high levels of Japanese craft, particularly timber construction, and the meticulous details.

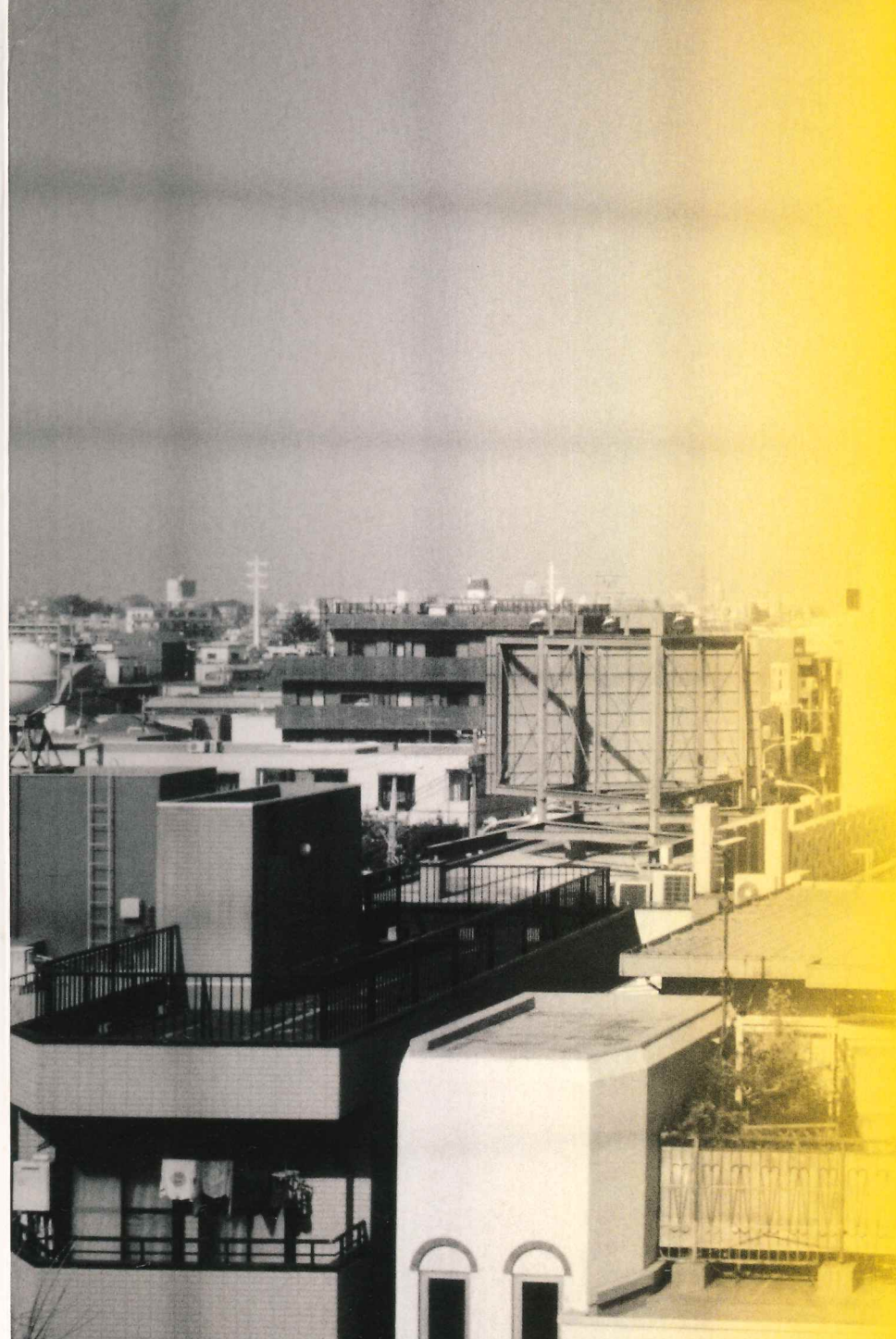
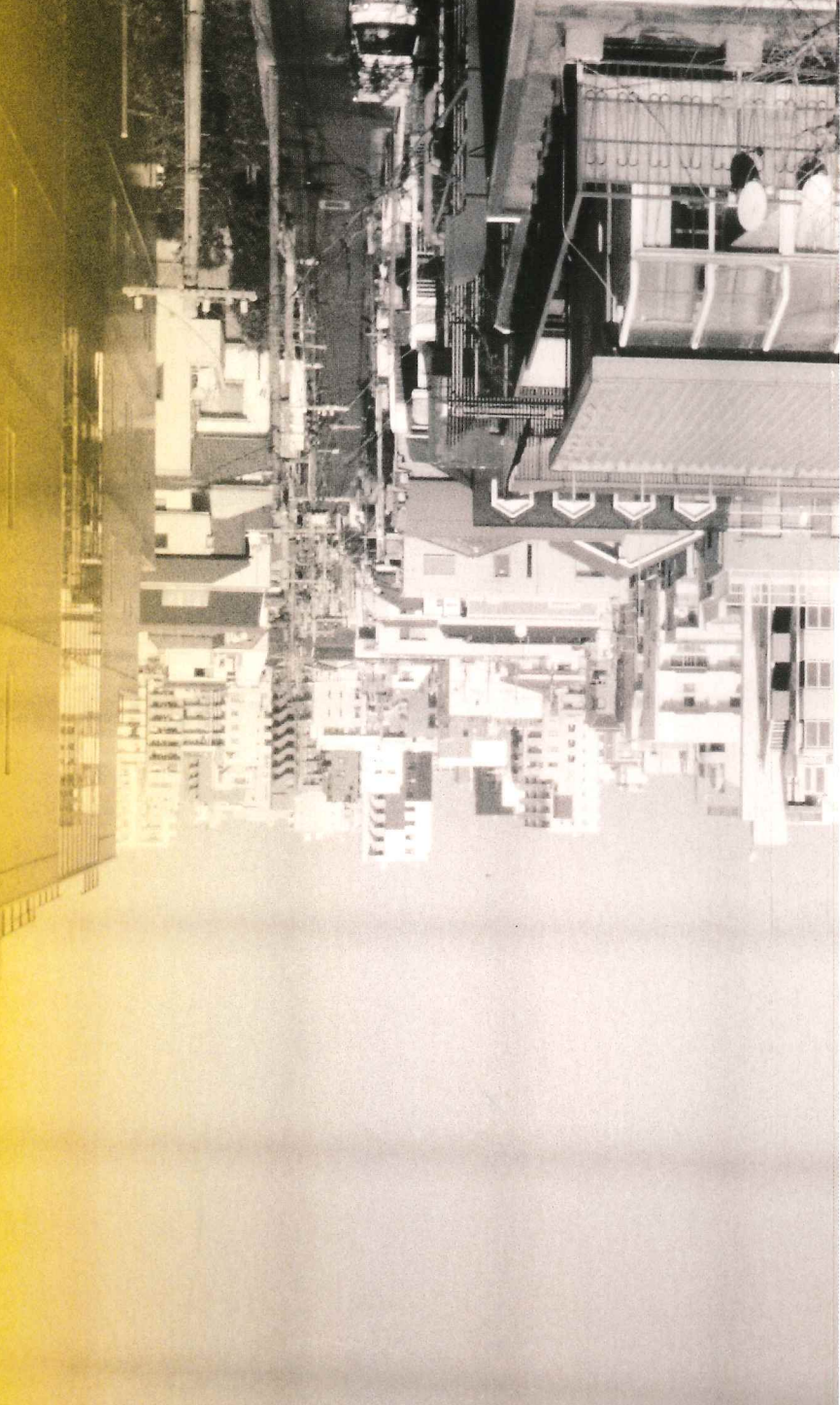
Another fact that might be relevant to the decline of Japanese architecture is that many current professors do not possess sufficient and diverse worldviews. Like you mentioned before, the younger generation of Japanese are practising within borders, within a closed system and society. This is certainly a safe and comfortable position for them, especially in terms of language and the local working environment. But the danger of this is that when one has the power to educate or influence society, they wouldn't know the required international standards to uphold their designs. When I say architecture work standards, I refer to how people around the world practise. What is normal, and what is the standard? That is a difficult concept for the Japanese to grasp.

I think you should be aware by now that the Japanese design on the surface is somehow exaggerated, too appreciated, and overestimated. In reality, if you have the chance to live here in Japan for several years, you will notice and grasp the Japanese architect's way of thinking. Of course, you can feel it right now during this interview, however this is merely a small percentage. I honestly wish that I could speak more about these kinds of topics in other countries. But of course, I'm invited to mainly speak about my own work. Some of the audience members are genuinely curious and want me to talk

about present day Japan. I am aware that there are a lot of misconceptions about contemporary Japanese architecture, however, the shortage of time doesn't allow me to speak on this matter.

SATOSHI OKADA ARCHITECTS

Satoshi Okada graduated from the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) of Columbia University, New York, in 1989. He conducted research as a Visiting Scholar under Kenneth Frampton at Columbia University, before receiving his Ph.D. from Waseda University, Tokyo in 1993. Okada has been appointed research fellowships by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, by the Ministry of Education (Fellowship for Distinguished Researcher, 1993–96) and by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (Fellowship for Distinguished Artists, 1996–97). In 1995 he founded Satoshi Okada architects in Tokyo. Since starting his practice, he has taught in numerous universities around the world, and won the Grandprix at Dedalo Minosse International Prize (Italy), etc. He is an Honorary Member of ALA assoarchitetti, Italy.



SMALL PRACTICES:

*In Conversation with
Malaysian & Japanese
Architects*

NOORUL FADZLEE KHAMIS

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