

AGAINST GEOMETRY. ARCHITECTURE IN CONTINUUM: INTERVIEW WITH KENGO KUMA

AYA JAZAIERLY: *Kbōrein* is a journal for architecture and philosophy. And this issue, through the topic of “phenomenon,” bridges between practice and phenomenology. In this framework, we would like to know more about what you have in mind when you are doing architecture or when you are producing architectural acts.

First we would like to ask you a little bit about philosophy. Which philosopher or philosophers have you read, or are you reading now? And if you can give us some idea about your relationship with philosophy. And specifically, Japanese philosophers.

KENGO KUMA: The theme I’m interested in recently, because of my exhibition in Venice¹ last year, is the concept of language and onomatopoeia, which my practice is interested in exploring and applying in architectural design. For example, my favorite onomatopoeia, *para para* (パラパラ), is translated into *particled* phenomenon: instead of using big volumes, we try to cut it into small particles, with small distances between them. And that kind of phenomenon is very similar to the phenomena in the forest: the leaves, the trunks, and branches are at some distance, and natural light filters through those small particles. So, we basically feel some kind of sympathy to that kind of phenomena. But it is difficult to describe that kind of phenomena and the term *para para* is the most useful word to explain it.

And in our office design meetings, we often use *para para*: “we need more *para para*, or we need much *para para*”... that is a very typical discussion for us in the office. Why am I interested in this onomatopoeic

¹ Referring to “KENGO KUMA Onomatopoeia Architecture” exhibition for the 18th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, held at Palazzo Franchetti (May–November 2023).

vocabulary? Maybe the reason is that we tried to show or explain some kind of phenomena using scientific vocabulary. By “scientific,” I mean not coming from individual senses. I try to find some common word to explain the phenomena. And maybe it’s related to phenomenology. In the twentieth century, people started to talk about phenomenology, it was considered as an individual feeling towards the place. Personal, individual experience, is always considered as a phenomenon.

But if we are living together and we are in the same space, maybe people’s experience can have some similarity; some common experience exists. And onomatopoeia is the best way to explain that kind of common experience. But usually, in architectural design, nobody uses onomatopoeia. The vocabulary we use comes from geometry: the cylinders, or circles... But geometry is related to geometrical design. I’m not interested in that kind of geometrical design. What I’m interested in is some ambiguity, and without focusing on the shape, we can get some experience from that kind of ambiguity. That is the main reason I try to avoid the vocabulary from geometry and instead I use onomatopoeia. Also, in Japanese we have many forms of onomatopoeia, much more than in most other languages. Besides Japanese, Basque, and some African languages have a similar number of onomatopoeias, but I think Japanese tops the list. And my understanding, as to why this onomatopoeia happened, is that Japanese people are interested in natural phenomena.

And because of Japanese conditions—Japan is an island, it is very tough, very small, dense place. And we have always had disasters, typhoons, earthquakes... Every year we have these kinds of disasters. So people began to think that nature is much stronger than us and that taking care of nature and the environment is the key to survival.

These tough conditions made Japanese people [prone] to that kind of phenomenon. It is the Japanese lifestyle, I think. And Japanese has weak structures; it has many words to explain the phenomena. It is very different from other languages.

My architectural design is related to this Japanese way of thinking, way of living with nature. It is different from China. Chinese is not ambiguous. It has a very simple structure, and they don’t use onomatopoeia so often.

ANDREA CANCLINI: It's like hosting nature in the language. Receiving nature in the language.

KK: Yes.

PETAR BOJANIĆ: Is it possible also to say that onomatopoeia contains mimesis, that you are trying to imitate what is close to you, protecting, and at the same time reconstructing it? Is it possible to say that onomatopoeia starts to be creative, when you are producing something? How can we design something through this protocol of onomatopoeia?

KK: In the beginning, we used very few “onomatopoeias”: *para para* (パラパラ), or *tsun tsun* (ツンツン). But recently we have expanded the vocabulary to explain some ambiguous situations. Because I began to understand that onomatopoeia is very useful to talk about design in the team. And maybe that kind of approach is different from other firms.

PB: Certainly the way you are producing new *concepts* with onomatopoeia is different from a Western way. That's the new design *concept*? Is it possible to say that?

KK: Yes, it is. The main design concept is onomatopoeia.

The “material” is always our main theme. As you know, we are interested in using natural materials: wood, stone, or clay. But our way of using materials is different from the “normal” way. The “normal” way to use materials is applying it as a texture on the building volume; it's like texture mapping in computer graphics—after deciding on the shape of the building, architects map and add textures to the volume; that is the “normal” or common way for material application, acting just as a thin skin. But I'm not interested in designing a thin skin; instead, we are using wood to create small particles, or the condition of “tsun tsun,” for example: *tsun* means sharp edge that gives a strong magical feeling, not sharp as metal edge or a knife, which gives us a sense of risk or danger. But the *tsun tsun* onomatopoeia applied in this project [GC Prosthodontics Museum, 2010, Aichi, Japan], for example, you can see the edge of the wood bar is coming to us, as if attacking us. Here, the wood material is not that thin surface, the material is a kind of “animal,” I feel. There is always some relationship between the animal and the human. And onomatopoeia is the best way to explain this relationship between animal life and us. The

wood in the forest also has this “tsun tsun” feeling... the branches, and the leaves, and the sharp edges are giving us some feeling, and our life always depends on the relationship with other lives and we should find a way to explain the essence of that relationship.

AJ: So, the materials are active and not passive.

KK: Yes, exactly, active!

AJ: You previously mentioned the word “common,” as in common *experience* in terms of the Japanese way or *feeling* translated through onomatopoeia. It is not an individual experience, but it’s a common experience. How can you define this “common”? The way you explain it seems like it’s a feeling that anyone would have, a child or a grown-up. But how is this achievable in architecture, in practice, in the daily practice in the office?

KK: Using onomatopoeia enhances our sensibility to the material. Without using onomatopoeia, people often misunderstand and consider wood just as a surface. People often say that we use wood for the façade, and it’s beautiful! Okay, but in fact, using wood as surface is just the beginning, we should develop the relationship between lives: the material and the human.

AJ: You spoke a little bit about Japan and disaster; in your public talks you always talk about disaster as a possibility of change. So, are you only interested in natural disasters? What about political, social, economic major shifts? What’s your view on that and how does this affect architecture?

KK: Historically, for the Japanese, political disasters and natural disasters are not so different. If a disaster happens, such as a big earthquake or fire, people would blame politicians who made a mistake, and heaven punished us. So, there is no division between political and natural disasters; it’s one thing, it’s connected.

AC: It’s a common destiny.

AJ: Do you think that climate change and the climate emergency, is a sort of natural disaster as a result of political crisis?

KK: Maybe, as most of Japanese think, it is basically one thing. And this is also the problem of Japan: we don't do political protests against politicians because we persevere and practice resilience; "how to survive quietly" is important in Japan. Japanese mentality is like that. In America, it is the total opposite: they always protest against something or speak up. In Japan, it is not polite to speak against somebody, and Japanese people prefer to always be quiet. This is also very much the case with disasters. There are always disasters and the disasters cannot be protested against.

AJ: So in line with that idea of disaster, you say that if we don't change the way we do things, we do architecture, we will perish in our own disaster, we create this disaster as architects, but also as a society. Yet, you rarely talk about sustainability. What then is your view on sustainability and the future that will exist between us and nature? What is the role of the architect in that?

KK: Sustainability is a kind of respect of nature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, people thought that we could control nature, and that we could do anything in the environment.

That arrogant way of thinking was the basis of the twentieth century industrialization. But now we began to think that nature is basically uncontrollable. What we can do is reduce the damage to nature as much as we can. It's not perfect, and people have become very humble compared with the industrialization at the beginning of twentieth century. Our attitude has become very, very humble. Humbleness is the basis of sustainability, I think.

In that sense, this attitude, the humbleness is similar to the Japanese way.

PB: Can we go a little bit back? You mentioned the Japanese way several times. But we are sitting now in Paris. How do you modify, or do you modify your Japanese experience and way of thinking to build here?

KK: I think, the Japanese are kind of pioneers in this environmental crisis. Long before industrialization, the Japanese attitude towards nature was very humble: living in small spaces, consuming as little as possible. This kind of attitude was the basis of our tradition. And now, most people in the world began to think that this kind of humbleness is needed and

that without it we cannot survive anymore. This is why I think that the Japanese are pioneers of this humble lifestyle. And my dream is to apply this lifestyle to other places.

PB: But I think that there is something more. There is something more substantive in your Japanese experience here. You know, in structuralism we had several investigations 50 years ago, some kind of pre-linguistic moment, that means on one side there is grammar (or geometry as you said), and on the other side there is semiotics. For example, onomatopoeia belongs to semiotics. Here you are referring to onomatopoeia but written in Japanese letters, because when we say it in, for example, French or other European languages, we put onomatopoeia in grammar. Cuckoo, for example: once it is written it is already in grammar.

Here you are using letters, and with these letters you already have some kind of design moment, because the letters are already designed. And this is beautiful, practically from your letters, from your language you are exporting and transforming it into design and material. You said this is the Japanese way of thinking, but your letters also help you do this.

KK: It is a good point. For Japanese, the letters and these kinds of images are continuous. So, no clear border between the letters and image.

AC: It's a graphic onomatopoeia.

KK: And it is a 2-D graphic image, and architecture is a kind of 3-D image. And it is all continuous. Letters, 2-D, and 3-D are continuous.

AC: Exactly because, *ónoma* means name in Greek and *poieîn* means creation, so onomatopoeia means creation of names. So, it's a seamless creation from sound and graphic: description of this sound and then application in 3-D, and design is all together.

AJ: To follow up on this line of thought, you talk a lot about place and designing with place, with the context. What is *context* for you?

KK: Place is the basis of my creation. Because when we talk about place, we refer to the place for the "animal" to live, a place for humans (as animals), to survive. If we sit in one place, we are surrounded by so many lives, trees and animals.

PB: Would you call these objects?

KK: Yes, *living* objects. We are surrounded by living objects: water is flowing; sometimes, the flood or the typhoon are coming, but it is always the experience in the place. Ideas without the place have no meaning for the animal. This is totally different from Le Corbusier's idea. He tried to float buildings and separate them from their place. I think that kind of separation actually has no meaning. We should always stand in the place, on the ground, and we should start thinking from the place. And this is the difference from Modernist ideas to forget the place; this is the basis of modernism. I want to go back to the place.

AC: You're talking about this relation with the ground, the place. Could we say that this relation is one we establish with time in that place, as time is part of nature?

KK: Yes, time is part of nature and also the history of place is part of nature. Whenever I go to a site, I do some research of the history of that place. In postmodernism, history is not a history of nature; history is a kind of story. But the history of a place is the history of nature in that place and the history of the relationship with that place. I am very much interested in the history of a place.

PB: In that case, are you, as an architect, a holder of something common? Because you said, through onomatopoeia you are trying to make some kind of alternative grammar or geometry. When you are on site or in a place, you are not part of this context, you are *doing* something, you want to *do* something. As an architect, you make a design moment or gesture. You said you are trying to understand the history of this order of objects. And then what? What are you doing after that as an architect? Because you are certainly changing something?

KK: Yes. Gesture is very important. If I design something, the design is a "gesture" towards the environment. I want to invite people, or I want to control the moment, that kind of gesture, as an intention.

PB: Can we say that your gesture (from your perspective) is a social gesture? Because you hold people's opinion, you are trying to objectify the subject, the experience.

KK: Yes. My design process starts with doing the research of the history of a place, and also at the same time I want to hear people's opinions and idea for the place. And through this process, I want to objectify people's ideas.

PB: This is onomatopoeia. You are listening. And then?

KK: Yes. Research and listening. And then I propose something to the people. Also, we often do workshops, and I want to listen to the people's comments on the project. Dialogue with them is the best way to objectify the project.

PB: Yet, since you bring something new with you to a place, how do you use your own old experiences?

KK: Yes, old experience is very helpful to talk with people.

PB: Do you require interaction with others all the time? In studio also?

KK: Yes. And the references from the past are very important for the process.

PB: What does author or authorship mean, in that sense?

KK: Authorship is a kind of group creation. The group needs to have some kind of center, an organizer. And maybe I am an organizer of the creation.

AC: The organizer not the creator?

PB: Is it perhaps also Japanese?

KK: Yes, authorship is not so clear in Japan. For example, Western poems always have authors, but in Japan, Haiku is the result of group work.

AJ: You created this exhibition in 2018, "The Lab for Materials,"² for which you wrote: "I want my legacy to be the lab of materials [...] and

² Referring to Kengo Kuma's exhibition in Tokyo, titled "Kengo Kuma: a LAB for materials," in 2018.

not [architectural] objects.” You talked a lot about the Anti-Object.³ Our question here is: are you creating anti-objective objects? What is an “object” and what are “objects” for you, in your architectural projects?

KK: I think that our design, our product is always a temporary—non-permanent—object. Through that kind of process, we could create something. But this design is just the beginning, and the product can be modified again and again; there is no end to that process. It is continuous, architecture should change, in the process. Actually, Japanese wooden buildings are always changing, because wood is very easy to cut and adapt, and the columns of Japanese houses are always moving. It is a very special structural system that we have. And even structural columns can be moved to other places. Because life is always changing and architecture is always changing, following life.

AJ: Is it like Material Immaterial?⁴

KK: Yes.

AC: This is like “The ship of Theseus” paradox in Greek philosophy: if you have a boat and you replace all pieces of the boat over time, is it still the same boat?

AJ: In Tokyo, we are organizing a symposium⁵ with you and with Professor Kenneth Frampton, with the title “Shared Phenomenology.”

KK: “Shared Phenomenology” is a very interesting title.

AJ: We are interested in the intersection between phenomenology and social justice, society, public space, and the future of the built environment. In your view, what is Shared Phenomenology?

KK: We need to have some kind of new language in the team. Instead of a strong authorship of an architect, everyone [can] say something about design, or say something in relation to the environment. But we don’t

³ Referring to K. Kuma, *Anti-object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture*, AA Publications, London, 2008.

⁴ Referring to B. Bogna, *Material Immaterial: The New Work of Kengo Kuma*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2009.

⁵ “Shared Phenomenology” Symposium held at the University of Tokyo, 2 July 2024.

have a good way to manage the conversation; there is always a fight that happens between the community and architects. For example, the community asks us to preserve something—an old building—because preservation is the only vocabulary we have; preservation or construction, it is the total opposite. But maybe the best solution lies between construction and preservation, but we don't have the vocabulary for that which is between these two opposites. Onomatopoeia can give a new way of communication; it makes the conversation softer than before. And actually, I prefer the softer conversation between team members, not fighting. In architectural firms in America, people are always fighting, but I don't think that fighting is fruitful. So instead of fighting, I want to have a new way of communication.

PB: Do you have any philosophers in your team?

KK: We don't have philosophers, but sociologists give us new ideas about society and community. Feminism, for example, and the role of women is very important in architecture.

PB: Have you read Husserl or other phenomenologists?

KK: Husserl? Yes. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, very interesting people.

PB: How did you find this idea for an onomatopoeia?

KK: Phenomenologists try to analyze experience. But for me, what they write is not open to the community. It focuses on our experience in a deep way. But I want to widen our experience, which relates it to shared phenomenology.

PB: What about the Japanese heritage of the philosophers Heidegger and Husserl? Have you had any contact with any Japanese philosophers in this tradition? Have you read them?

KK: Yes, in Japan, Washida-san⁶ studied Merleau-Ponty.

PB: Did he participate in your work?

⁶ Kiyokazu Washida (鷺田 清一) born 1949.

KK: He is a friend. He gave me hints about phenomenology. For example, he emphasized the importance of listening; listening to other people is very important. He wrote about the power of listening. The architectural practice and the philosophers should be on one platform, stimulating each other. Sometimes architects misunderstand philosophers, but I think we share the same problems.

AJ: We are talking about philosophy and philosophers, but we also want to ask you if there are other disciplines that interest you and inspire you in your work? For example, you worked with Noh masters, or master carpenters, but are there other disciplines that inspire you when you work?

KK: Yes, craftsmen might also provide many hints. In European history, the architect is above craftsmen; architects draw everything, and craftsmen apply the design with material. But between craftsmen and us [architects], the relationship should be different. We are working with craftsmen and talking to them, and they give us hints for the detail. Without their support, we cannot find solutions for project details.

AJ: Our last question relates to the stadium. We are publishing an academic article⁷ about the Japan National Stadium and we are comparing autonomous architecture and a regionalist phenomenological approach. Further, you have the exhibition opening today in Paris⁸ of Kenzo Tange. Any comment on the relationship between the two stadiums, your stadium and Tange's stadium?

KK: Yes. Tange's generation wanted to be architects with strong authorship. The Western architect was a model for that period. Because, before their generation, we didn't have architects [in Japan]. Basically, Japanese traditional buildings were designed by carpenters and politicians. So, for Tange's generation, the model was Western architects. But what he actually did is a collaboration with excellent engineers. We had a symposium in the Maison du Japon here in Paris yesterday: Shimizu,⁹ the construction company, explained the construction process. And it's really

⁷ A. Jazaierly, A. Canclini, "The Japan National Stadium: Between architectural bigness and urban smallness," *The Plan Journal*, 9, 1, 2024.

⁸ Referring to the "KENZO TANGE – KENGO KUMA – Architects of the Tokyo Games" exhibition, held at the Japan Cultural Institute in Paris (May–June 2024).

⁹ Shimizu Corporation is an architectural, civil engineering and general contracting firm in Japan.

amazing. Tange's idea is kind of primitive with the suspended roof. It's a strong idea, but primitive, and there's a lot of difficulty in constructing it. And based on that primitive idea, structural engineers and construction companies worked together to realize that vision. And Tange was open to that kind of idea; he also *listened* to their ideas and assembled those ideas together to create the final product. So, the model was the Western architect, but what he did is, basically, a collaboration with the construction company, craftsmen... And then, the final product, looks like a kind of miracle. I was really impressed by it.

Comparing Tange, in the same generation, Eero Saarinen designed some beautiful buildings. They're beautiful, but as for the detail and for the construction, I was not so impressed by Saarinen's buildings compared to Tange's gymnasiums. Tange is different because of the Japanese way of collaboration.

SNEŽANA VESNIĆ: The title of the recently published issue of *Khōrein* is "Change." And we would also like to ask you what is *change*? What is your *change* of a place? Can we say that you are producing new concepts? And what is the *context* or onomatopoeic concept? Because when your architectural intervention is an addition to the place, it is immediately a new concept since you have a new value in that place.

KK: A new concept, perhaps; what is new for me is simply a kind of ambiguity. Authorship wants to achieve strong identities and a clear shape, but I want to go in a different direction; some new type of ambiguity to accept people, their desires and their requests, open to people. And if architecture is too strong it rejects people. What I'm trying to create is a new type of ambiguity.

Interview conducted by Aya Jazaierly, Andrea Canclini, Snežana Vesnić, and Petar Bojanić.