

Architecture is complex. It takes the form of both a sketch on a piece of paper and an object in space. It can be theoretical or craftsman-like, conceptual or actual, private or public, pleasing or polarizing, utopian or physical, temporary or lasting.

Architecture is determined heteronomously, and is influenced by countless external factors: building regulations, spatial programs, cost-benefit analyses, social contexts, and political intentions. If there is one thing that architecture is not, it is simple. Oddly enough, it seems at first sight to be precisely this characteristic that defines SANAA's architecture. However it is not the "simplistic," "limited," or "ordinary" that stands out and astonishes one, but rather that which is emphatically obvious. This obviousness is expressed in neither the conceptual nor the technical approach of their work. SANAA's studies and applications are too advanced and too refined for that. Nor does this obviousness show itself in the rational or the reasonable, because their spatial views are often very complex. The obviousness I am talking about is expressed above all in an emotional way: their architecture seems in to be singularly *familiar*. This is all the more amazing because their strictly volumetric, colorless, transparent white spatial compositions at first appear cool, abstract, and ephemeral.

Appearances, however, can be deceptive. It is only at a second glance, or rather by actually "being" in their spaces, that their architecture reveals itself to be essentially very human. It turns out to be conceived and made for people. SANAA's architecture helps people to *orient* themselves. This is, in my opinion, what makes it different from the modernism upon which its architects do indeed draw, but which at the same time they thoroughly question. This orientation is not the kind that relieves a feeling of being lost, but rather the kind that anchors. It is an architecture that has the ability to translate the most fundamental needs and demands into spatial form. It is an architecture that very generously gives people space and shelter without thrusting itself upon them, without the intention of emphasizing the fact that it is architecture. This is precisely what is both obvious and unique about the architecture of Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa.

A link is often made between SANAA's highly distilled architecture and the minimalist approach. This view is not in itself incorrect, but it is limited purely to issues of form. After all, in art at least, minimalism rejects narrative and emotional elements and takes an exclusively rational position. The well-known pragmatic statement made by the American painter Frank Stella in 1964—"what you see is what you see"—exemplifies the rejection of any form of symbolism or meaning and refers entirely to a reality that exists in its own right. But there is no autonomous reality in architecture. One must there-

fore view the minimalism of SANAA's aesthetic rather as a reduction, an attempt to reveal the essence of architecture. This consists, in the first instance, in *creating space*. Making something out of nothing, exposing something that is concealed. Or, as the German phenomenologist Franz Xaver Baier once put it: "the unfolding of a point into a space," which can be very well illustrated by referring to origami, the Japanese art of paper folding that originated in the seventeenth century (*ori* = to fold, *kami* = paper). With a masterful nonchalance one can create a complicated three-dimensional "sculpture" out of a flat sheet of paper.

We can illustrate this by means of two projects which are comparable in program and scale: *House in Plum Grove* (2001–03), a single-family house designed by Kazuyo Sejima, and *Moriyama House* (2002–05), a house for one person who regularly receives guests, designed by Ryue Nishizawa. Both are in Tokyo and make use of a complex spatial structure based on the principle of agglomeration. Each leads an autonomous existence, but makes pointed reference to its immediate surroundings or neighbors by means of an ingenious interplay of visual axes through openings and full-length glass. The arrangement of space in Sejima's project is very compact, and is based on the vertical stacking of spaces of different heights and proportions within a single, rigidly delineated volume. The walls are in sixteen-millimeter steel, the external ones thickened to fifty millimeters by added insulation. The windows cut out of the internal and external walls (the latter glazed) create relative transparency. Each opening provides not only a through-view into the adjacent room, but also a view in the sense of a tableau—a view into another "place." Nishizawa's project employs the same principles but is based on the "horizontal stacking" of spaces, separate entities spread over the whole building area. Each volume exists in its own right and has its own function separate from those of the other spaces: bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, library, annex. A winding garden links all of these units together.

SANAA often applies these two spatial typologies to other projects. Vertical stacking is employed in the *Dior Building* in Tokyo, the *Zollverein School of Management and Design* in Essen, and the *New Museum* in New York. The horizontal layout of separate entities can be seen in the *21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art* in Kanazawa, *Onishi Hall* in Onishi, and the *Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art* in Ohio. These spatial concepts, however, are never applied unequivocally. In the *Dior Building* and the *Zollverein School*, for instance, one cannot tell from the façade how many stories there are or how high they might be. In the Kanazawa museum, the structure of the individual volumes within the circular floor plan causes the