

A Japanese Constellation

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A Japanese Constellation Pedro Gadanhó
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The Museum of Modern Art has interwoven Japanese architecture into its presentations from its inaugural architecture exhibition of 1932, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, in which Mamoru Yamada's Tokyo Central Telegraph Office (1925) represented Japan's burgeoning modernism. In 1954, Junzo Yoshimura's full-scale post-and-beam demonstration house transformed the Museum's sculpture garden, bringing to its environs a modernism less familiar to New York audiences. The third and last of the House in the Garden series (1949–55), following projects by Marcel Breuer and Gregory Ain, Yoshimura's house combined seventeenth-century precedents with traditional *shoin* building techniques.

The very walls of the Museum are now the beneficiaries of this lineage in the graceful canopies of Yoshio Taniguchi's 2004 extension that frame the sculpture garden. Together with the collection's representation of the Japanese postwar turn to utopic, technoscientific schemes for cities, exemplified by Metabolist projects like Kisho Kurokawa's Helix City (1961) and Fumihiko Maki's proposed megastructures, as well as the imprint of Japanese influence in works from Frank Lloyd Wright to Rem Koolhaas, this history runs through the Museum's holdings. *A Japanese Constellation* introduces a contemporary chapter, turning to an architecture both in conversation with and responding to these earlier projects.

With *A Japanese Constellation*, one of the Museum's first exhibitions in ten years to focus on architecture from a particular country, and the first dedicated solely to Japanese practitioners, curator Pedro Gadanho focuses on a small cluster of contemporary Japanese architects working within the larger field, exploring their formal inventiveness and close professional relationships to frame a radical model of practice in the twenty-first century.

Unique in focus, *A Japanese Constellation*'s forty-four projects represent a diverse panorama of work from small domestic projects to museums. Presented in models, drawings, and projected slideshows, the work highlights the significant structural innovations and use of transparent and lightweight materials, while foregrounding the architects' refreshing commitment to the social lives of their buildings, reviving a social conscience that characterized earlier avant-gardes. Drawing on Japanese material traditions, the gallery design casts aside walls for soft partitions of semitranslucent fabric, which act as surfaces for multimedia and provide an immersive visual experience.

The luminous presentation in the gallery is complemented by the catalogue's generous color portfolios and critical essays by curators, architects, and scholars writing both from within and outside of Japan, which situate this architectural genealogy within a longer chronology of Japanese practice and, more broadly, a tangled inheritance of global modernity. *A Japanese Constellation* promises to be an indispensable resource for practitioners, students of architecture, and the general public.

I congratulate Pedro Gadanho, Director, Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology, Lisbon, for his engagement in theorizing new directions in contemporary architecture. Begun during his appointment as Curator of Contemporary Architecture at MoMA, *A Japanese Constellation* has been long in the making. His dedication and insight, together with the support of Phoebe Springstubb, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design, have brought this catalogue and exhibition to fruition. On behalf of the Trustees and staff of the Museum, I am grateful to the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, The Japan Foundation, and Chris A. Wachenheim for major support in funding this endeavor. I deeply appreciate the generous funding provided by Obayashi Corporation, Kajima Corporation, Shimizu Corporation, Takenaka Corporation, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Kumagai Gumi, and The Obayashi Foundation. I extend sincere thanks for additional funding provided by MoMA's Annual Exhibition Fund and special thanks to Muji. The Dale S. And Norman Mills Leff Publication Fund provided essential support for this book.

Glenn D. Lowry
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

As was the case across various fields in Japan during the early twentieth century, architects, too, had looked to Western culture to inspire change within the country’s deeply ingrained traditions. As Terunobu Fujimori recounts elsewhere in this book (p. 73), in the first half of the twentieth century, a number of architects from Japan worked with some of Europe and the United States’ most important modernists. Eventually, these Japanese apprentices would bring home innovative materials and a novel interest in functionalism, borrowings that would in part serve to fulfill ambitions of modernization across Japanese society. But the influence wasn’t merely unidirectional: classical Japanese art and architecture had for some time generated considerable fascination among early modernists in the West. For those architects privileging both clarity of design and functionality over ornament—including masters such as Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959), Bruno Taut (1880–1938), and Walter Gropius (1883–1969)—traditional architecture from Japan offered a unique aesthetic, its undecorated geometric constructions and refined spatial qualities highly unusual. This mutual curiosity fomented a prolonged exchange between Japanese and Western architecture throughout the twentieth century.⁴

The resulting architectural cross-pollinations, the products of a fruitful give-and-take between two distinct conceptions of space, assumed different forms in the postwar period. During the 1960s, for instance, the Japanese Metabolists, as much as figures such as Kenzo Tange (1913–2005) or Arata Isozaki (born 1931), absorbed impulses from the Western avant-garde (fig. 2). They rose to prominence in Japanese society and eventually captured the interest of many forward-thinking architects elsewhere.⁵ Two decades later, in the 1980s, the country’s development of a local but significant variant of postmodernism not only aligned many Japanese architects with their Western counterparts; it also influenced architectural styles in the international arena.

In the 1990s, the circumstances were suited once again for Japanese architecture to become a reference for architects outside Japan. As an intensely metropolitan culture thrived in Tokyo and other major Japanese cities, the nation’s architects found themselves immersed in a global culture as much as in an urban society fronting numerous trends that would come to mark the start of the twenty-first century—from the explosion of consumer culture to the omnipresence of information to the increasing

Prelude

As I was beginning work on this text in the spring of 2015, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation announced the winners of a competition for a new museum in Helsinki with pomp and circumstance (fig. 1). According to a museum press release, the call attracted more entries than any of its kind in history, with 1,715 submissions from nearly eighty countries. Yet what captured my attention was the fact that the young French-Japanese firm awarded the commission, Moreau Kusunoki Architectes (est. 2011), is directed by disciples of Japan’s SANAA (est. 1995), Kengo Kuma (born 1954), and Shigeru Ban (born 1957), whose architecture has been met with wide acclaim. This was, to my mind, yet another sign of the influence contemporary Japanese architects wield over the discipline worldwide. Moreover, their impact was escalating as the work of global architects began to be received with a new mood. As the vice chairman of the city of Helsinki’s executive board said to the *New York Times* on the occasion, “It’s not the fashion to create ‘wow’ architecture anymore,”¹ alluding to Frank Gehry’s design for the Guggenheim Bilbao almost two decades before. Cast against the expressive flamboyancy of the American museum’s first outpost, the submission by this virtually unknown duo of young architects was distinctly contextual, embracing local traditions and blending with the existing city. Mark Wigley, jury chair and professor and former dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, told the *Times* that the proposal “kind of undoes the monumentality of most museums.”² While the invariable, sometimes pharaonic styles of so-called starchitects—architects whose worldwide celebrity and acclaim have transformed them into idols of design—were gradually coming under attack, the subtle but influential sensitivity of some Japanese architects was emerging through the crevices of the previous establishment and flourishing.

Architecture for the Twenty-First Century

Society is undergoing shifts that are far more pragmatic and radical than we even imagine, so I harbor no frustrations concerning such a development, nor do I even think to despair over it. I have, therefore, but one interest: the question of whether architecture as architecture is feasible in such times.

—Toyo Ito³



fig. 1



fig. 2

demn their supposed indifference to local values; or, as lately, outright blame them for the upsurge in distended skylines across contemporary metropolises.⁵⁰ More pointedly, one could say that any star system tends to trap its protagonists in formulaic and predictable responses to any given demand. Out of conviction for personal style, many starchitects repeat formal and technical models while remaining indifferent to the context in which they are intervening. And while they may celebrate distinctive individualism on a global scale, at home their popularity, and corresponding cultivation of an uncritical following, often contributes to a lack of architectural diversity and even hinders the flourishing of new talent.⁵¹

The constellation of architects that eventually diverged from mainstream architecture in Japan, and now gravitates around Ito and Sejima, testifies to a different scenario. Ito, in particular, exemplifies at once an ethic of public responsibility and an unparalleled virtuosity, having responded to diverse challenges with a variety of architectural languages, thereby opening the field to new positions. As the Pritzker Prize committee wrote of Ito on its website, “It is evident that while innovating and pushing the boundaries of architecture forward, he does not close the road behind him.”⁵² Of course, when Japan’s star architects favor cross-fertilization and cross-generational mutual support that move beyond mere competition and self-aggrandizement, they are observing a Japanese tradition that maintains as essential mutual respect between master and disciple. Yet, it must be noted that, by returning to the avant-garde values described earlier, these architects have also reverted to a notion of collective endeavor in which the desire to impact society supersedes singular will. That these aspirations were reciprocally reinforced—as exemplified by prominent figures like Ito consistently praising younger colleagues and paving the way for their achievements⁵³—surely allowed these architects to continue wedding vigorous aesthetic exploits with both a profound architectural integrity and a renewed sense of social responsibility.

The potential difference between a star system and a constellation is that in the latter major and emerging stars are tied by gravitational pulls that render their aggregation of interests recognizable, if partially imagined. In contrast to shooting stars, single entities doomed to fade spectacularly, constellations evoke a very different image: each individual star, of course, carries its own significance, but so too does the stars’

Another Kind of Architectural Star System

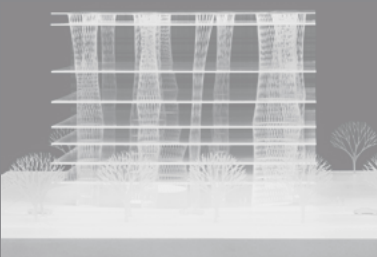
To embody in architecture that which has never been architecture before—I wish to explore this possibility. The scales of space engendered by the natural environment. The liberating feeling of a landscape extending seemingly forever, the vastness of the sky, the lightness of the sky, the lightness of a cloud, the fineness of rain drops.

—Junya Ishigami⁴⁸

In the early twentieth century, like-minded artists disposed to upset social conventions and produce radical critiques of the period’s social transformations collectively formed avant-garde movements. The quest for personal artistic success came as an afterthought, if it emerged at all. By the end of the century, however, the art market, and the dramatically increased financial value of individual works of art, incentivized artists to pursue solo careers, and their concomitant rewards, and led to the appropriation of the formal accomplishments of successive avant-garde programs. In parallel, the artist’s newfound creative autonomy from everyday needs buried art’s commitment to social change.

In the world of architecture, which from the 1980s onward embraced neoconservative politics and the free-market economy, these developments converged in a newly formed “star system.” The term, imported from the Hollywood studio system, refers to a group of globally praised professionals that replaced the avant-garde. And even if, much like the term “starchitect,” the designation has many detractors—namely among those who meet the definition—the classification has become usual currency and, consequently, an effective tool to analyze contemporary architectural production.⁴⁹

For one, the celebrity status of architects is not historically unprecedented. Also, contrary to the instant fame of many contemporary media celebrities, the recognition of today’s internationally acclaimed architects emerged from concrete achievements. Most of those who are now called “starchitects” have, on account of hard-won technical aptitude, led long careers and made important contributions to their profession, often developing idiosyncratic and influential architectural visions. Their success is typically well-deserved; but, like a double-edged sword, it can also attract hasty attacks. Criticism of today’s starchitects tends to reprimand their share of important international projects; con-



terministic spatial organizations.³⁹ Ito has offered that Sejima’s conceptual freedom “liberated from social conventions and restrictions” gave her “greater insight into social realities.”⁴⁰

Architects such as Fujimoto and Ishigami have been similarly praised for their architectural commitment to both radical aesthetics and the production of social change. Fujimoto’s work has been described as taking “the elements of architecture apart,” only to reassemble them in a leisurely yet critical commentary on privacy in contemporary society.⁴¹ And while Ishigami’s architectural quests may seem obsessive and focused almost exclusively on abstract disciplinary issues, he counts on users and their experiential sense of wonder to render meaningful his artistic endeavors.

Ito has described his aesthetic pursuits as a search for “places that are free of institutional constraints.” He has strived not only to probe “the meaning of public buildings” but also to interrogate “the excessive importance architects attach to expression.” Convinced that local governments and architects conceived architecture “according to a manual and with little consideration of the people who use them,” he realized that “the social significance of architecture [needed] to be reconsidered.”⁴² Ito displaced the discipline’s emphasis on design, preferring instead to attend to audience reception—as he did with Sendai Mediatheque—thereby shifting the inflection of his work. Sendai was a manifesto against what Ito has called “ready-made ideas,” but it was also indicative of the “struggle between the respect for a powerful idea and all technical constraints and legal regulations.”⁴³ In parallel, while Ito’s architectural ideas constituted the fundamental driving force in overcoming constraints and captivating people, his design approach increasingly relied on his discussions with residents, local communities, and clients—that is to say, on those who would in fact be using the buildings.⁴⁴

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake only reinforced this changing attitude. In the wake of the disaster, architects in Japan developed a new consciousness, recognizing that their work must extend beyond the immediate urban context and support emergent social needs. As Ito described it, architecture should move “beyond delight,” “refrain from criticism,” and seek “self-effacement.”⁴⁵ And yet, the 2012 Venice Biennale Golden Lion winning project, Home-for-All—in which Ito together with SANAA, Fujimoto, Hirata, and other architects created simple, lodge-like structures in rural areas, enabling residents of temporary housing to gather for meetings and social events—retained an experimental edge.⁴⁶ It pointed to contemporary Japanese architecture’s ability to maintain an avant-garde attitude in face of everyday requirements,⁴⁷ and confirmed that in Japan’s network of established and emerging architectural luminaries, shared core values superseded individual interests.

architectural space, were presented by the architects as a rational and inescapable legitimation for design decisions in which aesthetic intuition, not to say dubious notions of beauty, no longer played a role.³⁰ After this broader, international diagrammatic turn—and the faux pragmatism that ensued from it—few architects would dare say they sought only to make beautiful buildings.

Yet, this is precisely how Ito has described some of his more important projects. Of the Sendai Mediatheque he has said that he wanted “to create tubes of light so blindingly beautiful it would be difficult to tell if they were structural.”³¹ Reemerging alongside Ito’s own approach to diagrammatic design was a notion of architectural experience tied to aesthetic impact—to the tactile and, in Ito’s words, the “enjoyable” reception of new kinds of space.³² What for Ito had begun as a kind of withdrawal from the contemporary city, or an “ideological refusal of [its] obnoxious banality,” as he has also called it, soon turned into a conceptual investigation of architecture that, while refusing formalism, celebrated “the discovery of a new urban reality” in aesthetic terms.³³

In any case, an architecture that reflects changing urban contexts need rely on more than superficial effects. As Ito recognized early in his career, in a society decidedly “pre-packaged and hermetically sealed,” architecture risks turning into a fiction, with architects “beautifully [visualizing] the wrapping rather than [attempting] to make the content look real.”³⁴ Ito’s radical aesthetic, common also to Sejima’s early works, took inspiration from generic building types, such as the convenience store, whose hierarchical and uniform spaces he would then overturn, positing changed social organizations and novel perceptual experiences.³⁵ Ito married a dramatic sense of beauty with a commitment to respond to new social needs and modes of spatial consumption.

Remarkably, Ito’s pledge to both aesthetics and ethics accompanied his return to core aspects of the architectural discipline. The centrality of structure to Ito’s work following Sendai—be it in his use of exoskeletons to define a building’s image or his interest in interiors derived from complex geometries³⁶—was soon matched by Sejima’s and later SANAA’s profound questioning of established functionalist blueprints, their innovative organization of clients’ needs, and their sophisticated use of materials such as glass and metal. Architecture in Japan would from then on leave behind languages based on signs and symbols, and with them, any simplistic version of architectural beauty. Although terms such as *kawaii* (cute) have been used in analyses of contemporary Japanese architecture,³⁷ such descriptions, as with characterizations founded on the structures’ apparent simplicity, are profoundly misleading when considering the built achievements of SANAA.³⁸ The firm’s aesthetic feats, beyond their defining lightness and effortlessness, have been described as “inclusive” and “democratic,” owing to their innovative, nonde-

Fig. 5: Toyo Ito (Japanese, born 1941). Sendai Mediatheque, Miyagi, Japan, 1995–2001. Scale model 1:150, acrylic, 10 5/8 × 31 1/2 × 29 1/8" (27 × 80 × 74 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the architect in honor of Philip Johnson. Fig. 6: Junya Ishigami (Japanese, born 1974). Balloon, 2006–07. Aluminum truss, 24 × 42 × 46" (730 × 1,280 × 1,400 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Fig. 7: Sou Fujimoto (Japanese, born 1971). Akihisa Hirata (Japanese, born 1971). Kuniko Inui (Japanese, born 1959), and Toyo Ito (Japanese, born 1941). Home-for-All, Rikuzentakata, Japan. Scale model 1:50, 2012. Polystyrene board, 8 11/16 × 7 1/2 × 6 11/16" (22 × 19 × 17 cm). Collection Akihisa Hirata Architecture Office

To Create Architecture that Breathes

I prefer soft objects to hard, curved lines to straight, ambiguity to clarity, spatial diversity to functionalism, and naturalness to artificiality. Humans came out of caves or climbed down from trees and created architecture using geometry. It was considered a human virtue to create geometric order in a naturally chaotic world. Ever since, architecture has been received and appreciated as distinct from nature. The same is true of the body. Humans believe that the beautiful body is separate from nature, a perfectly proportional form to be inscribed in circles and squares. The body, however, is connected to nature through the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Humans used to live by rivers and absorb their taintless water as if part of a stemming stream branch. Humans were part of nature. Ecology and sustainability are gaining importance today. It is evident that architecture must be part of nature, not separate from it. Most modern architecture is composed of euclidean geometry, although there is no perpendicular grid in the natural world. Branched trees display angles of varying degrees, for example, but no branch intersects precisely at a perpendicular. Trees merely repeat a simple rule of branching, and yet they are able to produce complicated forms that fit comfortably within the natural environment. Today we are able to create architecture based on the rules in the natural world by using computer technologies. However, we should use these rules not to make forms that imitate nature but instead to create architecture that breathes and is congruous with the environment.

Toyo Ito



Sendai, a sleek, cubic structure, combines a multimedia hub, library, and information-services center for the audiovisually impaired. Interior walls are eliminated to allow for a fluid space that departs from the typical uniformity of the flat-slab-and-column construction of modern architecture. Thirteen tube-like columns support a stack of lean 538-square-foot (50-square-meter) steel floor plates. Each structural tube is an open latticework of steel that is torqued to resist building stresses and changes in cross section between floors. The dissolution of the structural columns into reticulated, lightweight forms allows each, in addition to providing support, either to carry air-conditioning and power conduits; serve as a

light well; or hold vertical circulation. The facade's double layer of glass acts as a mediated surface: by day, it fluctuates between reflection and translucency; by night, it dissolves against the illuminated building. Envisioned during the early design phase as a pliable structure of "soft tubes that wav[e] slowly under water" and "rubber tubes filled with fluid,"¹ the building's remarkable transparency is, in the architect's words, encountered "like a Japanese garden, where space comes into being as the sum total of the sequences experienced by a person walking through it."²—Phoebe Springstubb



Aerial view of the southeast corner



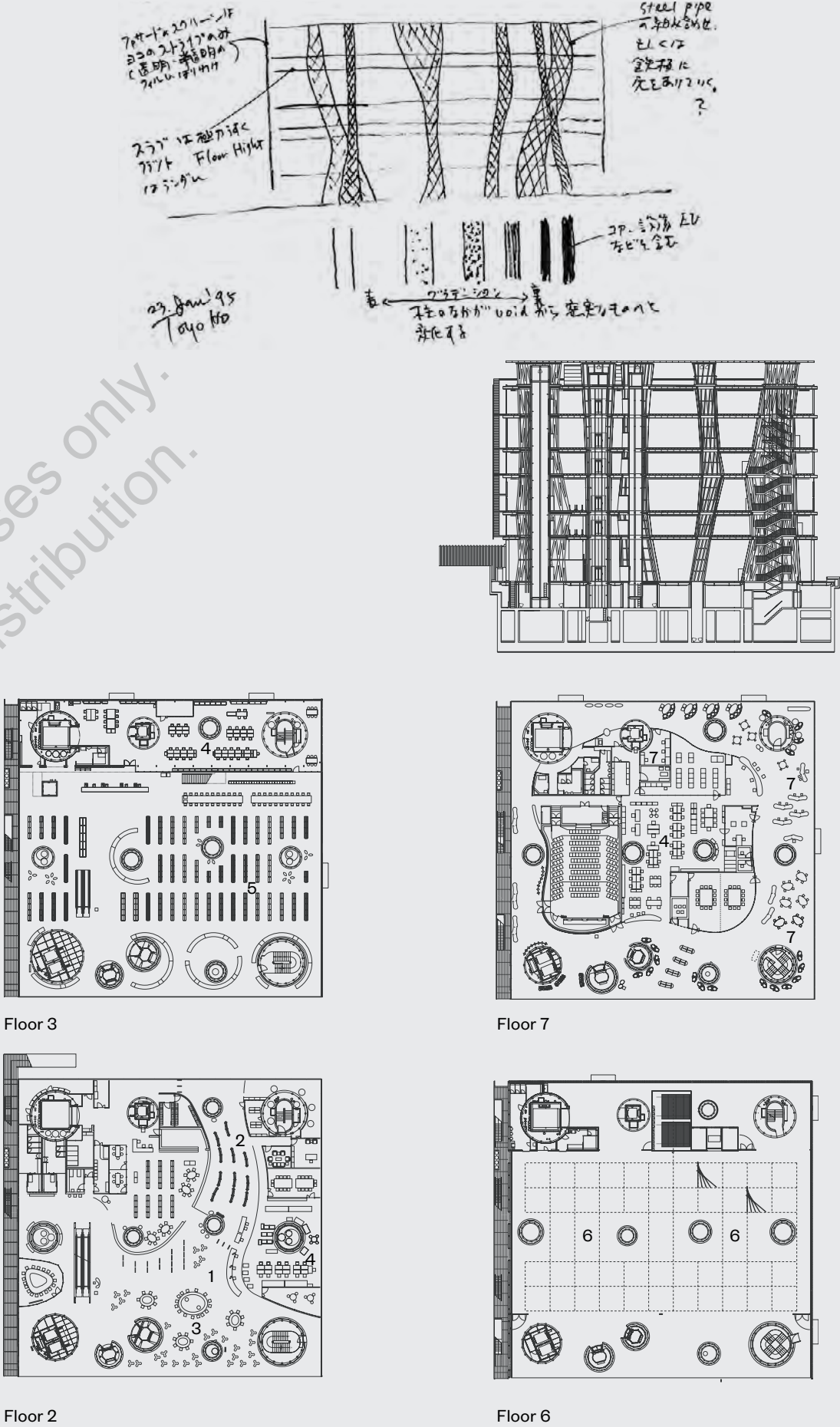
Previous spread: South facade from Jozenji-dori
Above: Detail of the south facade

1. Toyo Ito, "Three Transparencies," in *Toyo Ito: Works, Projects, Writings*, ed. Andrea Maffei (Milan: Electa, 2002), 346. First published in Toyo Ito, *Suké Suké*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Tokyo: Nuno Nuno Books, 1997). 2. Toyo Ito, interview by Toto Gallery staff members, "Sendai Mediatheque—Conversation with Toyo Ito," in Toyo Ito, *Toyo Ito 1971–2001*, trans. Hiroshi Watanabe (Tokyo: Toto, 2014), 180.

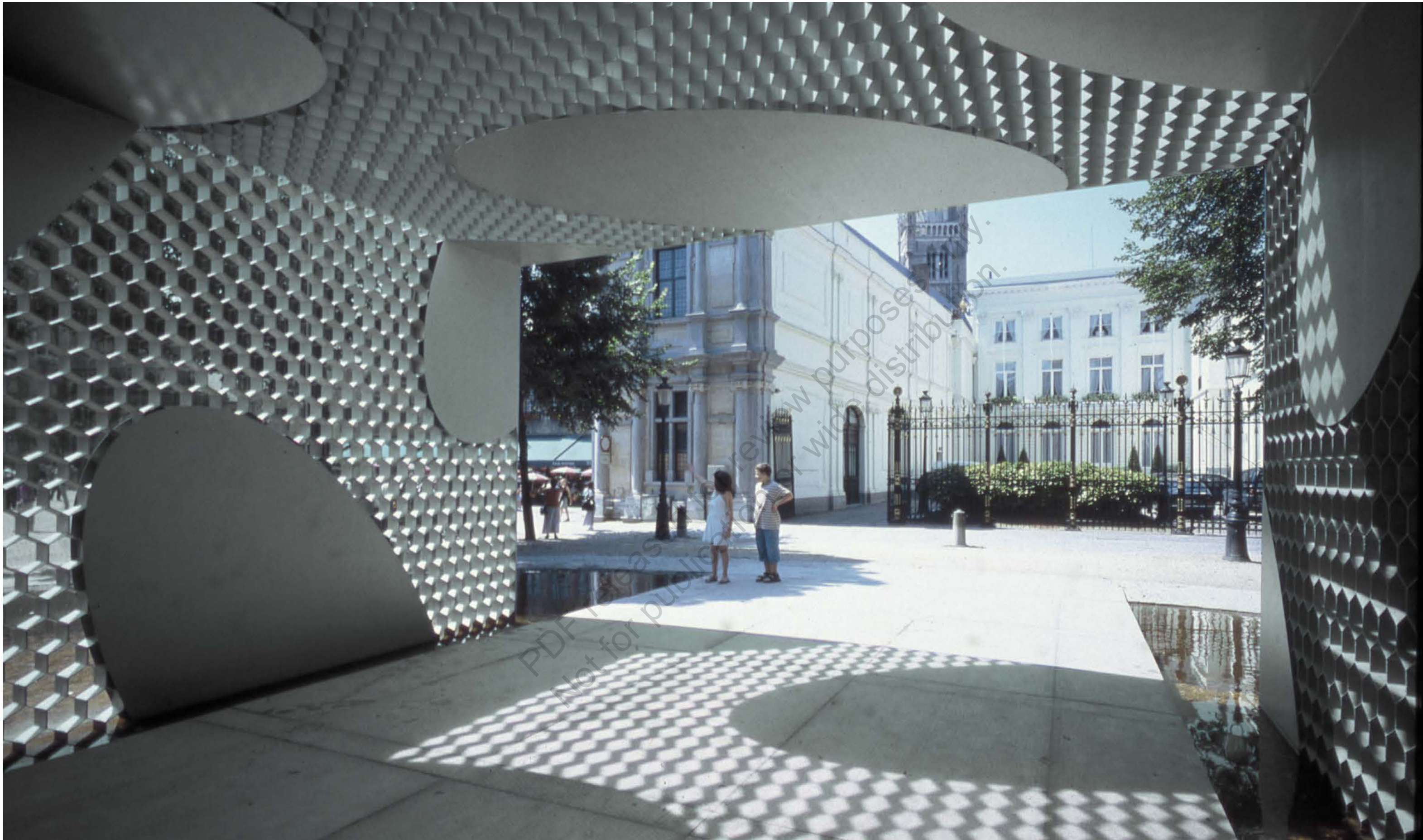


From top: View upward into a tube. Second-floor newspaper- and magazine-browsing area

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From top: Initial sketch proposing composition of structural tubes, 1995. East-west section. Plans of the second, third, sixth, and seventh floors with information center (1), audiovisual library (2), browsing (3), offices (4), library (5), gallery (6), and studio (7)



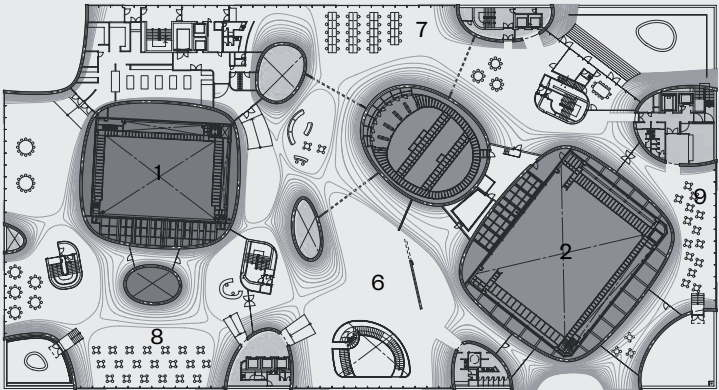
This contemporary folly was commissioned as a temporary project to commemorate the European Union's designation of Brugge as the 2002 European "capital of culture." The pavilion straddled an archaeological site containing the ruins of a medieval cathedral in the city's historic center. Lifted above a circular reflecting pool designed to protect the ruins, the pavilion's walls and roof were made of a lightweight aluminum panel folded over a sheet of polycarbonate that served as a bridge. The honeycomb pattern, insufficiently rigid on its own, was structurally reinforced by the application of large, flat ellipses that evoke the cutouts of Belgian lace. Taking an essentially decorative pattern as its generative motif, the

pavilion transformed the pattern through scale and material, forming a facade that was both structural and, with its filigreed aluminum, transparent—presence without mass. The open, honeycomb-shaped tessellations of the aluminum created a shifting perceptual experience that hid and revealed the cityscape in fragments as visitors passed through the pavilion. Reflective and ephemeral, the pavilion was a playful counterpoint to the surrounding masonry buildings. The light appearance mandated by the preservation of the historic site placed it in conversation with the existing architecture. Intended as a temporary project, the pavilion was disassembled in 2013.—PS

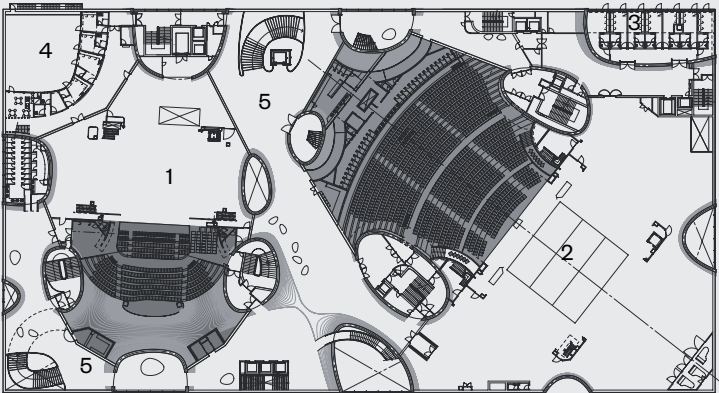


National Taichung Theater, located in a redevelopment zone near the center of the Taiwanese city, holds three opera theaters—the Grand Theater boasts seating for up to two thousand people—along with retail shops and restaurants that open onto a landscaped plaza at the lower floors. The building's porous structure, described as a sound cave, is the result of a fluid topological grid in which three-dimensional curved shapes soften and distort the divisions between horizontal and vertical planes. Individually bent vertical truss walls form the catenary curves of the halls, skinned in metal mesh and given supple surface through sprayed and poured concrete. The concave spaces bear horizontal floors to accommodate

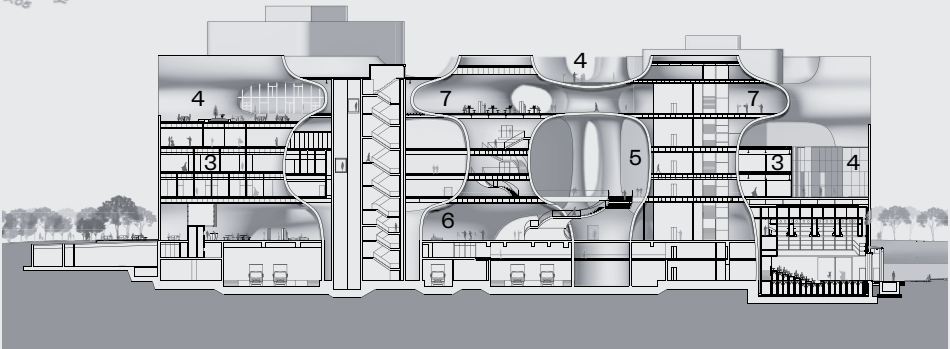
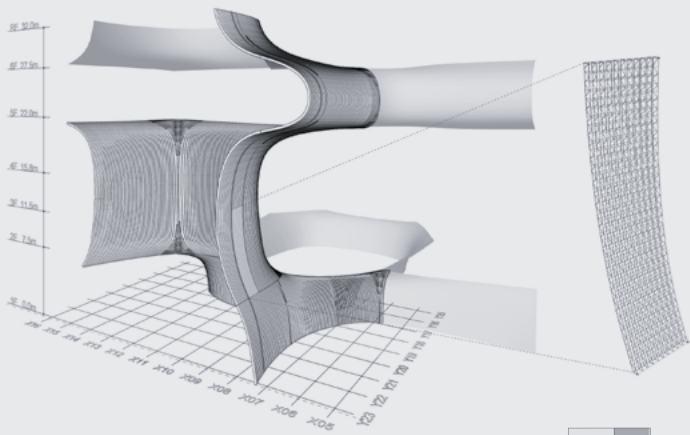
seating and theater stages. National Taichung Theater realizes a longstanding theme in Ito's work, in which the grid is modified and transformed to produce sensory-rich spaces that are as variable as those of the natural world. At the opera house, this connection to the environment is realized by merging interior and exterior in cambered forms that resemble the digestive organs that in Ito's words "are in some ways inside and in some ways outside the body."¹—PS



Floor 5



Floor 2



From top: Plans of the fifth and second floors with playhouse (1), grand theater (2), dressing room (3), terrace (4), foyer (5), event space (6), offices (7), restaurant (8), and green room (9). Catenoid construction unit made up of truss walls. North-south section



Previous spread: View toward the city
From top: Southeast facade from the plaza. Main entrance at the southeast facade

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