Nothingness: Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space

Jin Baek

ROUTLEDGE

Nothingness

Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space

The Christian architecture of Tadao Ando, one of the most celebrated contemporary architects, has acquired a monumental status in post-war religious architecture.

This book explores the cultural significance of Ando's works such as the Church of the Light (1989) in reference to the Buddhist idea of nothingness. Specifically, this book situates the works within the legacy of nothingness expounded by Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), the father of the Kyoto Philosophical School, and its theory of perception and *shintai*, or the Japanese term for body.

The interview text with Ando found in this volume elucidates his conception and embodiment of sacred space as it pertains to nothingness, the relationship between his residential architecture and Christian architecture, and his design approach to the Museum of Kitarō Nishida's Philosophy (2002).

Jin Baek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include cross-cultural issues between East Asia and the West in architecture and urbanism.

To my family

Nothingness

Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space

Jin Baek

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This book is a modest one, yet probably one of the very first in architecture in two aspects: first, in terms of dealing with the influence of the Buddhist idea of nothingness by Nishida, which is equipped with a distinctive notion of body and perception, on the conception of Christian sacred space; and, second, in terms of bridging Japanese phenomenology and contemporary architecture. I think it could be easily a case in the scholarly world that the first becomes the last or at least the most vulnerable to a series of anticipated criticisms. I do see this as the potential fate of any first work and I hold myself responsible for any mistakes that may exist in the book.

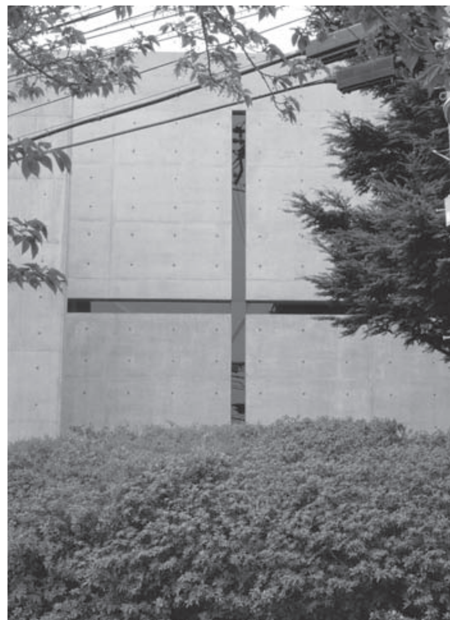
In all humility I must add, however, that this book is a meaningful achievement for me at a personal level. At the time of my birth in a small rural town in South Korea, it must have been impossible for my parents to imagine me departing for the United States to pursue intellectual interests, and, furthermore, at the moment of my departure, it must have been difficult for them to imagine me staying in the States for a period now

far longer than a decade. In a way, they are still waiting, very much like the pine-covered mountains of my hometown and its graceful, sinuous river watering the rice-farming fields below. In tribute to their unremitting waiting—a form of sacrifice—I present this book, written in a strange foreign language and on a topic that is equally as foreign. This work is a testament to their unfailing parenthood, support and patience. This is equally true for my mother-in-law and my late father-in-law. Without their understanding, continuous support and encouragement there would be no book like this today. I also thank my brothers and sisters, and brothers-in-law, for their support. Finally, I share the happiness of completing this work with my wife and children: Youngsun, Soomin, Soochang, and future additions to my family. Youngsun's love, personality and attitude toward life are always a great inspiration and a gentle reminder to me when I inadvertently allow my scholarly castle and vision to make me less attentive to the other joys of life. For these reasons, I dedicate this modest book to all that are mentioned in this paragraph.

Introduction

> *All these likenesses seek to say that God dwells in the emptiness. They are good in so far as they succeed in bringing "emptiness" nearer to human comprehension.*[1]

This work illuminates the conception of Christian sacred space in Tadao Ando's architecture, taking as the major object of interpretation the Church of the Light in Ibaraki, Japan (1989) (Figures I.1 and I.2). In interpreting Ando's church of spatial emptiness, of particular interest is the Japanese religious and philosophical tradition of nothingness (*mu*), which was revived during the twentieth century by Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945) (Figure I.3), the Father of the Kyoto Philosophical School. This revival is characterized by renewed profundity and significance in an effort to confront negative facets of modernity—the visible substance-oriented world perspective and self-enclosed subjectivism. In a sense, this work is proposing a methodological re-orientation for the understanding of Ando's Christian architecture with a view duly attentive to nothingness, a Japanese intellectual legacy equipped with distinctive implications on perception and body. Situating Ando's church within the indigenous tradition is not simply reactionary; it is an acknowledgment of a hermeneutical principle in which tradition is seen as the ontological ground of being, based upon which a meaningful dialogic engagement with the other is possible.



I.1 (facing)
Tadao Ando, interior, Church of the Light, Ibaraki, Osaka, 1989

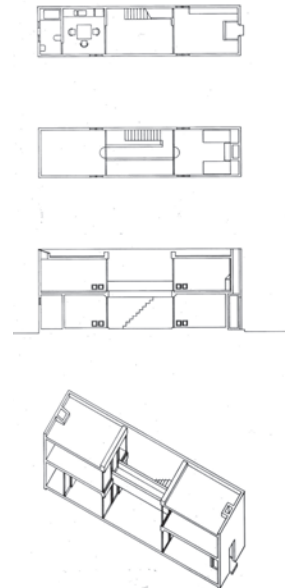
I.2 (right)
Tadao Ando, exterior, Church of the Light, Ibaraki, Osaka, 1989

I.3 (far right)
Kitarō Nishida, photo taken in 1938

Despite an impression that one might receive from the title of this book, which conjoins nothingness and architecture, this work is not concerned with a minimalistic definition of Ando's church architecture. The intention is quite the opposite. The non-figurative, empty form and space of minimalism compensates its poverty by exhibiting the sensuous qualities of the materials themselves and by introducing their dramatic play with natural or artificial lights. While claiming its own autonomous sensuous beauty, the incurably theatrical setting in minimalism is necessarily conjoined with the disappearance of the inhabitant and, along with it, the disappearance of the rich traces and spectrum of life transcending the self-narcissistic aesthetic pleasure: the excessive play of reflectivity in the lobby of the Hotel in Lucerne (2000), Switzerland, by Jean Nouvel; the fashion boutiques by John Pawson in New York and London, which present a "flowing opalescent space anchored in places by monolithic pieces of furniture and divided … by translucent screens";[2] and the Prada Store in Tokyo (2003)

I.4
Tadao Ando, view of the courtyard from the dinning Area, Azuma House, Osaka, 1976

by Herzog and de Meuron, a crystal made of curved and diamond-shaped panes of glass. In particular, within such minimalism as Pawson's—whether it is a residence or a boutique—aestheticism disguises itself as a secularized religious code. In contrast, though restrained at first glance, Ando's architecture—whether a residence such as the Azuma House (1976) (Figures I.4 and I.5) or a religious building such as the Church of the Light—is not an empty aesthetic code. Nor is it concerned with an uninhibited, hypnotizing sensuousness of architectural materials themselves. Rather, it is a capacity to receive not only the ever-changing natural light and the manifestation of material qualities, but also their sublimation into a narrative that aspires to a larger horizon of humanity including the ethical and the spiritual.



I.5
Tadao Ando, plan and axonometric, Azuma House, Osaka, 1976

In this context, the concern of this work is how nothingness, with its implications on perception and body, renews the figurative and corporeal performance of architecture, particularly in the context of Christian architecture. The reason why this work concerns itself with the power of figures partly comes from its major object of interpretation, the Church of the Light, a Protestant church that presents a distinguishing cross of light. The architectural quality of the church in the shape of a rectangular monolithic box is certainly restrained and even minimal. Its simplicity thus marks a striking contrast with, for instance, Le Corbusier's (1887–1965) Chapel of Notre Dame-de-Haut at Ronchamp (1954) (Figures I.6–I.8), the representative Christian church of the post-war period, which invites a visitor into an incessant concatenation of images ranging from Pagan mythology to those of traditional church architecture including the catacomb and Noah's ark. Despite the restrained approach based upon salient poverty of association, however, Ando accepted—or had to accept—the cross, the universal symbol of Christianity. What ensues is an intriguing integration, or conflict if you like, between the reductive ideal of emptiness predicated upon the removal of representational attributes from architectural elements and that of icons and figures, on the one hand, and the cross of light, on the other. How can we come to terms with these two seemingly incompatible attitudes between the reductive and the figurative? If there is any consistency between them, it means that the cross that shines in the emptiness is not the cross that the reductive procedure would take as the object of riddance. The investigation presented here looks into this ontological shift of the cross in the emptiness, transcending the dichotomy between the minimalistic and the figurative, and the architecture of silence and that of parlance.

Nothingness is a unique linguistic device. Its genesis out of a "metaphorical twist,"[3] which joins together the two opposing semantic directions of "nothing" and

I.6
Le Corbusier, exterior, Notre Dame de Haut, Ronchamp, France, 1954

I.7
Le Corbusier, entrance view, Notre Dame de Haut, Ronchamp, France, 1954

I.8
Le Corbusier, interior, Notre Dame de Haut, Ronchamp, France, 1954

"ness," liberates the term from the confines of linguistic scientificity. Instead, it reveals itself as referring to a form of reality, an experiential horizon. Nothingness is a point where language itself becomes aware of its inability to convey true reality; yet, by that same token, it breaks off the precinct bound by rational linguistics and points toward the deep stream of reality. Nothingness thus baffles the Aristotelian prejudice of language as the primary mode of knowing true reality,[4] while lending itself, like a Zen koan that frustrates the intellect yet is nevertheless made up of words, as an inevitable means of conveying the unspeakable. Only in this redefined state of language, nothingness as a conceptual means operates as an aperture to what is elusive and to what cannot be framed, conceptualized, or intellectualized. From a different perspective, then, nothingness as a term exists on account of, or emerges from, the possibility in which the untamable, active reality articulates itself in temporality into the realm of the conceptual.

Strangely, the challenge that nothingness poses to linguistic scientificity is simultaneously the index of its success as a linguistic device. Nothingness not only overcomes any nihilistic connotation of the true reality as a void from which things are completely evacuated, in that nothing*ness* is not simply nothing, but it also outmaneuvers any characterization of itself as an objectifiable concept or entity before the disengaged subject of reflection, in that *nothing*ness is not something which can be regarded objectively. For Nishida, one way to escape this conundrum of double binding —nothingness is neither nothing nor something, or it is nothing and at the same time something—is to consider nothingness as "the ultimate place"[5] of experience, on which the subject of judgment himself stands and, furthermore, from which the perceiving subject and the object to be perceived emerge concurrently. The metaphor of "the ultimate place" is particularly advantageous because, while being existent, it is also non-existent; the subject of judgment is situated within itself, resulting in the impossibility of its objectification by the subject in whatever manner. Nothingness is thus an experiential horizon that embraces both the objectifying subject and the object as unified, internally transcending the dichotomy between the two parties.

Nishida's nothingness, which was formulated around 1926 with his writing "Place (*Basho*)" and developed until his death in 1945, gave rise to two cultural ramifications in post-war Japan. His comprehension of nothingness as the ultimate concrete universal from which, through the logic of reciprocal negation, individual particulars emerge in their concreteness, operated as the bridge between Buddhism and Christianity, characterized by the theology of the self-transcending love of Agape.

I.9
Nobuo Sekine, *Phase-Earth* (*Isō-daichi*), Sumarikyu Park, Kobe, 1968

It also affected the emergence of an art movement called the School of Things (*Mono-ha*). This art movement was vigorously active from the late 1960s to the early 1970s as a remarkable avant-garde current in modern Japan and, more largely, in East Asia.[6] In terms of practice, this art movement was initiated with Nobuo Sekine's 1968 *Phase-Earth* (*Isō-daich*), a "huge cylinder built of packed soil that rose beside a cylindrical hole in the earth" presented in *Sumarikyu* park, Kobe (Figure I.9).[7] Yet, the emergence of the School of Things was not through the presence of this work itself, but through its criticism made by Ufan Lee, a Korea-born philosopher and artist. His consequent writings and criticisms, combined with practices, shaped a cohesive datum bringing together younger artists especially of Tama Art University in Tokyo.[8] His criticism of *Nihongainenha*, or Japanese Conceptual Art, and of such Western art practices as Earth Work, Minimalism and Pop Art, saw them to be still in one way or another the products of a disguised form of the representational will of the anthropocentric subject.

In order to propose an alternative to what he considered unsatisfactory contemporary art movements within and beyond Japan, Lee adopted Nishida's philosophy of "the place of absolute nothingness (*zettaimu no basho*)" and its implication on perception and body. Through this philosophical scaffolding, Lee and other artists of the School of Things practiced "structuralization of the state in which *mono* reveals its existence"[9] and in which the mediating role of the human body in one's perception of the world is re-instated and enhanced. Under the concept of "structuring emptiness," they envisioned the restoration of perceptual depth where dichotomous semiotic representation is overcome through *shintaise*, the co-originating corporeal fabric between subject and object. This kind of practice was one of architecture, rather than of art—art in its traditional sense indicating the masterly creation of two- or three-dimensional objects—in that it was focused on the provision of a new type of place. This rather architectural movement was publicized not only through media internal to the art world such as *Bijutsutechō*, but also through *Space Design*, an architectural magazine established in 1965 with an inter-disciplinary cultural vision, in the hope of rectifying the direction taken by *Shinkenchiku* and *Kenchikubunka*, which it saw to be too purely architectural.[10] Its cultural importance notwithstanding, the School of Things was first, and probably last, mentioned by Arata Isozaki within the discipline of architecture and especially in relation to Ando's architecture. In his "A Refreshing Breeze in Japanese Architecture (*Une brise rafraîchissante dans l'architecture japonaise*)" published in 1985, Isozaki briefly introduced this art movement as the cultural backdrop which had an impact on the advent of Ando's restrained residences of the 1970s.[11]

I.10
Ohno Kyōkai, exterior, near Nagasaki

I.11
Ohno Kyōkai, interior, near Nagasaki

This work's adoption of Nishida's nothingness as the interpretive framework for the Church of the Light is based upon this historical context of post-war Japan. To be sure, this historiography is not so much about defining how the church emerges from the two-fold cultural backdrop—theological and architectural—as about repositioning Ando's Christian architecture within the legacy of Nishida's idea of nothingness. In other words, the church is not simply a perfunctory echo of the post-war cultural milieu, but, as Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002) hermeneutics would suggest, entails a hermeneutic dimension in which Ando embraced Christianity by taking the tradition as the ground of understanding and by being rooted in it. The molding of the church is a creative linguistic event of interpretation, arising from the common ground between nothingness, on which Ando stood, and the God of Christianity, as re-introduced to East Asia with the inception of modernization during the second third of the nineteenth century. Of course, nothingness, as originating from the ancient Indian religious teaching of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, which later came to be incorporated into nothingness when Mahayana Buddhism was transmitted from India to East Asia, and the God of Christianity would present their own particularities towards each other, even those incompatible ones. However, as Gadamer elaborated, this kind of cultural encounter at the level of hermeneutic understanding, which "always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other,"[12] engenders a synthesis mediated through their common ground. It is through this fusion of the horizon of a tradition, or nothingness, in this case, and that of the other, or the God of Christianity, that the other becomes *meaningful* to Ando. It is this emerging common ground between the positive prejudices of the author and the other that opens a dialectical structure of experience between the two parties.[13]

In this way, Ando's church architecture results in one of the most interesting inter-cultural phenomena between East Asia and the West during the modern period. It would be hasty to assume that the Church of the Light was the only meaningful inter-cultural product in the history of Christian architecture of East Asia. Since St. Francis Xavier (1506–1552), one of those who vowed himself on Montmarte to the service of God with St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1557), and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the first grain of Christianity indigenous to East Asia, opened the gate to evangelize the Far East in the sixteenth century, there must have been various versions of the inter-cultural encounter in the realm of architecture. In Japan's case, while pre-modern examples are not existent, there have been numerous churches since the Meiji Restoration (1868) that

I.12
Furue Kyōkai, exterior, near Hirado

address this cultural encounter. Examples include: *Ohno Kyōkai* (1893) (Figures I.10 and I.11) by a French Father, near Nagasaki, built in rustic stone masonry, punctuated with windows for the exterior and a restrained composition between wood and pilaster for the interior; *Furue Kyōkai* (1899) (Figure I.12) near Hirado, a *Minka* (Japanese farm house) style church; *Yamada Kyōkai* (1912) (Figures I.13 and I.14) near Hirado, designed and built by Tetsugawa Yusuke, a local non-Christian carpenter, in Japanese carpentry imitating Gothic and Romanesque motifs, such as the wooden square pillar attached with four shafts, arches, and quartered rib-vaults; and, lastly, the Anglican Church (1930) (Figure I.15) in Nara, built by Kichitarou Ohoki, a local Christian carpenter, in a style alluding to a

I.13
Yamada Kyōkai, exterior, near Hirado

I.14
Yamada Kyōkai, interior, near Hirado