

Excavated Margins: Notes on the Pondering of Matter in the Works of Ryoji Suzuki

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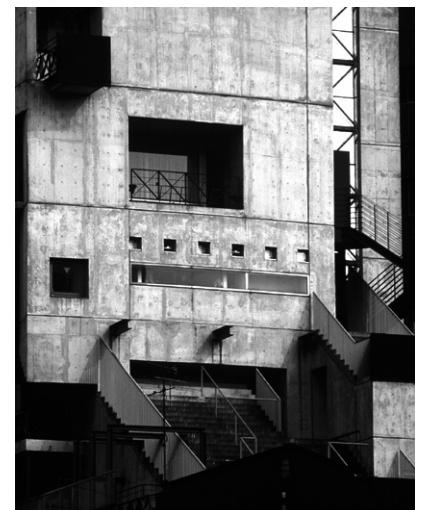


10 *Honkomagome House*

However, building remains essentially tectonic rather than scenographic in character and it may be argued that it is an act of construction first, rather than a discourse predicated on the surface, volume and plan...we may think of it as a 'thing' rather than a 'sign.'

—Kenneth Frampton

Ryoji Suzuki's work defies definition. In spite of over twenty years of practice and a number of very important realizations which constitute landmarks in Japanese contemporary architecture, he has remained a person in the shadow created by the stylistic elusiveness of his own work. Compared to other well known Japanese architects Suzuki's work does not possess an easily recognizable formal expression which could be found in the consistency of the employment of certain tectonic, spatial and compositional constructs and methods. This point of relative obscurity and unpredictability of his work denotes its most important aspect and it is from this point that Suzuki's thinking and acting have to be examined.



Azabu Edge



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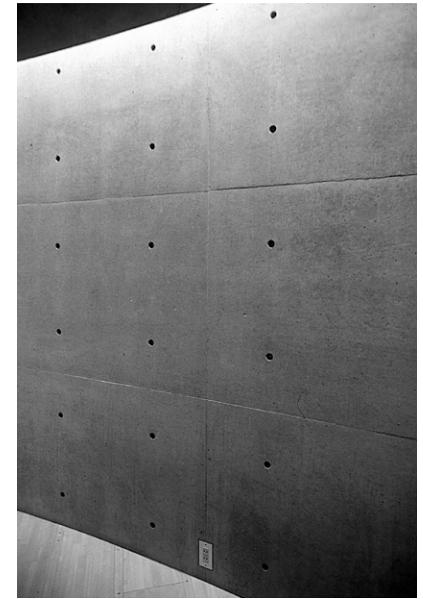
As a preliminary consideration it could be argued that Suzuki's approach to architecture is a heretic one. He is not interested in the finality of architecture as an object and space oriented proposition. This is unmistakably signified in the projects like "Azabu Edge" and the "Honkomagome" house, where the resulting building form appears as an almost unintelligible and intensely dense mass of concrete erratically pierced by the hollows of dark window apertures and transected by the surreal topography of stair flights which, without actual places to connect, converge on themselves as frozen testaments of untold desires. The disquieting sense of inequilibrium born in the physical and formal incompleteness of the fragmented structures and the mute uncertainty of meaning delineates an antithetical idea of architecture. The conceptual strategy of Suzuki's work is not necessarily based in the antimodernist agenda which wishes to dismantle the false unity of form and meaning. The absence of the final resolution in his projects denotes a different kind of heresy, the one which wants to do away with all representational and rhetoric aspects of architecture in order to engage exploration of its more intrinsic dimensions that for him reside in the processes and the structures of the becoming of an architectural object.

This proposition could eventually be made more clear through the comparison of Suzuki's design strategies and methods with those of Tadao Ando. The similarity between Ando and Suzuki is a tentative one found primarily in the formal abstraction of their work where the (exterior) form emerges as an opaque residue of the inwardly focused design operations. These respective design operations and their intentions, however, are based on diametrically opposed conceptual considerations rendering on a closer look any similarity in the work of these two architects purely incidental. For Ando, who operates within the modernist framework of ideological reference, the whole idea of architecture is centered on the notion of space production. Space is conceived as a primary vessel of meaning and the main rhetorical device through which signification is generated. Consequently the sole purpose of the design method in his architecture is to inscribe the space. The use of geometry, light, and matter, notwithstanding Ando's profound knowledge and understanding of these elements, is predicated upon their conceptualization as instruments in the creation of space, and architecture analogously. Since Ando's method is always based on a ploy: the creation of space as a predetermined and unquestionable point of the final resolution of all architectural action, the physical means through which the design is materially executed (concrete) are used subordinately to the ploy where their nature is allowed expression only to the extent that it serves to construct and objectify the preconceived idea of architecture.

In relationship to this "traditional" method of architectural production, Suzuki's work embodies a curious conceptual inversion. While Ando seeks reality and authenticity of architecture in the rhetorical dimensions of its spatial constructs, Suzuki himself, relative to the same fundamental questions, is preoccupied with exactly the opposite: the exploration of the invisible dimensions of the inner workings of physical and formal structures that constitute architecture as a corporeal entity. In other words he seeks [reality of] architecture in its physical means rather than ends to which these means are put. His design method is predominantly dissective and analytical centered on the desire to create a rupture, to open up and intersect an internal dimension of architecture which resides within the thickness of its walls, hollowness of its bodily cavities and the taste of its matter. The purpose of the rupture, however, is not to unmask and explicate but, rather, mark a passage into an uncharted territory where things are pregnant with their own shadows whose mysterious sediments can be deciphered only through the poetic vision.



Suzuki—House in Higashi-Kurume



Ando—Kidosaki Residence



*Images left to right:
Ando—Rokko Chapel*

Suzuki—House in Higashi-Kurume



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What Suzuki seems to be searching for is a primary generative state of architecture, an elemental condition inherent in all architectural works which, at the same time, is inexhaustible by them. This would hypothetically imply that the finite form of an architectural object is only tentatively so and that it actually circumscribes its own opposite—a parallel and latent otherness of its formal and spatial makeup which resides within the physical system that renders it present. The most explicit example of such an idea is the intrigue of the framing stage in a house construction. It marks a dramatic moment of becoming in which space and form are progressively fluid and transparent and all possibilities for their combination and intersection seem simultaneously present and open. Hence, it could be argued that the resulting architectural object represents just one of the possible spatial and formal configurations inherent in its underlying generative structure.



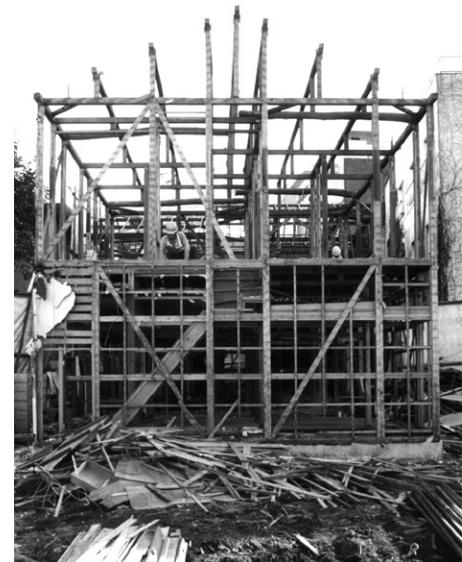
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The cavity of a wall contains within the darkness of its breath the concealed dimension of the becoming of architecture—it is a repository of dormant potency that lies sedimented in its physical textures. To open it up means to awaken and release an inverse world where the singularity of the constituted architectural object is dissolved into its multiple shadows that inscribe the uncontainable depth of the conceptual matter which is its incarnating source. Suzuki's incisive design operations are an attempt to trace out these shadows and discover in their deposits the other, latent, architectural configurations invisibly inscribed within the body of a building. In doing so he eventually hopes to uncover the elemental condition of architecture that resides in the spirit of its own materiality. The conscience that arises from such an exploratory process encompasses an idea of physical plurality of architecture which cannot be subsumed into any formal condition. Instead, opposed to form and space, the physical substance is perceived to, within its own internal structure, embody the sui generis of architecture.

Suzuki's design method represents an almost reverse, subtractive, process of making whose expressive power bears a curious resemblance with the work of the late American architect and artist Gordon Matta-Clark. In spite of the relative ideological difference - Suzuki's actions are in no comparable degree motivated by the activist political agenda—their work centers on the similar desire to interrupt the single-dimensionality of the physical perspective of architecture and consequently, by deconstructing the normativity of space and form, reinscribe its body as a vessel of unsuspected depth. The vertiginous voids of Matta-Clark's magic chain saw incisions in the bodies of the condemned buildings, their haunting surreality arrested in the silent echo of still photographs, represent unsurprisingly intense explorations and extractions of the meaning of materiality of architecture. They, in the intangibility of their hollowness signify matter, the palpable shadows of the joist spaces and the dust of time deposited in the layers of the intersected plaster planes from which they were born.



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Absolute Scene

In Suzuki's work the volatility of chain saw gestures is replaced, or rather concealed, by more subtle, process oriented, operations. The reversal of the construction process in the project "Absolute Scene" employed as a strategy for the dismantling of two building structures in Tokyo had, in almost analogous thematic fashion to Mata-Clark's work, produced an utterly dramatic moment of the poetic revelation of architecture. At the point where no more physical reduction of the existing structures was possible, with all semblance of their form but that of the materiality of the wood skeletons lost, in an infinite fraction of time which divides essence and oblivion, Suzuki, through the minimalist mastery of glass contrapting, had succeed in suspending its movement and uncovering within the depths of the barred matter the prefiguration of an hitherto invisible ontological dimension of architecture buried in these mundane objects.



Absolute Scene

It is perhaps arbitrary to insist on the connection between Suzuki's and Matta-Clark's work, particularly since Matta-Clark was fairly unknown outside American art, rather than architecture, circles. However, judging the work itself, the comparison seems to be inevitable. More than methodology, the insistence on approaching architecture by way of the conceptualization of its materiality is what brings Suzuki ideologically closer to Matta-Clark than to any of his contemporaries in Japan. Like Matta-Clark, Suzuki is also frequently referred to as an artist.

What eventually defines work of art—versus architecture—is the fact that its subject cannot be isolated from the medium [material] through which it is produced, or more precisely, it is exactly the medium that constitutes a conceptual framework of an artistic idea. Suzuki's conceptualization of architecture relative to the exploration of the matter/idea causality falls very much within such a category of things and it is in this respect that his work comes closest to that of art. The causality of matter and idea is in Suzuki's work the primary question whose pursuit transcends and supersedes all programmatic and utilitarian concerns and relegates architecture into realm where there is no distinction between an exploratory artistic act and a productive design act: they both constitute architecture in as much as they are used as instruments in confronting the question of its materiality. His projects embody a compelling liberating force which springs from their continuous positioning on the outer limits of the normative boundaries of architecture. Their true power, however, becomes fully unfolded only when these boundaries are finally transgressed.

All photographs by Vladimir Kristic except those of 'Absolute Scene' courtesy of Shigeo Anzai, Tokyo.



Kohun-ji Temple



Kohun-ji Temple



Ring Building

