fig 1 (top left) SYNTAX, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 1990 (Photo: Tom Daniell)
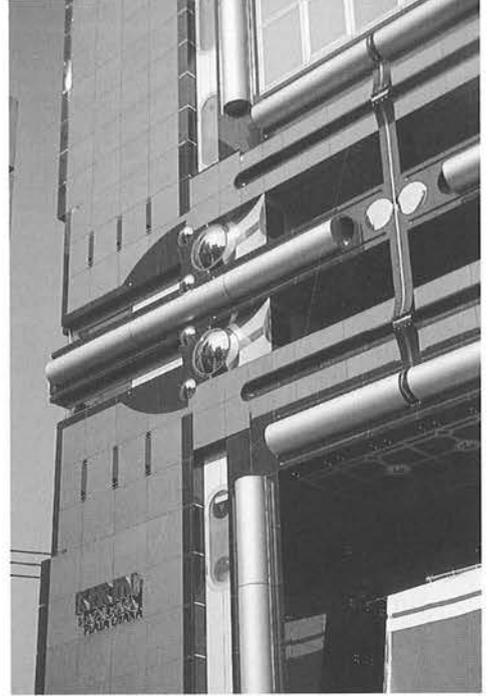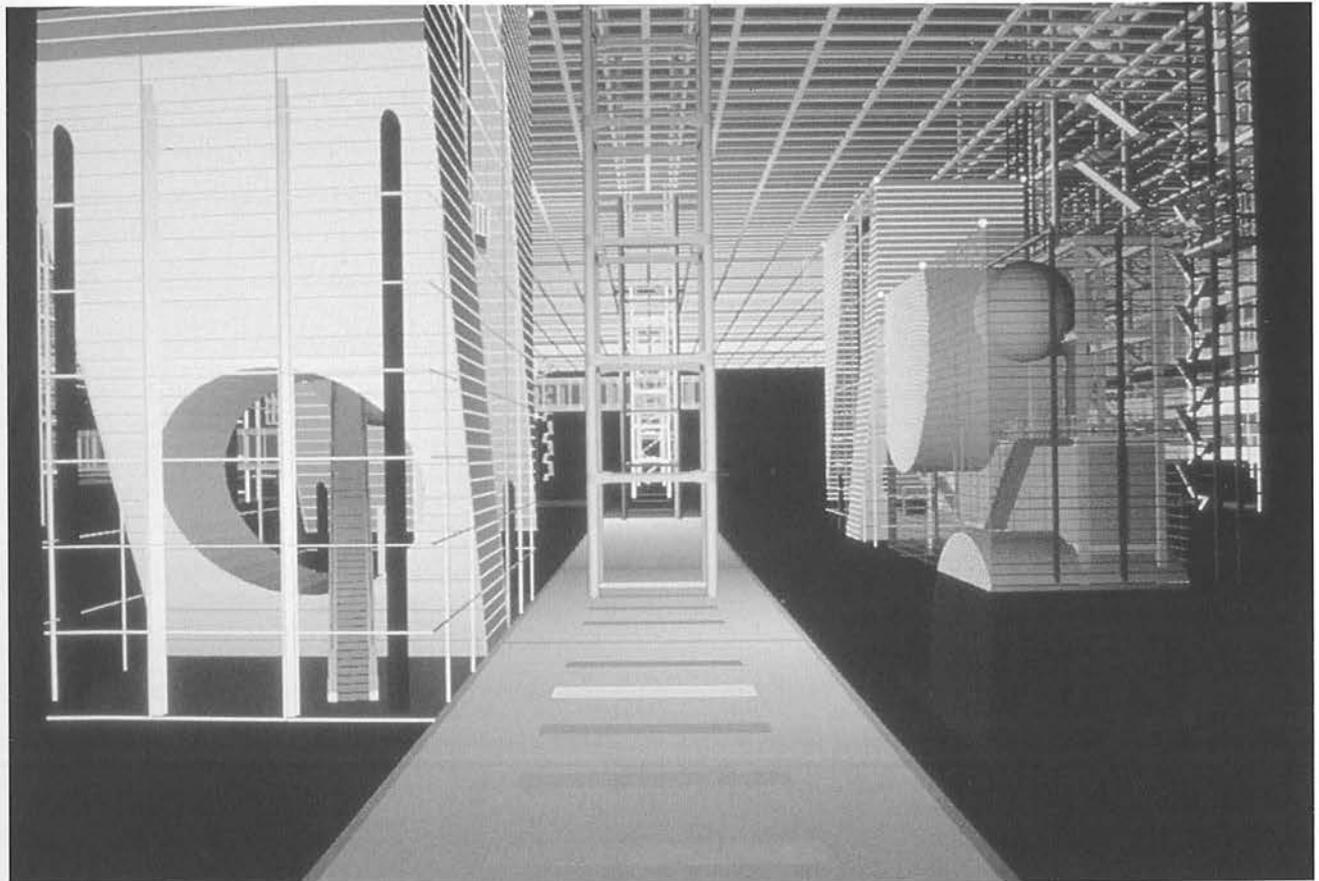fig 2 (top right) Kirin Plaza, Osaka, 1987 (Photo: Tom Daniell)
fig 3 (bottom) Crystal Monolith, Yokohama, 1992 (Computer graphics: courtesy of Akihiko
Endo, Shin Takamatsu Architect & Associates)

INTERVIEW WITH SHIN TAKAMATSU AND TOM DANIELL
# Ornament and (anti)Urbanism

**TD** Your architecture is uncompromisingly individualistic and without apparent precedent. It has been characterised as a response to the overpowering and chaotic nature of the contemporary Japanese city. This is certainly true of a building like Kirin Plaza Osaka, located in the Shinsaibashi district of Osaka, one of the most intense urban environments in all of Japan. Kirin seems excessive in photographs, but in reality it is silent and serene: the eye of the storm. There, it is a perfect response. However, it seems ironic that the majority of your built work to date is located here in Kyoto. This is a very traditional city, in both architecture and custom. How do you regard context in your work?

**ST** There are two ways to deal with context. One is to harmonise as much as possible, to work with utmost sympathy for history, tradition and the aesthetics of the surrounding buildings. By way of analogy, imagine the city to be a length of *obi*.[1] If you wish to add to or repair the *obi*, you could weave a new pattern into it using a very similar thread and stitch. This would then become indistinguishable from what was existing. The second method would be to inlay a brilliant and complex knot of gold thread into the *obi*, to transform it. This is my method. Kyoto has a profound tranquillity which rapidly assimilates all new intrusions. It is a form of stagnation. The context here is something that must be played with, challenged, fought and transfigured. In creating a new building, it is necessary to also create a new place, to redefine the surroundings.

As long as the making of a building is intended to add value to the city, architecture and urbanism cannot be separated. When I make a building, I am always considering both the immediate context and the deep structure of the city.

**TD** Kyoto is becoming increasingly modernized; tradition is fading. You have said Kyoto is dying.

**ST** Entropy increases. All cities must die, and it is exciting to be present at their death. What is important is how a city dies. Unfortunately, Kyoto is dying very badly. On the other hand, Vienna is dying well. The Viennese show wisdom in dealing with their city. Kyoto needs such wisdom right now.

**TD** Wisdom in what way?

**ST** We must take account of that which makes a city unique. One thing vital to Kyoto is *shakkei*.[2] *Shakkei* enhances and invigorates every space in the city, and allows spectacles such as the *diamon-ji*.[3] As long as Kyoto does not lose its *shakkei*, it will die well. Unfortunately, projects such as the Kyoto Tower Hotel and the new Kyoto JR Station were designed without thought for this, without an understanding of Kyoto. If the city was analyzed more intelligently, better architecture would result, and Kyoto would die with dignity.

**TD** Many of your commissions have been from developers and other commercial clients, yet these buildings have very powerful, almost religious, qualities, far in excess of the average tenant building. You once said, in reference to the LINKS building, "To me, a commercial building is like a temple ... commercial space, in an extreme sense, is a space to sublimate and to rescue us from all our wants and cravings."[4] Are such buildings intended to ritualise consumerism? Do you believe contemporary society has substituted materialism for religion?

**ST** No. Materialism will not bring us closer to the infinite. However, commercial space requires intense realization. If we use language as an analogy, a word does not exist in isolation. The word becomes a sentence, a page, an idiom of its own. If you read a book - Mishima perhaps, or Pynchon - you gain far more than just a collection of words. The words attain a certain synergy. It is the same with architecture. A commercial building must be more than functional. It must be architecture.

In the case of LINKS, that is a building which is intended to be seen from a distant place. A person seeing LINKS has a glimpse of a different world, a different definition of their world. Each viewer
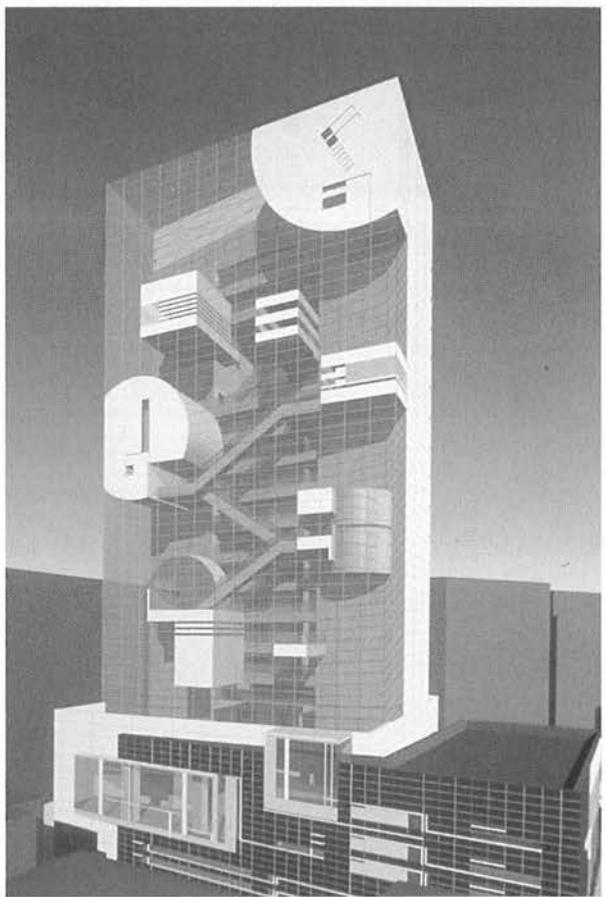
fig 4 (top left) "the garden of abstract forms" Kunibiki Messe, Matsue, Shimane-ken, 1993 (courtesy of Nac sa & Partners)
fig 5 (top right) Okamura Research Centre, Yokohama, 1992 (Computer graphics: courtesy of Akihiko Endo, Shin Takamatsu Architect & Associates)

fig 6 (bottom) Kunibiki Messe, Matsue, Shimane-ken, 1993 (courtesy of Nac sa & Partners)

creates their own definition. I want to create an architecture that enriches and transfigures its surroundings. If architecture is a language, then LINKS is not only a means of communication, but a totally new word in the mind of the perceiver.

**TD** And the function of consumerism is then irrelevant?

**ST** If we are to believe Hegel, architecture is building without function.

**TD** I am interested in the paradigm shift regarding technology that has occurred in your work in recent years. This is perhaps exemplified by the differences between the SYNTAX building in Kyoto and the Crystal Monolith project for Yokohama. SYNTAX is a concrete fortress ornamented with mechanistic details; Crystal Monolith is a floating glass box, its form defined by the LCD video screens on its surface. The references here are to information technology, electronics rather than mechanics.

**ST** There is indeed a paradigm shift between these projects. Architecture is always changing, and technological developments will guide these changes. Crystal Monolith is a field of serial simulations, manifested as a simple glass box. Electronic and media technology provide an appropriate metaphor for architecture in the public domain. Technology, the machine, is a means by which architecture may be transformed.

**TD** Why the machine?

**ST** The machine has two important aspects. Firstly, the machine is a sign, that is, a visual message. Secondly, it is a metaphor: it has an invisible function. The machine *desires* something. It desires transcendence, and this secret function is more important than its appearance. A machine expresses both functional efficiency and the invisible dynamic forces that act within it. My machines are pure energy. They provoke and transform their context.

**TD** The mechanistic detailing of your early work was generally unrelated to function, yet in Crystal Monolith the ornament has apparently become inseparable from the structure. Similarly, in Kunibiki Messe and the Okamura Research Centre, you are dealing with forms that seem to be simultaneously undecorated yet entirely decorative in and of themselves. The distinction between essential and auxiliary, between the ornament and the ornamented, is no longer clear in any conventional sense.

**ST** Such a distinction has never existed in my work. Throughout history, ornament has been seen as something added, a question of rationality and efficiency versus beauty and grandeur. I am interested in something in between, beyond questions of utility and decoration. I compose architecture. It is all essential.

**TD** It is Hegel who suggests architecture is at its most powerful when it is most concerned with appearance, with pure symbolic power. Perhaps Kirin Plaza is a good example. The light towers are ornamental, yet completely integral to the architecture.

**ST** Yes. Kirin Plaza is a monument without physical form. You have seen Kirin Plaza by night: the building dissolves into darkness, and the floating towers remain. It is architecture composed of light.

**TD** I have noticed connections between your recent work and certain aspects of traditional Japanese architecture. The early buildings were dense, formally-complete monuments, yet your current work has become more sequential and episodic, freer in its composition. This interest in the time- oriented, experiential possibilities of architecture has obvious links with spaces such as Katsura Riky  or Ry an- ji stone garden.

**ST** Two major factors led to these changes. The first is the issue of scale. The early buildings were very small, and hence designed to be instantly comprehended by those who see them. I wanted people to feel their power and strength in the first glance, to experience a moment of ecstasy when
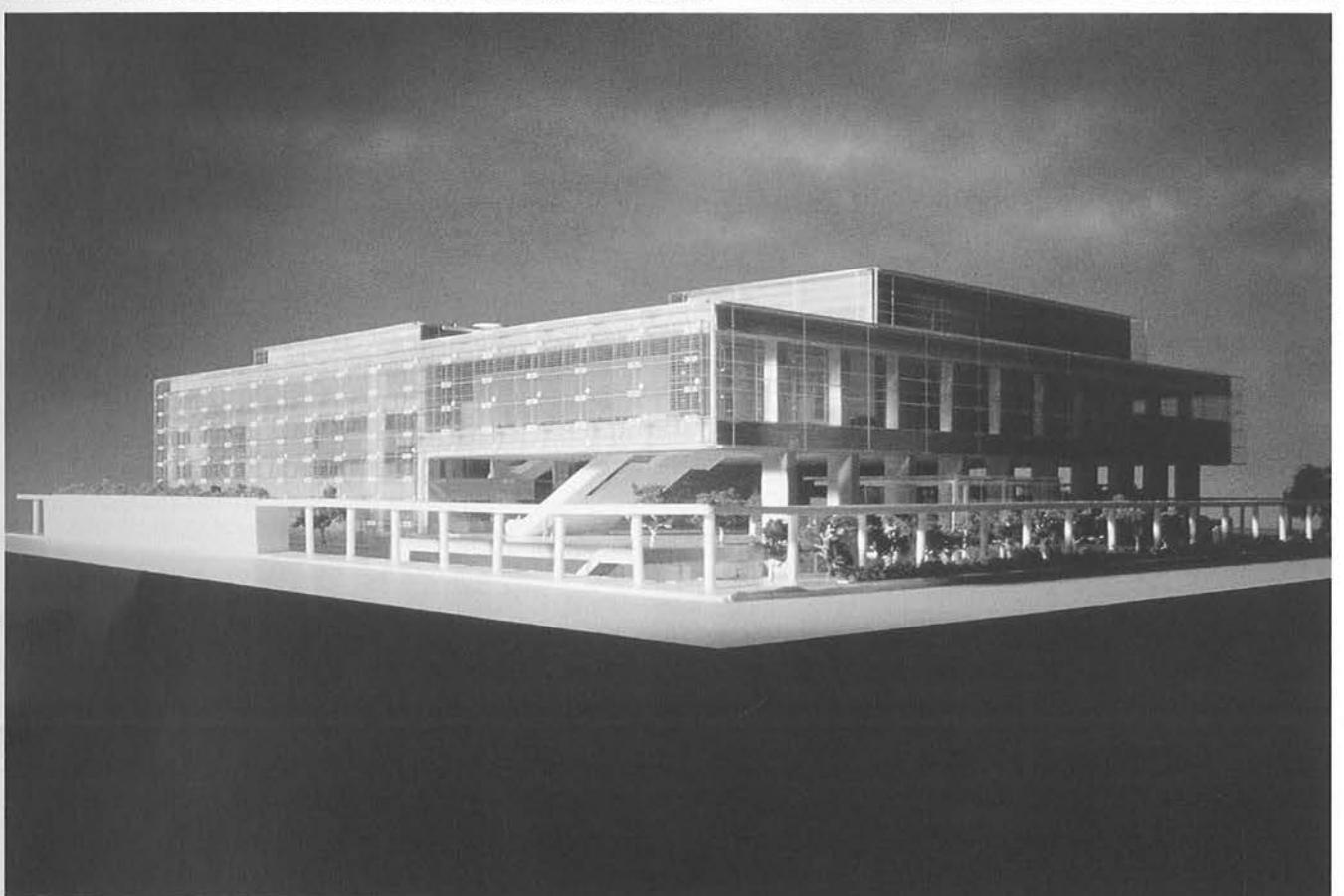
fig 7 (top) A stone garden designed in the Karesansui (waterless stream) style circa 15th century, Ry an-ji temple, Kyoto (photo: Tom Daniell)
fig 8 (bottom)Kyoto Concert Hall, 1991 (courtesy of Shin Takamatsu Architect & Associates)

they encounter these buildings. However, as I started working at a much larger scale, I had to allow for the time it takes to comprehend vast forms and spaces. Such buildings require the accumulated understanding of their many aspects. I began to question the possibilities of large scale, to experiment with what I might achieve during the time it takes to perceive these buildings.

The second reason is that many of my commissions are now for public buildings rather than tenant buildings, and there is a huge difference in the design process. The programmes for public buildings are complex and varied. Tenant buildings simply require neutral, open space. On the other hand, specific functional requirements become very important for public projects. The complexities of the brief guide the design process.

**TD** So form follows function?

**ST** In a sense. While designing Kunibiki Messe, I was focusing on the programme very intensely. The building required a tight hierarchical system. We may design with diagrams showing different programmatic functions connected by line segments. This can then be translated into an arrangement of spaces. I struggled for a long time with this approach, and the results were unsatisfactory. I then shifted my attention from the functions to the line segments themselves.These tend to be all but ignored, and resolved into corridors and alleyways of no architectural power. I wanted to create a new type of line between elements, a new method of division and connection. I intended to create a building in flux, in a fluid equilibrium. I don't mean this as a banal deconstructivist aesthetic, but in an experiential sense. Rather than connecting the elements with lines, I allowed the elements to be swallowed up by the lines. At ground level in Kunibiki Messe, there is a 90-metre long processional space. In the taller section of the building, there is a 24-metre high glazed volume containing a number of floating elements, each with a different function: the "garden of abstract forms." There is a similar play of elements within transparent voids in the Okamura Research Centre and YKK Okayama projects. From the original planning diagrams, line segments without dimension became these enormous spaces.

The elements themselves are held in a delicate balance. If you imagine a bowl of water with several apples floating in it, over time the apples will find a stable equilibrium in relation to each other. Or if you look at the kanji character *kokoru*, the location of the fourth and final stroke is not fixed, but is contained within a zone defined by the preceding three.

The design process for these buildings involves a rigorous examination of the programme, followed by an analysis of time in the abstract. It is each particular system which provides the solution, through rigid adherence to every aspect of the system rather than by capricious transgressions of its rules. A system is always impoverished, but it is a poverty that guarantees richness. The solutions lie within this poverty. The purer the system, the greater the possibilities for discovery.

I am aware that my work right now is moving closer to aspects of traditional Japanese architecture. There is a similar equilibrium involved. For example, at Ry an-ji, if one stone is moved, or a stone is added, that space is significantly altered. Japanese space is always balanced on the edge of change. The system may be relatively flexible, but altering a single element can radically affect the entire structure.

**TD** If these recent projects are related to the minimalist zen space of Ry an-ji, are buildings such as Kirin Plaza and SYNTAX related to the ornate and hermetic Shinto shrines, for example T sh g gate at Nikk ?

**ST** Yes.

**TD** Your buildings have always floated. The recessed podiums and top-heavy compositions of the early buildings create the illusion of weightlessness.

**ST** I am trying to set architecture free. Architecture is constrained by so many things: function,

budget, building codes, systems, institutions, society, daily life, common sense. But above all, it is constrained by gravity. It is very difficult to free architecture from any of those things, although historically it has perhaps been attempted through religion or technology. To actually free architecture from gravity itself is, of course, totally impossible, so I try to achieve this freedom metaphorically rather than physically. In other words, I want an architecture that plays[5] with gravity. My architecture expresses the hope of one day escaping from gravity. In the early buildings, I wished to suggest a kind of instability, through their heavy appearance and tenuous connections with the ground. Although those buildings wish to float free, they barely levitate.

**TD** Your work is beginning to achieve that freedom, in projects such as Kunibiki Messe.

**ST** Perhaps. Those projects are tentative experiments. To simply resist gravity is no longer sufficient; I must escape gravity altogether.

**TD** Your architecture has always been explicit about its own artificiality, its unequivocal separation from the natural world. Recently, however, I have noticed that the boundaries between architecture and environment are becoming ambiguous. Why the shift from darkness to light, from enclosure to openness, from pure artifice to the inclusion of nature?

**ST** I have become interested in blurring the division between a building and its surroundings. This is related to the shift to public projects. For public buildings, you must examine their relationship with the city very carefully. Of course, you must deal with the facade, the structure, the space, but you must also deal with the transition between the surroundings and the building interior in a new way. For example, in my design for the Kyoto Concert Hall, the building changes over time[6]. It is a flexible[7] system which interacts with its environment. One section is clad in a three-layer "breathing membrane." On the outer perimeter there is a glass boundary wall, which absorbs the landscape. The glass wall is required for the functioning of the building, although I would rather have nothing at all, no separation between inside and outside. Behind the glass is a layer of infra- red-reflective polycarbonate. Behind this is a system of computer-controlled timber louvres. These louvres filter interior and exterior space, and allow glimpses of the activities within. Thus, the building breathes light. Ultimately, it will breathe in the history of Kyoto.
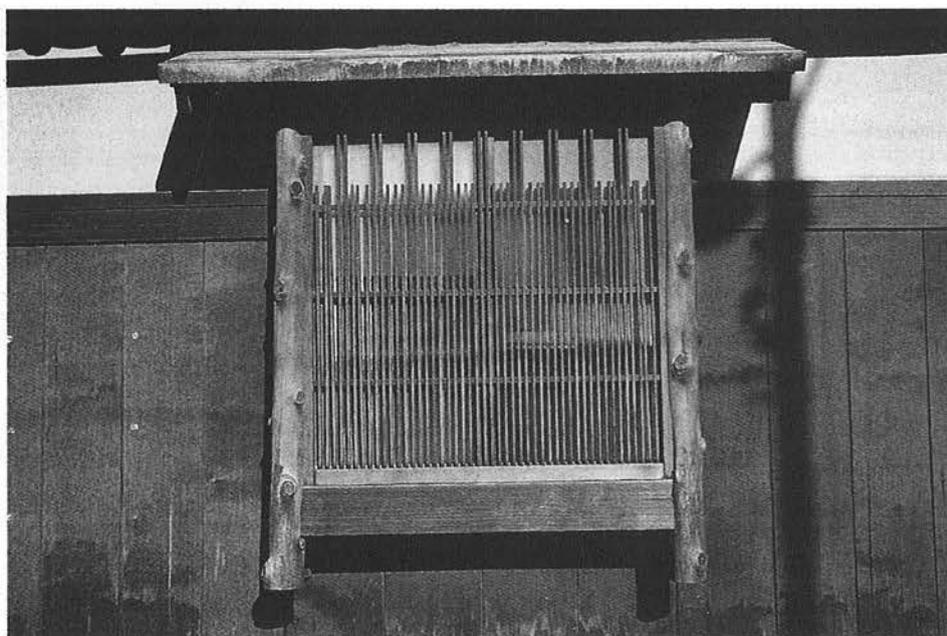


fig 9 (above) Katsura Riky, the former Imperial Villa, Kyoto, circa 17th century (photo: Tom Daniell)

I wish to alter the relationship between the interior and the exterior in architecture. I wish to mingle these two conditions, to layer space.

**TD** Japanese architecture has always layered space as you describe.

**ST** Of course. The traditional Kyoto townhouse is separated from its surroundings by membranes and lattices, by *shoji*[8] screens, marsh-reed blinds and bamboo shutters. The Kyoto Concert Hall project achieves this layering by means of high technology.

I am now searching for new types of spatial relationships, an open and ambiguous architecture. This is the ambition of the series of projects beginning with Kunibiki Messe. As I deal with public buildings, I wish to redefine the public domain. I am trying to eliminate boundaries.

June 1993, Kyoto, Japan.

Translation: Hiroshi Watanabe (Japan) and Hideaki Inoue (New Zealand)

[1]The traditional kimono sash, made from hand-woven silk.
[2]"borrowed scenery," the inclusion of distant views as background in the design of a building or garden. Kyoto is located in a basin, and is surrounded by bush-clad mountains. While the middle distance is ignored, the mountains are acknowledged and included in the composition.
[3] An annual festival in which bonfires are lit on seven mountainsides around downtown Kyoto, in the shape of enormous Kanji characters.
[4] "A Temple", *GA Architect* 9, (1990) pp. 118-119.
[5]"tawamureru", a childlike freedom from cares.
[6] "utsuroi", transient, floating, ever-changing.
[7] "kaihoteki", open, frank, easy, flexible.
[8] sliding rice paper screens.