the possible future of architecture
MASAKI FUJIHATA / KEVICHI IRIE

There is an impending feeling that it is impossible to have any new ideas on architecture — that architecture is in a desperate state.

From a modernist point of view, form and space are constantly forced to be new.

New architecture creates something opaque for new individuals, new space and form with no traces of the past. But matured, it falls into the dilemma of ambiguity being a subject to confront or a source of repulsion.

At such a point, architecture settles down as another historical genre, enumerating and repeating quotations from its historical context. This was the kind of thinking of the postmodernists about the categories of architectural forms.

Something that is essentially opposite gets smudged, its relationship becomes obscure, overshadowed by form. In this way architecture is neutralized and abducted by categorizing institutions.

In our reality, new schemes of relationship are generated through the forthcoming of new technologies; between people and objects, and between people themselves. We could liken this hyper-environment to computerized word processing; words, which before were understood sequentially, transmute into one object, exposed to a random access editing process. A sea of possibilities as opposed to the illusion of the original one-off creation.

A new concept of creation is now developing, that of the computer model which converts both the intractable world of facts — the form/material relations — and highly imaginative flights or logical proposals, into the same abstract patterns patterns which can be freely manipulated.

For such a model even the most obvious process of calculation must be analyzed into orderly steps before it can be used for simulated prototyping; the same step can follow, even anticipate, the least obvious and most complex formsof unconscious reasoning. Not that hidden depth could be revealed by such a model — rather everything is flattened by it. Above all, the very distinction between abstract formalism and pragmatic realism is eliminated.

Formerly, designers were classified as formalists and realists. The formalists developed viable general rules that could be applied as a method. The design of a building entailed the selection of a suitable method and the pursuit of its logical consequences. Architecture became a game, but nevertheless one that — paradoxically — is deemed to be useful. The realists on the other hand, sought to subordinate form to the world, limiting the field on which any such game could be played.

Although architecture is woven into the hyperenvironment of the real city, it still exists in the world of visibility — space and form can never be hyper themselves.

All architecture built as a metaphor of that kind of technology is nothing more than a kind of papier-maché. I want to find a way out of this dilemma.

Architecture, which has been understood as a sort of geometrical composition, consists of a limited number of physical elements within the spatial void.

Alternatively, suppose architecture is not a porous geometric construction, but a whole filled with invisible dynamics. The old theory will be invalidated because it is unable to differentiate this kind of whole.

It can't be accomplished by a detailed cataloguing and specific recognition of each of the species of differentiation that operate within the space.

This model of the space, as an invisible dynamics with distinctive heterogeneity, is our world today. In this real world an aggregate as architecture involves different forms, different programs, which may be understood as sort of forms themselves.

The common critique: there is nothing new worthwhile in architecture, most particularly not any new forms, and only the limitation of traditional hierarchical thinking is evident.

No, it seems to me, by every indication today's society is to the contrary. The stock of possible forms, of aesthetic and institutional forms, is not depleted at all. It is just about to be created.

One option for architecture is to enfold a hyperreal environment and to respond with concrete forms, Raum-Gestalten, to global phenomena.

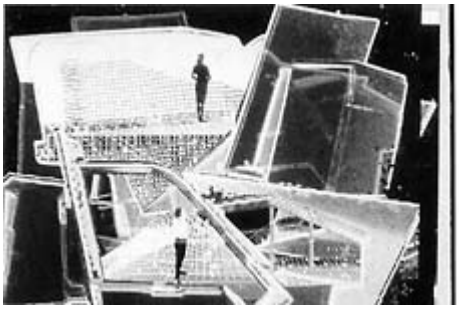
New technologies need many experiments. If we open our eyes we can see a broad field of possibilities emerging.

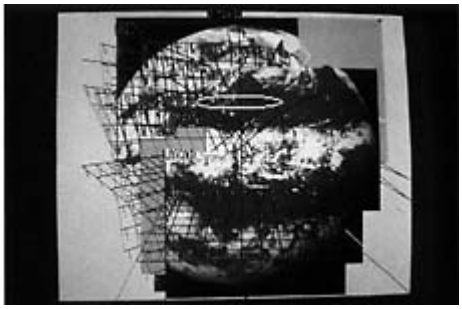
Architectural — and Gestalt-theories are still in the age of the Stone Age compared to technological advancements, to step over existing theories and abandon the concept of fine architecture.

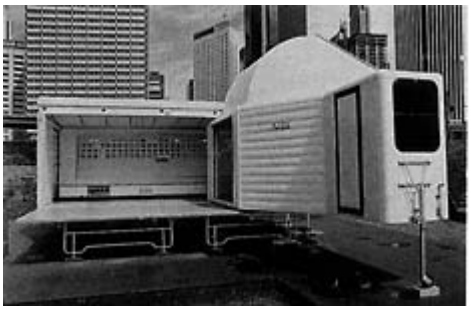
Even though creativity might be an illusion, we want to be positive in this bewilderment: this is the age for generating the totally new.

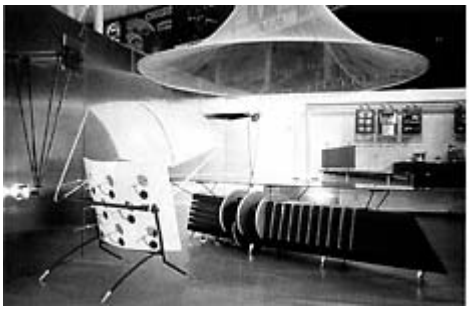
Now we do not have any expression for a prospective architecture. It would be exciting to further generate confusion, the creation of models, which refuse any simple categorization, the creation of intellectual currencies that entail an unexplored understanding of form and the world.

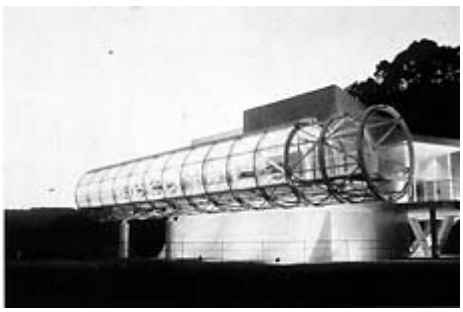
KEI'ICHI IRIE









Removable Reality Excerpts from a dialogue:
KEI'ICHI IRIE + MASAKI FUJIHATA

IRIE: We seem to be in the habit of grasping the world three-dimensionally. So when we think about media in relation to us, say, we see it in terms of a three-dimensional model: we're floating in this city space, enveloped in this permeable membrane upon which various information is projected - an image of media-as-membrane. But that schema is wrong. And as long as we're struck on that schema, we'll never get beyond this floating nomadic giddiness. No, in order for us to shift our consciousness over the reality of all theses diverse media impinging upon us. We have to write in another schema to replace the three-dimensional one. That seems to be our basic task. As guidelines for this re-writing, let's consider three simple spaces. First, very realistic physical space. Second, not physical space, but nonetheless one in which we customarily move, systematic space. And third, another type of space altogether, the space created by telecommunications. Therein, all the old worn-out models we've used to discuss the world no longer hold; it takes a different model. Which might be something that people involved in programming and other advanced work sense as their reality. At least I think we are going to start to see one common line of exploration emerging here. Which means, such a reality currently exists in a scattered state, but has yet to be rendered into a model.

FUJIHATA: About this third space: say someone who's into mathematics, who has only to look at an equation to see an image of what it means, that sort of conceptual realm might in one sense be very close, and indeed may well become much more immediate to our experience through the evolution of technology - extremely so with computer technology. It

might be worthwhile to put forth a manifestation on this space that had previously been invisible but is now coming into view.

IRIE: Or else as one more possibility, we could perhaps reassess the meaning of art. Up until now, art — including contemporary art — has meant placeable solid objects imbued with an intrinsically artistic something. As the locus of encounter between the physical art object and the viewer, there was always the fantasy that this art-as-intrinsic-something could be separated out. The interesting thing is, with the advent of this third space, this is already happening, albeit at a completely different juncture. So just what is the form it is to take? Well, half the resistance we feel toward the "honkeyness" of contemporary art seems to say that we've had enough of it - that our reality has already shifted elsewhere. (…)

FUJIHATA: The new technologies that surrounded us are altering our lives dramatically, if little by little. We may not even be aware of the changes.

But taking another good look at things, I get the feeling we'll see just how everything had changed, which is what prompted our efforts to seek out this new reality. We just wanted to say, "Here's the turning point."

I think we're in a tremendous epoch right now. Fifty years from now we'll look back and see just how much of a turning point it was. But since we're presently right at that point, we're seeing both the destruction of what went before as well as the promise of what lies around the corner. So there are times we can't quite distinguish what's on this side or that side of the bend. Faced with the very same object, we can see it as something that has broken down or again as something new, receding or approaching. That's why the very same installation, utilising identical devices, can completely reverse on itself depending on how it's put together, what is or isn't shown.

Everyone believes in technological evolution, yet seems to think that we'll turn the corner leaving the reality before the turning point as-is. Like the extension of the present, as if new technologies will come along and totally replenish human sensibilities, giving us our dream of dreams. Sheer nonsense. Right up front I doubt the whole thing; I'd like to take all that music and art and sense-object stuff and take it apart to show them, just dash those rose-colored high-tech fantasies to pieces. (…)

I went to see architect Itsuko Hasegawa's Shonandai Culture Center. She used aluminum and glass, but without any heavy material feeling at all. I was shocked. The building seemed practically weightless. I couldn't help thinking: is it really such a good idea to build something so much like a computer graphic? Where the outward appearance doesn't externalize what's inside.

IRIE: There was a time when architecture tended to be extremely heavy, grounded and laden with extrinsic symbols, but those bonds have long been severed. Conversely, it's gotten to the point where we don't even know where to pin it down. Which means that right now we have all sorts of different directions — probing how far architecture can be pressed to impart the sensibility of the times, how far it can deliver the feel of the materials — they've emerged all at once.

In the past, the-mass production of "things" was generally where all discussion started. Things came out of various fenced-off fields in quantity. Tanks were produced in quantity and printed

matter was produced in quantity. But the things that are produced in quality nowadays arise wholly according to completely different methods. And moreover, they're interchangeable.

Given this situation, we can see an apparent parallel between architecture becoming extremely lightweight and our coming to terms with images that can only be seen but not touched via the dematerialized conceptual operations of computer graphics. However, we soon notice that these operations are still quite close to what we had in the fenced-off past. It seems to me that the next step should be to pull everything apart again.

FUJIHATA: Look at Duchamp, who called the things he made "ready-mades". He didn't call them sculptures. He put marble "sugar cubes" and a thermometer in a birdcage. Or set out a urinal. I imagine he did such stunts just to break out of the mold.

When I did my first three-dimensional works I thought of them as "computer sculptures", but they were neither sculptures nor even objets d'art. I don't know what it was I'd made. But the funny thing was, the very instant they became physical objects I lost sight of what I'd found so interesting beyond that turning point. The result: objects weren't the actual things I'd encountered. I now call them "scabs" — scabs formed from a physical wound, although the itch remained afterwards. For lack of any corresponding terminology, I draw on physiological language.

Formerly, when printing out a computer text, if you were using a dot-impact printer you'd get this very physical sound of the ink hitting the paper. Came the laser printer, however, and the whole print feel was lost; what comes out is more like a xerox copy. Nobody says anything about this, but it's all rather remarkable if you think about it.

IRIE: The same can be said of a lot of things. Take remote control, for instance, the very idea of being able to change something without touching it is extraordinary.

At the time of the Surrealists, they thought glass was so remarkable, an invisible substance. But now that it's become so commonplace for us, instead we've got the ability to alter physical things without even touching them. 'Telecommander' remote control units are one good example of this, but in fact you could attribute the same characteristics to our system itself as a whole. It's very strange.

FUJIHATA: Which must be why nowadays even in industry, when they're designing doors and windows, they're having to make everything auto-open-and-close.

IRIE: Everything's getting those devices.

FUJIHATA: Even no-hands drafting.

IRIE: The way things change, for a while they tune-up and add on turbo-power, whatever, on and on. They go as far as they can like that. But of course, there are limits, so it eventually grinds to a halt. The thing is, that's where a completely different engine comes into the picture. Right now, we're in the tune-up stage where we're boosting memory and throwing in miscellaneous extra functions, trying to make the state of the art catch up with our reality, but at some point it's definitely all going to burst into something else, I just know it. Not that I have blind faith in high-tech, mind you. But it does seem to be the task at hand for the next two or three years.

FUJIHATA: And not just more of the same, Formula 1 racers turning into aircraft. (…)

IRIE: The idea being that it was best to allow the person, when wandering around the desktop, to become a cursor as-is, one's same-as-always subjective self without any additional preparations. How to go about that or how people would receive it, we didn't have any idea.

FUJIHATA: There are lots of things that work like that when you play with computers. You give out 3 or 5 million-Yen for a computer, you switch it on, and nothing happens. So you run through the demo, just to see with your own eyes that the thing is "up and running". Simple-minded, yes, but you do it anyway. It's almost as if you've been waiting for something to happen, like when you watch TV.

Off the subject, I find Japanese household appliances fascinating. Like, when you read a classic modern novel by Soseki Natsume, you're moved by what you get out of it, how they did things. There's something there you're distilling out from this "other side" as it were, an essence. However, when it comes to "which Walkman do I buy", say the novelists Soseki Natsume and Toson Shimazaki and Naoya Shiga all had Walkman, you'd look at the specs in the brochures and see they're all different — "The Soseki Natsuma Walkman has no fast forward." They've all got these fabulous features — high-speed rewind or microchip adjustment or stereo-into-mono or whatever — but each unit's got a distinct line-up of features. When you buy the thing you have to guess, what's this AMS function? What does this feature really do? It seems to me that we're in an age where functions and features have become black boxes we're buying blind.

But somewhere in these functions there's an essence you sense.

IRIE: A while back, in stereo components, the thing was which makers offered which sound, which products had what characteristics. Speakers from such-and-such a company gave quality high tones, this needle was good for classical music. But now that the technology has risen to a certain level, it's more or less averaged out. Who buys Pioneer components like some hi-fi nut anymore? So, like you say, everyone's interests have shifted to what controls it offers, what personality it projects.

FUJINATA: Look at television set designs, it's down to a mere frame now. Otherwise there's only the remote control. No "design" per se, at all.

IRIE: And that's only within one framework. Meanwhile, the frameworks themselves are slowly vanishing, television and video fusing together, with broadcast satellite reception thrown in for good measure, and finally a computer connection. So that ultimately, the fixation on the objects "thing" loses all meaning. Our interest shifts to a series of interfaces between things.

FUJIHATA: With a flick of the remote control we can command the television. "Turn into a radio." "Now turn into a washing machine." Push a button and the TV becomes a rice-cooker. Everyone's making these things in the name of convenience and the users must think they're handy, too, or else they wouldn't be buying them.

Or me, I find myself buying these things just to find out what they're about. The same way as I'd pick up a Soseki Natsume novel.

IRIE: All they ask is that you consume.

FUJIHATA: Yes and indeed I do. I really do consume a lot of utterly crazy features.

IRIE: Like with most purchases. When you buy a CD, by rights you really ought to listen to it first, but it doesn't work that way. Actually what you're after is some special feature. Then when you've bought one or two of the things, you don't need to consume any more. That's why they're always revamping products with model changes, even if not the actual features.

FUJIHATA: Probably, almost any music would do.

IRIE: Yeah, all you really have to do is turn on the radio and you'll get music.

FUJIHATA: That's why Yumi Matsutoya — "Yuming" — sells so well. Her kind of innocuous pop music is the perfect lowest common denominator for people who just want to press a button on their Walkman and run through a palette of colors. She's the common reference base "Mona Lisa" they all need.

At that level, I want to make art a household appliance. For instance, the way a servomechanism makes sure your CD plays a constant speed, as stable as possible. But that's just the sort of thing you want to get inside and fiddle with. Put a lever on the outside. I'd like to give it a try. I think it'd be art. Cassette decks and CD players that don't produce sound, strange appliances.

What with all the functions they pack in before the sound even c,omes out, there's got to be plenty of room parametrically to play around, or even to bring them all out.

IRIE: At which point, all you'd need is one piece of software. All at once every company releases one song only.

FUJIHATA: You're right! It's the same reason why synthesizers sell. Nobody writes songs. Less than one percent of the people actually does any songwriting.

IRIE: Everyone's just fiddling around.

FUJIHATA: Push a button and you get a rumba! It's a push-button fetishism.

IRIE: When people play around with computers what they do is all pretty similar. Mac-users getting all excited about how to get a bomb. It'd be a dull old world if all there was were Excel- and LOTUS-users.

FUJIHATA: You'd probably make a mint if you published a book collecting the entire "no-no" how to tech that's floating about. Or you could establish an art-of-interface-alone, whereby you could call up all these modern art paintings merely as interfaces. Call them up in any order, so as to write-in the scenarios of how one looks after viewing another, with no concern whatsoever for the individual picture screens. Ultimately, you'd get an image of the viewer's mental processes, itself visible as a switching interface.

IRIE: That probably was a function of modern art. In all actuality.

FUJIHATA: Don't you think we got too heavy on the meaning of what pre-moderns like Velasquez or Delacroix painted? They were just portraits after all. Beyond that, you get into

questions of the person who painted the things. It'd be interesting, though, to see a history of modern-art-as-interface.

IRIE: Things shifting from right to left giving rise to interfaces on the left.

FUJIHATA: That they do.

IRIE: Which, I guess, makes it design.

FUJIHATA: Right. And that design determines whether or not we can bring it along with us. What succeeds as an interface and what doesn't. So when you look just at the form of interface, you'll see what a person is trying to carry off.

IRIE: Then again, it's often the case where the forcing in the wrong interface crashes everything.

FUJIHATA: I did that once. Tried to hook up a video camera to a different deck than it was originally intended for, split up the lead cable to connect it and the thing started to smoke. Seems there are things you really shouldn't do after all.

IRIE: It seems there was that aspect about art in the old days, too. Things that just wouldn't mount in the big picture of history.

FUJIHATA: Someone ought to make a piece that sets that part of the story clear because short of any major on-going changes in new interfaces, no one looks back over these things.

IRIE: Speed is everything. (…)