



# Interview with Architect **Ito Toyo**: Architecture for the Future



In October 2011, about seven months after the Great East Japan Earthquake, *the first minna no ie* (“Home-for-All” by Kumamoto Artpolis Tohoku Support Group) was built in Miyagino-ku, Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture. ©ITO TORU

Interview with the Architect Ito Toyo by Moronaga Yuji, Editorial Department of  
Asahi Shimbun Digital

We must turn away from modern thinking that separates human beings and nature. So says world-renowned architect, Ito Toyo. Ito was involved in reconstruction following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, but he lost the competition to design the new National Olympic Stadium. Today, he is working on wooden temporary housing in Kumamoto. From someone who builds, he has become someone who connects. We asked Ito about the image of the architect in an age of shrinking population and few expectations for economic growth.

**Moronaga Yuji:** *What sort of temporary housing are you creating in areas hit by the Kumamoto earthquake?*

**Ito Toyo:** I want to provide temporary housing that is warm, not dreary and dull prefabs. The governor of Kumamoto, Kabashima Ikuo, feels the same way; of around 4,000 temporary houses 15% will be made of wood. Because there have been many natural disasters in Japan recently, we need to pay more attention to quality of life when they occur. I would like to explore those possibilities.

### *What do you mean by “warm” temporary housing?*

Houses built from Kumamoto timber by local carpenters have much more human warmth than steel frames. We have increased the distance between the buildings by 1.5 to 2.5 meters, and added a passageway down the side of every third building. Each house also has sliding doors and a veranda. We wanted an environment where residents can easily start a conversation with people they don't know, and where they can relax without becoming isolated. We weren't, however, able to get hold of the materials and labor needed to do this for all the houses.

In addition, for every 50 temporary houses we will create a community space called *minna no ie* (“Home-for-All”) All 81 of these will be made from wood. They will have verandas and tatami rooms, and our plan is to plant a cherry blossom tree in the front garden of each.

### *“Home-for-All” has a friendly ring, doesn't it?*



Ito Toyo, Architect

They are modelled on the “Home-for-All” projects built in North-East Japan. Soon after Great East Japan Earthquake I visited a community space in Sendai. All it had was wallpaper on steel walls, a cheap carpet, cushions piled up in a corner, and a single TV. I saw this cold space and thought how I wanted to make somewhere to who had lost their homes could warm their hearts together. In other words, a space where community life cut short could be recreated.

I believe that making small but beautiful and comfortable spaces is the work of an architect. We listened to the requests of the disaster victims and worked together with builders. It is architecture for all and made by all. To date we have built 15 of these in North-East Japan; the timber and funds for the first provided by Kumamoto Prefecture. That assistance was thanks to my role as a commissioner for Kumamoto Artpolis, a Kumamoto Prefecture project that works towards regional revitalization through architecture.

### *You also decided on wooden temporary housing for Kumamoto, didn't you?*

It seems that the national government was reluctant and asked why we don't use prefabs. But I heard that Kumamoto Prefecture stuck at it and managed to convince them. But prior to that there was an obstacle: two weeks after the earthquake, preparations for putting up standard prefabs had almost started. I understand that they wanted to do things as quickly as possible, but when you consider that people will live in these buildings for five or six years, it is important that they function as livable community spaces. Compared to setting up lines of steel frame prefabs, building wooden houses took around one month longer and was a little more expensive. But wooden houses are much more pleasant to live in. I thought that, even if it takes a month longer, there is no replacement for the benefits of timber.



Kitazuka Temporary Housing Complex in Aso City, Kumamoto Prefecture  
©Kumamoto Prefecture



"Home-for-All" in Mashiki-Kiyama Temporary Housing Complex in Mashiki Town, Kumamoto Prefecture  
©Kumamoto Prefecture

*It sounds like you believe that livability and community-building are the essence of temporary housing. But on the other hand, I recall how you recently failed to win the competition to design the new National Olympic Stadium. What ideas were you trying to express via that building?*

At the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics I was in my fourth year of university. The Yoyogi National Gymnasium had been built by my architecture teacher, Tange Kenzo, and it made an impression on me. I was impressed by the design of the open space between the two gymnasiums, and the skillful way the flows of people fitted with the building. Structurally, it was also extremely original. That time, however, was the first peak of Japan's modernization. Right now, the concept of modernism itself is on the edge of bankruptcy. Under the global economy there is a plethora of similar looking high-rise buildings, while Japan's post-Edo Period sense of locality and history is disappearing. The reason I entered the competition for the new stadium was to offer an antithesis to this current situation.

*What did you try to say with this antithesis?*

Human beings cannot win a fight against nature. The disasters of March 2011 taught us that. Yet, three tactics have featured in the reconstruction plans: huge seawalls to repel tsunami, levees, and relocation to higher ground. As ever, we arrogantly think that we can control nature with technology. Distinctive local features and history are ignored, while a philosophy of homogeneity implements exactly the same plan everywhere. I wanted to question that again.

*What exactly did you propose?*

The new National Olympic Stadium will be built in a wooded shrine area that is right in the center of a huge city. But it is also a sacred area into which capitalism and political power cannot enter. I thought that the most important job when building the stadium would be to redefine that extremely special geographical and historical setting. Also, I aimed to bring some of the nature outside the stadium inside, and rely on the energy of nature as much as possible. One way to do that was by creating water features around the stadium. The design would allow breezes to cool as they pass over the water, then be drawn through holes in the bricks into the stadium.

*So the idea was to fuse interior and exterior?*

If we pick one phrase that sums up the features of the modern age, it is the concept of separation. It has always been inevitable that architecture separates interior and exterior. But it is the modern age that tries to put a clear wall between us and nature and create a space independent of nature.

Until the Edo Period I do not think Japanese people had the concept of creating walls. Verandas and sliding lattice doors subtly connected with the street outside, and buildings were sensitive to the seasons. I keep a Shiba Inu dog in my apartment. When it is hot I can see her lying down on the cool floor of the entrance. When it is cold she moves to a place good for sunbathing. My dog moves to a different location numerous times a day. Once humans had a similar way of living. But as we modernized, we divided living space by function, such as bedrooms and children's rooms. As a result, people have been separated from each other and from nature. I have no intention of completely rejecting modernism, but I'd like to bring back that gentle connection and repair our ties with nature. I wanted to build a stadium open to that natural environment.

*But you lost two competitions?*

Partly because first time was during the bid to bring the Olympics to Tokyo, Zaha Hadid's rather flashy design was chosen even though parts of it did not meet the competition conditions. The second time was after the increase in construction costs when the process started again. That time all the emphasis was on budget and construction period. Either time, I don't think there was any effort at all to ask fundamental questions, i.e. what are we aiming for with the building? As a public project it was unusual. The selection process was opaque and information on what reviewer made what evaluation was not made public. There was no overall vision about what to do with the entire shrine area.

Not just when it comes to the new national stadium, I think that we are overly bound by the "now" in front of our eyes, and can't stop to pause against the flux of time any more. I felt that this is a strange society in which essential discussion does not take place.

*The population is shrinking and financial resources are limited. Would you agree that the era of large-scale public architecture projects has also come to a turning point?*

There are empty houses all over Japan. We need to think more about how to strengthen and renovate old buildings. If we cannot build new houses, we should renovate houses not destroy old ones. We should ask the residents who will use them how they want to use them, and proceed while thinking about that together. If we don't do that, architecture will stop being useful. The architects of the future will be required to play the role of interpreters and coordinators connecting the administrators that commission buildings with the residents who use them.

*The role of the architect will change. That will take time and effort, won't it?*

Yes, but I think that is important. In fact, we all considered the issues together as we built our

“Home-for-All” projects. And it is important to make the process from planning to construction transparent. Recently, I have been involved in assessing proposals for the rebuilding of the Hiroshima-Miyajima ferry terminal and the interviews with designers were made public. Assessors are judged on their awareness of the issues involved and their accountability. When things are decided that way it is easy for residents to agree to and accept the result.

*How do you imagine this new modern age in which everyone creates together?*

I believe that in the future we should aim for harmony between nature and time. I have two clocks inside of me. For the last five years I have been travelling to an island in the Seto Inland Sea called Omishima. There I am surrounded by nature, and when I place myself in that slowing flowing time I don't get agitated. I can think a little further ahead: to the next generation, or the generation after that. That sense of time is precious. In fact, the young people who travel there with me are more sensitive to it. If we find a viewpoint away from the center of things, we can get hints about the new age.

(Interviewed by Moronaga Yuji)

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## **ITO Toyo**

Born 1941. 2012: Wins Golden Lion for Best National Participation for the Japan Pavilion 13th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale (Served as Commissioner). 2013: Wins The Pritzker Architecture Prize. Recent publication: “Changing Japan Through Architecture” (Shueisha Shinsho)

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