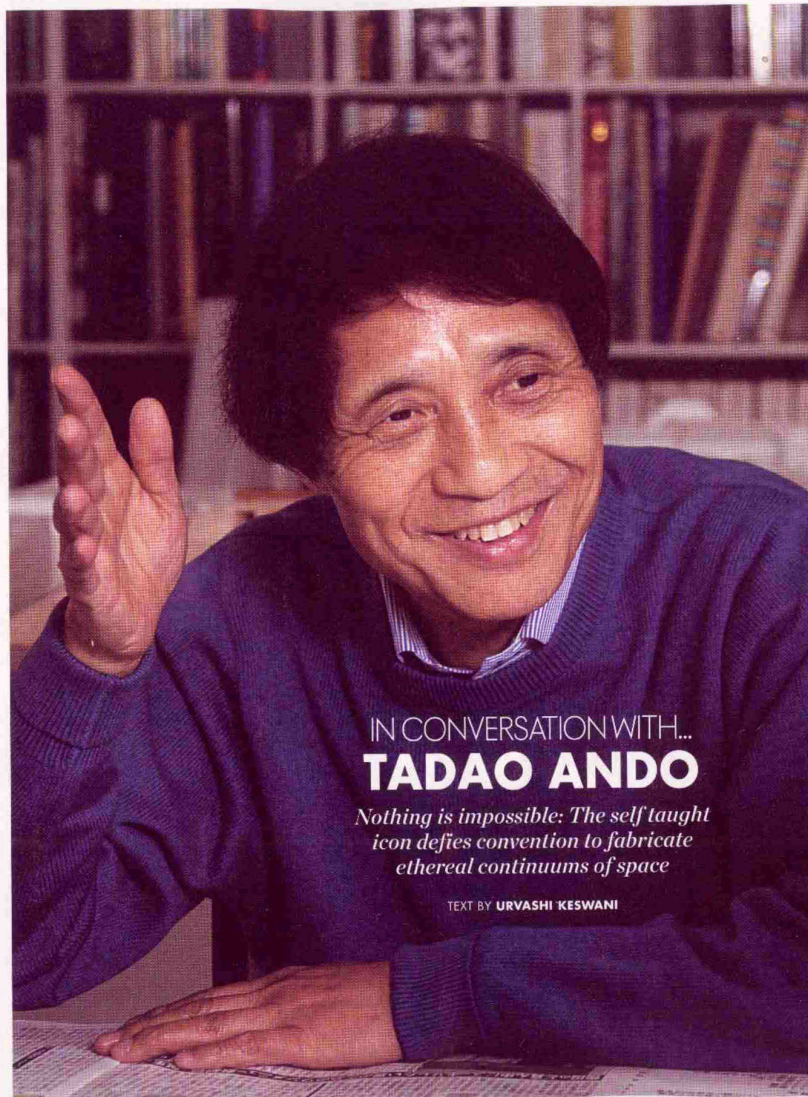


Clip: 1 of 2

DECOR PEOPLE



### I BELIEVE IN CREATING SPACES WHERE PEOPLE CAN INTERACT WITH NATURE, HISTORY AND THEMSELVES

From my teens to my 20s I was busy absorbing architecture, so I didn't have the time to learn English," Tadao Ando chuckled as he offered an explanation for the presence of his translator. On a sweltering May afternoon, hundreds of us had gathered at the Godrej & Boyce auditorium to listen to the Japanese visionary at a lecture organised by Godrej India Culture Lab.

The first born of twin boys in 1940s Osaka, Tadao's early days were spent in the workshop of a carpenter sculpting wooden models of ships and airplanes. He then went on to be a truck driver and joined his brother as a boxer for a short while. During his time as a pugilist, he learnt a vital lesson that has stayed with him since: "No one helps you in the ring. You have to draw on your own power."

What followed was years of avid reading, extensive travelling, but no formal education. The self taught structural conceptualiser visited temples, shrines and tea houses across Japan. He lived and breathed the works of his heroes – Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe – through the United States, Europe and Africa. And at 28 returned to Osaka to establish his own design studio, Tadao Ando Architect & Associates.

A day after the talk I was lucky enough to be sitting across from him, engaged in a tete-a-tete. Deep lines creased his forehead as he rued the state of our planet. "The population of India, China and Africa is increasing but food and energy sources are diminishing" he asserted, "Architecture needs to focus on sustainability, to realise the urgency of caring for the environment, but it will take years before it can turn the tide. However technology is moving faster than population growth so we should look towards it for a solution

to counter the depleting resources with human intelligence." And whether it is replanting and reviving Naoshima, the formerly barren Japanese island town, or developing around nature and not replacing it as exemplified in the Rokko Housing projects: Tadao is doing all he can to contribute.

A masterful mix of ancient tradition and a modern vocabulary dominate his largely open, concrete and glass structures. Simplistic, strong and bold lines lift the materials' dense physicality while water, light and fresh air unfailingly make their way into his designs. They forge a pertinent dialogue between landscape and the built environment that traces back to quintessential Oriental building styles. He elaborated: "I believe in creating spaces where people can interact with nature, history and themselves."

The Pritzker Prize (1995) winner's mind and sketch pen stop at nothing: Places of worship, residential complexes and bustling cultural centres. Magic lies in the concepts he conjures out of empty land. His fabrications are driven by the possibilities of what they will mean to the users and their relationship with it. In 1989 he built arguably his most iconic project yet – Church of the Light. A concrete wall behind the altar stands cut by a cruciform opening that floods the interior with sunlight, where pews are arranged on an unusual downward slope ensuring the congregation is at the same level as the priest. Glass is fitted into the cross-shaped slits, an inclusion the church insisted upon. The ethereal calm that filled the space impressed the Vatican enough to invite Tadao and moved Bono (of U2 fame) to sing within its walls. "Initially I wasn't sure why the Vatican had called me," Tadao reminisced, "but when I got there I was honoured with 30 million yen."

Speaking of his hosts in India, the Godrej's, and their plans to preserve the mangroves that flourish on their land here in Mumbai, his eyes light up. "It is imperative to divide where development can take place and where greenery will be conserved. I haven't seen any other large companies with such a clear and formidable intent, I like it – it is a strong message and should be communicated all over the world."

Readying to leave, I brought Bono back into the mix: "At the lecture yesterday you mentioned the musician is now a client?" Pat came the matter of fact reply: "Well, there's not much to say at the moment. I am designing his house in Ireland and we're facing some regulation issues which he has to solve. But he's a busy man, travelling around the world like a satellite, so it's proceeding rather slowly." As I walked away, I continued to hear traces of his signature chuckle, one that just seconds earlier had drowned out mine. ♦

#### ON BEING A TWIN

"In my work, many a time you will see two buildings – similar on the outside and completely different within. Like twins, often indistinguishable externally, each has their own DNA and develops distinctly, aware that they have to live life on their own terms, but there is a connect that joins them unconsciously."

Tadao Ando, Osaka. Website: [www.tadao-ando.com](http://www.tadao-ando.com) Photograph courtesy Tadao Ando