

# Architecture of Terunobu Fujimori and ROJO

## Terunobu Fujimori

Two unique art movements are attracting attention in Japan recently. One is the architecture of Terunobu Fujimori and the other is ROJO (roadway observation).

The leaders of contemporary Japanese architecture include such internationally renowned architects as Fumihiko Maki, Arata Isozaki, Kisho Kurokawa, Yoshio Taniguchi, Tadao Ando, Toyo Ito, and Kazuyo Sejima. Their work has advanced along the path of modernism that began with Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius (rational, functional, and international) and is widely recognized as being on the cutting edge of world architecture.

Fujimori's unusual architecture appeared suddenly in the midst of ordinary contemporary Japanese architecture 15 years ago. What first strikes the eye is the treatment of surfaces. Fujimori covers his buildings with rough natural materials such as earth, stone, wood, charcoal, tree bark, and mortar. For example, he has faced walls with hand-split or charred boards, covered roofs with thick pieces of slate or bark, installed roughly carved or charred posts in interiors, and attached firewood or charcoal to ceilings.

Ordinarily, when natural materials are used, the form of the building is based on a pre-modern traditional style. However, Fujimori's mode of expression does not make use of the traditional styles of Japan or any other country. It is non-traditional, but at the same time is not modernist. It is not connected to any particular place or time, so in this sense it is international. It is both international and vernacular.

Fujimori began designing architecture at age 44 after working for many years as an architectural historian. As a historian, Fujimori surmised that "the international exists in two places, at the beginning and the end of the long history of human architecture." The international at the end of history was explored in twentieth century architecture, but Fujimori is exploring the international from a time before there were nations or ethnic groups.

Another feature of Fujimori's work is the use of plant life in his buildings, which came from his deep interest in the relationship between architecture and nature.

The usual way of incorporating vegetation in architecture is to make a roof garden, but the construction of a roof garden often results esthetic conflict or disconnection with the rest of the building. Le Corbusier advocated roof gardens at the beginning of his career but later abandoned them, perhaps because he noticed



the esthetic contradiction caused by combining plants with architecture.

How could one go about incorporating plants in architecture without esthetic discord? In search of an answer, Fujimori grew leeks on a roof, planted dandelions on a wall, covered an entire roof with turf, and planted a pine tree symbolically on the peak of a roof. It should be noted that these experiments didn't always work.

Fujimori's desire was to get as close as possible to the time when human beings first built the artificial structures called architecture. He did so by using natural materials and plants and rethinking the basic relationship between architecture and nature. This avant-garde looks to the past rather than the future. In the present, the age of science and technology, it might be considered a reckless venture with no hope of success. However, a bit of hope is being placed on the method of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *The Method of Ledoux for Giving Reality to Images Through Illusion*.

*Rojo* means "on the roadway." *Rojo kansatsu* means "roadway observation," walking the streets, noticing objects that people do not ordinarily notice, and recording them with a camera. There are, however, conditions placed on the objects of observation. First, anything that is beautiful in the ordinary sense is excluded. Also, commercial products and fashions are categorized as "perishable goods" and excluded. Such raw food might cause an upset stomach.

The kinds of things that are observed include manhole covers, door knockers, mail boxes with unusual shapes, houses that are oddly shaped due to additions or remodeling, building facades that resemble human faces, stairways that run into a wall as they ascend, trees lining the street with iron railings embedded in them, potted plants in a baby carriage, a thrilling slippery slide cut off halfway down, cat footprints in a concrete road surface, etc., etc. In general, members of the ROJO Society are interested in things that are diverted from their original purpose.

The ROJO Society was organized in 1986 by the five main members who are still active today: Genpei Akasegawa, artist and novelist, Terunobu Fujimori, architectural historian, Shinbo Minami, illustrator, Joji Hayashi, writer, and Tetsuo Matsuda, editor.

Akasegawa is the core member of the group. He is known for his avant-garde activities carried out with such artists' groups as the Neo-Dada Organizers



and Hi Red Center. From the 1970s on, he became disillusioned with the methods of the avant-garde. He began to doubt any forms of art or beauty deliberately created by human beings and he eventually turned away from the path of the avant-garde and leaped head over heels into roadway observation.

As indicated by Akasegawa's story, ROJO, or roadway observation, is a visual activity that comes after the end of contemporary art.

What is the relationship between ROJO and Fujimori's architecture? In terms of time, the ROJO Society was founded in 1986 and Fujimori's first building, the Jinchokan Moriya Historical Museum, was erected five years later, in 1991. It cannot be denied that ROJO cast a shadow on Fujimori's architecture, but it is difficult to pinpoint how far the influence extends.

The ROJO Society members undertook part of the construction of the Akasegawa residence, Fujimori's third building. ROJO members and their friends attached firewood to the ceiling and planted leeks on the roof, work that professionals refused to do. The Jomon Company emerged naturally about this time.

Jomon is a Neolithic culture period in Japan that dates back some 5,000 years. This name was given to the company because of the very primitive sort of hand work it specializes in. The Jomon Company has participated in all of Fujimori's architectural projects since it was founded, and it has performed the construction work for this exhibition at the Japanese Pavilion.

Fujimori's architecture and ROJO are both about 20 years old. They have become very well known in art and architecture circles as well as in the popular media in Japan and have exerted a great deal of influence. Until now, however, they have not been the subject of a substantial exhibition either in Japan or overseas. This is the first exhibition devoted to their work.