PREFACE

> I think that for any architect such things as the effects of form-making or the readiness to fulfill a "use" constitute the foundation of their work. The other conscious operations—for example, the history and philosophy that can become the content of the context—do not intermix with the imagination of the generative idea. Context and rhetoric are not needed, and I wish that one would see a work as it appears, honestly and without logic. If one does not offer a spatial experience unhindered by explanations and window dressing, then critique will not be born, and the precision of the critique will I think be determined by the degree of purity of this experience. A borrowed doctrine does not make a critique.[1]
>
> —*Seiichi Shirai*

It would be hard to find a more forthright assertion of some of the basic precepts shaping the idea of modern architecture than these words of the architect Seiichi Shirai (1905–1983), recorded late in his life in a conversation with the poet Shuntarō Tanigawa. That the criterion for the success of a work should ultimately reside within the spatial conditions for a subjective individual engagement free from external manipulations of rhetoric, theory, media, and publicity is a belief rooted at once in the Kantian independence of aesthetic judgment from a priori rules and in the nineteenth-century emergence of a new conception of space as a fundamental determinant of architectural expression in its dialectical relationship with form.[2] Moreover, the references to use and form-making, while in some sense expressing a universal truth, affirm a distinctly modernist conception of disciplinary commitment and autonomy.

At the same time, Shirai's choice in the original text of the word *yō* (用) for "use," which differs from the usual rendering of "function" as *kinō* (機能) in architectural discourse, signals another dimension of meaning, a dual interpretation that keys into Shirai's abiding preoccupations with the issue of Japanese identity. Indeed, Shirai's response to the estrangements and disruptions of modernity, one that he would employ to great architectural effect and that must be understood within the historical arc of Japan's intensive embrace of Western culture during the Meiji era (1868–1912) and the critical reactions it provoked, was to subvert the function of a sign by purposely ambiguating and destabilizing its possible cross-cultural meanings. While the word *yō* is

intended in this conversation to evoke the idea of rational design and the provision of comfortable space for the user, an image that may resonate with the functionalist and Western rhetoric of modern architecture, it is also elaborated in other texts by Shirai as something harboring much broader and more syncretic, if less penetrable, meanings, as a kind of "will to life" associated with the purposeful immersion, training, and cultivation that elevates the practice of everyday activities, as both a necessity and a service through which the universal and eternal in human experience become spiritualized.[3] It is with such multivalence that one should also interpret Shirai's similarly abstruse use of the concept of critique, as something that is directed at society and time (echoing modernist rhetoric) but is at the same time a reflexive commentary on one's own activity, one that (meshing with the notion of *yō*) plays out through process and the working of materials rather than inhering in the architecture of a finished object. Acutely aware of the difficulties of translation and appropriation, most significantly although not exclusively between Japan and the West, Shirai consciously leveraged the semantic slippages that inevitably arise when one is forced to settle for rough correspondences over exact identities in meaning, ultimately developing this condition into a rich programmatic source for artistic invention in his ambition to engender a uniquely Japanese modern architecture.

How and to what extent does all this impress on the built reality? To the casual observer Shirai's works seem to communicate something deeply antithetical to the modern spirit. At once enigmatic and charismatic, they appear to stand outside their time, in some indeterminate past. Greeting the eye are an abundance of motifs drawn from classical, Romanesque, and Gothic architecture, a rich material presence with hypersensitive attention to various scales of detail, striking singularities in form, a multiplicity of inscriptions and insignias, and a carefully curated assortment of antique and modern furniture. These elements are moreover often combined—through the choice of colour, material texture, and spatial distribution—to hint at traditional Japanese typologies such as the tearoom.

While Shirai's buildings were prized by clients and users and were subjects of fascination for critics and artists, they were also dismissed for their misplaced energies and betrayal of modernist ideals, altogether garnering a spectrum of adjectives ranging from "philosophical" and "spiritual" to "antirational," "heretic," and "bizarre."[4] Shirai himself cultivated a certain philosophical veneer in creating his public persona. In the passage from his conversation with Tanigawa quoted at the beginning, one can sense a tone of regret and frustration concerning his work's reception, which for him had traded too much on rhetoric and theoretical window dressing at the expense of experience itself.[5] Indeed, it is precisely by taking Shirai's plea at face value that we can begin to more fully appreciate how his work fits within the broader arc of modern architecture. Most importantly, we can see his work as part of the continuity that has been thematized in recent reevaluations of the history of modern architecture, which recognize the for-

mative significance of the eighteenth-century English landscape garden and the nineteenth-century debates about style and emphasize the heightened tension between representation and the theatre of material and spatial reality that came to be problematized and transformed as part of modernism's own basic dynamic.[6]

The two essays in the present volume, on the respective themes of text and inversion, aim to demonstrate the distinctive ways in which this tension was exploited by Shirai, sometimes to self-conscious extremes, and to examine the logic underlying his architectural maneuvering. This is not a logic of the type derided by Shirai as something grafted onto a building as an explanatory theory, nor is it a prescriptive formal calculus for design. It is rather a generative logic of what we might call architectural disruption in which the parameters of scale, form, material, depth, transparency, lighting, texture, color, and graphics are subject to radical operations, from the subtle to the jarring, of transposition, convolution, invagination, and juxtaposition. This general strategy will be investigated in the second essay under the rubric of inversion. What is especially remarkable, and highly unusual within the course of modern architecture, is the integral role that text plays as part of this architectural ethic, as a key to Shirai's attitude toward the function of symbolic allusion in its capacity for metacommunication, in which the message is not a transparent literal one but rather the very fact that potential meaning has been inscribed at all. Accordingly, the first essay is devoted to a case study on text.

Shirai's buildings and their conceptual references also make for fascinating and challenging photographic subjects, and we hope that the original photography presented here will help enrich the understanding and experience of the built reality. In addition to Shirai's own work, we have included images of Nikkō's Tōshōgū shrine, whose relation to Shirai's views on aesthetics is discussed in the section "Kohakuan, Nikkō, and the Jomōn-Yayoi dichotomy" of the text essay; Manpukuji in Kyoto, whose wooden hengaku inscriptions were a likely source of inspiration for Shirai's attitude toward text; and Kōzanji in Kyoto, the brutal presence of whose stone landscaping had a great impact on the architect's later output.

Despite the relatively cursory attention his work has received in public discourse around architecture, especially outside Japan, Shirai was deeply embedded within prominent circles of architects, artists, and intellectuals. He was, for example, a seminal contributor to the highly publicized tradition debate in the late 1950s, whose main players included the architect Kenzō Tange and the critic Noboru Kawazoe. Shirai's practice, which he continued to run on the small atelier model and which was comparatively modest in its output, was, like many, overshadowed by the media frenzy that propelled Tange and the Metabolists to international fame in the 1960s, an episode whose legacy continues to be felt. Standard accounts of postwar Japanese architecture tend to identify the 1970 Osaka Expo as a branch point from which Metabolism gave way to a newer and more diverse generation of architects like Arata Isozaki, Kazuo Shinohara, Tadao Ando, and Shin Takamatsu and to the rise of large construction companies like

Takenaka, Kajima, and Obayashi, marking a threshold beyond which a tidy historical view becomes impossible to maintain, with the narrative now expanded along multiple genealogical lines. Even so, Shirai continues to figure uncomfortably in this picture. It is precisely the untimely nature of his architecture that beckons us to take a closer look, to approach the work not necessarily as part of a lineage of influence but as a singular cultural phenomenon, which, in classic dialectical fashion, has much to tell us about architectural practice and the modern condition.

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NOTES

1 Shirai Seiichi and Shuntarō Tanigawa, "Taidan: Shi to kenchiku," in Sōroku Shioya, ed., *Shirai Seiichi kenkyū IV* (Tokyo: Nanyōdō, 1982), 57.

2 Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture, 1750–1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 277.

3 Shirai and Tanigawa, "Taidan," 55. For various meanings attributed by Shirai to the word *yō*, see Seiichi Shirai, "Tōfu," in *Musō* (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 2010), 113–20, and Seiichi Shirai, "Meshi," in *Musō*, 121–31.

4 Noboru Kawazoe, writing under the pseudonym Tomoo Iwata, called Shirai an "author of spiritualism" (seishin shugi no sakka; 精神主義の作家) concerned with the well-being of the masses and traces the source of this orientation in part to Shirai's familiarity with Kantian philosophy. See Tomoo Iwata, "Genbaku jidai ni kōsuru mono," *Shinkenchiku*, April 1955, 43. Michio Yoshinaka, Kazuo Yoshijima, and Noriyoshi Kawazoe, in their article "Shirai Seiichi ron," *Shinkenchiku* 30, no. 10 (October 1955): 24–26, pit the spirituality they ascribe to Shirai's work against a modern architecture driven by universal principles based on rationality, technology, and function. Ryūichi Hamaguchi and Teijiro Matsumura describe Shirai as a "heretic one-man architect" (itan no wanman kenchikuka; 異端のワンマン建築家) in *Gendai kenchiku otsukuru hitobito: Sekkei soshiku rupo* (Tokyo: KK sekai shoin, 1963), 37. Kishō Kurokawa suggests that Shirai be studied in relation to the postmodern condition in Arata Isozaki and Kishō Kurokawa, "Kindai kenchiku no doko ga warui ka: Posutomodan no kenchiku dezain o tou," [What is wrong with modern architecture?: Questioning postmodern architecture design], in *Kenchiku ron* 2 (Tokyo: Kajima Shuppankai, 1990), 77, originally published in *Nikkei Architecture*, April 9, 1984. Hajime Yatsuka, in his "Architecture in the Urban Desert: A Critical Introduction to Japanese Architecture after Modernism," in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from a Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture, 1973–1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 253–87, originally published in *Oppositions* 23 (Winter 1981): 2–35, describes Shirai as a "heretical antithesis" to the tradition set by Kenzō Tange, likening the former to a shaman or monk and the latter to a prophet or preacher. Botond Bognar uses the expression "evocative of the bizarre" in reference to Shirai's architecture in *Guide to Contemporary Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 2011), 164, and writes that "Shirai remains one of the most enigmatic figures in Japanese architecture today" in *Contemporary Japanese Architecture: Its Development and Challenge* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985), 216. Hiroyuki Suzuki, Reyner Banham, and Katsuhiro Kobayashi, in *Contemporary Architecture of Japan, 1958–1984* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 209, describe Shirai's work as having a "unique, spiritual quality" and Shirai himself as a "transcendental figure among his contemporaries."

5 Compare this with the stance of the Metabolist architect and media star Kisho Kurokawa, whom the curator, critic, and interviewer Hans Ulrich Obrist describes as having said, looking out the window of his office, "all of these buildings will disappear, but writing is forever." See Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Kayoko Ota, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), 397.

6 See, for example, Neil Levine, "Castle Howard and the Emergence of the Modern Architectural Subject," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, no. 3 (September 2003): 326–51; and Bergdoll, *European Architecture*.

7 See, for example, Koolhaas, Obrist, and Ota, *Project Japan*; Seng Kuan and Yuki Lippit, eds., *Kenzō Tange: Architecture for the World* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2012); Zhongiie Lin, *Kenzō Tange and the Metabolist Movement: Urban Utopias of Modern Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Terunobu Fujimori, *Kenzo Tange* (Tokyo: Shinkenchikusha, 2002).