

KENZO TANGE, 1966

Kenzo Tange has raised the spirit of architecture without repudiating the rational revolution of the 20th Century. In hardly more than a decade of practice he has built a personal style consistently, brick by brick, or - to metaphorize more aptly - reinforcing rod by rod. This style is a sort of Super-functionalism, as different from early box-Functionalism as it is from all romantic visions of architectural beauty. His self-appointed task is to find the "essential and progressive function", the typifying or symbolic form of any human activity being sheltered. He wants to express the essence of social reality in the most enlightened structural terms, yet as naturally and unselfconsciously as the realities are expressed in a peasant cottage.

He has become an architect of the world largely because his work is so intensely Japanese. For he has demonstrated to the world's great satisfaction that a unique regionalism may develop genuinely within the international modern idiom. There is nothing superficial about this; nothing in architecture is more abhorrent to him than the mincing mood of Japonica and the sweet, fey details of shibui. The smell of Japan permeates his work in a subtle, formal and often intangible way, reflecting not his emotional submission to the historical traditions of his land but his intellectual conquest of them.

He has been in the vanguard of recent structural advances, making early experiments and contributions to the development of most of the concepts that have excited the 1950's and the 1960's, including shell concrete, macro structures, super spans and tension. He uses these devices not for their own sakes so much as means to expand the limits of the universal language of architecture.

There is a monumental simplicity about the corpus of his career. His search for a creative realism can be followed through two interweaving themes. One is the trabeation theme. Beams are significant in the Japanese tradition and Tange has played with them in many forms. The building which launched his career, the Hiroshima Peace Hall designed in 1949, is in concept no more than one long beam held high on two uneven rows of props. Later he exploited the negative timber formwork in separate celebration of individual concrete beams - super-heavy, square-cut, criss-crossed - as in the most photographed building of his early years of practice: the Kagawa Government office building at Takamatsu (1955-58). Later again he encouraged the individual beams to expand until the grey mass of their concrete dominated all other elements. Windows disappeared behind narrow slits between the mammoth planks. Thus structure was as elemental as in a giant's log cabin in the Kurashiki City Hall of 1958-60. Logically, in Tange's next move, whole buildings or massive sections of buildings became logs, or simple beams, end supported, interspersed with

others at various levels high above the ground, each one spanning some hundreds of feet between the substantial posts of service towers. This concept was glimpsed in his famous Plan for Tokyo of 1960 and will first be realised when the Yamanashi Press and Radio Centre at Kofu City is finished.

In these later buildings Tange's style has steadily grown more personal and mature, and an earlier habit of taking brief quotations direct from the revered master, Le Corbusier, has been broken.

Meanwhile Tange was developing his second theme, of plastic form. He gave notice of this objective at the very beginning. His Children's Library near the Peace Hall at Hiroshima was built during 1951-52 around a concrete trumpet bell sprouting from the ground. He restated the plastic theme at intervals, whenever the enclosure of a big space encouraged it: at the Ehime Centre in 1952, at Shizouka stadium in 1955, in the mass-housing blocks of the plan for Tokyo. And it was in a variation on this theme that he made his most impressive contribution to architecture so far: in the Tokyo stadiums for the 1964 Olympic Games, commissioned in 1961.

These two buildings, linked by a long, rectilinear and robust podium, are tensile structures of fairly familiar pattern. Masts

prop up woven cable webs covered with steel decking; nothing very new in the avant garde. Yet here for perhaps the first time tension was used in an assured and convincing way as a creative force in architecture. The two stadiums are individuals related to each other like sisters. The big one, with central swimming pools and long side tiers of seating, is a bland, majestic, symmetrical space. The smaller one, for basketball and drier sports, is like a giant snail shell, a whirlpool of space around a single eccentric mast.

In this sisterly complex each detail of the structural process is conceived with directness and openly displayed. Each shape is convincingly practical. The consistent discipline operates in a benign and flexible way. The complementary external forms are monumental and international and yet are sometimes startlingly Japanese, as when the canted spurs that hold the main cables to their masts are seen silhouetted like the chigis of an ancient shrine against the sunset. Above all, the internal spaces transport the spirit.

It is hard to think of any other building complex anywhere that comes closer to realising simultaneously all the highest promises of 20th Century architecture.