



CHENCHOW LITTLE'S 'ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM' ISN'T THAT FAR REMOVED FROM HOUSE N'S CONCEPTUAL ACHIEVEMENTS. TONY CHENCHOW SPEAKS WITH SOU FUJIMOTO.

**TC:** *In an essay by Julian Worrall, he mentioned that when you moved to a larger office, one item from your old office remained unchanged: a photograph of Albert Einstein, which hangs on the wall of your office. How is Einstein significant to you and how has his particular way of 'thinking through things', been an important model for your office?*

**Sou Fujimoto:** He is, quite simply put, something of a hero to me. He has significance to me, because his works were the very reason behind my interest in space. I am forever interested in the idea of space not being a concrete notion but relative to diverse matters and their relationships. I feel architecture and space always undergo change and ambiguous states of being in correlation to people, context and many, many other factors.

I just look at Einstein's works and admire the bold path of discovery he has set in the world.

**TC:** *Your buildings (such as House N) appear as abstracted objects within an urban or landscaped setting. You also discuss your buildings in abstract terms, for example in your monograph Primitive Future (2008) you discuss your architecture in terms of 10 'founding intuitions', such as Nest or Cave, In a tree-like place, City as house-house as city and so on. You also discuss House N as resembling 'living in the clouds'. During the design process, how have you moved back and forth between these broad abstracted and imaginary issues and the more mundane and concrete issues, such as the client's brief or program, climate, surrounding environment and technical issues such as construction and regulatory codes.*

**SF:** The 10 chapters or concepts in *Primitive Future* are not exactly a strict order of an approach to architecture, they are rather, like you mention, intuitions founded (and emerging) along previous projects by the office, which have become a kind of signpost for how we converse within the office. They are definitely signs that exist only to be rewritten and to be expanded upon.

It's hard to define, but it does not really feel like we move back and forth between these terms and mundane/concrete issues. They are created and expanded through engaging with the client's brief, and other technical issues that make architecture as architecture.

**TC:** *The reason behind the question is that your buildings seem deceptively simple but complex at the same time, as you need to negotiate with the concrete and the mundane. As a practitioner, I know to achieve simplicity is very complex and difficult. For example, the aim of the construction detailing is to achieve*

*abstraction, that is, to detail the building without it appearing that it is detailed. (Detailing involves hiding and at the same time emphasises and restructures to maintain the abstract reading of the building). A good example is your House Before House where the house is conceptualised as a number of randomly arranged and stacked boxes. Here you have achieved an almost literal translation between the concept and the built building through the way you have detailed the building.*

**SF:** Many of the works from the office do appear very simple, but perhaps, a term we often speak about is for them to appear 'clear'. The main intention is to make clear the relationships, which is to say, the architecture itself.

The House Before House project is indeed detailed in a way that the diagram is almost literally erected, however the emphasis is not for it to appear model-like, but rather to define myriad levels of resolution within the relationship of architecture, nature and man.

You will find that the white walls of the cubes are finished in such a way that the rough texture becomes apparent only from about 50cm away. The resolution of interaction jumps in relativity to one's experience.

**TC:** *House N and House Before House are both white houses. The method of construction and its materiality are not visible. My interpretation is that abstraction here involves a process of reduction or 'stripping away'. In House O and the model for the Garden House, the walls express the materiality and construction: the concrete and the lines of the formwork are visible. Can you discuss the two different approaches to abstraction, materiality and construction.*

**SF:** We feel that white is very much a material, and we try to utilise its properties in many different ways as much as possible. In the case of House N, we felt the architecture to exist like a cloud, seeing pieces of the sky in layers. The presence of the architecture here is taken to the background as an instrument to mediate the filtering of the light and the many views.

House Before House, on the other hand, prepares the site with fields of canvas for the trees to acrobatically fuse the notion of nature and architecture by its configuration and the orientation suggested by each of the boxes.

We envisaged the walls of House O and House Garden as being rather like a continuation of the cliff edge or the garden. Both of the approaches dissolve the architecture to make apparent the spatial relationships and dialogues within the space.

**TC:** *From the description and photos of your buildings, traditional binary oppositions such as inside/outside, natural/unnatural, open and enclosed space are undone. For example, the spaces of House N are experienced as neither inside or outside. You talk about this space as being 'in-between'. Could you discuss the notion of the 'in-between'?*

**SF:** It is architecture's inescapable fate to delineate the inside to the outside. However, I feel that in reality, the world that we live in is full of many ambiguities and in-betweens.

What I envisage to articulate in architecture is not to necessarily undo these binary opposites, but rather allow the in-betweens to be an experiential being, to enrich how one can interact with space. This notion of in-betweens, finding gradations of matter, has long lived within traditional Japanese architecture. I myself am simply rediscovering these notions of exploring the riches of space that exist between these opposites.

**TC:** *What I find interesting about your work is the sense of 'scalelessness'. In a traditional building, the openings in a wall correspond to a room and its floor plate and as such provide a register of human scale. In House N the openings and their arrangement appear random. It is not until you look at photos of House N showing furniture and people do you begin to understand the scale of the building. To what extent are the openings random? What process do you go through to locate the openings?*

**SF:** Yes, I am very much interested in the scale of things. One thing I wonder at is how the conventional human scale of contemporaneity is only a very recent development within human history. Looking at our entire human history and nature, I believe that there are myriad scales that people are able to register; either small or big.

In House N, the openings are a portal to the sky. The scale of the openings is, in itself, very large to be called a conventional window, however, I feel it is a rather comfortable scale for someone to register it as a medium that mediates both enclosed and open.

**TC:** *In your later house, House H, there is a sense of scalelessness in the exterior wall of the model of the building, but the openings are not as random as they appear from the drawings. They clearly relate to each room and the stepped floor plates. This seems to be different from House N. Did you have a different approach for House H? The stepped height of each room and the interior spatial structure of House H remind me of an abstracted elaboration of Adolf Loos' Raumplan.*

## CONTRIBUTOR: TONY CHENCHOW

is a principal of Sydney-based Chenchow Little, the practice he co-founded in 1994 with Stephanie Little. They were awarded the 2009 AIA Robin Boyd Award for Residential Architecture for Freshwater House. Their body of work will be featured in **MONUMENT 96**.



**SF:** In House H, the openings are, again, not treated as windows, they are apertures to connect rooms to each other. The apertures punctuate each room at a scale appropriate to register the aperture layers which exist in layers beyond the one you look through. They seek to attain a field between fully connected and segmented relationships. The opening in House N was imagined to exist like a loose skin with a significant thickness.

**TC:** *You founded your office in Tokyo in 2000. You have won architecture awards locally and internationally and you have gained international prominence through recent publications. Your practice has grown and you are undertaking not only larger projects, but projects outside Japan, in places such as Oslo, Dubai, and Tehran. Has this changed the way your office and you now work?*

**SF:** The approach to larger projects sited in wider and variegated contexts has most definitely opened up newer ideas and perspectives in our approach to architecture.

In these larger contexts, architecture explores a being not as singular spatial matter but something that is both landscape and infrastructure; a wider spectrum of notions on how architecture coexists with nature and urbanity.

Our office is now a home for staff and interns from many places around the world. As global cultural views are shared, the manner and attitude towards how we work with architecture also changes for the better, I think.

For me personally, when we began undertaking international projects I started to rediscover many very Japanese notions of space and architecture.

**TC:** *The themes of randomness, stacked repetitive elements and scalelessness appear to have allowed you to jump from the small scale of your houses to larger scale projects, such as your entries for the Benetton Building in Tehran and the Library in Oslo. Have you found this shift difficult? Do you think that your clients have also recognised this quality of your work – its ability to be extended?*

**SF:** Not necessarily difficult, challenging though, but in a very good way. Many spatial theories and ideas deteriorate with certain scales, and some become more powerful. I enjoy exercising new sensitivities and intuitions picked up along the way in different contexts, which is very exciting.

I hope to continue to traverse these differences in scale and to expand further on many new definitions of architecture in the future.

