SANAA. Figuration / configuration.

The "nothingness" of SANAA's architecture, the apparent simplicity of the formal expression, together with the refusal of its authors to delineate a theoretical vehicle able to expose the principles and mechanisms of their architecture, complicate any labor of critical evaluation.

On the one hand, these points could spark certain skepticism. For instance, William J.R. Curtis has suggested that SANAA's "simplicity" indicates a refusal to face up the complexities of architectural tasks[1]. On the other hand, the extreme precision, the richness, the phenomenological nuances and, above all, the strong interconnection between their architecture and the cultural and material practices of our time, accentuate the interest of the many attempts of rationalization. Building upon the architecture´s simplicity, formal austerity and weightlessness, those elaborations usually pursue the description of an overarching architectonic apparatus. However, this endeavor is not exempt of difficulties.

Architects as close to Kazuyo Sejima as her mentor Toyo Ito have not succeeded in their critical analysis. Particularly, Ito suggested that Sejima operated on the idea that "a building was ultimately the equivalent of the diagrams of the space used to abstractedly describe the mundane activities presupposed by the structure"[2].

Despite how interesting or provocative it might be to connect, in light of these ideas, the work of Sejima with distinct architects notorious for designing through diagrams, like Rem Koolhaas, the shortcomings of Ito's theory cannot be disregarded. In repudiation of Ito's characterization of hers as a diagrammatic architecture, Sejima later pointed out: "The way we understand the program is very abstract, so it can't become a form. It cannot be turned into something that is

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[1] Curtis, William J. R. 2010. "Less is more? Or less is less? Masters of Simplicity." *Architectural Review* 228 (1360) (06): 31-2.

[2] Ito, Toyo. 1996. "Diagram Architecture", in Kazuyo Sejima 1988-1996. *Croquis* (77).

identifiable as form because it is just too abstract to become so well defined"[3].

Moreover, the immateriality and lightness conveyed by SANAA's architecture are usually handled as if they were physical characteristics, when in fact they are the product of an elaborated artifice of perception rather than a tangible structural reality[4]. The absence of form might be more elegant than its presence; however, this absence is by no means a mere physical fact, but the expression of a studied series of effects and nuances. Similarly, with the use of hierarchy, SANAA is not just concerned with its suppression, but with the creation of a different field condition:

> "We are not interested in creating a non-hierarchy but in making a new one, which is different from the existent hierarchy. We think that hierarchy is limited, a kind of ready-made product, and that sort of ready-made response is neither creative nor useful. If you do something new, you can do different things and new ways to approach them."[5]

Additionally, the cultural references customarily associated with their works fail to convey any useful set of underlying principles - other than emphasizing an aesthetic resemblance, a sense of isolation, a minimal physical condition always on the verge of vanishing.[6]

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[3] Blau, Eve. 2008. Tensions in transparency - between information and experience: The dialectical logic of SANAA's architecture. *Harvard Design Magazine* (29): 29-37.

[4] Cortés, Juan Antonio. 2008. "Topología Arquitectónica. Una indagación sobre la Naturaleza del Espacio Contemporáneo", in SANAA Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishzawa, 2004-2008. *Croquis* (139).

[5] Ryue Nishizawa, in "SANAA: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998-2004". *Croquis* (121/122). P. 25.

[6] Kyoichi Tsuzuki, Takashi Murakami, Hariuki Murakami (Galiano), John Cage (Pérez Rubio), Turner, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Mies, Jacobsen...
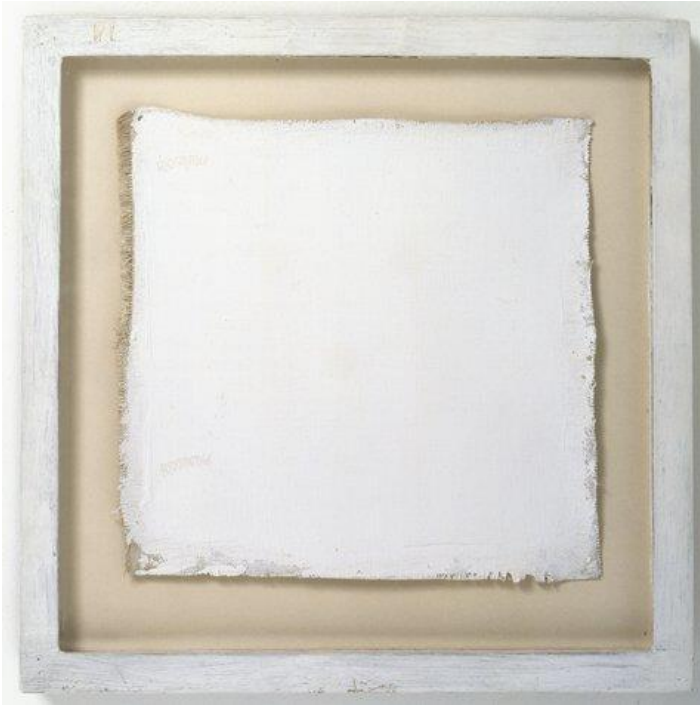
1 Robert Ryman, *An all-white painting measuring and signed twice on the left...,* **1961. Oil on linen canvas, 34.93 cm x 34.93 cm x 3.81 cm**

The label of Minimalism, frequently adjunct to those rationalizations, reveals some theoretical misconceptions – as Stan Allen already pointed out in 1996[7]. Not only are there methodological difficulties involved in trying to establish a parallel between the specific 1960's artistic movement and a different discipline and period. Even in using the term more broadly, with poetic license, it is not possible to sustain that SANAA's architecture merely aims to reveal its formal idealism through the reduction of the architectonic elements.

And yet, although general theoretical frameworks seem to have flubbed in describing the conceptual mechanisms behind SANAA's designs, there are aspects of their work that have been more successfully enlightened. For example, their use of transparency has been depicted not only as a functional or visual resource, but also as a projective relationship, as a

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[7] Allen, Stan. "Sejima's Theater of Operations". *Assemblage 30*. 1996. P. 103.

mode of "flexibility"[8] detached from simple games of reflections and blurriness, or from the mere ability to see[9].

2 Glass Pavilion. Toledo. Ohio.

For SANAA, transparency is not a plastic figurative feature. The Toledo Museum, as a redundant architectonic container of a collection of glass, is the perfect trope for their use of translucence. As Eve Blau points out, at Toledo they deconstruct the *poché* into a permeable space defined by two plains of glass, revealing "the contradiction between information and experience without resolving it"[10]. That is to say, the transparency expresses the dichotomy between the visual interconnection and the isolation of the individuals in modern society. This is a phenomenon different from the

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[8] SANAA: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998-2004. *Croquis* (121/122). P. 19.

[9] Sejima: "What I mean by transparency is a bit different from being able to see. For me, information society is mainly about not seeing. […] I think that in information society, it may be that there is no physical movement at the edge between spaces, but you can still get flexibility." in Kazukyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1995-2000. *Croquis* (99). P. 14.

[10] Blau, Eve. 2008. Tensions in transparency - between information and experience: The dialectical logic of SANAA's architecture. *Harvard Design Magazine* (29): 29-37.

mechanisms of control described by Michel Foucault in "Panopticism"[11] - an analogy that has been suggested repeatedly when talking about transparency in Sejima's architecture.

Along these lines it is necessary to acknowledge that the complications of theorizing the architecture of SANAA are not only external, but perhaps intrinsic to their methodology. Sejima explains in these terms her skepticism towards academic theorizations:

> "I do not want to create a theory first and then interpret or prove that theory by making architecture, because the technique of writing and the technique of project design are completely different. For me the process of designing the project for a building is in itself a way of thinking about architecture."[12]

Consequently, the same friction or dissonance between the techniques of writing and design that Sejima suggests would not only thwart her translation of the design process into theory, but might also preclude others from doing so. The question is not whether it is accurate to assert that the techniques of design and critical evaluation are incompatible *per se*, but if they are so in the particular case of SANAA.

Nevertheless, this same argument implies that a theoretical analysis linked to their design methodology should render better results than an abstract attempt. The twofold condition of the architectural reality can help in this process: By reversing the customary approach - which considers the built elements as the by-products of a project – we could diagnose those elements as symptoms of a methodology, as traces of SANAA's architectural thought rather than its result. This approach will also contribute to correct a dislocation in the perception of SANAA's sophistication: The most extremely exquisite, refined feature of their architecture is the precise exploration and definition of the architectonic atmosphere through the design process, rather than the built product itself.

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[11] Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984."Panopticism", in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

[12] Díaz Moreno, Cristina, and García Grinda, Efrén. 2004. "Océano de Aire" in SANAA: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998-2004. *Croquis* (121/122). P. 24.

Unlike other arts such as sculpture, architecture is condemned to the mediation between conception and materialization. Whereas a painter would interact with the final product of his work, the architect is subjected to an intercession with the final product through an interposed media. Reversing Plato's myth of the Cavern, the architect can only craft a certain spatial conception through interjected representations. He can only mold the concept outside the cavern by representing its "shadow", thus exposing himself to Plato's allegory, mistaking the depiction of reality from reality itself (disengaging the techniques of representation from the techniques of edification).

At the risk of oversimplifying the relation between architectural thought and its materialization, we can say that there are three main approaches in response to this problem. Some designers have affirmed that architecture is not in the material realization but in the intellectual process of conception, or in the abstract essence behind that materialization – for example, Eisenman at certain points of his career.

In contrast, others like Boullée, would accept the intermediate representation as an architectonic product in itself. Or they would more easily capture their "architecture" in the drawings than in the materialization – as does, for instance, Zaha Hadid.

Finally, there are those who would acknowledge the instrumental role of the mediation: Some pragmatically accepting it as another factor of the design strategy - like Chipperfield - some trying to enhance the mediation between concept and reality. In the case of Frank Gehry, for example, the ambition of collapsing the dysfunctions between the conception, representation and construction of his architecture, lead to the development of software that allows him to represent and (more recently) to define the fabrication of his complicated geometries.

SANAA belongs to this third group. However, their attention is not towards the development of technological tools that facilitate the mediation. It is amusing to read how, for SANAA, the best consequence of the use of computers in design was that they were able to produce many more models in a

shorter period of time[13]. Unlike Gehry, they are not invested in adapting the potential of the new design tools but in the absolute, obsessive mastering of a very idiosyncratic design process. In this sense, Sejima has acknowledged:

> "I am more interested in changing what I am going to create than altering the rules of the game. Reflecting on my past experiences and looking ahead to my future work, I think that I want to present the physical constraints placed upon architecture as possibilities to be explored, rather than limitations."[14]

By constraining their palette, concentrating tremendous efforts on a few constructive details, on one hand, and designing almost exclusively through iterations of physical models and diagrammatic drawings, on the other, they have been able to perfect the exploration and definition of the spaces they create. That is to say, they have developed a process that allows them to predict and evaluate in advance (and therefore manipulate with extreme precision) the phenomenological outcome of their projects.

Traditionally, modeling was a tool that allowed the architect to confirm certain qualities embedded in the design – light, proportion, and so forth. It was a mechanism of evaluation rather than of exploration. In cases like Siza´s, the tremendous accumulation of experience, partially assisted by the use of models, allows him to reach the highest degree of sophistication in the materialization of architectonic spaces. The case of SANAA is slightly different. They don't rely on experience, but on the precise feedback offered by a simple and extremely refined design process, largely based on the iteration of physical models. The precision of that process, the secondary role that the new media of design have on it, together with the extreme attention given to a pervasive constructive detail helps in preventing a disconnection between the architectonic concept, its re-presentation and the final materialization.

SANAA compulsively pursues the precise exploration and materialization of very particular and controlled spatial

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[13] SANAA: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998-2004. *Croquis* (121/122). P. 11-12

[14] Koji Taki. 1996. "Conversación con Kazuyo Sejima", in Kazuyo Sejima 1988-1996. *Croquis* (77). P. 16.

conditions, whereas certain landmarks of recent architecture - like the Central Library of Seattle or the Beijing National Stadium - renounce the control of the spatial experience. Rejecting the aesthetics of complexity (that is to say, differentiating between something complex and something just complicated), they reaffirm a radical confidence in simplicity:

> "If you don't spend a lot of time on projects, things get very complicated. In Japan at least, if you don't ask architects to make something specific, very complicated projects will appear. That is the reason why Tokyo's landscape is becoming so overloaded and unpleasant. I think that if you want to be an architect, you have to spend a lot of time making your work more simple."[15]

Nonetheless, this obsession with control and simplicity has certain disadvantages. The same reduction of architectonic elements that allows an exact determination of the desired phenomenological outcome also hampers the available architectonic answers:

First, it restricts the ability of architecture to respond and adapt to multiple sociological and performative requirements. The result is that some constraints will not be attended to. The buildings may not be as comfortable, durable or functional as others, or they may not thrive in the recognition of theoretical architectonic problems, for instance.

Second, it implies a limitation in the spectrum of possible formal solutions available. Sejima understood, early in her career, that it is worth developing a personal idiosyncratic expression to its ultimate outcome, with rigor and obsession, with a suspension of historical or theoretical context, disregarding anything that does not pertain to that personal universe. However, that restriction of the factors opens up the possibility of exhausting the potential formal outcomes. At a certain point, the necessity of being more and more radical in the exploration of the architectural syntax would lead the architect to miscarry his proposal, taking his mannerism too far.

This is, I am afraid, the process that led SANAA to build the Rolex Center, forcing an idea that others didn't pursue (like

[15] Ryue Nishizawa, in "SANAA: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998-2004". *Croquis* (121/122). P. 12.

Koolhaas in Agadir) but failing to convey the sophisticated phenomenological experience that characterized most of their earlier work. The boldness of the design (a social form-less space, a non-hierarchical mat covering a park) does not justify, in this case, the overlooking of certain problems – not only physical (the slopes…) but also formal (the anodyne repetition of the two parallel stacked slabs…), and spatial (the failure to preserve the quality of the park underneath).

In summary, we can consider that the objective of SANAA's methodology is neither whiteness, nor lightness nor transparency, and it is neither the subversion of the program, nor the interaction with the site. For SANAA, the act of building means creating a certain atmosphere contained by a physical reality, a frame that defines the sensorial expression of seeing. Thus, the product of SANAA is the spatial phenomenology, the precise and exquisite synthesis of all the parameters addressed in the project, the holistic materialization of a particular way of inhabiting space.

Their architectonic restraint is a symptom of the methodology of design, of their obsession for controlling the outcome. The final result is a consequence of the extreme refinement of the design procedure. This process, based on the obsessive, precise representation and evaluation of numerous iterations, precludes conventional theoretical mechanisms from informing architectural decisions.

Paradoxically, contemporary methodologies like SANAA's have already been observed and categorized[16]. Given the parallels and correspondences in the conception of design as a projective synthesis of architectural deliberation and as a routine with its own operative nature (and turning back to our previous argument on the necessity of an approach linked to SANAA's methodology) we can infer that a theoretical vehicle

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[16] "A projective architecture does not shy away from reinstating architectural definition, but that definition stems from design and its effects rather that from a language of means and materials. The Doppler shifts the understanding of disciplinarity as autonomy to disciplinarity as […] practice. In the former, knowledge and form are based on shared norms, principles and traditions. In the latter […] discipline is an active discursive practice, governed by rules, but in perpetual transformation." // Somol, Robert, and Sarah Whiting. 2002. "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism." *Perspecta* 33 (Mining Autonomy): pp. 72-77.

like "projective architecture", depicts their work more successfully than other frameworks.

However, Sejima's skepticism towards theory does not entail a lack of criticality. "In a society where ideology has become null and void, the desire to plan directly without going around in circles, with diagrams that embody and represent reality must be in itself a stance loaded with criticism."[17] SANAA's buildings suggest the possibility of a discipline that finds its specificity in the agency of design rather than in academic theorizations.

Hereafter, SANAA's work substantiates how the process of design (when tackled with unique precision) can be a mode of architectural thought.

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[17] Ito, Toyo. 1996. "Diagram Architecture", in Kazuyo Sejima 1988-1996. *Croquis* (77).

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