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Atsushi Kitagawara: Architecture Designed by the Arts



Atsushi Kitagawara

An architect by trade, Atsushi Kitagawara has experience in urban planning, landscape design, and furniture design. Transforming his love of poetry, philosophy, music, and the contemporary arts into a trademark architectural style, Kitagawara has become one of Japan's most prized architects.

In 2000, he and his firm, Atsushi Kitagawara Architects, secured the Architectural Institute of Japan's top honor for its "Big Palette Fukushima" design. This award is Japan's most prestigious architectural award; past winners include Junya Ishigami and Pritzker Architecture Prize winners Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa. Kitagawara's design for the Nakamura Keith Haring Collection won the Japan Art Academy Prize, the Murano Togo Prize, the Japan Institute of Architects Japan Architecture Award, and the American Institute of Architects Japan Design Award, among others. Not surprisingly, Atsushi Kitagawara Architects has doubled in size since its inception in 1982—and in 2007, opened a second office in Berlin, Germany to handle its growing European portfolio.

When he was just 21, Kitagawara won first place in the Japan Architect International Design Competition for his design for Forest City. As a talented artist who had pursued philosophy and painting, he decided then to devote his life towards the craft of architecture. But he did not abandon his other pursuits; rather, he incorporated them. "Architecture is an incubator of high creativity with the potential to provide better solutions to meet requirements, satisfy conditions, and create programs that stimulate the human imagination and generate new meaning. Like the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, architecture opens

our eyes to brand new ideas. Architecture, like other forms of art, makes hopes and dreams possible," he maintains. His reinvention of architectural forms continues to inspire and delight those who live and work in his spaces.

Kitagawara received both his bachelors and masters of architecture degrees from the Tokyo University of the Arts, and in 2005, he was appointed to a professorship. During his postgraduate studies, Kitagawara worked with Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Kenzo Tange on an urban planning project in southern Saudi Arabia, which included maintenance of old urban areas and city planning for newly developed urban areas in five cities. Later, he traveled widely throughout Europe, absorbing a variety of artistic styles that would influence his work. Upon Kitagawara's return to Japan in 1977, Yuji Morioka, Chief Urban Designer for Kenzo Tange and URTEC, asked him to design a residence—and he began to focus on architecture again. In 1982 Kitagawara launched his firm, Atsushi Kitagawara Architects, with a staff of ten. Japan was experiencing an economic boom, and by the time Kitagawara was 35, he employed 20 professionals. At the age of 40, he designed a large-scale factory complex called ARIA, and four years later took the coveted Architectural Institute of Japan's prize for the Big Palette Fukushima International Exhibition and Convention Center. These two projects have shifted the firm's focus towards public architecture.

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The elliptical roof of the Big Palette Fukushima features space frame construction selected for its strength as well as its aesthetic value.

THE BIG PALETTE FUKUSHIMA: OASIS IN THE URBANSCAPE

Completed in 1998 and covering 23,000 square meters, the Big Palette Fukushima complex was the largest space that Kitagawara had designed up to that point. Its technologically advanced design features a column-free 5,500 square meter multi-purpose exhibition hall, and a 1,000 square meter international conference hall that can seat up to 1,000 people, along with space for conference rooms and service facilities.

Named for its iconic roof, the Big Palette Fukushima was created as an oasis that reflects beauty and well-being onto the busy urban environment of Koriyama, Japan. Kitagawara designed the structure to capture the essence of water, “the incubator of all life.” The building represents “a single body of

water” that hovers over the Koriyama Basin; it’s a fluid and harmonious shape that enhances and embraces the natural body of water. The large elliptical roof, named “Mother Roof,” features space frame construction selected for its strength as well as its aesthetic value. Kitagawara and his team designed an outdoor canopy out of carbon fiber reinforced plastic (CFRP) to protect the outdoor exhibition space from rain while allowing light to flow through. The pedestrian deck boasts horizontally-connected hyperbolic paraboloid structured shells, and the outer shell has reverse conical fan columns that connect keel trusses, creating dynamic spaces.

Kitagawara used the Vectorworks® Architect application for the first time for this project. He and his team were able to learn the software quickly. “I remember that the staff at my office had difficulty at first because the prevalence of CAD in Japan was very low at that time, but by final design, they began to draw at relatively fast speeds,” he recalls. The firm used CAD to collaborate with various other team members, including the structural engineer, installation engineer, landscape designer, and lighting designer. “Using Vectorworks as our common CAD application, we could easily exchange compatible files and meet tight design and supervision schedules,” he notes.

THE HEART OF ALL HUMANITY: THE NAKAMURA KEITH HARING COLLECTION

This museum and spa complex sits quietly in a lush forest 1,000 meters above sea level at the foot of Mt. Yatsugatake, an ancient active volcano in Kobuchizawa, Japan. When they designed the building, Kitagawara and his team were mindful of the surrounding trees, designing a one-story building to protect them. Two black walls flank the contemporary white building, and two large polygonal-shaped windows welcome light into the building; the left window pulls the eye in through a plank-like protrusion. The flat roof is crowned by a large curved block with bold red flourishes reminiscent of the energetic and primitive artwork inside.

It’s the first museum ever to exclusively showcase the works of the brilliant Keith Haring, a New York City artist who passed away when he was just 31 years old. The rooms track his life and art in a chronological journey, aptly named “Chaos,” “Space of Premonition,” and “Hope.” This location receives some of the longest hours of daylight anywhere in Japan, and Kitagawara capitalized on this opportu-

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My responsibility when designing them is very high, and I would always like to create the best solution.

I think that spacious areas and surroundings have a strong emotional aspect, as well as a scientific and logical one.

In short, I always seek spaces and environments in which reason and emotion co-exist, like a poem.”

— Kitagawara, Atsushi Kitagawara Architects, Tokyo, Japan

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nity. He effectively captured the “Light and Dark” that characterized Haring’s life and work and the 1980’s New York art scene that embraced him. After entering the space, one follows the road of darkness into the “Chaos” room. After walking through a blue door, the last room is flooded with light—it represents “Hope.” Kitagawara and his team used Vectorworks’ 3D modeling capabilities to visualize the complicated shapes throughout the building and to provide various perspectives for their client, Museum Director Kazuo Nakamura.

This unusual museum has a commanding view of the Japanese South Alps. Across the courtyard, the famous South American relaxation spa KUROTEL taps the hot springs that were once used by the Jomon people, who prospered here from 8000 to 7000 B.C. “I like the hot spring that wells up from the museum site. When I have a bath in the hot spring that gushes from the earth of Mt. Yatsugatake, I can imagine the ancient people of the Jomon,” says Kitagawara.

Haring’s work has found a perfect home here. “With the highland geographical environment, the flora on site—Mongolian oaks, mountain cherries, larches, and red pines—we’re reminded of the primitive character of the Jomon period—full of life. We may tend to characterize the works of Keith Haring as just pop art, but on the other hand, they primitively represent the anxiety and the terror of society, the craziness,

the absurdity of being human, our dignity, and the dangers of life. They make us feel something very serious, something which approaches the roots of human life,” explains Kitagawara. The director, Nakamura, brought this connection to life. “He focused on the primitive character and vitality which underlie both the Jomon culture and the works of Keith Haring, and he thought to convey a totally new way of life linking these different cultures.”

Additionally, Kitagawara notes that archeologists have discovered many artifacts from the Jomon period in the nearby ruins, some of them pots with reliefs that resemble the human-shaped drawings by Keith Haring. “The works by Keith Haring and the Japanese ancient culture are alike not only in their character but also in their expression,” says Kitagawara.

LIKE A POEM

Kitagawara infuses his architecture with art. He draws inspiration from human imagination and behavior, society, nature, and life. “Spaces and environments are our places to live and reflect our society’s fundamental values. My responsibility when designing them is very high, and I would always like to create the best solution. I think that spacious areas and surroundings have a strong emotional aspect, as well as a scientific and logical one. In short, I always seek spaces and environments in which reason and emotion co-exist, like a poem,” he says. As he pursues global frontiers, the international architecture scene will benefit greatly from this expansive, worldly view.

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Images: Courtesy of Atsushi Kitagawara Architects

Original text and publication by: Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
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