

# China Academy of Art Museum in Xiangshan, China by Kengo Kuma

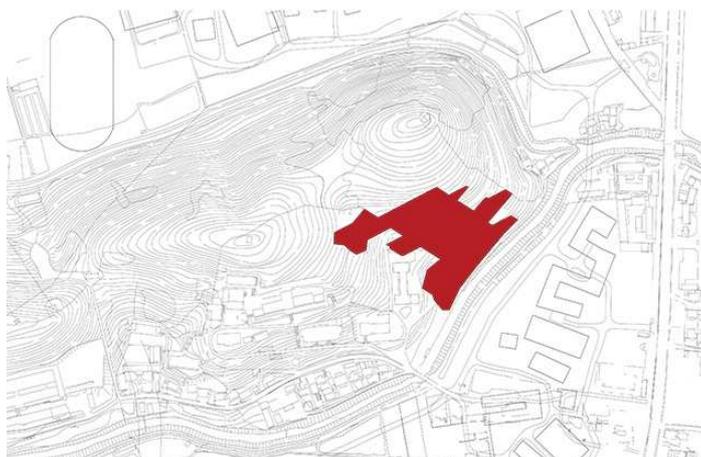
20 March 2015 | By Jack Self

Planing down the hillside in Hangzhou, Kengo Kuma's new museum for the China Academy of Art is a dazzling play of pottery parallelograms that pays homage to his friend Wang Shu

Hangzhou is at the southern mouth of the Grand Canal, an artificial river a thousand miles long and two thousand years old. The city is renowned for its natural beauty, its many Chinese gardens, ornamental lakes and its enormous wealth. As one of the seven ancient capitals of China, Hangzhou was built up as a seat of imperial government, and its geographic importance made it a powerful centre for trade and culture. For almost a millennium it was arguably the locus of southern Chinese civilisation, and vast numbers of important politicians, scholars, philosophers, poets and scientists all lived and died there. To the south of the city, wedged between the mass housing blocks of Zhuangtang Residential District and the forested mountain of Xiangshan, is an outpost campus of the prestigious China Academy of Art (CAA).

Itself bisected by a tributary to the Qiantang Estuary, the campus was built less than a decade ago as a sprawling network of squat buildings flanking the river and set among groves of ancient camphor laurels. The architect of the complex, Wang Shu, was named China's first Pritzker Prize winner shortly after its completion and is himself an alumnus of the CAA (and now dean of its architecture school).

If this seems like a protracted introduction to Kengo Kuma's architecture, it is because for Kuma context is king. His conference centre and museum is set slightly above the other buildings, on the site of an old tea garden, and takes every opportunity to express its deference and respect for Wang Shu's architectural intentions for the campus - although the manner by which Kuma mimics these strategies is at times quite astonishing. Wang famously salvaged seven million tiles and bricks from houses demolished during Hangzhou's rapid modernisation (AR July 2008), and his sweeping roofs and sharp edges abstract rather than imitate traditional building forms. This somehow post-postmodern historical sensitivity, combined with Wang's psychogeographic determination to leave the contours of the bucolic hillside untouched, informs his strategy to 'respect, [not] erase the past' (AR March 2012).

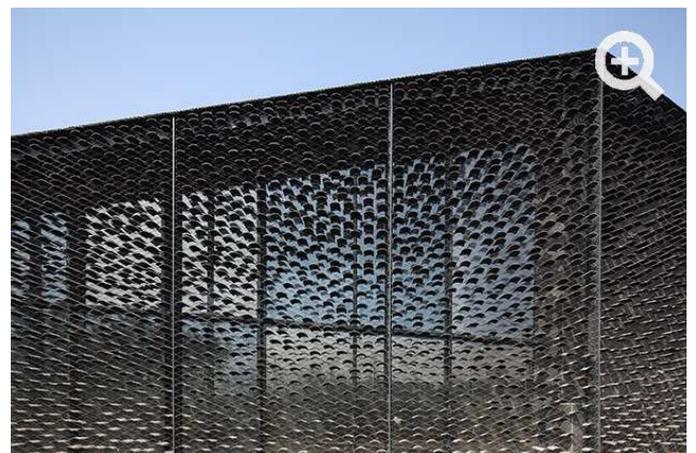


Site plan

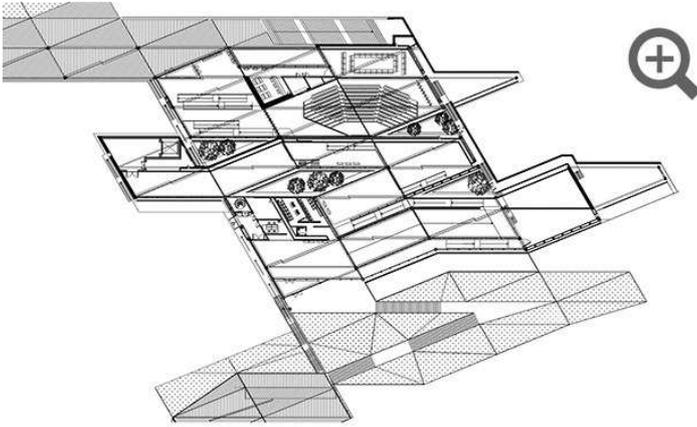
Kuma overtly reinterprets this approach, saying, 'an arrangement was made that no slopes would be cut or modified and that the architecture would be configured to closely relate to the mountain'. To accommodate the steep grade, the plan is thus rhomboid, unfolding and cascading down the site in a series of sloping ramps, jagged rooflines and partially enclosed courtyards, in a way that both conceals and confuses the scale of the building (which at almost 5000sqm is substantially bigger than it looks from below).

Also like Wang Shu, Kuma made arrangements for 'clay tiles and stones from the old houses of the district to be gathered as reusable materials,' saying, 'This methodology proposes the idea that rather than gardens being put in contrast to architecture, the soil of the tea gardens is actually transformed into the architecture.' This may be technically, or even poetically, correct; however, in light of Kuma's general approach to tectonics and form, this position does seem slightly disingenuous.

There is a move in the building towards what Kuma calls the 'anti-object' - indefinable architectural form and its inseparability from its landscape - reinforced powerfully in the facade treatment, which only superficially relates to the adjacent campus. Rather than setting the tiles into concrete, or stacking them as infill, Kuma upends their physicality completely, suspending them in a wire matrix or 'three-dimensional body'. This double offset grid has the black tiles screwed below the steel cable junctions, making them clay parasols. As part of a double facade, the tiles unexpectedly have no waterproofing role, at best a highly ornamental *brise soleil*. Unlike bricks, a tile cannot float, nor can it gracefully hover in an arch or lintel. So what does a tile want to be? Kuma breaks the interrelationship of the tiles, which would normally form an overlapping surface, to suggest the immateriality of the building itself. Fragmented, the tiles are vaulted into patterns that flash like the scales of a fish with movement, sometimes dense and dark, at other times invisible or impossibly thin. Taken as a whole, the duality of Kuma's response and non-response, his reinterpretation and resistance, creates a building both profoundly rooted in its place and yet disintegrated and ethereal.



Suspended in a wire matrix, reclaimed tiles present an atomised screen; from a distance, the porous facade shimmers like fish scales

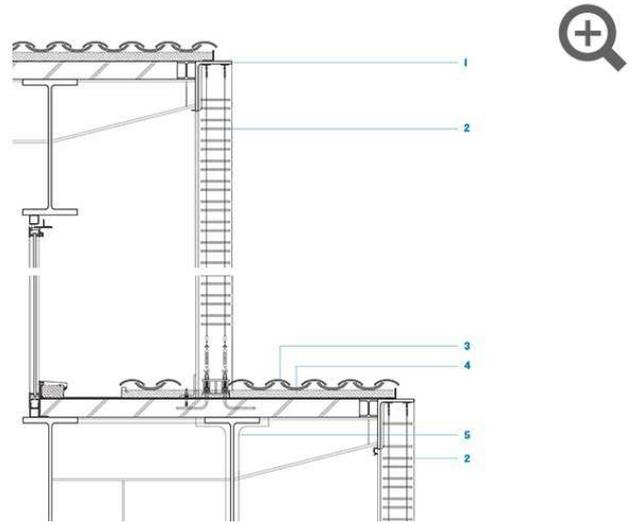


Ground floor plan

The total absence of horizontal lines or floor levels, in favour of what Claude Parent might have called the 'architecture of the oblique', blurs any interpretation of the building's programme. Because one can't tell how many storeys there are, the height and scale are not at all clear. The overlapping lozenge rooms, which appear from some angles as parallel, only to splinter apart at the next turn, make depth perception confusing. This couldn't be further from Wang Shu's monolithic building-objects, and Kuma's is an architecture of disappearance, dissimulation and ambiguity. It rejects the easily understandable, freestanding object in favour of the fluid experience of an ever-changing interior, framed moments unfolding like the path in a Chinese formal garden.

When I learnt to speak Japanese as a boy I remember being quite confused by the ambiguous significance of silence in a conversation. To my Anglo-Saxon mind, meaning was conveyed through sound, gesticulation, animation and facial expressions. For the most part, I would have argued, silence is just a gap, or a heightening of suspense *between* sentences.

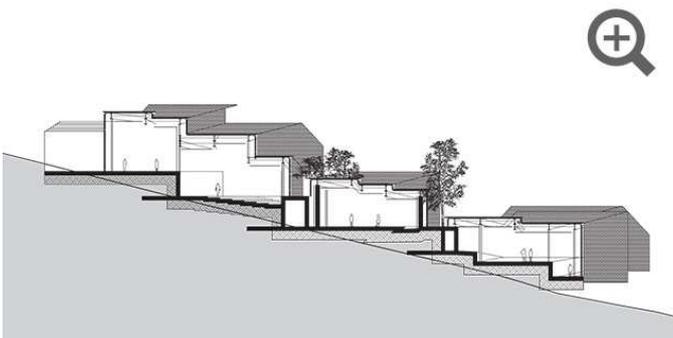
By contrast, for the Japanese silence has a positive power to say what cannot be spoken. Years ago I was in Tokyo with a group of architects kindly showing me their city. After lunch I asked, 'Do we have time to order a coffee?' They all leant in, as if to respond, but not one spoke. I had my answer without having any answer; an answer irrefutable because it was immutable ... Similarly, I had long interpreted my Japanese students' silences during tutorials as disinterest, until I was told it was a sign of respect to let a teacher speak uninterrupted. In both cases, I vaguely understood something was being communicated to me, but I am still not sure exactly how. Japanese silence can be deployed strategically, weaponised as an insult, or used to explain everything words cannot. It can be so subtle you sometimes think you must be mad for thinking it means what you think it means, but my experience is that this camouflage etiquette is, in a sense, the true purpose of the silence.



Detail of external wall

With this in mind, it is what Kuma doesn't say about Wang Shu's adjacent campus that is significant. Is it criticism? It's hard to say, the silence is so deafening perhaps I'm imagining it. First, there is the actual shape of the building: a parallelogram plan, a tessellating elevation, a diamond in three dimensions broken everywhere into a fractured whole. It was only in the process of attempting to simplify these irregular shapes into triangulated facades that Kuma 'finally understood that the mountains as a topographical existence appear as triangles in elevation'. Far from a facile association of mountains with three-sided shapes (one familiar to anyone who has ever eaten a Toblerone), Kuma is describing the terrain of the museum as a fractal reduction of the topology. The building is quite literally the same shape, and as such manifests the same formal complexity of mountains: so massive they are hard to grasp or delineate. And that is how the museum appears, as an indeterminate mass in the landscape, no more comprehensible from within.

In comparison with his contemporaries, what makes Kengo Kuma so refreshing is his insistence on a lack of stylistic continuity. There are certainly trademark strategies: an atomised, uniform facade; an intense sensitivity to place; an indefinable silhouette. But these are a long way from the signature details and repetitiveness of his peers. The way Kuma treats space and time through architecture is radical and philosophical. But it is not polemical. It is demonstrative and assertive, but also immensely patient and non-judgemental. This passivity is what creates the dark silence of the work.



Sections