

# Hard-boiled Wonderland by Tsutomu Abe

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From 1966, when he was a member of the Junzo Sakakura Architectural Institute, until 1970, Tsutomu Abe traveled back and forth between Japan and Thailand as a project manager for a school construction project in Thailand. There, he was exposed to the Thai lifestyle of creating shade, ensuring ventilation, and living in harmony with nature, which profoundly impacted his approach to architectural design from then on.

The “House with a Center” is like a small forest that appears in a residential area, seemingly covered in trees, and stands at an angle to a crossroads. The ground floor is enclosed by concrete walls, while the first floor is a wooden structure, with many windows providing a sense of open space. The roof, in contrast, is constructed of “light” materials giving a softer image. The house employs two key spatial concepts - “enclosing” and “covering” – as well as the architectural designs of “open” and “constricting” .

Entering the central living space from the low-ceilinged entryway, one feels a sense of spatial expansion into the inner space even being inside, while light from the first-floor windows pours through the vaulted ceiling areas from outside. The many variations in spatial configuration, which is open and constricted here and there on both the horizontal and vertical planes, are a delightful experience for any guests. The space created by the vaulted ceiling areas skillfully utilizes light and space, creating several comfortable places. The more deeply one is involved with the house, the deeper the relationship becomes. Likewise, a home can be a pleasant place to live if you put some work into it.

For Abe, the kitchen was like a toy box. As he got older, he tended to forget things, so he wouldn't put his utensils away. He would leave his favorite things out whenever possible so that he felt happy even though they were left lying around. To Abe, stairs were not just for climbing, they were places to leave books and sit down to read.

He also left sketches for planned future renovations. When he got old, he would add a sunroom on the south side of the house, and install a bathroom, washbasin, and toilet. He wanted to relax in a comfortable place with plenty of sunlight and open to nature, while taking a bath. This would be hygienic and he believed it would give a sense of comfort for the caregivers, too.

“Even after more than 20 years since its completion, I still discover new aspects of the house. The elements of space become deeper as time goes by, and the house has a sense of romance and attraction.” This is what people who live in the houses designed by Abe have to say. “The layout is complicated, and the walls are difficult to maintain, but even with these drawbacks, I would have the same house built again...” . Only the homeowners can enjoy the true pleasure of these spaces. As Abe’ s lifestyle changed, the uses of the spaces in the “House with a Center” changed, and like the trees in the garden, it has grown in character while blending in with the surrounding streets. During his lifetime, this was both his workplace and his playhouse. He loved the time he spent here, talking with, cooking for, and entertaining his guests from time to time, while enjoying the sunlight filtering through the trees and the breeze blowing through the house. Neither elaborating nor compromising, he would let guests and homeowners find their own joys of living there.

If you were to ask Abe the reasoning behind these shapes, dimensions, and layouts, he would probably give you a lot of smoke and mirrors. That’ s because there is no single answer, and we can only try and look into Abe’ s mind for a guide.

This uncompromising architect’ s small 100 square meter “home” is Tsutomu Abe’ s hard-boiled wonderland.



## The Houses of Tsutomu Abe

**Yasushi Watanabe**

Architect and professor at College of Industrial Technology, Nihon University

It was in 1975, when he was 39, that Tsutomu Abe established ARTEC architects & associates with Jiro Murofushi, after having worked at Sakakura Associates and Archivision. This was one year after his home, the “House with a Center” , was featured in the magazine “Urban Housing” . In his 40s, he designed the Kagawa Archives and Resource Center and the JIA New Face Award-winning Laneside Stanley and Stanley Electric Technology Research Institute, as well as the Tokiwadai House, Utsukushigaoka House, and other residences. In his 50s, starting in 1986, he designed the Yokohama Futaba Girls' High School Chapel, the Chateraise Hakushu Factory, and the Okayama Prefectural Nakasho Housing Complex, while also building houses such as the Sakuradai House III (now Bontana) and the Tsudanuma House. In his 60s, he worked on the Chateraise Toyotomi Factory and the Yokohama Futaba Gakuen West Wing while also building residences such as the Kokubunji House and the Nerima House, but from around this time, he started appearing less in architecture magazines, and after he turned 70 his work was rarely published, so I think there was not much awareness of what kinds of designs he was doing. When I looked into his work after he passed away in 2023 at the age of 86, I found that he had continued to show great ingenuity in his housing designs even though they had not been published in magazines, and was surprised to learn that he had six housing projects in progress at that time. An overview of the nearly 100 houses he built over a career spanning 48 years shows that while there seems to be something unchanging that he continued to pursue, we can also see changes in the way he thought about and created mixed structures, his aims gradually becoming clearer after some trial and error in the early stages. I am struck anew by the fact that these many houses, starting with the House with a Center, are full of interesting discoveries.

I think a distinctive characteristic of Abe’ s approach to architecture is that he begins by trying to think about what people feel inside and around the building, rather than focusing on the shape of the building itself. When I started working as a staff member in 1986, we were surrounded by the glamorous shapes of postmodernism. In the early stages of a project, we might draw sketches that seemed to be influenced by this postmodernism, but as the project progressed, the playful aspects of the form gradually disappeared. As we were not toying with form, we had to think hard about how to make the spatial experience within the structure into something of value.

When I was still new to the staff, he once showed me how to think about design while looking at a floor plan. With eyes half-closed, he let his imagination go as he followed the floor plan with his fingers, saying “You enter from the middle, see? … Then there’ s a staircase on the right, and the light pours in … nice! You climb the stairs and pass under the low ceiling to come out into an open hall…nice!”



# Analyzing the spatial experience of Abe Architecture

Yasushi Watanabe

Architect and professor at College of Industrial Technology, Nihon University

The spatial experience of this type of architecture can be seen in his early works, House with a Center and Tokiwadai House, mixed structures consisting of concrete wall-enclosed spaces and wooden post-and-beam spaces with only pillars, which show that from the beginning he was trying to create a variety of places using closed spaces and open spaces as a point of reference. In this respect his work differs from Mayumi Miyawaki-style mixed structures, which use concrete as a hard shelter and wood for the interior parts that people come into contact with.

## How to Read the Drawings

**C** ... The closed spaces depicted here are spaces that face inward. The open spaces are spaces that face outward – places that fall under the category “semi-outdoors” when speaking in terms of indoors and outdoors, or “intermediate area” when speaking in terms of internal.

Color-code the open space as follows

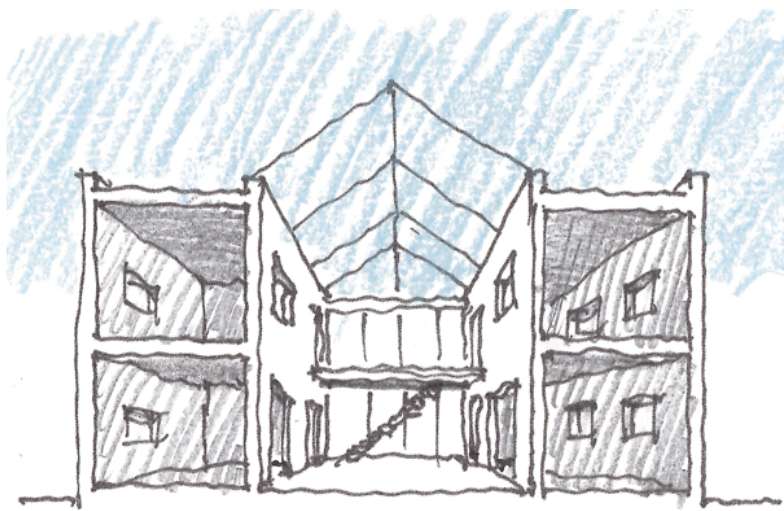
- O** ...Representing spaces that open upwards, such as those with a no roof or a glass roof.
- O** ...Representing spaces that open sideways, such as those with no walls or mostly glass walls.
- O** ...Referring to outdoor-like areas with a dirt floor or plants growing.

These open spaces might be upward-facing spaces in a densely-populated residential area, spaces in the suburbs that allow you to look out toward the horizon, or semi-outdoor inner garden-like spaces. They are interwoven with closed spaces to form a sequence. To make this easier to understand, I have made a visual representation of the diversity of **C O O O** spaces in the plans.

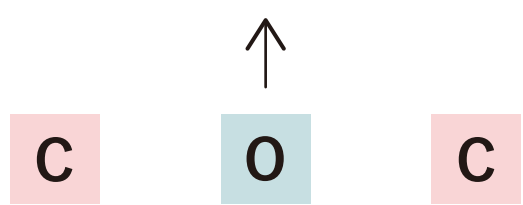
Furthermore, in his later works, due to structural constraints, it became difficult to create a mixed reinforced concrete and wooden structure, so for structures made entirely with reinforced concrete, he divided the structure into three parts on both the vertical and horizontal planes, designed with the intention of creating “open” and “closed” space variations. As you move up and down the first, second, and third floors, you experience a sequence of three-dimensional changes, so you might enter what you thought was a “closed space” to find that it is actually open to the sky, or open downwards, or open to the outside, giving rise to complex and unexpected experiences.

I invite you to explore these houses as Abe did, following the sequence of “open” and “closed” spaces with your fingers as you let your imagination run wild.

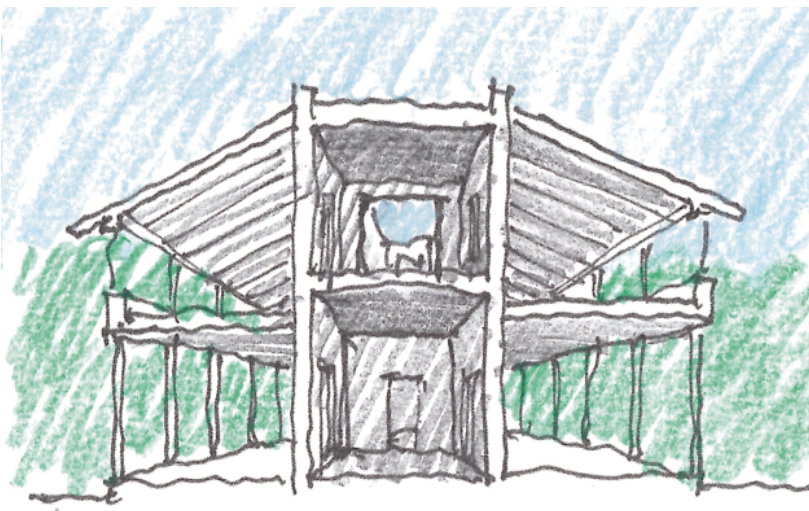
## Examples of Space Configuration



Open upward



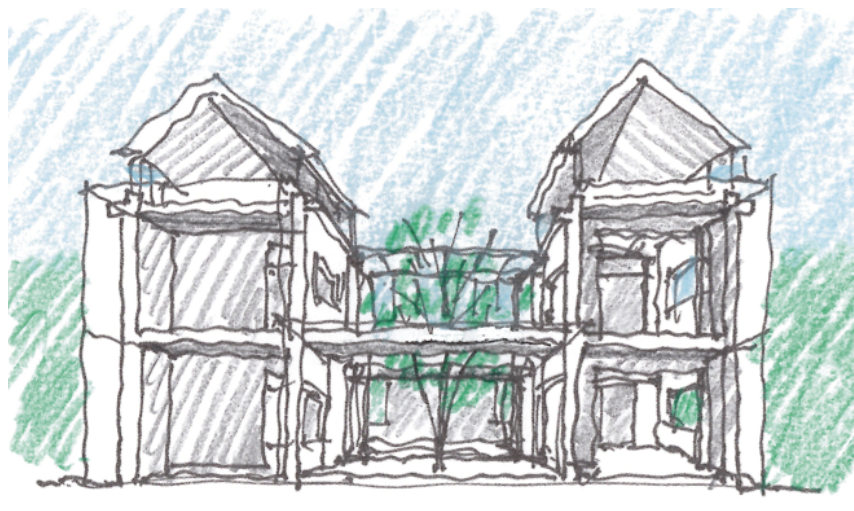
- 12 West Sugamo House
- 21 Geba House
- 25 Sakuradai House III
- 26 Honcho House



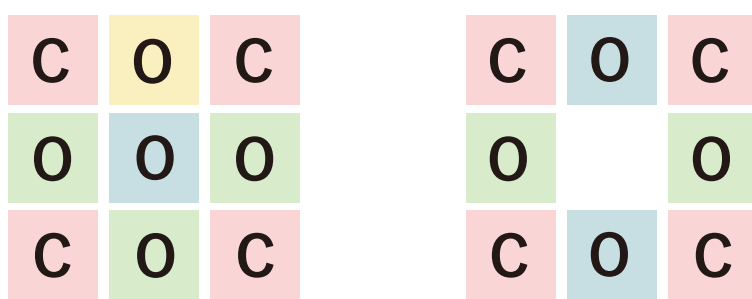
Open horizontally



- 2 House with a Center
- 16 Utsukushigaoka House
- 31 Yoshihama House
- 88 Kamakura House II



Mandala-like structure



First floor plan

- 42 Kakinokizaka House
- 56 Nerima House
- 61 Shirasagi House II
- 78 Kokubunji House



## What Architect Tsutomu Abe Sought to Achieve

Kazuki Wakahara

Architect and professor at Nihon University College of Art

The House with a Center, completed in 1974, is etched into the history of housing as a masterpiece of experimental urban residential architecture. Despite its small floor area of approximately 100 square meters, it can be described as an ideal home that many people aspire to, and has lost none of its power. However, Tsutomu Abe designed around 100 houses in his lifetime. What was it that architect Tsutomu Abe continued to think about over the course of a career that spanned a half-century, from his own house to his final work? In search of clues, I visited three of his houses, each built at different times. Drawing on my own experiences and interviews with the residents, I would like to share my thoughts on what Abe was trying to achieve through his work.

The first house I visited was the “Tsudanuma House” (completed in 1991), located in a suburban residential area. It is a house with an attached studio for sculpture, designed to take advantage of the sloping terrain, creating a layered effect with the various rooms. The cross-sectional plan, which makes clever use of the differences in elevation, is outstanding, and the vertically elongated space creates a unique sense of “tension and relaxation” . The “Nerima House” (completed in 2001) is a plan with an inner garden and concrete boxes arranged in parallel on a spacious site. From the floor plan to the details, the space has undulations and contours, and the shadows that capture the ever-changing light add richness to the lives of the residents. Finally, the “Kokubunji House” (completed in 2009) is a very laid-back design compared to the previous two. During the planning stage, the owner would come up with plans, and every time they showed it to Abe he would say, “That’ s great!” As a result, a simple structure with a strong framework was born that contains both open spaces and spaces where you can shut yourself away.

First, let’ s consider the similarities in architectural form. One characteristic is that there are a number of nearly square boxes lined up, with the walls are hollowed out so that you are aware of the space enclosed within, and your line of sight can pass right through it. And there are places that open outwards but also close inwards. The cross-sectional plan is also distinctive. There are contrivances here and there that make you feel a sense of space going upwards, not only in the places with stairs. The structure is a combination of reinforced concrete and wood. However, an analysis of the spatial composition alone is not enough to fully explain its appeal. The answer seems to lie in the psychological effect it has. As I thought about what that might be, I realized that it was because Abe was trying to make “conflicting phenomena” coexist in his architecture. When I try to put the spatial experience into words, I always end up with a combination of contrasting expressions: “tension and relaxation” in Tsudanuma, “light and shadow” in Nerima, and “enclosed spaces and open spaces” in Kokubunji. The same applies to Abe’ s home, which can be described as “centralized and migratory” . In general, architectural design tries to sort out the conditions and find a rational solution. However, I feel that Abe's houses aim to create a world that cannot be reached through such a rational approach, and instead seek to create a structure full of “irrational” contrivances. Furthermore, I also get the feeling that he even thought that a house should not be too accommodating to its residents. This, too, can be described with the opposing words “accepting and rejecting” .

Finally, the residents of all three houses described their homes as having “a sense of comfort that never gets old” . This is surely due to the fact that, while the houses were all built under different conditions – family structure, site features, etc. - there was a consistent underlying universality that Abe was striving to achieve. Abe was fond of quoting the Swedish painter Carl Larsson, who said, “What is correctly old is forever new” . I think Abe saw architecture not as a thing, but as an abode for the ever-changing human heart. That is why the homes of Tsutomu Abe still shine with vitality.



Photo: Kazuki Wakahara