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GALLERY A<sup>4</sup>

Cover ©Shigeo Ogawa

# 建築家・阿部勤 のいえ展

暮らしを愉しむ  
デザイン





## Hard-boiled Wonderland by Tsutomu Abe

Michiyo Okabe

Director/Chief Curator, Gallery A\*

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.



House with a Center: Exterior Sketch, Painting: Tsutomu Abe



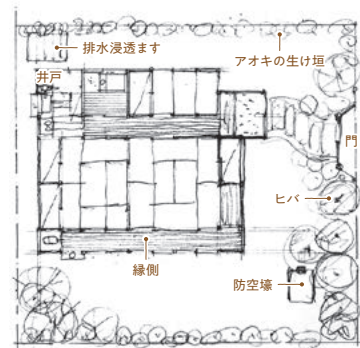


Left: House with a center 2F  
(space with connected windows)  
Above: House with a center 1F (central space)  
Bottom: House with center 1F (kitchen)  
All photos ©Shigeo Ogawa



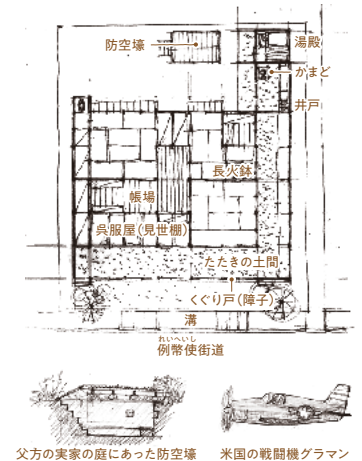
## House for rent in Sakuradai 1938-47

Abe was born in 1936 in Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, but moved to a rented house in Sakuradai, Nerima-ku when he was two years old, where he spent his childhood. The house had a wooden sliding door, clapboarded exterior walls, and was surrounded by a hedge of aoki trees. As a child, Abe was introverted and rarely went outside to play. Inside the house, he used the porch and under the porch as his playground, climbing the hiba tree in the garden and sometimes building a tree house.



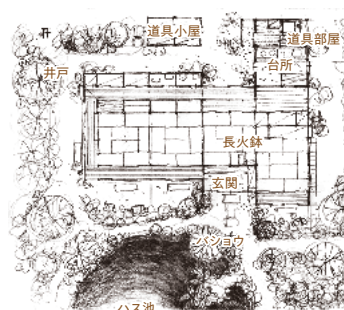
## Father's family home 1944-45

As the war raged, Abe evacuated to his father's family home in Ashikaga, Tochigi Prefecture. The house, which was run by a draper, was a pleasant place to spend time, with its merchant storefront, doorways, and L-shaped earthen floor. While the neighbors casually visited and conversed with each other in the community and the natural surroundings, they were also forced to evacuate due to air raids. The smell of the damp red soil in the air-raid shelter and the time spent in the dark are etched in her memory for a long time to come.



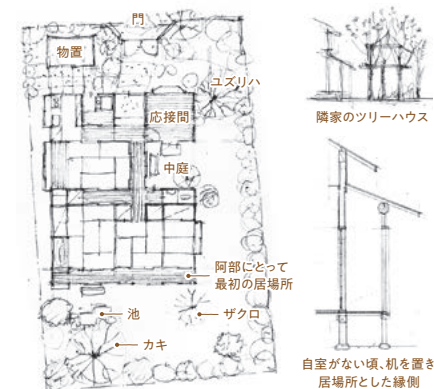
## Mother's family home 1943-45

During this period, Abe sometimes spent time at his mother's family home in Ashikaga. It was a magnificent house with a Japanese garden, and a lotus pond in the center of the house was surrounded by lush shimotsuke and basyo (Japanese flowering plants). In the backyard was his grandfather's tool room, and Abe was always excited to see all the garden tools and carpentry tools lined up. He would run around and play in the corridors of the mansion, sometimes drawing pictures, which was his specialty, to the delight of those around him. Through these days, Abe, who had always been modest, gradually grew into an aggressive and strong boy.



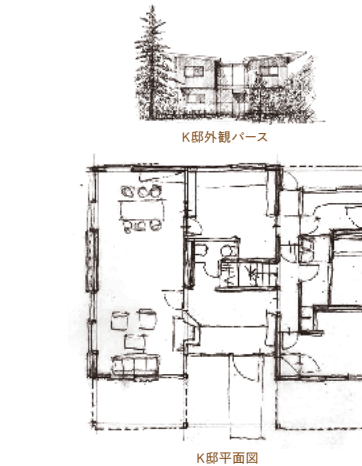
## Owned house in Sakuradai 1947-74

When he returned to Sakuradai after the war, his house was still standing, but all the surrounding wooden structures had burned down, leaving only a few concrete and earthen storehouses. Abe says that it was not unrelated to this experience that he later became oriented toward concrete dwellings. After two years in a rented house, he bought a 15-year-old house in Sakuradai and moved his family there. The house had a Western-style parlor, an unusual layout, he said. According to his sister Yoko Usuki, their mother often rearranged the furniture overnight, which was interesting because it changed the atmosphere of the house each time.



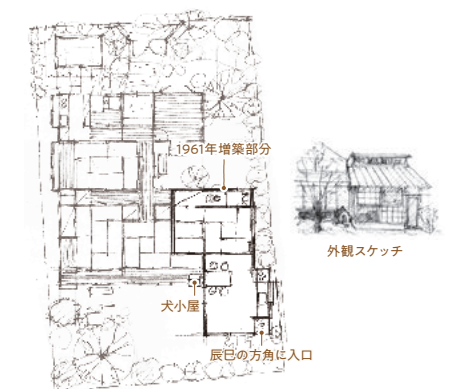
## Junzo Sakakura Architectural Institute period 1960-1971

While a student at the School of Architecture at Waseda University, Abe had a part-time job drawing drawings for the Yokohama Silk Center magazine. Through this work, he was attracted to the architecture of Junzo Sakakura, and after graduation, he joined the Junzo Sakakura Institute of Architectural Research and began a full-fledged career in architecture. His first project was "K Residence," a residence in Meguro Ward, Tokyo. The U-shaped plan, the space connecting the north and south wings, and the butterfly roof were the distinctive features of the design. Under the guidance of Sakakura, he took charge of the design from the very beginning, and while he felt responsible for the project, he also found it challenging and rewarding.



## Sakuradai family house 1961-74

Shortly after joining the Junzo Sakakura Architectural Institute, Abe got married and built a one-story wooden house next to his parents' home in Sakuradai. Considering the direction of the house, he placed the entrance in the direction of Tatsumi, which is believed to bring good luck. With the birth of his child, the house became too cramped, and he began to think about an independent residence. In 1969, Sakakura passed away, and Abe decided to set up his own office and design his own residence, building "A House with a Center" in Shin-Tokorozawa, Saitama Prefecture. After dismantling the house extension, he designed "Sakuradai House" (1987) for his younger sister's family.



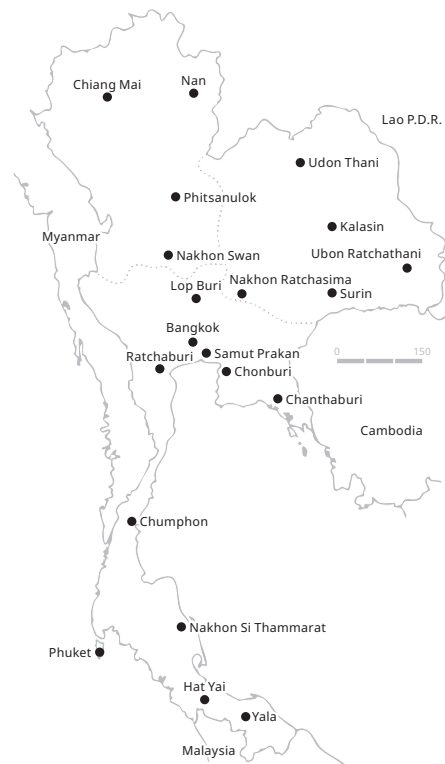
Sketch by Tsutomu Abe  
Collection: ARTEC architects and associates  
Commentary: Yukari Takahashi  
(Nihon University College of Art,  
Kazuki Wakahara Laboratory)

- What is  
right and old is  
forever new.

Carl Larsson  
(1853-1919)

– He decided to rethink the design from the very starting point of living. At that time, he was greatly influenced by Thai architecture.

Tsutomu Abe (2022)  
*A House with a Center*,  
 p. 60



Thailand 25 school planning locations.  
 Improvement plans are located throughout Thailand.

## Vocational education project Thailand (25 schools planned for Thailand)

Yasuhiro Mandai

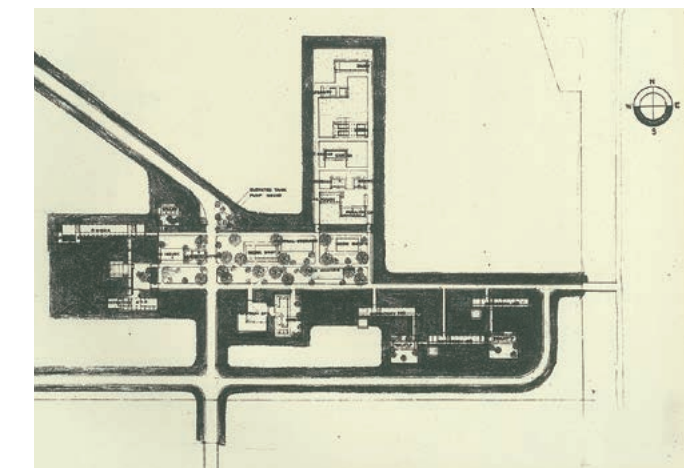
The Junzo Sakakura Institute of Architectural Research was approached in November 1965 with a plan for 25 schools in Thailand, which was completed in 1970, the year after the death of Junzo Sakakura. At the time, the Junzo Sakakura Institute of Architectural Design had a staff of 30, but was already working on the Shinjuku Station West Exit Plaza (1966) and the new building of the Museum of Modern Art, Kanagawa (1966), and Abe participated in this project following the construction of the Kanagawa Prefectural Government Building (1966). The project was funded by the Ministry of Education of Thailand with a loan from the World Bank. 25 schools were dispersed throughout the country, and the total building area reached 176,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The team was small (Tadahiro Too, Ikuo Kiyota, Tsutomu Abe, Yoshinobu Yoshida, and Jiro Murofushi), so the team initially set a policy of domestic standardization and studied the method of transporting materials made in Japan and assembling them. However, after the initial site survey, the team changed course: they experienced a great culture shock by investigating the lifestyle and construction conditions in Thailand at that time (elephants were used to transport goods at some sites). On the other hand, Abe said, “Thai architecture is wonderful, and you can’t go from a foreign country and build with Western sensibilities. We have made a major change in our policy that we should build educational facilities and environments using local materials in cooperation with locals who fit in with the local situation.

Referring to the floor plan of the educational building, it can be seen that the classrooms, which are the main functional purpose of the building, are located on the north side, and the corridor is located on the south side. Next, the cross-sectional drawing shows that benches were built in the corridor, which is a semi-exterior space, to provide a shaded place for relaxation. The 3-meter cantilevered eaves bordering the colonnade structure and the 2.5-meter distance from the colonnade to the classroom wall together total 5.5 meters, or 34.3% of the north-south dimension ratio, and are designed as a semi-exterior space. Thus, it can be read that the designers paid great attention to the area of interface with the external environment in relation to the main purpose space in terms of function. The attitude of facing the vernacular and regional characteristics based on a sense of trust in the international style can also be pointed out in common with his teacher Junzo Sakakura.

## School construction project in Thailand



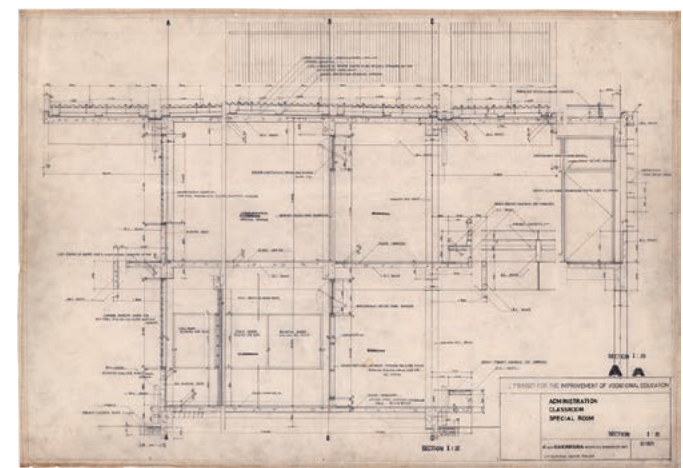
Lacabang Agricultural University Cafetorium during rainy season flooding  
 Collection: Sakakura Associates



Plan of Lacabang Agricultural University layout, upper left is the education building, Collection: ARTEC architects and associates



Lacabang Agricultural University, Education Building  
 Collection: Sakakura Associates



Standard Design Rectangle Drawings for Offices, Classrooms, and Special Rooms, National (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Architecture, Agency for Cultural Affairs)



## Exploring the origins of space in Thailand

Yukari Takahashi

Nihon University College of Art, Kazuki Wakahara Laboratory

Abe visited Thailand about 60 years ago and was exposed to a way of living that is at one with nature.

The traditional Thai house is built on stilts, with a steeply pitched roof that connects the bedroom and kitchen buildings, which are connected by a spacious terrace\*<sup>1</sup>. Benches, pots, and pots of bougainvillea were placed on the terrace, where people ate and relaxed as they went about their daily lives. In towns along the streets, the boundary between the street and the stores was blurred, and people spent their time as they pleased at the chairs and tables placed in front of the stores. Abe felt that wherever he went, people's lives were part of the scenery\*<sup>2</sup>.

This kind of lifestyle in which the house and landscape are integrated has something in common with traditional Japanese housing. Spaces such as eaves, verandas, and earthen floors separate the inside from the outside, yet gently connect them, and life is born there. Abe found the Thai houses reminiscent of the Japanese countryside, and felt a sense of nostalgia and comfort\*<sup>3</sup>. Through this experience, Abe may have felt that the way of integrating the house and the landscape is the starting point of a common home that transcends different cultures.

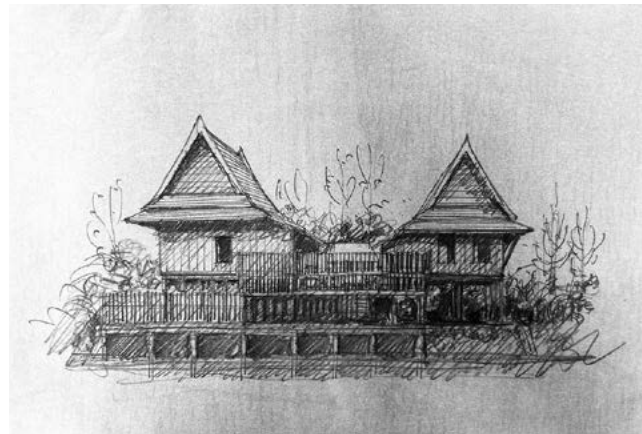
Abe also applied what he saw in Thailand to his own design, as exemplified by his own residence, "House with a Center". The house is structured with a double enclosure, with the central space surrounded by the perimeter space. The width of the perimeter space is approximately 2.1 meters, creating a veranda-like space where one can feel the presence of the outside while inside. By arranging the kitchen, dining room, and other living functions there, the living space is loosely connected to the outside, creating a comfortable space. The sense of openness and unity with nature that I saw in Thailand, where the inside and outside are gently connected, is brought to life in my own residence.

\*1 Shuji Nuno, Mari Tanaka, Chantane Chirantanat, and Nawit Onsawanchai, *Dwellings in Southeast Asia: Their Origins, Propagation, Typology, and Transformation*, Kyoto University Press, 2017.

\*2 Tsutomu Abe, "Dwellings as Landscape," *My Home Plan*, 1991

\*3 Tsutomu Abe, "Lokonni - Outdoor Living Space-," *Housing Special*, 1999

Above, right: View of Thailand taken by Tsutomu Abe  
Below: Sketch of a traditional Thai house by Tsutomu Abe  
Collection: ARTEC architects and associates



## Life in Thailand as seen by Tsutomu Abe





– I don't feel that this house is a work of my own creation. I feel more comfortable calling it a search than a creation.

Tsutomu Abe (2022)  
*A House with a Center*,  
p. 136



## House with a Center

Hideaki Kawachi  
cue DESIGN

The house, completed in 1974 when Tsutomu Abe was 38 years old, is a two-story mixed-use building with concrete walls and beams and a wooden roof and floor. In a newly developed residential area neatly divided into a grid pattern, the building at this site is unique in that it is placed at an angle to the site.

The first floor is composed of a double wall enclosure like the character for “回-Kai,” and the relationship between the inside and outside of the enclosure is transformed by the openings in the wall, creating a variety of places. The center of the “回-Kai” is a secluded place, but winds pass through it, and through the openings, one can feel the presence of the outside and light, creating a sense of security, as if in a cave.

The second floor has the same structure as the first floor, but the entire upper portion of the second floor has bay windows from waist height, creating a bright space. The eaves overhang the bay windows, gently enveloping the building. Abe compared this place to a bird's nest, saying, “From the outside it is difficult to see what is going on inside, but from the inside you can see what is going on outside and feel a sense of security that you are protected.

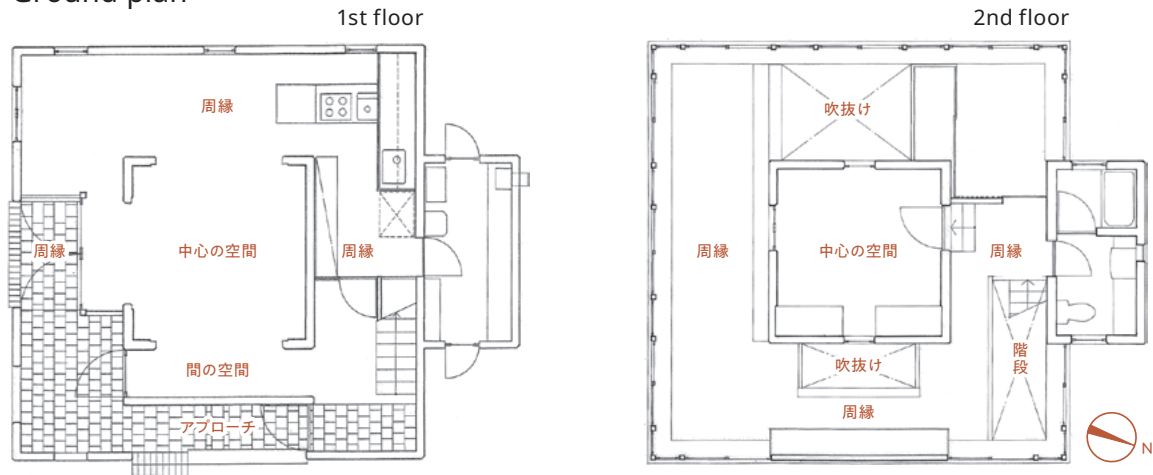
The house is also scattered with Abe's favorite objects that he has collected. They include chairs, books and magazines he is reading, potter's vessels, stones he picked up in the river, and many other things. All of these things have a story behind them and become a part of the building, creating a sense of coziness.

The vacant lot, created by the layout of the building in relation to the site, is planted with various trees, which grow freely like a forest as time goes by, blurring the boundary between the building and the greenery, just like a bird's nest in the forest.

Completed: 1974  
Structure: RC + wood,  
2 floors above ground  
Total floor area: 102m<sup>2</sup>  
Design: Tsutomu Abe

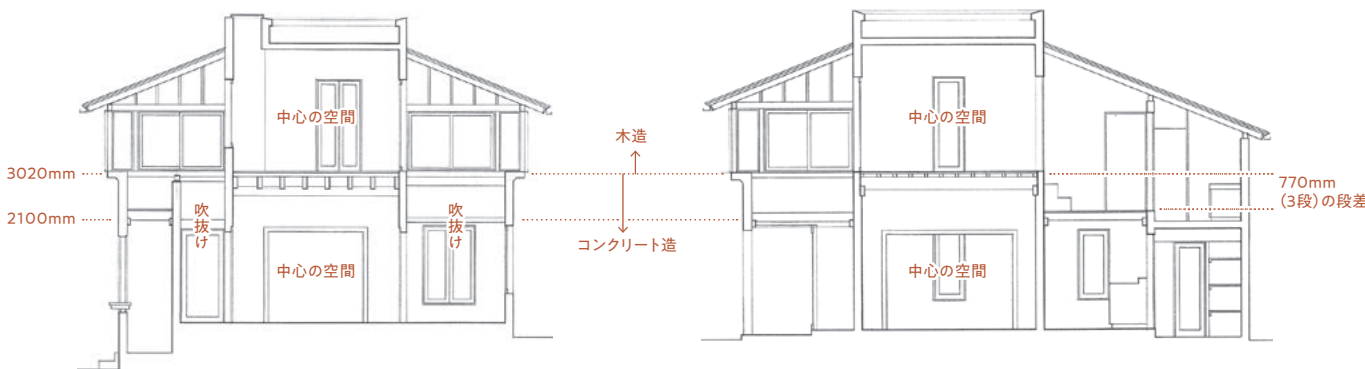
All photos ©Shigeo Ogawa

## Ground plan



Viewed from above, the central house is a double enclosure, not separated by walls or doors, but by a single perimeter where people spend their time eating, cooking, and working, and where they circulate around the house. The first floor, made of concrete, is enclosed but still allows one to see what is going on outside, providing a sense of security that appeals to animal instincts. The second floor, on the other hand, is wooden from the waist up, with horizontal glass windows, creating an open space where one can feel the sunlight and trees in the garden.

## Cross-section view



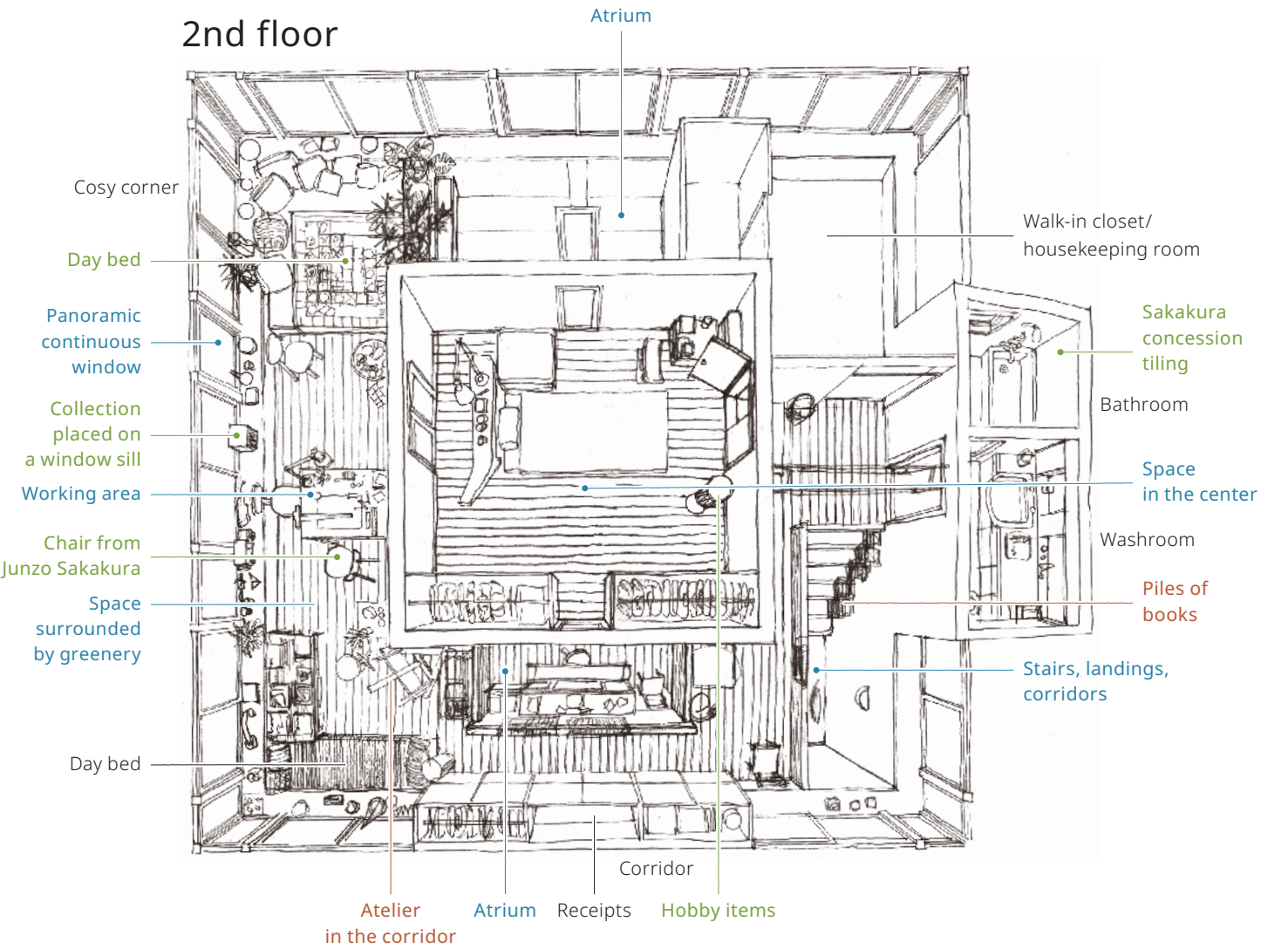
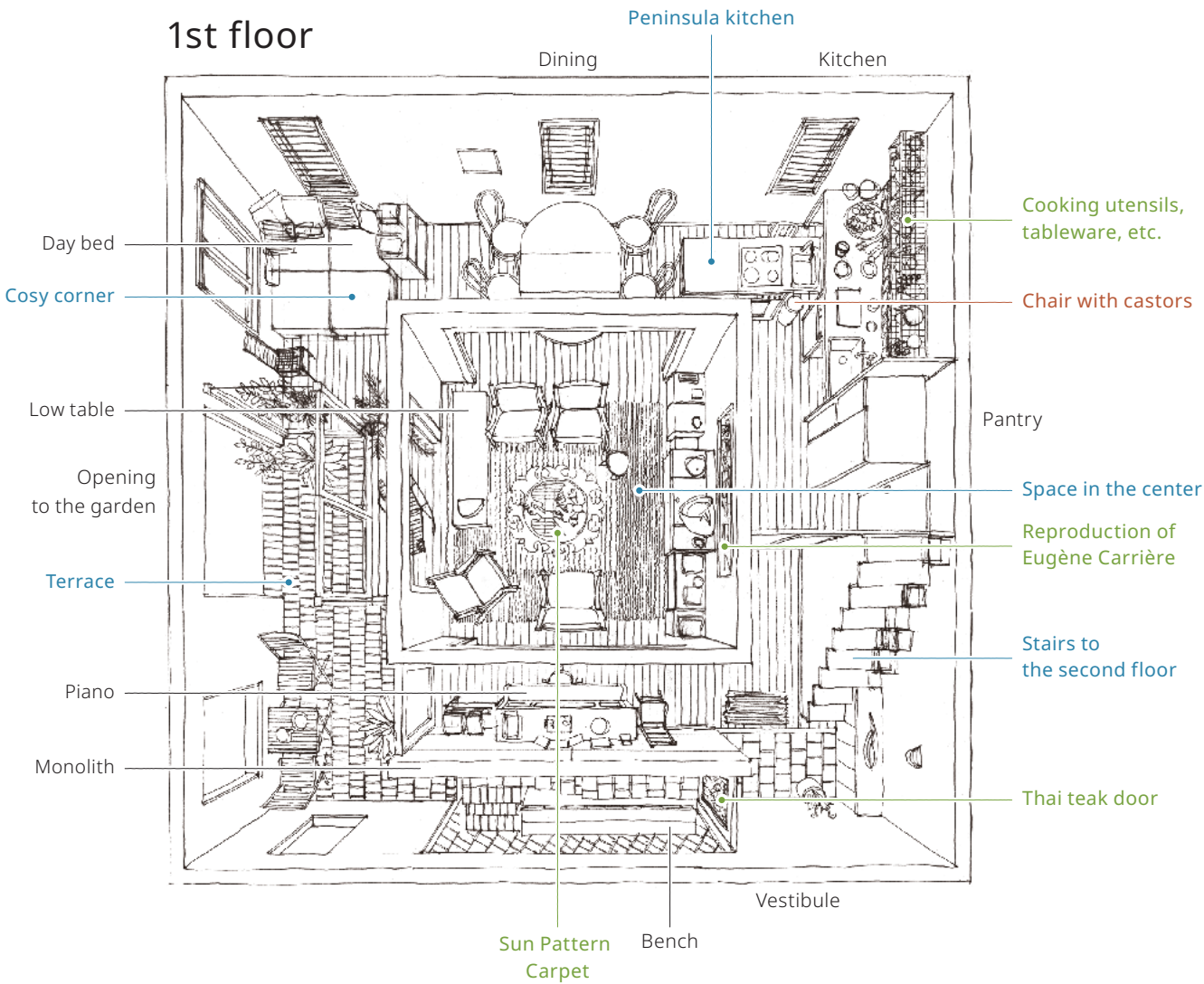
The central space on the first floor has a high ceiling (3.02m), while the surrounding area has a low ceiling (2.1m) and a vaulted ceiling. Due to the difference in ceiling height, the central space on the second floor is three steps higher than the hallway, creating a special “inside” atmosphere. The atrium conveys the presence and sound of people and light from the windows, gently connecting the first and second floors.

Drawing provided : ARTEC architects and associates

# Design for living

Explanation of the architectural points of the “House with a Center” and how to enjoy a life full of specialties.

Sketch Source:  
Tsutomu Abe,  
photo by Mitsumasa Fujitsuka,  
*A House with a Center:*  
*50 Years of the Residence of*  
*Architect Abe Tsutomu*  
(Gakugei Shuppansha, 2022)

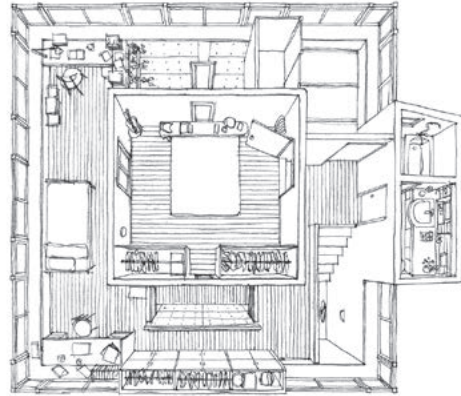




## Transition of life

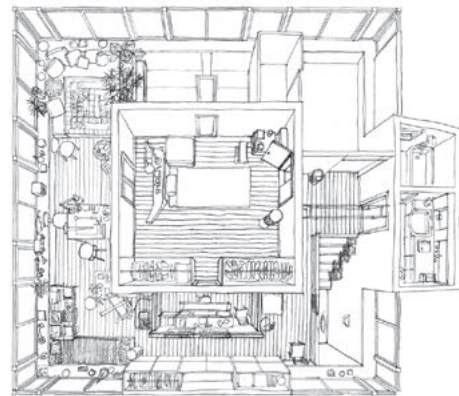
Introducing the transition of a home that has freely changed over the years to suit the shape of the family.

### 1980- House for a family of three

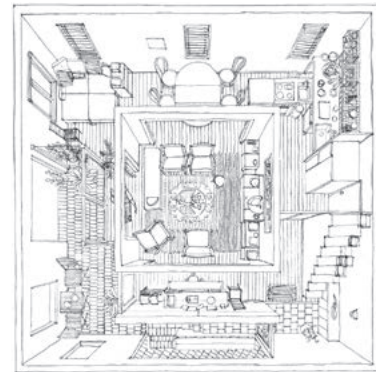
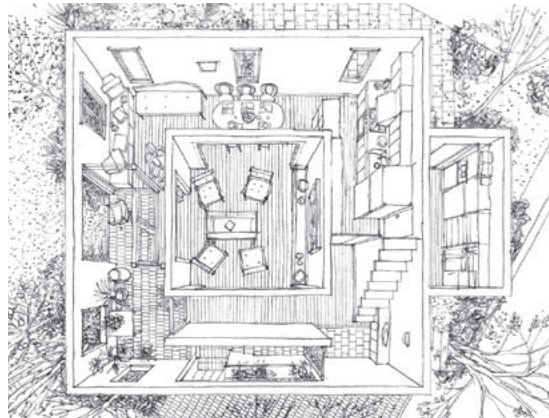


2nd floor

### 1995- One person's house



1st floor



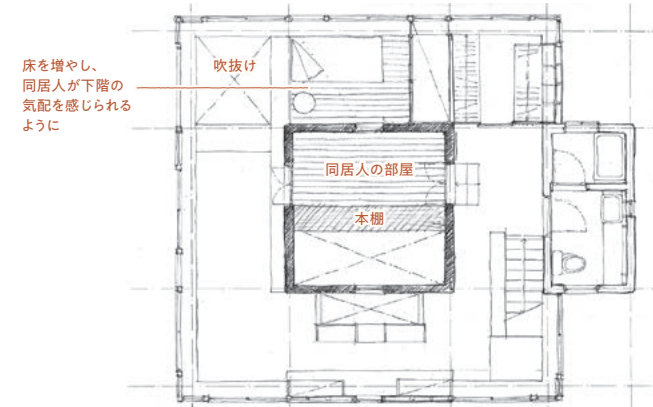
#### Growth and Change

The use of space changed freely as the occupants changed. When his wife and son lived together, the long, narrow space on the second floor was occupied as the son grew up, and Abe's study was moved to the first floor. In the dining room, the family sat around the table side by side facing the central space, and the dog that was kept outside occasionally peeked out of the window.

#### Diverse Ways to Spend Time

After his wife passed away in 1993 and his son became independent, the house became Abe's home where he lived alone. Daybeds were placed in the corners of the first and second floors, creating more space for various ways of relaxing. The kitchen, which originally faced a wall, was remodeled into a T-shaped peninsula kitchen, which allows the residents to eat while they cook, and to enjoy conversation with their guests.

### 2030- Future House

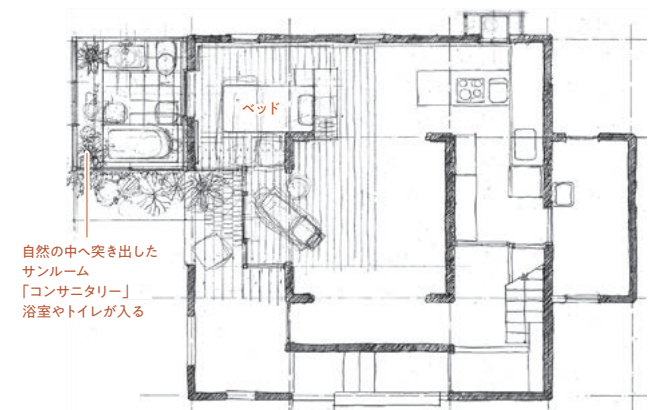


床を増やし、  
同居人が下階の  
気配を感じられる  
ように

吹抜け

同居人の部屋

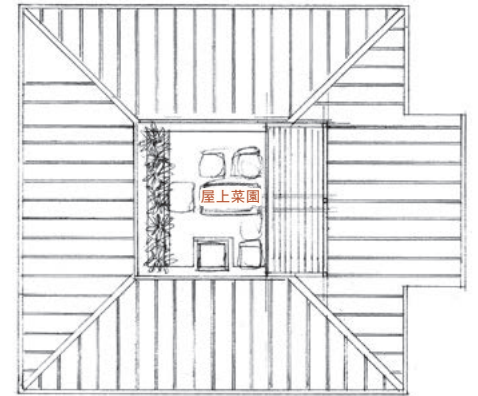
本棚



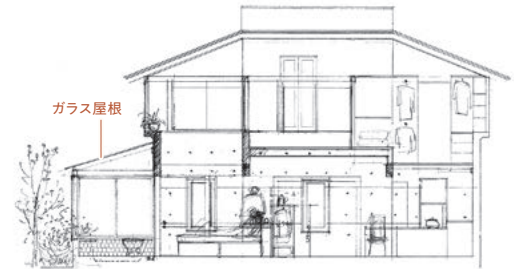
自然の中へ突き出した  
サンルーム  
「コンサニタリー」  
浴室やトイレが入る

#### New Barrier-Free

His book "A House with a Center" also includes sketches for the future. In addition to the idea of "Conserbatory (Conservatory Greenhouse + Sanitary Sanitary Facilities)," which includes a bathroom and toilet in a sunroom added on the south side to make the elderly feel comfortable and at home, a rooftop vegetable garden has been created. On the second floor, a floor can be put up in the atrium to create more rooms for roommates.



屋上



断面

ガラス屋根

Sketch Source:  
Tsutomu Abe,  
photo by Mitsumasa Fujitsuka,  
*A House with a Center:  
50 Years of the Residence of  
Architect Abe Tsutomu*  
(Gakugei Shuppansha, 2022)



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.



Space created by 2.1m modul



Entrance (upper right)



Place for making sculptures (currently living room)



Living room and dining table

House in Tsudanuma

A mixed-structure house in a residential area in Tsudanuma. The L-shaped concrete frame is placed like a retaining wall, and the interior responds to the slope of the site. The combination of this difference in elevation and the concrete exterior gives the building an austere appearance, as if it refuses to be inhabited. On the other hand, the flat land left to the south is covered with lawn and trees, creating a peaceful garden. Facing it, an open and soft one-story wooden house discreetly peeks out from the greenery.

This wooden section was designed based on the dimension of “2.1m wide,” which also serves as the standard for the overall dimensions of the house. This dimension is exactly the same as that surrounding the perimeter of the “House with a Center”. Although 2.1 meters is larger than a ken (1.8 m), it is a bit small to be used as a room. However, if this were a one-and-a-half-ken (2.7m) space, the relationship between the garden and the building would look completely different. The sense of unity with the garden created by daring to make the living space a little smaller is a sensation that Abe discovered in his own residence. Abe himself describes this as a “long and narrow porch-like space”.

This residence was designed with the understanding that the client’s latent desire was to create various “contrasts,” such as hardness and softness, tension and relaxation, within the three-dimensional space created by the site’s characteristics. More than 30 years after its completion, the universality of the architecture that Tsutomu Abe strives for is evidenced by the words of the residents, who say they can “feel the space in their bodies” and “never get tired of it, and have yet to make the most of it”.

Completion:	1991
Structure:	RC + wood, 1 basement floor, 3 above ground
Total floor area:	183.20m <sup>2</sup>
Design:	Tsutomu Abe, Kei Konishi / ARTEC
Photography:	Motoharu Yagi

– Designing architecture means designing relationships between people, between people and things, between people and space, and so on.

Tsutomu Abe (2022)  
*A House with a Center*,  
p. 131



# House in Nerima

A 10-minute walk from a private railway station, this house is located in an environment halfway between the city and the suburbs. Two concrete boxes are placed parallel to each other on a spacious site. The plan of the house is a U-shape with orthogonal lines of flow added. The short side of the box is 0.9m×5 for 4.5m, and the long side is 2.1m × 4 for 8.4m. Only in the long side direction, the same “2.1m width” as in his own residence is used here as well. The effect is first seen in the entrance on the first floor. Entering the room from the porch without any difference in level, one finds “a wide space in the corridor and a small space in the room” spreading out in a straight line. It may sound strange to say, but this is a space with a quality that makes it difficult to create a “purpose as a room,” and it is a place just like a porch. Furthermore, on the second floor, the kitchen is well accommodated in this “2.1m wide” space. The kitchen is also unique in that the sinks are orthogonal to each other and can be used from both sides. The glass sunroom connecting the two buildings and the sundeck facing the bathroom also make use of the edges of the space.

The plan is characterized by two staircases that provide a three-dimensional circulation despite being a one-family house. The southern staircase is generously designed to face a large atrium, but the northern staircase, at 45 cm wide, is much narrower than usual, which is surprising. The staircase on the north side is 45cm narrower than usual. The variety of light and pleasant breezes also add a subtle touch of color to daily life. The residents’ words, “On a beautiful moonlit night, when the moonlight illuminates the courtyard and the first-floor corridor, it creates a fantastic atmosphere inside the house,” fully conveys the enjoyment of living here. It is a beautiful residence with “richness” that goes beyond functionality.

Completion: 2001  
Structure: RC + wood, 2 floors above ground  
Total floor area: 176.17m<sup>2</sup>  
Design: Tsutomu Abe, Etsuko Adachi / ARTEC  
Photography: Motoharu Yagi



Second floor living room



sun deck



kitchen



vestibule



1st floor living room



kitchen



Garden constructed by the resident



steel staircase



1st floor living room



courtyard

# House in Kokubunji

The site is a corner lot facing the road on the northeast and northwest sides. The house was planned as a residence for a family of seven, and is currently occupied by a couple. The first floor is made of concrete and the second floor is made of wood, and the standard dimensions are 2.73m (1.5 kan) grid based on 0.91m (3 shaku) to match the wooden structure on the second floor. The floor plan is based on the size of a typical four and a half mats. Compared to his own residence and two other residences with a width of 2.1m, this house has a much greater sense of spaciousness in terms of plan. Also, the lack of an atrium space differs from the method used in the other residences. The simple courtyard style, with the four and a half mats placed in a clumpy manner, is also a difference from the conventional design method.

However, when we talk to the residents, we can understand why they dared to adopt such a simple approach. The residents were probably considering changes in their family structure, and thought that the plan would be able to adapt to such changes without restricting their daily lives. Even without the manipulation of the plan dimensions, this house is filled with the essence of Abe’s architecture: a circular plan with no corridors, diagonal sight lines through the courtyard, a sense of light and shadow wherever you are, a place to stay, and a connection with the outside. In addition, the owner’s own hands have added not only decorative shelves and storage space, but also many plants, and the architecture has been gradually built up over time. It is a work in progress, a “forever unfinished house.”

From the planning stage, the client’s wishes were taken into consideration, and the plan changed many times before settling on the current proposal. Including this way of working, this residence may have been a step toward the universality of architecture that Abe was aiming for. This residence strongly reflects the gentle gaze of the architect.

Completion: 2009  
Structure: RC + wood, 2 floors above ground  
Total floor area: 142.66 m<sup>2</sup>  
Design: Tsutomu Abe, Hideaki Kawachi / ARTEC  
Photography: Motoharu Yagi



– It is comfortable  
to have fun together,  
to create together,  
to eat together,  
and to talk together.  
Humans are  
social animals.  
When we have a place  
in society, we enjoy  
and feel at home.

Tsutomu Abe (2022)  
*A House with a Center*,  
p. 130



Collection :  
ARTEC architects and associates



Jiro Murofushi  
Architect

#### At the project in Thailand

After graduating from college and before joining the Junzo Sakakura Institute of Architecture, I went to greet him and he took me to lunch at a very expensive and famous restaurant called “Zakuro”. He was a cool brother, I thought. That was our first encounter. In 1966, when the country of Thailand asked the institute to plan improvements for the 25 schools it had nationwide, Abe-san and I went on a two-week research trip. In Thailand, people lived in spaces that remained in the open air, with benches and shade in the space outside on terraces under the eaves, forming a cozy space that was rustic in its construction but at one with nature. If we exported Japanese prefabrication technology without taking root in the Thai lifestyle and climate and designed a large-scale building in a short period of time with a modernist architectural approach, we would be sure to ensure quality and success. After returning to Japan, we discussed whether this was a good idea or not, and decided to create a building with deep eaves and open to the outside, utilizing existing local techniques and materials and emphasizing a way of living. The “House with a Center” is a continuation of this experience and a certain type of Thai house.

#### Magician of the cross section

Perhaps, but I believe that Mr. Abe thinks of architecture in terms of cross-sections. I think that “House in Sakuradai” is the one where his skills as a magician of the cross-section are best utilized. I think that the house planned by Mr. Abe is at its best in the abundance and degree of change in the cross-sectional direction, which is composed of a half-underground nook, a floating floor, an atrium, top lights, and so on. Mr. Abe appears to be a carefree person full of goofiness and humor, but on the other hand, there is a side to him that is secretly meticulous and meticulous about organizing materials. I think it was always about the other self watching and acting with the eyes of others in mind. I think that Mr. Abe’s residence in the “House with a Center” was also well thought out in terms of “showing. I think it was not a “house” where he lived with his family, but rather the “Abe Pavilion.



Mitsumasa Fujitsuka  
Photographer

#### Abekin-san

Even though I am three years younger than Mr. Abe, I have called him “Abekin” from the beginning. It is a nickname that is typical of Mr. Abe, who is somewhat pampered, good-natured, and well-liked by everyone. I don’t know who the godfather of the name is, but it spread naturally.

#### Taking the “House with a Center” picture

In order to compile “A House with a Center” into a book, we decided to shoot only one day. The first shot was of the slanted, green-covered exterior of the house, and I decided to face the space alone with Abekin-san, without any assistants. All architecture has a rawness to it. The architect’s emotion moves my heart as I photograph it. I wanted to make a book like a preparatory sheet that cut out a slice of that emotion. The plane is square, and the space is a single room surrounded by walls of the same length in all directions, so the scene changes rapidly as you walk around it. The windows were filled with his favorite things, and the whole house was already Abekin. When his wife died, he remodeled the kitchen so that he could cook and eat right there by himself. When friends came over, that became the center of the house. Even though the relationship and shape of the family changed, Abekin started anew. The house is truly a self-portrait of Abe.

#### Beautiful house after 25 years

Several of the houses designed by Abe have received the JIA 25 Year Award, given to buildings that have been beautifully maintained for 25 years or more after completion. All of the owners have great sensibilities and personalities, and they live in their homes. I went to see some of the houses myself, and I felt that all of them were more beautiful than when they were completed. The architectural parts do not make a strong statement, but there are eaves to maintain beauty and ventilation to prevent moisture from accumulating--I think this is important.



Masako Akiyama  
Centre Head/Co Representative, Maggie’s Tokyo

#### About meeting Mr. Abe

I met Mr. Abe when Maggie’s Tokyo was being planned. Mr. Abe had lost his wife to cancer, so he deeply understood the importance of a place where people living with cancer could go for consultation. He also sympathized with Maggie’s concept of architectural space, using natural materials and focusing on the relationship with the garden, and he agreed to supervise the entire building.

#### Speak with a pencil

During our meetings, I often saw him making pencil drawings with the young designers and others involved, as if in a session. Sometimes he would say, “Ms. Akiyama, stand at that bookshelf there,” and then draw a line with my shoulder line right there, saying, “Cut the dimensions according to the height of the people working inside,” while standing on the side of the user as he designed the room. I also thought it was wonderful that he took advantage of the young people’s sense of style, going with them to select the finishing tiles, etc., and taking advantage of the user’s sensibilities and preferences.

#### Attunement of the mind

After Mr. Abe became ill, I think he did not want people to see him in his weakened state, but he asked to see me, his nurse. Even though his condition was not good, I think he was facing his illness with a clear vision of what he wanted to do in the future. Until his last days, he never gave up hope, never letting go of the pencil he held, making drawings at his desk or making phone calls here and there. He always kept in mind that the environment and buildings heal people and are as important as therapeutic medicines, and he said, “Wooden furniture and spaces tune the mind”. It was like Abe to be able to say those words so easily, and I thought he was a truly wonderful person.



# 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 Futa ba 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 something unchanging that he continued to pursue, we can also s ee 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 t he 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 grad ually 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 thin k 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... innice! You climb the stairs and pass under the low ceiling to come out into an open hall...nice!”

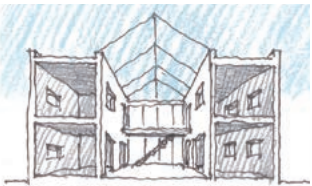
# Analyzing the spatial experience of Abe Architecture

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 s helter and wood for the interior parts that people come into contact with.

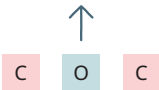
These open spaces might be upward-facing spaces in a densely-populated residential area, spaces in the suburbs that allow you to look out toward the horizon, or semi-outdoor inner garden-like spaces. They are interwoven with closed spaces to form a sequence.

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.



Open upward



12 West Sugamo House

21 Geba House

25 Sakuradai House III

26 Honcho House



Open horizontally

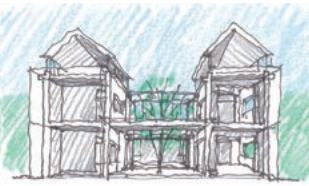


2 House with a Center

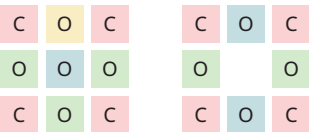
16 Utsukushigaoka House

31 Yoshihama House

88 Kamakura House II



Mandala-like structure



First floor plan

Second floor plan

42 Kakinokizaka House

56 Nerima House

61 Shirasagi House II

78 Kokubunji House

## How to Read the Drawings:

### “Close”

C The closed spaces depicted here are spaces that face inward.

### “Open”

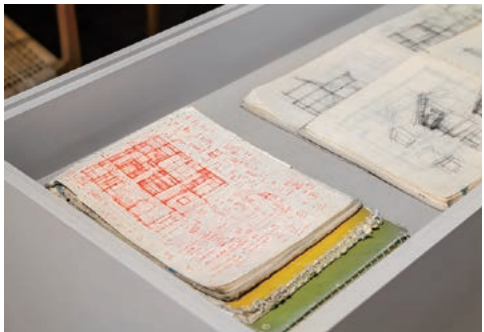
The open spaces are spaces that face outward – places that fall under the category “semi-outdoors” when speaking in terms of indoors and outdoors, or “intermediate area” when speaking in terms of internal.

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.





# The Home of Architect Tsutomu Abe: Design for Living

April 4 (Fri.) to June 26 (Thu.), 2025

Organizer: Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Gallery A<sup>4</sup>  
 Michiyo Okabe, Kei Tokuhira, Yuria Fukazawa, Kazumi Futo  
 Chiaki Nishida, Yasutomu Ishii, Yoriko Manabe, Hideo Kitahara  
 Cooperation: Jun Abe, Jiro Murofushi (Studio ARTEC)  
 Shiro Segawa (ARTEC architects and associates)  
 Yasushi Watanabe Laboratory  
 (Nihon University College of Industrial Technology)  
 Kazuki Wakahara Laboratory (Nihon University College of Art)  
 Sakakura Associates, Hideaki Kawachi (cue DESIGN)  
 Yoko Usuki (Bontana), Yasuhiro Mandai, Maggie's Tokyo  
 Gakugei Shuppansha Co., Ltd., Shinkenchiku-sha Co., Ltd.  
 Koto-ku, Tokyo Society of Architects & Building Engineers  
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 Exhibition Construction: Tadayasu Sakai (Former Director, Setagaya Art Museum)  
 Advisor: Naoyuki Kinoshita (Director, Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art)  
 Masako Wake (CEO, AWP Co. Ltd.)

## Related Events:

### Dialogue: A Discussion of “Home” Between an Architect and a Writer

Date: Thursday, April 17, 2025, 18:30-20:00  
 Speakers: Yoshifumi Nakamura (architect)  
 Masashi Matsue (novelist)  
 Venue: Toyocho green+ 2F Hall (2-5-14 Minamisuna, Koto-ku, Tokyo)

### Talk Show: Tsutomu Abe’s “Home”

Date: Friday, April 25, 2025, 18:30-20:00  
 Speakers: Yasushi Watanabe  
 (architect and professor at College of Industrial Technology,  
 Nihon University)  
 Kazuki Wakahara (architect and professor  
 at Nihon University College of Art)  
 Tatsuo Iso (architecture journalist)  
 Interviewer: Interviewer  
 Venue: Toyocho green+ 2F Hall (2-5-14 Minamisuna, Koto-ku, Tokyo)

### Talk Show: The Origins of Tsutomu Abe’s “Home”

Date: Friday, May 30, 2025, 18:30-20:00  
 Speakers: Jiro Murofushi (architect, Studio ARTEC)  
 Maki Onishi (architect, co-director of Maki Onishi + Yuki Momota/o+h)  
 Venue: Toyocho green+ 2F Hall (2-5-14 Minamisuna, Koto-ku, Tokyo)

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