

The following interview was recorded during my internship at Go Hasegawa & Associates on January 30, 2014, at the office in Harajuku, Tokyo.



Office in Harajuku

Max Treiber:

Could you briefly tell me about your background? Where did you grow up, and how did you come to architecture?

Go Hasegawa:

I was born in Saitama Prefecture, about 30 minutes by train from the center of Tokyo. It is part of the suburban area of Tokyo. I was born in 1977. At that time, my hometown had some problems. The residential area was developed maybe 40 years earlier, with many two-story wooden houses with pitched roofs. It was a very spread-out area.

MT:

Like a typical Tokyo suburban structure?

GH:

Yes, I grew up in this kind of general environment. Nothing special.

MT:

Where did your first inspiration to study architecture come from?

GH:

It's actually a boring answer. I had to decide my university course quite early. I was relatively good at mathematics. In Japan, there are basically two gene-

ral directions: science and mathematics, or literature, economics, and similar subjects. I chose the mathematics course, and in order to take the entrance examination, I had to select a specific field. Among them, architecture looked creative and interesting.

Also, my father was an engineer. He made drawings for very large ships, for example. In his generation, working as an engineer was very common. That was around 50 years ago. At that time, heavy industry was important, and Tokyo was the center of Japanese industry. So he chose that profession. Anyway, I saw his drawings and his drawing tools many times. Every weekend, he drew something. He was a hard worker, like me. In the beginning, I was not really aware of his influence on me. But now I can say, I was influenced by him. At least, I thought it was interesting to plan and create something real — something big.

When I was a high school student, I often went to the library. Sometimes, I looked at books about architecture. That was the first time I discovered Kazuo Shinohara. But it was difficult to pass the entrance exam for Tokyo University. The second option was the Tokyo Institute of Technology — Tokyo Tech. Fortunately, they had a more interesting group of professors. Unfortunately, when I entered Tokyo Tech, Kazuo Shinohara had already retired. But I could meet Kazunari Sakamoto and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto at that time.

MT:

Let's talk about your student life. You travelled to Europe twice.

GH:

Yes. I was 19 years old. In my second year at university, I travelled to Paris and Switzerland, mainly to visit buildings by Le Corbusier and Peter Märkli.

MT:

Did these two architects have a big influence on your work?

GH:

Let's say, they were two of my favourite architects when I was a student. But now I have many different references. I was also influenced by Tsukamoto-san, because he was always close to my activities. His wife, Momoyo Kajjima, taught at ETH Zurich together with Peter Märkli. That's why, as students at

Tokyo Tech, we were very interested in the work of Peter Märkli. It was quite special information, not so common. That's why it was fascinating. I never liked to visit typical tourist places.

MT:
Very focused?

GH:
Yes, very much.

MT:
Sakamoto-san was a student of Kazuo Shinohara, and later the teacher of Tsukamoto-san at Tokyo Tech?

GH:
Before the Second World War, there were Yoshirō Taniguchi, Kiyoshi Seike and Kazuo Shinohara. Sakamoto, Tsukamoto, and myself — we all belonged to the same laboratory.

MT:
Do you see a connection or a deeper relationship between the work of these architects and your own work?



Tanikawa House by Kazuo Shinohara

GH:
I am very interested in their work. But in my design process, I don't actively think about this connection. I am aware of that background, but unconsciously I try to make my own effort.

Their buildings are always authentic — and also something new, of course. But at the same time, they always questioned the idea of the “new.” What is new? Or even the word new itself. Architects often use this

word — “new” or “newness.” But they always doubted that. They had a special way of thinking about society and architecture. I was always very impressed by that attitude.

MT:
There is an impressive history of teachers at this institute?

GH:
Yes. Everyone belongs to that history in some way. Basically, there is a strong background, and I like it. I really like it. It's not so special in a direct sense, but graduates always try to go beyond their teachers.

Taniguchi was a typical modernist — and a very good architect. Seike tried to bring architecture closer to daily life. And Shinohara was more radical again. As you know, he explored the abstraction of space and other ideas like that. Sakamoto-san questioned that. He focused more on a specific poetry — a poetry of daily life. Thanks to Tsukamoto-san, I didn't have this kind of trauma when I started my own office. Of course, he didn't say that directly, but there is always some kind of competition between students and their professors. Tsukamoto-san continued that spirit — not as a confrontation, but more as a shared development. The background of Tokyo Tech is very important to me. I am interested in the connections between these different approaches, rather than only the contrasts. That is also an influence from Tsukamoto-san.

MT:
Let's talk about your office. I noticed your staff is very young. You are still very young yourself, of course. But it seems most of your staff come directly from university — is that their first professional experience?

GH:
Yes, more or less.

MT:
Do you prefer working with staff who come directly from university? Or is it also possible for people to join your office after gaining experience somewhere else?

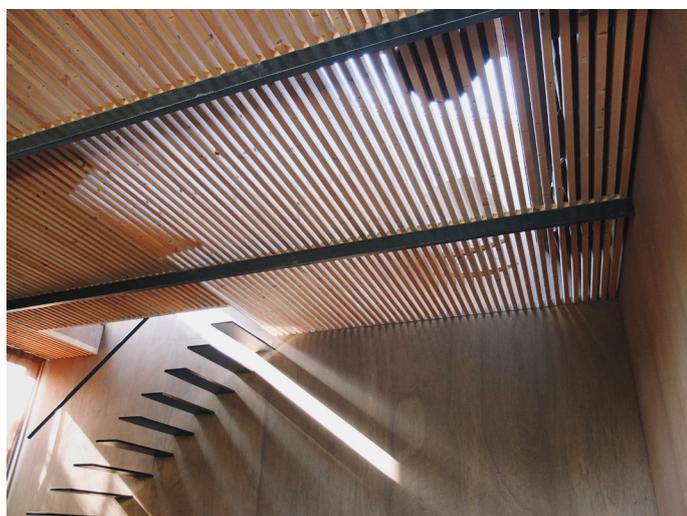
GH:
That is difficult to say. I think I still need more experience myself in managing an office. I don't really

have a clear example yet. But in general, it is easier if people start here without any previous experience. Because, as you know, the way of thinking and working in my office is quite different. I also heard it can be difficult to hire staff who already have professional experience. But probably one day, we will need them.

MT:
How is the dialogue between you and your staff?
What is your role in the office?

GH:
Basically, I see myself as a kind of moderator. I give ideas, but I try to keep some distance from the decisions. In this way, the staff have to work and struggle — from the first sketches to the construction and completion. It is better to keep looking for new possibilities and to protect the freedom of designing. Keeping distance is important for me. I also try to be open. I don't want to focus only on one thing. I want to stay open as much as possible. Sometimes even internship students can discover something — they can see the hidden potential of spaces. That is my role — to keep the atmosphere fresh.

MT:
Let's talk about your projects. Sometimes, the spaces in your residential projects seem like they are not only for daily living. For example, the void in Pilotis in a Forest, the oversized door in House in Gotanda, or the wooden slats on the floor in House in Komazawa. What is your idea behind these spaces? And what do you expect from the residents?



House in Komazawa

GH:
This connects to what I said earlier about Tokyo Tech. I try to design a house as a space for one specific client. But at the same time, our proposal should be open — something more general, something universal. The house should also feel good for Germans. [laughs]

I don't like to design only for a specific client or only for a general idea. I want to answer both sides at the same time. Maybe my way of designing is to give possibilities. I like spaces that are not fully controlled by someone or something. Normally, a house is controlled, or monopolized, by the resident. But I don't like this monopolization. I try to keep freedom — even inside private spaces. I always try to combine the atmosphere and scale of public space with the interior of a private house. This creates a new feeling, even about the idea of ownership or control. I like to keep some distance — this brings something interesting to contemporary houses. There are different ways to achieve the same goal.

MT:
That difference is a good starting point for the next question. In your projects, I often see different materials — in the façades or interiors. Every project uses different materials, but still, they all speak the same architectural language. They are recognizable as your work. How do you create this common image — even though the materials and scales are different?

GH:
This started when I was a student. I entered university in 1996 and graduated in 2002. At that time, SANAA became very influential — they became known outside of Japan. I was influenced a lot by Kazuyo Sejima-san, and I worked at her office for a short time. But at the same time, I had doubts about architectural space. They often realized their concepts or diagrams with a very white, aluminium style. For me, that felt poor. I travelled to Europe and Korea. Everywhere I visited, the spaces were built with different, typical materials. That's why I like to combine something like Japanese abstraction — a strong, clear vision — with a material sense in a contemporary way. Especially after Pilotis in a Forest, this became typical for my work. Before that project, I mostly painted everything white. That was a difference — Pilotis in a Forest changed this. After that project, instead of focusing on white surfaces, I try to control the urban structure through the proportions of elements — the

proportion of beams, pillars, and other building parts. These proportions control the abstraction and the relationship between inside and outside. That was an important turning point for me.

MT:

Your recently published project is the House in Shakujikōen. I can see a different approach there — is that correct?

GH:

Maybe I cannot explain it clearly yet. But I think Go Hasegawa & Associates is now in a second period. The first period ended when we published the book *Go Hasegawa Works* (2012) with Toto Publishing and the exhibition at Gallery MA. With that monograph, we could show who we are and what we have done. That's why now I want to discover something different. Of course, we still have the same background and interests. But at the moment, we are trying to find something new in every project. I cannot describe it very precisely, but I think I was influenced by Europe.



House in Shakujikōen

As you know, I visit Europe often, especially Mendrisio — every three weeks. Every time, I am surprised by the strong relationship between the city and its

architecture. I like the quality of scale and time. Of course, the lifestyle there is different. I don't really like German food [laughs], but for example, in Berlin, I can feel a certain quality — something created by the scale of time. I know that Berlin was destroyed after the Second World War, like Tokyo. But compared to Tokyo, Berlin still has important old buildings — like the works of Schinkel — which give the city a strong character. Tokyo is my favourite city. But sometimes, I think it's a pity that architects cannot really deal with it. Even Toyo Ito or Kazuyo Sejima are just “dancing” on Omotesandō. Architects are not able to handle this situation. The House in Shakujikōen is influenced by Baroque expression in Italy. Now I feel positive about having references from architecture all over the world. That is the difference from our first period.

MT:

Some last questions about your teaching. You have been a guest professor at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Switzerland, for one and a half years. It's a very international school, with students from all over the world. Most of the time, you only have these students for one semester, which is a very short period. What is your main goal when teaching them? What do you want to explain in such a short time? What is the most important thing?

GH:

How to understand architecture. Many students think architecture is only an idea. When they have that idea — or some references from another project — they believe the project is finished, exactly as they imagined it. But I think differently. They should integrate all the information from the site. Integration is one of the most important things.

I don't like projects that are only based on an idea or a presentation. Even if the drawings or the presentation are weak, I like projects where I can feel something behind the result — some richness. That is what I try to tell them. But it's difficult.

As I mentioned before, Mendrisio is a very image-oriented university. I don't like that. I want the students to struggle, rather than produce only sophisticated images. You can maybe understand this from your experience in my office.

MT:

Sometimes I asked for your opinion about offices in Europe or Japan. Most of the time, your answers were

like, “that’s not a good architect” or “that’s bad architecture.” So, in your view, there are only a few good architects in the contemporary scene?

GH:

Only a few architects can really think. Many architects design buildings. But for me, only a few can really think.

MT:

What do you mean by think?

GH:

To think originally. To think about architecture in an original way — creatively, truly creative.

MT:

Do you have any wishes or dreams for future projects? Is there something you really want to realise?

GH:

I would be happy if I can simply continue these hard days. One day, when I am 60 years old, and I can still struggle like I do today — then I would be very happy. If I become satisfied too early with my career, I would be a very boring architect. So I want to keep fighting and breaking something. That is my wish.

MT:

Architectural thinking is often reduced to short, striking sentences — even though architecture itself is much more complex. Still, some phrases become associated with certain positions: “Less is more” by Mies van der Rohe, “Architecture as a Forest” by Sou Fujimoto, or Valerio Olgiati’s “I don’t believe in anything”, which reflects his idea of non-referential architecture. Do you believe it’s possible — or meaningful — to express your own approach to architecture in such a condensed form?

GH:

No, I don’t have such a sentence. Maybe that connects to your last question. If I had a slogan, it would be easy to explain what I do. But for me, architecture is not so clear, not so simple. Every project is different — but of course, with the same character. Only politicians need slogans.

MT:

Thank you!