



Kengo

Forests sprawl over 90 percent of Yusuhara, the mountainous Japanese town in Kōchi prefecture, home to just over 3,000 people. Its stacked rice fields, the Senmaida of Kanzaiko, were described by writer Ryōtarō Shiba on his visit as “an inheritance not to fall behind the Great Wall of China.” But Yusuhara, hugged by the forests and close to the skies (its nickname is “Town Above the Clouds”) has many more inheritances. It is home to the delightful, experimental, and predominantly wooden structures of visionary modern Japanese architect Kengo Kuma.

Kengo’s mighty structures redefined Japanese architecture. But don’t put it to him that way. “I don’t think that it is necessary to change form in each age,” Kengo says. It is an extraordinary statement for an architect whose designs—ones that arrive to fanfare in Japan and do what the best architecture does, which is to induce awe and bend the arc of history—indeed end forms and movements like a period. Kengo clearly rejects Bauhaus

architect Hannes Meyer’s assertion, “Each age demands its own form.” Nothing so dogmatic or prescribed maps the biography of Kengo’s work.

The spectacle, such as it is, of a Kengo Kuma artifice accumulates in the relationship between form, function, and nature. The way the landscape hugs the structure, the way his humility allows for a kind of grace to flow into the objects; it is as though Kengo suffuses the space, his modesty as a person flowing into his practice. When asked what, to him, the meaning of good taste is, he replies: “Humility.”

Kengo’s aesthetic—freethinking in its simplicity, incorporating ancient materials, praising the osmotic boundaries of interior and exterior—is applied as much to monuments of cultural import as

to cultural oddities. The Asakusa Culture Tourist Information Center in Tokyo, his experimental, 148-foot-long (45-meter-long) cedar Wooden Bridge Museum in Yusuhara, but also the latticed cypress forms that house a pineapple-cake store in the Tokyo neighborhood of Minami-Aoyama—all these have furthered the vocabulary of Japanese and world architecture.

Kengo’s romance with architecture, like all good love stories, began with *un coup de foudre*. It is a rather simple story, one he can recite excellently, because he still adores the building so ardently: “When I was 10, I saw

the Yoyogi National Gymnasium in Tokyo by Kenzo Tange. That is the moment I decided I wanted to be an architect. Since this moment, architecture has evolved me every day of my life.”

There is a deep wellspring of affection for Kengo in Japan. Of his four decades as an architect, the unassuming author of his own timeless style, he best describes his efforts thus: “I am making a conscious effort to create something.” Kengo