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Folly of Sky, Earth, Man: The Work of Yatsuka Hajime

Dana Buntrock

天
地
人

The thingness of a building is...determined by its being between earth and sky as a sculptural form.¹

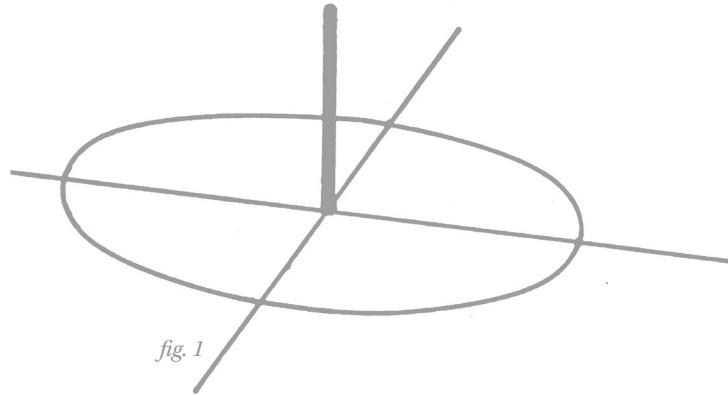
—Christian Norberg-Schulz

Japanese names are revealing; choice of script may suggest a word as indigenous or not, and render a Japanese concept more foreign or visa-versa. Many architects, although Yatsuka is not among them, fabricate words, relying on the meaning of Japanese characters. In the case of this small folly in Nagaoka, Yatsuka chose three individual characters for a title, linking concepts without the benefit of particles to suggest their relationship: Folly of Sky, Earth, Man.²

One of the notable things about this name is that, to date, Yatsuka has not advised his clients to use Japanese names for his buildings. A quick perusal of his projects yields names written in the Japanese katakana script used for foreign words (Media Luna, the Angelo Tarlazzi House); prosaically unnamed buildings, his preference (Bunkyo University Gymnasium or House in Negishi); and buildings named using the English alphabet (NOBBY, or the nonsensical OMY). The use of Japanese script signals a departure, no small thing when one realizes that Yatsuka is, in addition to being an architect, one of Japan's most thoughtful architectural critics and a prolific writer.

Yatsuka chose the characters for sky, earth, and man because they refer to a simplified compositional structure found in traditional Japanese approaches to design such as ikebana.³ It is relatively easy to see these pieces in the folly. The “sky” is a slim, attenuated tower finished in mirrored glass and painted, white aluminum panels; Yatsuka has suggested that the small twinkling lights which scale upward in the dark symbolize the ascent of a princess, a local legend. The “earth” is a deep red, tile-covered ramp which emerges out of the ground and shelters a cool, shaded room within. For this piece, Yatsuka worked closely with the Japanese tile and ceramics manufacturer Inax to develop customized materials, and the wall finish was inspired by a neo-primitive vase in Inax's collection. These tiles were deliberately fired to achieve a gradation in color, from a rich red at the base to a lighter, slightly purplish color at the top of the wall. “Man” is the most enigmatic piece, and as a result does indeed tend to draw people inside. It is a cylindrical volume perched above the ramp, enclosed in ironwood slats. Even when no one is present, the eye-level slits in this volume suggest the presence of someone inside, peering out at the landscape beyond.





When we say that life takes place, we imply that man's being-in-the-world mirrors the between of earth and sky. Man is in this between, standing, resting, acting.⁴

—Christian Norberg-Schulz

'Humanity' – that is, the wooden cylinder—is suspended between the heavens and the earth, symbolizing the position of the humanity in the universe.⁵

— Hajime Yatsuka

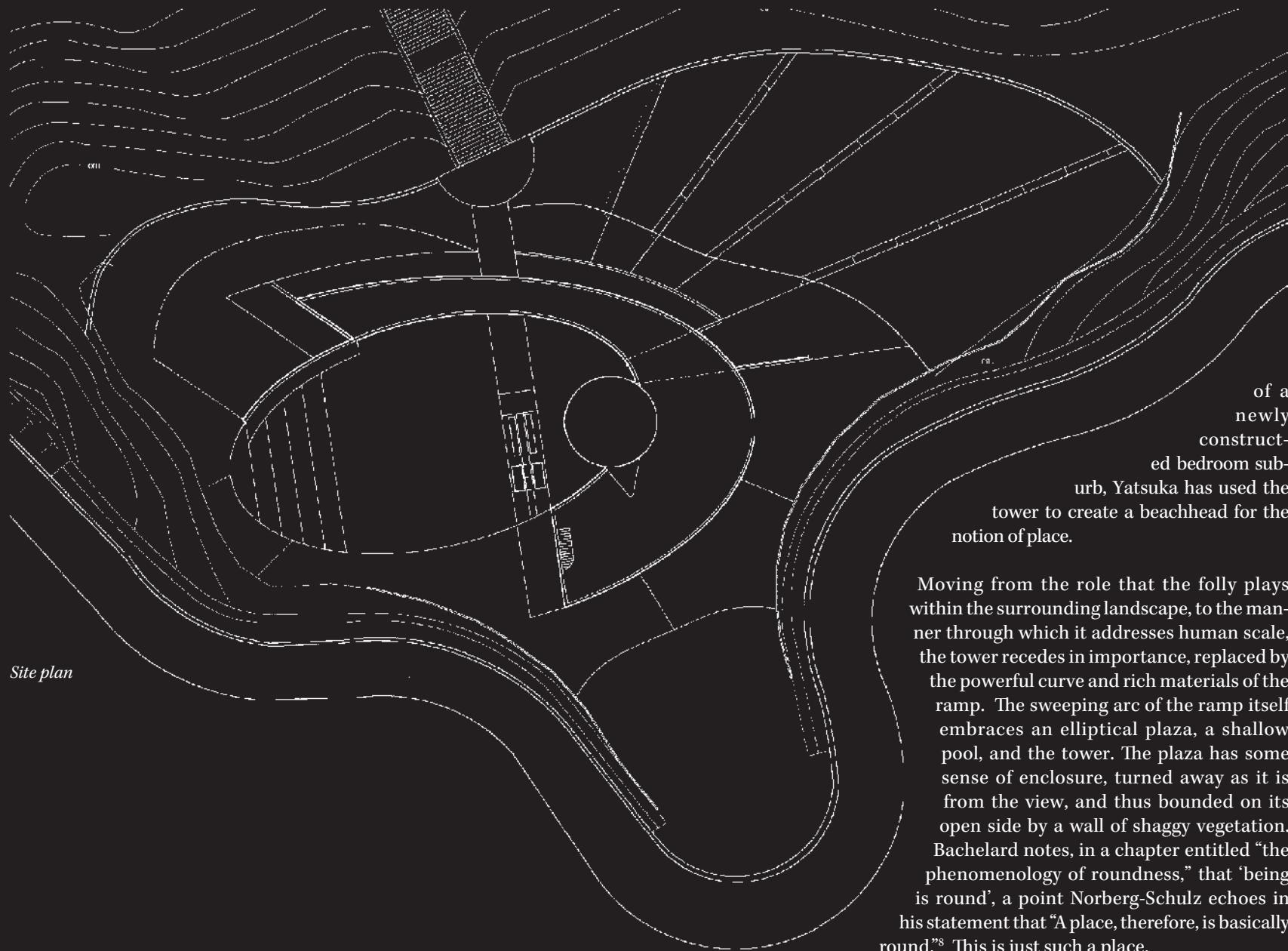
To Western architects, references to earth and sky, and to human presence between, are also suggestive of phenomenology. A closer look at Yatsuka's building demonstrates there are indeed reasons to explore the connections between Folly of Sky, Earth, Man and the goals outlined in phenomenological texts. In the limited space of this essay, I will address three issues in particular: concentration and the marking of landscape, enclosure and the relationships between inside and outside, and tectonics.

Folly of Sky, Earth, Man sits at the top of a low rise at the edge of a long valley. At its base is a rather odd and undistinguished assortment of structures. Within Echigo Park itself, there are, in addition to Yatsuka's folly, a hedge which is both a maze and the inscribed image of the area's Jomon pottery, a musical water fountain, and a clumsy "monument" with no clear purpose.⁶ Beyond the boundaries of the park, it is no better: a spa dominates a sea of bland, standardized housing.

But the view from the knoll is a rare, expansive one, and on a clear day it seems almost possible to see as far as the ocean. Yatsuka responded sympathetically to this location, creating a bounded, grassy space from which the low ramp of the folly emerges, guiding visitors to an unobstructed view of land and sky. There is indeed a sense of gathering here, whether one arrives by climbing the long stair to the lip of this clearing or rides the park's carts, emerging from surrounding trees. The parti is remarkably close to a diagram found in Norberg-Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture*, although here Yatsuka has not quite centered his vertical axis. The composition, though, neatly reflects Norberg-Schulz's "simplest model of existential space."⁷(fig. 1)

With the split tower, Yatsuka attempted to establish a landmark. By day, the slender white towers are clearly visible from below, and at night its glow can be seen from the streets below. Within the isolation and heterogeneous jumble





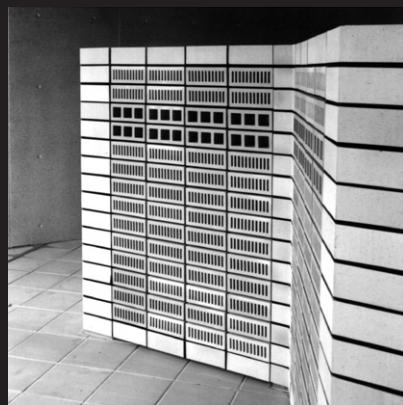
Site plan

of a newly constructed bedroom suburb, Yatsuka has used the tower to create a beachhead for the notion of place.

Moving from the role that the folly plays within the surrounding landscape, to the manner through which it addresses human scale, the tower recedes in importance, replaced by the powerful curve and rich materials of the ramp. The sweeping arc of the ramp itself embraces an elliptical plaza, a shallow pool, and the tower. The plaza has some sense of enclosure, turned away as it is from the view, and thus bounded on its open side by a wall of shaggy vegetation. Bachelard notes, in a chapter entitled “the phenomenology of roundness,” that ‘being is round’, a point Norberg-Schulz echoes in his statement that “A place, therefore, is basically round.”⁸ This is just such a place.

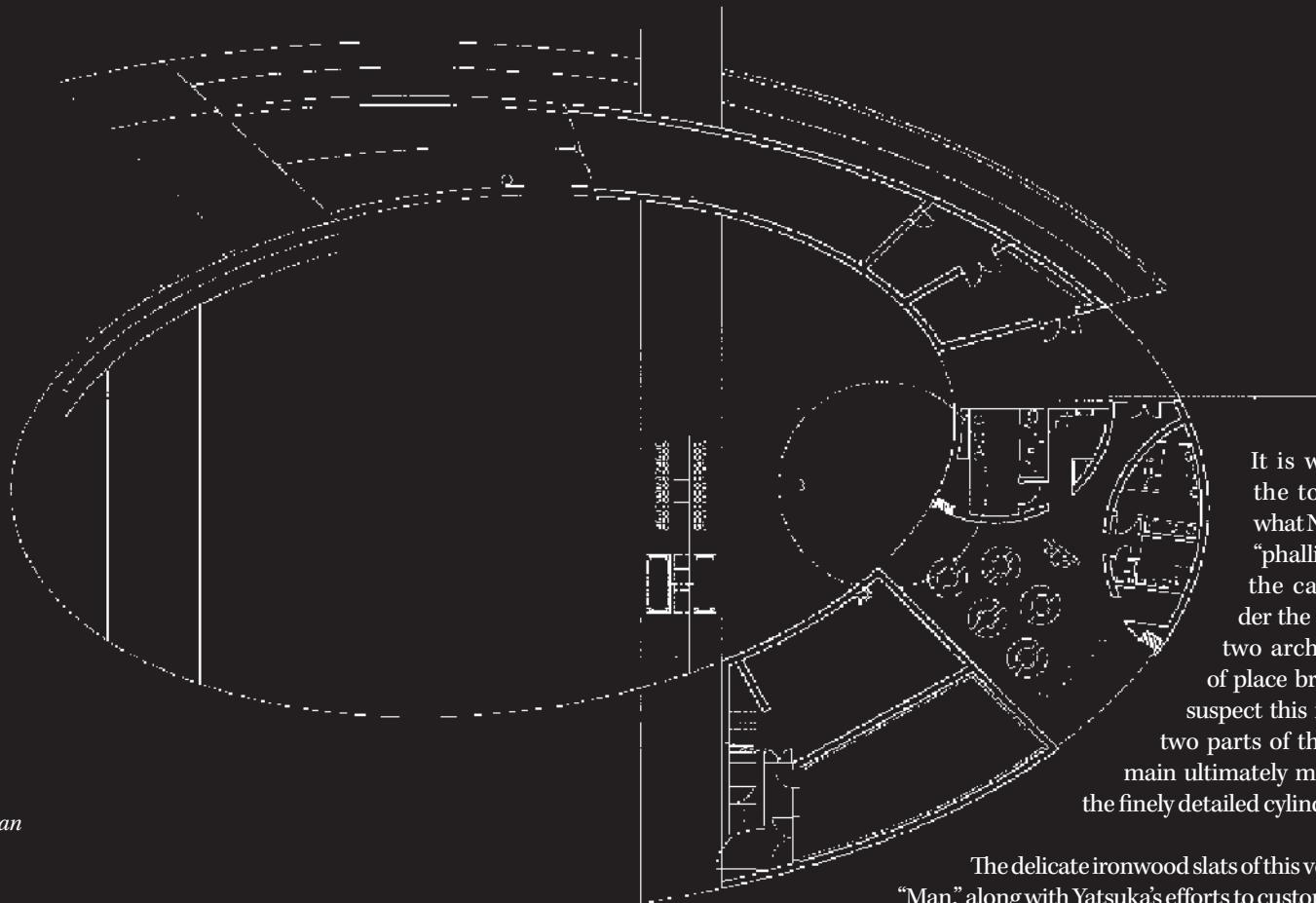


The “Earth,” ramp in red tile



Wall of porous ceramic blocks

Beneath the ramp, enclosed by thick concrete walls, is a small, protected eating area. This is actually the only area on the site where Yatsuka has located conventional furnishings (chairs and tables) and most visitors eventually come to rest here. In phenomenological discourse, it is important that such interior spaces feel separate and sheltered while remaining connected to the outside. And indeed, Yatsuka went to some trouble to assure just such a relationship. It was his particular concern that air conditioning might become necessary in the heat of mid-summer, thus requiring the closing off of the interior. Yatsuka worked with Inax to develop a wall of porous ceramic blocks to cool the space instead. Water courses through the wall, and draws heat from penetrating breezes blowing through the open cells, in this way allowing the room to remain spatially extended into its surroundings without the interior growing uncomfortably hot.



Ground floor plan

It is worth noting that the tower—embodying what Norberg-Schulz calls “phallic character”—and the cave-like space under the ramp recreate “the two architectural symbols of place brought together.”⁹ I suspect this is the reason these two parts of the composition remain ultimately more satisfying than the finely detailed cylinder perching above.

The delicate ironwood slats of this volume, symbolizing “Man,” along with Yatsuka’s efforts to customize finish tiles and the heat-absorbing wall, all begin to suggest something else about Folly of Sky, Earth, Man. Yatsuka has not, to date, been considered a material- or detail-oriented architect. Very often his buildings are best accepted as bold, abstract gestures – although the sculptural Tarlazzi Building and Yatsuka’s two follies for the Osaka Flower Exposition of 1990 share with this folly greater attention in execution. While it cannot be said that every facet of this folly is elegantly rendered—in particular the horizontal surface of the ramp and the handrail which encloses it are disappointments—unusual care has been taken in the fabrication of its parts.

One might argue that tectonics is concerned primarily with the handicraft of building, rather than the exploitation of flexible production. However, in Japan, the opportunity to customize finishes (the mirrored glass made by Figla, with its gradually diminishing stripes, is another customization) and to fine-tune small details (as with the apparently random pattern of the tiny lights in the aluminum panels of the tower) is as particular to the Japanese construction industry as triple blocked brackets once were.

The response to place seen in Yatsuka’s building is also echoed in a dense sound sculpture by Taiko Shono. The sculpture is activated by water filling ceramic cones until they overflow. As drops then slowly seep through the walls of these cones, they fall to stainless steel drums below, striking inconsistent tones. This, too, fits within the notion of “existential space.” Shono is less interested in creating a brume of sound and mist than she is in shaping an awareness of the spaces between receding sounds.



The enclosed cylindrical volume, “Man”



Slatted walls of South American Ironwood



View towards water and sound sculpture



Shallow pool within the elliptical plaza



Detail of water filled ceramic cones

In spite of the fact that this building neatly reflects many of the attributes which are key to a phenomenological architecture, I do not believe that Yatsuka made a deliberate attempt to achieve this correlation. For one thing, in all our lengthy discussions of the folly, I have never heard Yatsuka suggest such associations.¹⁰ Rather, Yatsuka's desire to create an architecture of meaning, emerging out of the personal challenges he has faced in the recent years of Japan's recession, have lead him to rely on many of the same elements which the phenomenologist Norberg-Schulz (quoted here) identified in his own observations of the landscape. Yatsuka's efforts to create meaning and purpose in this little building led him to those features of architecture which, for many theorists, give meaning to places and to buildings.

Notes

1. Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture" in Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda of Architecture: An Anthology for Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 435.

2. As a feminist, the final character in this set has caused me fits. The Japanese character used implies no gender or singularity; it indicates people, a person, humans, or a single human being, without perhaps the clinical detachment of the latter. It shares with the English-language "man" a deeper resonance, and this is the reason I ultimately acquiesced to its use.

3. Yatsuka notes that, "the notion of harmony in the three different elements is intended to achieve a more delicate balance than symmetry." Within the system, there are establish proportional relationships between each element. "Man" achieves a height which might be called one unit, "earth" two thirds the height of "man", and "sky" equal to the combined height of "earth" and "man."

4. Norberg-Schulz, p. 437

5. Yatsuka sent this quote to *Wallpaper magazine*, and I received a copy of the unedited text by e-mail on February 17, 1999.

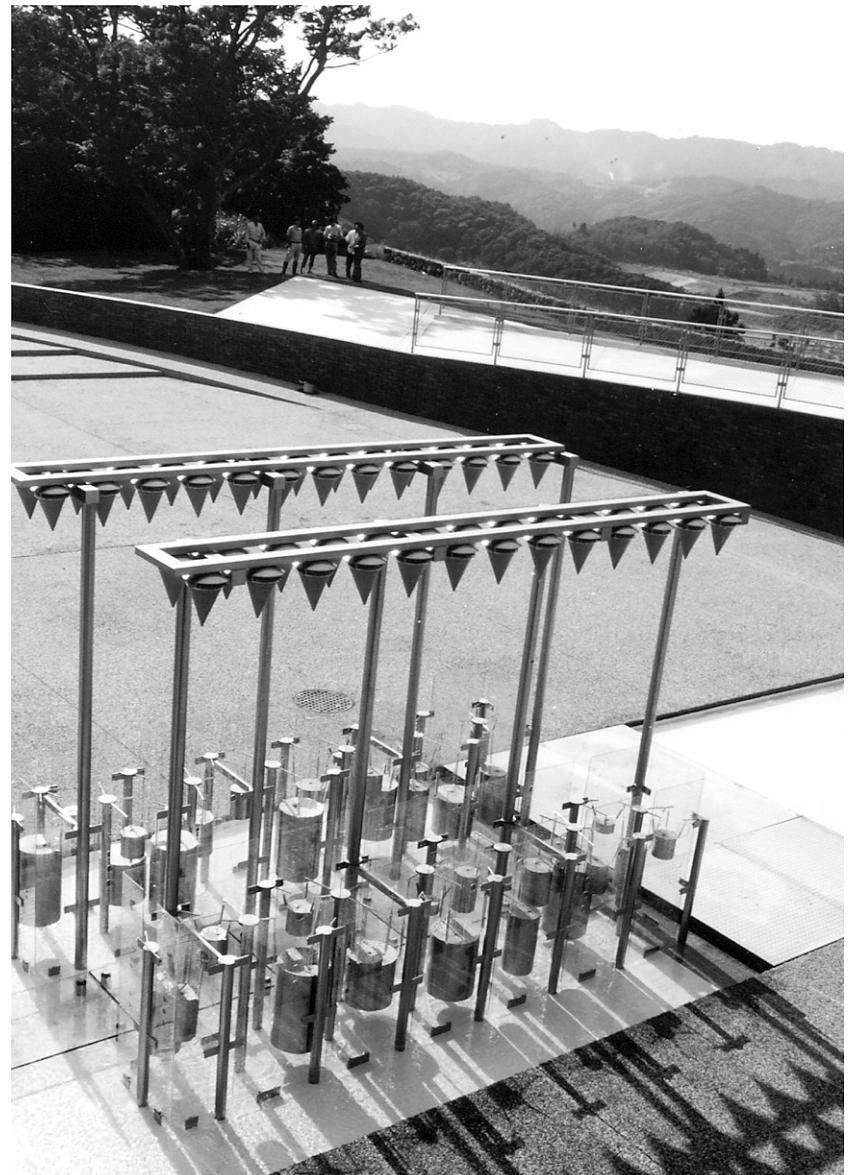
6. The Jomon people were a primitive culture which inhabited Japan from about 10,000 to 300 B.C. They were noted particularly for their corded pottery, replicas of which are displayed in Nagaoka because of the importance of regional archaeological finds.

7. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space, and Architecture*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. p. 21.

8. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964. p.234 and Norberg-Schulz, *Existence*, p. 20.

9. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence*, p. 39.

10. In response to the draft of this text, Yatsuka noted, "A good criticism, for me, should contain something the architect has never thought of, and your text falls within this category. I was surprised and then pleased. Of course, I have never thought myself as a phenomenologist." February 17, 1999 e-mail correspondence.



Taiko Shono's water and sound sculpture