

## Kengo Kuma on Japanese Carpentry and Hadid's Olympic Stadium

by [Darryl Wee](#)

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From left to right: Sonia Dhillon-Marty of the Dhillon-Marty Foundation, architect Kengo Kuma, and moderator Lucy Birmingham.

(Photo by Darryl Jingwen Wee)

TOKYO — Renowned architect **Kengo Kuma** gave a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo on October 29, where he spoke about his experiences leading a unique architectural study tour of Japan that saw participation from a team of 20 international architects, designers, and students.

Kuma was joined at the conference by **Sonia Dhillon-Marty**, founder of the [Dhillon-Marty Foundation](#), an organization dedicated to the promotion of social activism through art, design and architecture that hosted the tour. Over a period of one week, Kuma and Dhillon-Marty guided participants in a packed program of activities that included designing mobile homes in rural areas, redesigning a school in quake-hit Miyagi prefecture and, in their words, “building awareness among 2020 Olympics tourists.”

The famed Japanese architect emphasized the diverse multi-cultural character of the tour, which included participants from seven different universities from as many cultures. “Usually, Japanese university students of architecture are quite conservative, but recently we’ve been pushing them to do exchange programs with top foreign universities like Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia. This particular tour was the first of its kind to offer such a multicultural experience to students at university departments in Tokyo.”

Entitled “Material Equilibrium: Social Action for Architects,” the workshop-style tour comprised three phases. The first was a field trip to the famous Ise Shrine that is rebuilt anew every twenty years, and was reconstructed for the 62nd time this summer. Participants were given the rare opportunity of learning directly from Japanese carpenters and woodworking craftsmen — a direct form mentorship that is rare even for Japanese students. “Most Japanese people are familiar with Ise Shrine, but this is merely the final result that takes the form of a building. On this workshop tour, we were able to study the entire process of rebuilding this iconic shrine, learning more about the forest where the wood is taken, the factory where parts are manufactured, and more,” said Kuma.

The second part of the tour took participants to Ogatsu, a town north of Sendai that was hardest hit by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, with more than 80% of the buildings completely destroyed. There, students visited an old school built during the Taisho period by a group of special carpenters known as the *Kesen Daiku*, whose unique building expertise based on truss structures rather than the standard Japanese post-and-beam construction spread to the capital during the Edo period, when these itinerant workers from an especially poverty-stricken rural region traveled there to work during the low autumn and winter farming seasons.

A certain muted criticism of current architectural issues in Japan dominated Kuma’s other comments during the conference. Asked about how architects might best respond to the host of contemporary social ills now facing the country, including an ageing population and a creeping sense of isolation among urban dwellers, Kuma chalked up many of these social problems to the housing situation in Japan.

“Traditionally, the layout and development of Tokyo was based on the individual family unit, and a separation between each family and household, which has made Tokyo a boring city. Now you see various trends that are trying to change that a little, such as the ‘shared house’ (essentially communal living in larger properties with private bedrooms but shared kitchens, bathrooms, and other facilities). But I hear that the Japanese government is now drafting some new laws that will make it impossible for these ‘shared houses’ to exist, claiming that they’re unsafe.”

Towards the end, Kuma expressed his mixed reactions to the recent controversy and subsequent [protest by several prominent Japanese architects over Zaha Hadid’s](#) “massive” design for the new Olympic Stadium slated to be built for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. “Basically, the conditions for Hadid’s stadium were set far in advance by the government — room for 80,000 spectators with a covered roof, for instance. These conditions were absolutely necessary in order for Tokyo to win the bid. It’s just that the proposed size of the stadium doesn’t make a good fit for the site conditions — the site is really too small for the stadium, but finding a larger site in central Tokyo

would be close to impossible. During Tokyo's last bid for the games, the organizers put forth Odaiba as a possible site, but the IOC criticized it for being too separated from the center of Tokyo. So the decision regarding this particular stadium has been difficult from the beginning."

"I think that Hadid knew about these constraints, and tried to address the site conditions in a smart way. She has proposed a symbolic building, which is a necessary condition for the Olympic stadium, and I think that she is good with symbolic designs in general."