

The Artist: Toyo Ito

Toyo Ito is a contemporary Japanese architect whose work exists at the intersection of technology, nature, and the human spirit. While he is not exactly a media artist or programmer, I have chosen him from the list due to personal interest as I initially wanted to study architecture. Artists like Ito shape how I think about space, material, and the emotional weight of form and how I can apply it when programming or doing my work in CART.

He is an artist who functions fluidly across design disciplines, merging structural logic with poetic intent. He operates within the broader design industry, often engaging with corporate or institutional projects, yet his work never feels compromised in message or intent. Instead, it feels elevated.

Born in 1941 in Seoul (then under Japanese rule), he later moved to Japan, studied architecture at the University of Tokyo, and eventually established his own firm “Urbot” which was later rebranded to “Toyo Ito & Associates”. From early in his career, Ito sought to reimagine architecture not as rigid or bounding, but as something fluid, transparent, and responsive to the world and more specifically the people around and in it.

In a 2013 interview with NPR News following his receipt of the Pritzker Prize, often regarded as the Nobel Prize of architecture, he talked a little about his design philosophy as follows:

“Air and wind and water, these metaphors that I find in nature, that’s always the inspiration for my architecture.”

This statement is the foundation of his work. Rather than dividing us from the environment or from one another, he believes that buildings should seamlessly blend the boundaries. He critiques modern urbanism for its tendency to enclose, separate, and isolate. His response is to design spaces that open and connect. Thus, Ito sees architecture as a medium to bring us closer to our surroundings by highlighting natural elements through innovative design. Ito’s buildings mimic the logic of nature as we will see in the case study, not as visual aesthetics, but as structural philosophies. He intends not to assert presence and rather blend seamlessly with the environment in an ephemeral manner that will grow and adapt. Rather than freezing time into fixed forms, he gives space by using materials such as glass, perforated metal, and light materials for a weightless and organic emphasis on flowing forms.

Ito does not place value on creating a lasting legacy, acknowledges that his work may not outlive him, nor does he want them to. He sees his structures as participants in the ever-changing stream of life, meant to be experienced while they exist, then let go. His architecture asks us to slow down, to notice the way sunlight moves across a floor. It reminds us that we are never separate from the world around us, only passing through it like everything else. This philosophy is quite unique and clearly illustrated in the demolition of a house he designed for his sister. Despite its deeply personal significance, Ito allowed it to be dismantled

without a second thought, It had simply lived its life. Even a project so intimate was not meant to remain indefinitely, but to serve its time and fade gracefully, ephemeral.

The Work: Sendai Mediatheque

These concepts are exemplified in Ito's Sendai Mediatheque embodying the Japanese philosophical principle of Mujo (the transience of all things). The Mediatheque is a library and cultural center in the Miyagi prefecture of Sendai, Japan commissioned to Ito in 1995 and completed in 2001.

It may look like a normal glass building on the outside, though it is not. Although constructed of steel and glass, materials traditionally associated with permanence and solidity, the building feels almost weightless. Its transparency, openness, and flowing internal structure suggest that it is not a fixed monument, but a vessel for ever-changing life, fitting for a library. Within the building, there are no hierarchies or rigid zones, only open spaces that can shift in function and meaning over time complimented by thirteen vertical tree-like tubes.

These tubes, though made of steel, their fractal organic pattern of metal wiring and negative empty space make them conduits of air, light and movement. The tubes are not just decorative, they represent an interconnectedness of systems, people and environmental elements all passing through these vertical passages, weaving the building into a dynamic network as well as creating a sense of continuity with the forest beyond the building. They connect the upper and lower levels of the building, creating a sense of vertical network as well.

The glass was deliberately used to dissolve the boundary between interior and exterior, between viewer and viewed. You are always aware of the city beyond the building the viewer is in, it somewhat forces a rethinking of private spaces and the role of architecture in mediating this invisible fence. Being in the library is also deeply embodied. As one moves through the space, the vertical tubes subtly shift form, almost like organs in a body. The building becomes an extension of the nervous system in a sense, reacting to stimuli like light and movement, and returning us to a heightened awareness of our own presence within space.

In sum, Ito's work breaks down boundaries as we have seen in the Mediatheque, flowing between states, as does the library it hosts. As its name implies, the Mediatheque isn't just a library, it's a multimedia center of many disciplines. Ito integrates screens, networks, and programming into his practice, simply once again, a sign of the times.