

# Design for Human Beings

**A doughnut-shaped kindergarten designed by the husband-and-wife architecture firm Tezuka Associates is producing effects beyond the conventional functions of buildings.**

**HIROSHI SAKURAI**

**O**PENED in 1971, Fuji Kindergarten in Tachikawa City, suburban Tokyo, became one of the most famous kindergartens in Japan as a result of its reconstruction in 2007. Many parents apply to have their children admitted to the kindergarten. People visit Fuji Kindergarten from across Japan all the time. The reason for the kindergarten's popularity and recognition is its novel building, which was designed with gigantic playground equipment as its motif. It is a

doughnut-shaped, one-story building that surrounds a courtyard. Its circumference is approximately 183 meters. The structural pillars and window frames are connected by sliding doors made entirely of glass. There are no fixed walls in the building dividing the space into rooms. The whole kindergarten building is one large space. Its entire roof has a wooden floor so that the rooftop functions as a playground as well.

Three *keyaki* (Japanese zelkova) trees grow skyward through the kindergarten's roof. The trees have been there since the kindergarten was opened. Assumed to be about 50 years old, the three keyaki trees are each more than 25 meters tall. Solid safety nets have been installed to fill the gaps between their trunks and the roof. The children at the kindergarten enjoy themselves with screams of delight, jumping up and down on the nets, climbing the keyaki trees whose branches stretch wide and running around on the wooden-floored roof.

Takaharu Tezuka and his wife, Yui, who comprise Tezuka Architects, took charge of the design of the kindergarten's renewed building.

"The children at the kindergarten start running

Fuji Kindergarten in Tachikawa City  
Photo: Courtesy of Tezuka Architects



around naturally when they go up onto the roof,” notes Yui. “All children love running around the same place again and again. We didn’t install any fixed playground equipment on the roof, but the children seem to find many clues there for discovering games on their own.”

Various sounds, including the screams of delight of the kindergarteners, the voices of their teachers, and the tones produced by pianos and singing voices, blend with each other and travel through the kindergarten building. It is an environment that helps kindergarteners to develop the concentration they require for recognizing the information they need. The roof that kindergarteners can run on like a track makes a significant contribution to the improvement of their physical strength as well. According to one university survey, children move an average distance of 4 to 6 kilometers each day at Fuji Kindergarten. Furthermore, they do not experience isolation from the other children because the teachers look after them carefully.

The high evaluations for this educational environment have meant that Fuji Kindergarten has been the recipient of multiple awards in Japan and overseas, including the Good Design Award (see HJ Aug. 2017, pp. 10-11) in 2007 and the Best all-round submission in the “Designing for Education: Compendium of Exemplary Educational Facilities 2011” published by the Centre for Effective Learning Environments of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

“Architecture is not a goal for us,” explains Takaharu. “The important thing is what happens with architecture. The latest technologies are used for Fuji Kindergarten in various areas, including resistance to earthquakes, acoustics and lighting. But people do not take note of them at a glance. The important thing is for people to naturally call to mind the senses they are equipped with, instead of thinking about technologies. We use technologies to make that happen if and when they are necessary.”

In addition to Fuji Kindergarten, Tezuka Architects has designed a range of buildings, including houses, hospitals and Christian churches.



For example, at the request of the Japan Committee for UNICEF, Tezuka Architects designed the building for Asahi Kindergarten in Minamisanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture, which had been destroyed by a tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Giant Japanese cedar trees that died because of salt brought in by the tsunami are used as building material for pillars, beams, handrails and floors in the one-story kindergarten building, which was rebuilt in a high location in the town in July 2012. A traditional construction method in which the components are dovetailed is used for the building, which is free of metal fittings. The square kindergarten building has long, deep eaves on all sides that provide protection against rain and snow. A corridor wide enough to allow children in the kindergarten to run around was built under those eaves. Three more buildings were constructed at Asahi Kindergarten in November 2016. All of the kindergarten’s four buildings are connected via stairs and passages made of wood.

“We believe that Asahi Kindergarten is able to pass what the tsunami taught us down to the members of future generations,” says Takaharu. “We have dealt with the architecture consistently based on our approach of designing for the sake of human beings. We have no intention of changing this approach in the future.”

Tezuka Architects is currently involved in more than thirty projects for building educational, cultural and other facilities in Japan, other parts of Asia and Europe, including those still in the planning stage. These facilities will take concrete shape in the next few years. The effects created by the buildings designed by the Tezukas are worthy of attention. **17**