

## T-House



### **Ranbir Lal: T-House**

Statement 2007



*T-House paper model*

The T-House project began – as its name suggests - as an attempt to design a building directly associated with tea drinking; somewhere where you could have a cup of tea.

The well known historical influences which for us informed the development of such a place were first and foremost, the Japanese tea house (now an internationally recognised almost the platonic

ideal) and to a lesser extent the English garden pavilion and, in its more eccentric variants, the architectural folly.

However, from the outset it was never intended that T-House would be a retro imitation of historical architectural forms, or conform to the rigorous conventions of the original Japanese model with its strict aesthetic codes. After the initial early stage of our planning, we were perhaps more influenced by the overall relationship between the tea house/pavilion and the garden in which it is to be found. That is to say, we thought of T-House as a modern structure which would provide some focus in the landscape, or help to furnish the city in some way. Whether in a park or forest, beach or city car park we imagined that T-House would take a form which would be both a place and at the same time a path; not two easy notions to reconcile. We talked about collapsing the inside and the outside, in order to make it possible to be walking around and being in T-House at the same time. In Japan there is a spatial separation between various places core to the tea ceremony scattered throughout the garden— the anteroom, the portico, and the garden path – they are separate and all have a strict relationship to one another in time and space. We knew it was possible that T-House could function as a shelter for meditation, although we wondered whether such a high moral purpose might be either inappropriate to the project or beyond our scope. We felt it would be beneficial if the shape of the project were to be kept as open as possible, ie. open to a number of uses to be determined by its future visitors as much as its current designers.

Further research into the earliest meaning of the traditional Japanese tea house revealed that the tea house was known variously as an abode of fancy (in as much as it was built to house a poetic impulse), an abode of vacancy (devoid of any unnecessary ornament), and an abode of the unsymmetrical (as a place dedicated to the imperfect, purposely leaving some things unfinished for the imagination to complete). Looking at the final designs for T-House it seems that this third, the unsymmetrical, has been the primary influence on its development. T-House constantly offers glimpses of the consolations of symmetry, so important to basic human aesthetic appreciation or the proportions of Palladian classicism, while being consistently un-symmetrical.

And yet it starts out in pure mathematics. T-House is made from a single building block – a triangle with proportions of 3 to 4 to 5. This pure Euclidean geometry is an awkward, not to say almost impossible, form for building. For T-House this unit is repeated many times over in the house, and some rigid constructional rules are applied to how they fit together: each triangle is placed at 90 degrees to one another— no other angle is allowed. In theory this should assist the creation of a conventional building- where walls and ceilings sit at 90 degrees to each other. But not here; instead, there is a sequence of dynamic shapes and angles are created.

T-House is an un-ashamed architectural folly, one of those experiments with architectural form which pull things apart as much as moulding them into familiar building forms. Its form –part architecture, part sculpture - unfolds like a monumental piece of origami, another Japanese influence subtly worked into the conceptual underpinning. Its folds and corners refuse to make conventional architectural shapes, never quite being a proper wall or acceptable ceiling. Here and there it suggests the makings of enough shelter to suggest a roof, has echoes of a gateway entrance at one end, but its surfaces never fully express the polite conventions of form married to function. Instead, what you see are surfaces where an interplay of light and dark takes place, here and there shapes twist and bend. This refusal to coalesce into the recognised form and meet the recognised function is what identifies its pedigree, amongst the iconoclasts, the undoers of architecture who sometimes play dangerous de-constructive games with the basic ideas of their discipline.

At this point in time we have recently settled on wood as the material to build T-House with. From sustainable sources it is environmentally acceptable, and is currently a highly desirable material used throughout the building industry. In our case, it has the traditional advantages of wood being warm and welcoming to the touch, being more likely to invite people to have a closer relationship with the structure than if we had used the harder more usual metal or similar material. It is also of

course another reference to the Japanese T-House tradition, which insists on the use of wood, eschewing the use of metal nails and celebrating the art of carpentry – not that we could claim any craftsmanship of this type from T-House.



**Further Information:**

*T-house* is a developing concept which, will be researched further with a range of different groups of people from Eastside during the Festival of Extreme Buildings where a prototype of the T-House construction will be presented May-September 2007. Venue details tbc. Please check [www.vivid.org.uk](http://www.vivid.org.uk) for updates.

T- House is part of the Interdisciplinary Support Programme (ISP) developed by VIVID to explore the creative possibilities arising from collaboration across disciplines - artistic, curatorial, technological and industrial by supporting joint research projects between creative individuals in Birmingham and other industries across the West Midlands.

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