



EASTERN DESIGN OFFICE: SLIT HOUSE

HERBERT WRIGHT



Opposite: View along corridor with the light from the slits modulating its length. Above: The slits reinforce the traditional simplicity of Japanese interiors

SLIT House, in the Japanese prefecture of Shiga, challenges the orthodoxy that the main interface between exterior and interior is the window. In Slit House the interface is the slit, and it creates a unique space where the passage of days and seasons, the quality of light and the perception of scenery outside become integral to life inside the house. The architects, Anna Nakamura and Taiyo Jinno of the Kyoto-based Eastern Design Office, say their fresh approach creates 'an ambiguity between interior and exterior', and that they 'redefine the window in architectural terms'.

Slit House is built on an unusually narrow site: 7.5m wide at the street but stretching 50m to a river at the back. One hundred and five metres of 4m-high reinforced concrete wall encloses the long single-storey structure and runs the entire north side of the site. The house is split from ground to top by 60 randomly positioned slits, each 14cm wide and mainly vertical, but with some slanting gently. A patio at the end of house extends as a finger beside it, and here, as an entrance from the street, the wall curves to round off the small indented open space. A straight hallway runs along the south side, where more slits admit sunlight through glass, while others extend as short cut-aways in the roof slab. The house encloses a small internal courtyard.

To a western eye, this wall could suggest a bunker, and the slits the medieval architecture of forts, where they were originally used as defensive elements through which to observe and shoot arrows at the enemy. Space is a precious resource in Japan and worth defending, but Slit House suggests other things. At night, the light from it emerges in rays, suggesting the warmth inside. It is inside and by day, however, that the slits create the most magic. A normal window diffuses brightness throughout a space, but a slit reduces the light getting through, so that even in bright sunshine, when the slits create tight beams, the ambient light inside is soft. Moreover, the passage of the sun changes the angle of these beams as they fall across the floor, marking time gradually and naturally. The outside world is seen in separated strips, and only by moving can an idea of the exterior be assembled, just as the flight of a bird is inferred from points on its trajectory momentarily glimpsed.

The first resident of Slit House has been a woman in her eighties, and this radical house has easily adapted to her typically minimalist Japanese furnishing. She enjoys a feeling of spaciousness that is unexpected considering the narrowness of the house. The slits have proved to be a continuation of the Japanese tradition of manipulating domestic space with such features as the fusuma, the sliding rectangular partition, or the shoji, the sliding or folding screen placed across a doorway. The fusuma and shoji are translucent while the slits are transparent, but they all filter light to fill space.

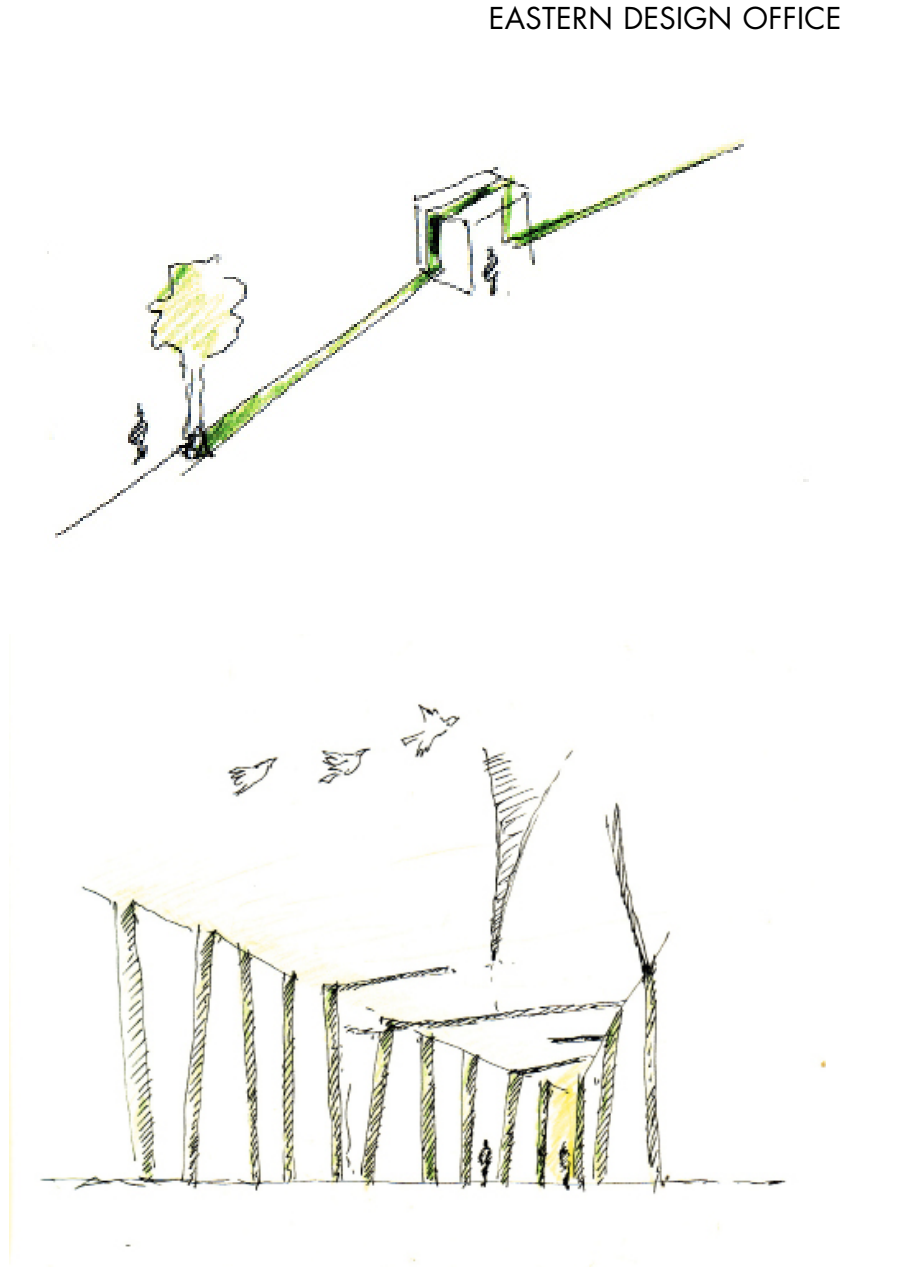
Nakamura and Jinno have subsequently gone on to play with other unusual variations in wall apertures, even designing a horizontal slit house. Their Misaki Health Centre in Beijing, designed in 2006, is dominated by slits, but some of them widen out into full curving windows, while their three-story Villa Saitan in Kyoto, completed in 2006, has leaf-like flowing shapes punctuating its concrete exterior. Opening up concrete walls with random apertures to create interior ambience was a technique used brilliantly by Le Corbusier in the chapel at Ronchamps, and more recently by Jean Nouvel in the Torre Agbar, Barcelona. But concrete walls have suffered from their association with Brutalism and memories of car parks – no wonder steel and glass are in vogue again. Nakamura and Jinno say their slits are 'poles apart from glass-heavy contemporary architecture'. Interestingly, their rejection of glass facades in favour of concrete chimes with architects who realize that solid walls provide insulation without fancy technology. In 2005 Ken Shuttleworth, a designer of the global icon skyscraper, 30 St Mary Axe in London (aka 'the gherkin'), went as far as proclaiming: 'Wake up, all you architectural glass junkies, it's time for a change!' Eastern Design had already done so.

Slit House challenges glass with an almost forgotten architectural device and makes a near-impossible site a serene space for living. It revives concrete as a conceptual, sculptural medium for domestic architecture and, in a stroke, expunges its cold, inhuman associations. For a first house, it is an amazing accomplishment for Nakamura and Jinno, and for the occupant, a very special place to live.

HERBERT WRIGHT IS THE AUTHOR OF LONDON HIGH, SKYSCRAPERS AND INSTANT CITIES, A WRITER ON ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN, ART REVIEWER FOR LONDON LE COOL, AND CONSULTANT ON 20TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE



Above: An open indent of space at the end of the Slit House. Opposite top: A conceptual sketch projects the field of vision through a slit to a tree. Opposite bottom: An array of slits in external and internal walls is sketched out.



Location: Shiga, Japa

Size: 210 m²

Client: Niwaka, Inc

Budget: 405 000 EUR

Design date: 2004

Construction date: 2005

Main architects: Anna Nakamura+Taiyo Jinno/Eastern Design Office

Engineer: HOJO STRUCTURE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Contractor: Fukasaka Co., Ltd