



# SHADOW PLAY

## NEZU MUSEUM

Text by Gwen Lee  
Photography by Gwen Lee and FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa  
Drawings courtesy of Kengo Kuma & Associates

With a new name and a new building by Kengo Kuma, the Nezu Museum has emerged from a three-and-a-half year rebuilding and branding exercise to become Tokyo's latest attraction. **Gwen Lee** reports.

### PROJECT CREDITS

**ARCHITECT** Kengo Kuma & Associates  
**CONTRACTOR** Shimizu Corporation  
**LAND AREA** 21,625 m<sup>2</sup>  
**GROSS FLOOR AREA** 4,014 m<sup>2</sup>  
**GARDEN AREA** approx. 17,000 m<sup>2</sup>

There has always been a deep connection between the garden and the built form in Japanese culture and here, Kuma taps on this deep-seated psyche to welcome the visitor into a realm unifying art, architecture and nature.

A dramatic pitched roof rises above a row of lush bamboo at the end of the swanky shopping street, announcing the arrival of the new Nezu Museum. Designed by renowned architect Kengo Kuma, the 69-year-old museum differentiates itself from the concrete-box architecture that characterises post-war Tokyo's urbanscape, and instead draws its inspiration from an older vernacular tradition closer to the Japanese soul. Entering the building is akin to entering a traditional Japanese residence. With its grey tiled roof, rectilinear form and minimal aesthetics, the building draws the visitor in with its quiet simplicity and understated elegance—so rare in a world where wavy facades and blobby forms seem to dominate every other high-profile low-rise building these days.

“I treated the museum as a kind of gate connecting the city and the sacred garden of the museum,” says Kuma, who worked on the project for five years. There has always been a deep connection between the garden and the built form in Japanese culture and here, Kuma taps on this deep-seated psyche to welcome the visitor into a realm unifying art, architecture and nature.

The bamboo thicket and pebbled path along the length of the main building creates a natural screen separating the museum grounds from the

busy street. The façade next to this is composed of a bamboo wall on the lower half and vertical steel cladding above; a secondary roof separates the two and creates a sheltered corridor evocative of a garden path. This layering technique using both natural and manmade materials results in a sanctuary away from the hustle-bustle of Omotesando—one of Tokyo's liveliest streets and a major architectural playground for the likes of Herzog & de Meuron and Tadao Ando.

Further away from the street, the façade becomes increasingly lighter and more transparent with the use of glass and a carefully detailed steel frame. Walking past the bamboo wall, and into the shadow cast by the roof, one then enters into the darkened lobby of the main building adorned with ancient Buddhist



OMOTESANDO STREET & SITE



**OPPOSITE** Kuma conceptualised the building as “a kind of gate connecting the city and the sacred garden of the museum.” (Photo: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa)

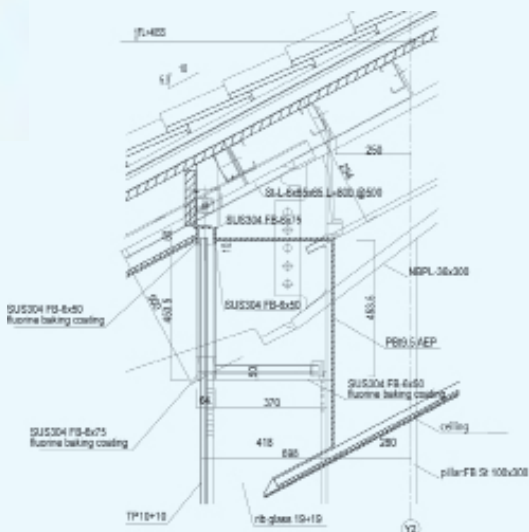
**ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT** Bamboo is used both as a façade cladding and a natural screen separating the museum grounds from the busy street. (Photo: Gwen Lee)

The ceramic tiled roof spans the entire 50-metre length of the museum's main block. (Photo: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa)

View of the museum from Omotesando street. (Photo: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa)



"I wanted to recreate an atmosphere of 'stillness' as opposed to 'motion' as found in Omotesando," says Kuma.



### FACADE DETAIL

sculptures. Immediately, the view opens up to a large expanse of green—a 1.7-hectare garden dotted with waterfalls, stone bridges, teahouses and a pond. With the floor-to-ceiling glass wall, Kuma has manipulated nature to create a backdrop of greenery that both frames and connects the sculptures in the main hall. The boundary between the manmade and the natural is dissolved through the architect's hand. The trunks of the trees and the slender steel columns are no longer opposing statements but are orchestrated into a symphony of lines growing towards the open sky. Further in the distance, the roof of the NEZUCAFÉ—a smaller pitched roof structure—peeks out from behind the foliage, inviting one to step out and descend down the winding stone path. The new architecture is the embodiment of *wa* (harmony) and *roji*—a traditional garden path leading to a teahouse, designed to distant the mind from the outside world.

"I wanted to recreate an atmosphere of 'stillness' as opposed to 'motion' as found in Omotesando," says Kuma. "A light atmosphere of Tokyo dating back 150 years, when architecture was still in wood."

The site of Kuma's building had originally been occupied by the old Nezu family home and store houses. The museum founder, Kachiro Nezu Sr. (1860-1940), was an industrialist and avid collector of Asian art. He first acquired the land in 1906 and set out to build "a garden based on the ideal of a natural deep valley space, adding rustic farmhouse-style structures and tea ceremony houses to the valley setting." In 1913, upon the completion of his garden, Nezu held a "Garden Critique Session" as an opportunity to gather feedback on his new garden, as well as to showcase his art collection in various parts of the villa. In 1941, the museum (then known as the Nezu Art Museum) was officially opened to the general public. When roof leaks and poor climate control in the storage buildings threatened to damage the 7000-piece art collection in the recent years—among them Ogata Korin's gold-foiled iris screen, a National Treasure of Japan—the three storage buildings, along with the old gallery were demolished to make way for Kuma's new gallery building.

Various innovations were brought about within the museum. In response to the scenario of potential earthquakes, stone figures in the main hall are placed on pedestals with concealed metal springs that absorb seismic tremors. To maximise the viewing conditions while preserving the fragile art pieces, Toyohisa Shozo of Kilt Planning Office Inc. introduced LED lighting and fibre optic spotlights in the display cases. A total of 80,000 LEDs provide curators with the flexibility of modifying lighting effects from bright white light to warm orange light.



**OPPOSITE** Nature blends seamlessly into the building's reflective façade. (Photo: Gwen Lee)

**LEFT** The 1.7-hectare garden is dotted with waterfalls, stone bridges, teahouses and a pond. (Photo: Gwen Lee)







The internal space, unlike the complexity of the technology within, is laid out in a straightforward and intuitive manner. There are a total of six galleries spread over the first and second floor. Facilities such as the ticket counters, restrooms and museum shop are wrapped around the main hall which houses the central staircase constructed from glass and steel. A 140-seat lecture theatre occupies the basement and can be accessed by a separate staircase next to the shop. Between the darkened exhibition floors is a visitors' lounge flooded with natural daylight. Here, one can rest on zigzag benches made from bamboo and wood salvaged from the old store houses.

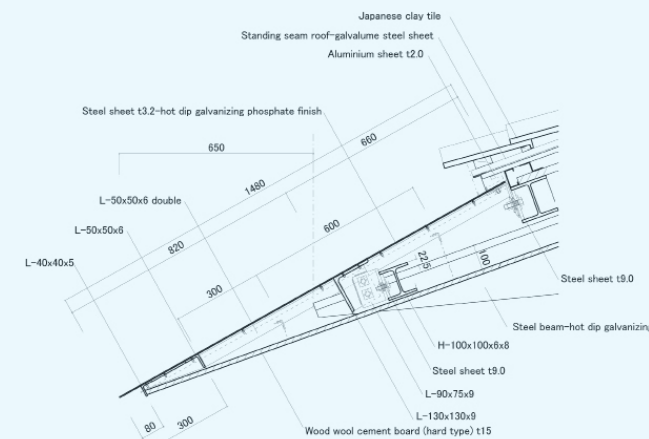
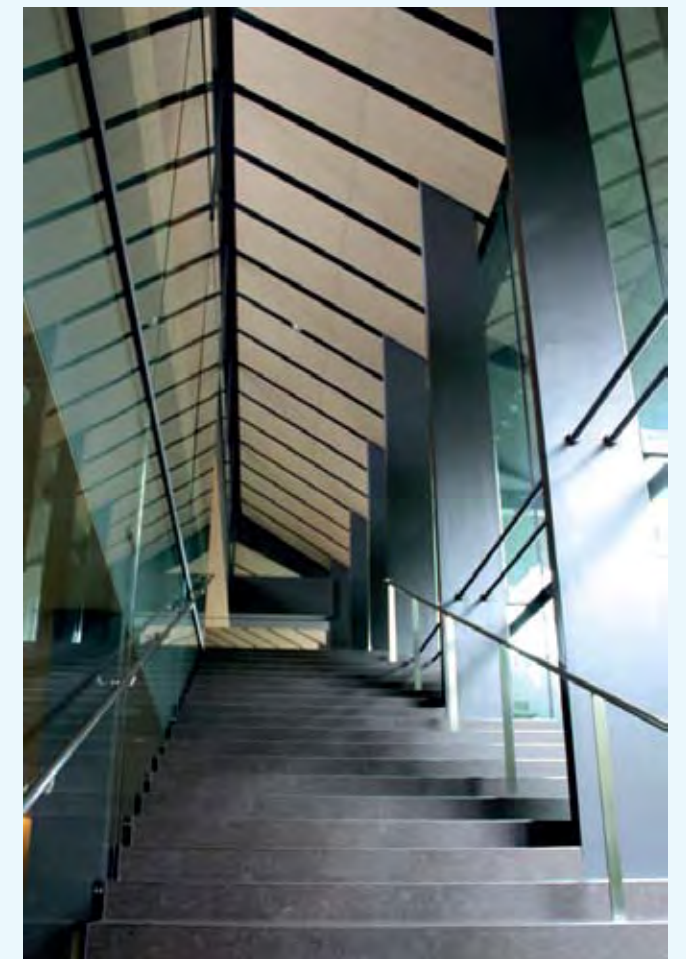
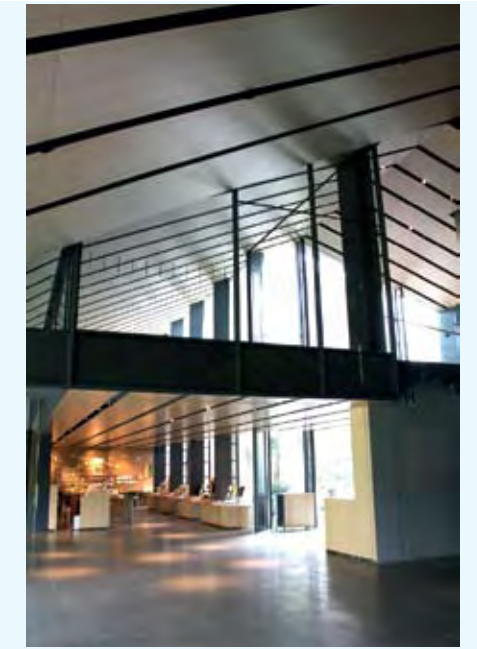
The eye is often drawn upwards by the swoop of the roof which is most visible from the column-free main lobby and lounge area. Kuma has clad the underside of the ceiling with bamboo panels which complement the natural colour of the sandstone flooring and offset the severity of the dark grey walls.

On the exterior, the ceramic tiled roof spans the entire 50-metre length of the museum's main block and seemingly levitates above ridged metal eaves made from 0.3-centimetre-thick sheets of industrial grade steel. (This is the same steel that is articulated on the façade of the building as a series of vertical strips.) Devoid of gutters and supported by 2.7-metre-long cantilevered beams, the eaves shield the walkways around the building and create a large expanse of semidarkness. The black sandstone pavers wrapping around the perimeter of the building multiplies this contrast between light and shade.

"The beautiful shadows created by roofs were destroyed by post-war Japan's concrete-box architecture," Kuma says. "Shadows link architecture to the ground and give comfort to the architecture and warmth to the city." Indeed, warmth is what Kuma's play of shadow and light has achieved in a landscape dominated by cold and faceless modern buildings. Once a low-key institution, the Nezu Museum has looked back to history and transformed itself into a rare integration of tradition, modernity and nature. ■

For more on the Nezu Museum, visit [www.nezu-muse.or.jp](http://www.nezu-muse.or.jp).

For more on Kengo Kuma, visit [www.kkaa.co.jp](http://www.kkaa.co.jp).



EAVES DETAIL

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The main hall's ceiling is clad with bamboo panels which complement the natural colour of the sandstone flooring and offset the severity of the dark grey walls. (Photo: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa)

View of the museum shop and entrance area. (Photo: Gwen Lee)

**ABOVE** The zigzag benches in the visitors' lounge are made from bamboo and wood salvaged from the old store houses. (Photo: Gwen Lee)

The pitch of the roof is visible even from the internal areas. (Photo: Gwen Lee)

The pitched roof of the NEZUCAFÉ is opened to the sky. (Photo: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa)