Intermingling the Contrasts: An Analysis of Glass Exploitation in   
Museum Architecture in Japan since 2000

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This research investigates the phenomenon of increasing exploitation of glass in museum buildings in Japan since 2000. It challenges the pre-dominant association of glass with transparency and modernity and argues instead for a contextualized and site-specific reading of glass. Previous research in the field of architectural studies focused on glass employment in all types of buildings and overlooked the specific situation of museums; while museum studies showed more interest in exterior and space design and neglected the building materiality.

This research adopts inter-disciplinary methodology including visual analysis of museum buildings, literature review of prior theories and architects’ discourse, and empirical studies including site observations. Two key examples are Sendai Mediatheque designed by Ito Toyo (2000) and The National Art Center, Tokyo designed by Kurokawa Kisho (2007). These establish that glass in museum buildings express varying visual effects, symbolic meanings of technology, ethos of the Information Age, locality, and the changing social roles of museums since the turn of the twenty-first century. The extensive glazing creates a visual discrepancy from the old, functions as a visualization apparatus intermingling the contrasts such as the inside and the outside, the real and the virtual, and the artificial and nature. It also reveals the institutions’ visions towards openness and inclusiveness.