

Is SANAA's 21st-century museum of contemporary art one of SANAA's most interactive projects?



Figure 1 (Dezeen. (2010))

Introduction/ history

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art sits in the centre of Kanazawa, Japan, offering outstanding views of the city. Every part of the museum and its site encompasses a captivating look, creating a unique space that stands out from the rest of the city. The museum, which became the city's visualisation of modern and minimalist architecture, was designed by the world-famous Tokyo-based architecture firm SANAA and was officially completed in 2004 (Accessible-japan ,2017). SANAA was established in 1995 by Architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (Flatman, B. 2025). Surrounded by all sorts of different trees and greenery, the site (see fig.2) contradicts the monochrome building and flaunts its clean visuals. The building structure itself rests in an asymmetrically shaped park. The park location isn't too far from the Kenrokuen Gardens, one of Japan's most visually pleasing gardens (Accessible-japan ,2017).



Figure 2 (Google Maps, 2021)

Kazuyo Sejima, one of the most inspiring female Japanese architects of the 20th century, has a profound interest in minimalism, transparency, and the blurring of boundaries between indoor and outdoor space.([Merscher, M. 2019](#)) Ryue Nishizawa, who's architecture style is similarly defined by minimalism, but also specifically nature-oriented and embraces how human interaction can relate to design. Sejima and Nishizawa combined their common design interests to lead SANAA, now one of Japan's most influential architectural firms. ([DesignWanted. 2017](#))

The Architecture firm specialises in minimalism, sustainable design and its distinctive approach to architecture, which focuses on transparency that blurs the lines between exterior and interior. Owing to the firm's successful career, they've won several awards, including the 2025 RIBA Gold Award ([Waite, R. 2025](#)). The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art is one of SANAAS's major projects, as it helped define their style and additionally won the architecture firm awards ([Charles, S. 2025](#)). Aside from the 21st century museum of contemporary art, Some of SANAAS most iconic work that further sums up their architectural style includes the Rolex learning centre in Switzerland (**see fig.3**), the Louvre-Lens Museum in Lens,France (**see fig.4**) and lastly the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York(**see fig.5**) ([Solanki, H. 2022](#)).

When the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art was built, it was created with certain ideas in mind, one of the architect's main design ideologies was to create a suitable atmosphere for the local community, one that embraces contemporary society, additionally connecting it with traditional art, and lastly a space that motivates people to take part in activities ([Kanazawa21.jp. 2024](#)).



Figure 3 ([Bollinger-grohmann.com](#) ,2021)



Figure 4 (ArchDaily, 2012)



Figure 5 (Arquitectura Viva, 2018)

Plans and section

The museum axonometric (**See fig.8**) shows off the main forms of the 21st Century Museum, particularly the exhibition rooms and their variation. 'Suspended in a white, disc-shaped roof, nineteen exhibition galleries of varying shapes project at different heights like objects in a still-life tableau' ([Gadanhó et al,2016, p.106](#)). Additionally, the top view of the extruded galleries almost resembles a small city on top of the building, mimicking parts of its surroundings.

The 21st Century Museum plans (**see fig.6**) are considerably unusual, as they display a boundless design; owing to the predominantly glass structure, the plans feature an open, circular plan that focuses on embracing curves and geometric shapes. The museum is a single story build, but it has an overall area of 27,920 square metres, leaving it limitless in terms of space ([Kanazawa21.jp. 2024](#)). The circular form of the building displays the idea that it has no certain front or back, making it more accessible to the public and allowing guests to explore it from their preferred direction. The circular plan plays a huge part in making the building more interactive, as circular plans tend to draw people to the centre, increasing interaction (Journal. 2017). Throughout the open-plan design, the exhibition spaces are scattered around the circular form in different shapes and sizes, leaving the circulation space flexible and interchangeable. SANAA's intentions for the indoor circulation space were to give people the pleasure of free roaming, whether through the interim space, corridor, terrace, or garden ([Rethinking The Future, 2022](#)).

The exhibition rooms range in height from 4 metres to 12, they follow a repetitive, bulky form, but the transparency of the glass used in them balances them out and brings in natural lighting. Although the lighting varies across the exhibition rooms, some rooms feature glass ceilings (**see fig.9**) that admit maximum natural light, whereas other spaces offer no natural light ([Divisare. \(n.d.\). SANAA / Kazuyo Sejima](#)) The exhibition spaces are flexible as they can be contained within a single room or expanded across several and linked to the corridors, which also perform as display spaces. ([Gadanhó et al,2016, p.107](#))

Aside from the exhibition spaces, the museum promotes public spaces such as a library, a lecture hall, and childrens workshop. ([Charles, S, 2025](#)).

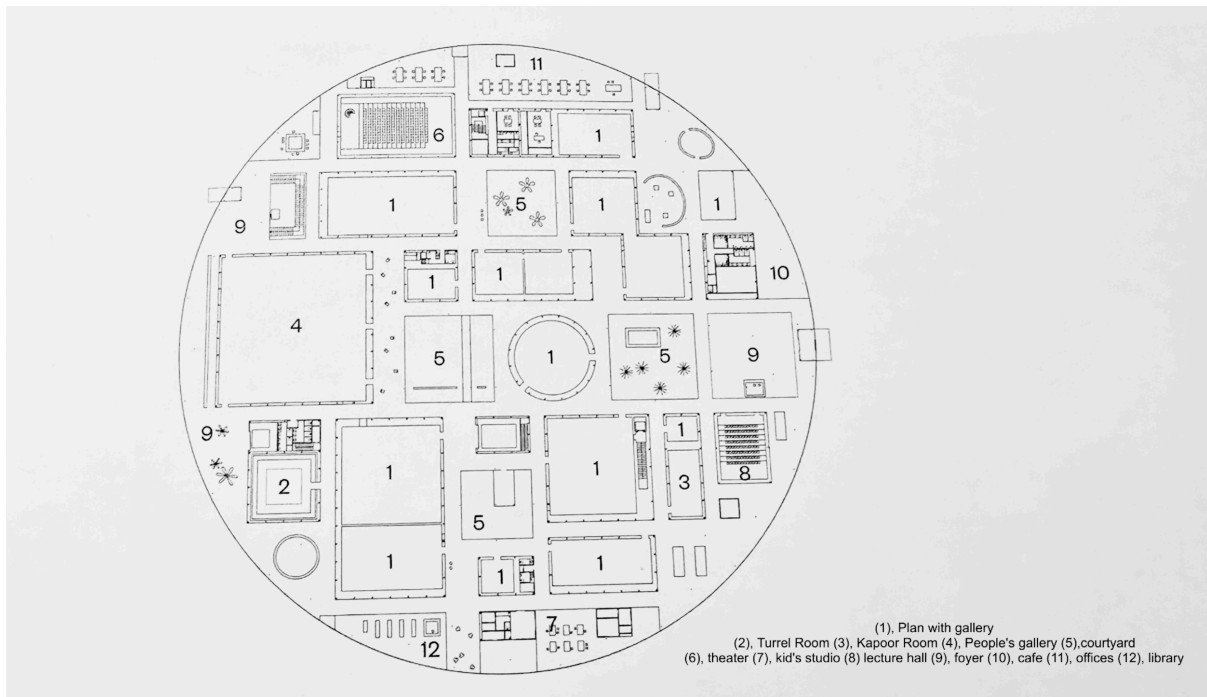
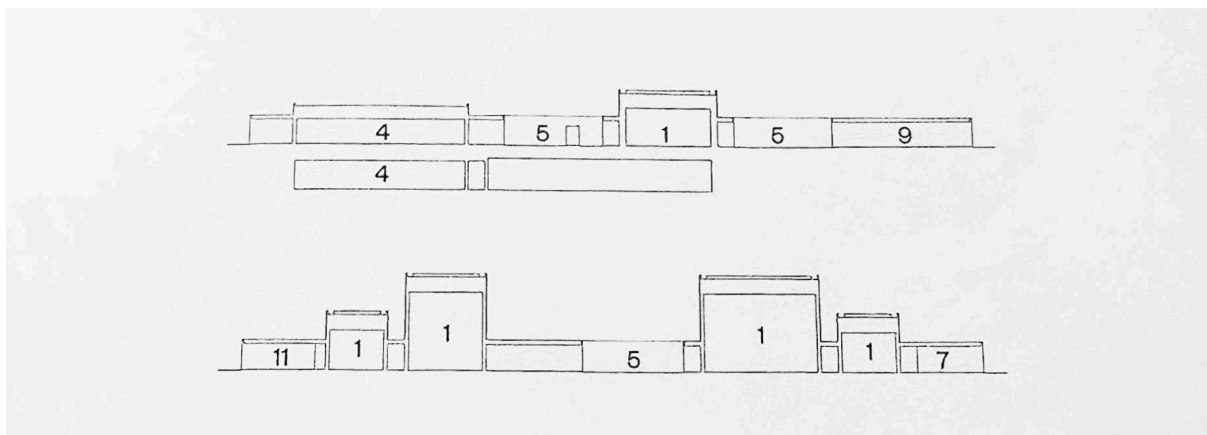


Figure 6 ((Gadanh et al,2016, p.111))

Figure

7



(Gadanh et al,2016, p.111)

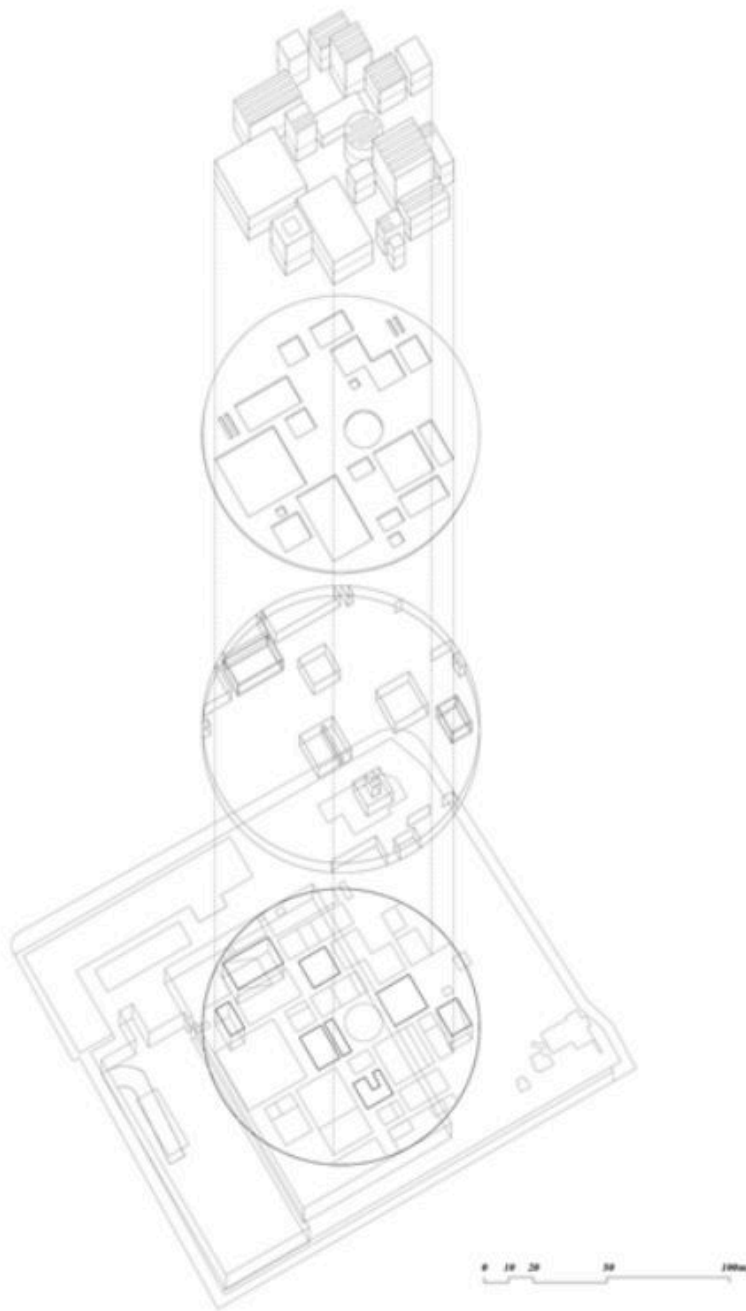


Fig.53 Axonétrica desplegada
Museo del Siglo 21 de Kanazawa
Dibujo del Autor de la Tesis

Figure 8



Fig.9 Divisare. (n.d.). SANAA

The section displays a view of some of the unevenly heightened gallery spaces. It displays the people's gallery, which leads into the courtyard (see fig.10), gallery, and another courtyard, and a foyer



Figure 10 (Gadanhho et al,2016, p.108) shows interior view towards courtyard

Astoundingly, the museum faced some controversy, one of the key reasons being the modern facade and its apparent lack of a traditional museum look. Additionally, the public had doubts about contemporary art, as it wasn't the most familiar type of art in Japan at the time ([Scratchingthesurface.fm. 2024](https://scratchingthesurface.fm/2024/)).

Aside from the exhibition rooms, the museum includes interactive installations that make it even more engaging, for example, the illusory pool titled 'Swimming Pool' by Leandro Erlich (see fig.11) The pool appears as a regular pool from above, but it's actually majorly shallow, as the water only reaches 10cm; a layer of transparent glass braces the water. The pool creates a visual experience from above and below; beneath it is a square room where guests can enter and enjoy the unique experience as if they were at the pool's depths ([IGNANT. 2016](https://ignant.com/2016/)).



Fig.11 (Kanazawa21.jp. ,2024).

Another mesmerising and effective installation in the museum is the colour activity house (**see fig.12**). Not only is it an engaging visual stimulus, but it's also a representative of the museum as it sits right outside the main entrance. This colourful pavilion contrasts with the muted surroundings and becomes a key element that attracts guests and connects the outside space to the museum. The pavilion creates a whole new perspective of the site, considering that as guests make their way through the pavilion, they are hit with different primary colours, immediately coating their view of the city in monochromatic hues.



Fig.12 (Olafureliasson.net. 2016).

Another interactive installation in the museum is the 'Pulse Room' (**see fig.13**), this room designed by Atelier Lozano Helier, features three hundred clear light bulbs. The light bulbs are evenly distributed all across the room and hang from cables at a height of three metres. What makes this installation intriguing is that it detects the heart rate of participants by a sensor on an interface that is located on one side of the room. When someone grabs the interface, a computer senses the user's pulse, and it instantly triggers the nearest lightbulb to flash at the same rhythm as the user's heartbeat. The instant the person lets go of the interface, the bulbs turn off for a moment and then the flashing sequence carries on. This singular installation is enough to represent the main ideas behind the museum; it's not just visually alluring, it finds away too connect to the guests and make the experience worth it([Lozano-Hemmer, R. 2006](#)).



Fig.13 (Lozano-Hemmer, R. 2006).

Another vital element that improves the interior visuals of the 21st century museum is its 'Vertical garden' (**see fig.14**), designed by Patrick Blanc, the garden presents as a partition through one of the courtyards and is perpedicularly roamed by a glazed front (RTF | Rethinking The Future. 2022).



Fig.14

Materials

Due to the faultless choice of exterior materials in the museum, it portrays a calming, transparent facade. The facade plays a huge part in the first impression of the building. One of the main materials that gives the museum its distinct look is the curved glass facade. This 360-degree glass wall allows the interior to become part of the exterior visuals, giving outsiders a view of the inside exhibitions, therefore motivating more people to come in. This material choice play a huge part in the museum lighting, allowing the interior to be heavily dependent on natural lighting.

[\(Sivakumar, K. 2022\).](#)

A pleasant factor about the curved shape of the museum is that when visitors enter the glass facade, they're immediately faced with a 360-degree panoramic view of the site.

The interior materials include materials that don't have a loud visual effect, such as white walls for exhibition rooms, natural floor materials such as wood and stone, and glass once again to help bring the spaces to life and contrast with the natural materials ([Divisare. n.d.](#)).

Regarding the colour palette of the museum, it's symbolised by neutral foundations such as white, light grey, and charcoal, which offer a clean look; this could be purposeful to minimise overshadowing the artwork. According to the 'Modernist shift' which occurred in the early 20th century, this revolutionary change had a massive influence on museum design, particularly inspired by movements like cubism and modernism, which were especially visible in artists like Piet Mondrian ([Johnson, F. 2025](#)). This minimalist outlook was especially prevalent in museum design and helped emerge the 'white cube aesthetic'. Though the museum isn't specifically inspired by Mondrian, it follows the modern movement's design principles, which results in a look that could be speculated as Mondrian-inspired.

In regards to the structural materials, the museum is primarily made up of reinforced concrete, a steel frame, glass partition walls that serve as both structural support and visuals. Addressing specific interior elements, the museum continues to emphasise transparency by using translucent acrylic doors. ([Nogueira, M.C. 2024](#)).

Ideas and theories underpinning design

The museum has several ideas behind its exceptional look, but its main theories focus on openness, embracing the circular form, blending boundaries, interaction, and lastly, the most prominent ideology comes from the minimalist approach through its materials and structure. ([Waite, R.2025](#)).

The museum promotes openness and transparency through its material choices, spatial configuration, and circular form. SANAA's architectural work is typically open space for a reason; they're open space because SANAA plans to build relationships, which, once the relationship is built, motivates various creative developments. SANAA applies this to the relationship between inside and outside, and to some degree to the relationship between two spaces. The architecture firm has an ideology in thinking of architecture as if it were furniture, a landscape, or even a city ([Gadanhó et al,2016, p.105](#)). The 21st-century museum of contemporary art is a clear example of SANAA's unique beliefs.

In terms of blending boundaries, the museum executes this idea through connecting the building with the city and diminishing the boundaries that separate the two; overall, this

gives the building a 'park-like' circulation ([Kanazawa21.jp. 2024](#)). In terms of independence and connection, this is achieved through the different facilities that the museum offers, allowing it to be suitable for socialising or individual activities. SANAA has a charming way of viewing space as a form of communication, with architecture being the catalyst. SANAA believes that spatial arrangement is one of the most vital steps in establishing new experiences and relationships (Gadanhoe et al, 2016, p.105).

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art puts on view a clear definition of contemporary art and modern architecture, which, though blatantly obvious, is a statement within itself, as contemporary art wasn't widely popular. 'Many eccentric, photogenic new museum buildings stress one thing above all else: the fact that they are contemporary, which encompasses both their presence as well as their newness' (Beisiegel, K. and Basel, A.C. 2017, p.186). SANAA's 21st century contemporary art museum's current success came from challenges in the past, as creating a balance between public and private spaces wasn't straightforward. Intentionally, the transparency of the museum helped deliver the balance and admittedly also ceased the building from being observed as a bulky mass (Rethinking The Future. 2022).

The Rolex learning centre (**see fig.3**) is another example of SANAA's architecture that promotes interaction all over, the building was similarly designed to encourage social interaction and collaboration through its open plan (see fig.15) and spectacular form that manages to combine the floor and roof into a continuous landscape (Viva, A. 2018). Although this building smoothly reciprocates the idea of creating an interactive space, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art could be considered more interactive as it expectedly, has more exhibition spaces than the learning centre, on top of that the museum's circular form that connects all the exhibition spaces together. The Rolex learning centre's interactivity primarily comes from social study while the museum's interaction comes from visitors and the art.

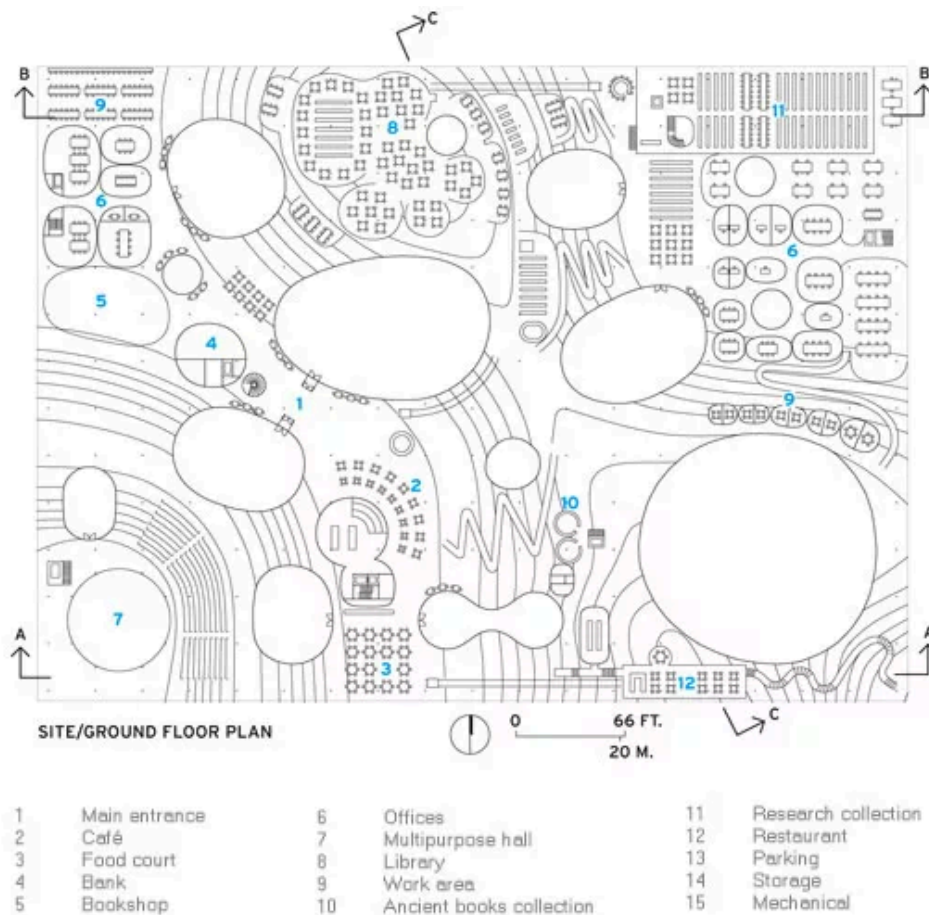


Figure 15 (architecturalrecord.com. n.d.).

In conclusion, the Museum of 21st century contemporary architecture is one of SANAAS most successful and interactive projects when multiple factors are considered. The museum embraces connections with outside space as well as people. The museum is suitable for a wide audience due to some of its interactive exhibitions and installations, it's a place where visitors can feel calm due to the muted atmosphere and visible greenery. What makes this museum stand out compared to other museums is its ability to resonate with everything that surrounds it, including the people. The museum is a space that includes endless possibilities without being overbearing or even visibly overwhelming. The museum allows the site itself to become part of the display, thanks to the 360-degree glass facade and endeavouring features like the vertical garden, guests are constantly entranced with an endless view of what's going on outside. The museum is highly interactive owing to its various installations that focus on the viewers and allow the visitors to feel important. The interior of the museum displays all sorts of interactive and unique exhibition spaces that haven't been done before. The site plays its own role in the museum and was planned

accordingly, it truly encapsulates the idea of a city in a city, it's individual yet connected. The museum is a taste of SANAAS architectural style and opened up a new world of contemporary art in Japan. Aside from the visual that it displays, the museum has something to offer for everyone; children's workshops, community gathering spaces, and gallery spaces are enough to attract a wide audience, and the open space environment will only keep people longing for more.

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Fig.1

Fig.2

https://www.google.com/maps/place/Kanazawa+21st+Century+Museum+of+Contemporary+Art/@36.5608756,136.6559502,873m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x5ff83380db53b801:0x512a01db8b6568c1!8m2!3d36.5608713!4d136.6585251!16s%2Fm%2F09g7j62!5m1!1e3?entry=ttu&_ep=EgoyMDI2MDIyNS4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D

Fig.3 <https://www.bollinger-grohmann.com/en.projects.selected.html>

Fig.4 <https://www.archdaily.com/312978/louvre-lens-sanaa>

Fig.5 <https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/nuevo-museo-de-arte-contemporaneo-4>