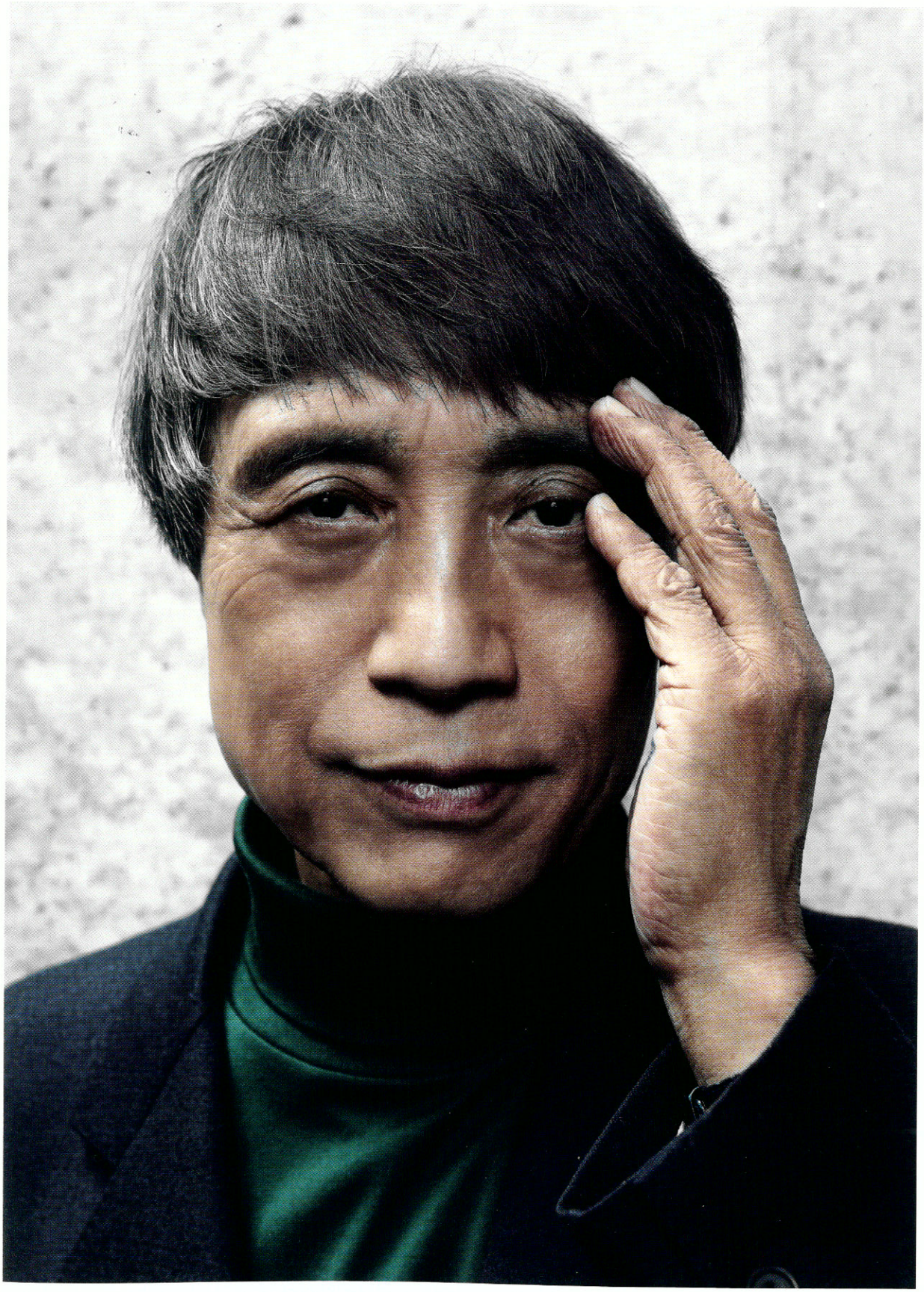
TADAO ANDO

SURFACE



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Common Ground

A new restaurant near Harvard and MIT is as much an eatery as it is an incubator for ideas.

BY ROXY KIRSHENBAUM

The world's greatest ideas are rarely conceived in conventional, cubicle-filled office settings. That's why when French designer Mathieu Lehanneur and American scientist and Harvard professor David Edwards set out to work together, they chose to create a restaurant that would serve not only food but also innovative conceptions.

Strategically located between the campuses of Harvard and MIT in Cambridge's Kendall Square, the recently opened Café ArtScience is a hybrid café and scientific laboratory. Open to the public, the space is meant to attract scholars, students, artists, and investors to brainstorm and share their perspectives. To aid in this effort, Lehanneur wanted to leave the floor plan as open as possible, without any walls acting as partitions, to facilitate a sense of flow and flexibility for various functions. Central to this concept is a large green velvet sofa that can accommodate 30 to 35 people. Unapparent at first glance, the sofa can be split into two to four parts to form small islands in different areas and "can change continuously during the week," Lehanneur says.

A circular lecture hall sits in the middle of the space. Referred to as the "Honeycomb," the hexagonally-shaped auditorium is filled with black slate tiles intended for written messages and comments. The reason for the beehive shape is metaphoric, referencing the collective intelligence of bees. "Innovation does not come from one people," Lehanneur says. "It actually comes from many peoples together." Playing with this idea resulted in a space devoted to meals as much as it is to conferences, artistic workshops, and other moments when people can gather to explore creative possibilities. Next to the main space that houses the restaurant, bar, and Honeycomb is an art gallery featuring diverse exhibitions.

The hexagonal motif continues with a green glass lighting fixture hanging above the cement WikiBar, which serves experimental cocktails. At dinnertime, ambiance-invoking, cordless copper lamps from Australian brand Neoz are set on each table, then taken away for recharging during the day. The designer felt that maintaining a neutral color palette was important in creating a space in line with nature and its many variations of greens and grays. "We didn't want to put in too many elements of decoration," Lehanneur says. "We wanted a level of sophistication."

The café's forward-thinking design and atmosphere is showcased to passersby through large windows—which, according to Lehanneur, were one of the raw building's foremost draws, along with its high ceilings. "I wanted to try and make people outside understand what was happening [inside], and what could happen," Lehanneur says.

By positioning the café between two world-renowned universities, the designer and scientist hoped to provide the backdrop to connect students from both institutions. "We intentionally put [the café] in the middle, as a kind of provocative way to force them to meet and make projects together," he says. "This space will attract a mix of people."

PHOTO: PHASE ONE PHOTOGRAPHY