The client's brief for this kindergarten was a simple one-liner: to provide a roof house for 500 children. Having visited Tetsuka Architects' Roof House in Hadano (AR October 2001) and having discussed the balance of practicality and delight with its owners, the kindergarten directors wanted their own inhabited roof deck. While the original provided a shared space for family life—a simple surface for diving and reclining, with ladder access for each family member—this preschool in Tachikawa, 40km west of central Tokyo, provides a magical and stimulating environment for children between the ages of four and six years old. Using its gently sloping roof to provide extensive external space, the building allows over 500 children to sit together in a circle, legs dangling over the edge, in a unique congregation as a young community. As Takaharu Tetsuka is proud to point out, this is the largest kindergarten in Japan. As such, while it would be easy to focus on its architectural新颖性, it should also be understood as a significant new educational building. In accordance with priorities of the Montessori education method, while its simple form can be seen as a novel eye-catching landmark fun, it also provides a flexible, robust and secure framework within which to encourage key notions of independence and freedom.

The Montessori methodology states that satisfaction, contentment and joy are encouraged when children are able to fully participate in daily activities, individually and collectively, in a place where they can understand, engage with and control their own environment. As a hands-on approach to learning, which dismisses traditional tests and measurements of achievement, it encourages children to develop skills by doing activities that use the five senses and that promote movement. In response, this building provides an ideal context for such activities, achieving continuity, containment and interaction in a single wave. With a looping plan that focuses on a central activity space, a continuous ring of interiors that shelter beneath a generous low-hanging soffit, and a reversable roof deck, this simple structure creates a wide variety of stimulating environments, without dead ends or unmanageable hidden places. On the roof it is not uncommon to see children literally running circles around the staff. With some doing as many as 30 laps a day (30km), this is an entertaining and rewarding sight that speaks volumes about the accuracy and pertinence of the architect's initial concept. Recalling how his own children instinctively make circles in the ground, running (usually) in a counter-clockwise direction to mark out their territory, while usefully burning energy the eccentric plan form emerged quickly as Takaharu Tetsuka's first response to site. With no complicated algorithms or formulae used in the creation of its form, this was very much an intuitive reaction, expressed as a gesture on paper, which was then traced and scaled from the architect's sketch and marked out on site by contractors. Incorporating three semi-mature trees, it broadens where it can to maximise space, which also serves to accentuate the structure's informality, with no obvious hierarchy or

LEARNING CURVE

Running circles around other schools, Fuji Kindergarten is leading the way.