



Revisiting Japan's Fictional Gardens

A Critical Reading on Nature Imagery in Contemporary Architectural Essays

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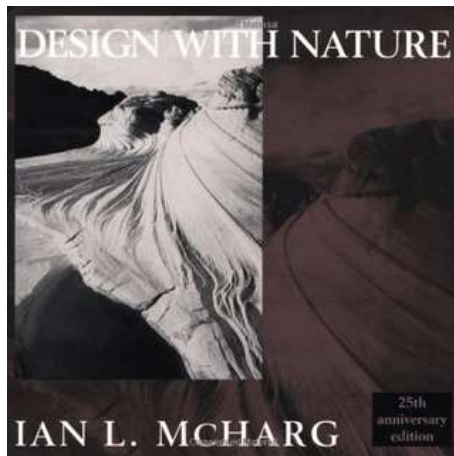
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the context

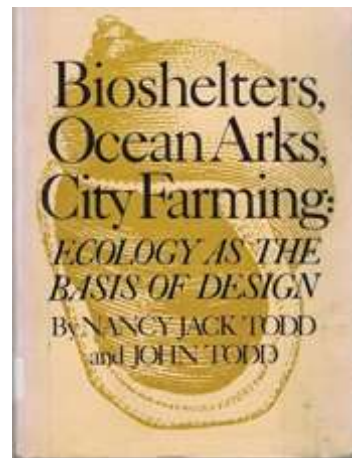
Architectural discourse has long been implied in early displays of ecocriticism.

Since the 1970's and until the 1990's, a vast theoretical production reflected the cultural awakening to environmental limits, and focused on the search for an ecological architecture with a lighter footprint on the planet.

Ian McHarg



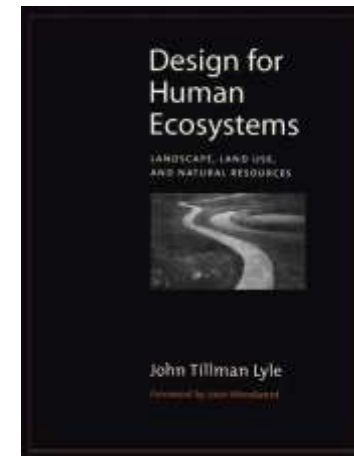
John & Nancy Todd



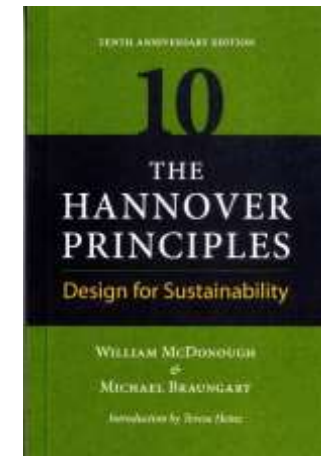
Sim Van der Ryn



John Lyle



William McDonough



the context

Contemporary architectural theory and practice is still culturally contaminated by pressing environmental matters, even when not actively engaged in reportable green building metrics, as these four Japanese architectural essays written during the last decade (2007-2010):

Terunobu Fujimori



2007

Junya Ishigami



2008

Kengo Kuma



2009

Hiroshi Nakamura



2010

the context

The idea of a Japanese-specific harmonious coexistence between nature and culture has been long mystified from abroad and from within, sourced in concepts as:

- *Shinto* animistic tradition
- Japan connection between cultural expressions and nature worship in Japanese art, as *haiku*, *cha-do*, *ikebana*.
- *Satoyama*, idealized traditional agricultural and forestry socio-ecological landscape



...leading to a widespread expectation that Japanese architecture inherently reveals a particular respect towards nature, substantiating in part the interest and exposure of Japanese architecture in western culture, since the 20th century.

the context

Japan is however characterized by intense urbanization, with high populational density and shortage of habitable land area. Despite the existence of parks, green roofing and street greenery, urban spaces have a high percentage of soil occupation, impervious surfaces, and a pressing need for remediation of riverfronts and canals.



Other key environmental issues in Japan include:

- significant share of energy consumption and atmospheric emissions
- very short building life cycles, associated with construction waste production and landfill deposition
- limited area of arable land
- dependency on foreign biocapacity, related with food and timber sources
- shrinking and ageing population, and the abandonment of traditional sustainable forestry practices.

Terunobu Fujimori

Fujimori Terunobu Architecture (Fujimori, 2007)

Sprout of the Earth/Tokyo Plan 2107, 2006

Fujimori identifies the failure of contemporary architectural approaches to address environmental issues and the understanding of an eminent environmental catastrophe:

“Global warming causes a rise of sea level and desertification of the land, forces that will cause most of the major cities developed in the 20th century to vanish. (...) Urban visions in the 20th century were proposed assuming the progress of technology, whether they relied on or protested against technology.”

“By the middle of 21st century the Earth will become a desert. However, by the end of that century rejuvenation will begin because of efforts to reduce CO2 and prevent desertification, and perhaps the reawakening of the Mother Earth Goddess.”



Another trait in his architecture is also the search for a coherent relation between plants and buildings:

“The ideal would be to combine architecture and nature in such a way that each shows the other to advantage.”



Junya Ishigami

Junya Ishigami: Small Images (Ishigami, 2008)

Kait Workshop, 2008



In Ishigami's imaginary, plants are more conspicuous than architecture. The intention of these projects is unveiled as simultaneously the fruition of nature, a pedagogical approach, and the dilution of architectural boundaries:

“By creating huge wilderness areas within urban areas, we can better understand the city coexisting with nature at large.”



“While the formulation architecture-and-landscape typically suggests buildings within a larger encompassing environment, I have chosen to consider them both the same level. (...) I am seeking ways to design so that nature comes close enough to be indistinguishable from architecture.”



“I wanted it to be the kind of place where people could come and feel like they were strolling through the woods with sunlight filtering through the trees.”



Kengo Kuma

Studies in Organic: Kengo Kuma & Associates (Kuma, 2009)

Kiro-san Observatory, 1991-1994

Kuma expresses the intention of erasing a conspicuous architecture expression. This approach appears singularly motivated by the intention of local recovery and ecological conservation:

“I still remember my feelings when I first stood on top of the mountain and looked out on the beautiful islands of the Inland Sea. The place itself was desolate: the mountaintop had already been leveled and shorn of trees in preparation for the creation of a parking area and the observatory. I felt it would be a crime to put a solid form there. I was fearful of incurring the wrath of nature if I dared propose a form.”

“...the idea of an invisible observatory – to pile up soil once more on the flattened earth, plant trees and restore the mountain to its original state.”



And, in other projects, there is a strategy to disintegrate the solidity of the surfaces in particles dissimulating buildings into their environment, or creating an alternative topography.



Hiroshi Nakamura

Microscopic Designing Methodology (Nakamura, 2010)

Dancing trees Singing birds, 2007

Nakamura expresses a wish of proximity to nature, and focus on dynamic relationships that occur between human beings and buildings, materials and natural elements, including local variations:

“I want to listen carefully to the voices coming up from the site like a gardener and create a design in response to the trees and nature.”

“The movement of the trees, texture of the trunks, and smells of the greenery – each tree has different expressions. I determine the design in response to these expressions.”

Some projects follow a detailed study of tree roots and the movement of branches, to obtain an architectural adapted form *“while cutting down trees to the least possible extent. (...) Especially in urban areas, trees, human beings, and buildings have no choice but to coexist in overcrowded conditions and this method allow us to establish equal communication with trees while ensuring capacity”*

interpretations

Despite the individual aesthetical sensibilities, theoretical and methodological approaches, visual, tectonic and semantic expressions, there is an underlying common substance to them, beyond the overlying presence of nature imagery.



1. Mutual and contextual influence.

The intentions expressed in these texts and reflected in the projects, vary from the will to dematerialize architecture, to promote nature proximity and phenomenological experience, contributing to act on environmental thinking and change behavior patterns.

interpretations

Concepts:	Publications	T. Fujimori, 2007	K. Kuma, 2009	J. Ishigami, 2008	H. Nakamura, 2010
1. Methods or Standpoints					
Criticism of western modern thinking and architecture models		•	•	•	•
Site-responsive architecture		•	•		•
Human beings and nature (or architecture and landscape) at the same level				•	•
2. Architectural References					
<i>Teahouse</i>		•	•		•
<i>Nest</i>		•	•		•
Nature (or architecture) as <i>relationships</i>			•		•
Architecture as <i>a walk in the forest</i>				•	•
3. Intentions					
To dematerialize architecture			•	•	
To allow nature observation		•			•
To bring human beings closer to nature				•	•

2. Predominance of the artistic over a materialistic approach.

A rich poetics and a strong connection between graphical and literary forms are used to convey the authors' statements, emphasizing the visual, perceptive and emotional properties of architectural experience. They rely mainly on the communication and qualitative skills of architecture to remind us of the collective urge of ecological thinking and behaviors patterns.



3. Awareness of architecture's ecological footprint, responsibility, and limitations.

These essays expose the existent and pressing environmental unbalance and an observed and quotidian dissociation between human beings and nature. They also express the practical impotence of architecture, as built form, to tackle the existing environmental crisis and also the inadequacy of current built environments to convey ecoliteracy concepts

“An earthwork is usually termed pit excavation, or the cutting of roots, and the concept of cutting roots and killing trees underlies the act of construction.” Nakamura, 2010

4. Biophilic intentions.

Biophilic design may be interpreted as a necessary complement to the reduction of buildings environmental impact, to address human reconnection to nature.

When nature is left on its own, and this proximity between human beings and nature, or other living beings, is possible, a more balanced relationship can emerge.

“Nature is sometimes ugly, terrifying, and keeps our hands full. However, when we accept it, we will probably truly understand the real beauty of nature.” Nakamura, 2010



5. Aim for regenerative settings.

The resource to unbuilt idealized scenarios and imaginary projects also expresses the desire for the built environment to go beyond sustainable mitigation and to achieve a regenerative quality able to repair already existing damages.