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## ANALYSIS AND ADVANCED PROJECTS / ANÁLISIS Y PROYECTOS AVANZADOS

p. 1057-1067: **NATURE INSIDE. THE FIGURES OF THE TREE AND THE FOREST AS SYMBOLIC REFERENCES IN THE CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1068-1079: **LA NATURALEZA INTERIOR. LAS FIGURAS DEL ÁRBOL Y EL BOSQUE COMO REFERENTES SIMBÓLICOS EN LA ARQUITECTURA JAPONESA CONTEMPORÁNEA**  
*López del Río, Alberto*

p. 1081-1088: **THE SATURATED WORLD OF CHARLES AND RAY EAMES: OBJECTS, ATMOSPHERE AND CELEBRATIONS** / p. 1089-1096: **EL MUNDO SATURADO DE CHARLES Y RAY EAMES: OBJETOS, AMBIENTES Y CELEBRACIONES**  
*Jódar Pérez, Ana Irene*

p. 1097-1103: **CARLO SCARPA: ABSTRACTION AS AN ARGUMENT OF THE SUBLIME. RESEARCH STRATEGY** / p. 1104-1111: **CARLO SCARPA: LA ABSTRACCIÓN COMO ARGUMENTO DE LO SUBLIME. ESTRATEGIA DE INVESTIGACIÓN**  
*Ros Campos, Andrés*

p. 1113-1123: **REM AT BOTH SIDES OF THE MIRROR** / p. 1124-1134: **REM A LOS DOS LADOS DEL ESPEJO**  
*Butragueño Díaz-Guerra, Belén*

p. 1135-1144: **DOMESTIC BIG DATA. CLUSTER TOOL FOR THE ANALYSIS, ASSESSMENT, DIAGNOSIS AND DESIGN OF THE CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN DENSE CITY CENTRES** / p. 1145-1155: **DOMESTIC BIG DATA. CLUSTER TOOL PARA EL ANÁLISIS, EVALUACIÓN, DIAGNÓSTICO Y PROYECTO, DE LA VIVIENDA COLECTIVA CONTEMPORÁNEA EN LOS CENTROS DENSIFICADOS DE LA CIUDAD**  
*Sallago Zambrano, Borja*

p. 1157-1167: **ARCHITECT, WORK AND METHOD** / p. 1168-1179: **ARQUITECTO, OBRA Y MÉTODO**  
*Besa, Eneko*

p. 1181-1191: **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHITECTURAL WORK OF MILTON BARRAGÁN** / p. 1192-1203: **ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DE LA OBRA ARQUITECTÓNICA DE MILTON BARRAGÁN**  
*Casado López, Guillermo*

p. 1205-1216: **CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND ITS INTEGRATION WITH PATRIMONIAL ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1217-1228: **ARQUITECTURA CONTEMPORÁNEA Y SU INTEGRACIÓN CON EDIFICIOS PATRIMONIALES**  
*Martínez Gómez, Josué Nathan*

p. 1229-1240: **THE URBAN FORM IN MORELLA AS A HISTORIC LABORATORY IN THE 21ST CENTURY** / p. 1241-1251: **LA FORMA URBANA EN MORELLA COMO UN LABORATORIO HISTÓRICO EN EL SIGLO XXI**  
*Beltran Borràs, Júlia*

p. 1253-1263: **MODEL MANAGEMENT OF HABITABILITY IN PROTECTED WILD AREAS (ASP) CASE STUDY TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK (PNTP), PATAGONIA CHILE** / p. 1264-1274: **MODELO DE HABITABILIDAD EN ÁREAS SILVESTRES PROTEGIDAS (ASP) CASO DE ESTUDIO PARQUE NACIONAL TORRES DEL PAINE (PNTP), PATAGONIA CHILENA**  
*Villanueva, Laura; Cuchi, Albert*

p. 1275-1282: **DWELLING. INVARIANTS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE** / p. 1283-1290: **LA MORADA. INVARIANTES EN LA ARQUITECTURA CONTEMPORÁNEA**  
*Moreno Sánchez-Cañete, Francisco José; Martínez Díaz, Daniel; Bolívar Montesa, Carmen; Muñoz Carabias, Francisco*

p. 1291-1300: **THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TRADITION. JUVENAL BARACCO AND THE RECOMPOSITION OF THE LOST CITY** / p. 1301-1311: **LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA TRADICIÓN. JUVENAL BARACCO Y LA RECOMPOSICIÓN DE LA CIUDAD PERDIDA**  
*Montestruque Bisso, Octavio*

p. 1313-1321: **FROM THE IMMEASURABLE TO THE MEASURABLE** / p. 1322-1331: **DE LO INCONMENSURABLE A LO MENSURABLE**  
*Delpino Sapeña, Rossana María.*

p. 1333-1343: **HIDDEN SPACE CARTOGRAPHY. ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIMENTATION LABORATORY** / p. 1344-1354: **CARTOGRAFÍAS DEL ESPACIO OCULTO. LABORATORIO DE EXPERIMENTACIÓN ARQUITECTÓNICA**  
*García García, Tomás ; Montero-Fernández, Francisco J.*

p. 1355-1364: **ARCHITECTURE & ENTROPY. TIME AND DESTRUCTION AS A CREATIVE SUBJECT** / p. 1365-1375: **ARQUITECTURA Y ENTROPÍA. TIEMPO Y DESTRUCCIÓN COMO GENERADORES DEL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO**  
*Blázquez Jesús, Pablo*

p. 1377-1381: **ARCHITECTONICAL LIMITS IN THE BIDIMENSIONAL WORK OF EDUARDO CHILLIDA** / p. 1382-1386: **LÍMITES ARQUITECTÓNICOS EN LA OBRA BIDIMENSIONAL DE EDUARDO CHILLIDA**  
*Dovale Carrión, Carmiña*

p. 1387-1396: **DISASSEMBLING DOMESTICITY. HABITING HETEROTOPIAS** / p. 1397-1406: **DESMONTANDO LA DOMESTICIDAD. HABITANDO LAS HETEROTOPIAS**  
*M-Millana, Elena*

# NATURE INSIDE. THE FIGURES OF THE TREE AND THE FOREST AS SYMBOLIC REFERENCES IN THE CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

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## Abstract

For traditional Japanese culture, man is understood as a being integrated into an indivisible whole with Nature, which is why, contrary to what happens in Western culture, we should talk about "Naturalism" instead of "Humanism" when dealing with their aesthetic values. This results in the appearance of numerous cultural manifestations that are endorsed by art and architecture, which establish mechanisms that seek to emphasize the relationship between nature and man, so that it can feel integrated in the natural environment. The ideals present in traditional culture, religion, art and architecture have penetrated deep into today's society, causing several generations of Japanese architects to have taken up in many of their works the aesthetic searches and, above all, the referents present in the traditional culture, while they have endowed with a new approach coming from the social and cultural evolution. Given the present circumstances, in which man is fundamentally understood as an urban being, more distant from the natural world than his predecessors, new mechanisms are necessary to guarantee the desired connection with the natural world, which contemporary architecture develops from the perspective of the world in which it sits without losing sight of tradition.

## Keywords

Japanese contemporary architecture, Japanese traditional culture, Nature, Tree, Forest

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Brief sociocultural context*

We can say that Japanese architecture is based, as a general feature, on the worldview of Japanese culture, and one of the characteristics that define it is the close relationship between man and nature, and so many authors recognize. Ivan Morris, a scholar of the Japanese feudal period, affirms that the cult of nature's beauty is the greatest contribution of Japan's culture to the world (Lanzaco 2011) and Professor Federico Lanzaco clarifies that according to the Japanese cosmic vision, Heaven, Earth and Man form a single integral set of the Nature in which they are (Lanzaco 2011). These statements are widely accepted if we speak of traditional culture, and there are numerous artistic and architectural works in which attention to nature and the importance given to the relationship with this is the defining element of them. On the other hand, such a relationship is not so clearly seen, at least at first glance, in a contemporary, hyper-technological urban society in which the individual seems to be the only center on which cultural interests gravitate and where it is more difficult to identify the presence of such an important and clearly identifiable characteristic of traditional Japanese culture.

However, there is no doubt that in contemporary Japanese culture values and tradition are present and since the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the search for a rapprochement between man and nature appears more clearly in Japanese society, motivated partly by a new social awareness of the natural environment and by the growing need for contact with it and on the other by a greater value in the qualities of the traditional culture. This fact is evident in architecture through the concerns of various architects, which are reflected both in his works and in his writings, and make up the object of the present investigation.

### 1.2. *Brief chronological context of modern Japanese architecture*

To understand this value in the relationship between nature and architecture present in contemporary architecture we must understand the architectural evolution that occurred in Japan throughout the twentieth century and its apparent distance from the values of tradition. We can understand the

modern stage of Japanese culture as it comprises from the end of the nineteenth century, which in Japan is marked by forced end of the isolation of the country to the outside<sup>1</sup>, until today. This forced end of isolation produced in Japan a sharp leap from a feudal society to a fully industrialized society, which brought about enormous changes in all social and cultural estates, with a rapid and self-imposed assimilation of Western customs and manners. Speaking about architecture, it is necessary to incorporate the construction techniques coming from Europe and America and the aesthetics according to them, thus opening the way to the arrival in Japan of the Modern architecture, which forms and, above all, the motifs of traditional Japanese architecture are relegated to a second term<sup>2</sup>, given the pre-eminence of the new languages. It will not be until the 60's of the 20th century, with the appearance of proposals based on repetitive structures inspired by natural patterns of Metabolist Movement, which the relationship between nature and architecture once again take on a leading role in the Japanese architectural landscape. However, the few achievements carried out by this group<sup>3</sup>, the excessively rational and scientific understanding of the relationship with the natural referents<sup>4</sup> and the rapid assimilation of new architectural languages by its members prevented the subtle mechanisms of relation with the nature present in traditional architecture to be resumed.

In the last years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the XXI, the relationship between nature and architecture has become more relevant in Japanese architecture, which relates contemporary production, more or less intentionally and even recognized by its authors, to the traditional architecture. There are many architects who in their works and theoretical discourses introduce the figures of the tree and the forest, having their own cultural symbolism, which is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, which makes their presence evoke certain values very recognizable and appreciated by the Japanese people.

## 2. Main goals and methodology

Contemporary Japanese architecture has produced in the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the 21st century a series of unique works in which the presence of forests and trees is decisive. These appear in a direct way, that is to say, in their natural form, or through their recreation, as structures of arboreal reminiscences or those are inspired by them for its formalization, as central motive of the project. It is the object of the present work to identify and analyze these works, locating those in which this aspect is determinant for its designing development, seeking characteristics common to each of them and grouping them into categories that clarify their study and analysis, supporting such categorization in the presence of the natural referent or of his more or less abstract recreation. The presence of these arboreal elements responds to the search for retaking, on the part of man, a certain intuitive and idealized relationship with nature through architecture, which directly links contemporary works with certain values of traditional Japanese culture. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the importance in this of certain natural elements through its presence in cultural, artistic and architectural manifestations, since all of them have created a posed that has remained until today and that has influenced in the formalization of contemporary works of study. Therefore, this study aims, on the one hand, to identify and analyze certain unique works of contemporary Japanese architecture, highlighting the design mechanisms that allow the integration in them of the natural elements and on the other, understand why the importance of the presence of these elements in these works and how this links with the values of tradition and maintaining a quality so characteristic of Japanese culture as the relationship between individual and nature.

## 3. The inner nature. Art and architecture as catalysts of the relationship between man and nature in Japanese culture

Japanese culture stands out for its great sensitivity and its ability to appreciate the subtlest aesthetic qualities of the world around it. These capacities, developed over the centuries, seemed to have fallen into the background in the sociocultural context of the mid and late twentieth century, in which Japan,

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<sup>1</sup> The trigger of this opening was the entrance of several North American warships, known as the black ships, *kurofune*, in the Bay of Tokyo in 1853, which made the Japanese authorities aware of their lack of power compared with foreign powers.

<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy are the works of Sutemi Horiguchi, a prominent architect co-founder of the first group of *secessionist* Japanese architects, the *Bunriha Kenchikukai*, which tries to merge the new architectural languages with traditional Japanese construction solutions.

<sup>3</sup> Within the proposals of the Movement itself, but not its members, whose individual architectural achievements are really numerous and significant within the international architectural scenario.

<sup>4</sup> This understanding has its logic within the large-scale growth needs present in Japan at that time.



as a highly developed country, showed the world a hypertechnological and modern society image which at first glance diverged from the most recognizable aesthetic values of their traditional culture. In the field of architecture, rapid urban development and the idiosyncrasy of Japanese cities, with Tokyo leading the way, favored the development of grandiloquent proposals based on the languages of postmodernism and high-tech, which were approached with the originality of the Japanese point of view on the part of certain professionals who enjoyed and enjoy great international prestige, giving rise to works according to that image of highly developed society to which we have referred.

However, at the end of the 20th century, certain voices, notably those of Tadao Ando and Toyo Ito, begin to echo the necessary recovery of the values of traditional architecture and, in particular, the relationship between nature and architecture<sup>5</sup>.

Many works have appeared in contemporary Japanese architecture, understood as such that develops from the late twentieth century to our days, in which it is sought to resume this relationship, mainly through the presence of plant elements, forests and trees.

In order to observe and reveal these qualities in the works of study, it is necessary, in addition to the analysis of the works themselves, to pay attention to the relationship between man and nature present in traditional Japanese society in a broad way, locating those cultural and artistic in which this becomes more evident, the understanding of its formalization in traditional architecture being the ultimate end.

### **3.1. Tree and forest figures as bonds to nature in Japanese culture, religion and art tradition**

Traditional Japanese culture, as we have said, cannot be understood independently of nature, and the starting point of its understanding is religion. Due to the particular conditions of the Japanese landscape<sup>6</sup>, nature is exuberant and threatening, which led to the traditional society to fear and reverence in equal parts. This is especially present in Japan's ancient religion, Shinto, a worship based on the veneration of divine spirits, the *kami*<sup>7</sup>, which are usually linked with natural phenomena or prominent characters. These spirits sometimes temporarily inhabit certain natural objects<sup>8</sup>, such as rocks, *iwasaka*, or trees, *shinboku* or *shinju*, which are considered sacred as are many forests and mountains. This veneration towards the natural world is not, however, exclusive to the Shinto, but is also present in the other major religion of the country, Buddhism, partly because of its own tradition<sup>9</sup> and partly because of the contaminations suffered from Shinto over the years, since both religions coexist of syncretic form in Japan.



**Fig. 1** Sacred trees, Meiji Jingū Shrine, Tokyo

<sup>5</sup> This fact is partly favored by the end of the Japanese expansion of the 70s and 80s that led to the explosion of the Japanese real estate bubble and led to a reduction in the size and number of orders, especially in the production of single-family houses.

<sup>6</sup> The philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji tells us that the Japanese climate has a dual tropical and cold nature, which causes strange dualities in the landscape as a typical Japanese scene in which we can find the bamboo, a tropical plant, covered with snow.

<sup>7</sup> *Kami* is a word of difficult cultural direct translation, since it is not about gods, but of divine spirits that inhabit a higher plane and they descend, at certain moments and to some very concrete places, to the terrestrial and human plane.

<sup>8</sup> These elements are marked and delimited by a braided rope called *shimenawa* from which usually hang paper amulets that are known as *gohei*.

<sup>9</sup> According to tradition, Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, attained enlightenment when meditating under the branches of a Bo tree or Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*).



These ideals of devotion to the natural, joined to others from religion such as the understanding of the transience of time and cycles of life, make the contemplation of certain natural phenomena especially appreciated. Thus, the color change of the maple leaves, *momiji*, in autumn, plum bloom, *ume*, in winter and, above any other, the bud and fall of cherry blossoms, *sakura*, in spring, are events highly valued by Japanese aesthetic taste, and give rise to festivities such as the *hanami*<sup>10</sup> in which the Japanese gather around the trees to enjoy them.



Fig. 2 *Hanami* festival, Ueno Park, Tokyo

The attention to nature has become especially present in traditional art, especially in those disciplines that can best pick up natural values and their subtle variations, such as painting and poetry. In the case of poetry, stands out especially *haiku*, brief poems usually associated with the observation and valuation of everyday situations, and closely linked with the natural course of life and with the passage of the seasons<sup>11</sup>.

The painting seeks to achieve a representation of the idealized nature, something similar to what happens in the garden, through the representation of a landscape charged with symbolism and from which its values are extracted to incorporate them in the works through detailed observation and employment of aesthetic principles from religion. As in the case of *haiku*, the relation of certain styles of painting, such as *sumi-e*<sup>12</sup>, to the ideals of Zen Buddhism, which give rise to works in which an evocative environment is built, beyond what is defined in the limits of painting itself, as we have observed in some compositions by authors such as Tōyō Sesshū and Tōhaku Hasegawa. In addition to those styles that relate more closely to these religious ideals, there are many other authors and schools in which this idealization is present, as can be seen in numerous Rinpa and Kanō School paintings, especially in the works of Kanō Eitoku or Kōrin Ogata. It is mainly the work of these schools and styles that decorate the screens and side panels of residences, temples and castles, allowing to introduce inside the buildings natural elements that favor the constant contact of man with nature.



Fig. 3 Tōhaku Hasegawa, *Shorinzu* folding screen, right panel

The representation of a nature charged with symbolism appears subtly in the garden. This is always, even when it does not seem to be, a construction of man, that is, it is a controlled nature and arranged in a way that provokes an effect, since what is sought is to rebuild an idealized landscape. From the gardens of walk, *roji*, to the small dry Zen gardens, *karesansui*, the arrangement of natural elements and architecture is studied and taken care of always having in mind the possible points of observation and contemplation of the scene. Trees and vegetation that accompany the walker, emphasize or nuance a scene, or even act as focal elements to which the gaze is directed are common in landscape compositions, and for this reason, their appearance and layout are greatly worked.

<sup>10</sup> *Hanami*, literally looking at flowers, is a widely extended and appreciated celebration in Japan, with the cherry blossoms viewing being especially appreciated.

<sup>11</sup> Although not a strict rule, *haiku* often contain a word that makes a direct or indirect reference, recognizable to the Japanese reader, to the season of the year in which the action takes place.

<sup>12</sup> *Sumi-e* is a style of painting from China and its main characteristic is the use in works only of diluted black ink applied on the paper.





Fig. 4 Katsura Villa, Kyoto, garden view

In traditional architecture, there are many mechanisms that seek to emphasize the relation of man to nature, from the presence charged with symbolism of natural elements in the stages of the *nō*<sup>13</sup> theaters; through the disintegration of the physical limits of the building that allow the exterior to seep into the interior, generating an intermediate space, the *engawa*<sup>14</sup>, which makes the man feel both inside and outside; the use of untreated natural elements, usually trunks and branches of trees that maintain their appearance practically unchanged, as constructive components; the necessary dialogue between the building and the garden, however small it may be, from the relation between interior and exterior, from the point of view of architecture, to the layout of the buildings that we can observe in the gardens and larger dimensions; or even the construction of certain architectural models as metaphors of the natural referents<sup>15</sup>.



Fig. 5 Katsura Villa, Kyoto, Shōkintei pavilion

### 3.2. Natural as a reference. Tree and forest figures in contemporary Japanese architecture

In contemporary Japanese architecture we can observe a series of works in which the presence of plant elements becomes the mechanism on which the definition of the project is based. These vegetation elements, forests and trees in most cases, appear in the works of study in two clearly contrasted forms, which in turn generates two general categories in which to encompass each of the projects. Broadly speaking, we can talk about projects that seek an understanding with nature, which are those in which the natural referent appears as such, and on the other, the projects in which this referent is manifested through an abstraction of same.

It should be noted that this fact is not exclusive to architecture, but in the contemporary Japanese scenario, many artists use the vegetal elements in their works, either directly or representations of them, just as in architecture. The comparison between artistic and architectural works enriches the point of view of analysis, providing a greater number of mechanisms and clarifying certain attitudes and ideas that can be presented in art more explicitly or less conditioned, due to the lack of limitations of which enjoys this front to the architecture. This fact also underlies the idea of the pre-existence of a previous cultural land that is nurtured by artists and architects, and which is again important at the moment.

Not to forget also the importance of the presence of trees can be seen in many works of modern and contemporary architecture, authors such as Le Corbusier, Sverre Fehn or Bernard Rudofsky, as well

<sup>13</sup> There pine painted on the back of the stage is a representation of the tree around which danced the god of Kasuga Shrine in Nara, whose dancing is the mythological origin of *nō* theater.

<sup>14</sup> The *engawa* is the veranda that runs along the perimeter of many Japanese buildings. Its virtual boundaries are defined by the projection of the sloped roof, its physical boundaries with the exterior usually nonexistent or formed by light and movable panels.

<sup>15</sup> As Professor Jose María Cabeza Láinez clarifies, in Japanese pagodas the symbolism of the sacred tree is recreated.



as the use of tree shaped inspired solutions in works by Alison and Peter Smithson or in some structures of Frei Otto, among others. These referents have given rise to a series of architectural mechanisms that have already become typical of modern architecture, and in which the Japanese architects have relied to a greater or lesser extent on the works studied here.

### 3.2.1. Understanding with nature. Project Mechanisms

Similar to what happened in traditional art and architecture, the presence of natural elements in these projects is based on a subtle observation of nature, generating a dialogue between equals in which a balance is sought between the natural and the built. The mechanisms used to achieve this can be organized following a gradation of physical proximity, starting from projects in which there is a greater separation between nature and architecture to works in which the natural and the built are indistinguishable.

The first of the mechanisms is what we might call the gaze and the reflection, and its used by works in which the natural elements are not part of the same, but are completely external to the projects. In order to achieve their integration in the works they react in a subtle way, through formal mechanisms that direct the look towards the natural elements and through the creation of reflective surfaces that absorb and contain in themselves what is around them, thus enhancing in both cases the relationship with the environment. Two outstanding examples are, on the one hand, the house *On the cherry blossom*, 2008, in which the architect Junichi Sampei takes as starting point of the project two cherry trees located in a nearby park and through a subtle turn of one of the volumes which made up the building makes them part of it, and on the other, the urban furniture *in flakes*, 2010, by Mount Fuji Architects, a series of small dispersed and grouped banks built in stainless steel plate with reflective finish that absorbs in its surface the surrounding woodland, emphasizing the seasonal variations that occur in it.

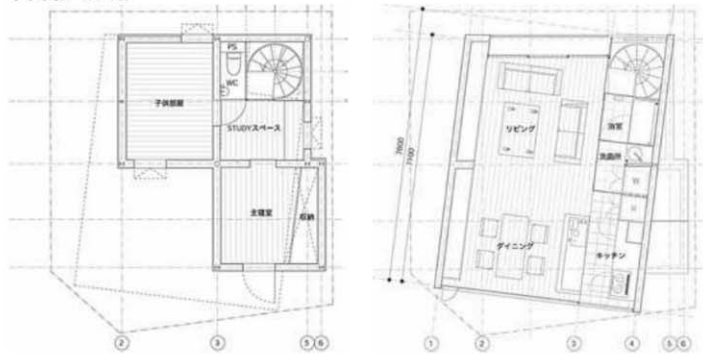


Fig. 6 Junichi Sampei, *On the cherry blossom*, floors 3rd and 4th



Fig. 7 Mount Fuji Architects, *in flakes*

In the next of the mechanisms, *the natural in the garden*, the natural elements are already part of the architecture and become defining of a space that is understood as not completely inside or outside<sup>16</sup>. It is a space that could be understood as garden, since it is exterior, but the architecture clothes it, thus its condition like space of transition or intermediate. This establishes a gradation between the natural space, a naturalized architectural space and a more cozy space that can be understood as exclusive to man. In these works, the natural intermediate space, whose inhabitants are the vegetal elements, is understood as inseparable from the architecture and necessary for the complete definition of the project, although the natural elements do not directly modify the architectural form. Examples of this category would be *House N*, of 2008, work of Sou Fujimoto or *Row House*, also of 2005, a non-constructed project by Junya Ishigami. In both cases, an external envelope volume is generated that delimits the house and within which other interior volumes are developed. In the intermediate space between these is where a kind of natural microcosm develops that serves as a filter between the urban space and the inner space more specifically deprived of man, thus establishing a more direct relationship between this and a controlled natural world.

<sup>16</sup> This space is that architects as Sou Fujimoto referred to as space in-between.





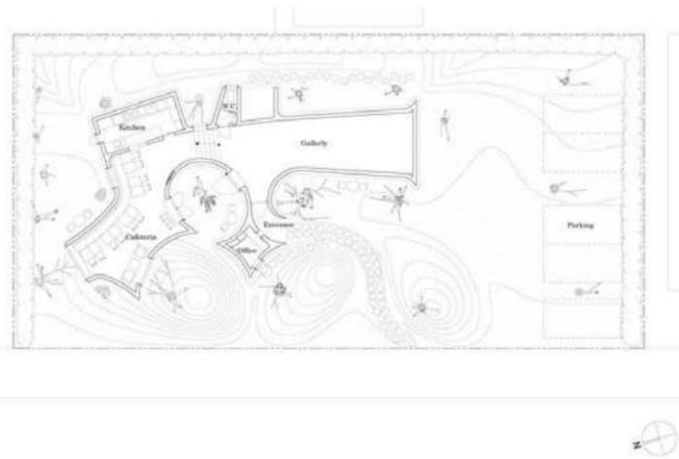
**Fig. 8 (left)** Sou Fujimoto, *House N*

**Fig. 9 (right)** Junya Ishigami, *Row House*, model

Following this gradation, we arrive at a series of works in which the natural element comes into direct contact with the architecture modifying its form, which tends to adapt to protect it, in what we could define as a *dialogue between the natural and the architecture*. Typically, natural elements, trees in most cases, are present at the site prior to the project and are even highly valued by the local community, so it is the buildings that adapt to these pre-existing conditions by separating and enveloping the natural elements. These are similar to the *yorishiro*<sup>17</sup>, objects or sacred spaces, present in religion, linking this attitude of architecture with the veneration that the Japanese people feel for these natural elements. Projects such as the *Fuji Kindergarten*, 2007, by Tezuka Architects, in which three courtyards are trimmed in the rotund oval shape of the building in order to preserve three existing *zelkova* on the plot, or the *Roku Museum*, 2010, the work of Hiroshi Nakamura, who places a series of trees on a plot and projects a building for a small museum that adapts its shape both in plan and section respecting the space occupied by trees.



**Fig. 10** Tezuka Architects, *Fuji Kindergarten*



**Fig. 11** Hiroshi Nakamura, *Roku Museum*

*The natural as a constituent* is the last of the categories and encompasses those works in which the natural element becomes a component of the building, thus preserving, its image virtually unchanged or, at least, recognizable, in such a way that it becomes an element completely inseparable from the architecture. The vegetal element is extracted from the natural flow of time, preserving it as part of architecture, in a state of stopped evolution and change, but retaining those qualities that make it recognizable and incorporating them into architecture, so that it is enriched with such contribution. We can frame here works such as the *Garden Tree House*, 2010, by Hironaka Ogawa, in which two trees in a garden are removed and, with a small treatment, are incorporated as supporting elements of the house that is built in the place, for sure, conserving its recognizable form. There is a contrast here between the natural curved and irregular shapes and the straight and regular forms of architecture,

<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, the divine spirits, *kami*, can be "called" to special objects, *yorishiro*, through rituals or inhabit singular elements, whether natural or man-made.



which enriches the latter, something we also observed in *Takasugi-an*, 2004, and *Chashitsu tetsu* of 2006, tea houses both works by Terunobu Fujimori, in which the architect builds a small room dedicated to the tea ceremony<sup>18</sup> on tree trunks, which also appear in the interior space providing aesthetic qualities of the tradition such as *wabi* and *sabi*<sup>19</sup>.



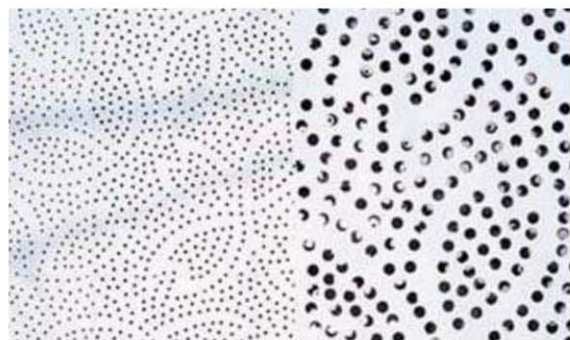
**Fig. 12 (left)** Hirokana Ogawa, *Tree House*  
**Fig. 13 (right)** Terunobu Fujimori, *Chashitsu tetsu*

### 3.2.2. Natural abstractions

The second of the categories in which we can include the works of study clearly contrasts with the previous one, since in this case, the vegetal elements do not appear as such, but are their abstract representations that refer us to the natural referent, trying to preserve by evocation the characteristics of this. Therefore, a primitive and immediate symbolism is used, based on recognizable images from the Japanese collective subconscious, originating fundamentally from religion and other cultural manifestations.

The differentiation of the characteristics common to the works that allows us to group them into subcategories, is based on the recognition of the basic pattern of the tree and its repetition, relying on its written representation by *kanji* as the title of each one.

Thus, in works such as the *SAKURA house*, 2007, by Mount Fuji Architects, the tree does not appear as such, but is recognized by the presence of one of its parts, namely by the floral pattern that decorates the facade of the building. *Leaves* (葉) and *flowers* (花) are, therefore, the elements that represent the tree and give rise to the first subcategory.



**Fig. 14** Mount Fuji Architects, *SAKURA*, facade pattern

In the 2009 *Tree House*, also a project of Mount Fuji Architects, the tree is already clearly recognizable in the element that resolves both constructively and spatially the dwelling, as it happens in *Tree restaurant*, 2010, by Koichi Takada. In this case, the *tree* (木) comprises works in which the space is configured by a single element that usually occupies a central position and which, moreover,

<sup>18</sup> The tea ceremony, *chadō*, is another manifestation exclusively Japanese and in which many of its aesthetic tastes are collected.

<sup>19</sup> *Wabi-sabi* is an important concept of Japanese aesthetics of difficult cultural translation. Authors like Leonard Koren describe it as the beauty of imperfect, changeable, and incomplete things.



is usually constructed by independent slats ordered radially around a focal point. The analogy is clear and alludes to universally recognizable sensations that is, even beyond Japanese culture. Sitting under a tree, leaning on its trunk and feeling protected under its branches makes us feel in a pleasant place to live or enjoy a meal.



Fig. 15 Mount Fuji Architects, *Tree house*



Fig. 16 Koichi Takada, *Tree restaurant*

The group of several recognizable arboreal elements is what gives rise to the following subcategory, the *grove* (林). Here, these elements are simplified with respect to what we could see in the works of the previous section, although they still maintain a certain figurative character. In this case, the most determinant in spatial terms is the relationship between the elements as well as their own formalization, which gives rise to full and empty visual relations and an organization based on the balance between these elements. Thus, in the *Forest chapel*, 2011, by Hironaka Ogawa, a series of tree reminiscent pillars built from bent steel profiles are located inside a wedding chapel, in such a way that they reconstruct, in an interior space, the sensations typical of a natural environment. Contrary to this work, in the *TOD's Omotesando Building* that was built by Toyo Ito in 2004, the façades are constructed by means of reinforced concrete structures, which do not interfere with or shape the interior space, but endow it with symbolism to the exterior image of the building, playing with the idea of an architecture supported in the branches of the trees that allows them to be able to travel and, ultimately, to live.



Fig. 17 Hironaka Ogawa, *Forest chapel*

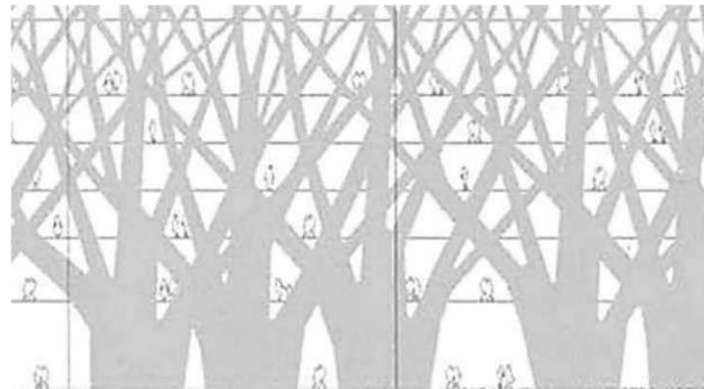


Fig. 18 Toyo Ito, *Edificio TOD's Omotesando, elevation fragment*

The last of the subcategories, the *forest* (森), is the one that encompasses those works in which the figurative form of the referent has been completely lost, reaching the highest degree of abstraction. The natural elements have been replaced by their more refined representation, the space is being defined through an approximately horizontal plane of cover, continuous in some cases and composed of fragments in others, and, above all, by a great number of pillars distributed seemingly random. These, in addition, thin their section to the maximum, in such a way that it is only the relation between them, their dispersion and concentration that generates zones of passage, "roads", and estancial zones. This is the case at the *KAIT Workshop*, in 2010, by Junya Ishigami or in what could be understood as his most direct model, the *Park Cafe in Koga*, 1998, by SANAA. It is the first of these works in which this idea of arboreal space is best reflected, despite its great formal abstraction, once the boundary of the glass façade is crossed, we find ourselves in a unique and continuous space determined by the placement of 305 steel pillars of different dimensions and relative position, located



in such a way as to achieve the balance and bracing of the structure and the definition of areas in which to locate the different workshops and that allow the intuitive recognition of the pass zone.



Fig. 19 SANAA, Koga Park Café

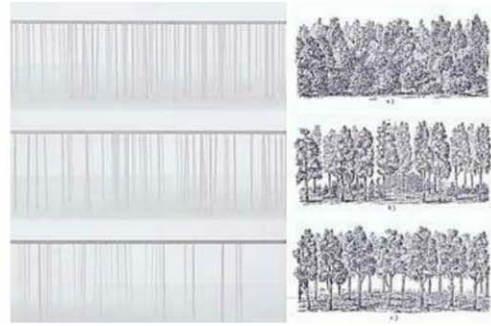


Fig. 20 Junya Ishigami, KAIT Workshop, study of density of pillars and variation of tree densities

#### 4. Conclusions

As a result of the analysis on the study, we can clarify its main motivations and referents in which is related to the relationship between nature and architecture as a defining idea of the project.

A first general observation allows us to establish several characteristics that are common to all works and serve as a starting point. In the first place, we can observe how the awareness of the distance that the contemporary man suffers from the natural world makes it necessary to put it into value, thus becoming an important point of departure both in theoretical reflections and in their physical part of the Japanese architects<sup>20</sup>. Japanese architecture seeks to regain a subtle and intuitive relationship with the natural world, establishing a direct approach between man and the plant elements, making these participants and even protagonists of the architectural space.

This kind of relationship with the natural world was already present in the traditional culture, so we can say that the rediscovery and redefinition of the mechanisms present in the tradition is the second of the common characteristics that these works share. The unique qualities of the landscape of the Japanese archipelago have generated in the man a reaction that has given rise to the numerous cultural, artistic and architectural manifestations in which this natural world is the center of the same, generating a pose that has penetrated over the centuries in Japanese society, maintaining to this day, allowing certain aesthetic values linked to it to have sprouted again today. The achievements of tradition have been subtly incorporated into contemporary production, either expressly, through reinterpretation or the direct use of a concept, or in an oblique way, serving as distant referents.

In this way, we can observe how, in contemporary projects in which natural elements are used as such, the mechanisms present in the artistic and architectural manifestations of tradition are more relevant, which rely on a detailed attention to nature and the subtle changes that occur in it. Even in certain contemporary works, these mechanisms are used without being reinterpreted, that is, they appear in the same way as they did in tradition. A clear example is the use of *shakkei*, which appears in numerous gardens as well as in several current works.

On the other hand, in works in which the natural elements do not appear directly, but are replaced by abstractions of the same, the most important is the evocative character of its presence, so that have more weight as referents those manifestations of the tradition that stand out for their symbolic character, that is, those that go beyond the concrete exterior or a certain aesthetic and focus on recognizable and valuable, but less tangible, qualities of the natural elements. In these cases, therefore, expressions derived from religion and culture that are not formalized in concrete physical elements, as works of art, would therefore be the most relevant.

Even if both projects are more closely linked to aesthetic or symbolic aspects of tradition, this relationship cannot be understood as closed in itself, as is evident in the analysis of the works that have been carried out, instead of the combination of all the values inherent in the relationship between man and nature, which forms an essential part of the baggage of contemporary artists and architects.

As we have seen, in contemporary Japanese culture, architecture seeks to become the means to close or at least minimize the gap between man and nature, also appealing to qualities of tradition, which have managed to remain inseparable of the idiosyncrasy of the Japanese spirit.

<sup>20</sup> The importance of this idea is made clear by Toyo Ito in his acceptance speech of the Pritzker Prize in which he clarifies that "My work has always tried to tear down this wall that separates modern architecture from nature and the local community, to create a architecture open to both".

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