

Re-reading Japan  
SANAA's Relational Architecture  
A reflection on the EPFL Learning Centre, Lausanne.

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Opposite SANAA's Zollverein School of Management and Design. Facade detail. Photograph by James Kirk



“Looking at a SANAA building is like looking at a pool on a hot day.”

Idenburg, F. (2010) Relations p74



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Fig.1. The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Photograph by James Kirk

# Introduction

The experience of seeing a SANAA<sup>1</sup> building is visceral. This experience is despite the ephemerality of appearance achieved by Sejima and Nishizawa and is little reduced upon first glimpse by anticipation, or by knowledge of previous works. Whether a glass and concrete garden emerging from a meadow in an Alpine city; a perforated cube deposited in a post-industrial Bauhaus landscape; or a bright white disc raised on a glass wall, punctured by a mass of solid white forms set within a Japanese city scarred by the remnants of a supposed architectural future, SANAA's "*extreme abstraction and perfect clarity*"<sup>2</sup> of built form is astonishing. There is more to these works however, which operate decisively within the public realm and employ spatial complexities internally that require a greater degree of analysis than has been afforded them.

The Japanese culture, and the architecture that emanates from it, has been wilfully misunderstood by Western critics, practitioners and clients due to a historical cultural hegemony, and the fetishization of Japanese cultural forms and products by the West, and throughout Japan's modern history Western artists, architects and others have appropriated Japan's perceived remove to promote their own ideas. The idiosyncratic appearance of published works in the West and the lack of rigour in the critical analysis of the works is indicative of this wider cultural phenomenon, and a cause for concern. SANAA is a prime example of this, and we can analyse their work to identify the wider cultural issues.

Typical of Western discourse on the cultural exchange between Japan and the West is the assertion that Japan is an 'other' culture, promoting the sense that the culture has evolved independent of outside intervention, and thus is an alien culture with the potential to subvert the existing state of affairs, economically, culturally or societally. This assertion is however demonstrably untrue, and the reality is that the technological, social and economic interaction between Japan and the West has been rich and diverse from the middle of the 19th century to the present day.

Japanese architecture is however fundamentally different from its Western counterpart, and though the significant technological and cultural interventions of the 20th century have united the two somewhat, a series of differences between the praxes has maintained a separation that has caused misunderstandings. By exploring a series of contemporary lineages in Japanese architecture, the thesis identifies that relationships are emphasised in Japan, over Western precepts of materiality and form. This notion of an architecture of relationships is misunderstood because it is a part of Japanese practice alongside the craft and

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1 SANAA, was founded in 1995 by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (Sejima And Nishizawa And Associates). Alongside SANAA, Sejima and Nishizawa run their own offices, *Kazuyo Sejima and Associates* and *Office of Ryue Nishizawa*. For clarity for the purposes of this thesis the work produced in all three offices will be considered under the banner of 'SANAA'.

2 Daniell, T. (2008) "Immaculate Conception: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art" p102

tradition that dominates discourse about Japan in the West. Again, SANAA are characteristic of this combination of themes and this is expressed through the extraordinary visual quality of their architecture. In focussing purely on the visual aesthetic, the Western critic is able to disregard the importance of the relational qualities of the architecture, which employs a nuanced and subtle architectural method that does not engage in the hubris of the tradition of their well-known counterparts in the West, particularly characteristic of the 20th century. SANAA's architecture is a subtle, intricate architecture of interpersonal relationships that aims to restore the social bond through its materiality and form and to alleviate antagonisms related to the social structures of the locations of their works.

Happening concurrently with the establishment of SANAA as an international practice was a Western art movement that promoted a similar set of values to this relational architecture. Relational Aesthetics was a term defined in the early 1990s to bring together a group of artists who diverted their attention from visual aesthetics, to embrace an aesthetic of relationships and encounters, an art that focussed on the experimental production of new social bonds. The thesis highlights the significant crossover in the approaches and aims of the relational artists of the 1990s and the relational architecture of SANAA and their followers. It is however important to contextualise the relational work (both for art and architecture) in any critical analysis, and it is essential to judge the work of relational architects in these terms; we should not assume that all interpersonal relationships are positive, and conducive to a better society.

As the West endeavours to emerge from the worst recession of a century, it is more important than ever to understand the recent cultural history of Japan where the collapse of the asset bubble caused a traumatic period of loss and stagnation that has lasted decades. The young architects of Japan have developed their professional methods in this period, and SANAA have built an international reputation. This thesis identifies that by re-reading Japan and understanding how one group of architects has learned to operate in a world that is totally different from that of their mentors, the West can begin to learn how to remake a society in crisis.

This thesis includes the author’s reflections on a journey through Western Europe to witness three buildings by SANAA, alongside reflections on two other SANAA buildings visited previously. The journey provides some of the primary evidence for this thesis.

A travel diary in the appendix of this thesis provides a first hand account of the pilgrimage taken in the summer of 2011 to three SANAA buildings in Western Europe. This had been preceded by visits to two SANAA galleries in Japan and the United States the previous year. The case studies that make up the evidence in this thesis are as follows:

**The EPFL Learning Center, Lausanne, Switzerland**

The Zollverein School of Management and Design, Essen, Germany

The New Museum, Manhattan, NY, USA

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan

Also visited, was the Kunstlimie in Almere, The Netherlands



Fig.2. The EPFL Learning Center



Fig.3. Zollverein



Fig.4. New Museum



Fig.5. 21st Century Museum



Fig.6. Kunstlimie

All photographs by James Kirk

Proceeding Pages. The EPFL Rolex Learning Center, the primary case study in this thesis. All photographs by James Kirk

Fig.7. Learning Center meadow

Fig.8. Learning Center undercroft with Lake Geneva and the Alps behind

Fig.9. Learning Center Soffit Detail

Fig.10. Learning Center Interior detail

Fig.11. Learning Center Internal Ramps detail





*The EPFL Learning Center in Lausanne, Switzerland is located on the north shore of Lake Geneva. It stands at the entrance to the campus in a wildflower and grass meadow. (p58)*













*...the building effectively extends this meadow, changing the floor surface from plants to bound gravel to carpet.*  
p58





*"...these projects without their people and furniture would merely seem a collection of reflections and multiple shades of white."*  
p58







Fig.12. Walter Niedermayr, Novartis Office Building, Bildraum S 105



Fig.13. Walter Niedermayr, Zollverein School of Management and Design, 2006 Bildraum S 131, 2006

# The (mis-)representation of SANAA's work through photography and critical analysis

SANAA's work up to the completion of their Learning Center in Lausanne, Switzerland, on the edge of Lake Geneva, has been mischaracterised, mislabelled and misunderstood. The projects, typically critically described as '*minimal*', '*refined*', '*pristine*', '*reductive*' are, as Stan Allen argues, "*at odds with the effect of their more recent built works, which operate more assertively within the public realm*"<sup>1</sup>. Their complete work has been often wrongfully depicted as little more than a series of beautiful objects, but as a former employee has written "*it is the regressive (not minimal) qualities of these architectures and the potentiality of the spaces in between that make up the work.*"<sup>2</sup> The architects themselves resist the 'minimalist' label<sup>3</sup>, and as Allen notes, this is confirmed by the experience of being inside their buildings.

Although they work with simple forms, SANAA sidesteps the essentialism of those architects who appeal to minimalism as a reductive resistant formal language. The effect of SANAA's form and detailing is instead to create an architecture that is light and ephemeral, and continually changing with different situations of perception.<sup>4</sup>

SANAA has frequently worked with the photographer Walter Niedermayr, and published an authorised book featuring photography of their architecture in 2007<sup>5</sup> (see Fig. 12-13). The book was not published jointly between the architects and photographer, but SANAA had seen an exhibition of Niedermayr's work, and invited him to photograph the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Art in Kanazawa. Following this, he continued to travel to visit SANAA's buildings, and "*has done so ever since*"<sup>6</sup>. Sejima has written that though they share an aesthetic sensibility with the photographer "*in the best way*" the architects see the photographs as "*very much independent viewpoints, as much about Niedermayr as about our architecture*".<sup>7</sup> This could seem like deliberate obfuscation on the part of the architects, were they not renowned for their unwillingness to discuss the content of their architecture on a detailed level. Distancing themselves from the photographic work however highlights their unwillingness to reveal much about their creative process, inspiration or interests<sup>8</sup>, but they evidently feel strongly enough

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- 1 Allen, S. (2010) "SANAA's Dirty Realism" p58  
Stan Allen is dean of Architecture at Princeton University.
  - 2 Idenburg, F. 2010 "Relations" p78
  - 3 Allen, S (2010) "SANAA's Dirty Realism". p58
  - 4 Allen, S. (2010) "SANAA's Dirty Realism" p 58 Footnote 1.
  - 5 Moritz, K. (2007) *Walter Niedermayr/Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA)*
  - 6 Campbell, H. (2008) p 93 In an email interview conducted with SANAA in 2007
  - 7 Campbell, H. (2008) Interview with SANAA p 93 In an email interview conducted with SANAA in 2007
  - 8 Asked about their work in relation to Zen, Nishizawa replies shortly "*We try not to refer*"



Fig.14. Rolex Learning Center, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2010, by SANAA Photo by Hisao Suzuki. Figures appear as silhouettes, some even coloured in black in order to not disrupt the clarity and abstraction of the space. The photographs *maintain a level of detachment that restrains the viewer from a complete understanding of the architecture.* (p12)



Fig.15. Hisao Suzuki The Zollverein School of Management and Design by SANAA. ... *those people that are present are props, placed in the buildings equivalent to furniture.*



about the publication of their buildings to avoid their architecture being misrepresented through misreading or simplification.

The published images of their more recent work is credited frequently to Hisao Suzuki, a Japanese photographer, living in Barcelona (Fig. 14-15). Suzuki is principal photographer to *El Croquis* and has photographed a number of SANAA's buildings, including the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art, the Zollverein School, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Art, the New Museum and the EPFL Learning Center<sup>9</sup>. Suzuki's photographs convey more of the architecture and the context of the buildings than the abstracted photographs of Niedermayr, but maintain a level of detachment that restrains the viewer from a complete understanding. The buildings do not include many people, and those that are present are props, placed in the buildings equivalent to furniture; they do not give a sense of how the space is used. Allen writes that SANAA's work "*often appears in photographs and publications as resolutely abstract, detached from the messy contingencies of life.*"<sup>10</sup>

The representation of SANAA's buildings through photography conforms to a Western sense of beauty, which obscures a sensitive reading of a theoretical basis to the architecture. SANAA's aesthetic relates most clearly to the European modernist tradition<sup>11</sup> (though with references to Japanese architecture and design), and an image of beauty described by Mark Wigley of whiteness and cleanliness in his book *White Walls, Designer Dresses*:

The identity of modern architecture seems inseparable from the whiteness of its surfaces. The very idea that there is such a thing as "modern architecture," a set of principles or practices that unite an otherwise heterogeneous group of artists and buildings, seems to turn on the white walls they share [...] The white wall is taken for granted.<sup>12</sup>

According to Till, "*Modernist architectural beauty is so often associated with pure forms, elimination of decoration and white walls.*"<sup>13</sup> SANAA's architecture can be easily (and somewhat superficially) associated with a kind of reimagined modernism, strictly in terms of its aesthetic (though this is often as far as the critic is willing to take their analysis). Isozaki notes this problem of Western attitudes with "*the understanding of Japanese beauty retained today as a stereotype rarely goes beyond the notion of compositional beauty - the same understanding of architectural style rehabilitated to serve its own purposes by the nineteenth century West*"<sup>14</sup>. This

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9        *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne*

10       Allen, S (2010) "SANAA's Dirty Realism". p 58

11       The mistake is apparently easy to make, and the building has deceived architectural critics in the British press before. Jay Merrick in the Independent questioned: *Is this great architecture? The Rolex Learning Center is certainly no advance on the architectural vision of Walter Gropius in 1919*. Merrick, J. (2010) "Learning curve: Sanaa's spectacular floating Lausanne library rockets them into architecture's premier league" 18 February 2010

12       Wigley, M. (1995) p xiv

13       Till, J. (2007) p. 123 in reference to Wigley, M. (1995).

14       Isozaki (2006) p26

cultural association of SANAA's aesthetic minimalism, (or more accurately reductionism) allows the Western viewer to disregard (or not look for) any actual theoretical substance.

In this regard, it is revealing that SANAA uses models rather than visualisations as the primary method of testing ideas, and presenting work:

I think from a practical stand point, we believe in the power of physical models to test certain designs, we believe in toning down rather than up, or at least we try to get to the essence of an idea.<sup>15</sup>

Many pictures are available of SANAA's studios stacked with models and stories of interns working long hours to complete a new model to test an extremely small design change emerge frequently. This is important because it highlights the importance of the experience of space to explain (and market) their ideas.

Critical commentary on SANAA's recent output frequently observe perceived failures in the detailing and the exactitude of the completed buildings, and this is usually put down to poor workmanship. This is a particularly frequent criticism of their well known buildings outside Japan, including the New Museum in New York, their temporary pavilion for the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2009, and the Learning Center in Lausanne.

On the Learning Center:

Is it structurally and spatially innovative? Most definitely. Is it sustainably built? Arguably. Is it impeccably finished? Not by a long shot. [...] Cost-cutting measures are evident throughout the building, most noticeably in all the off-the shelf components that draw attention in a structure that is anything but. [...] Most visitors to the building, including a very curious public, are able to look past these flaws.<sup>16</sup>

On the New Museum:

Having developed a reputation for precisely detailed, exquisitely refined buildings, the Tokyo-based firm SANAA faced a very different kind of challenge with the New Museum in Lower Manhattan: Design a building for an anti-establishment museum

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15 From an interview with Florian Idenburg of SO-IL, a past employee of SANAA, conducted by email in November 2011.

16 Minutillo, J (2010) p156



Fig.16. Facade and soffit detail, The Rolex Learning Center photograph by James Kirk



Fig.17. Facade detail, the New Museum photograph by James Kirk

in a scruffy-but-gentrifying part of town. [...] Best known for buildings with perfectly honed skins--such as the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art, in Ohio, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, in Kanazawa, Japan --SANAA struggled with the wrapping for the New Museum.<sup>17</sup>

A different reading of the architecture of SANAA, which does not prioritise the quality of the detailing on specific projects (which is a benefit of the Japanese construction industry over their British and American counterparts, and not a defining feature of SANAA's design aspirations) allows the critic to understand how material choice and use is far more important to the production of the building than the quality of its attachment, and basic cost. It is necessary to formulate new terminology for their work, to describe the work beyond its form and appearance. This should also be used to analyse work of their contemporaries.

Certain critics have attempted to explain the output of Nishizawa and Sejima in terms beyond observation of its appearance, attempting to place the buildings in a critical context. Stan Allen refers to *SANAA's Dirty Realism* in his essay of the same name<sup>18</sup>, referencing Frederic Jameson's essay *The Constraints of Postmodernism*<sup>19</sup>, in which the author employs terms borrowed from literary criticism and applied to urban and architectural analysis (the specific focus of which was Rem Koolhaas and OMA). Jameson's definition of dirty realism is "*a collective built space, in which the opposition between inside and outside is annulled.*" This analysis explains well the appearance and performance of the building in the public realm, but does not seem to be able to analyse the spatial decisions that are made, and the relationships between circulation and programmed space – a key feature of SANAA's plans. This is an issue that is often misunderstood by critics, gushing about the aesthetic appearance, while moaning about the layout:

Apparently, the efficient floor plan is so last century.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas Daniell has analysed what he sees as contemporary minimalist architecture in Japan as split into two separate schools, the visceral and the ephemeral. SANAA is assigned to the *ephemeral* category, in contrast to the *visceral* minimalism of Tadao Ando and others. "*While a more conventional minimalist approach attempts to burn away the unnecessary, reducing a building to its tectonic or functional core, this new [ephemeral] work instead eviscerates that very core.*"<sup>21</sup> Daniell's analysis of the œuvre, and his

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17 Pearson, C. (2008) p45

18 Allen, S. (2010) "SANAA's Dirty Realism" p 58-67

19 Jameson, F. (1994) "The Constraints of Postmodernism" p129-206.

20 Minutillo, J (2010) p156

21 Daniell, T. (2008) p38

explanation of the ephemeral as a necessary defence against the impermanence of the Japanese city is appealing, though it too shies away from analysis of space, explaining the final plan as an unelaborated diagram. *The initial generating diagrams are arbitrary, with little or no pragmatic significance. There is an absolute minimum of elaboration once the initial strategy is set.*<sup>22</sup>

Misreadings of the architecture of Japan by the West is not unique to SANAA, and is part of wider misunderstandings between the two cultures. The next chapter explores these interactions between the cultures, and Western depictions of Japanese urban forms. Aldo Van Eyck in his

Western civilization habitually identifies itself with civilizations as such on the pontifical assumption that what is not like it is a deviation, less advanced, primitive, or, at best, exotically interesting at a safe distance.<sup>23</sup>

Van Eyck’s statement is particularly applicable to Japan, the West’s first competitor for global hegemonic power, which it regards with both suspicion and quixotic interest.

Right and following pages.The published images of the Learning Center. Whilst showing the form and appearance of the building, the images do not show it in use. This serves to confuse the viewer, and promotes a sense that the plan is inefficient, and the building wasteful.

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22 Daniell, T. (2008) p41  
23 Van Eyck, A. (1962) p 22 cited in Frampton, K. (1983)





Fig.18. *Domus* no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 20 - 21 shown)

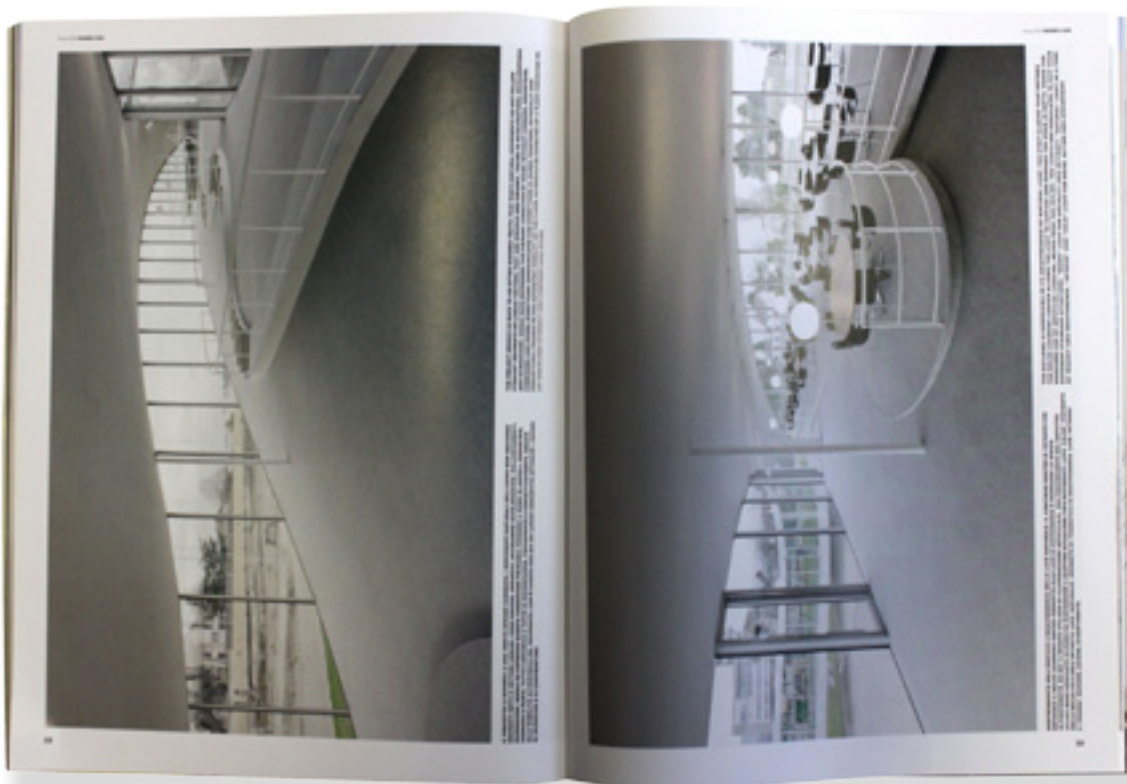


Fig.19. *Domus* no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 22 - 23 shown)



Fig.20. *Detail* Vol. 50 no. 5 2010 p 470 - 478 (p 470 - 471 shown)



Fig.21. *a+u (architecture and urbanism)* no.1 (484) January 2011 p 112 - 117 (p 112 - 113 shown)



Fig.22. *Casabella* Vol. 74 no 790 June 2010 p 4 - 17 (p 12 - 13 shown)



Fig.23. *Casabella* Vol. 74 no 790 June 2010 p 4 - 17 (p 14 - 15 shown)



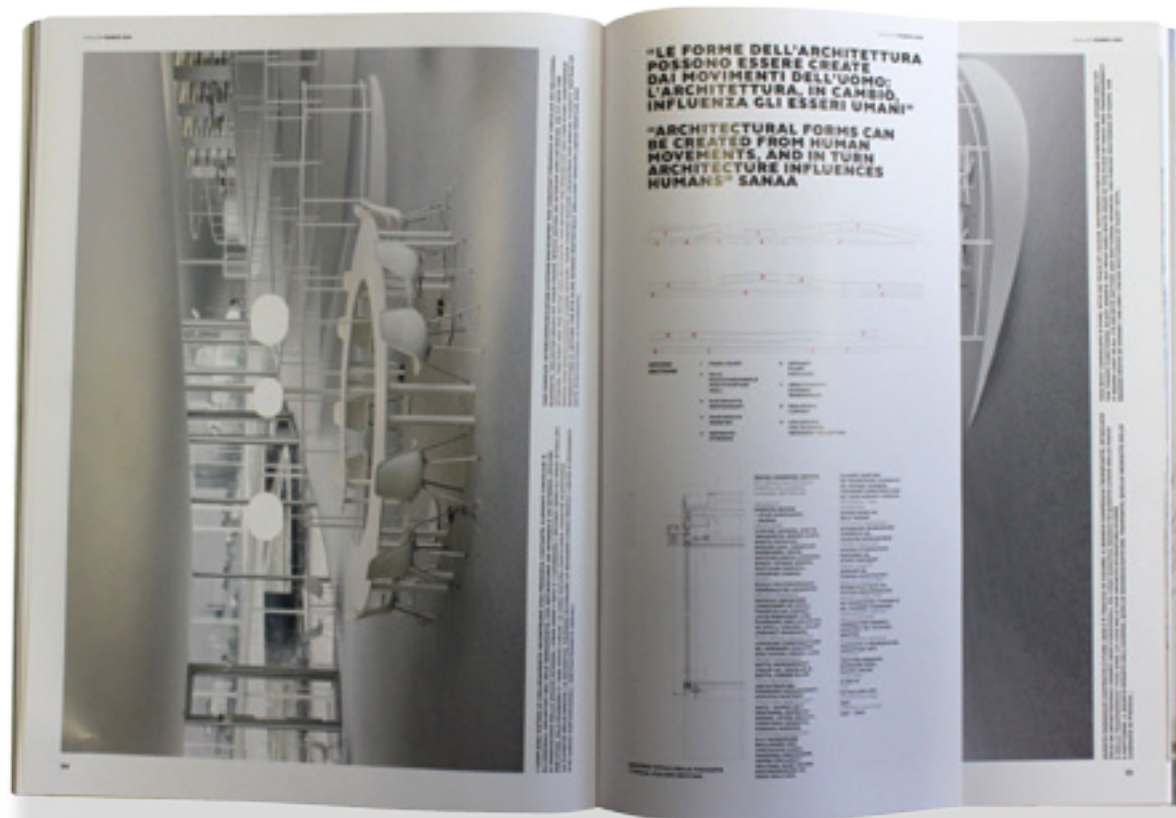


Fig.24. *Domus* no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 24 - 25 + insert shown)



Fig.25. *Domus* no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 24 - 25 +insert shown)









## Cultural interactions - A Western Perspective

While in the West cities and their street have a design and the context has precise points of reference, cities like Tokyo appear to be undifferentiated systems with neutral and ever changing urban characteristics, which could be extended endlessly in any direction [...] so that the image of the city is always being modified without ever changing its basic concept: a neutral and fragmentary system, lacking precise points of reference except systems of transport and communication.

Introduction to *works projects writings* TOYO ITO

Edited by Maffei, A. (2001) p 9

Each generation of Western architects has seen in Japan what it wanted to see.

*Two Naifs in Japan* Venturi, R. Scott Brown, D. (1991)

### The modern Japanese city and metropolis

The development of the contemporary Japanese city has been very different to that of the Western city. On the premise that the city is a reflection of the social structures, environmental and geophysical factors and economic climate, it is evident that Japan's urban forms should differ from those of other parts of the world. Western practitioners and critics have long struggled to analyse the form and appearance of Japanese cities because they differ so greatly from their European and American counterparts. It is essential that different methods are used to analyse the spatial and formal context of Japanese buildings within the urban landscape in order to be able to contextualise the analysis of individual buildings, as well as the way in which practitioners (architects, urban planners, etc) operate.

Japanese cities have been subject to frequent destruction throughout history: in war, by earthquake, fire, and political and economic upheaval. The most recent force to effect the make up of the Japanese city has been from the decade or so of the speculative financial bubble which caused significant disruption to the construction industry, and consequently the Japanese architectural profession<sup>1</sup>. These physical and social factors have had a significant effect on how the buildings and cities are conceived and built, encouraging qualities that are not traditionally valued in the West; the likelihood of a short lifespan (due to both the unstable geology of Japan, and the social and economic make up of the city) means qualities which in the West would be considered problematic are sought, such as ephemerality and weakness, fragmentation and impermanence (whereas

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<sup>1</sup> Angelidou, I. (2011) p 90

Fig.26. Left The Tokyo Metropolis characterised by a different urban form to its Western Counterpart. Photograph by James Kirk



Fig.27. Typical Japanese lunchbox, “a makeshift meal” source: Chaplin,S. (2005) p82 photographer unknown



Fig.28. Wall/Floor architectural detail on a traditional Japanese teahouse<sup>1</sup> Photograph by James Kirk The unsuitability of this rounded stone as a foundation for the small building would be considered problematic in the West.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Chaplin’s essay “Makeshift: Some Reflections on Japanese Design Sensibility” discusses the importance of the makeshift in Japanese design as an expression of society at large. The makeshift represents the problematic of ephemerality, weakness, fragmentation and impermanence

in the West, qualities of robustness and longevity are traditionally solicited). Furthermore “*coffee table books of ‘recent Japanese architecture’ tend to focus on the latest offering from the superstar elite of global designers*”<sup>2</sup> ignoring the mundane, everyday aspects of Japanese urbanism and design. This has the effect of placing the discourse on Japanese architecture in a contextual vacuum, which renders the reading of individual buildings extremely difficult. Western interest in the urban fabric of Japanese cities tends to either fawn over the sophistication and aesthetic of the architecture, or fetishizes “*the extreme incoherence of their urban context*.”<sup>3</sup> Kazuo Shinohara regards these diametrically opposed interests as productive saying about Tokyo that “*no other city has the diversity of buildings that comprise its streets, or the disorder of decorative surface colors and forms on their facades. [...] Tokyo has now become one of the most exciting cities in the world.*”<sup>4</sup> The contextual vacuum that this unfamiliar urban form and corresponding architecture, produces misreadings of individual built works, and misunderstandings of the practitioners.

The depiction of Japanese urban forms in the West is also interesting, as it fits into a wider cultural discourse between Japan and the West which Arata Isozaki has analysed extensively in *Japan-ness in Architecture*:

For Japanese modernists - and I include myself - it is impossible not to begin with Western concepts. That is to say we all begin with a modicum of alienation, but derive a curious satisfaction - as if things were finally set in order - when Western logic is dismantled and returned to ancient Japanese phonemes. After this, we stop questioning.<sup>5</sup>

In order to be able to successfully analyse the architecture (and the architects) of Japan, it is essential to understand the differences in the formal make up of the cities and landscapes for which buildings are conceived, and further, the cultural landscape and cultural interactions that have informed them. The next section examines the extent to which this cultural interaction, and the changing nature of social and political dialogue between Japan and the West has influenced Japanese architects work and the Western appreciation of these works. A history of interaction since the policy of seclusion was lifted in 1868 at the end of the Edo period has had an enormous impact on the way Japan is perceived, and the way its culture is engaged with in the West.

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2      Guy, S. (2010) p124  
3      Daniell, T. (2008) p14  
4      Shinohara, K. (1981) pp140 -141  
5      Isozaki, A. (2006) p65

## The cultural interaction between Japan and the West

I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. [...] In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.

Vivian to Cyril in Oscar Wilde's *Intentions: The Decay of Lying*

The gaze of the West, eastwards, towards the archipelago of 6582 islands<sup>6</sup> lying off the coast of mainland Asia, has long been held in captive fascination. Japan is unique in its existence and appearance to the Western 'world'. Until recently, *the only successful non-Western path to modernisation (and capitalism)*<sup>7</sup> Japan and Japanese culture has long presented a challenge to the Western observer and, despite its allure, this has in the past given rise to specious assumptions and conclusions that have obstructed the West's understanding of the Japanese built environment, and impeded its ability to appreciate the nature of Japanese architectural forms and practice. An ongoing cultural discourse has informed both cultures since the nineteenth century, though in a globalised age the boundaries of the wider cultures have become increasingly blurred. Frederick Jameson, in an essay on culturalism observes:

The West has always been willing to acknowledge that Japanese architecture, whether the traditional kind or its extraordinary modernist production, was unique: an acknowledgment which allows it to be left out of the usual surveys and to be segregated on an expensive and high-quality reservation of its own somewhere, along with Japanese literature, film, technology, industry and even military history.<sup>8</sup>

Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*<sup>9</sup> relegates Japanese architecture to a periphery, separate from a tradition of architecture that the West holds, and is described as *largely derived from China, but [with] its own special character of minuteness in carving and decoration*<sup>10</sup>, a place where no real concept of architecture existed.

This acknowledgement stems from the West's inherent fear of losing political and economic hegemony over the Far East, and

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6 "Facts and Figures of Japan 2007 01: Land". Foreign Press Center Japan [http://fpcj.jp/old/e/mres/publication/ff/pdf\\_07/01\\_land.pdf](http://fpcj.jp/old/e/mres/publication/ff/pdf_07/01_land.pdf)

7 Jameson, F. (2007) "Perfected by the Tea Masters" pp 21 - 23

8 Jameson, F. (2007) "Perfected by the Tea Masters" pp 21 - 23

9 Fletcher, B. (1950)

10 Fletcher, B. (1950) p924 from the fifteenth edition

whilst these sentiments have been reduced in the period since Japan’s economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, the sense of ‘otherness’ that pervades discussion of Japan remains. Peter Wollen identifies this in his essay *Out of the Past: Fashion / Orientalism / The Body*:

The West described the East to itself in terms that simply reflected its own political anxieties and nightmares: an exaggerated absolutism dispensing with the established rule of law.<sup>11</sup>

In his renowned theory of *Orientalism*, Edward Said promotes the thesis that the ‘East’ has been developed as a way to establish political Western hegemony of the Near East, and to foster a sense of ‘Other’ to maintain dominance. Said, as with Wollen above, in this instance was discussing the Near East in his critique, however Said’s critique can be extended to China and Japan as Zhang Longxi has observed. In *The Myth of the Other* he describes “China as a land in the Far East [that] becomes traditionally the image of the Ultimate Other.”<sup>12</sup>

The Orient is the site of scientific and political fantasy, displaced from the body politic of the West, a field of free play for shamelessly paranoid constructions, dreamlike elaborations of a succession of Western traumas.<sup>13</sup>

According to Morley and Robins, “Japan has been among the West’s Others. It has been seen as the exotic culture (zen, kabuki, tea-ceremonies, geishas) of aesthetic Japonisme. And it has been seen as an alien culture, a dehumanised martial culture (kamikaze, ninjutsu, samurai), to be feared. Its difference has been contained in the idea of some mysterious ambiguity.”<sup>14</sup>

Perry Anderson in *Lineages of the Absolutist State*<sup>15</sup> writes in his conclusion for his chapter *Asiatic mode of production* that “it is merely in the night of our ignorance that all alien shapes take on the same hue.” It is with this in mind that Japan during the late twentieth century, when the country was threatening Western hegemony that misunderstandings of Japanese culture were wilfully incubated.

Essential to discussing Japanese culture from a Western theoretical starting point is the cultural exchange that has taken place over the past century and a half, and to question what place Japanese culture has in the West; specifically how particular

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11 Wollen, P. (1993) p5  
12 Longxi, Z. (1988) p110  
13 Wollen, P. (1993) p5  
14 Robins, K. and Morley, D. (1995) p147  
15 Anderson, P. (1974) p549



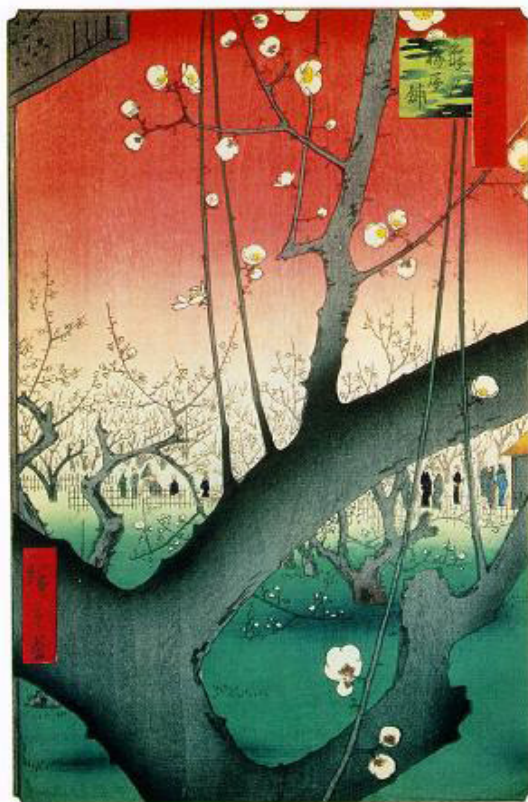


Fig.29. Left: Hiroshige: Plum Estate, Kameido 1857

Right, van Gogh: Japonaiserie, 'Prunier à Fleurs' (après Hiroshige)

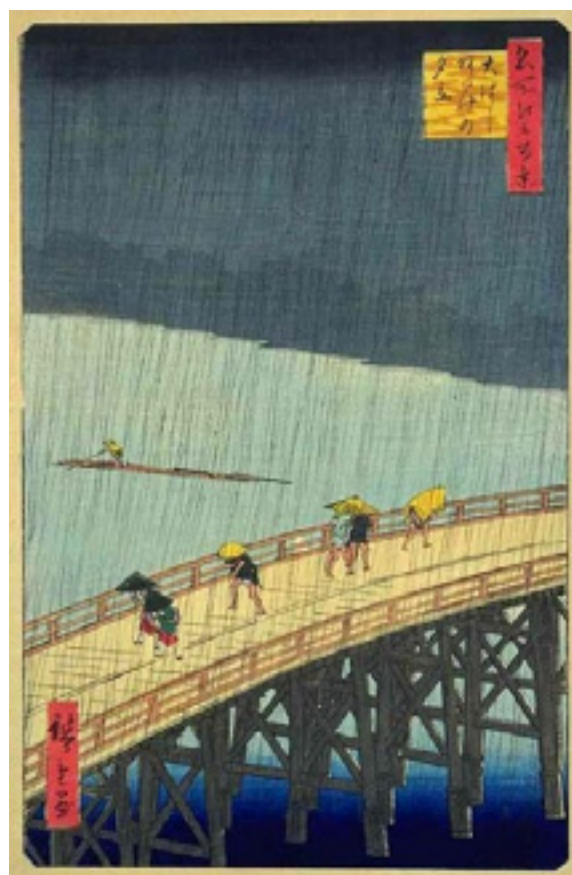


Fig.30. Left: Hiroshige: Evening Shower at Atake and the Great Bridge 1857

Right, van Gogh: Japonaiserie, 'Japonaiserie : Pont Sous la Pluie' (après Hiroshige)

Japanese architects have come to operate in Western Europe, how they have been received and the techniques and methods they have employed in their designs.

Since the mid-nineteenth century when the Western bourgeoisie developed a passion for collecting Japonaiserie, (a Japanophilia similar to the electronics and cars fetishized by the Western consumer in the 1980s and 90s) an interaction has taken place which has indelibly changed both cultures. The Art Nouveau and Impressionist movements were heavily influenced by the interest in Japan of their main protagonists<sup>16</sup> (though this must also be considered along with the obsession with Chinoiserie and African artefacts). Vincent van Gogh was heavily influenced by Japanese art, and wrote to his brother “*All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art...*”<sup>17</sup> In this letter Van Gogh discusses the decline of Japanese art in Japan, and its establishment in the French Impressionist tradition. At the time Van Gogh was making copies of Hiroshige<sup>18</sup> prints, modifying them stylistically, enhancing colour and adding borders. (Fig. 29-30)

Japanese craftsmen accordingly modified their craft to conform to Western stylistic tastes: “*Items were selected to satisfy the appetites of Western collectors [...] What is notable is that in Japan these objects had not therefore to been considered art, nor the craftsmen artists [...] This from the very beginning, the Japan-ness commonly considered as Japanese conformed, in fact, to an external gaze.*”<sup>19</sup>

*Orientalism* had been popularised in the early 20th century by the Russian Ballet which toured Western Europe with *Schéhérazade*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s adaptation of the recently translated *One Thousand and One Nights* in 1910. Following the success of the ballet, the fashion designer Paul Poiret appropriated the aesthetic to alter a “*fashion world that had been dominated by corsets, lace, feathers and pastel shades*” into “*a seraglio of vivid colours, harem skirts, beads, fringes and voluptuousness*”<sup>20</sup> This popularisation of a ‘barbarian’ aesthetic influenced Matisse who fought against the elimination of decoration in European and Modernist art, taking his influence from the colours and shapes of the Orient. The importance of Orientalism to the early 20th century art that it inspired was that it “*served as a metaphor for a greater, stranger ‘Elsewhere’, rooted in the Freudian concept of the unconscious and political possibility of an alternative to a technology-driven productivism.*”<sup>21</sup> This appropriation of an alien culture to react against the dominant machine aesthetic of Modernism, or conservative, traditional aesthetics caused the dominant culture to eye the Orient warily, as a potentially subversive force against the status quo. The *Orient* that Peter Wollen refers to in his essay *Out of the Past* is the Orient of the Middle East and South Asia, the world of the *Thousand and One Nights*, but the

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16 Van Gogh, Manet, Degas and Monet were all collectors of Japanese woodblock prints, and until the Convention of Kanagawa, and the end of the Japanese foreign policy of seclusion in 1854, trade between Japan and any Western country was confined to the Dutch.

17 Van Gogh, V. *Letter 640*

18 Ando Hiroshige (1797 – October 12 1858) was a Japanese Woodblock print artist

19 Isozaki, A. (2006) p4

20 Wollen, P. (1993) p 10 quoting Cecil Beaton

21 Wollen, P. (1993) p26





Fig.31. The Imperial Hotel, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, photographer unknown. The Imperial Hotel was the best known of Lloyd-Wright's buildings in Japan, but was demolished a number of decades after falling into decay.



Fig.32. Katsura Rikyū, the Villa. Photograph by James Kirk 2009



sense of an *Other* culture is equally valid and a useful parallel in discussion of Western appropriation of Japanese culture for the destabilisation of the dominant culture and the use of the myth of another culture as a subversive force.

The interaction between Western Modernist architects and their contemporaries in Japan is well documented, and a number of the leading figures of Modernism, in both Europe and the United States lived, worked or were inspired by the Japanese culture that they observed. Le Corbusier built only one building in Japan, the National Museum of Western Art, though a number of Japanese architects including Kunio Maekawa and Junzo Sakakura had apprenticed with him in Europe. Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruno Taut were also interested in Japan, and both worked in the country. Wright and Taut saw their own architectural ideas in the culture and traditional architecture (respectively) of Japan.<sup>22</sup>

Frank Lloyd Wright's passion for Japan was first aroused by replicas of Japanese buildings that he saw at the World's Colombian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago. This led him to the Book of Tea in which he claimed to see his own ideas<sup>23</sup>. In 1922, he was commissioned to build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (now demolished), which was the best known and largest of Wright's buildings in Japan. (Fig. 31)

Taut arrived in Japan as a Nazi refugee in 1933. He travelled immediately to Kyoto and was taken to the Katsura Imperial Villa by the head of the Japan International Architectural Association, who had studied at the Wiener Werkbund.<sup>24</sup> One of the first sites he visited, the Katsura Imperial Villa (Fig. 32) he described as *"pure, unadorned architecture. Moving, innocent as a child. Realization of a modern desire"*<sup>25</sup>. Taut saw himself as something of a discoverer of the villa, as well as the famous Shinto Temple at Ise on the southern coast of Honshu, which he claimed was as important as the Acropolis in Athens. *"[The Parthenon] is the greatest and most aesthetically sublime building in stone as the Ise Shrine is in wood"*<sup>26</sup>

The construction methods and materials associated with Modernism were met with enthusiasm in Japan, where the material and structural *"abstraction of Modernism fell in line with vernacular building values and thus was not only a representation of progress, but also embodied a sense of beauty which in the west was often associated with the negatively perceived notion of austerity."*<sup>27</sup> Observation by Bruno Taut, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others, of Japanese architectural forms substantiated their ideas, and the culture was appropriated as an 'other' culture, theoretically independent of outside forces to vindicate their theories. Though this position is not in accordance with the history, it helped to establish Japan as 'other' to the Western viewer.

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22 Isozaki, A. (2006) p5-9

23 Isozaki, A. (2006) p5

24 Isozaki, A. (2006) p9

25 Speidel, M (2006) "Reception Rooms at the Villa Hyuga, Atami, Japan 1935 - 1936 (Bruno Taut)" p105

26 Taut, B. (1937) p139

27 Angelidou, I. (2011) p 90

In the decades following the second world war there was little foreign cultural engagement, and “*given Japan’s pariah status, and the atrocities of the Allies, no Japanese worked for major firms*”.<sup>28</sup> This allowed Japanese architects to re-imagine a modern Japanese style, mining *their interiority, having detoured via an external gaze. In this way, they escaped the vicious circle of self reference*.<sup>29</sup> By the 1950s, a new Japanese style, *sometimes referred to as Japonica was being produced under the influence of American taste*.<sup>30</sup> This was due in part to Japan’s need for economic stability and protection from adjacent powers following its destruction during the second world war.<sup>31</sup> With economic and military reliance on the United States came cultural influence. In 1964, the Olympic Games were held in Tokyo, and were significant for Japan’s re-acceptance by the West as a modern, rebuilt state with the capacity for self governance. It is from this point that the interrelationship within architectural theory between Japan and the West becomes less clear. As Japan began to modernise and global markets were opened up, Japan began to emerge as a wealthy economic power. Accusations of ‘world conquest’ were famously made by the then French prime minister, Edith Cresson in her ‘vivid’ comments about the Japanese people for which she was widely accused of racism.<sup>32</sup> The funding provided by the Nippon television company of \$3 million for the restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling<sup>33</sup> represented a symbolic transfer of power and dominance to Japan that was causing significant *anxiety and exposure to, and penetration by, Japanese culture*.<sup>34</sup>

The collapse of the Japanese asset price bubble over a decade from the start of the 1990s, saw Japan absolved of its apparent crimes, and as global capitalism strengthened its grip on cultures around the world, interaction of these cultures became increasingly less significant. The focus of cultural suspicion now appears to have shifted to China and India as dominant economic powers, and we can observe similar anxiety expressed in the 21st century as had been aimed at Japan in the late 20th.

Martin Filler, in his review of SANAA’s New Museum in the New York Review of Books, questions the nature of intercultural architecture within the freedoms of global capitalism:

The globalization of architecture is now so pervasive that one wonders if any architects still build in their native countries, or if foreign architects enjoy an insuperable edge over local talent in international design competitions.<sup>35</sup>

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28 Isozaki, A. (2006) p 25  
 29 Isozaki, A. (2006) p 25  
 30 Isozaki, A. (2006) p 31  
 31 Keohane, R. (1984) p182  
 32 ‘*The Japanese have a strategy of world conquest*’ *The Japanese, she said, ‘are little yellow men’ who ‘stay up all night thinking about ways to screw the Americans and Europeans. They are our common enemy’* Though Edith Cresson was widely condemned for her comments, they reveal an attitude towards the Japanese that she was not alone in. Robins, K. Morley, D. (1995) “Techno Orientalism: Japan Panic” p147  
 33 Robins, K. Morley, D. (1995) “Techno Orientalism: Japan Panic”, p149  
 34 Robins, K. Morley, D. (1995) “Techno Orientalism: Japan Panic” p150  
 35 Filler, M. (2008) p21

Though clearly tongue in cheek, Filler's comment highlights an issue related to architecture in the globalised economy in which developers and clients are commodifying Japan's 'otherness' for consumerist and branding purposes.

Japan however has long been a culture defined by others, and the current era of globalisation is part of a longer trend of the absorption of cultures into Japan: Hitoshi Abe writes that Japan "*for millennia has been absorbing the cultures of a wide variety of nations located westward, such as Greece, Persia, India, and China. These cultures have all drifted ashore here at the eastern edge of the world, and given birth to a unique culture.*" Japan has been a testing ground for global culture over a very long period of time." Arata Isozaki notes (though the translation is rather clumsy) that "*were an insular nation merely a closed, self sufficient community it would have no need to solicit its proper characteristics or the essence of its culture. [...] Only when a gaze from without supervenes has a response to be formulated in an effort of introspection bound to shape aesthetic tastes*".<sup>36</sup>

Japanese culture has been fetishized in a similar way to the Middle Eastern culture had been fetishized in the early to mid 20th century through *Orientalism*. SANAA's architecture is symptomatic of this, and this is most evident through the representation and critical reception of SANAA's built work, highlighted in the previous chapter (*The (mis-)representation of SANAA's work through photography and critical analysis*). The documentation of SANAA and other Japanese architects work in the modern (online) media is equally revealing of the fetishization of the work, presenting it in a way that demonstrates Jameson's *segregated [...] expensive and high-quality reservation*<sup>37</sup>. The success of these idiosyncratic architectures that are *always so popular* demonstrates the power of subversion of the status quo; the eccentricities of the architecture represents the possibilities a different world, or a different way of living and working: Sejima's office building Shibaura House (Fig. 34) with its interior exposed to the city through glass cladding and external circulation; Nishizawa's Moriyama House (Fig. 35) in which the rooms are separate buildings, connected only by a external circulation; Sejima's Gifu Kitagata Apartment building (Fig. 33) in which the washrooms directly about the external facade, "*daily ablutions thereby become the focal point of each unit; the most private activities are put on public display*"<sup>38</sup>. All of these projects communicate a way of living that is in some sense different, exposing our suppressed desire for a world that is more interesting, idiosyncratic and ideal than that of our own. A world that is fundamentally *other*.

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36 Isozaki, A. (2006) p3

37 Jameson, F. (2007) "Perfect by the Tea Masters" pp 21 - 23 Dezeen, a popular and prolific blog of contemporary design recently separated Japanese architecture into its own section, due to the popularity of the subject matter: "*Japanese architecture is always popular on Dezeen – see more projects in Japan here*" source: <http://www.dezeen.com/2011/11/28/sunbrella-house-by-ikeda-yukie-architects/> retrieved December 2011.

38 Daniell, T. (2008) "Reflecting Modern Life" p79



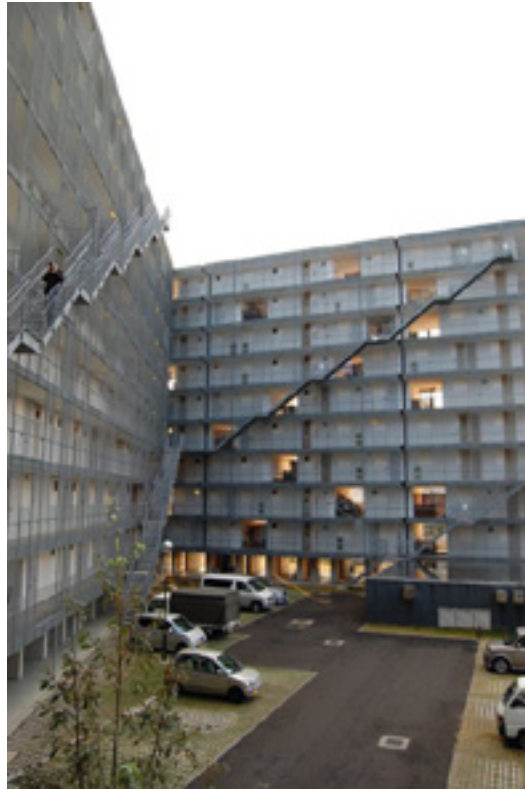


Fig.33. Gifu Kitagata Apartment building



Fig.34. Shibaura House



Fig.35. Moriayama House

## Evolving lineages in Japanese architecture

The cultural difference and remove of Japan presents a challenge to the Western gaze. This may have limited its ability to appreciate the varied nature of Japanese architectural forms and practice. One method that has been used to clarify the labile nature of Japanese architecture, from a western viewpoint, is to observe and trace historical evolving lineages, effectively identifying schools of architecture, equivalent to European architecture's 20<sup>th</sup> century schools.

Drawing on both the spatial traditions and material assembly of Japanese tradition alongside the precepts of Western Modernism, various Japanese lineages have “*adapted, developed, reinterpreted and modified*”<sup>1</sup> both the Japanese and Western traditions, developing and evolving themes across successive generations of teachers and students, studios and employees.

It is valuable to present a number of separate flows and lineages within Japanese architecture over the past century in order to be able to highlight the theoretical differences between them, and to be able to thoughtfully analyse contemporary architects' working practices. This thesis presents three separate lineages, two emerging from the Metabolist movement, and a separate lineage that emerged from an anthropological viewpoint. These three streams are of interest because they follow two lineages from the Japanese mainstream, as well as presenting a more idiosyncratic societal line.

Maekawa, Tange, and the outcomes of Western technological modernism

A significant movement that strongly influenced the 1970s Metabolist movement and continues to influence a current generation of Japanese architects began with Kunio Maekawa (1905 - 1986), who worked as an apprentice for Le Corbusier in Europe, and with Antonin Raymond.<sup>2</sup> Maekawa is best known for his attempts to combine Modernism with Japanese tradition. Maekawa's own students, notably Kenzo Tange, were unable to study and apprentice abroad due to *Japan's prewar footing and belligerent status*<sup>3</sup> however, as Isozaki notes, their ideas and methods were *more Western* than the previous generation who had the opportunity to study abroad, since they had been able to *internalise Modernist ideas*. Tange continued to combine European and American Modernist ideas with Japanese traditions, notably through a return to the use of *tatami* as a proportional tool.<sup>4</sup> In 1946 Tange established the *Tange Laboratory* where Fumihiko Maki, Kisho Kurokawa and Arata Isozaki worked and exchanged ideas<sup>5</sup>. Taking one member of this group as an example, Isozaki's continuation of the act of combining Western technological

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1 Idenburg, F. (2010) “Relations” p68

2 Isozaki, A. (2006) p24-25 Antonin Raymond was an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright, influential in bringing an American Modernism to Japan, but who had returned to America after the War.

3 Isozaki, A. (2006) p25

4 Idenburg, F. (2010) “Relations”. Tatami is a modular system based on a straw mat approximately 910mm x 1820mm

5 Idenburg, F. (2010) Relations.

construction with Japanese spatial and decorative methods continued this intercultural fusion of methods, themes and concepts, which is now being modified and extended further by Isozaki's apprentices and students including Jun Aoki who worked with Isozaki for 7 years in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

#### Kon, Fujimori and the Bow-Wow Generation

A significantly different and less celebrated lineage that is now gaining significant popularity and international acclaim has been developing over the past century and a half. The current practitioners known as the *Bow-Wow Generation*<sup>7</sup> emerged on the Japanese architectural scene during and after the slow burst of the 1980s bubble economy which had influenced the form and structure of the contemporary Japanese city. Atelier Bow-Wow, and their contemporaries, who were effectively unable to build due to an extremely slow moving economy began their careers with close analysis, explicit observation and recording of the mundane aspects of Japanese cities, and the objects and buildings within them. This method was ostensibly begun by an architect and social theorist called Wajiro Kon (1888-1973) who studied peasant houses in search of the origins of Japanese Architecture. Following the disastrous Kanto earthquake of 1923, Kon walked through the rubble of Tokyo and observed the makeshift shelters that the people built. He watched these shelters become communes and eventually homes, observing that *"it was like watching thousands of years of social development compressed into a few months."*<sup>8</sup>

This method was continued by Terunobu Fujimori, an academic and architect who began building late in his life.<sup>9</sup> Fujimori focussed his research on Western-style buildings in Japan from the Meiji period<sup>10</sup> onwards. His architecture is easy to dismiss as pure aestheticism to the Western eye, and is *"perhaps prone to be misunderstood by reductive descriptions"*<sup>11</sup> yet it is based on a great deal of research and cosmopolitan knowledge, and conforms to neither Japanese nor Western architectural traditions. Fujimori continued the method of observation as a research method, having joined with friends to set up the Tokyo Architectural Detective Agency in the 1970s whilst writing his thesis. *"Carrying maps and cameras, the detectives walked around Tokyo[...], seeking out western-style buildings that had long been forgotten and covered up [...] finding and documenting the idiosyncratic subversions and*

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6 Idenburg, F. (2010) "Relations" p68

7 The term Bow-Wow generation was first used by Akira Suzuki in relation to Atelier Bow-Wow, made up of architects Yosiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima

8 Gill, T. (1996) p198

9 Fujimori is an academic at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan, and began building in 1995. His first commission came from a request from a prominent family in his home town to suggest an architect "to build a small museum and store to exhibit historical materials of the family" (Fujimori, T. 2007) Unable to suggest a local architect whose buildings would be appropriate to the aesthetic sensibilities of the family (despite Toyo Ito's family being parishioners of an adjacent shrine) Fujimori decided that he "would have to take on the commission" himself. (*ibid*)

10 The Meiji period (1868 - 1912) in Japanese history (meaning *enlightened rule*) was the period in which Japan changed from an isolated feudal society to its modern form.

11 Sumner, Y. (2009) p31



*flaws in buildings.*"<sup>12</sup> This culminated in the publication of "*Kenchiku Tantei no Boken: Tokyo Hen (Adventures of an Architectural Detective: Tokyo)*"<sup>13</sup>. Following the success of this publication Fujimori met novelist Genpei Akasegawa at the house of writer and designer Joji Hayashi, along with a collector and an illustrator. This meeting formed the start of a collective which came to be known as the Roadway Observation Society (*ROJO*). The group took overnight trips together<sup>14</sup> to observe interesting urban scenes within the city to which no-one had paid attention before and recorded these scenes with cameras and notepads as expressions of the city's unconscious. Fujimori's own architecture builds upon the findings of his observations, and the materials and objects he uses in his work "*share the same haphazard, disparate existence that ROJO's findings tend to exhibit.*"<sup>15</sup>

Atelier Bow-Wow, continued Kon and Fujimori's methods of observation and recording, but shifted their focus onto small buildings, free of professional artifice, as expressions of the city around them, and published two books, *Pet Architecture Guidebook*, and *Made in Tokyo* <sup>16</sup> The two books highlighted buildings and urban interventions with *shapes and forms that do not conform to styles and pretensions [that] are quite refreshing to our eyes. They illustrate unique ideas with elements of fun without yielding to their unfavourable conditions such as small sizes and widths.*<sup>17</sup> This method, developed from the work of Kon between the 1920s and 1950s, and continued by Fujimori in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, has allowed Atelier Bow-Wow to amass a significant amount of research on urban forms, and analysis of the places where they intend to build, which provided a starting point for their architecture, following the collapse of Japanese economic bubble. Atelier Bow-Wow's buildings use the inventive solutions to urban problems, that they have observed in their publications as a conceptual starting point for their design. They produce an architecture that is highly site specific and inventive.

Kikutake, Ito, SANAA and the relationalists

A separate and final thread was begun by Kiyonori Kikutake who established his own firm in the 1950s in Tokyo. Eight years after completing his studies he finished construction of his own home, the *Sky House* in Tokyo (Fig. 36-37), a building that defined his career, and helped establish the Metabolist Movement in Japan. The house was designed around a single living space, originally elevated on piers, with the elements most likely to change distributed around the outside of this main volume. The Japanese Metabolists (established in Tokyo in 1960 at the World Design Conference) set out to explore the "*symbiosis of*

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- 12 Sumner, Y. 2009 p34  
For more information on the ROJO, see the website created for the 2006 Venice Biennale. (See Bibliography) The Japanese pavilion was curated by Fujimori.
- 13 Chikuma, S. (1986)
- 14 Akasegawa, G. (2004)
- 15 Sumner, Y. (2009) p38
- 16 *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (2002) Tokyo, World Photo Press  
*Made in Tokyo* (2001), Tokyo, Kajima Institute Publishing
- 17 Kuroda, J. and Kajjima, M. (2002)



Fig.36. Kiyonori Kikutake *Sky House* photograph by Iwan Baan. The house has been expanded by this point, in line with it's original intention to cater for the changing needs of the inhabitants.



Fig.37. Kiyonori Kikutake *Sky House* photograph by Iwan Baan

*diverse cultures, from anthropocentrism to ecology, from industrial to information society, from universalism to the age of symbiosis of diverse elements, from the age of the machine to the age of the life principle.*"<sup>18</sup>

Toyo Ito worked in Kikutake's office between 1965 and 1969, at which point he started his own studio.<sup>19</sup> In his early studies, Ito explored in more detail the relation between new technologies and urban living and responded to the Japanese city where boundaries between interior and exterior space, and public and private space were becoming increasingly blurred. This led to a significant interest in the skin and surface of his buildings that was increasingly concerned by a relation between interior and exterior spaces. Particularly illustrative of this is his Tower of Winds project completed in 1986, a ventilation shaft for a shopping centre clad in perforated aluminium panels which reacts to the changing atmospheric conditions of the environment around it, responding with changing lighting.

Kazuyo Sejima of SANAA does not see their work in any kind of Japanese tradition:

We may be influenced by Japanese architecture subconsciously, but we don't think of ourselves as particularly Japanese architects.<sup>20</sup>

Sejima however worked in Toyo Ito's studio between 1981 and 1987, setting up her own practice at the height of the bubble. With the collapse of the economy the Japanese architectural establishment went through a period of reflection, surrounded by the towering excesses of the bubble economy. The rapid change in the character and visual appearance of Sejima's work reflects this sudden change to the economy. The Japanese city yearned for a more restrained architectural language, and Sejima (alongside her student and first graduate student Ryue Nishizawa) built upon the work of Toyo Ito, and his investigations into the relation between building and city, expanding this to search for relationships and interfaces that would go on to inform their architecture. SANAA's international status and prolific international office has allowed them to expand the conceptual basis of their working methods, and to observe the methods and theories of other cultures. It is likely that this is why SANAA does not see themselves as a particularly *Japanese* practice, as their influences and references extend from far beyond Japan's shores.

Sejima and Nishizawa's own apprentices, including Jun'ya Ishigami, Tetsuo Kondo and Florian Idenburg of American practice SO - IL have continued to explore interfaces and relationships within their architecture and this is examined in depth later.

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18 Kurokawa, K. Quoted in *Cities on the Move*, by Obrist, H. Hanru, H. Cantz, H. in the Exhibition description shown 1998-1999

19 Idenburg, F. (2010) "Relations" p71

20 Glancey, J. (2009) Interview with Sejima, K.





Fig.38. *Tower of Winds*, Japan, Toyo Ito, photograph Tomio Ohashi

Though the lineages described are discrete with little overlap in their theoretical direction, what is interesting is the status and importance of relationships within each of the flows. Maekawa, Tange and their followers, referred heavily to Western Modernist precepts, and their work explores relationships between Western and Japanese theoretical and practical methods. Their work looks at how technology can be used for the benefit of people, and the relationship between the two. Fujimori and the Bow-Wow Generation explore the relationship that inhabitants have with their city, whilst Kikutake, Ito and SANAA are more interested in the interfaces and relationships between the public and the private, urban and residential scales, and the relationships between the people in architecture. These relationships and interactions (be they with cities, buildings, technologies or people) differentiate Japanese architectural method from its Western counterpart.

Japanese international architects have discussed the fundamental differences between Western and Japanese architectures, and in an interview from 2010 Kengo Kuma refers to the idea that, “*Western architecture is about shape and form and Asian architecture is about relationships*”<sup>21</sup>. This idea that relationships may transcend the importance of shape and form in Japanese architecture demands that the observer use different tools to analyse and critique the evidence.

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21 Lifson, E. (2010) taken from an interview with Kengo Kuma



Fig.39. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002 Front Cover showing Ritkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (One Revolution per Minute)*



# Relational Aesthetics and a new Japanese tradition

The *relational* that has been explored in terms of Japanese architectural lineages has been manifested more recently in the West in a contemporary art practice known as Relational Aesthetics, and the group of artists who were the main protagonists of this movement were working at the same time as SANAA were developing into an successful international practice. There is significant crossover in the methods that both SANAA and the relational artists used to produce their work, and the language that has been used to describe it.

## Relational Aesthetics

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, published in 1998 (originally in French, *Esthétique Relationnelle* translated into English in 2002)<sup>1</sup>, is a significant text in the field of art criticism that attempted to account for, characterise and collect a series of artists and works of the 1990s. Stewart Martin in his *Critique of Relational Aesthetics* identifies the text as acquiring "*the status of an 'ism', a name for what is new about contemporary art, and a key position in debates over art's orientation and value today.*"<sup>2</sup> The text has generated debate following its publication, and significant critical responses have been published that deal with the strengths and limitations of the theory.<sup>3</sup>

Bourriaud begins his analysis by questioning his peers critical abilities to comprehend the art and contemporary art practices that various artists were engaged in at the time of writing:

Where do the misunderstandings surrounding 1990s' art come from, if not a theoretical discourse complete with shortcomings? An overwhelming majority of critics and philosophers are reluctant to come to grips with contemporary practices.<sup>4</sup>

Bourriaud defines Relational Aesthetics as an "*aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations*

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1 Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with M Copeland, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002. Originally published in French by same publisher in 1998 as *Esthétique relationnelle*

2 Martin, S. (2007) p369

3 As well as Stewart Martin's critique referred to above, significant responses have also been written by Claire Bishop in *October* and *Artforum*, Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces* and Hal Foster's "Chat Rooms", in *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. The text itself appears to be written in response to Dave Hickey's *Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (pub. 1993, Art Issues Press/Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies), which advocated a conservatism and return to beauty in Art, and which is referred to in the text: "*We can credit Dave Hickey, the art critic who is today's champion of this return to the norm, with calling a spade a spade.*" (Bourriaud, N. (2002) p62)

4 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p7

*which they represent, produce or prompt.*" He further defines Relational art as a *set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.*<sup>5</sup>

Bourriaud promotes art that is itself an experimental production of new social bonds, which encourages interrelations between people. The artists and works that he discusses are seen by the author as an improvement of traditional object-based works.

Though it would be a mistake to consider the art theory as being influential over the work of the practice<sup>6</sup>, this thesis argues that SANAA are a part of this aesthetic tradition.

Bourriaud's relational works are distinguishable from conceptual work taking place concurrently in Britain under the banner of Young British Artists by their "*low impact appearance*" and avoidance of "*accessible references to mass culture.*"<sup>7</sup> Claire Bishop in her response to Bourriaud's text, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, describes the conceptual work being produced in Britain as formally conservative in appearance, whilst Bourriaud's relational pieces *insist on use rather than contemplation*. This move from the formal composition of gallery installations puts the artists Bourriaud describes closer to the tradition of performance art from the 1960s.

It is worth quoting in full Bourriaud's introduction to the relational artists that he uses as case studies throughout his text. This helps to outline the range of work that the artists he is describing engage in:

Rirkrit Tiravanija organises a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. Philippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favourite hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line. Vanessa Beecroft dresses some twenty women in the same way, complete with a red wig, and the visitor merely gets a glimpse of them through the doorway. Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats on 'Bel Paese' cheese and sells them as multiples, or exhibits recently robbed safes. [...] Carsten Höller re-creates the chemical formula of molecules secreted by the human brain when in love, builds an inflatable yacht, and breeds chaffinches with the aim of teaching them a new song.[...] Pierre Huyghe summons people to a casting session, makes a TV transmitter available to the public, and puts a photograph of labourers at work on view just a few yards from the building site. One could add many other names and works to such a list. Anyhow, the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p112 - 113

6 Barnett Newman famously quipped "*Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds*" after speaking at an art conference in Woodstock, New York, in discussion with philosopher Susanne Langer.

7 Bishop, C. (2004) p55

8 Bourriaud, N. (1998, trans. 2002) pp7-8

In the examples that he cites and the language that he uses to describe them, Bourriaud identifies the innovation that occurred in 1990s art as not a particular *style, theme or iconography* but *the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations*.<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud argues that art has become about its social form as opposed to its appearance to the viewer; in other words, that the art object has been subjugated by the social (or in his own language, relational) encounters that it produces:

...what [the artist] produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.<sup>10</sup>

In 2010, Philippe Parreno exhibited his first solo exhibition in the UK in the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens.<sup>11</sup> The exhibition was set up with four separate film pieces arranged by Parreno in the gallery, as well as an installation on the outside of the building emitting fake snowflakes over the windows of the gallery. The exhibition brought together four video and film pieces produced by Parreno between 2003 and 2010, and placed them in a theatrical setting, directed by the artist. As one film finished the next began in a separate room, closing and opening blinds on the windows of the rooms as required, directing the audience through the gallery to experience the films sequentially. The content of the films varied, starting with a re-enactment of the train transporting Robert F. Kennedy's body from New York to Washington, on June 8, 1968. The film observed the individuals who had come out to observe the passing of the train. The film was projected at a large scale so that the individuals on screen matched more closely the scale of the audience involved in the piece. A second film, *Invisibleboy* shows an illegal Chinese immigrant child hidden in a deserted Manhattan room, whilst characters from the boy's dreams are physically scratched into the film, highlighting the child's illegitimate status in the city. The other films in the show deal with politicised subjects from energy generation, and protest.<sup>12</sup> Parreno is discussed frequently in *Relational Aesthetics*, though the exhibition in the Serpentine Gallery was shown a number of years after the book was published. Parreno's occupation of the whole gallery, and control of the viewer through a choreographed routine of lights turning on and off, blinds opening and closing, and films starting and ending is the important relational aspect of the work. Bourriaud assigns the control of visitors by the artist as *relational*, and potentially the most important aspect of a piece. In relation to a piece by Julia Scher (*Security by Julia*), Bourriaud explains:

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9 Bourriaud, N. (1998, trans. 2002) p43

10 Bourriaud, N. (1998, trans. 2002) p42

11 I attended this show, with little knowledge of the artist, and no knowledge of the associated art history theory. The exhibition was in 2010, and the book published in 1998.

12 A description of the pieces can be found at [http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2010/09/philippe\\_parreno25\\_november23\\_3.html](http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2010/09/philippe_parreno25_november23_3.html) (accessed 19 November 2011)





Fig.40. *June 8, 1968* (2009) Philippe Parreno



Fig.41. *June 8, 1968* (2009) Philippe Parreno

Scenes from Philippe Parreno's  
installation for the Serpentine Gallery



Fig.42. *The Boy From Mars* (2003) Philippe Parreno

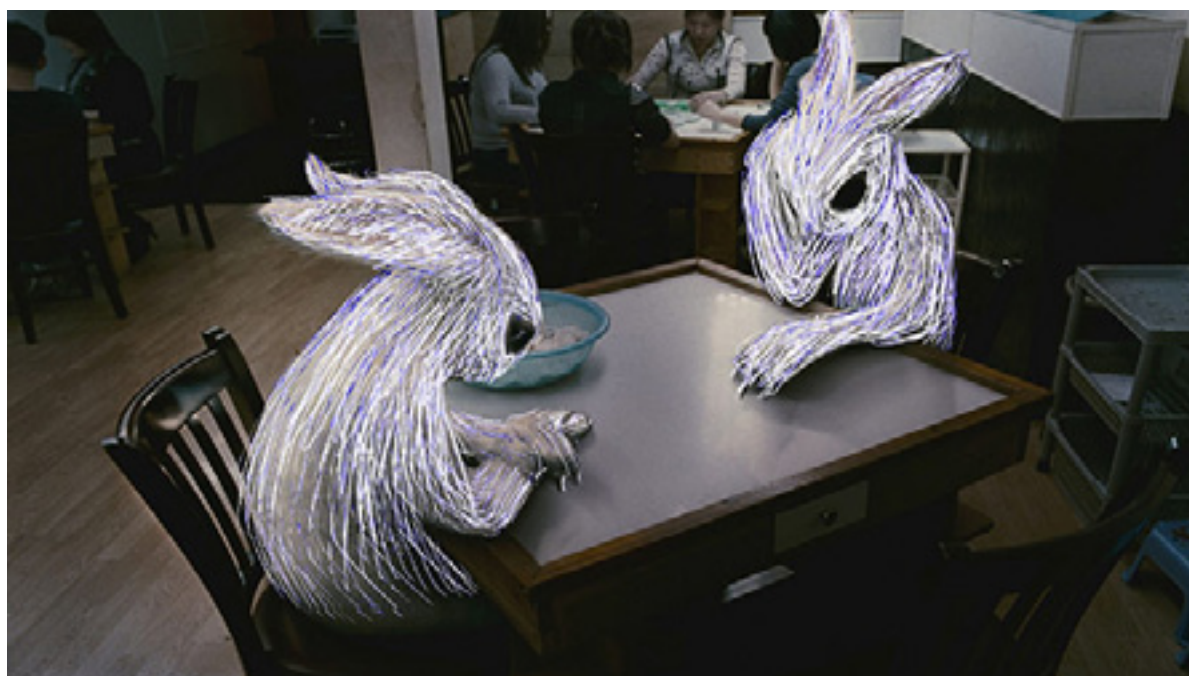


Fig.43. *Invisibleboy* (2010) Philippe Parreno

Scenes from Philippe Parreno's  
installation for the Serpentine Gallery

It is the human flow of visitors, and its possible regulation, which thus becomes the raw material and the subject of the piece. Before long, it is the entire exhibition process that is “occupied” by the artist.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the occupation of the gallery, Parreno’s piece operates in a relational manner by virtue of its assembly of people at the gallery engaged in the same activity for the exact period of 30 minutes, the time for the films to play in order before starting again at the beginning. By bringing together a group of people, who would otherwise view an object-based exhibition with a limited relationship to one another, Parreno is encouraging relations between his viewers, bringing together a number of people to perform a synchronised activity.

The theoretical basis for Bourriaud’s thinking lie with Walter Benjamin, in his “*The Author as Producer*”<sup>14</sup> in which Benjamin approaches the question of the autonomy of the individual when producing work within the cultural, social and economic frameworks of the era in which they are working. Benjamin suggests that the author “*directs his energies towards what is useful for the proletariat in the class struggle. We say that he espouses a tendency.*”<sup>15</sup> Benjamin goes on to say that “*a work which exhibits the correct political tendency need demonstrate no further qualities.*”<sup>16</sup> Bourriaud’s 1990’s artists represent the requirement for audience engagement with itself, facilitating discussion and discourse, and he sees this as exhibiting Benjamin’s *qualities* of a relational artwork. The relational aesthetes, by engaging the audience in the work beyond that of an observer, that is to say becoming a participant in the artwork itself, the audience is elevated to the status of a collaborator.

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13 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p38

14 Benjamin, W. (1934) The text from an address delivered at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, on 27 April 1934. Source: <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=135> Accessed Nov 2011

15 Benjamin, W. (1934) p 1

16 Benjamin, W. (1934) p 1.



## Relational art and the political

A central theme in the description and promotion of relational art is its engagement with the realities of the contemporary world. The artists that are described are not promoting utopian responses to the system of social relations existing in the contemporary world, but practice art that learns *to inhabit the world in a better way*.

[...] the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.<sup>17</sup>

Bourriaud's system of social relations, which we can call global capitalism, are not attempted to be changed by his relational artists; Bourriaud's chosen artists do not attempt to overcome, change or even highlight the system of exploitation or subordination that the world they inhabit requires. *"Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond."*<sup>18</sup> Bourriaud does however, assert that the *"social bond has been turned into a standardized artefact"* where *"anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish"*, and this sets up a situation in which relational art can fill the void: in a world where the media is the spectacle that *"deals first and foremost with forms of human relations[...], it can only be analysed and fought through the production of new types of relationships between people."*<sup>19</sup> Bourriaud is explaining that in order to compete with the perceived problems of the system that we inhabit, the artist or activist must (and can only) operate in its manner. This is manifested clearly in Parreno's installation at the Serpentine Gallery described previously. The artist shows a series of films which deal with politicised subjects but the visuals are so abstracted from their subjects that without the gallery description, it is unclear what theme they are dealing with. It seems for Parreno, highlighting the issues that he has chosen to render in his films is less important than the act of creating a choreographed space in which *new types of relationships between people* can be produced.

Claire Bishop compares the works that Bourriaud describes with 1960's performance art, which placed a premium *"on the authenticity of our first-hand encounter with the artist's body,"*<sup>20</sup> though she makes clear that Bourriaud distances the work that he is promoting as different from that of previous generations. Bishop describes the main difference as Bourriaud sees it as *"the shift in attitude toward social change: instead of a "utopian" agenda, today's artists seek only to find provisional solutions in the here and now; instead of trying to change their environment, artists today are simply "learning to inhabit the world in a better way"; instead of looking forward to a future utopia, this art sets up functioning "microtopias" in the present"*<sup>21</sup>

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17 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p13

18 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 36

19 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 85

20 Bishop, C. (2004) p54

21 Bishop, C. (2004) p 54



Fig.44. Santiago Sierra *250cm line tattooed on six paid people* (1999)



Fig.45. Santiago Sierra *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*, (2000)

This politicised aspect of the work that Bourriaud is describing challenges the viewer to judge the work on more than its aesthetics, but as Bishop puts it, to “*judge the ‘relations’ that are produced by relational art works*”. Though Bishop questions the relational success of the artworks that Bourriaud promotes, due to the limited exposure that many will have to a largely similar social group (or alternatively the owner of the piece) she does not argue that “*relational art works need to develop a greater social conscience*”. It is however important to consider who the consumers of relational art are, and how the institutions that maintain the collections are visited primarily by the cultural elite. By separating the work from the struggle that it professes to support and those who could use it, the work loses its power.

When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?<sup>22</sup>

It is unclear why relational art that is ostensibly set up to promote “*entry into dialogue*”, and question how one “*could exist, and how, in the space*” defined by the artwork<sup>23</sup> would not more actively attempt to “*develop a greater social conscience*”<sup>24</sup> though Bourriaud argues that “*it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows*”.<sup>25</sup>

Bishop illustrates her point with the artist Santiago Sierra<sup>26</sup>, an artist who like Bourriaud’s relational aesthetes, sets up relationships between the artist, the audience and the participants in his work. Where Sierra differs from the relational artists however is that his works “*are more complicated—and more controversial—than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics.*”<sup>27</sup> The artworks that Sierra produces are controversial in their use of people, in a way that he sees his art functioning to highlight the disparities and unfairness inherent in the world that he inhabits. His piece *250cm line tattooed on six paid people* (1999) took migrant workers who were paid the equivalent of a day’s wages to have a single black line tattooed on their backs. “*His work can be seen as a grim meditation on the social and political conditions that permit disparities in people’s “prices” to emerge.*” Other works by Sierra include: *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined Sixty Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by*

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22 Bishop, C. (2004) p 65

23 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 109

24 Bishop, C. (2004) p65

25 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 45

26 Santiago Sierra born 1966 living in Madrid.

27 Bishop, C. (2004) p70



*Five People*, Mexico City (2000), *A Person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours* (2000), and *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*. Arsenale, Venice Biennale, (2001) (Fig. 44-45) These evocative titles do not shade the works from their conceptual weight, and by showing what people are willing to have done to them for a small amount of money with which to feed themselves, Sierra is shocking his audience, and producing a space in which artefacts are displayed to instigate debate within a formed community.

With an understanding of relational art, and a critical response to the text with which to criticise the works, the thesis will now turn its attention to the social conditions that demand a relational approach to architecture and to SANAA, their followers and a series of case studies to argue that their creative output is best analysed and explored as works in the critical analysis of relational aesthetics.

# The origins of and cultural need for relational space

*What a blinding light.*

*It's so hot.*

*I hate sweating.*

*Why did I come out?*

*Right.*

*I'm going... Where.*

*To the left. The subway station.*

*No, the bus is better.*

*3 Daizawa. Right, I don't have any money.*

*Nobody must see me.*

*Where do I have to go?*

*[...]*

*Let's walk. Off we go.*

*hikikomori,*

From the film "Shaking Tokyo" by Bong Joon-ho<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 46-47)

*Hikikomori - Lit. "pulling away, being confined"*

*Japanese term to refer to the phenomenon of reclusive individuals who have chosen to withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement.*

Shaking Tokyo describes a *hikikomori*, who has withdrawn from human interaction in Tokyo, surviving on deliveries and an allowance from his estranged family. When he leaves his apartment after 10 years to pursue a delivery girl, he notices that the streets of the city are empty and the entire city has become 'shut in'. An earthquake forces the inhabitants from their homes, into the bright sunlight of the empty streets, and the distressed residents are forced to interact with each other, very briefly.

The phenomenon of *hikikomori* in Japan, of which conservative estimates account for hundreds of thousands of cases<sup>2</sup> is expressive of a withdrawal from the real in Japanese society, to a life of limited social interaction, and isolation. Though the issue is widely discussed around the world, in Japan and the East<sup>3</sup> the problem is manifested most significantly in Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> Joon-Ho, B. (2008) *Shaking Tokyo*, from the film *Tokyo!*

<sup>2</sup> Jones, M. (2006)

<sup>3</sup> A number of cases of hikikomori have also been reported in South Korea and Taiwan. (Source: Jones, M. (2006))



Fig.46. *Shaking Tokyo*, Bong Joon-Ho (2008) The *hikikomori* depicted survives on deliveries...



Fig.47. *Shaking Tokyo*, Bong Joon-Ho (2008) ...avoiding face to face encounters with people



Claire Bishop identifies the issue of the shift from the physical to the virtual to explain *relational aesthetics* in her critique of Bourriaud's text:

[Relational Aesthetics] is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own "possible universes".<sup>4</sup>

Architects have long attempted to deal issues of human interaction, to foster relationships between individuals, and provide spaces in which people wish to be with one another, but a culture of withdrawal caused by a reduced need for face to face interaction in Japan in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has antagonised the issues. Japanese architects have a history of considering this premise in their work, and before exploring the relational work of SANAA and their followers, it is worth briefly exploring the work of Kengo Kuma who has taken a different approach to the cultural shift from the real to the virtual in society, particularly in Japan. Kuma's approach which he sets out in his series of essays *Anti Object*<sup>5</sup> explores case studies of his own work, setting out his theoretical approach to an architecture of disappearance. His opposition to object architecture is an opposition to architecture that is *of material existence distinct from its immediate environment*. Kuma's architecture, through *Disappearance, Connection, Flowing Out, Erasing, Minimising, Unravelling, Reversing, Substituting and Breaking down into Particles* attempts a manifestly new type of architecture: an architecture that learns from *new digital and information technologies as [...] an aesthetics of disappearance, rather than image or form*.<sup>6</sup> In a world in which *everything has become connected* it is the role of the architect to create forms in which people can continue to interact and relate. (Fig. 48-49)

Our objective should not be to renounce matter but rather to search for a form of matter other than objects. What that form is called - architecture, gardens, computer technology - is not important. Until a new name is given to that form, I will call it the 'anti-object'.<sup>7</sup>

The architecture of SANAA, and their response to the disintegration of physical relations in society is explored in the next chapter, and though it differs from Kuma's methods, the intention remains the same; *to patiently re-stitch the social fabric*.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Bishop, C. (2004) p 54 (quoting Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) *Relational Aesthetics*, p13)

5 Kuma, K. (2008) *The Anti-Object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture* London AA Publications

6 Kuma, K. (2008) in the Foreword written by Brett Steele.

7 Kuma, K. (2008) p 32

8 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 36



Fig.48. *Anti-Object*, Kengo Kuma (2008)

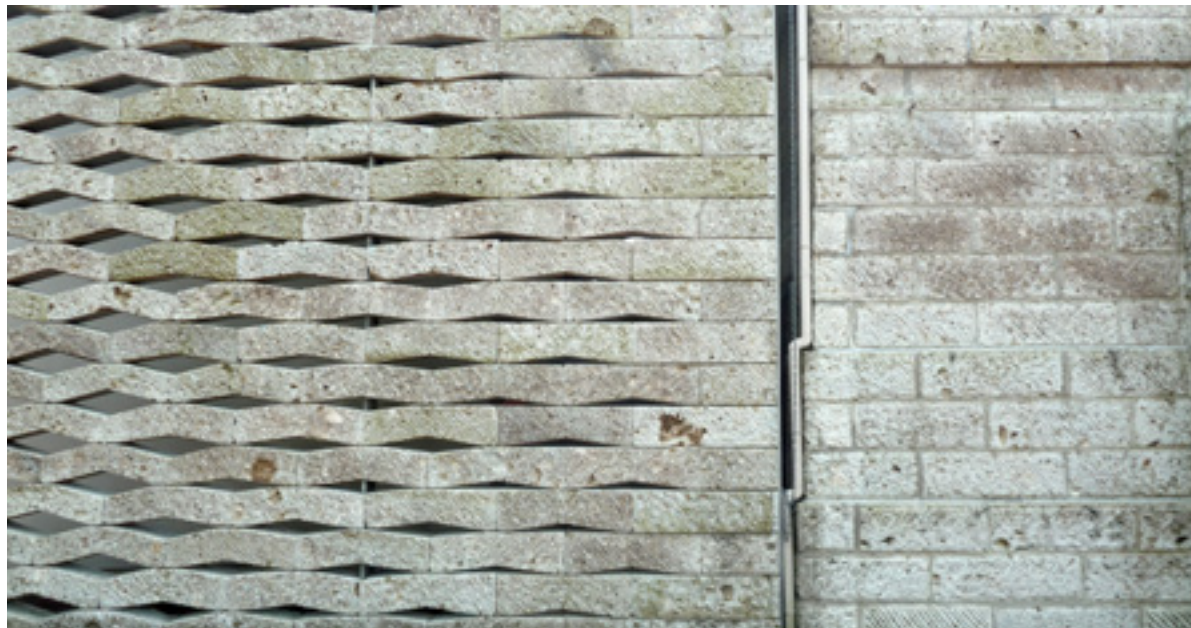


Fig.49. *Chokkura Stone Plaza, Tochigi, Japan* (2006), Kengo Kuma Photograph by James Kirk

The relational artists that Bourriaud identifies in his text share a similar intention to these architects in Japan, however where the artist can comment on the disintegration of the *social bond* and suggest solutions, the architect is uniquely capable of providing spatialised concrete responses to the issues that are perceived. One such method of response is explored in the following chapters.

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Facing page: Kuma's use of materials on the Chokkura Stone Plaza is an example of Breaking Down into Particles. By subtracting parts of the stone wall, Kuma subtracted elements of the 'object'. *"Waver[ing] between being and representation, between its essential heaviness and its apparent lightness, between its opaque attribute and its actual transparency"*. He hopes to achieve this also on the scale of the building itself. Here Kuma is breaking down into particles the existing storehouse on the right to reduce the mass of the addition.





Fig.50. *Field Party* Photograph of a book spread by flickr.com user Packing Light



Fig.51. *Field Party* Photograph of a book spread by flickr.com user Packing Light

# SANAA's Relational Space

“Our focus is always to find different relationships.” <sup>1</sup>

In an age of non-physical communication by various means, it is the job of the architect to provide real spaces for direct communication between people.<sup>2</sup>

Kazuyo Sejima (SANAA)

## Field Party

In 2002 Sejima with her students tested an architectural installation in a field outside Tokyo. The project consisted of a grid of around 100 barbeques separated by approximately 12m on a grid formation. (Fig. 50-51) Each offered a single type of either meat or vegetable, with some points on the grid offering drinks. The residents in the adjacent neighbourhoods to the field were then invited to wander among the barbeques encountering their neighbours along the way, encouraging interactions between the residents.

The party looks disconnected, but people share the coming dusk together.<sup>3</sup>

Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA)

Nicolas Bourriaud opens *Relational Aesthetics* with a description of Rirkrit Tiravanija’s piece in which he organises a dinner in an art collector’s home.<sup>4</sup> He leaves all of the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. In another piece produced for the Aperto ’93, Tiravanija allows visitors to make dehydrated Chinese soups in the gallery, using hot water provided on a camping stove in the centre of the gallery.<sup>5</sup> These pieces, alongside many others described by Bourriaud set up possibilities for encounter that are not unlike the encounters or *relational situations* set up by Sejima for her *Field Party*. This thesis shows how these early activities were used to inform their later large scale building projects, and that Sejima and Nishizawa are pioneers in a tradition of Japanese architects who consider the relational within their work to gain, and respond more successfully to, larger scale work.

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1 Moore, R. (2010)

2 Sejima, K. (2003)

3 Sejima, K. and Nishizawa, R. (2003)

4 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p7

5 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002). p25

### The EPFL Learning Center

The EPFL Learning Center in Lausanne, Switzerland is located on the north shore of Lake Geneva. It stands at the entrance to the campus in a wildflower and grass meadow. The plan of the building effectively extends this meadow, changing the floor surface from plants to bound gravel to carpet. The building is entered on foot, by crossing the meadow, which is interrupted in places by patches of concrete. The floor of the building then gracefully sweeps up from the ground, allowing access into the interior and exterior landscapes, enclosed by the walls of the building. When approaching on foot, the experience of a parkland setting is unbroken by the interior of the building, which is arranged as a series of character areas and pavilions, both enclosed and open that define the wide spaces around them.

The building is nothing when empty of people. *“Not unlike SANAA’s renderings these projects without their people and furniture would merely seem a collection of reflections and multiple shades of white.”*<sup>6</sup> This has equivalence to a comment made by the relational artist Liam Gillick<sup>7</sup> who describes his work as such:

“My work is like the light in the fridge,” he says, “it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it’s not art—it’s something else—stuff in a room.”

The open spaces of the building facilitate interaction between the different departments and users of the building, the glass walls and minimal balustrading on the circulation pieces encourage unbroken visual access between spaces. Vast undefined areas of floor between programmatic elements within the plan allow unprogrammed space for working and engaging with other building users. Nodes of programmatic elements are distributed around an internal landscape, encouraging the discourse and interaction essential to successful study.

The basis for both the nodes of activity set within unprogrammed space, and the interaction between the interior and exterior space within the building footprint and its surroundings are preceded by the smaller work undertaken prior to their major commissions. The nodal points serving functions within the landscape of the building are informed by the experiments undertaken for the *Field Party* project; the manner of the perimeter walls may come from Sejima’s time spent in Toyo Ito’s office, and particularly Ito’s interest in the interface between building and city. This leitmotif was developed by SANAA through projects such as their *Moriyama House*, completed in 2005, by Nishizawa. The house separates the typical functions of a home

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6 Idenburg, F. (2010) p77 “Relations” Florian Idenburg is a past employee of SANAA.

7 Liam Gillick is a British artist born in 1964, residing in New York. He exhibited in Bourriaud’s exhibition *Traffic* at the Musée d’art Contemporain de Bordeaux, France, which was an exhibition ‘built around a theoretical work [which tried] to catch a moment in art production’, namely Relational Aesthetics. Source: Morton, T. (2009)

into separate rooms within an exterior landscape, engaging the day-to-day use of the house by the resident, with the day to day use of the surrounding city, by its inhabitants. This expression of the buildings' interiors into the surrounding landscape has a clear evolution into the Learning Center, the success of the interior spaces being dependent on the landscape in which they are situated. Sejima likens the interior of the building to a landscape, using a frequent analogy of a park:

We somehow imagine it like a park, with the space for the chance to start communicating.<sup>8</sup>

Much can be taken from the way that the building is represented through drawings and photographs in the literature and journals published since the completion of the project. The plan of the Learning Center is particularly revealing of the relational nature of the building, in its manifestation as well as the way it is drawn. (see Fig. 52) As is typical with SANAA's presentation drawings, the plan is presented with the appearance of a diagram, with significant graphic qualities. The shapes and forms of the plan give the appearance of a subtly arranged spatial composition, though the reality is far more formally complex; despite the brief requirement that certain areas of the building are able to be closed, the building is required to be open to the public throughout the year. This adds a significant complexity to the spatial hierarchy that is not shown in the plan.

When discussing the arrangement of the plan and the internal landscape of hills and valley, SANAA use references to human movement:

Human movements are not linear like the way a train travels, but curve in a more organic way. With straight lines we can only create crossroads, but with curves we can create more diverse interactions.<sup>9</sup>

Nishizawa, R.

The internal topography of hills and valleys that comprise the interior space is applied throughout the design of the floor of the building, so that the curving space formed by the plan is evident also in the section of the building.

By allowing the building to curve in both plan and section, the architects are encouraging interaction between building users, by gently nudging them to the entrances, programmatic functions and circulation routes, rather than by dictating spatial orientation through routes and corridors.

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8 Sejima, K. (2010) Interview with SANAA on the EPFL website available at [http://www.rolexlearningcenter.ch/the\\_building/](http://www.rolexlearningcenter.ch/the_building/) Accessed November 2011

9 Nishizawa, R. (2010) Interview with SANAA on the EPFL website



When people find valleys, they tend to settle there and build villages. When they find a hill, they like to build a beautiful cafe on the hill. When they find slopes, they cover them in terraces.<sup>10</sup>

Nishizawa, R.

The building includes a large number of very different programmatic elements. The project brief includes a bank, restaurant, cafe, library, departmental offices, seminar rooms, lecture halls and a bookshop. These are arranged around the landscape as if it were found, and not a meticulously engineered piece of architectural design.

The programme of the building operates, and is possible, due to the relational spaces that it sets up. The way the building operates is not by chance; the relational spaces are the product of SANAA's smaller works and installations that operate from a similar starting point.

The games SANAA instigates are local, they end at the perimeter. They can be playful, as the sets of rules and relationships do not represent a blueprint for an all-encompassing utopian system. One often mentions the permeable nature of SANAA's facades, but these will not allow the game to escape into the world. They are transparent to seduce people to enter. The more participants, the more fun the game yields.<sup>11</sup>

Idenburg, F.

SANAA's aesthetic for the Learning Center shares clear similarities with the modernist tradition as highlighted in relation to Mark Wigley's *White Walls and Designer Dresses*. Whilst aesthetically similar to those architects who continue to work in this modernist tradition, including by way of example Oscar Niemeyer's landscapes and buildings the architectures of SANAA and Niemeyer are conceived from very different theoretical positions<sup>12</sup>. For his Centro Niemeyer, the architect conceived a landscape in which pavilions are arranged in an expansive white landscape. Curved external walkways, and narrow ramps moving through the internal space characterise the landscape of Niemeyer's building, and much of the same landscape is used to describe both the Learning Center, and the Centro. Despite this, the formal beauty of Niemeyer's landscape is conceived as an utopian vision, like that of his utopian capital, Brasília, and this sets it apart greatly from Sejima and Nishizawa's playful and humane relational architecture which is conceived to accommodate its users.

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10 Moore, R. (2010)

11 Idenburg, F. (2010) "Relations" p74

12 Despite this, Nishizawa has referred to Niemeyer as part of his 'unforgettable trio of architects' including Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe.



a sparrow which inhabited the cafe within the interior space of the meadow was unperturbed by the existence of a roof above her head

















The internal landscape protects the private and quiet parts of the brief from the public noisy activities using spatial techniques usually used in landscaping. Here a hill protects the working space from the public restaurant.

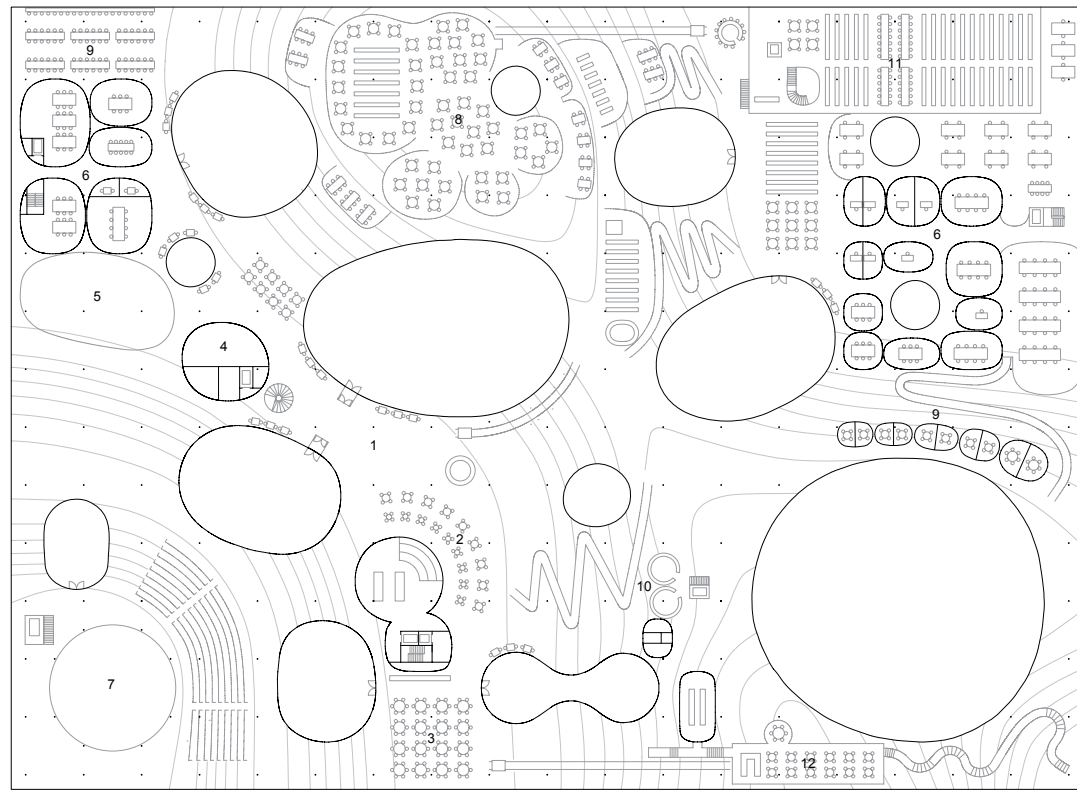




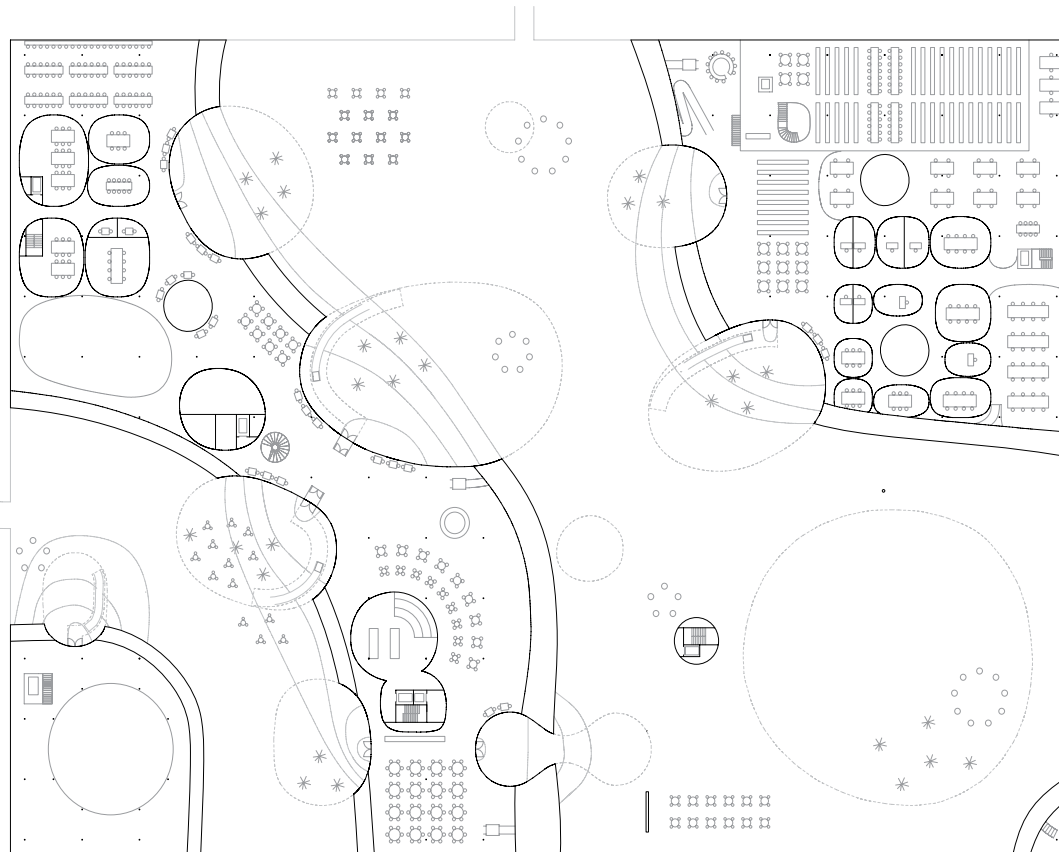


The building is designed to encourage interaction between the different users of the building. Here the glazed walls allow some communication between students, while maintaining the privacy and silence to work.





10m



The graphical style of the plan presents the building with the appearance of a landscape, with paths, amphitheatres, lakes and pavilions. The reality of the spatial composition is much more complex however. Open areas of the building, in the lower edge and left side of the plan allow public and student interaction, protecting the working areas around the perimeter from intrusion. The brief requirements are gradated from the bottom to the top (towards the campus) with private working areas separated by the internal hills, and external courtyards from the public areas.

Top, Primary floor plan

Bottom, Undercroft and external landscaping plan.

1. Main entrance
2. Cafe
3. Food court
4. Bank
5. Bookshop
6. Offices
7. Multipurpose hall
8. Library
9. Work area
10. Ancient books collection
11. Research collection
12. Restaurant

Previous Pages The Learning Center. Photographs by James Kirk

Fig.53. Sparrow in the Landscape

Fig.54. The Learning Center Undercroft

Fig.55. The Learning Center Interior Landscape

Fig.56. The Learning Center Restaurant

Fig.57. Interaction between students in the Learning Center

Fig.52. Plans of SANAA's Rolex Learning Center. Source: *Detail Magazine* (English Edition), Vol. 4, 2010.



## 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art

The relational spaces realised so effortlessly and beautifully have been developed and explored in other projects, notably in the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan.

The museum is set within a city block, in a landscaped setting. A perimeter path around the exterior of the building is separated from the path around the perimeter of the interior of the building by a single sheet of glass that extends from the floor to the ceiling. A polished concrete floor in the interior of the building extends the trimmed grass outside. This extension of the adjacent landscape fits with the architects frequent analogies to the park as a place where multiple and diverse activities take place concurrently. *“Paths, trees, and shrubs form soft separations between zones of accommodation. The user can roam freely between these different zones and see people enjoying their surroundings.”*<sup>13</sup> Within the interior, SANAA vary the density of the programmatic elements, and create ambiguous spaces in much the same way as at Lausanne. The arrangement of the various types of space within the museum reflects that of the adjacent city, with variously proportioned spaces piercing the ceiling and roof of the building, as though individual buildings piercing a layer of clouds.

A significant difference between the two projects is the arrangement and shape of the spaces within the glass walls. While the Learning Center is free in its organisation of spaces, the plan of the museum is explicitly on rectilinear plan (though notably not a grid). This may be related to the cultural and geographical settings of the buildings. The museum is located in the centre of a provincial city with a layout of streets, densely packed buildings and most importantly, people. The experience of interaction and relations is vastly different to the experience of relations in the landscape of a Swiss town on the steep slopes of the Alps. Whilst SANAA not simply referencing the form of the landscapes in which the buildings are located specifically<sup>14</sup>, they are modifying the landscape in which relations may occur based on the cultural and geographic landscape to which the building users are likely to experience and encounter outside the building.

## New Museum

The landscape response is evident also in SANAA's New Museum in Manhattan, New York City, though the landscape form is urban. The success of the project is diminished somewhat by the environment, and *culture of congestion*<sup>15</sup>. This is surprising given that SANAA's background is the congested city of Tokyo. Martin Filler highlights that SANAA's *“expansive imaginations*

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13 Idenburg, F. (2010) “Relations” p77

14 Though Rowan Moore suggests this possibility in his review of the building in the Observer 21 February 2010  
Moore, R. (2010)

15 Koolhaas, R. (1994)

*A polished concrete floor on the interior of the building extends the trimmed grass outside. This extension of the adjacent landscape fits with the architects frequent analogies to the park as a place where multiple and diverse activities take place concurrently.*

p62





The internal streets of the museum allow controlled access to the individual gallery spaces, and encourage interactions between visitors

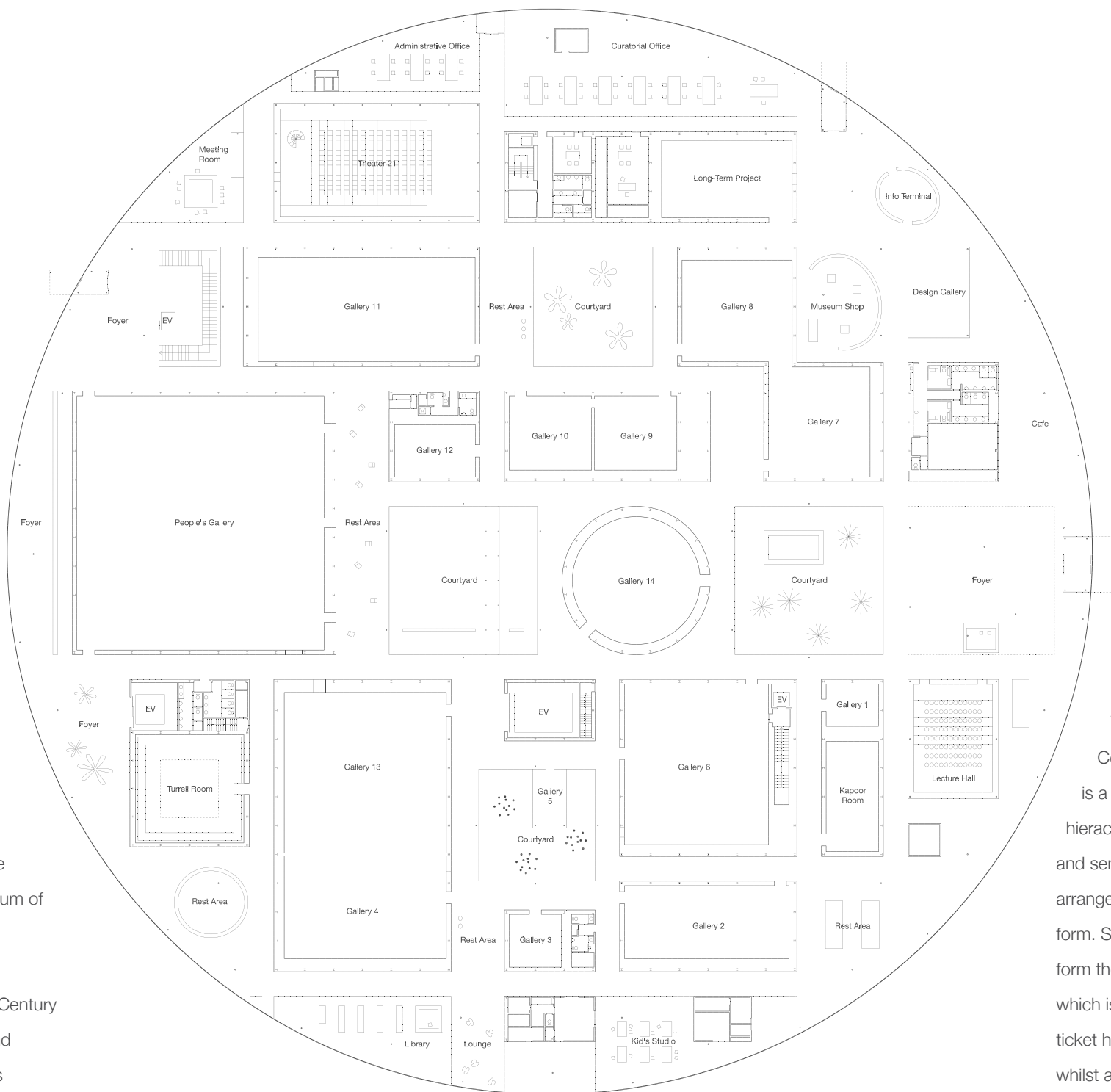




Previous pages The  
21st Century Museum of  
Contemporary Art

Fig.58. The 21st Century  
Museum interior and  
exterior landscapes

Fig.59. The 21st Century  
Museum internal streets



The plan of the 21st  
Century Museum  
is a complex spatial  
hierachy of public, private  
and semi private space  
arranged in an urban plan  
form. Streets and squares  
form the circulation,  
which is able to control  
ticket holders internally  
whilst allowing the public  
freedom to walk around the  
perimeter of the building.

Fig.60. Plans of SANAA's 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art  
Source: Architectural Design Vol. 81, Issue 1, January/February 2011, Pages: 94–101, Plans courtesy of SANAA

*refuse to be cramped by the postage-stamp-sized building plots typical of Tokyo,”*<sup>16</sup> so the New Museum’s 71 x 112 foot ought to have been a non-issue. However, the resulting building is typified internally by constrained gallery spaces that may emulate the constrained spaces in which New York artists work, with only the seventh floor relieving the monotony of the black box above the ground floor, the most successful space in the gallery. The success of the ground floor is through its engagement with the street and the city; a major gallery space, separated from the cafe and reception by a clear glass wall it is successful “*in the way in which it seamlessly [becomes] part of the life of the city*”<sup>17</sup> This relational approach to the design of the floor is similar to the approach undertaken in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, however where the Japanese museum maintains and gradates this engagement with the city around it into the depth of the plan through the circulation spaces, the New Museum’s engagement with the city around it stops abruptly at the first floor.

SANAA have had much involvement with the relational aesthetes that Bourriaud identifies in his text; while curating the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010 Sejima invited Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator heavily involved with Relational Aesthetics to develop an exhibition, after Obrist as co-director of the Serpentine Gallery had invited SANAA to produce the summer Pavilion the previous year; SANAA has produced an installation for Obrist’s *Mutations* exhibition; Carsten Höller produced a large exhibition of new work for the New Museum. SANAA’s New Museum does not *attempt* relational space above the ground floor in the limited site, but provides spaces that facilitate the *possibility* for relational art.

The Zollverein School of Management and Design

SANAA’s work for the Zollverein School is a less explicit manifestation of relational space, however it is valuable to critically appraise the building using the terms of Bourriaud’s text. Relational Aesthetics comes from an artistic lineage which rejects formal conservative aesthetics to promote an aesthetics of interaction, where the work promotes interpersonal relations rather than the containment of formal beauty. This is a familiar position found also in 1960s performance art, and relational art is conceptually within this lineage. It is not a coincidence therefore that Wim Wenders’ recent film *Pina*<sup>18</sup> is filmed in part in SANAA’s Zollverein school, with a significant scene recorded in the roof terrace of the building. It is significant however that whilst SANAA does not seek to achieve formal beauty as the main intention of a building, it is achieved, and this leads to misunderstandings within their architecture.

The Zollverein School provides accommodation for a design school, as well as office space and a library. An open roofed

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16 Filler, M. (2008)

17 Idenburg, F. (2010) Conversation: Kazuyo Sejima, Stan Allen, Florian Idenburg and Toshihiro Oki conducted in Spring 2009.

18 Wim Wenders, *Pina*, released 22 April 2011 (UK) Directed and written by Wim Wenders. The film is a cinematic tribute to Pina Bausch, a dancer, choreographer and director. Bausch is credited with developing the style known as *Tanztheater*.

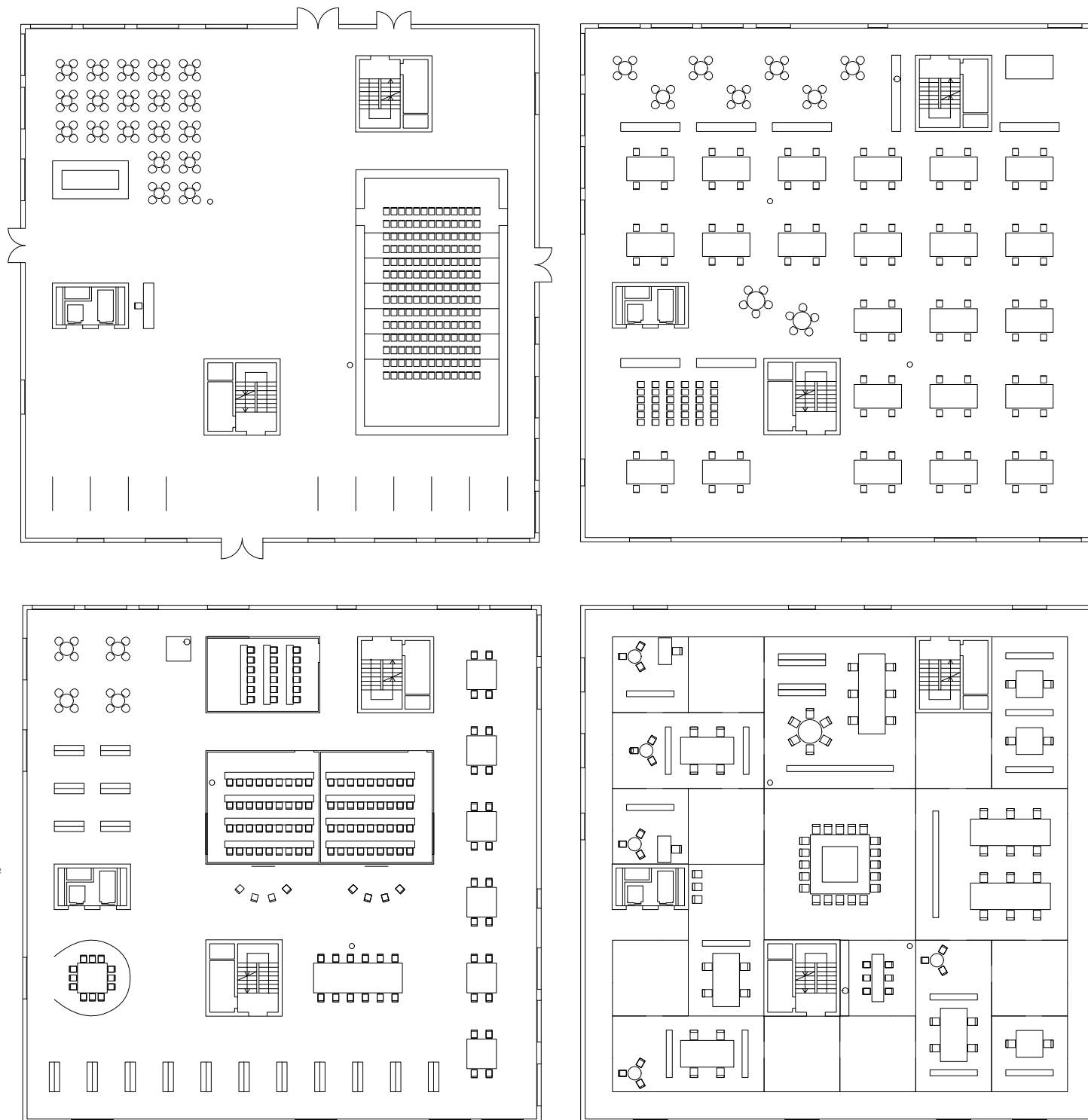
The unprogrammed open area on the ground floor provides relational space for student interaction.





*the building provides a closed system for a relational architecture that reveals itself to the outside world with glimpses through the facade*  
p66





Previous pages The  
Zollverein School of  
Management and  
Design

Fig.61. Zollverein  
School Interior 1

Fig.62. Zollverein  
School Interior 2

Fig.63. Plans of SANAA's Zollverein School of Management and Design, Essen

Source: Cobiex Projects Literature. Available at:[http://www.cobiex.it/downloads/italian/press/Materia\\_09\\_2008.pdf](http://www.cobiex.it/downloads/italian/press/Materia_09_2008.pdf) Accessed January 2012

fourth floor is the only direct exposure to the outside world other than the entrances, so the systems that SANAA sets up in the building cannot escape past the perimeter walls. Although referencing its surroundings in its form<sup>19</sup> the building provides a closed system for a relational architecture that reveals itself to the outside world with glimpses through the facade. Many of the spaces of the interior appear oversized, particularly the ground floor and full roof terrace, and although it would be easy to explain this through the rigour of the stacked open floor plan, the building is more considered than this. The interior spaces have been carefully and efficiently arranged to provide programmed spaces including the library and offices, and open, appropriately sized spaces for unprogrammed use. A generosity of these spaces as with the Learning Center allows learners from different disciplines to interact. Though this interaction may be existent in any multidisciplinary school in SANAA's learning spaces the interaction is implicit, intentional in the architecture, and in every design decision.

Through SANAA's work there is a clear and identifiable stream of experimentation of relational space that culminates in the Learning Center. From early experimental houses such as Moriyama House in Tokyo, through experimental student work, and their various educational buildings, SANAA (both Nishizawa and Sejima) are developing and modifying the conceptual and thematic stream of Kiyonori Kikutake and Toyo Ito who explored the possibilities of an architecture of interfaces and new technology. SANAA have modified the theoretical bases for their work to be able to operate in the globalised, increasingly virtual world that they inhabit, to produce an architecture of social relations that facilitates interaction and *"fill in the cracks in the social bond[...] so as to patiently re-stitch the social fabric."*<sup>20</sup>

The success of SANAA's theories is evident in their own work, with a developing sense of a new relational architecture that culminates in the Learning Center in Lausanne. As we explore in the next section, this innovative praxis is also evident in the work of SANAA's colleagues Jun'ya Ishigami, and Florian Idenburg, both of whom have now gone on to set up their own practices. Ishigami and Idenburg have achieved international status, working around the world.

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19 The dimensions of the building, a 35m cube reflect the dimensions of the Zollverein mine, adjacent to which the building is located.  
20 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p36



# The Relational Space of SANAA's followers

Jun'ya Ishigami

Jun'ya Ishigami worked in SANAA's office between 2000 and 2004, when he set up his own office [junya.ishigami+associates](http://junya.ishigami+associates). Ishigami's architecture is concerned with materials and scale, and his output comprises both art and architecture; some of his projects are gallery based, whilst others are pragmatic buildings on an urban scale. There is no reduction in the clarity of his built work at larger scale, and like SANAA, he uses his small scale projects to inform his larger work. Ishigami's best known building is the Kait Workshop for the Kanagawa Institute of Technology in Japan. Though this building is unmistakably relational in its realisation, this thesis will deal with a project that the author has visited, and been able to assess first hand.

In 2011, Ishigami produced an installation for the Barbican's Curve Gallery in London, a project that was "*a development of his experimental installation Architecture as Air: Study for Château la Coste, which was first shown at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2010.*"<sup>1</sup> The installation in the Barbican is made up of a series of 53 columns 4 metres high running the length of the Curve Gallery, hand rolled in carbon fibre sheet. These columns are 2mm in width, supported by 52 diagonal members each, numbering 2573 in total. "*The columns, [Ishigami] says, are about as thick as raindrops, and the bracing threads are as thick as drops of water vapour in clouds.*"<sup>2</sup>

The extraordinary installation is an exercise in reduction, and an experiment in formal and aesthetic minimalism. Though there is a function to this diaphanous installation, beyond technical achievement and aesthetic beauty, which Ishigami uses to inform his architecture. Through a reduction of architectural elements Ishigami is constructing relational space which can be defined through minimal, unobtrusive and gentle architectural intervention. By reducing the impact of the architectural elements, and dealing with standard architectural parts (column, beam etc) Ishigami is able to remove any obstacles between people, allowing freer and easier interaction. Though the artwork itself is not a pragmatic template for an architecture of interaction, through experimentation of this kind, Ishigami has been able to produce buildings and projects of startling clarity that create a minimum of obstacles for their users.

Though the installation is not necessarily a relational artwork itself, being as it is developed with 21<sup>st</sup> Century concerns in mind, the project does display characteristics of relational space, and develops themes that Ishigami has explored in his architecture. In short it displays characteristics of *relational space*, even as it is not a *relational artwork*.

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1 The Barbican Art Gallery Website  
2 Moore, R. (2011)

Where SANAA have used unprogrammed space and minimised the materiality of the architectural elements to produce space specifically to allow people to interact, with minimal barriers to this, Ishigami is exploring methods by which the structure and the architecture itself can be reduced to its absolute minimum, for the freedom for users to interact. A type of permissive, relational architecture.

Ishigami is approaching the perceived social problems to which SANAA is responding with a different method though he still is engaged in relational work, and these types of experiments go on to inform his own larger scale architecture.

Florian Idenburg - Solid Objectives - Idenburg Liu (SO-IL)

Florian Idenburg was associate with SANAA for eight years, between 2000 and 2007, at a time when the practice was developing into an international studio. Idenburg's personal connection with, and sensitive understanding of SANAA's work is evidenced by the work that his own practice produces, as well as his written contributions to books and journals about the work of SANAA and the work he undertook whilst working with them. Having left SANAA in 2007, Idenburg set up his own practice in New York with Jing Liu and some of their work with SO-IL shares an aesthetic approach with SANAA, greater than that of Ishigami. It is clear that the studio influenced his approach to design, and equally that his design sensibilities were welcomed by Sejima and Nishizawa, Idenburg's approach is not however an appropriation of SANAA's aesthetic approach, transferred to a Western location; though the two practices work share a theoretical base.

Idenburg's personal connection with, and sensitive understanding of SANAA's work is evidenced by the work that his own practice produces, as well as his written contributions to books and journals about SANAA and the projects he undertook whilst working with them. His reflections on his time at SANAA are significant, and Idenburg is aware of the influence that the office has had on his architectural development. The quotations reproduced here are from an interview conducted for the thesis in November 2011:

In a very elemental way, [working with SANAA] introduced me to an understanding of the legacy of Modernism and how this can still be a generative force for architectural production. I learned to see that architecture can happen in any scale, and can be highly personal. I learned to detail well, and I learned that good detailing is critical. I learned how to work with people that make (manufacturers, contractors, fabricators etc) to resolve things.

Idenburg is quite candid in his discussion about the impact that working at SANAA has had on him professionally, and he



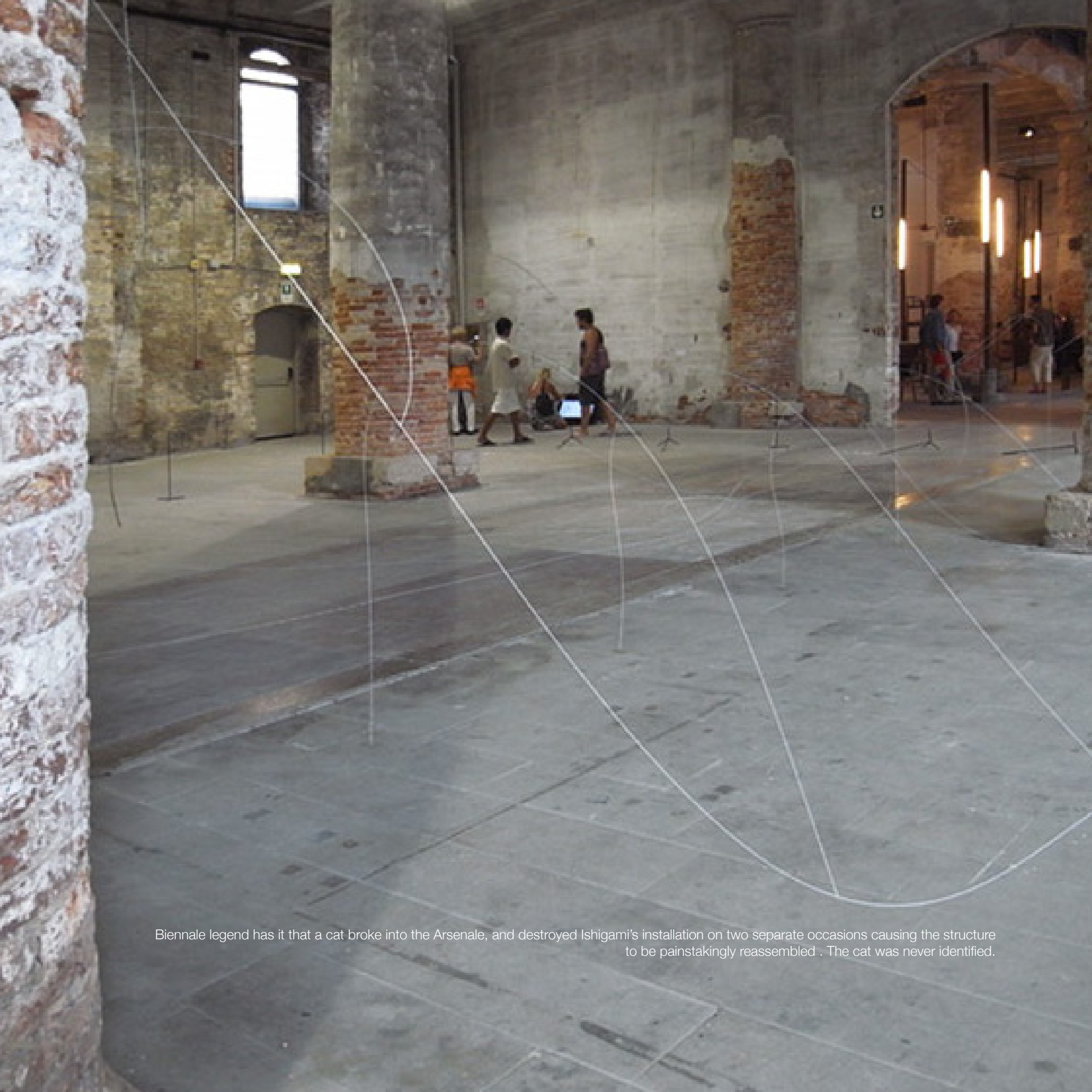


*"The columns, he says, are about as thick as raindrops, and the bracing threads are as thick as drops of water vapour in clouds."*  
p67









Biennale legend has it that a cat broke into the Arsenale, and destroyed Ishigami's installation on two separate occasions causing the structure to be painstakingly reassembled . The cat was never identified.





Fig.64. *Hangin' On A String 2* (Portrait) of Jun'ya Ishigami by Lyndon Douglas  
The figure highlights the tension supports threads of the structure

Previous pages Architecture as Air

Fig.65. Architecture as Air Exhibition, The Barbican, Curve Gallery photograph by James Kirk

Fig.66. *ibid.*

Fig.67. Architecture as Air: Study for Château la Coste, 12th International Architecture Biennale, Venice.

Photograph: designboom

Fig.68. *ibid.* [destroyed]



recognises that the differences in the cultural background are important to the work that he produces; his work differs from SANAA in from a simple level that he is not Japanese.

In our work we are not just interested in human interrelationships, but also in a more abstract relationship between self and world. Where the “Japanese” relational sensitivities are intuitive and natural, I have a desire to make it apparent in a conscious manner. It might be something that no Japanese can do. So I took cues there, but my adoption transforms them.

Idenburg’s consciously relational architecture which manifestly sets up systems and places for inter-relationships is an important development to SANAA’s work, and Idenburg sees the successful relational projects as those which allow the relational system to dictate the aesthetic:

The aesthetisation of the relational system is what often makes a SANAA project a success. I think Toledo<sup>3</sup> is one of the best examples where through ultimate transparency and toning down, [an] incredible rich inter-relational system is made apparent.

By identifying the successful aspects of SANAA’s buildings, Idenburg is able to construct an architectural method that is based on the themes that he explored during his time with Sejima and Nishizawa, but is equally able to stand alone as a developed and highly personal architectural method. It is unclear from Idenburg’s comments how he influenced the direction of SANAA during his eight years there, and only through analysis of both offices future output can Idenburg’s influence on Sejima and Nishizawa be assessed.

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<sup>3</sup> The Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art The pavilion is an exhibition space for the museum’s glass collection, and glass making facility.

# Criticisms and successes of relational aesthetics and relational space

Claire Bishop's *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* that was introduced in the section *Relational Art and the Political* questions Bourriaud's claim that it is no longer necessary or valuable to attempt to change the system in which one is operating, but to "set up functioning 'microtopias' in the present"<sup>1</sup>. Bishop is concerned that the assumption that all social relations are necessarily beneficial, and therefore all relational art is valuable to democratic life:

The quality of the relationships in "relational aesthetics" are never examined or called into question. When Bourriaud argues that "encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them," I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit "dialogue" are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. [...] If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why? <sup>2</sup>

Bishop, C.

To illustrate this point, Bishop uses examples of artists producing work manifested through the "literal setting-up of relations between people: the artist, the participants in his work, and the audience", but whose work is "more complicated - and more controversial - than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics."<sup>3</sup> (Santiago Sierra's work has been explored previously in the thesis, and is an example of the type of artist Bishop is discussing.)

Bishop's contention with the work produced under the banner of relational aesthetics can be applied in part to the relational spaces of SANAA and their followers. Relational space is assumed to be a positive attribute independent of external factors. This idea is identified by Bishop as being indebted to Louis Althusser, in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)* of 1969, in which he associated social forms with the production of human relations, which "permitted a more nuanced expression of the political in art" <sup>4</sup>. SANAA is not particularly discerning when it comes to ethical judgements of what work to undertake, and associated with this, whether the relational systems they are setting up are beneficial. This is most

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1 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p 13

2 Bishop, C. (2004) p 65

3 Bishop, C. (2004) p 70

4 Bishop, C. (2004) p 63:

Althusser, L. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)* first appeared in French in *La Pensée* in 1970, republished in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: New Left Books, 1971

explicitly evident in their design for a pharmaceutical company in Basel. When an office member questioned their involvement in the project “*on the basis of ethics, this was overruled by the potential for creating a new architecture*”.<sup>5</sup> Since relational art does not place value on the quality of relations taking place, it is appropriate that SANAA is unconcerned with this in the production of their relational spaces.

I think the [pharmaceutical] project does not fail because of the client, but because of site constraints, the somewhat ignorant push for an unworkable typological proposition [...] It is looking at yourself rather than the other, and in that sense it fails to make people aware that they are part of a social system – the building sits in a campus plan that resembles a city, with arcades etc dreamed up by Lampugnani, but the only way to enter this “city” is with an iris scan (employees only).<sup>6</sup>

The sense that the possibility for a new architecture could outweigh the ethics of designing private offices for a pharmaceutical company is reflected in Bourriaud’s text, where he suggests that “*it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows*”<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster in his essay *Chat Rooms* suggests that the relational artists aim to do no more than “*aestheticise the nicer procedures of our service economy (‘invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments’)*.” If the relational work that the artists or SANAA and their followers do, does little to improve the lives of its users, what benefit does the relational bring?

The project for the pharmaceutical company is the most expressive of the issue related to ethics and relational aesthetics, but other projects also suffer from the same issues. With a limited access system to the institutional buildings that SANAA produces such as the Zollverein School, the architects are making connections between people, but crucially only those who have access to the building. In reference to a piece by the relational artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Clare Bishop identifies the issue that those who are observing the piece form a community, but this is a pleasant community, in which the users are likely to share the same values, and ignores the importance of difference within a community for dialogue: “*There is debate and dialogue [...] but there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls “microtopian”: it produces a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common.*”<sup>8</sup> While the artists of relational aesthetics produced relational pieces only for those people who frequented galleries, the nature of SANAA’s clients has typically allowed a limited group of people to interact in their buildings. The Learning Center is an exception, with public access possible to the vast majority of the internal and external

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5 Idenburg, F. (2008) p122

6 Interview with Idenburg, F. (2011) Lampugnani refers to architect and architectural theorist Vittorio Lampugnani, who masterplanned the Novartis campus.

7 Bourriaud, N. (1998 trans. 2002) p. 45

8 Bishop, C. (2004) p67



space, including working space, and book storage; the public are able to walk freely around the building, and interact with all of its users. This places the building with SANAA's public galleries and public halls rather than exclusive, secure private company sites. This is a significant improvement, and a more successful articulation of their ideology and realisation of these design principles as a result. The openness of the building is likely made possible by the sponsors' desire to showcase their new building, though of course the continued willingness to allow the public access to their buildings remains entirely at the school's discretion.

Hal Foster's attitude to the political problems associated with relational art, and by extension relational space are similar to Bishop's:

[The] possibilities of 'relational aesthetics' seem clear enough, but there are problems, too. Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world.[...] But surely one thing art can still do is to take a stand, and to do this in a concrete register that brings together the aesthetic, the cognitive and the critical. And formlessness in society might be a condition to contest rather than to celebrate in art – a condition to make over into form for the purposes of reflection and resistance.<sup>9</sup>

On this point however we should give SANAA and the other relational architects the benefit of the doubt: by experimenting with the emancipatory possibilities of architecture rather than accepting the status quo, particularly as they resist the hubristic ideas of many architects that have preceded them, they are responding to perceived problems in society in an undomineering fashion, with subtlety, with care. They are not *doing nothing*.

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9 Foster, H.(2006)



## Conclusion

The critical commentary, analysis and response to SANAA's buildings demonstrates that they have been often misunderstood and the thesis shows how this characterises a wider cultural misunderstanding by the West of Japanese culture. The critical commentary on SANAA's architecture typically refers to the works as a form of *minimalism*, and as part of the aesthetic tradition of Modernism with a Western sense of beauty at its heart. Though their work is not always well understood in the West, SANAA are prolific and highly successful, and the explanation for this success beyond the work's aesthetic appeal and the significant abilities of Sejima and Nishizawa, is that they promote a sense of 'other' and provide a curious appeal distinct from their Western counterparts. In order to be able to analyse the work of SANAA – and of other contemporary Japanese architects' practice – we need to develop a new set of analytical tools which appreciate how misapprehensions have arisen and how they can be redressed, as well as maintaining a thorough understanding of the cultural interaction in the modern period.

The cultural interaction between Japan and the West is complex, and an understanding of the differences in the formal makeup of their respective cities and landscapes, and the cultural interactions that have informed the architectures of Japan helps to provide new methods of analysis. The physical manifestation of the cities has a significant effect on the individual buildings within them, and by understanding the assembled structures in which Japanese architects work, we are better equipped to understand the architecture. A sense of 'other' fostered by hegemonic interests to maintain dominance has caused the West to be disengaged from Japanese culture, and misunderstandings of the cultural forms have been wilfully incubated in the West over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This apparently intrinsic fear of hegemonic shift has been reduced since the collapse of the Japanese asset price bubble in the past two decades.

This sense of *other* is manifested in the interaction of artists and architects ranging from the Impressionist artists, European and American Modernists, and Postmodernist architects who have seen in Japan what they wanted to see, and fetishized the culture in order to justify their own theories. As an *alien* culture that was seen as emerging in isolation from Western culture, credence was lent to many who wished to justify their theories using Japanese culture, though this thesis demonstrates that the cultural interaction had been taking place for centuries, and continues today. Nevertheless in the 21st century, Japanese culture retains its alien status, and the architecture its otherworldly charm.

SANAA have emerged from an architectural lineage including Kikutake, Toyo Ito and others, who are interested in interfaces and relationships between city and technology, city and inhabitant, and between these inhabitants. The status and importance of relationships is prevalent within Japanese architecture, and provides a much needed technique with which it is possible to

analyse the evidence. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s with the dawn of the information age, the need for a relational architecture in Japan that promotes interactions between people has become more critical, as evidenced by the increase in the phenomenon known as *hikikomori* in this period.

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* provides a theoretical method with which to analyse this architecture of relationships. The text was written to provoke debate and to provide a theoretical basis for the 1990s art practices that were engaged in a praxis that took *the whole of human relationships and their social context as their starting point* rather than the more limited and conservative tradition of aesthetic beauty. Analysis of artwork that engaged in inter-human relations as opposed to formal beauty provides us with a set of tools for the analysis of an architecture of relationships. Critical commentary on the art theory can provide us with methods of criticising the work of the relational architects, and Claire Bishop's analysis of the political aspects and aspirations of relational aesthetics equips us with a critical basis for the relational architects.

SANAA's own *relational* architecture is subtle in its manifestation, and the extraordinary and beautiful appearance of the work allows the architects freedom to experiment with and quietly develop their theories through built works. From their small installation works to their large-scale building projects, SANAA have developed a *relational* architecture of physical interfaces and exchanges. Their process is ongoing, and the criticisms that are associated with the Bourriaud's *relational* artists (particularly a lack of interest in the types of relations that are being produced) are being considered in their later work. Their adherents continue to build upon the relational architecture that Sejima and Nishizawa, as developed from the work of Toyo Ito and Kikutake, in various personal and thoughtful ways.

In order to be able to learn from the architecture and urbanism of Japan, we need to look beyond the pure aesthetic beauty and stylistic methods in order to be able to analyse the theoretical approaches and social responses that are also taking place. It is essential for the West to learn from Japan as it attempts to limp out of a recession and to adjust to the long-term stagnation of its economies, as Japan is the "*only other wealthy country that has undergone the kind of decline that now awaits us.*"<sup>1</sup> Japanese architects who have been in practice through the slow inexorable decline of the bubble economy have developed approaches that do not provide a blueprint for how to operate, but rather methods through which a collapse of society can be mitigated or averted. Kengo Kuma, Atelier Bow-Wow, SANAA, and the new generation of architects, including Jun'ya Ishigami, Sou Fujimoto, Tetsuo Kondo and Go Hasegawa have worked through these lost decades to produce a thoughtful architecture that responds (beautifully) to and transcends their social condition. By understanding their methods, and being able to look beyond the pure aestheticism and eccentricities of their realisation, architects in the West can begin to change their methods to suit the changing

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1 Chakraborty, A. (2011)



social and economic worlds that they inhabit.

SANAA's work [...] appears effortless, but we should not be deceived. They strip things down, not to arrive at some irreducible truth or to offer a corrective to an imperfect world, but to construct a new form of complexity, a complexity truly adequate to the strange artificial reality of the world today.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis argues that more than finding a method with which to approach architecture, Sejima and Nishizawa have woven together theories in Japanese architecture in order to create a humane architecture of physical interfaces and exchange, which is influenced by Western Modernists, and have nurtured a tradition of their own which they have imparted to their employees. By looking beyond the aesthetic of their idiosyncratic architecture we can learn how to encourage interaction between people, and begin to remake our broken economies and broken social bonds.

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2 Allen, S. (2010) *SANAA's Dirty Realism*. p 67



Fig.69. Detail of *Clear Skies over Western Europe* annotated to show my journey from Almere to Lausanne in Switzerland. Source: NASA by Jeff Schmaltz, MODIS Rapid Response Team

## Appendix 1 Travel diary and reflections

Case Study Visits The Kunstlimie and Schouwburg , Almere, Netherlands. Zollverein School of Management and Design, Essen, Germany. Rolex Learning Center, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

5th - 8th August 2011. 2200km

The pilgrimage was taken over the course of 4 days in early August to the backdrop of the riots in British towns and cities. The tour took me through three countries, with significantly different economic and social conditions, and regions within these countries that are facing the global economic crisis in different ways. The unifying theme was the architecture of Japanese practice SANAA realised in the 21st century. I travelled to the buildings with little knowledge of the detail of any of them, and with an enthusiasm to understand their idiosyncracies, motivations and contexts.

My interest was what socio-economic conditions had inspired the clients of the various institutions to employ Japanese architects. The trip was inspired by a visit to a building as part of a trip to Japan during the summer of 2009, during which I visited the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture by SANAA. The building had a profound effect on me, and I spent the entire day walking in the spaces, sheltering from the rain, and observing the way that the architecture was being used, by the curators and the public. This text was largely written (with some subsequent editorial changes) in the days following my return from the trip, in order to be able to recall my experiences, and to reflect upon the buildings before the majority of my research had been undertaken.

Friday 5th August, Almere, Netherlands

Almere is the youngest, and seventh largest city in the Netherlands. Designated for housing following World War II, the first house was finished in 1976.

Located in the centre of Almere is De Kunstlimie, and Schouwburg Almere, completed in December 2006 by SANAA through a design and build contract following a limited competition. The building is part of an OMA masterplan for the area.

Having flown into Amsterdam very early in the morning, I made my way through the gridded roads around the airport to pick up my hire car that would take me over 2200 kilometres between Amsterdam and Lausanne on the shore of Lake Geneva and





Fig.70. *Getting the perfect photograph*



back. The short drive between Amsterdam and Almere was unmemorable, with the exception of a short part of the A6 road to the south of the Weerwater in the centre of Almere, across which I first glimpsed De Kunstlimie, nestled among an elevation of towers, and modern high-rise buildings overlooking a lake.

It was a sleepy Friday morning in the town, and I arrived before the shops opened at ten. Parking in an older area of shops, I made my way through the older developments, and then the newer OMA masterplan to the water's edge, on which SANAA's Kunstlimie is located. The built form is sited directly over the water, touching the shore on one side only. The building was closed. I had been expecting this as refurbishment work had been taken place, and the venue was in the process of setting itself up for the new season. What was important to me however was the way the building was engaged with its context, surrounded uniquely by such a recent architecture, with an apparent intention to stand aloof from its more colourful context. The main centre of the masterplan is notably distant from the water's edge, and a large open plaza separates the Kunstlimie (as well as a number of other buildings) from the urban centre to which it is attached. This causes the building to be visually and architecturally aloof from its masterplan context, an issue with which it seems relatively comfortable. The Kunstlimie is located on the edge of the plaza, barely touching the concrete floor surface from which (materially) it seems to be extruded, before being moved out to float above the water.

The area has evidently seen high investment, which has clearly resulted in successful urban space. Significant public expenditure to improve the socio-economic state of the region has resulted in good quality buildings, and a well designed urban plan.

Returning to the Kunstlimie, I continued to explore the building, and the surrounding town before beginning the journey out of Amsterdam to Germany.

Saturday 6th August Essen and the Ruhr Valley, Germany

The Ruhr Valley in north-western Germany is adjacent to the Netherlands, and is the fourth most populous urban area in Europe after Moscow, London and Paris. The region consists of several large post-industrial cities including Dortmund, Essen, Duisburg and Bochum. These various adjacent cities grew rapidly in size during the industrial revolution and began to merge to form a large metropolitan area. The landscape of the region is typified by sprawling suburban development surrounding post-industrial landscapes that have been redeveloped or retained, amongst forested landscapes and steep river valleys. The character of the landscape is primarily forest, despite the relatively high population density of the area.

My interest was the Zollverein School of Management in Essen, which is located on the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex – a coal mine and coking plant that was active from 1847 to 1993. The most prominent building on the site, Shaft 12 is in a Bauhaus style, and is beautiful in its execution and technical form, with the triangular form of the winding tower for mine shaft 12 dominating the skyline. In the 1970s the plant remained one of the most productive coking plants in the world, though in the 1980s the plant ceased mining, and coking ended in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Essen has subsequently become a wealthy city by redefining itself as a centre of commerce. The centre of the city is dominated by large commercial and civic buildings and has styled itself as the ‘desk of the Ruhr area’.<sup>2</sup>

I had stayed over night on the outskirts of the city on the edge of a lake in the Ruhr valley. A tourist industry has developed around the shores of the lake, and is an attractive location despite overdevelopment of small second homes.

Returning to Essen in the morning I made my way to the SANAA building, which is located at the East entrance of the campus, on a large expanse of grass, between two storey houses, and the enormous Zollverein complex. The building deals impressively with this change in scale, engaging with the residential buildings through small punctured windows arranged on an oversized facade, inside which are double and triple height spaces, through which the sky on the other side of the building is visible. The scale of the concrete box on the site engages more directly with the industrial facilities, though in reality it is dwarfed by the complex.

Having entered the huge OMA/Norman Foster Ruhr museum, I made my way to the top of the building and the viewing platform, from which a view of the surrounding landscape is afforded. From here, the School of Management protrudes from the forested urban context, ably negotiating the scale between residential, and industrial architectures surrounding it.

The experience of the full campus is overwhelming, and the School of Management is no exception. Once again however, the building appears aloof from its immediate context, whilst negotiating the changes between the two scales, the school retains qualities of ‘otherness’ that cause the first glimpse of the building to be as powerful as seeing the vast industrial machinery.

Inside, the arrangement of the windows creates discrete spaces within the large volumes within the building. The hard spaces are warmed enormously by the quantity of light within the space, and the effect of the contrast in light and dark areas in the building is overwhelming.

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1 Zollverein Visitor Portal Source: [http://www.zollverein.de/english/index.php?f\\_categoryId=692](http://www.zollverein.de/english/index.php?f_categoryId=692)

2 Ruhr 2010 (online resource) Source: <http://www.essen-fuer-das-ruhrgebiet.ruhr2010.de/en/home.html>

After spending the full morning in the building, and adjacent museum, I returned to my car, and began the journey to Lausanne in Switzerland. I was aiming to complete the journey by later that night and initially retraced my route through Essen and Oberhausen to reach the road that took me through Germany and on to Switzerland. The route was along the valley of the Rhine in western Germany, and then to Basel, Bern, and through the mountains to the north shore of Lake Geneva. It was not possible to complete the journey in the afternoon and evening, as I passed through a series of violent rainstorms that on occasions forced me to stop the car on the Autobahn.

I spent the night in a campsite in Bern. Bern was an impressive city, though it was clearly very different in feeling to the previous two towns I had visited. There was significant wealth in the city, clearly on display.

The next morning I completed the drive to Lausanne, through the Swiss Alps.

Sunday 7th August, Lausanne, Switzerland

Lausanne is sited on three hills that overlook Lake Geneva in the French speaking part of Switzerland. People have lived on the site of the city since the Stone Age, and since the 18th century the city has been a resort and tourist city. The city is wealthy and a number of international institutions reside there, including the International Olympic Committee. The Rolex Learning Center by SANAA is the central hub of the campus of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), one of the two Swiss federal institutes of technology. The campus was built in a number of phases on the outskirts of the expanding city. A campus plan by Zweifel & Strickler beat a more celebrated design by an unknown Mario Botta.<sup>3</sup> The Learning Center resolves what is an architecturally chaotic campus, generally closed to the public by providing a public building with library facilities and public amenities.

The experience of the Learning Center has been well covered in the thesis and the relational experience of the wide-open space noted. However, what was striking about the Learning Center is the quality and sense of these spaces. The expansive floors control views out of the all glass facade on the sides of the building, allowing views to the lake and mountains beyond, whilst also giving sense to the arrangement of the campus around the building. The sloped areas of the floor plan are equivalent to open spaces in a landscaped park, and allow unprogrammed activities that are outside the foresight of the client, essential to a central hub for the campus.

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3 Della Casa, F. (2010) *Focus on the Learning Center: The Genius Behind a Building*. In *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*. No. 337 April/May 2010

The three buildings that I visited on my trip were conceived in significantly different economic climates, funded in significantly different ways for a variety of regenerative purposes. Though the buildings are connected by their designers, they serve significantly different purposes for the places in which they are built. This reflects their architectural ambition, and the way that SANAA operates as a practice; their main aim to create new architecture independent of the client institution or the location of the building. The Kunstlimie, and the Zollverein School were built as part of a public regeneration of their locations, and the use of a Japanese architectural firm as designers of these significant cultural buildings allows the cities to be visible on the international stage, as in the well-documented *Bilbao Effect*<sup>4</sup>. The Learning Center is a hybrid of public and private funding; the school itself is a federal institution, thus controlled by the Swiss Government, but in order to be able to afford the building, a large number of high profile sponsors were co-opted to pay for the building in its entirety, Rolex being the biggest sponsor. The building “*conceived as an open window to the world*”<sup>5</sup> provides a high profile, indulgent expression of Rolex and the other sponsors’ wealth and generosity, given the building’s impressive and costly construction method<sup>6</sup>. It seems to me that the building is less concerned with a *Bilbao effect* type change for Lausanne (the resort town is already phenomenally wealthy) and the sponsors are more concerned with a proud display of knowledge-based cultural resources.

The experience of visiting the three SANAA buildings significantly changed my perspective on their design, and after reading and reflecting on the buildings, formed the basis for this dissertation and was instrumental in constructing the link for me between hegemony and cultural misrepresentation. My passion for the architecture, and the fascination that allowed me to write about the buildings, was generated by visiting the artefacts and by the experience of seeing them first hand. I could not overstate the reward of visiting these accessible buildings, and personally experiencing SANAA’s relational space first hand.

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4 Witold Rybczynski, *The Bilbao Effect*, The Atlantic Monthly, September 2002

5 EPFL Website, *Internal Regulations* <http://rolexlearningcenter.epfl.ch/page-37125-en.html> Accessed Jan 2012

6 The construction cost of the building was 110 million Swiss francs or around £75 million. Source *EPFL - Ecole Polytechnique Federale De Lausanne Rolex Learning Center Press Information Revised: June 7 2010* available at [http://www.rolexlearningcenter.ch/documents/english\\_kit\\_revised.pdf](http://www.rolexlearningcenter.ch/documents/english_kit_revised.pdf) Accessed October 2011



## Appendix 2 Interview with Florian Idenburg

Conducted between the 26th October - 13 November 2011 by email

JK - James Kirk

FI - Florian Idenburg

JK - In your article *Relations for The SANAA Studios* book, you introduce a theme that is brought up often when discussing Japanese architects, that of flows otherwise described as genealogies or lineages. In the article you discuss a flow that was begun with Kikutake, developed through Ito and Sejima. Could you tell me about the approach in your own firm to working, and how your own work has been influenced by your time with SANAA. What are the working practices, and architectural theories have you maintained, and what of the 'office's collective subconscious' have you retained, developed, or carried forward now that you run your own (highly successful) practice?

FI - I was at SANAA for 8 years – this has influenced me consciously and unconsciously. In a very elemental way, it introduced me to an understanding of the legacy of Modernism and how this can still be a generative force for architectural production. I learned to see that architecture can happen in any scale, and can be highly personal. I learned to detail well, and I learned that good detailing is critical. I learned how to work with people that make (manufacturers, contractors, fabricators etc) to resolve things. I also understood Sejima's project as ultimately a relational one, and this is something that has certainly made an impression on me.

I think from a practical stand point, we believe in the power of physical models to test certain designs, we believe in toning down rather than them up, or at least we try to get to the essence of an idea.

JK - Further to this, is there anything particularly 'Japanese' about the way in which SANAA work? In an interview with the *Guardian*, a daily broadsheet in the UK, Sejima says "We may be influenced by Japanese architecture subconsciously, but we don't think of ourselves as particularly Japanese architects" This may in part be due to SANAA's influences, and references emanating from beyond Japan's shores. Of course the art theory you describe, Relational Aesthetics is a Western art movement, but when its practices are translated into an architectural context, is it successful because of the nature of the environment in which the work is undertaken, or does it potentially have a more universal application? How relational would you describe your own work? How Japanese would you describe your own work?

FI - In my text I tried to link a certain cultural quality which could be seen as typically Asian with a “western” theory. I do think my time in the east was necessary to construct this link. You could argue that Rikrit, who was one of the ‘first’ Relational Esthetes, basically was just being ‘himself’ entering the discourse, but I do not know enough about that. In our work we are not just interested in human interrelationships, but also in a more abstract relationship between self and world. Where the “Japanese” relational sensitivities are intuitive and natural, I have a desire to make it apparent in a conscious manner. It might be something that no Japanese can do. So I took cues there, but my adoption transform them

JK - Can you talk about SANAA’s work in relation to Clare Bishop’s well known review of Relational Aesthetics? The artists described in Relational Aesthetics do avoid to attempt an utopian agenda through their work, they attempt to learn to inhabit the world in a better way. Though she does not quite argue that “relational art works need to develop a greater social conscience”, she argues that the Bourriaud needs to do more to “judge the ‘relations’ that are produced by relational art works” This aspect of the relational work of SANAA is possibly evident in your article for a+u magazine in which the (lack of) ethics of producing a building for Novartis are outweighed by a desire to create a new architecture. Do you think this is a failure at all of the relational nature of SANAA’s work? Is the Novartis building relational at all? Is there any correlation whatsoever?

Did you read Hal Fosters “Chat Room”? the question is indeed if making people aware that they inhabit in a relational system, in which they themselves are active participants is enough. I am partially in agreement with these critiques. I would argue that the aesthetics part of Relational Aesthetics holds the clue. The aesthetisation of the relational system is what often makes a SANAA project a success. I think Toledo is one of the best examples where through ultimate transparency and toning down, and incredible rich interrelational system is made apparent. I think the Novartis project does not fail because of the client, but because of site constraints, the somewhat ignorant push for an unworkable typological proposition and the simplicity of the program. It is looking at yourself rather than the other and in that sense it fails to make people aware that they are part of a social system (the building sits in a campus plan that resembles a city, with arcades, etc, dreamed up by Lampugnani, but the only way to enter this “city” is with an iris scan (employees only) In the ethics discussion, SANAA trusts humankind to ultimately recognize ‘right’ from ‘wrong’ – their work can be seen as catalytic, or indeed as “mircotopiae” - no blueprints. It has no revolutionary claims. If it makes no claims, it cannot fail. If people do not recognize the intent, who is wrong?

Please note that all of this is my reading of SANAA, there is little other than my own observations that substantiate this position. It is up to you to build the case further.



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Fig. 24 Photograph of Domus no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 24 - 25 + insert shown) Photograph by James Kirk

Fig. 25 Photograph of Domus no. 934 (Mar 2010), p. 17 (p 24 - 25 + insert shown) Photograph by James Kirk

Fig. 26 Left The Tokyo Metropolis characterised by a different urban form to its Western Counterpart Photograph by James Kirk 2009

Fig. 27 Typical Japanese lunchbox, “a makeshift meal”  
source: Chaplin, S. (2005) (see main bibliography) p82  
photographer unknown

Fig. 28 Wall/Floor architectural detail on a traditional  
Japanese teahouse Photograph by James Kirk

Fig. 29 Left: Hiroshige: Plum Estate, Kameido 1857. Right,  
van Gogh: Japonaiserie, ‘Prunier à Fleurs’ (après Hiroshige)  
Source Left: [http://hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/100\\_views\\_edo/images/100\\_views\\_edo\\_052.jpg](http://hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/100_views_edo/images/100_views_edo_052.jpg) Right: <http://www.van-gogh-on-canvas.com/prod168.htm>. Accessed December 2011

Fig. 30 Left: Hiroshige: Evening Shower at Atake and  
the Great Bridge 1857. Right, van Gogh: Japonaiserie,  
‘Japonaiserie : Pont Sous la Pluie’ (après Hiroshige) Source  
Left: [http://hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/100\\_views\\_edo/images/100\\_views\\_edo\\_052.jpg](http://hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/100_views_edo/images/100_views_edo_052.jpg) Right: <http://www.van-gogh-on-canvas.com/prod168.htm>. Accessed December 2011  
Fig. 31 The Imperial Hotel, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright,  
photographer unknown. Source: Corbis-Bettmann.

Fig. 32 Katsura Rikyū, the Villa. Photograph by James Kirk  
2009

Fig. 33 Gifu Kitagata Apartment building Photographer  
unknown Source: <http://eng.archinform.net/projekte/7938.htm>. Accessed December 2011

Fig. 34 Shibaura House Photograph by naoyafujii Source:  
<http://www.designboom.com/weblog/cat/9/view/15553/kazu-yo-sejima-shibaura-house.html>. Accessed December 2011

Fig. 35 Moriayama House Source: El Croquis Vol. 139

Fig. 36 Kiyonori Kikutake Sky House photograph by Iwan  
Baan Source: Iwan Baan’s website. Accessed December 2011

Fig. 37 Kiyonori Kikutake Sky House photograph by Iwan  
Baan Source: Iwan Baan’s website. Accessed December 2011

Fig. 38 Tower of Winds, Japan, Toyo Ito, photograph Tomio  
Ohashi Source: RIBA Gold Medal 2006. Architecture.com.  
Accessed December 2011

Fig. 39 Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics, 2002 Front  
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Serpentine Gallery. June 8, 1968 (2009) Philippe Parreno  
Source: Serpentine Gallery <http://www.serpentinegallery.org/> Accessed December 2011

Fig. 41 June 8, 1968 (2009) Philippe Parreno Source:  
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Accessed December 2011

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Fig. 45 Santiago Sierra Workers who cannot be paid,  
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OCTOBER 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51–79.

Fig. 46 Shaking Tokyo, Bong Joon-Ho (2008) Source:  
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flickr.com user Packing Light Accessed December 2011

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flickr.com user Packing Light Accessed December 2011

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Detail Magazine (English Edition), Vol. 4, 2010.

Fig. 53 Sparrow in the Landscape Photograph by James Kirk

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Fig. 60 Plans of SANAA's 21st Century Museum of  
Contemporary Art Source: Architectural Design Vol. 81, Issue  
1, January / February 2011, Pages: 94–101, Plans courtesy of  
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Fig. 61 Zollverein School Interior 1 Photograph by James Kirk

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Fig. 63 Plans of SANAA's Zollverein School of Management  
and Design, Essen. Source: Cobiex Projects Literature.

Available at: [http://www.cobiex.it/downloads/italian/  
press/Materia\\_09\\_2008.pdf](http://www.cobiex.it/downloads/italian/press/Materia_09_2008.pdf) Accessed January 2012

Fig. 64 Hangin' On A String 2 (Portrait) of Jun'ya Ishigami by  
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Fig. 66 Architecture as Air Exhibition, The Barbican, Curve  
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Fig. 67 Architecture as Air: Study for Château la Coste, 12th  
International Architecture Biennale, Venice. Photograph:  
designboom.com Accessed December 2011

Fig. 68 Architecture as Air: Study for Château la Coste, 12th  
International Architecture Biennale, Venice. [Destroyed]  
Photograph: designboom.com Accessed December 2011

Fig. 69 Detail of Clear Skies over Western Europe annotated  
to show my journey from Almere to Lausanne in Switzerland.  
Source: NASA by Jeff Schmaltz, MODIS Rapid Response Team  
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Fig. 70 Getting the perfect photograph Photograph by Paul  
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