

Taro Igarashi

Plants vs architecture?

Architecture sees plants as “other.” Monoliths erected upon desolate plains, temples towering above hilltops, cathedrals piercing the heavens—architecture’s primal vision is of conquering nature. Not even treehouses merge with nature; they control it. Whereas plants invade when buildings are abandoned—ivy climbs the facades, moss covers the walkways, trees grow through walls and floors with violent force, as if to mete revenge upon architecture and return everything to nature.

In the West, where the concept of “architecture” was formulated, the memory of wooden construction was retained in classical detailing. Witness the acanthus leaf scrollwork of Corinthian capitals. Likewise Egyptians builders looked to papyrus and palm fronds, while their American counterparts incorporated corn motifs into

columns. The entire Art Nouveau movement drew upon plants for inspiration for architectural ornament. Even the very first greenhouse, while containing nature, featured plant-inspired ornaments atop its cast iron columns.

Today’s greenhouses often emulate the overall form of flowers or fruit by way of nature metaphor—a means of including plants externalized from buildings, albeit unremittingly premised upon hierarchical relations. Yet another scheme by which architecture subjugates nature.

Gardens exist outside buildings and consist, not of metaphors or formal replicas, but of actual plants. Yet even so, gardens are artificial nature. Encompassed plantlife, a symbol of our world. We see geometric gardens made to obey architectonic order, landscape gardens that replicate nature.

Le Corbusier’s *Ville radieuse* and New York’s Central Park are both nature abducted into the urban core, though without constant human attention to maintain the idealized scenery the

301

gardens soon go to ruin.

Junya Ishigami would push architecture as far back as possible to make room for plants. He envisions transparent dwellings surrounded by nature, tower-shaped homes “groved” together with trees, mid-air gardens that spring forth from the windows of buildings—architecture distinguished more by flourishing plantlife than rectilinear blocks. For a fact, he labors more over sketching the plants than the buildings in his drawings.

In short, plants are not outside or “other” to his architecture. Ishigami’s Venice Biennale project sets forth a new relationship in which both elements embrace on equal ground.

Extreme nature: Landscape of Ambiguous Spaces

Around the Japan Pavilion in the 2008 Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition, Junya Ishigami has designed a series of small greenhouses. Ordinarily, architectural exhibitions employ models, audiovisuals,

drawings and other representations, or installations that cleave parasitically to existing structures. Structural engineer Jun Sato’s collaborative efforts, however, have helped to realize extremely graceful, independent 1:1 “buildings.” The physical presence of the spaces for plants is so slight, they merge into the natural environment.

Rather than look back on past architectural achievements like a museum, the International Exhibition serves to introduce the next generation of architects. Indeed, as with the Eiffel Tower and Barcelona Pavilion, ever since the first London Exposition of 1851, world’s fairs have provided an arena for experimental new temporary constructions, a stage for challenging architectural history.

Thus far, Japan Pavilion themes have included earthquake, girlish urbanism and *otaku*, signaling the “end of architecture.” Now with the advent of a new century, however, the Japan Pavilion turns once again toward

302

architectural beginnings. At the very first expo, the Crystal Palace showcased greenhouse technology. Which thus places this Japan Pavilion exhibition as both a full-circle return to the source and presentation of new directions in architecture.

Ishigami’s greenhouses are not wholly artificial environments; the absence of air conditioning or rigid barriers gives them a soft edge that blends interior and exterior ambiguously. Moreover, botanist Hideaki Oba has helped bring subtle new shades of biodiversity to the park scenery. Neither building nor plants have primacy, but instead merge into one another—what we might consider the very latest in natural environments.

The interior of the Japan Pavilion is left largely empty, revealing the beauty of the original space, while its outer periphery is dotted with greenhouses that compose a landscape of ambiguous spaces. And yet this inversion upon architecture-as-object does not generate an external void, nor does any facade define the exterior. Rather the interiors

visible within the ethereal transparent volumes of the greenhouses make us more aware of the external space around them. Likewise, the furniture set around outdoors bids us to regard the Japan Pavilion itself as an element of the total environment. The outdoor space that has always been here overlaps with the space that was boxed up in a delicate glazed steel-framed structure creating a dual-layered ambiguous setting—a unique spatial condition that lets us recognize the simultaneous ambient coexistence of plants, furniture, buildings, landforms, all things inside and out.

Architecture as natural phenomenon

Junya Ishigami engages in what might be called extreme design, pushing the furthest reaches of built form and transforming it into something that is no longer even “architecture.” Thus, from early on as an architect he attracted the attention of the art world.

303