

THE FOREST AS A ROOM. THREE JAPANESE HOUSES

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A fuzzy boundary resembles, in a way, a forest. [...] A forest is not made by planting trees or erecting buildings imitating trees or a forest. It is made by creating a space in which transparency and opacity, the infinite graduation of shades between black and white, and the feelings of being connected and separated are constantly and dynamically shifting back and forth. †

To date, forest areas cover 67% of Japan's total land, of which 19% is classified as primary forest, the most biodiverse form of wild nature². This significant presence played an essential role in the development of Japanese culture, which is strongly characterized by an entangled relationship with wild and uncontrolled nature. Forests have been historically seen as an ancestral and spiritual site, especially due to the influence of Shintoism, a religion that puts a particular emphasis on nature because any mineral or plant, any natural element can house a divine entity. Ginko, Hinoki, and Cedar forests used to surround Shinto shrines as protective rooms, the passage through which is part of the spiritual experience³. The immense forest area prompted the development of a wooden architecture that, grafting an extremely unstable land characterized by intertwined cycles of earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and fires, is based on yield rather than on strength and hardness, typical of western constructive cultures. An architecture with natural characteristics, such as an extraordinary tendency to change and modification, that roots in theories of impermanence, voids, the transient, the contingent, and the precarious⁴.

The binomial architecture and forest, house and nature, therefore, consistently connotated traditional Japanese architecture, which has been renewed several times over centuries, encountering different experiments and evolutions⁵. Even from a linguistic point of view, the word "home" is made of two *kanji*⁶: "house" and "garden." The blurriness between inside and outside, between designed and not designed, between anthropic and natural, characterizes the Japanese conception of space. Instead of a clear division between these two conditions, a series of intervals, voids, disposals generate a porous, fuzzy and soft border⁷. More than an imposition of a clear form, space results from the design of the relationships between the parts. In 1930, Bruno Taut wrote: "European architects remain in a world of forms, even as they advocate modernism. They remain in a violent world called form. On the other hand, Japanese architects have lived for centuries in a world of relationships"⁸. In the *Kyokai*, the traditional Japanese technique for articulating the space, many are the disposals that explore the multiple borders between domestic

space and nature. The *engawa*, for example, the Japanese veranda literally meaning “edge side,” features a non-tatami mat flooring made of wood or bamboo connects the rooms of the house to the garden. Here, shoes do not have to be worn. Though it is an exterior space, it possesses the comfort of an interior space, while the interior possesses the openness of the exterior. This quality of “between-ness” is not a third kind of space but rather a continuum between exterior and interior where the qualities of these two zones merge and gradually transition from one to the other Λ .

Architecture is thus traditionally seen not as an individual object, a shelter that would separate it from the environment \mathbb{N} , but as part of it, resulting from the relationships between heterogeneous and precise elements, designed and not designed, interior and exterior rooms. In this blurriness, experiments in which domesticity results from the coexistence between anthropic and natural have developed over time through different interpretations, challenging both the sylvan dimension of architecture and the domestic character of nature.

PILLARS

Three hours by car from Tokyo, *Pilotis in a Forest* by Go Hasegawa (2014) blends with the tree trunks of the densely vegetated forest of Kita-Karuizawa. “The project called for a compact indoor space and a terrace to enjoy barbecues and other events. Doing my best to leave the trees undisturbed, I decided to create a group of *pilotis* in the forest. By making them tall enough so that even when you are in the bottom section of the house, you can see the trunks of the tall trees, I used the forest as the building’s walls” \mathbb{N} . A timber structure aerial space, clad in corrugated galvanized sheeting, stands on nine steel *pilotis* of 10x10 cm and forms a platform in the forest canopy at the height of 6.5 meters: the right one for framing the distant view over Mount Asama; the right one for exploiting the shade from the canopy leaves in summer and letting the light pass under in winter. A few years after *House in Nagano* (2006), Hasegawa further investigates the interaction with the forest, conceiving it as an integral part of the domestic space. The site is located in a particularly humid and rainy area: building on pillars and raising the house from the ground to prevent floods is a common language. Go Hasegawa decided, therefore, to stress this typology, test it through different proportions, and explore the possibilities of designing the space underneath as a hybrid dimension between architecture and nature.

The house is divided into two sections connected by light-

Go Hasegawa, *Pilotis in a Forest*, Kanagawa, Japan, 2014.

Photo by Go Hasegawa & Associates.



weight stairs echoing Kiyonori Kikutake's Sky House (1958): an open room in the ground and a closed one in the air. Underneath, thin pillars and tree trunks frame a "slightly outdoor space" ㄖ: a concrete soil open room defined by changeable borders, as in a clearing. Above, nested between the canopies, a compact, low loft-like volume – 1.8 meters from floor to beams at the lowest point – accommodates a bedroom, bathroom, dining, and guest room, with large openings that frame the forest in every direction. The house does not establish a mimetic relationship with the forest but explores a profound dialogic dynamic with it instead through the drawing of careful proportions. Pilotis in a Forest can be read as a sequence of rooms, vertically arranged in a delicate crescendo of controlled boundaries: from the "in-between-ness" of the ground floor room enclosed by tree trunks, passing through the open oak deck, which filters interior and outdoor spaces, to the compact and geometrical volume that opens to the surrounding through framed and precise views.

ROOF

On the hillside of Atami, in the Shizuoka prefecture, Momoyama House by Erika Nakagawa (2016) grafts an articulated topography, where rocks and trees define the plot. The area is located in front of a hairpin curve, which was once part of the mountain. Due to the height difference, a retaining wall encloses the site, punctuated by several rocks and trees. "Even if nothing was built on the plot, it was surrounded by existing things, so we treat them as the outer wall of a house that accepts whatever elements [between] inside and outside to come in. [...] It seemed a sufficient intervention to make just a roof" ㄖ. The house, in fact, is developed through a simple gesture: the definition of a roof and columns, some of which support the slab, some come out merging with the surrounding, generating an ambiguity between under and over the covering, between interior and exterior spaces. The ceiling height of the large irregular and concrete roof, supported by 14 pillars, is 4.5 meters. Underneath, a body-scale living space, partitioned by glass and furniture, is conceived to define a fuzzy border to welcome the environment inside. Erika Nakagawa wanted to design a house made of an amalgamation of interiors, surroundings, and distant mountain views.

The site, with its spontaneous vegetation and anthropic traces, is here considered as an *objet trouvé*, a kind of *ready-made* context that can participate in the definition of the domestic space. During the process, in fact, the team approaches the project through four categories in order to better balance a simple

and sensitive intervention: *existing materials* (spontaneous vegetation, rocks, retaining walls); *materials necessary for daily life* (furniture and miscellaneous walls); *boundary materials* (roof and columns); *environmental materials* (textures and materialities).

Momoyama House presents a scattered plan, where trees, ground, rocks, and retaining walls merge with the furniture, bedroom, bathroom, tatami, and living spaces. Here, the natural and spontaneous context defines unplanned rooms codified by the simple roof intervention, concurring in the intentional ambiguity of boundaries that allow future development of the house and its evolution with natural and uncontrolled times.

PERIMETER

In the Chino forest in Nagano Prefecture, Villa in the Forest by Kazuyo Sejima (1992-1994) clearly defines a curved perimeter inside a wild and apparently isotropic context. Two hours north of Tokyo by car, the forest expands in all directions: trees block the sun, the land's topography is concealed, and direction becomes irrelevant ㄖ. The Villa is geometrically defined by two non-concentric and pure circumferences intersected by five rectangular volumes. "Given that the natural space is so uniform, the geometry of the circle responded effectively to this condition, where the directionality and context (the variation in each orientation) are irrelevant" ㄖ. Sejima designed a house with gallery for an artist friend who wanted to have his remote refuge where to host people eventually.

The Villa comprises two parts: the living space and the gallery. Between the exterior and interior circles – 13.9 meters and 7.5 meters respectively for a 30-centimeter thickness – the living area is divided into two floors, and the space freely flows without fixed partitions. The interior circumference, eccentrically moved from the center of the outer circle, hosts the painter's gallery, conceived as a covered patio on the ground floor. Five functional volumes – the entrances, the laundry and the bathroom – intersect the purity of the perimeter, stretching out in all directions. Both circles are punctured with square or rectangular openings at different heights, which provide glimpses of the forest or the house's spaces. The interiors are finished in wood, while everything else is white. The forest is here seen as an a-directional and continuous room, inside which it is impossible to define a front and back. Sejima, therefore, chose a circular shape, not for its formal perfection or its ideality of clearness but for its supreme isotropic form.

In contrast to Pilotis in a Forest and Momoyama House,

Erica Nakagawa, Momoyama House, Shizuoka, Japan, 2016.
Photo by Erika Nakagawa Office.



Erica Nakagawa, Momoyama House, plan, Shizuoka, Japan, 2016.
Drawing by Erika Nakagawa Office.

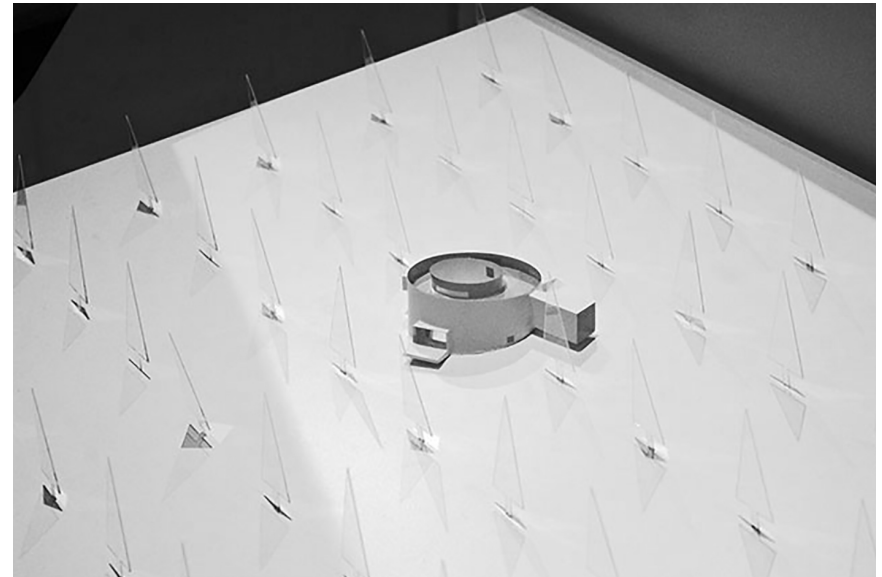


Villa in the Forest does not blur inside and outside. Conversely, it clearly states a thick and precise boundary. The forest becomes part of the project not literally but as an ordering and compositional principle. While, on the one hand, the house grafts into it in a sort of opposition, with its alien, white, pure shape, on the other hand, it intercepts, on a conceptual and then formal level, an extremely sylvan character: the continuity, the impossibility of reading a rational hierarchy. In the maquette, part of the MoMa collection since 1996, this idea is perfectly expressed through the decision to represent the building as a small and round volume, with a white exterior wall, in an endless forest made of triangular, identical, and lined up trees. In the model, the forest occupies much more space than the house itself, which appears remote and the only curve that intersects the continuous flows of the woods.

Pilotis in a Forest, Momoyama House, and Villa in the Forest question the sylvan dimension of architecture and the domestic character of the forest through three fundamental and foundational elements: pillars, roof, perimeter. Exploring the binomial house and nature and interrogating both the physical and conceptual intersection of architecture and forest, they challenge the design as an act of defining a certain boundary. By hybridizing it, as for Pilotis in a Forest; by blurring it, as for Momoyama House; by strengthening it, as for Villa in the Forest. Exploring the coexistence between designed and not designed, anthropic and natural, these Japanese houses dialogue with the forest as an operative and compositional dimension. A spontaneous and mutable room, a ready-made space to graft, an a-dimensional context to intersect.

Kazuyo Sejima, Villa in the Forest, Nagano, Japan, 1994.

Photo by A. Blair.



Kazuyo Sejima, Villa in the Forest, Nagano, Japan, 1994.
Photo by Shinkenchiku-sha.



✿ S. Fujimoto, *A Few Brief Words About Boundaries*, in K. Kuma (ed.), *Kyokai: A Japanese Technique for Articulating the Space*, Tankosha Publishing, Tokyo 2010, p. 133.

∞ According to the World Bank data regarding the forest area percentage in Japan. Accessible at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.FRST.ZS?locations=JP>, accessed 30 September 2022.

⇓ The Japanese word *mori* means the sacred forest in the precinct of a Shinto shrine which has been conserved for centuries. See S. Honda, *Towards Understanding Shintoism in Japan* [in Japanese], Nippon Bungei, Tokyo 2002.

Λ See G. Paba (ed.), *La città e il limite. I confini della città*, GEF; La Casa Usher, Firenze 1990; A. Branzi, A. Rocca, *Lo specchio dell'anima. Andrea Branzi e Alessandro Rocca, conversazione sul Giappone*, in "Lotus Navigator," 3, 2001, pp. 64-85.

└ "There are differences between western and Asian cities. I think western cities can be artificial, but in Asia it is different. Here, natural things and artificial things live together and there is a kind of mixture... I think we can encourage a more open lifestyle by using gardens as well as the buildings." Ryue Nishizawa in a *Conversation with Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa*, in "El Croquis," 139, 2008, p. 10.

ㇿ *Kanji* are the logographic Chinese characters used in the writing of Japanese, along with the syllabic scripts of *hiragana* and *katakana*.

* See K. Kuma, *Towards a Japanese-Style Architecture of Relationships*, in Id. (ed.), *Kyokai: A Japanese Technique for Articulating the Space*, Tankosha Publishing, Tokyo 2010, pp. 6-18.

|| B. Taut, *Nihonbi no saihakken (Rediscovery of Japanese Beauty)*.

┐ Fujimoto, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-133.

✿ ∪ "Rendering the role of architecture equivalent to changes in the environment. If we view buildings as shelter, inevitably they become immovable barriers separating us from the environment, but if we think of buildings as new environments, perhaps we can find alternative ways for them to endure." J. Ishigami, *Another Scale of Architecture*, LIXIL Publishing, Tokyo 2019, p. 47.

✿✿ G. Hasegawa, *Go Hasegawa Works*, Toto Publishing, Tokyo 2012, p. 90.

✿ ∞ As Go Hasegawa defines the *pilotis* space in presenting the project; see, for instance, his lecture at the Architectural Association in London "Amplitude in the Experience of Space," July 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZCDB-KCcz4, accessed 30 September 2022.

✿ ⇓ Erika Nakagawa, <http://erikanakagawa.com/enweb/workpage7en.html> and in the interview "Garden-like and exterior-like things. Thinking from frame windows, first roof, and

Momoyama House," in "10+1," <https://www.10plus1.jp/monthly/2017/11/issue-02.php>, accessed 30 September 2022.

✿ Λ A. Blair, *Endless Kazuyo Sejima* in "Moma PS1 Inside/Out," https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/01/06/endless-kazuyo-sejima, accessed 30 September 2022.

✿ ┘ From the project summary, in "El Croquis," 77, 1996, p. 70.