

THE CALL OF THE WILD. INHABITING THE FOREST IN THE WORKS OF KAZUYO SEJIMA AND SANAA

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THE CALL OF THE WILD

Exploring and interpreting the relationship between forest and architecture is a process of revelation, unveiling, and, in part, overcoming the mystery, the unknown. The forest is part of the design imagination, today more than ever, facing uncertain and extreme climatic conditions that force us to think about how we will inhabit the world in the future. The call of the wild[¶], the title of this essay, is metaphorically intended with a double meaning; on the one hand, thinking about architecture through the forest, that is, negotiating new relationships and alliances with nature; on the other, identifying the forest as a design element and, therefore, finding strategies and forms with which the forest becomes a project. The forest could be broken, crossed, observed, and protected by architecture, and it is in the reciprocal position between the parts that new balances are defined.

This essay tries to trace and explain the design connections between forest and architecture present in some significant works by Kazuyo Sejima and SANAA, starting from an emblematic work, the Inujima Art Project, which saw Sejima confront, for more than a decade, on the relationship between art, landscape, and architecture on the small island of Inujima in the Seto inland sea. But it also traces other important pieces intending to understand how the work of Sejima, and SANAA, deals with the forest, and the wild and how, often, it manages to establish visual relationships, intangible but profound, between the different parts at stake. The call of the wild is the attraction to the forest and, at the same time, the fear of the unknown, of the darkness; in Sejima's work – where transparency and lightness reign supreme – this dichotomy appears decisive and of great interest in contemporary design.

INUJIMA: THE DISCOVERY OF THE LANDSCAPE

When Kazuyo Sejima begins to discover and work on the island of Inujima, in 2008, she decides to develop a series of small architectures to host artistic activities of different nature that could preserve and protect the atmosphere of the island and, above all, its landscape and its vegetation. The island of Inujima is surrounded by wild nature, made up of forests and clearings; a nature that is partially uncontaminated and partially returned to the island after the abandonment of some quarries; where the nature grows also inside the ruins of an abandoned copper refinery, never demolished. The island encloses and guards a small community of inhabitants, about thirty, who preserve its traditions and memories; it is a precious alchemy that requires care and attention for any form of intervention.

The immersion in the landscape is the strategy that Sejima chooses to continue when she begins to visit and, later, to work in Inujima. She immediately perceives a different condition on the island, just as she feels the need to save the small village, and its inhabitants and, additionally, to preserve the relationship with the environment and the landscape.

The island is characterized by a privileged, wild, and ancestral natural environment, and it is in this background that the Inujima Art House Project comes to life: a series of pavilions, exhibition spaces, and installations immersed in the landscape are scattered and contaminate the rural context. The idea is that, through art, the village can be transformed into a museum inspiring the local community to experience the landscape in different ways, and that the architecture and art exhibited here merge with the housing, the landscape, the sky, and the sea. The project promotes the creation of a platform for art that ensures and preserves the future of the island and its inhabitants, in a sort of new alliance between nature and architecture. Each pavilion defines a specific relationship with nature, the forest, and the sea, according to the various perspectives that are emphasized. Over the years, Inujima has become a field of design and didactic experimentation for Kazuyo Sejima who in the program of her course, held at the Politecnico di Milano, suggests that “the island as a whole is a place where architecture ultimately becomes the environment”¹.

The sequence of projects imagined by Sejima animates the island thanks to prolific relationships with various artists who exhibit their works in the various galleries; three have opened in 2010, the F-Art House, the S-Art House, and the I-Art House displaying special artworks, two new galleries are inaugurated in 2013 – the A-Art House and the C-Art House – exhibiting the works of five artists. Each pavilion establishes a unique relationship with the site that is chosen to emphasize particular landscape criteria such as altitude, sea view, or relationship with the village. Through a small journey in the architecture designed for Inujima by Kazuyo Sejima, together with the artistic director Yūko Hasegawa, we will see how the pavilions decline the relationship with nature and with the surrounding buildings in very different forms.

Some pavilions, indeed, are the result of renovation projects of traditional wooden buildings, while others are new structures that create an interesting contrast with the surrounding environment. However, it should be remembered that all the architecture built as part of the project respect the scale of the existing constructions, thus preserving the rural character of the island and,

Kazuo Sejima, Inujima Art Project: F-Art House.

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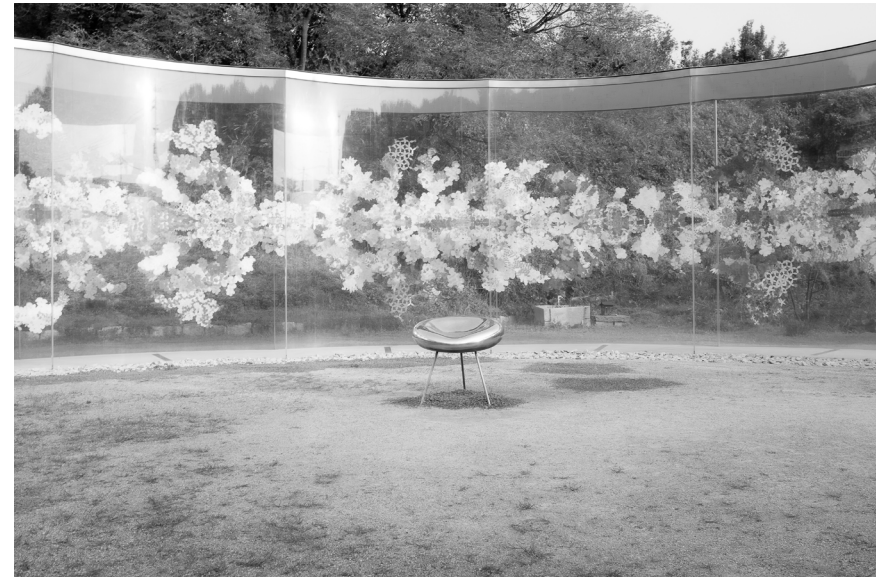
at the same time, defining new horizons and interesting material and volumetric contrasts.

The F-Art House, one of the first galleries created by Kazuyo Sejima on the island, is the result of an interesting restoration of a traditional Japanese house. The spaces of the house, made of wood, are open and become exhibition rooms that overlook the surrounding landscape and the visitors. The addition of a new courtyard, with the design of an organic shape, represents an open-air room that accompanies the visitor in the discovery of the building. In welcoming the works of different artists, the pavilions created by Sejima, together with the artistic direction of Yūko Hasegawa, describe each time new spatiality.

In 2016, before the start of the Setouchi Triennale, Olafur Eliasson presented his Self-Loop artwork created for the I-Art House in Inujima. The pavilion consists of a front and rear room with a square opening in the middle; this framed window looks like a mirror opening into the surrounding nature. For this reason, Eliasson conceives, inside the pavilion, an installation of three mirrors, arranged apparently in a casual way, but on the contrary able to build an infinite tunnel of perspectives. The pavilion is surrounded by a “soft garden, a landscape that mixes culturally and naturally organized elements. It’s not a formal garden, it’s a bit romantic”^Λ. The system of mirrors allows you to see yourself while looking at the garden, then to see your perspective from the outside, as if immersed in the nature surrounding the building.

A later addition, compared to the described pavilions, is the A-Art House completed in 2013, which represents a different strategy; the new pavilion is transparent with pink, red, and yellow floral motifs covering the outer skin. The pavilion’s structure is made up of slightly fluted walls that swell outwards and recall the shape of a flower. A single rectangular opening allows access to the internal courtyard, where a pair of silver stools offer seating for visitors who can, thus, observe the landscape and nature that filters through the transparent membrane. The shape of the pavilion invites you to contemplate the landscape and the forest, not too tame, present on the island; the two walls, the floor, and the roof of the structure help to visually frame the surrounding landscape, blending art, architecture, and nature.

In 2016, to complete the delicate balance between new projects and the recovery of existing structures, Sejima decided to create the Inujima Life Garden by reusing a long-abandoned glass greenhouse; the project was developed together with Akruhei Heya who took care of the landscape design part. The garden is not a conventional botanical garden. Still, it is designed as a place where residents and visitors to the island can experience





the cycles of nature and enjoy the vegetation that grows in the garden. Thanks to laboratories and various didactic activities, it allows the interaction with plants, with what they can offer, from food to fragrances, to recreation. A community place where visitors and the island's inhabitants can learn from each other and think about new future lifestyles.

The infinite variations of the relationship with nature appear in the projects for Inujima and describe the sensitivity with which Sejima studies and intervenes on the island; the forest is preserved, as are the various landscapes present, including abandoned quarries and fragments of industrial ruins, which become the protagonists of the small architectures that dot the village.

Even more interesting is the relationship between art and nature that has been developed transforming the island into a precious open-air museum, where the forest shows itself and where it can be observed and touched. The island becomes a catalog of design positions, ephemeral but precise, which tell about the purity of architecture and its ability to build, with small-scale interventions, a new landscape in nature.

Kazuyo Sejima's interest in Inujima's small-scale architectures is so deep that it pushes her to continue studying the island through various didactic experiments conducted as part of the Advanced Architectural Design Studio held, since 2016, at Politecnico di Milano. In Kazuyo Sejima's teaching experience, Inujima becomes a laboratory to test projects, options, and various possibilities to transform the island through the new and attentive gaze of dozens of students who, in the last seven years, have observed for the first time, and with a certain distance, these places. Observing the models produced within the course is, in itself, an educational experience and a journey into Sejima's way of thinking about architecture: "the model represents a work tool that moves between abstraction and reality"¹ and, in particular for Inujima, it describes the topography, vegetation, and landscapes of such an intimate and delicate place. It is a necessary tool to study the program, the volumetric composition, and, finally, the material details. Thus, each design step is tested on a model with numerous options until the right balance between architecture, environment, and materials is reached.

THE ABSTRACTION OF THE FOREST AND IMMERSION IN NATURE

Kazuyo Sejima's research and interest in nature do not start from Inujima, but start, many years earlier, with the project of the Villa in the Forest, built in 1994 in Nagano, Japan, where Sejima reflects on the timeless relationship, or conflict, between

architecture and forest; here, the forest envelops and protects the house, a small round building with a white exterior wall.

To understand the nature of this project, it is interesting to study the physical model of the house which, since 1996, has been kept in the MoMA collection; the building, small and round, lies between a grid of triangular, stylized, and transparent acrylic trees, measuring approximately 75x75 centimeters, placed on a slight slope entirely white. The forest, a significant fact, occupies much more space in the model than the house, with a diameter of fewer than 12 centimeters¹.

As we have already seen, the use of the model represents a fixed presence in Kazuyo Sejima's, and later, in SANAA's professional practice, it is the object from which each project takes shape and finds its conclusion; the model is used, however, to find new options, rethink and change a design, it is not a finite object, but it is part of the design process². Or, as in the case of the Villa in the Forest, it is a way to abstract an element – the forest – which becomes paradigmatic for interpreting the design choices in the construction of the small house, almost hidden by the forest.

Sejima, indeed, changes the usual representation of the forest, which is presented, in the physical model, as rigorous and orderly, in illusory opposition to the real perception of the forest. The only element capable of interrupting the obsessive geometry of the forest is the house, a circular shape broken by rectangular volumes and protrusions. The house is composed of two concentric circles that define the domestic space; the ring between the two circles is devoted to the living area, while the central space is the artist's studio. The circles are cut by square or rectangular openings of different dimensions that offer direct glimpses of the forest; ultimately, a rectangular volume comes out of the circle and creates a room, the bathroom, from which one can observe the forest.

The domesticity of the house – a central theme in Kazuyo Sejima's design research – is represented by the fluidity of the spaces that are continuous and blend into each other. "Each room flows into the next one without any compartmentalization. The curvature of the walls defines a perceptive horizon, depending on the observer's position as he or she moves through the space"³. The experience inside the house is intimately linked to the perception of the forest outside, from those small and discontinuous openings that allow you to see nature and the wooded mass.

This small house contains many interesting design topics that Sejima will later develop, together with the fundamental contribution of Ryue Nishizawa, with the firm SANAA. Fifteen

years after the experience of the Villa in the Forest, in 2009, the opportunity to create the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery and located in Kensington Gardens, London, represents an important return to a reflection on the relationship between architecture and nature. In defining the idea for the pavilion, SANAA seeks perfect mimesis between the park and the architecture. The pavilion's structure is made up of a corrugated aluminum plate resting on slender metal columns which gives the sensation that the pavilion is floating, almost suspended, among the trees and reflecting the colors of the sky and the park on its surface.

The organic shape of the pavilion, inspired by that of an amoeba, extends in several directions, with sinuous movements that generate a series of open rooms that develop at the same height as the base of the treetops and guarantee complete accessibility from all parts.

The relationship with nature – here decidedly less wild and more urban than in the previous cases – is total and engaging; the pavilion is completely permeable to the surrounding environment and becomes an extension of the park itself. Nature is enveloped by the sinuous shapes of the light structure. The thin roof, only 26 millimeters thick, is made of birch wood panels resting on a mesh of metal pillars of 50 millimeters in diameter, that appears casual but which, in reality, follows and accompanies the sinuous curves of the structure; the roof is clad on both sides with mirrored aluminum panels while the floor is in concrete, with light gray color, that integrates with the nuances and reflections of the pavilion.

The roof delimits shaded areas that accommodate the various functions provided, a cafeteria, a space for music, a break area, and a small area for special events that represents the only protected area of the pavilion. The temporary structure, which remained open for three months, guarantees outdoor activities and, due to the shape of its spaces, invites you to linger, to enjoy the shade and the spectacle of nature that is reflected on the roof, metaphorically and visually connected with visitors.

Unlike the Villa in the Forest, in the Serpentine Pavilion SANAA offers a different interpretation of nature that is welcomed within the architecture; its perception is amplified by the reflection of the trees on the roof expanding the size and power of nature. If in the Villa in the Forest, Sejima chooses to observe the forest with a certain detachment, abstracting it and establishing specific visual contacts always through the small and different openings scattered along the curved surfaces of the house; in the Serpentine Pavilion, the immersion with nature is absolute and without any barriers.



The different positions concerning the role and impact of the forest on the architectural design so far addressed in this essay, clearly describe a partial and, in part, subjective story, but allow us to overturn the point of view with which we usually study architecture. The starting point is not the building but what surrounds it, in this case, the forest, the wood, or a more urban vegetation. The last piece of this short story – which could grow and expand – is represented by an emblematic and recent project by SANAA, Grace Farms, built in New Canaan, Connecticut in 2015.

In the middle of a dense forest, SANAA conceives an architecture that becomes part of the landscape thanks to the choice of organic forms and a certain dematerialization of the surfaces that become almost ethereal¹. Through a sequence of glazed volumes, connected by a single silvery and sinuous roof, Grace Farms fits into the agricultural and wild landscape of this natural reserve in New Canaan, recalling the fluidity of a watercourse, where the nickname The River comes from. The building is inserted in the forest and seeks space, opening passages in the vegetation, winds along a gentle slope, drawing a sequence of soft loops that host different environments and spaces dedicated to the community (auditorium, gym, reading rooms).

The construction of the multifunctional building of Grace Farms does not prevent the homonymous Foundation from maintaining approximately 77 of the 80 acres of the property in perpetuity as open meadows, woods, wetlands, and ponds, thus preserving the landscape and favoring a delicate integration between the new building and nature. The forest and the landscape are the undisputed protagonists of this place; SANAA proposes a building that becomes part of the landscape and that even disappears – dematerializing – with the aim that the visitors of the property can freely enjoy the beauty of the environment, of colors in the changing seasons through the transparency of the building. Similarly, to the pavilion for the Serpentine Gallery, the project starts from the definition of the roof that seems to float, suspended on the ground, and supported by slender white steel columns with a diameter of only 13 cm. All the lightness, transparency, and delicacy of Grace Farms come from the relationship between the roof, pillars, and curved windows that embrace the visitor and, simultaneously, allow one to look through the architecture to admire nature. The roof's surface is covered with anodized aluminum panels that shine like the surface of the water touched by the sun, recalling, once again, the relationship between the building and the course of a river.

The idea to build a single long and sinuous roof, which

moves above the surface of the ground, folds, and turns across the landscape represents a courageous and daring choice that pushes the structural capabilities of the material and which strength, even more, what we have already seen in the project for the Serpentine. The forest is welcomed, almost domesticated, within the project, thanks to the large windows and the folds of the roof that allow, each time, to frame different views. The transparency of the glass volumes allows us to interact, observe, and admire the surrounding wild nature. “The building will come in the way between a person and nature, so we thought of ways one could be in touch with the landscape through the architecture”¹¹ says Kazuyo Sejima.

The sensitive work conducted at Grace Farms describes a significant evolution in the way in which Kazuyo Sejima, and SANAA, approach and study the landscape; if at the beginning, with the emblematic Villa in the Forest, the forest has been kept at a distance and observed through precise points of view, then nature becomes an object of ever stronger interest. In Inujima, the small architectures set on the island fit into the landscape and almost touches it; in contrast, in the projects for the Serpentine Gallery and Grace Farms – the latter of a larger scale – the architecture is immersed in wild or urban nature, trying ideally to disappear, to leave the visitor the possibility of complete involvement in the landscape.

In the opening of Eve Blau’s essay, which establishes the reasons for the awarding of the Pritzker Prize to Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa in 2010, some of the main peculiarities present in their works are highlighted and, in particular, the reference that it is made to the relationship between nature, architecture, and transparency. “The glass outer walls are both reflective and transparent depending on the time of day, angle of the sun, and weather. [...] At other times they become reflective, bouncing back refracted images of trees, houses, and bodies moving among them; their glass surfaces layering glimpses of nature with self-reflection as they project images of the mind’s eye through the spaces of the building and into the imagination”¹².

The mirrored images of trees and pieces of nature on the transparent walls of SANAA’s architecture reflect the imagination of wild and extensive nature and allow visitors to immerse in another, different world that tries to build new atmospheres and environments.

Evolving the relationship with nature, and with the forest, Sejima and SANAA declare a growing attention to the impact of their buildings on the landscape and, above all, to their ability to mimic and to immerse themselves in nature. An important

SANAA, Grace Farms, New Canaan, United States.

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approach, never taken for granted, develops in small-scale architecture, pavilions, and houses, which are the subject of Sejima's design research, especially at the beginning of her career. And that continues with innovative results when the projects increase in scale and, therefore, risk being more impactful. It is visible both in Grace Farms and in the Serpentine Gallery the ability to shape the materials and the light allowing SANAA's architecture to blend into the landscape and hide within it. The search for the immaterial pushes innovative experimentation, still ongoing in Kazuyo Sejima's practice and research, where nature becomes the protagonist and merges with an architecture that seems ethereal but which is, in reality, the result of a capillary study of materials and structural elements, still full of opportunities to be explored. Probably the essence of Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa's works, both as the collective SANAA and as individuals, lies in a very simple aspect, which is the core of each project: "This is perhaps also the way that architecture approaches them – initially as a schema, a sketch, invariably drawn not only so thinly as to be barely visible in relation to a specific location. And yet for SANAA, relations are critical. To explore these topics, they use drawings not only to examine the connections to a particular site but also as a means of articulating the clarity of internal relations; though it is the interrelations between the inside and the outside that make many of their projects so beguiling and relevant for contemporary practice" ¹⁸.



With reference to: J. London, *The Call of the Wind*, The Macmillan Co., New York 1903.



K. Sejima, *Inujima and Architecture*, in K. Sejima, J. Elding, G. Setti, F. Singer (ed.), *Inujima: Architecture Becomes Environment*. Selected Projects from Kazuyo Sejima's Design Studio, 2015-2019, Maggioli Editore, Santarcangelo di Romagna 2020, p. 13.



Referring to the Advanced Architectural Design Studio program that Kazuyo Sejima has held at Politecnico di Milano since 2016, entitled "Inujima: Architecture becomes Environment." The Studio has been held by Kazuyo Sejima and Jonas Elding, together with Giulia Setti and Francesca Singer.



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M. Mostafavi, *Inorganic Architecture*, in "El Croquis," 155, 2011, p. 245.

FOREST, AESTHETIC, PERCEPTUAL

II