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Empathy and Modest Grandeur: Learning from Traditional Japanese Architecture

Both Leonard Koren's *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designer, Poets, and Philosophers* and Nikil Saval's "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future" gave great insights into the underpinnings of ancient Japanese architectural design principles. For the most part, the Japanese design methodologies and aesthetics depart from the 20th-century and 21st-century Western notions of what is often considered a 'great building'. The governing views in Japanese architectural design stem from wabi-sabi, which accepts and embraces natural imperfections (letting natural happenstance show in the final design of buildings); and Zen Buddhism.[1] Together these foundations form the key features of traditional Japanese architecture. These include (1) the use of earthen, vernacular, building materials, (2) an innate respect for the natural environment and successful amalgamation with it, and (3) spaces designed to deeply affect the human psyche.[2] Practicing Japanese architect, Kengo Kuma is a famous representative for old-style Japanese architecture. He has been preserving the aforementioned design heritage and proving that the values are applicable in contemporary Japanese society and in international societies.[3]

Ever since the middle of the 19th century, the Western architecture culture (in Europe and the United States) has largely forgotten about the human and emotion-driven aspects of architecture (these concepts flourished during the Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo periods).[4] Instead, the culture is focused primarily on the 'wow factor'.[5] Relying on parametric design and unrealistic computer software for building design.[6] Far too often believing that authentic, futuristic, and geometrically-complex aesthetics and forms are superior to smaller, simpler buildings.[7] This is a problematic outlook because it is far from the truth. If present day, Western architectural design could be labeled as 'apathetic, excess, and spectacle,' then

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[1] Leonard Koren. *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers.* (Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.), 7-15.
[2] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 17.; Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 33.; Nikil Saval. "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future." New York Times. Last modified February 15, 2018. Accessed September 9, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/t-magazine/kengo-kuma-architect.html.
[3] Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."
[4] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 8-9.
[5] Vittorio Gallese and Alessandro Gattara. "Embodied Simulation, Aesthetics, and Architecture: An Experimental Aesthetic Approach." In *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*, edited by Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa, 161-77. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 167-169.; Harry Mallgrave. '"Know Thyself". Or What Designer can Learn from the Contemporary Biological Sciences"' In *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*, edited by Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa, 9-29.; Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future." (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 24-27.
[6] Mallgrave, '"Know Thyself", 20-21.
[7] Mallgrave, '"Know Thyself", 21.; Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."

customary Japanese architectural design could be classified as 'empathic and understated, yet transcendent'; with humble aesthetics that are closely tied to the natural environment and the orchestration of emotions.[8]

Yukio Futagawa's book, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*, states that the primary material of choice is wood (popular varieties include cypress, larch, and cedar), in ancient Japanese architecture—despite the fact that much of Japan is susceptible to earthquakes.[9] This can be attributed to the fact that wood is plentiful throughout Japan, that the Japanese are capable of engineering it to withstand heavy loads, and that the Japanese are willing to rebuild and preserve their buildings, as they degrade (i.e. Ise Shrine).[10] Wood is also used because of its distinct humanness (able to restore humans), and its ability to blend with the environment.[11] Humans may have a deeper relationship with trees than previously thought (possibly a holdover from their distant ape relatives who dwelled in the trees), creating a fondness for the material.[12] Theoretically contact with wood, be it through touch, sight, or smell could trigger a profound connection in humans, removing them from the stresses of their modern day lives—acting to rejuvenate them.[13] Wood has natural properties, and experiences weathering and other damage, meaning that with time it becomes further concealed in the natural environment.[14] Stone, ceramic tiles, and native grasses are secondary materials and are rarely used, but nonetheless originate from the earth.[15] The use of earthen materials helps the Japanese integrate their buildings with the natural environment, in conjunction with 'nestling' their buildings perfectly into the landscape.[16]

Buildings are often plopped-down on the ground without care for the environment nor the inhabitants, in the United States and in Europe—as they are often obtrusive and a large departure from the 'natural order of things'.[17] In traditional Japanese architecture, the opposite is true. Buildings are strategically placed, to combine precisely with their surrounding sites and avoid encroaching on the lives of the local inhabitants.[18] These beliefs are not limited to

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[8] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*.; Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future.".
[9] Cassandra Adams, "Japan's Ise Shrine and Its Thirteen-Hundred-Year-Old Reconstruction Tradition," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 52, no. 1, (Sept. 1998), p. 53-56.; Yukio Futagawa. *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*. (New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1963).; Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."
[10] Kazuo Nishi and Kazuo Hozumi, "Shinto Shrines," What is Japanese Architecture? (New York, US: Kodansha International, 1985), 40.
[11] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*, 21.; Rachel Kaplan, Stephen Kaplan, and Robert Ryan. "Restorative Environments." In *With People in Mind: Design and Management of Everyday Nature*, 67-78. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998.), 75.
[12] Tattersall, Ian. "If I Had a Hammer." *Academic Search Premier* 311, no. 3 (September 2014): 1-8. PDF., 3.
[13] Gallese and Gattara, "Embodied Simulation, Aesthetics, and Architecture", 174-175.; Mallgrave, '"Know Thyself", 28.; Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan, "Restorative Environments," 75.
[14] Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."
[15] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*, 21.
[16] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*, 81.
[17] Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."
[18] Saval, "Kengo Kuma's Architecture of the Future."

architecture strictly in Japan. In Philadelphia, the Shofuso residence and garden is wisely rooted in the earth, to the point where it looks like it has been there for hundreds of years. Purposeful orientation, material makeup, and landscaping unify ancient Japanese architecture with the environment. What can be gleaned from all of this is that besides being empathetic toward the environment, the Japanese traditional architecture is empathetic toward people.

Japanese traditional architecture appears to be built for humans. This may be a seemingly trivial point, but it all so important, in a time when architects dismiss human psychological needs.[19] At a logical level the Japanese build spaces with the understanding that humans: (1) are fickle and (2) desire spaces with privacy and openness. Using modular screens, rooms in traditional Japanese buildings can be adapted: to be intimate, to hold large numbers of people, or ambiguously fade into the natural world (and let the mind “wander” and revive).[20] Japanese architecture fulfills the need for human ceremony and guidance too.[21] Using traditional techniques the Japanese have artful choreograph passageways and thresholds framing dry and green gardens—delicately weaving occupants between interior and exterior spaces.[22] The Japanese have mastery over creating poetic moods as they design relaxing and mysterious spaces, with countless views to nature, a myriad of wood paneling, and interplays between dimly lit places and spaces lit with amber light from semi-transparent acrylic and fabric diffusion screens.[23] The Japanese also understand how to manipulate the perception of humans.[24] Occupants are expected to sit-down on the tatami flooring inside, which inherently gives them an entirely new perspective on the spaces around them. Clearly, the Japanese have a comprehensive understanding of what makes spaces profound.[25] Modern pressures like globalization are threatening these sacred beliefs.[26] However, architects like Kengo Kuma are proving through their contemporary designs that the old traditions are still viable; even if they have to get adapted slightly (or a lot).[27]

Kengo Kuma's architecture could be described as ‘a protest against globalization’. But, he is now facing pressures internationally, to build more ‘Westernized buildings’ (with spectacle) and fewer traditional style buildings.[28] Kuma seems to compromise with these projects by combining modern necessities with old-style Japanese beliefs—proving that traditional

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[19] Mallgrave, ‘"Know Thyself”, 16.
[20] Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan, "Restorative Environments," 76-77.
[21] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 33.; Mallgrave, ‘"Know Thyself”, 16-20.
[22] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*.
[23] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*.; Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 28-29.; Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 33.; Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[24] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists*, 75.
[25] Futagawa, *The Roots of Japanese Architecture*.; Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists.*
[26] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[27] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[28] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."

Japanese architecture works in an international context. One example is his “National Stadium for the 2020 Olympic in Tokyo”, which was selected as ‘the winning design’ (after Zaha Hadid's controversial design was scrapped).[29] It addresses capacity and modern infrastructure concerns, but also links back Japanese origins, deploying the use of “cedar and larch” sourced from all over Japan, light diffusion screens, living trees on every tier of the building (relating the building to the surrounding park), and a modified, traditional, “latticed wood” construction (with steel used to ensure structural integrity).[30] His “Cultural Village” in Portland, Oregon (his first building designed in the United States) takes traditional forms and puts an American twist on them—using a lot of glass and implementing gable-like green roofs.[31] The village is sustainable with its three buildings that are LEED certified and its “24 geothermal wells”.[32] It is ironic that Kengo Kuma avoided getting fixated on authenticity and uniqueness, only to unintentionally become authentic in the ‘public eye,’ with his traditionally-focused designs. The fact that his philosophy and 'story' are starting to gain traction might be evidence that the field of architecture is on the verge of another global paradigm shift.[33] The design of a building for The Clark Center of Culture and Sustainability on the UMass Campus would be the perfect opportunity for putting traditional Japanese ideals and Kuma’s ideas to good use.

The history of the Clark Center and the cross-pollination between Japan and the United States will be acknowledged in the proposed building design. Amherst's vernacular design (heavy use of timber) will complement the Japanese material palette nicely. The building will fulfill the logical needs of all occupants, with: modular spaces; private, semi-private, and public spaces; wayfinding guidance, and handicap accessibility. It will also meet the psychological needs of the inhabitants—creating emotion-filled habitation areas through the use of passages, thresholds, lighting, and a multitude of views to outside greenery (to benefit the psyche).[34] The building will have the utmost respect for nature. It will be seamlessly situated into the fabric of the site (the terrain and the nearby buildings) making it as unobtrusive as possible. It will use sustainable features (like green roofs), geothermal wells, and steam power (generated on-campus) to reduce its ecological footprint. Following these methodologies and unpretentious

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[29] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[30] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[31] KENGO KUMA & ASSOCIATES. "ポートランド日本庭園　カルチュラル・ヴィレッジ" [Portland Japanese Garden]. KENGO KUMA & ASSOCIATES. Accessed September 9, 2018. http://kkaa.co.jp/works/architecture/portland-japanese-garden-2/.; Philip Stevens. "kengo kuma expands portland japanese garden with green-roofed 'cultural village.'" designboom. Last modified October 6, 2017. Accessed September 9, 2018.; https://www.designboom.com/architecture/kengo-kuma-portland-japanese-garden-cultural-village-oregon-10-06-2017/.; Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[32] Fairs, "Architects are suffering from 'originality syndrome'".; Stevens, "kengo kuma expands portland japanese
[33] Saval, "Kengo Kuma’s Architecture of the Future."
[34] Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan, "Restorative Environments," 76-77.

design techniques should make the Clark Center the crossroads of cultures and an incubator for revolutionary ideas.

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