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# Regional Materiality in the Asian Context

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As the lead interior design architect in collaboration with Ian Schrager on the EDITION Hotel in the MahaNakhon, Kengo Kuma and Associates employed their extensive Asian design experience to inform the hotel's unique public interiors and guest rooms. Since each EDITION Hotel is expressive of its cultural context, it was critical to engage an architect that had a deep understanding of local design imperatives, and Kengo Kuma's commitment to regional materiality proved particularly applicable to the philosophy of this new hotel brand. Mr. Kuma's experiences throughout the Tohoku and Shikoku regions of Japan in the 1990s had a great impact on his architectural work and forever changed his outlook on the connection between place, relationships, and the built environment.

## History is Directed by Disasters – Why We Should Examine Our Own Ground

What I am most interested in now is inverting the structure of a culture that is centered on the city. The 20th century was an age of industry and an age in which everything from material goods, information, and culture flowed from metropolises to local towns and villages.

Following the same vector, architecture too flowed from the center to the periphery. Concrete, steel, and glass produced in metropolises were transported to localities, and buildings throughout the world came to be constructed of the same materials with the same details. Trends in design too flowed outward from metropolises. The flow of information in the 20th century followed a

familiar pattern: trends that emerged in New York, London, or Paris were transmitted to Tokyo and reached local towns and villages in Japan several years or decades later.

The end result was the destruction not only of local culture but of all local life. Local buildings were once constructed of locally produced wood, stone, clay, and paper, but such materials fell into disuse. Craftsmen skilled in the use of such materials lost their livelihoods and disappeared, and no one was there to follow in their footsteps. Local economies and lives as well as local cultures were destroyed through this process.

I am convinced that the earthquake and tsunami that struck the Tohoku region of Japan on March 11, 2011 provided an



Left: Regional map of Tohoku, Japan. (cc-by-sa) TUBS

Opposite: Aerial view of the damage caused by the 2011 earthquake in Tohoku. (cc-by-sa) BotMultichillIT



opportunity to invert this 20th-century social and cultural structure. That is because the Tohoku region is the area with the richest natural environment in Japan and the place where many craftsmen with skills that utilize that natural environment lived and worked. However, the Tohoku we saw destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami was not the old Tohoku with which we were familiar. It was not the Tohoku with the rich natural environment, the Tohoku that had been a paradise of craftsmen. Row after row of prefabricated housing units had been assembled from parts prepared in factories, and the people of Tohoku living in those units commuted to work in cities by car. A lifestyle similar to that of American suburbanites had destroyed the rich and distinctive culture of the Tohoku region. When I saw the tsunami washing away those American-style houses and cars, Noah's Flood came to mind. God sent the biblical Flood to punish an arrogant, corrupt humanity. The earthquake and tsunami seemed to me an expression of the anger of the gods at the way all of us had forgotten or ignored the fearsome power of nature. In that sense the tsunami was much like Noah's Flood.

The Tohoku region is a special place for me personally. I opened my office in 1986, but the bursting of the economic bubble in 1992 began a decade of recession in Japan. During those ten years, I received no commissions in Tokyo. My office managed to survive by doing small, local projects.

I was helped out during those ten years by jobs in the Tohoku and Shikoku regions. Those are the most underdeveloped and impoverished regions in Japan. One reason for this is their distance from Tokyo, but another has to do with topography. Steep mountains rise all the way to the coastline in both Tohoku and Shikoku; as a result, large plains do not exist, and areas are cut off from one another. Both Tohoku and Shikoku are essentially collections of countless small valleys.

This topography hindered the dissemination of a central culture transmitted from Tokyo. Because of this topography, both Tohoku and Shikoku lagged behind other regions with respect to 20th-century trends. Conversely, it was thanks to this topography – those valleys – that both Tohoku and Shikoku retained the rich cultural characteristic of small places. The richness and strength of that culture

cannot be understood until one has worked together with the people who live there – until one has made things, eaten local food, drunk local sake, and talked together with local craftsmen. In the decade after the bubble burst, I had an opportunity to learn from Tohoku and Shikoku the richness of small places. I probably would not have been able to change had I not had those ten years of experience. I probably would not be designing the kind of buildings I am designing now. That is why I continually tell students that a recession is the best of times for an architect and that having no jobs is the most fortunate thing that can happen to an architect. One tends to repeat one's past; one rarely attempts to change. One does not try to learn from the changed circumstances of a new era.

The biggest thing I learned from Tohoku and Shikoku was that relationships are what make a place rich. A place is not rich simply because it has a beautiful natural environment. A place is not rich simply because it is blessed with natural resources such as wood or stone, or because many skilled craftsmen live there. The relationships that tie these things together



are what make a place rich. Places that were rich in that sense once existed in countless number in Japan.

The German architect Bruno Taut perceived that Japanese architecture was an architecture, not of form, but of relationships. He declared that by comparison, European architecture was an architecture of form and that European architects were formalists. In 1933 Taut escaped Germany where the Nazis had taken power and after traveling by the Siberian Railway took a boat across the Sea of Japan, arriving on May 4 in Tsuruga. He headed directly for the Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto. May 4 happened to be his birthday.

Taken by Japanese architects to visit the Katsura Detached Palace, Taut, who had no background knowledge of the place, stopped in front of a fence known as Katsura-gaki. His eyes filled with tears. The Japanese architects were astonished by this unexpected reaction.

This world-famous architect whom they respected, the avant-garde architect and leader of the modernist movement who had designed the Steel Industry Pavilion

(1913) and the Glass Pavilion (1914), had suddenly begun to cry in front of a shabby bamboo fence in an old garden built in the 17th century. What had happened? Who was this man?

Taut later wrote a book entitled *Nihonbi no saihakken* (The Rediscovery of Japanese Beauty) and devoted many pages of it to the detached palace. He discovered from his experience at Katsura that the essence of Japanese architecture is "relationships." Taut explained that from the standpoint of European formalism, the Katsura buildings are nothing more than shabby huts. In fact, when Le Corbusier, whom Taut accused of being a formalist, later visited Katsura Detached Palace in 1955, he left behind only the negative comment that "there are too many lines." His reaction was the polar opposite of Taut's.

Taut discovered in front of the fence in Katsura a "relationship" he had never seen before. Katsura-gaki is a fence made of bamboo. However, the bamboo in this case has not been cut and detached from the earth. Bamboo culms still rooted in the soil are bent and woven into a fence.

Top: Katsura Detached Palace, Kyoto. (cc-by-sa) np & dijewell

Opposite: The fence surrounding the palace, known as Katsura-gaki. (cc-by-sa) Raphael Azevedo Franca

*“The biggest thing I learned from Tohoku and Shikoku was that relationships are what make a place rich. A place is not rich simply because it has a beautiful natural environment. A place is not rich simply because it is blessed with natural resources such as wood or stone, or because many skilled craftsmen live there.”*





Top: Asakusa Culture Tourist Information Center in Tokyo, which stacks the forms of various historic Japanese housing typologies - by Kengo Kuma. Source: Takeshi YAMAGISHI

Bottom: Nakagawa-machi Bato Hiroshige Museum of Art in Bato, which features layers of semi-transparent planes common in Japanese architecture - by Kengo Kuma. (cc-by-sa) Japanese Craft Construction

Opposite: Nezu Museum in Tokyo, featuring a traditional roof structure that blurs the line between interior and exterior - by Kengo Kuma. Source: FUJITSUKA Mitsumasa





Taut had never seen such a thing before. It was architectural yet natural, natural yet artificial. Moreover, this miracle was achieved thanks to the amazing skill of craftsmen. There was indeed a “relationship” here – a relationship established between a natural landscape, natural resources, and craftsmen coexisting with nature. If one looks at just the resulting form, it is nothing but bamboo leaves. However, he was suddenly moved to tears because he realized that there was an underlying relationship here.

Countless such relationships existed in Tohoku and Shikoku as well. In each small valley, trees grew, and those trees gave each valley its own unique texture, color, and fragrance. Unfortunately, this volume cannot give the reader any sense of that fragrance. Fragrance also played an important role in Japanese culture. Fragrance is traditionally deemed more important than appearance in the selection of a tree. Craftsmen lived in each valley. Using the rich resources yielded by the valley, they made things and constructed buildings. In doing so, they were very much like mothers giving birth. Through their production of things using that place as material, place and humans were connected.

It was through the act of production that the valley and humans were connected.

Many cultural anthropologists have pointed out that this relationship – the production of things using place as material – is the most important relationship for humankind. The father principle is universality and objectivity, the drive to dominate and govern the world according to one rule. The child, on the other hand, rebels against the father and opposes him with an individual’s subjectivity. Production by the mother mediates in this opposition between father and child.

Poststructuralist philosophers (such as Derrida and Kristeva) have pointed out that acts of production by the mother are the essence of the concept of *chora* (place) which Plato stated at the beginning of *Timaeus*. Universal principles exist in the world, but at the same time the world is a collection of countless, heterogeneous places. Plato pointed out that acts of production by the mother resolves this seeming contradiction.

Plato’s concept of *chora* closely resembles the concept of guardian spirits of places that has been traditional to Japan since ancient

times. The world is saved from opposition and schism between father and child through continued production by guardian spirits. Similar beliefs and ideas existed in many places in the Neolithic period, and Plato’s concept is said to be an extension of those beliefs and ideas.

I learned the significance of production from Tohoku and Shikoku. Architecture is an act of producing a thing from a place; it is production by those who live in the place. Such acts of production connect place and human beings. It is that great truth that I learned from Tohoku and Shikoku. I decided then to engage in architecture once more in earnest, and in that sense Tohoku and Shikoku are for me, a mother, indeed more a mother than my own mother.