

Article

Revisiting Japan's Fictional Gardens: An Ecocritical Reading of Nature Imagery in Contemporary Architectural Essays

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Abstract: This paper inspects editorial production in the field of Japanese contemporary architecture, screening the contents of essays written during the last decade (2007–2010) by four selected authors in which a recurring interplay with nature-related subjects is noticeable. This analysis highlights the diversity and intrinsic individual originality of these books by relating their specific approach with the overall work themes of each architect and discussing the existence of a common ground among them. While investigating their philosophical and conceptual standpoints, the paper also attempts to contextualize these discourses both within the larger context of architectural theory—particularly of early postmodern ecological approaches—sustainable construction, and in the milieu of Japan, where an imprinted notion of harmonious coexistence between nature and culture has long been mystified from abroad and from within. By assessing its motives and influence and finally questioning the existence of a paradox amidst the multiple existing forms of paraenvironmental architecture, it is discussed whether these narratives and practices manage to communicate ecoliteracy with their audience. Architecture's inherent traits as a visual, perceptive, and cognitive discipline to reflect contemporary environmental conflicts and encourage paradigm change are also highlighted.

Keywords: ecocriticism; architectural theory; contemporary architecture; Japanese culture; nature; ecology; sustainable construction; pastoralism; biophilia

1. Introduction

Architectural discourse has long been implied in early displays of ecocriticism. From 1970s to 1990s, a vast theoretical production reflected a cultural awakening towards environmental limits and focused on the search for an ecological architecture with a lighter footprint on the planet.

This trend, which developed from the inheritance of Buckminster Fuller, ranged from landscape designer Ian McHarg and his approach to design with nature, to biologists and writers such as John and Nancy Todd. It encompassed several architects such as Sim Van der Ryn, Kenneth Yeang, and William McDonough, unraveling the foundations, principles, and methods of ecological design. The emergence of environmental thematic in the field of architecture, rooted in radical ecologism (Du Plessis 2012) and capturing the criticism of international style, became recognized in architectural theory as post-modern ecology (Jencks and Karl 1997) and was thus inherently supported by written narratives.

In regards to environmental matters, however, contemporary architecture as a discipline has tended to be more commonly associated with its technical and physical facets such as building science and project management rather than read as an artistic or critical manifestation. This has become evident with the development of technical literature dealing with sustainable construction and the movement associated with environmental and sustainability assessment methodologies (Du Plessis 2012; Vitorino 2015) focusing on quantitative performance and relying on a new, specialized expertise professional class (Lee 2011).

Nevertheless, it is arguable that contemporary architectural theory and practice—even when not actively engaged in reportable green building metrics—is still culturally contaminated by pressing environmental matters constituting a potential vehicle for ecological interpretation and response. The existence of a more theoretical and critical approach led by architects towards environmentally responsible architecture is also evident in the compilation *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture* (Lee 2011).

Signaling a trend towards an environmental qualitative approach, this paper inspects the recent editorial production in the field of contemporary Japanese architecture, screening the contents of essays written during the last decade (published between 2007 and 2010) by four authors of different generations and backgrounds—Terunobu Fujimori, Kengo Kuma, Junya Ishigami, and Hiroshi Nakamura—where a recurring interplay with nature-related subjects is noticeable.

Observing the works *Fujimori Terunobu Architecture* (Fujimori 2007), *Junya Ishigami: Small Images* (Ishigami 2008), *Studies in Organic: Kengo Kuma & Associates* (Kuma 2009), and *Microscopic Designing Methodology* (Nakamura 2010) in particular, this analysis highlights the diversity and intrinsic individual originality of these writings by relating their specific approach with the overall themes in the oeuvres of each architect and discussing the existence of a common ground among them.

While investigating their philosophical and conceptual standpoints that waver between pastoralism and environmentalism, the paper also attempts to contextualize these discourses both within the larger context of architectural theory—particularly of post-modern ecological approaches—and of sustainable construction in the milieu of Japan.

2. The Roots of Japan's Fictional Gardens

The imprinted notion of a Japanese-specific harmonious coexistence between nature and culture has long been mystified from abroad and from within (Kuma 2011; Yuki 2014a).

One source for this belief lies on the animistic tradition of Shintoism, whose manifestations persist nowadays. Trees, waterfalls, streams, rocks and mountains are believed to be inhabited by—and revered as—manifestations of *kami* (gods or spirits) (Mansfield 2009). Another source is the often mentioned intertwined connection between cultural expressions and nature worship in Japanese art forms (ranging from *haiku* and *tanka* poetry, to tea ceremony and spatial expressions such as the landscape and moon contemplating spaces of Katsura Imperial Villa or the Zen Buddhism rock gardens). Some of these traditions are depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Shimenawa* rope around a spirit inhabited tree in Ise. *Ryōan-ji* zen garden in Kyoto.

This notion is often referred to—and to some extent misinterpreted as—environmental awareness or ecological thinking. However, the concept of ecocriticism or the infusion of environmentalist concepts in literary and artistic expressions has, with few exceptions, only been imported into Japan during the 1990s with the translation of English writing authors, and from the 2000s with

the application of ecocritical concepts to Japanese literature (Yuki 2014a) in parallel to the diverse stages of environmental movement in Japan (Edahiro 2009).

Satoyama, a traditional form of agriculture and forestry landscape and a central concept in contemporary Japanese environmental imaginary and sustainability research, is likewise idealized, as stated by Yuki (2014b). This idealization logically extends to the sustainability aspects of Japanese architecture, particularly that of traditional houses and contemporary practices, even though they might not entirely correspond to this idealized model (Sunikka-Blank 2011).

In the field of environmental architecture, it is possible to observe that Japan has followed a comparable trajectory to other international backgrounds. This ranges from Team Zoo, founded in 1971—an architects' cooperative with a focus on regional identity that is representative of the early postmodern architectural ecocriticism—to the development of a specialized technical expertise embodied by the launch of the national building sustainability certification CASBEE (Comprehensive Assessment System for Built Environment Efficiency) in 2004.

Despite the prevalence of nature contemplation in Japanese cultural forms, current key environmental issues are as important as in any other developed country. Buildings contribute to a significant share of energy consumption and atmospheric emissions, and a very short building life cycle—along with an intense production and deposition of debris—has made the construction industry the largest contributor of national waste production (Yashiro 1998). Japan also has a limited area of arable land and an extreme dependence on foreign biocapacity related with food and timber sources (WWF 2012). Combined with a shrinking and ageing population trend, this has aggravated the abandonment of traditional sustainable forestry practices. City centers are characterized by intense urbanization, with high population density and shortage of habitable land area. Despite the existence of parks, green roofing, and street greenery, urban spaces in Japan have a high percentage of soil occupation, impervious surfaces, and a pressing need for remediation of riverfronts and canals (Vitorino 2015).

At the same time, a widespread expectation persists nowadays that Japanese architecture inherently reveals a particular respect towards nature (Kuma 2011), in part substantiating the interest and exposure of Japanese architecture in western culture since the 20th century.

3. Nature Imagery in Four Contemporary Architectural Essays

Among the inexhaustible body of editorial production in the field of Japanese contemporary architecture in the last decade, *Fujimori Terunobu Architecture* (Fujimori 2007), *Junya Ishigami: Small Images* (Ishigami 2008), *Studies in Organic: Kengo Kuma & Associates* (Kuma 2009), and *Microscopic Designing Methodology* (Nakamura 2010) are four bilingual monograph publications that have been written in both Japanese and English. In these works, the methodologies and points of view of the respective authors towards architectural practices are expressed, with recurring references to nature imagery, including traces of pastoralism and paraenvironmental activism.

3.1. *Fujimori: Sprout of the Earth*

Fujimori Terunobu Architecture (2007), published by TOTO Publishing, covers an opening essay titled "Toward an Architecture of Humankind". The built works portrayed in the book are grouped in three themes: teahouses, works using natural materials, and works using plants. These are preceded by the interlinked projects "Sprout of the Earth" and "Tokyo Plan 2107" that were presented at the 10th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006.

Terunobu Fujimori (born 1946) recounts his professional path and his decision to withdraw from all architecture production linked with design and construction after his graduation in 1971, instead dedicating himself exclusively to teaching and research activities in the field of architectural history. At the time, as Fujimori recounts: "The contamination of the atmosphere and the oceans had been recognized by then as a problem of "industrial pollution", but there was as yet no discussion of the contamination of rivers in urban areas as a social or city planning problem" (Fujimori 2007, p. 19).

The inability or impotence of architecture as a discipline to effectively prevent or mitigate environmental impacts is understood by the author, whose built works are preceded by a hiatus of 19 years since graduation. The first built project by Fujimori, the Moriya Historical Museum that was completed in 1991, follows an aesthetic of primitive architype with local materials and rough finishes that went on to mark his subsequent buildings: “I wanted to use locally available natural materials of long standing such as wood, earth, and stone in a manner appropriate to the Neolithic period” (ibid., p. 35). Another major trait in his architecture is the search for a coherent relation between plants and buildings. Most of his tearooms are designed in such a way as to blend in with the surrounding landscape and to become natural observation points. The author writes: “The ideal would be to combine architecture and nature in such a way that each shows the other to advantage” (ibid., p. 134).

The understanding of an eminent environmental catastrophe is illustrated in the opening utopian projects depicted in the book, which takes place in 2107 after “Global warming causes a rise of sea level and desertification of the land, forces that will cause most of the major cities developed in the 20th century to vanish” (ibid., p. 11). Fujimori identifies the failure of the totality of contemporary architectural approaches to address environmental issues: “Urban visions in the 20th century were proposed assuming the progress of technology, whether they relied on or protested against technology” (ibid., p. 9).

In this future unbuilt scenario imagined by Fujimori, “The human beings who survive are forced to grow forests on the remaining strips of land caught between the sea and the desert . . . Then, the Sprout of the Earth with lots of greenery on their surface begin to emerge from the desert” (ibid., p. 11). The nature of these sprouts of the earth is at the same time vague, tectonic, spontaneous, and healing: “They look like a mirage, but on closer inspection they are gigantic towers of mud in which plants are growing, and insects and reptiles are nesting” (ibid., p. 7).

Fujimori’s descriptions symbolize the perspective of a new ecological order after anthropic devastation: “By the middle of 21st century the Earth will become a desert. However, by the end of that century rejuvenation will begin because of efforts to reduce CO₂ and prevent desertification, and perhaps the reawakening of the Mother Earth Goddess” (ibid., p. 7). In this regenerative scenario, architecture draws from the materials locally made available: “Due to the abundance of trees and coral, human beings will build wooden high rises finished with stucco [sourced from coral lime]” (ibid., p. 13), as the assimilation of pollutants released to the atmosphere is continuously performed by inland growing forests and marine coral reefs.

3.2. *Ishigami: Small Bedroom in a Field*

Junya Ishigami: Small Images, 2008, published in the Contemporary Architect’s Series of INAX Publishing, is a book that has a loose organization, with loose borders between projects and topics. Junya Ishigami (born 1974) groups his works under clusters of themes, where the resource to plants is recurrent in architectural plans and intricate detailed drawings.

In the project Kait Workshop (2008), built as part of the Kanagawa Institute of Technology campus, Ishigami significantly refers to the emulation of nature: “I wanted it to be the kind of place where people could come and feel like they were strolling through the woods with sunlight filtering through the trees . . . This view led to the thinking that some soft, ambiguous kind of borders could be fashioned by erecting columns, in what appears to be a completely random fashion” (Ishigami 2008, p. 28). “One who experiences this space can instantly see how, despite the lack of identifiable boundaries, each place has its own distinct expanse . . . [resulting] not of the columns alone, but of various combined elements like furniture and plants” (ibid., p. 29).

Plants are a recurring element to shape space in Ishigami’s architecture, and the intention of providing proximity to nature, inside and around building enclosures, in dense urbanized areas is expressed in several unbuilt projects, as «row house», including a “Rooftop bathroom with a sky view” (ibid., p. 57). This strategy is also patent at the 2008 Venice Biennale installation where Ishigami mounted “several greenhouses in the garden around the Japan pavilion. Each is at once a structure in its own right and a new garden created in the pavilion’s periphery . . . The density of the plants is

determined through exacting adjustments to the balance so that the space created by the architecture, space created by the plants and the peripheral landscape are equivalent" (ibid., p. 97), manifesting the author's will to dilute the distinction between landscape and architectural design.

Depicting a book inside a book, Ishigami writes in *Plants & Architecture*: "While the formulation architecture-and-landscape typically suggests buildings within a larger encompassing environment, I have chosen to consider them both the same level . . . Instead of regarding lakes and rivers and hills and forests and fields as far from the built environment, I am seeking ways to design so that nature comes close enough to be indistinguishable from architecture" (ibid., p. 101).

Ishigami draws a new urban order comparable to Ebenezer Howard's "garden city", but where instead of hierarchical, segregated, and geometric rings; built and natural elements coexist in a blended and distributed way. An urban order where a very small bedroom stands alone in a field of flowers, or a bath is installed in a garden inside a greenhouse. In Ishigami's imagination—depicted as minute handmade illustrations—plants are more conspicuous than architecture, which is thin and at the verge of defying the boundaries of physics. The architect intensely studies each plant species, characteristics and location and apparently spends more time and effort on drawing them than the buildings (ibid., p. 303).

Ishigami's intention to include flora and landscape elements in his projects is revealed as simultaneously pastoral fruition and ecopedagogical: "By creating huge wilderness areas within urban areas, we can better understand the city coexisting with nature at large" (ibid., p. 108).

3.3. Kuma: Organic Architecture

Studies in Organic: Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2009, published by TOTO Publishing, covers a selection of projects organized in three sections: Contour, Texture and Organization. It has an opening essay entitled, "From erasing architecture to organic architecture".

In the text, Kengo Kuma (born in 1954) recounts the shift in his project approach over the years towards organic architecture. This mutation, predominantly motivated by the internationalization of his practice and the increasing need for competitiveness in a global sphere, occurred in the 1990s—the same time that sustainability issues emerge in mainstream culture. After a period of scarce commissions, Kuma rejects an earlier "cut and paste" technique to architectural form as too objectified, and instead develops a new project approach intrinsically linked with the intention of erasing a conspicuous architecture expression.

In the Kiro-san Observatory project, a municipal mountaintop observatory in the southern island of Shikoku (1991–1994), this approach is also motivated by the intention of local recovery and ecological conservation. As he writes: "I still remember my feelings when I first stood on top of the mountain and looked out on the beautiful islands of the Inland Sea. The place itself was desolate: the mountaintop had already been leveled and shorn of trees in preparation for the creation of a parking area and the observatory. I felt it would be a crime to put a solid form there. I was fearful of incurring the wrath of nature if I dared propose a form" (Kuma 2009, pp. 20–22). The desire to erase architecture is thus combined with a concealed minimal intervention in such a natural setting: "It was that earnest desire that led me to conceive the idea of an invisible observatory—to pile up soil once more on the flattened earth, plant trees and restore the mountain to its original state" (ibid., p. 22).

However, Kuma realizes that, when trying to apply the same strategy in other architectural programs, from the developer's perspective, "there is no desire to simply bury without a trace buildings on which a great deal of money has been spent and increasingly scarce resources and energy have been invested" (ibid., p. 40). Consequently, Kuma's site specific approach and the desire to dematerialize architecture are pursued in other projects, with an alternative strategy. The disintegration of the solidity of the architectural surfaces in small particles and the exploration of material possibilities become central themes in Kuma's work. Buildings are dissimulated into their environment by adding a mosaic of vegetation to walls and roofs, using small material elements to create an alternative topography or by combining more than one of these tactics. Among the pages dedicated to the project

of Besançon Art and Cultural Centre (2007), the architect's intentions are translated into a haiku-like description as follows:

*The large undulating roof merges
Into the surrounding landscape* (ibid., p. 129).

The principle behind organic architecture is expressed with an analogy to organisms and the nest manifestation of animal architecture: "When organisms make a nest or lair, it must be invisible or difficult to find for enemies but easy to find for those living there . . . a wavering between wanting to be conspicuous and wanting to be invisible" (ibid., p. 44). Defying separate notions of culture and nature, Kuma concludes: "If the leading role in architecture is played by organisms called human beings, then it seems to me only natural to regard architecture as a matter of relationships, that is, the relationship between organisms and matter on the one hand and the relationship between organisms and the environment on the other" (ibid., p. 52).

3.4. Nakamura: *Dancing with Trees*

Microscopic Designing Methodology, 2010, published in the Contemporary Architect's Series of INAX Publishing covers four sections: Body, Materials, Nature, and Society.

Hiroshi Nakamura (born 1974) describes his design approach as the microscopic observation of the dynamic relationships that occur between human beings and buildings, materials and nature, and between themselves. Focusing on these intangible molecular or motion behaviors, Nakamura's strategy is to highlight and enhance variations—local variations—as in different site-specific contexts and realities, but also temporal and thematic variations within the same context as different phenomena emerge.

In the chapter dedicated to Nature, Nakamura organizes his works into three topics: Behaviors of Trees, Motion of Light, and Corporeity of a Nest. Within this theme, Nakamura's architecture reveals itself as an architecture of senses, textures, and physicality. "The movement of the trees, texture of the trunks, and smells of the greenery—each tree has different expressions. I determine the design in response to these expressions" (Nakamura 2010, p. 106).

Consequently, building design is shaped due, and in response to, local circumstances, and the building envelope becomes a flexible skin that accommodates and gets deflected by internal and external motions. His approach results in site-specific and site-driven responses: "I want to listen carefully to the voices coming up from the site like a gardener and create a design in response to the trees and nature" (ibid., p. 106).

The motivation behind Nakamura's methodology can be interpreted as a wish of proximity between humans and nature. "The method of design based on the motions of the body is applied to nature as well . . . When the motions of each [motions of human beings and motions of natural elements] synchronize, people gradually physicalize the motions of nature. This repetitive motion, I think, creates affection to nature" (ibid., p. 106). "I want the people who use a building to be in a close physical and mental relationship with nature, because I think this communication brings with it a meaningful relationship, which is different from a dichotomy between the two, nature and something artificial" (ibid., p. 106).

The physically intertwined relationship between human body, architecture, and trees is also explored in the T-museum, an art museum in Toshihi prefecture: ". . . we decided to construct a building which existed as if to fill the gaps between the trees in a forest" (ibid., p. 108). The adaptation of the interior space to the surrounding coppices with different ceiling heights and narrow passages evokes and mediates the experience of walking among the woods: "This space engenders the same motions as when people walk in a forest—to walk on while avoiding branches with a bow or to rest in the shade of a tree" (ibid., p. 108).

Nakamura also opposes the effect of "real" nature versus "tamed" nature in the way architecture integrates vegetation. More specifically, Nakamura points that in buildings where plants are placed in planter boxes as commodity, "people cannot associate with nature on an equal footing" (ibid., p. 106).

By contrast, where nature is left on its own in a state closer to wilderness and this proximity between human beings and nature is made possible, a more balanced relationship can emerge: “Nature is sometimes ugly, terrifying, and keeps our hands full. However, when we accept it, we will probably truly understand the real beauty of nature” (ibid., p. 106).

In the project *Dancing Trees Singing Birds* (2007), a housing complex in central Tokyo located along a tree grove, Nakamura’s methodology comprised a detailed study of tree roots and the movement of branches to “ensure the utmost capacity in the building while cutting down trees to the least possible extent” (ibid., p. 108). Nakamura asserts his expectations and standpoints with this project, writing: “This method will arouse new criticism towards those acts of construction which carry with them the burden of original sin in environmental destruction. An earthwork is usually termed pit excavation, or the cutting of roots, and the concept of cutting roots and killing trees underlies the act of construction” (ibid., p. 108). Regarding architecture’s environmental impacts, Nakamura refers to the nest as a textbook with interpretations to environmental architecture: “A nest, which is made with materials requiring the least amount of work in terms of material and cost, and not requiring needless labor, is the most ecological form of architecture” (ibid., p. 110).

4. Interpreting the “Fictional Gardens” in Japan’s Contemporary Architectural Literature

The four selected architectural essays reflect individual aesthetical sensibilities, theoretical, and methodological approaches and specific visual, tectonic, and semantic expressions. Beyond the overlying presence of nature imagery, they share an underlying common substance that can be interpreted as paraenvironmental and ecocritical.

A non-exhaustive map of connecting concepts, references, and intentions shared among the represented authors is depicted in Table 1. While some of the recurring patterns are related intrinsically to architectural forms and representation (including the selection of teahouses and nests as architypes), others pertain to a sort of environmental engagement (targeting nature proximity, observation and ecological awareness). The authors’ intentions expressed in the texts and reflected in their projects vary from their intention to dematerialize architecture to their aim of promoting nature phenomenological experiences or contributing to act on environmental thinking and human behavior patterns.

Table 1. Brief relation of concepts, standpoints, and intentions in four contemporary Japanese architectural essays.

	T. Fujimori 2007	J. Ishigami 2008	K. Kuma 2009	H. Nakamura 2010
1. Concepts				
Criticism of western and modern thinking and architecture templates	●	●	●	●
Site-responsive architecture	●		●	●
Equal importance of architecture and landscape and of humans and nature		●		●
2. References				
Teahouse	●		●	●
Nest	●		●	●
Nature as “relationships”			●	●
Architecture as “a walk in the forest”		●		●
3. Intentions				
To dematerialize (or erase) architecture		●	●	
To allow nature observation	●			●
To bring humans closer to nature		●		●
To reinforce environmental awareness		●		●
To avoid the wrath of nature			●	●

The critical reading and interpretation of the architectural essays by Fujimori, Ishigami, Kuma, and Nakamura reveal the existence of a mutual and contextual influence and a critical awareness of architecture’s impact, responsibility, and limitations. These texts also portray hints of restorative, biophilic and regenerative imaginaries, and a predominance of artistic and qualitative communication tactics in detriment of a pragmatic and technical approach.

4.1. Mutual and Contextual Influence

The four essays echo both international and local conceptual and environmental backgrounds, express cultural affinities, and respond to shared contextual frameworks. They reflect the inheritance of early ecocriticism manifestations in architecture as well as currently widespread notions of environmental awareness. Their strategies and reflections act in response to the distance found in the surrounding built and urban settings from wilderness immersion and nature contemplation, to the failure of regular human constructions coexistence among untroubled landscapes.

Culturally, these essays demonstrate affinities with other international and national architectural practices, where an equivalent interplay with nature proximity can be observed with the addition of vegetation to the building envelope¹. Examples of this are portrayed in Figure 2. The intention to limit the architectural footprint within its natural setting and perform a lighter concealed intervention on the territory is as visible in Kengo Kuma's Kiro-san Observatory as it is in Nikken Sekkei's Pola Museum of Art. Using Japanese specific vocabulary, other projects recall the *shinto* (神道) notion of temporary occupation of the site that intrinsically belongs to *kami* (神) natural spirits and the avoidance of the "wrath of nature", a ubiquitous concept in both Kuma and Nakamura's descriptions used when interfering with trees and other ecological values.



Figure 2. *Green Cast*, in Odawara (Kuma). *Dancing Trees Singing Birds*, in Tokyo (Nakamura).

4.2. Awareness of Architecture's Impact, Responsibility, and Limitations

In addition, these writings expose the awareness of an existent and pressing environmental crisis, attributed more or less to an observed and quotidian dissociation between human living and nature (both in wild and untamed forms and as all-encompassing complex ecosystems) and associated with a notion of detachment and superiority of humans towards nature.

Although very few projects designed by these architects pursue a reportable lower environmental impact² or portray an objective intention to increase the ecological value of the site, they demonstrate a consistent awareness of architecture's ecological footprint and responsibility. For instance, Nakamura (2010, p. 110) specifically regrets that "About half of the resources consumed in Japan each year are reportedly used in construction."

Simultaneously, the conviction of the practical impotence of architecture as a built form to tackle the existing environmental crisis seems to be evidenced by these authors, who recognize the impossibility of sustainable construction without natural resources consumption and without negative impacts. In addition, the inadequacy of current built environments to convey ecoliteracy concepts is highlighted, expressing the responsibility of architectural forms to facilitate the contact and understanding with natural manifestations.

¹ Particularly in Japan, Atelier Bow Wow, Ryue Nishizawa and Sou Fujimoto in the same decade.

² One exception, for instance, is the Yushara Marche project certified by CASBEE and designed by Kengo Kuma.

4.3. Restorative, Biophilic and Regenerative Imaginaries

Without attempting a direct environmental sustainability approach that can be interpreted as an internal paradox amidst these paraenvironmental practices, these authors demonstrate inherent restorative, biophilic, and regenerative intentions.

According to [Kellert and Wilson \(1993\)](#), biophilic design and the innate search for closer connections with nature and other living beings is a necessary complement to current green architecture. In contrast to the aforementioned editorial production, only a minority of projects focused on the reduction of buildings environmental impact through sustainability certification to address site-specific and eco-pedagogical human reconnection to nature.

Unbuilt pastoral scenarios are used to express this biophilic necessity, particularly in the texts by Fujimori and Ishigami. Some of the imagined architectural displays by Fujimori also denote regenerative qualities, sought with incidence during the first decade of the 21st century within environmental architecture discourse and research ([Reed 2007](#)). The *sprouts of the earth*³, express the need of human built environments to go beyond reducing environmental impacts and to start repairing already existing damages.

4.4. Predominance of Artistic and Qualitative Tactics

These four editions share a rich poetics and a strong connection between graphical and literary forms to convey the authors' statements, emphasizing the visual, perceptive, and emotional properties of architectural experience and enhancing their literary interest. In response to—and to complement—the more common sustainable construction technical approach, the authors of these essays opted to demonstrate the need for an alternative communication of environmental awareness within the field of architecture.

Intangible and unmeasurable perceptive qualities, as those referred by [Nute \(2004\)](#), are reclaimed and sought to reconnect humans with the environment in these four authors' work. Furthermore, standardized notions of comfort that excessively inhibit exterior perception (including noise insulation, glare avoidance, and thermal mitigation) are questioned and defied by, for instance, the variations that form Nakamura's architecture methodology and its focus on sensual perception that is shared with other early ecological architecture writings such as Team Zoo's *Principles of Design* ([Speidel 1991](#)).

5. Conclusions

Recent editorial production in the field of contemporary architecture exhibits a persistent interplay with nature imagery and environment-related subjects, as demonstrated in the four essays by Fujimori, Ishigami, Kuma, and Nakamura. Although a specific Japanese-ness is often idealized in terms of the practical environmental response that derives from the ubiquity of nature in its cultural expressions, the mutual and contextual influence it exerts in the selected works is clear.

These architectural essays also express a collective contagion by pressing environmental matters and act as reflections of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, demonstrating a critical awareness of architecture's ecological impact and responsibility. However, in contrast to early displays of ecocriticism in the field of architecture, the aforementioned essays do not predominantly intend to suggest alternative ecological architecture methods, manifestos or solutions. In contrary to subsequent technical and specialized strategies to building sustainability, they reclaim a more personal, critical, and sensible approach to communicate with their reading audience and future building occupants.

Belonging to a third wave of environmentalism in the field of architecture, these contemporary works—without being purportedly engaged in quantifiable ecological performance—paradoxically

³ Comparable to other unbuilt projects such as the Sabo House, designed for an internal competition by Nikken Sekkei in 2010.

show an unresolved contemporary conflict between the nature/culture binary and the limitations of existing construction practices to address it.

Relying mainly on communication and qualitative skills and exhibiting different aesthetic and semantic styles, the expressive contents of these Japanese “fictional gardens” narratives highlight architecture’s inherent ability, as a visual, perceptive, and cognitive discipline in order to motivate paradigm change and participate, as artistic manifestation, in the evolving ecocritical culture.

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