

# MARK

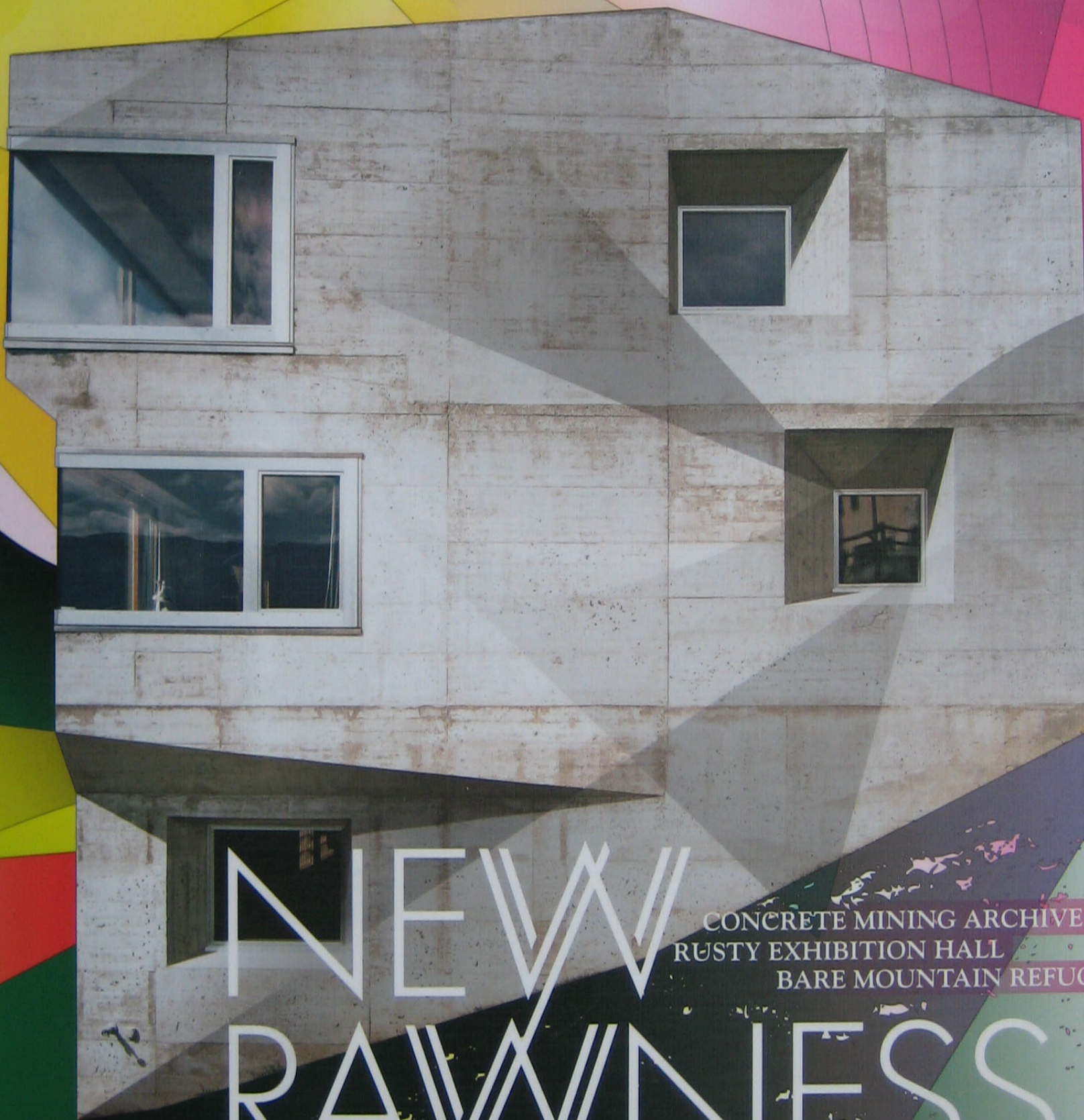
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# 'CHANGING THE SCALE CHANGES THE ATMOSPHERE'

AFTER A LONG STINT WITH SANAA, ARCHITECT JUNYA ISHIGAMI IS MAKING A BREAKTHROUGH WITH HIS OWN PROJECTS. AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS WORK TOUCHES ON TOPICS SUCH AS SCALE, PROPORTION AND ATMOSPHERE.

BY CATHELIJNE NUIJSINK  
PHOTO IWAN BAAN



JUNYA ISHIGAMI





Let's talk about the scale of your work – you make things three, four, even five times longer or narrower than what we're used to seeing. What's this obsession with scale?

Junya Ishigami: Rather than the plan itself, scale and proportion can make a space. Changing the scale changes the atmosphere as well. A solid wall adds strength to a space, whereas something extremely tenuous has a completely different effect. Living rooms or streets are spaces in which we can immediately feel the organization, because they have edges or borders. But what if a space and its organization are one and the same thing? That's what I'm trying to achieve with my thin, elongated structures that seem to defy gravity.

Do you think your architecture merges with art? Or perhaps product design?  
I'm an architect, not an interior designer or a product designer. I consider all my projects from an architectural point of view. It might be that

some people think my designs look like products, but it's architecture I want to make, even inside a building. In 2004, for example, a client in Yamaguchi Prefecture asked me to design a restaurant interior, complete with furnishings. At the time I had no experience in furniture design, but I knew how to make architecture, so I approached the design of the required tables and chairs as though they were small pieces of architecture. My image of the space to be designed was not that of a room but of a building site with small architectural volumes on it. I put those tables into the space as I would have erected buildings on a site outdoors.

Is there a relationship between those tables and your gallery table for the 2005 Kirin Art Project?

The gallery table is immense. It measures 10 x 2.6 m. The organizers wanted a table that would be on display in an exhibition space. The table I

designed for the restaurant had to be strong enough for carving meat – or even to sit on – but the gallery table was only for display. After rethinking the concept of a table, I made a soft aluminium example that's less strong than the restaurant table. I was inspired by the image of clothes floating on water. The 3-mm-thick tabletop may look hard at first, but the slightest touch generates a slow waving motion that ripples across its surface. The restaurant table required a load-bearing frame sturdy enough to hold whatever was put on top of it – a load subject to constant change. In the case of the gallery table, no change was involved. Because the objects on the gallery table would remain the same, I included their weight in my calculations regarding the strength and curvature of the table.

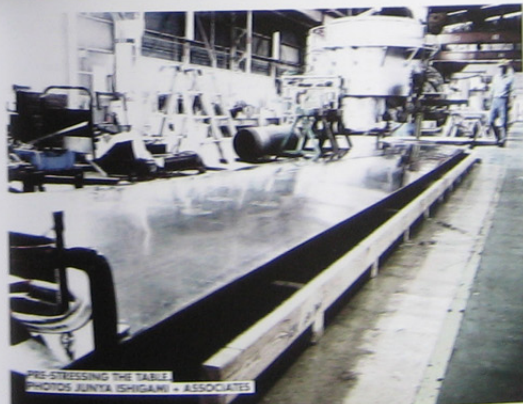
When you set up your own practice, did you have a specific goal you wanted to achieve? I had been with SANAA for six years, including



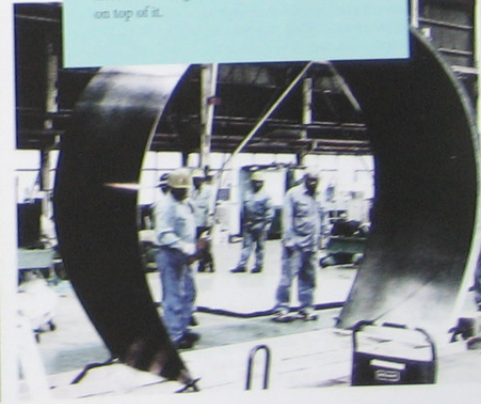
PHOTO JUNYA ISHIGAMI + ASSOCIATES /  
COURTESY OF GALLERY KOTYANAGI

## TABLE TAMADA ART SPACE TOKYO 2005

The table was made as part of the Kirin Art Project, an initiative by the Kirin brewery to support young artists in Japan. Ishigami's contribution was of surreal proportions: the table is nearly 10 m long and 2.6 m wide. The aluminium tabletop is only 3 mm thick. The extreme span (the table is supported only by a slender leg at each corner) was made possible by pre-stressing the tabletop as well as the table legs. The bulge produced is suppressed by the table's own weight as well as that of the objects on top of it.



PRE-STRESSING THE TABLE  
PHOTOS JUNYA ISHIGAMI + ASSOCIATES







**LITTLE GARDENS  
ARTS GALLERY  
TOKYO  
2007**

Design journalist Eizo Okada, curator of the exhibition 'Deroll Commissions Series 1: box', was looking for a new kind of 'box' that would have the same charm as Kyoto's traditional ink-stone boxes. As an architectural model, in his view, is somewhat like a box, he invited five young Japanese architects to create a box each, with an entirely unique concept and execution. Ishigami's box is a collection of 320 small containers distributed over a round table 120 cm in diameter.



PHOTOS YASUSHI ICHIKAWA / COURTESY OF GALLERY KOYANAGI

**'MOST PEOPLE LOOK AT A COFFEE CUP AND SEE NOTHING SPECIAL, BUT I SEE IT AS A CONTAINER WITH A SMALL SPACE INSIDE'**

the period I spent as a full-time employee while still attending the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music. At the age of 30, I opened my own practice. The KAIT Kobo project for the Kanagawa Institute of Technology had just started, and I was asked to present an installation for Lexus at Salone del Mobile 2004, in Milan. This is when I began developing new ways to work with scale. Architects make models that help them understand the spatial content of just about anything, even the smallest of objects. Most people look at a coffee cup and see nothing special, but I see it as a container with a small space inside. A cup viewed as a drinking vessel is a small-scale product and nothing more. But an architect looks at it and sees the object on any number of scales.

**Can you describe your method of designing?**  
The modernists were all aiming for the same primary goal. There's an age-old architectural approach that demanded a strong concept. The

situations and objects that characterize today's architecture, however, do not always require a strong concept. In my opinion, it's all about balance and about the right distance between one thing and another. Although my initial plan always has a strong concept, I make it weaker as the design process continues. A design based on a strong concept forces people to look at it from only one perspective, whereas a less assertive concept leaves room for interpretation.

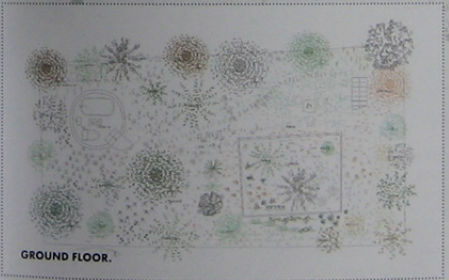
**Can you explain the subtle differences between the interior and exterior of your Tepco House project?**

Tepco House is a one-person dwelling that's all about exterior. I see this exterior not merely as a landscape, but as more of an environment. When I make architecture, I make the surroundings, and it's the surroundings that make the space. The house itself is very transparent and has a ground floor that appears to continue into the

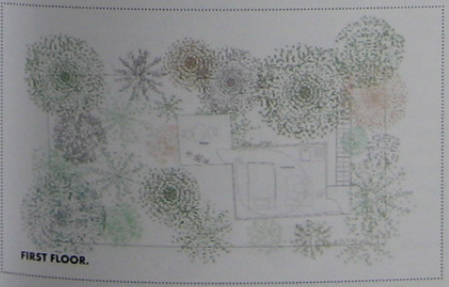
landscape. With a core that includes trees, the project is like a little forest in the middle of the city. The project is about *fuukei*, which can be defined as 'scenery' or 'the atmosphere of the landscape'. Compare the scene at Roanji Temple in Kyoto, where the garden radiates an atmosphere strongly influenced by its surroundings. This ambience is vital to the space itself. Tepco House was my attempt to distinguish the feel of the surroundings from the residential space in the same way the distinction is made at Roanji Temple.

**Please describe the environment of the recently opened KAIT Kobo workplace at Kanagawa Institute of Technology.**

My design was based on *aimai*, the Japanese term for 'ambiguous' or 'unclear'. The space is only partly resolved. Despite a plan that denotes a metalworking shop, a woodworking shop and so forth, the design is extremely flexible, with no



GROUND FLOOR.



FIRST FLOOR.

**TEPCO HOUSE  
TOKYO  
2006**

With Tepco House, Ishigami won first prize in a competition held by the Tokyo Electric Power Company. The definitive design will be carried out in a different location in Tokyo. The little house is designed for one person only. The transparency of the house is absorbed by an encircling 'forest' of extremely slender trees. Because the dimensions of the columns are derived from those of the trees, the line between architecture and nature is blurred.





**'ALTHOUGH MY INITIAL PLAN ALWAYS HAS A STRONG CONCEPT, I MAKE IT WEAKER AS THE DESIGN PROCESS CONTINUES'**

fixed perimeters, and thus unresolved. The various areas can be enlarged or reduced as desired.

**Do you have a metaphor for this kind of space?** Compare it to the expanse of a starry night sky or to an astronomy map, which was what I actually had in mind when designing the plan for KAIT Kobo. In this type of configuration, constellations are seen as areas shaped like animals or objects. They are more than outlines. It's precisely because of the undetermined borders that the image is what it is.

**What's it like to be inside a space that resembles the night sky?**

The client requested one big space, which I created without fixed boundaries that would have defined various areas. KAIT Kobo has 305 columns, each with unique dimensions and a different position. The columns have longitudinal sections. Depending on their angle of orientation,

the effect they produce is of a wide open or a somewhat closed interior. Someone walking around in the building sees a different space as his viewpoint changes.

**How did you determine the dimensions and positions of all those columns?**

Together with a programmer, I developed a special software program that analyses the effect of variously shaped and positioned columns. It helped me to determine their placement and to predict how the space would look from different angles. If we rely on walls in designing architecture, we're limited to thinking about one space. Making KAIT Kobo required consideration of every possible space within the entire volume. I wanted to give people choices as they moved through the building. I spent a total of three years getting those columns in the right spots.

**Were you thinking of the slender columns that**

**SANAA used for the Harbour Terminal in Naoshima?**

The Harbour Terminal is about making an object by means of the roof, with columns that tend to disappear. KAIT Kobo is about the presence of columns that change according to the viewer's perspective; it embodies a sense of distance that makes each space different. Although each person may experience KAIT Kobo differently, the space as a whole follows some general rules. If the broader surfaces of the columns are facing you, you feel as though you're entering a rather closed, narrow area and that it would be better to go around it. But because of the building's soft, flexible plan, you may as well pass right through.

**Your brief for Little Gardens was to reinterpret the traditional ink-stone box. What did you do?** Like the coffee cup, a box can be seen as nothing but an object, but I contemplated the space inside the box. I reinterpreted the box, creating many



## SHOP NEW YORK 2008

Yohji Yamamoto's new flagship store in New York is a conversion project. An existing brick building was radically divided in two to create an original free-standing building. In response to the (existing) high plinth, a concept using raised displays was chosen for the interior, so that the programme is still visible from outside. The division in the building creates a programmatic separation between the shop and the stockroom. The staff can only access the stock by crossing the newly created alley.





**WORKPLACE**  
KANAGAWA INSTITUTE  
OF TECHNOLOGY  
HONATSUGI / JAPAN  
2008

KAIT Kobo, on the campus of the Kanagawa Institute of Technology, is a space used to hold workshops. The building contains 305 columns of varying dimensions and orientation, creating a new perspective with each new viewpoint. The detailing is in harmony with the spatial concept and ensures that the columns are fused into the concrete floor without a plinth. The glass façade seems to allow the interior and exterior to merge. Ishigami also designed the light, white furniture, which is complemented with wooden tables and benches as well as randomly positioned flower boxes.

**"I SPENT A TOTAL OF THREE YEARS GETTING THOSE COLUMNS IN THE RIGHT SPOTS"**







small spaces on top of a table and placing tiny flowers in them. The little metal containers with their soft, rounded walls act as tiny museums, each displaying a flower. The flowers don't fill up the space – they *make* the space.

The viewer who looks at Little Gardens from a distance sees something entirely different from what he sees as he stands next to the table.

I was thinking of a city when I made Little Gardens. Looking at the table from above, you see a product recognizable as a table, but viewing the small spaces around the objects evokes the image of a city. The project is about the borderline of the space. I was also thinking of two-dimensional painted landscapes.

You also designed the recently opened Yohji Yamamoto shop in New York. Was it a challenge?

I wanted an autonomous structure, not a typical

New York City building connected to its neighbours. The existing building looked like a cake, so I cut it like a cake. The newly cut part contains the shop. The cut makes a small curved street that goes through the block. Seen from one side, the building looks extremely independent, but from the other side it seems to continue into the adjacent building.

**Urban design in the form of an interior project?**

A retail project often involves only the interior and the front of the building, but I wanted to make a bit of the cityscape as well. In designing the Yamamoto shop, I gave New York City three new corners. One corner is quite sharp; people approaching from both sides might collide. Another is slightly curved, and the third starts out as wide as the existing pavement and gradually narrows.

You've been asked to design the Japanese

**pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2008. What can we expect?**

An architectural exhibition is normally a platform for models and drawings, but I want to make real architecture. At the current stage of design, I've created six pavilions, the largest of which is 11 m high and 30 cm wide. Another is 5 by 9 m and only 15 cm high. It's more like a carpet. Some of the others can be entered, but all of them are about transparency and about the borderline between interior and exterior.

<http://jnyi.jp>

**'A**N ASTRONOMY MAP WAS WHAT I HAD IN MIND WHEN DESIGNING THE PLAN FOR KAIT KOBO'

