

# JAPAN Nation Building Nature

Joachim Nijs

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日本





**JAPAN**  
Nation  
Building  
Nature



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# Prologue: A Work in Progress



The past few years I have been living on and off in Japan. I discovered the country as a travelling volunteer, then came back for a year-long traineeship in a large Japanese architecture office. During my spare time, I laid the groundwork for this book, which I originally drafted as a Master's dissertation at the University of Ghent upon my return to Belgium. After obtaining my degree in architecture and urban design, I was able, thanks to this dissertation, to come back to Japan once more, and start working for Florian Busch Architects in Tokyo, where I am doing my best to refine and put into practice some of the ideas put forward in this book. The work is never finished.

Although every step in my gradual acquaintance with Japan still comes with new lessons and experience, I have only made minor amendments to the original manuscript. Looking back from a point where I now have a stable routine in this country, I can see that I started writing at the best possible time—right in the middle of my transition between Europe and Japan. I was no longer in the comfortable position of a visitor, looking in from the outside. It was a time when keeping interest in Japan was not merely a matter of fascination for me: it had turned into an active effort to make myself at home in an absolutely foreign country.

In my view, this meant that I had to relearn the very basics of human interaction, at least to a certain extent. For instance, I grew up fluent in five European languages but learning Japanese demanded more of me than simply adding a sixth to the mix: it was an immersion in a whole new system of thought... Just like I had to relearn how to read people, their manners, their expressions, their values, I also had to relearn how to read the cityscape. How do the Japanese house and street express themselves? What stories do they tell?

I discovered that, even as a beginner, the ability to switch between two sets of cultural norms offers more than a choice between one or the other, or even the ability to pick and choose. The real opportunity here is to take a step back and critically address the invisible ideas and habits at the core of your being. This experience, while humbling, was a source of freedom for me. It sparked curiosity and creativity. A young expat, I spent my time getting to know this country in a playful state of mind, where Japan could be what it was, there to discover... but also what I consciously decided to make of it. This playful attitude shaped *Japan: Nation Building Nature*. At a base level, the book explores a new way of writing history, taking joy in bending the rules of convention.

Like many books, the original manuscript has been overtaken by time. When I was writing, I was looking at the 'present' time frame between 2016 and 2018, wondering how that situation would extend into the future, up until 2020 and beyond. Soon, 2020 will have passed and ended in a way no-one could have expected. The relative isolation we experienced this summer has been a shocking turn of events, around the globe yes, but in Tokyo in particular since we were expecting a mass influx of tourists when hosting the 2020 Olympics. The cancellation of the Games has somewhat shaken up the premise of this book, the publication of which was originally geared towards this potentially era-defining mega-event. Nevertheless, I am confident that the crisis has added an additional layer of meaning to the book.

Although it is too early to make definite statements about the long-term impact of the coronavirus outbreak on architecture in Japan and abroad, we are already getting a glimpse of how, rather than triggering a complete change in course, this pandemic is only accelerating existing social and economic trends. This historical pattern

corresponds the societal impact big earthquakes have had in Japan, as we discuss in chapter one. Many parallels to what is happening in the world at this very moment can be found throughout the book. History and travel always help bring the ‘here’ and ‘now’ into perspective. That is why I hope the story told will stay alive, taking on new meanings in the years to come. I think that, by its nature, this book is open to change, eager to absorb additions and interpretations. It is by no means comprehensive and should lead to a broader discussion and debate, opening doors to follow-up projects.

In the meantime, I want to thank all those who helped me keep this project alive through years past, as it took on many different forms. First of all, I would like to thank my thesis promoters, professor Johan Lagae, professor Andreas Niehaus, and professor Tjil Vanmeirhaeghe from the University of Ghent, who guided me in my research and later encouraged me to pursue a publication. I especially thank professor Johan Lagae for keeping in touch with me while I was abroad, even though my studies were officially on hold. I would also like to thank Hera Van Sande who joined my professors in the jury, for her feedback on the manuscript, and her kind support as I made my way back to Japan.

I want to thank Yasuhiko Kumagai and all the staff at Yasui Architects and Engineers for inviting me to Japan and mentoring me as a young apprentice, before I had even graduated. Many thanks to my Japanese teachers at the Naganuma Language School in Shibuya, who always looked after my classmates and me, and taught us much more than how to speak Japanese—as if that was not hard enough in itself. Professor William Steele and doctor Kishi Yu from the Christian University in Tokyo have also been very generous with their council and helped me put my research on the right track in the very early stages. I am especially grateful to one of my favourite architects and my current employer, Florian Busch, who offered me a chance to come back to Tokyo after my graduation, and has always trusted and encouraged me to explore a wide range of interests at the office.

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# Earthquake Ecology



x 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake

x 2011 Great Tōhoku Earthquake

x 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake

x 1891 Great Nōbi Earthquake

x 1906 Formosa (Taiwan)

x 1883 Krakatoa disaster



Seismology was the first modern science developed on non-Western soil. Well-funded by a burgeoning nation aspiring to become a modern power in its own right, the study of earthquakes became entangled in a set of decolonizing as well as colonizing practices. Beating the West at its own game, Japanese scholars were able to scientifically prove the technical inferiority of imported construction methods while legitimizing Japanese influence in other earthquake ecologies, especially around the Ring of Fire where seismic activity peaks around the turn of the century. Branding Japan an ‘earthquake nation’ in control of its own nature opened a new door to territorial expansion.

x 1906 San Francisco

Earthquake		Ring of Fire		Spreading plate boundaries		Converging plate boundaries	
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無常

Mujō

‘If nature offends your ego, then transcend  
your ego by becoming one with nature.’<sup>1</sup>

—Matsuo Bashō, haiku poet, seventeenth century

## Mujō

To become one with nature is challenging when nature itself shows two faces. While the expectation of cherry blossom petals dancing in the wind takes the mind of the imminent threat of typhoons and earthquakes, Japan's streams, flanked by cherry blossom trees, remain trapped in their concrete embankments. Will modern Japan ever transcend its highly ambivalent relationship with nature? Traditionally, the contradiction of nature's beauty and mercilessness is resolved in *mujō*, the concept of ephemerality promoted by Zen Buddhism. Zen spread into mainstream culture during the seventeenth century. *Mujō*, which combines nothing (*mu*) and permanence (*jō*), relates the foreseeable cycle of the seasons to unpredictable eruptions of natural disasters within this single concept. The theory of *mujō* is derived from the fundamental Buddhist teaching that life has to be accepted as transient and full of suffering in order to find enlightenment. Arriving in Japan through China and Korea as of the sixth century, the archipelago's shaking ground proved fertile for these Buddhist teachings, as they provided a philosophical perspective on destruction. In traditional buildings, the innate impermanence of building components such as wooden joinery and paper screens, which can readily be dismantled and replaced, appeared to provide the best defences against ensured ruin.

## Floating World

During the Edo period (1603-1868), *mujō* acquired secular meanings through the arts. The popular woodblock prints that depict premodern Japan in a flat axonometric style are considered a typical expression of *mujō*. In Japanese they are called *ukiyō-e*, literally: floating world. Although the ephemeral world depicted in *ukiyō-e* has indeed disappeared, I sense that the world that has replaced it remains afloat. Earthquakes used to wake me up at the dormitory in Yokohama. The first time, I mumbled half asleep: 'Huh what... who's that pulling my bed back and forth? Stop that.' The sensation was not alarming. It felt like being on a ship, gently rocking on the waves of the ocean. The back-and-forth was always so soothing that I usually went back to sleep as the ground was still shaking.

I should not have been surprised that our building was equipped with earthquake-proof engineering. In its 27-year old life, it must have withstood far greater shocks than I experienced during my one-year visit. But I remember being amazed by its structural flexibility able to smoothly absorb the shocks, a technique I previously associated with sturdy, high-tech buildings as opposed to our three-story dormitory, an ugly concrete building lacking any sort of architectural quality or finesse. It appeared to be put together as quickly and cheaply as possible. The same applies to the surrounding houses, and in fact to the great majority of buildings I encountered in Japan. While all this construction must have an exceptionally strong and resilient structure thanks to local construction knowledge and the appliance of strict safety regulations, this self-evidence seems contradicted by the feeble tectonics of the bulk of Japanese construction. Owners have to take into account the fact that even though their house or









Company president Ito envisions that the architecture brings the company such resilience that even if they were to lose the kind of work they have been dealing with in the past, the Shibaura house would offer possibilities in moving forward by altering the form

of the company.<sup>8</sup> Now SANAA's work is easily associated with *mujō* because its light, transparent design aesthetic already expresses a taste for the ephemeral. Their architecture believes in dissolving and blurring boundaries as a way to enhance the

safety and resilience of communities, inviting flux as an ingredient to make life more colourful and resilient. This particular case however is unique, because the ephemeral aspirations were a direct result of management and business considerations rather than

architectural ethics and style. Out of the post-earthquake economic crisis *mujō* emerged as a business model. It reconciles the risk of earthquakes and other hazards with the everyday cycle of life. It reproduces the poetic aspects of Tokyo's floating world by fully accepting

the harshness of its competitive arena. With this building, the company effectively transcended its ego by becoming one with the nature of Tokyo.



# Monsoon Ecology

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# Monsoon Ecology



source: J. Li, and Q. Zeng, 'Geographical Extent of the Global Surface Monsoons,'  
Accessed February 14, 2018 <http://www.lasg.ac.cn/staff/ljp/monsoon/>

As Western modernity crosses over the confines of public space into the intimate space of the household, the proliferation of a ‘cosmopolitan’ lifestyle quickly reaches a saturation point. Rediscovering the remains of their country’s own ‘unique’ culture as the product of a monsoon climate, Japanese intellectuals enquire into the possibility of formulating an alternative, East-Asian rationale. The environmental determinism placing climate at the source of a fundamentally different view of nature buttresses the Japanese territorial claim over the Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. That monsoon climates are in fact not homogeneous phenomena, is either overlooked or used to underline the uniqueness of Japan although even on the archipelago itself, climates vary substantially. Meanwhile, the expansion of the Japanese empire does largely coincide with the monsoon zones, due to the fact that both the monsoon climate and the imperial navy come from the sea.

<p>Temperate-Frigid Monsoon</p> 	<p>Subtropical Monsoon</p> 	<p>Tropical Monsoon</p> 	<p>Greater East-Asia Co-prosperity Sphere</p> 
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# Post-Nuclear Ecology



1955-1975 Vietnam War



Caught in the crossfire of the Cold War, the world's first pacifist nation was forced to trade an autonomous army for America's nuclear umbrella. Physically and morally ruined after its defeat in World War II, Japan was rebuilt into a bastion of American 'hard power' by offering a platform for American troops in a predominantly communist East-Asia, and an avid consumer of American 'soft power' as multiplying the incomes of the middle class became an effective distraction from political conflicts. The pursuit of affluence and uninhibited consumption justified a pro-nuclear energy campaign in spite of the threat of nuclear warfare present in the back of Japanese minds ever since the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Punggye-ri, 6 nuclear bomb tests 2006-2017



1950-1953 Korean War



2011 Fukushima 1 leak

1945 Hiroshima A-bomb



Nagasaki A-bomb 1945



Bikini Atoll, 23 nuclear bomb tests 1946-1958



Atomic Blast 	Cold War Front 	Japanese nuclear power plant 	Communist Block 
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# Island Ecology

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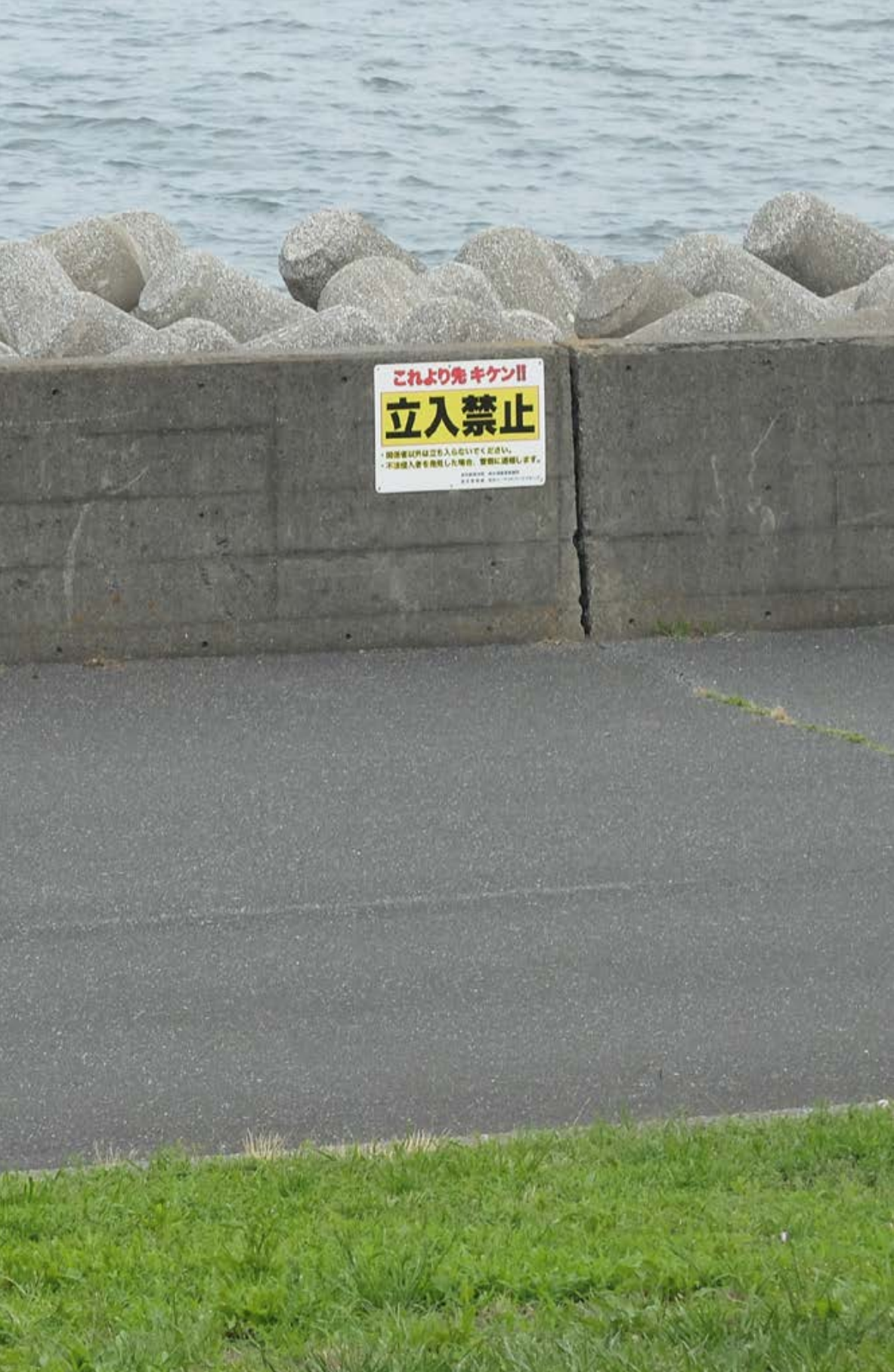
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Building demolition waste goes into landfills on Tokyo Bay. Originally planned as industrial sites, many of

these artificial islands are turned into public parks.

Wakasu Seaside Park,  
Tokyo Bay, 23 June 2017

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## About the Author

Joachim Nijs (1994, Belgium) is a young designer trained in architecture and urban design at the University of Ghent, Belgium, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in 2018. He has worked in several architecture offices, both in Europe and in Japan, where he is currently based. Nijs' previous publications have appeared in *Smple Magazine* (Vancouver) and *Trans Magazin* (ETH Zürich).

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*Japan: Nation Building Nature* is the first book to map out the views of nature that have shaped the widely acclaimed but often misunderstood modern architecture of Japan. By connecting the dots between philosophy, design,

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geopolitics, and an earnest quest for a greener tomorrow. This book explains how Japanese culture can cast a new light on our understanding of ecology, and vice-versa. Using a distinctive blend of academic research and personal

experience, Joachim Nijs draws on architectural history to navigate Japan's complex and unique ecological ethic through the lens of four stereotypical phenomena: earthquakes, monsoon climates, nuclear erasure of life, and

insularity. This book offers key insights and references for anyone wishing to deepen their knowledge of Japan and its architecture.

