



Tanikawa House, 1972
Kazuo Shinohara



Urban Forest (cake shop)
Kengo Kuma



A-Art House, Inujima Island
Kazuyo Sejima



Counter Void
Tatsuo Miyajima



Simulated Water Garden
TeamLab

CRITICAL ECOLOGIES

... decarbonization is not solely a question of technology and building systems, but also a theoretical question for architecture and the city.¹

This diploma studio is the third installment of the topic “critical ecologies”. For the past two years, this studio has interrogated questions around the uneasy relationship between culture and environment. These critical studies have landed at various sites in two U.S. cities: Chicago and Detroit. Western cities. This year, we’ll look elsewhere. Across the Pacific. Through the lens of an entirely different perspective of *human’s position in and relationship to nature*. This year’s studio site is in Tokyo, Japan. It begins by acknowledging the gaps and silences in western critical theory, and the unsustainable built environment that has arisen out of it. The studio will examine a different epistemology than that of a western, anthropocentric Judeo-Christian orientation. Crossing the international dateline, and into the eastern hemisphere, opens up an alternate eco-social theory respectful of all forms of being, including inanimate objects. Doing so, looking outside and elsewhere, might just provide the perspective needed for better understanding the way things are at home. As a society, Japan’s non-dualistic, metaphysical orientation has filled the general public with images of a distinct Japanese cultural aesthetic. Japan’s immersive attention to the environment reflects its archipelago geography. The drift ice in Hokkaido to the mangrove forests in Okinawa illustrate nature’s wonderment. Such landscapes are transposed into paintings, domestic gardens and neighborhood pocket parks. This is not to say that Japan is free of criticism. As an island-nation, there is both beauty and inherent resource poverty. Located along the Pacific ring of fire, Japan’s vulnerability is subject to grave natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, tsunamis²). As such, the culture’s relationship to nature is at best ambivalent. While the love of nature is intrinsic, modern environmental deterioration in the name of economic prosperity has been climbing since the 1980’s, from gross amounts of waste to abhorrent whaling to a persistent reliance on coal. Not that global environmental treaties and accords aren’t signed³. Arguably, when the east-west divide is examined ideologically rather than geographically, Japan could be classified as an equal partner in the problem of global environmental deterioration. These tensions will be the subject of study and design.

As in the past two years, the studio will turn to the humanities and the interdisciplinary discourse on *ecocriticism*, loosely defined as the study of the mutual constructing relationship between culture and the environment.⁴ Emerging from literary and cultural studies, ecocriticism defines the role the natural environment plays in the *imagination* of a cultural community (or nation). It examines how the concept of “nature” is defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it, and why. It is in this dialogic⁵ space between culture and environment that this studio will be situated and where complexity will be nurtured. *Ecocriticism in Japan* (Waki, Suga, Masami, ed. 2018) will serve as a research platform for cultivating a critical literacy of place⁶. A series of problems or dilemmas facing Japan will each serve as the initial site of inquiry. Each student will select a specific problem. Sample problems include consumption and plastic waste, massive food transport, work obsession, anime, manga and the dark side of gaming, changing demographics (aging population), patriarchy and gender equality, patrimony and rising land values, earthly volatility and radiation, to name a few. In this studio, student sites and programs are open and experimental yet derivative of their research. The field of *ecocriticism* reminds us of our placement *within ecosystems* and the importance of this fact for understanding life. This relatively new domain of critical theory provides the parameters that offer the ecological component often missing from cultural analyses of the city and the urban perspective often lacking in environmental responses to contemporary culture. The objective of this studio is to advance a series of “critical ecologies” in the context of understanding place as a *contested field* between cultural and environmental forces. Students will be encouraged to program anew, in unconventional ways, that contribute to our understanding of the real problems at work.

¹ Elena Iturbe, *Architecture and the Death of Carbon Modernity*, Log 47, Anyone Corporation, 2019

² Reference the 19th c. wood block prints of artist Hokusai

³ *The Diplomat*, Elliot Silverberg and Elizabeth Smith, 2019

⁴ See Michael Bennett and David Teague, *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999.

⁵ The dialogic concept is when a word, discourse, language, meaning (or building) becomes deprivileged, relativized, and aware of competing definitions.

⁶ Reference images of projects at the top of this page.