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Designing New Landscapes for the Metropolis

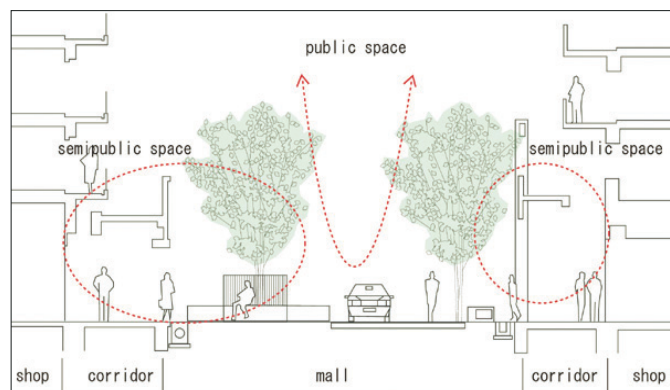
Yoji Sasaki



Two characters define the Japanese word for “landscape”: the first, *fuu*, in English means “wind”; the second, *kei*, means “scape”. It is significant that *fuu* is used instead of the character for “land” or “earth”. Direct translation of the two characters is full of suggestions about the original meaning of “landscape” in the Japanese language.

Wind, *fuu*, an invisible phenomenon, symbolizes nature, but also the accumulation of time in a place, the passing of history. Together with *kei*, the visible objects or surfaces, the characters describe a space willfully created to express a relationship between people and nature. While visible objects on the ground might symbolize elements of nature, they only become a landscape design by combining all elements of nature, including people, plants, buildings, roads and water.

As cities become larger, the scales and dimensions of architecture and open spaces become wider and more complex. Yet no matter how city space changes in scale, one question remains a constant challenge for landscape



Left: Collapsed express highway in the city of Kobe as a result of the January 1995 earthquake.

Right and below: Pedestrian mall and section of the semi-public green seating area for the HAT development in Kobe: an example of the use of “life fields” in urban regeneration after the earthquake.

architects: In what form will human sensibility express the two meanings of the visible and the invisible?

To illustrate the concept of the visible and the invisible, I will describe four recently completed projects. In each, our design attempts to make qualities of human experience visible. These projects are paired with four themes that help describe the contemporary Japanese metropolis: the network of cells, the urban forest, the discovery space, and the three-dimensional stroll.

Cell Network—Visualization of Invisible “Life Fields”: HAT Kobe Restoration Housing Complex, Kobe City

A great earthquake struck the Kobe and Osaka metropolitan areas on January 17, 1995. This earthquake was more violent than the Loma Prieta earthquake near San Francisco in 1989. It killed about 6,400 people.

As part of a restoration project, I conducted a survey among survivors evacuated from dense urban housing into parks. I found that the city dwellers had established invisible “life fields.” I use this combination of words quite literally, because these people had knowledge of safe spaces or fields where they could go in the event of an earthquake. In fact, these spaces saved their lives. But these spaces can only serve as “life fields” if they are integrated into people’s daily activities.

I became convinced that when we design a distribution system for parks in modern cities, we should not just place them evenly, which has been the conventional way, but organize them according to the invisible units of “life fields,” and network them like a mesh in a net. For example, if we regard “life fields” in a city as analogous to biological cells of various sizes, a park should be placed in each cell like a nucleus. When done successfully, this can produce a city environment that provides physical and psychological safety for its inhabitants.

HAT Kobe is a project in which this concept has taken shape. It is a high-density residential complex constructed on about 120 hectares of reclaimed land in the central area of Kobe as a demonstration project to provide recovery from the disaster.

The goal of the landscape design was to make use of the conventional perimeter block, or row-house type, and to connect the invisible “life fields” of the inhabitants with continuous open spaces. As a result, a street and a square were connected through the ground floor of the buildings. When these “walk-through” open spaces were created, the housing blocks no longer “created walls” in the city. The connections made people feel safer.



Urban Forest—Visualization of the Invisible Sense of Nature: Keyaki Plaza, Saitama City

In this project we attempted to recover the invisible sense of nature in the center of the city as a new urban space, Keyaki Plaza. The project resulted from a collaborative entry into an international design competition.¹ The design features a one-hectare urban square on an artificial surface, seven meters above street level. We called the square “Sky Forest.”

This new space is the central feature of the Saitama New Urban Center in the northern part of Tokyo. In the square we planted 220 zelkova trees in a 6m x 6m grid pattern. Inside this forest, we placed a “Forest Pavilion” with observation areas and retail spaces, and a “Sunken Plaza” and “Lawn Square” for various events. We also placed benches, shelters and other objects in harmony with the natural flow of people and activities.

Above: Zelkova trees of the Sunken Plaza in the Saitama New Urban Center.



The thoroughly flat flooring of the artificial subsoil was covered with natural stone and molded aluminum grating to reflect the shadow of the zelkova leaves and to embrace people with their reflections to heighten the sense of nature and light.

What we proposed here was not a morphologic imitation of nature. Rather, we endeavored to look metaphorically at the physical experience of nature so that the visitor could recognize those phenomena that translate between nature and people.

Above: Nighttime view of the sunken plaza in the Saitama New Urban Center.

Opposite: A new rooftop landscape installation at Roppongi Hills offers visiting children the opportunity to experience the changes of season and rural experiences such as rice planting, mowing and harvesting.

Discovery Space—Visualization of the Invisible Common Space: Roppongi Hills, Tokyo

In the landscape design of Roppongi Hills, a very large redevelopment complex in Tokyo, we aimed to make visible qualities of “common space” that otherwise would remain invisible. By common space we mean a place that has a dual—public and private—character. This is the type of place where people try to recover their sense as individuals in a city.

As large public projects expand in a modern city, and as people begin to be divided by social rank or into social groups, people try to discover places where they can belong, either by joining small groups or expanding their personal spheres. People will attempt such discoveries even in the most public spaces.

A “common space” will be especially meaningful when



it offers the individual a connection to nature, like a garden that is incorporated into a public space. Inside a garden, an individual can sense constant change, including seasonal changes, movements of the sun and the sounds of the wind. This constant change also evokes a sense of privacy.

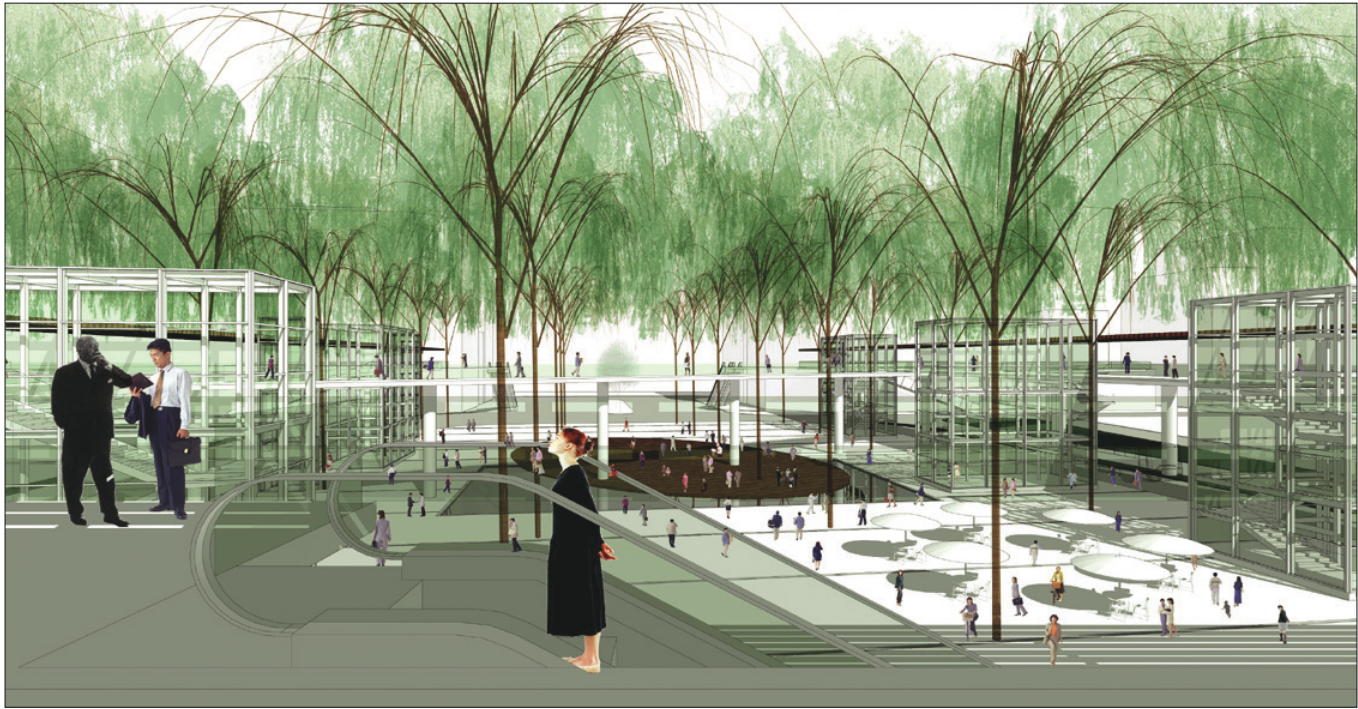
The “66 Plaza” has the sense of human scale and is furnished with details that allow visitors to feel as if they were in an outdoor living room. The “Arena” is spiral and oval, creating a space where people can have the sense of being, in a common space without having their eyes met by others’—wherever they may sit. The “Keyaki-zaka” offers street furniture on which one can enjoy sitting alone, even along a main street.

Finally, on the “Roof Garden with Rice Fields,” we offered the children in the city such experiences as “rice planting, mowing, and rice harvesting.” Autumn rice harvesting and rice cake making take place regularly.

The common rice garden described here is physically hard to see. It was designed to be discovered. Once found, the relationship between individual and society is discovered anew. Such interaction between people and nature in the city contributes to a new culture in the metropolis.

Three-Dimensional Stroll Plaza—Visualization of the Invisible Character of a City: Niigata Station Plaza, Niigata City

Designing a three-dimensional stroll plaza provides an opportunity to connect large-scale architecture to the ground. Large structures frequently become walls in the city that interrupt the relationship between inside and outside. The walls deprive people of the ability to partake in urban activities. As a result, places, their activities, and their history become invisible.



On the other hand, traditional Japanese architecture and gardens were not divided; internal space and outdoor space were united continuously. A transparent-space structure connected architecture directly with external gardens and the earth. The natural appeal and character of gardens could be seen and experienced.

For the three-dimensional stroll plaza, our team applied this traditional relationship between Japanese architecture and gardens to a large urban space. In the Niigata Station Plaza competition, we positioned the whole station square as “a city garden” that leads to a variety of activities and extends the center of the square to the north and south to secure it as a pedestrian space.² We covered it with a green canopy by planting forest willows, the traditional landscape tree of Niigata City. For a three-dimensional stroll plaza, a network of pedestrian decks, we created easy connections to guide people from the deck level of the station to the surrounding city center.

This three-dimensional stroll plaza is a place where various events take place. Starting with the early-morning market, food stalls and cafes are positioned under the forest of willow trees. The place is structured to bring about a

sense of identity by connecting the various outdoor and indoor spaces in the same manner as the invisible tension between the solids and voids of traditional Japanese spaces.

New Vision

Landscape design for the Japanese metropolis is at a turning point. Design is starting to confront the ambiguity and contradiction held by modern cities.

No clear guideline or theory has yet been produced. However, this ambiguity and contradiction is teaching us that an attractive city with vitality and the sense of energy is created not by romantic and dreamlike landscapes, or re-creation of nature, but by landscape design that makes available the direct experience, the multilayered meaning, and the tense relationships of an otherwise invisible city.

Notes

1. In collaboration with Peter Walker and Partners and the NTT Urban Development Company.
2. A collaborative team won the first prize in the design competition held in Japan in 2002. Hidetsugu Horikoshi was in charge of architecture, Tsuneaki Nakano urban planning, and Takeharu Ogiwara civil engineering. The author provided the landscape design.

All images courtesy of Ohtori Consultants Environmental Design Institute.

Above: Rendering of the stroll garden at Niigata Train Station Plaza.