

# A Droplet and a Crack

## Teshima and Naosima Islands' Art Museums. An Architectural Experience Through a Sansui Approach

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Teshima and Naoshima Islands' Art Museums. An Architectural Experience Through a *Sansui* Approach.

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While evoking Japanese culture's pursuit of a harmonic coexistence between nature and mankind could be thought of as clichéd, a specific connection between art and nature underpins an important yet underexamined aspect of certain Japanese architecture. What interests this study is the way in which a small number of leading architects have established a symbiotic nature–culture connection through their understandings of the horizon, reflecting the absence of the infinite line as in the traditional Japanese worldview. The Teshima Art Museum by Ryue Nishizawa and artist Rei Naito, and Chichu Art Museum in Naoshima by Tadao Ando, are proposed here as architectural projects that exemplify this horizonless approach.

From Japan's earliest cosmology, the Japanese understanding of space has not been based on a dramatic separating line between earth and sky.<sup>1</sup> Instead, space has been understood from an all-encompassing seamless continuum that comprises all reality. The absence of the horizon line in traditional Japanese cosmology is also reflected by the non-dualistic approaches of Buddhist practices, more recently revisited by Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani in their philosophical

proposals on “Nothingness” and “Emptiness.”<sup>2</sup> These ancient beliefs, along with their modern understandings, have been a fundamental part of the Japanese worldview and widely expressed through artistic manifestations. In visual arts, especially in the artistic representation of landscapes, known as *Sansui* (which translates as mountains and waters), the horizon-less-ness of the scenes depicted are characterised by enigmatic floating mountains and endless bodies of water. They are articulated by thick clouds that are diluted in the painting's support, enacting as empty pictorial space while offering the perception of an ethereal and weightless atmosphere of the represented horizon-less and non-perspectival world.<sup>3</sup>

The main pictorial landscape components of *Sansui*, being mountains and waters, find unexpected architectural analogies in the two works considered here. Isolated from the mainland and surrounded by the Seto Inland Sea, these buildings exhibit divergent geometrical languages while still sharing akin approaches to the landscape: Nishizawa's project is fluid and visceral, with an organic, womb-like form that resonates with the gentle slopes of the surrounding hills. Inside, Naito's drops of water connect the building

1.

Motoori Norinaga, *Kojiki-den* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.); W. G. Ashton, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to AD 697* (London: The Japan Society, 1896).

Together, these are the most antique texts that compile ancient Japanese cosmology.

2.

Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).



Figure 1:  
From Teshima Island towards Okayama.  
Photograph by Alfonso Arango Gonzalez (2024).

and its visitors with the encircling sea and the vastness of the sky above. By contrast, Ando's building searches for the interaction of perfect geometrical forms buried inside the rugged mountainous landform. Its straight lines and sharp edges are analogous to a cracked ground which is clearly differentiated from the irregular topographic conditions of the mountainous island, and yet remains indivisible from it. In fact, these aspects are reflections of the broader goal of some Japanese architectural practices to dilute the limit/horizon between interior and exterior, artifice and nature.

This study explores how Ando and Nishizawa's projects achieve this blurred transition –analogous to the Sansui's clouds– through their approach to spatial concatenation and dissimilar geometries. Additionally, in a further example of the approach to blurring radical distinctions in Japanese architecture, both projects also transcend the boundaries of their architectural function: at a time when the museum is the new temple and the artwork is object of cult, these two projects, as islands within islands, are imbued with the mystical and almost sacred atmosphere that invites an experience of personal introspection, not

only through art, but also in and through the landscape.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the art museums in Teshima and Naoshima are each conceived as a seamless continuation of the surrounding landscape, in a harmonic synergy between mountains and waters amidst a blurred horizon. The admiration and respect for the foundations of Sansui have also been a cornerstone in the endeavour to blur (like its pictorial mists) the limits between humanity and nature, creating a particular aesthetic approach not only seen in Japanese visual arts, but also in the Teshima and Naoshima projects. As a droplet and a crack, both museums evoke Sansui's potent atmospheric environments, reinterpreting them through architectural means. These projects are extraordinary examples of an architecture-landscape-art hybrid. However, reading them from the critical lens of an obliterated horizon sheds new light and reveals an alternate stance to an overly familiar trope.

3.

Ken-ichi Sasaki, "Perspectives East and West," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013).

4.

Ken-ichi Sasaki, "Landscape as Atmosphere," *Atmosfere* 33 (2006): 85–94, <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.4344>.