

Curator's statement: Junya Ishigami. How small? How vast? How architecture grows.

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This first exhibition with an overview of works of Junya Ishigami is an installation of 58 built and unbuilt projects. They evoke the themes, challenges and research of the Japanese architect over the last 10 years. It was created for Shiseido Gallery in 2010 and is shown for the first time in Europe.

The lay-out consists of a rhythmic succession of narrow tables on which all the projects are juxtaposed. Ishigami boldly overcomes the impossibility of exhibiting architecture: perhaps here we have a work of art as well as an installation. An exhibition with and about the work of Junya Ishigami is therefore a project which allows me, as a curator, to talk about all the possible aspects of architecture. Since I became acquainted with his work, immersed myself in it and, after accepting an invitation to collaborate at deSingel, followed him and his work like a 'groupie' at all kinds of events, one thing has become abundantly clear to me. Ishigami is one of a kind when it comes to the art of 'creating exhibitions'. Every installation is architecture in its purest form: a metal balloon that seems to defy the laws of gravity, the transformation by the use of glass and steel structures in the garden in the Japanese pavilion in Venice, constructions built from visible and invisible wires, rooms with floor-to-ceiling pastel drawings depicting lakeside cities, forest cities, garden cities and river cities. A virtual and natural landscape.

But Ishigami seduces not only through poetry and aesthetics. Beyond these – also intrinsic qualities – lies a boundless urge to create a new kind of architecture. An architecture which absorbs all that is familiar and turns it on its head.

The ingredients, inspiration and methods used by Ishigami to accomplish this are well-known, but he also makes a new and unknown combination. On the occasion of this opening I would like to describe a number of these familiar ingredients. For me, they are the main motives for exhibiting this work.

1. Relationship between nature and architecture

For a decade or more, the world of architecture has been plagued by a populist and deceptive debate on naturalness and sustainability. Don't get me wrong, this is a legitimate point. But unfortunately it has not led to a drastic approach within architecture, nor has it been a catalyst for new inspiration or imagination. Maybe because they were fuelled by well-intended but not always sincere ideas. Ishigami, by contrast, takes us through a world of wonder, physics, aerodynamics, and every possible natural science into the unknown and endless world of the phenomenon that is nature.

Natural properties in all their facets are the source behind his every study. Take, for example, the concept of a 'constellation' and how an abstract star-filled sky becomes a tool for people, a narrative, a symbol. It is an abstract and undefined something in nature that has a positive impact on people. This inspires Ishigami. The constellation of starry skies underlay his decision to design 308 randomly positioned load-bearing columns in a workplace.

Nature is not a pose, nor is it a selling point; it's about creating conditions that invoke naturalness, which in turn awakes all your senses.

Ishigami himself has this to say about it: "*A quality of nature is that it is governed by certain rules which at the same time we're never really aware of. ... I am interested in creating something that would merge into this normalcy that surrounds us*".

It is probably not Ishigami's main intention, but his different relationship to nature makes a serious statement about how humans and nature relate to one another. After all, man is just as fragile a part of that physical world; he is born, lives, changes and disappears only to begin again as part of an eternal cycle. What can be felt here is the very fragility of nature and of mankind itself. Mankind that is and continues to be conditioned by the natural.

2. Ishigami makes new space

Anyone familiar with the work of recent Japanese architects will know about the research carried out by Toyo Ito and SANAA into what they call *'blurring space'*. The library in Sendai by Ito and the Rolex Research Centre in Lausanne by SANAA are the key projects for this research. What these two architects started has become astoundingly self-evident in Ishigami's work. The blurring space has become an ambiguous space, which no longer has any visible identifiable boundaries. They appear to be spaces without geometry. The specific nature and hierarchy of passages, the typical components of a building are abandoned, and everything is without hierarchy. Furthermore, the juxtaposition does not lead to disarray, but rather to a spatially rich experience. There is a natural hierarchy like trees in a forest indicating where there is more light, or where there is a path. There is no doubt that Ishigami is using this to completely undermine our currently prevailing buildings and their classical typological features. It is the inevitable consequence of his quest for an ambiguous space.

The workshop for the Kanagawa Technology Institute near Tokyo is the first project in which Ishigami succeeds in expanding on this idea. Ishigami says about the design of this large open space: *"I was beginning to think there could be a flexibility that results when the plans or other different factors remain in effect, from simply softening and blurring their boundaries. Through this thinking my interest shifted. I became interested in finding a way to design space somehow free of geometry or any rules. I imagined this could lead to a new universality in space"*.

Two other examples of research in which new space and typology are related are:

1. 'Bath Studies' where he examines how the bathing ritual could offer more comfort and pleasure in daily life, not in terms of ease of use but in terms of how we can fundamentally live our life differently.

2. In the design for a narrow terraced house he introduces a narrow 'slice of nature' that he roofs over, creating an indoor-outdoor climate. Space as a vertical piece of furniture, so that each space is part of this adjoining garden. In his quest for the conditions of a fuller experience, Ishigami abandons the established order. The result of blurring space is the undermining of traditional typology in architecture and the creation of new space.

3. Construction and engineering

Ishigami's designs do indeed stem from poetic thought and the motivation to make a new kind of space; and a number of them have in fact been built. These finished projects are characterised by the far-reaching research into building and engineering itself. (After all, his previously mentioned motives should, by means of technology, preferably lead to an actual object, building and/or space.) If you take a closer look at the handful of publications about Ishigami, you get an account of months of collaboration between Ishigami and his engineer Jun Sato, who pushes constructive logic to the extreme for every design, or overturns certain forms of logic in order to come up with surprising and new solutions.

This was already the subject of his first commission for a series of tables for a restaurant. Tables with a top 4.5 mm thick, as thin as a piece of paper, made of aluminium and covered with a 3mm layer of veneer. Normally speaking the table top and legs would bend under the weight of the top. *“The structural analyses for each table calculated the extent of deflection. Then pre-emptive curvatures were generated against the direction of exceptional deflection, not only in the top but likewise in the legs. So, once it is set down on the floor, this structure, which lies with cambers in several directions, suddenly stands upright and level with its own weight”*.

“As I designed these tables I wanted their structure to be a mystery. The more discreet the better. The tables are exceptional in structure, but I assumed that people using them would enjoy them much more when not made aware of any underlying structural principles, when the resulting effect just feels natural”.

4. A manifesto or visionary?

Junya Ishigami's limited oeuvre has the power and radicalism of a manifesto. And manifestos need fertile ground: as a starting point, as humus and as a background to work against. Manifestos emerge against a background of solutions that fail or no longer appeal. Manifestos attempt to provide the answers to new questions, new challenges and a new zeitgeist.

This belief in a visionary and utopian architectural project is a familiar concept in twentieth-century Japanese architecture because of the Metabolism group. Metabolism was a 'techno-utopia'. Maybe Junya Ishigami represents a 'nature-utopia'?

5. The realm of the senses

What I want for all of you who visit the exhibition is that you feel the sensation that I repeatedly experienced when exposed to Ishigami's architecture. Installations in Venice, one in Kortrijk, in London and in Kanagawa in Japan. 'A realm of the senses' or what architecture is really about. And also a certain tension or confusion. I quote Ishigami again "*When various elements that normally could not exist together at the same time are enabled to exist simultaneously and without contradiction. Should architecture not always explore new spaces and new ways of living?*"