



JAPAN

A B o r r o w e d S c e n e r y

Japan - A Borrowed Scenery is a guide to Japan in advance. It explores my ideas and preconceptions of the country before my first visit there. The publication consists of reassembled, appropriated images and text material, found in different travelogues and guidebooks about Japan produced in the West. Above all, Donald Richie's *A Lateral View - Essays on Culture and Style in Contemporary Japan* (California, 1992), from which all the text excerpts are derived. The images come from four different books, found in flea markets; *Japan* by Schulthess/Watanabe (Bernes Förlag, Sweden 1961), *Japon des Réalités* by Darr/Giuglaris (Éditions Marcus, France 1965), *Les Grandes Cités: Tokyo* by Maraini/Sund (Éditions Time-Life, the Netherlands 1976), and 日本の博覧会—寺下勅コレクション (別冊太陽—日本のこころ) by 橋爪 紳也 (Japan, 2005). More information available here: www.malinpetterssonoberg.com

Malin Pettersson Öberg, Stockholm 2012

Japan is the country of calling cards and forests of advertising.





It is the land of the amateur artist and the camera.

Signs seem to be everywhere -
on roofs, walls, doors, and windows.
Almost every available surface carries a message.





The paddy fields assume their shape because mountains are observed and valleys followed, because this is the country where the house was once made to fit into the curve of the landscape and where the farmer used to cut a hole in the roof rather than cut down the tree.

The house itself is wood, and the mats
are reed - the outside brought inside.
The garden is an extension of the house.





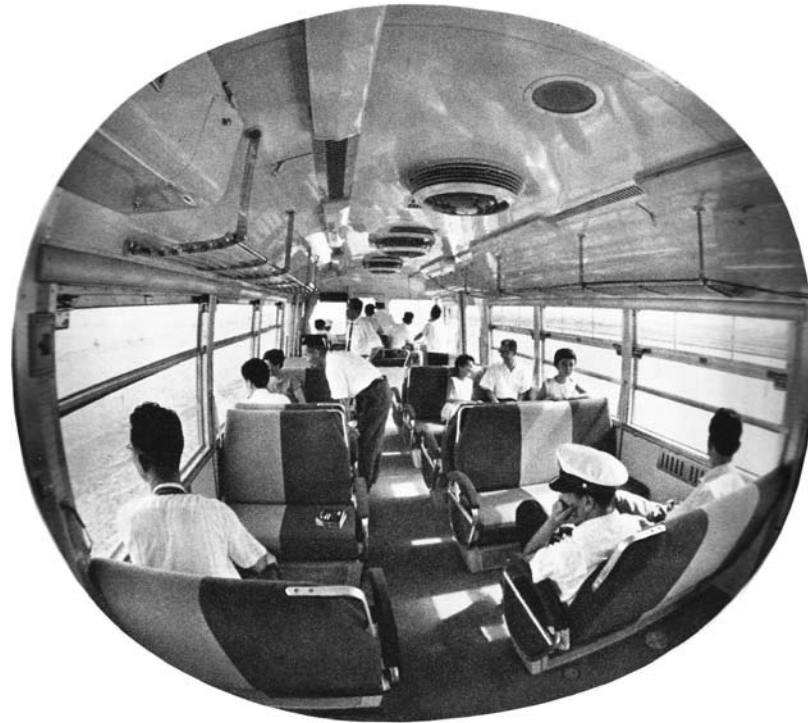
One does not go against nature but one takes advantage of it: one smooths, one embellishes.
Nature is only the potential - man gives it its shape and meaning.



A garden is not a wilderness. It is only the romantics who find wildness beautiful, and the Japanese are too pragmatic to be romantic. At the same time, a garden is not a geometrical abstraction. It is only the classicists who would find that attractive, and the Japanese are too much creatures of their feelings to be so cerebrally classic. Rather, then, a garden is created to reveal nature.

Negative space is calculated, too - in the architecture,
in the gardens, in the etiquette, in the language itself.

Negative space has its own weight, and it is through
knowing both negative and positive (yin and yang), the
specific gravity of each, that one may understand the
completed whole, that seamless garment that is life.





The shape of an idea or an action may be as important as its content.



Society is supposed to form. Such is its function.



If we are to live contentedly, if society (our own construct) is to serve,
then we must subject ourselves to its guiding pressures.



As the single finger bends the branch, so the social hand inclines the individual.
If the unkempt tree is not considered natural, then the unkempt life is equally out of bounds.

The support, the supported.
The structure of Japanese society is visible, little is hidden.



KOUMIKO, DAUGHTER OF THE NEW JAPAN

Koumiko, the young woman whose picture is on the cover of this book, is a Japanese girl who is « over twenty but under thirty. » She was born in Manchuria, the northernmost and coldest province, in the town of Harbin, and lived there until she was eleven. She knows what discrimination is. Her parents, who are both alive, live near Hiroshima, but Koumiko never talks about them, nor about Hiroshima either.

Koumiko is a voracious reader, generally of translations but often of original works as well. She is better acquainted with modern French, Anglo-Saxon, Russian, or Scandinavian authors than are many European university students. She especially likes modern novels and poetry : Prevert and contemporary Japanese writers are her favorites.

Koumiko is very beautiful. She lives alone. Often in the evenings she has dinner in a small Korean restaurant nearby. When she gets home she puts on her blue-jeans and then spends the evening alone listening to music : Beethoven, Vivaldi, modern music, Japanese music, and music of Asia, particularly percussion works from Indonesia.

The place where she lives is a tiny room with books, a record player, a kitchen cupboard, and a common washbasin where everyone on her floor does her weekly washing. The building where she lives is for single girls only, but it is nevertheless quite agreeable. Every evening Koumiko goes to the public bath in her neighborhood, a habit which she was forced to interrupt during the severe water shortage in the summer of 1964.





The kimono comes in only two sizes, male and female.
It is also never designed to fit the wearer.
Rather the wearer is designed, as it were, to fit *it*.

Though not shaped to the body, it encircles
and confines the body, it holds and supports it.
It is like a molded shell.





In Noh, natural forces, natural surroundings, are everything -
it is an animistic theater, the theater of pure Shinto.
Demons come from rocks and ogres from trees, the angel
descends from a pine, and the stage is peopled by the dead.

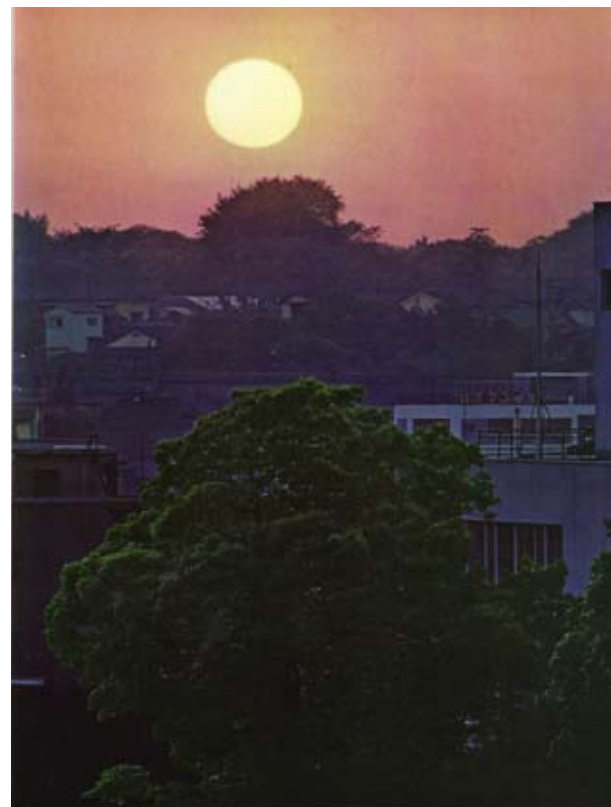


The costume is always a kimono but such a kimono as never walked the earth. Of indeterminate period, a synthesized garment, it is a landscape within itself. It is pure spider web, rich earth brown and silver skeins; it is autumn incarnate, red, orange, with a touch of dying green; it is a flaming maple tree or the spring's young cherry-blossom.



We are in a mountain pass, or in a forest, or by a sea-shore.

Questions are asked. They are partially answered, or they are evaded,
or they are cunningly answered, with ambivalence, with double meaning.
We circle warily around the truth. We guess but dare not ask.





The ritual of the Noh is like the ritual of the party, the picnic, even the weekly card game. But the party is as formal and meaningful as one in Proust; the picnic is of an elegance that makes one think of Watteau; the card game concerns life and death, and devil and angel play together.



This is a real, magical curtain which does precisely what a drawn curtain should - it reveals.

What one sees when one looks closely at Tokyo
is a collection of hundreds of villages.
Like cells in a body, each contains identical elements,
and the resulting pattern is an organic one.





Most of the streets, for example, are not named, though all the crossings are; the plots are not numbered, though the houses are, with the result that addresses (assigned to houses in order of their construction date rather than their locations) are much scrambled; though districts are numbered, the numbering plan is arbitrary.

There is much of the natural patterning one discovers in any living, growing organism, but this does not assist the confused Westerner who eventually must discover that the only way to travel profitably about the city is to memorize it.





Individual architectural styles, building to building, greatly differ and no attempt is made toward any kind of visual cohesion.



This air of the transient in otherwise permanent-seeming buildings is enforced in that traditional Japanese architectural styles are now largely neglected. Rather, new buildings in Japanese cities are constructed in styles so flamboyantly modern that one cannot but expect them to be shortly superseded.



The air of unreality is consequently strong.

Japanese cities feel like the back lots of movie studios where the various sets, all of them quite large and seemingly permanent, are constructed, used, and left standing.





Thus Tokyo is like an international exposition which has remained standing.



Impermanence is our natural state and
transience is the prime quality of life.

The great shrine at Ise is torn down once every twenty years.
The wooden building demolished, its replica - identical in all
respects - is constructed adjacent. This has been going on
for centuries and indicates Japan's accommodating
answer to the demands of immortality.





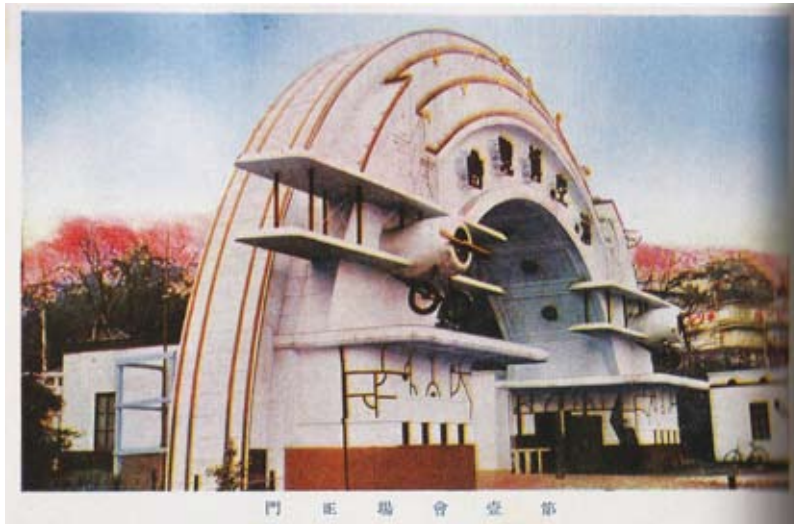
No other country has brought the principle of the microcosm -
ikebana, bonsai, *chanoyu*, gardens - to such profuse perfection.



No other has managed to turn so much into something else.



Japan is a kingdom of kitsch and Tokyo is its capital.
Here Mount Fuji ends up as a tissue dispenser and the Buddha's
sandals - 10 feet high - adorn a ferro-concrete temple pretending to be timber.



"I am modern", says this *mélange*, and it can say
this because the world at large, in this late-
Hellenistic time of ours, is enamoured of kitsch.
A taste for kitsch is a taste for the times.



And the poet Henri Michaux, in Tokyo in 1932, noted that "Japanese have been modern for ten centuries" and that "Tokyo is a hundred times more modern than Paris".

This then is the display of Tokyo.
It perhaps may be mercantile but its
appeal goes far beyond the financial.



Things become, in this plethora of sensation,
detached from their utilitarian aspects. They exist
for themselves: the cascades of kanji, the
plastic food replicas in the restaurant windows,
the façade, stories high, made entirely of TV sets.





As with all excess, the effect is exciting, hedonistic, diverting, mind-numbing. Meaning is cheapened but effect is heightened.



It is one of the wonders of the world -
hanging gardens, mighty columned temples, standing
colossi. Like them, it should be seen before it is too late.

There is an old garden concept (still to be seen at Kyoto's Entsu-ji temple) that is called *shakkei*. We translate it as "borrowed scenery". The garden stops at a hedge. Beyond that hedge, space. Then in the distance - the mountain, Mount Hiei. It does not belong to the temple, but it is a part of its garden. The hand of the Japanese reaches out and enhances (appropriates) that which is most distant. Anything out there can become nature. The world is one, a seamless whole, for those who can see it; for those who can learn to observe, to regard, to understand.



Japan - A Borrowed Scenery has been conceived in Stockholm and Paris during the spring of 2012, as part of a research and exhibition collaboration with Japanese artist Hiroko Tsuchimoto, prior to our exhibition *Somewhere, not here* at the D&Department Project Sapporo by 3KG in Sapporo, Japan. The project, travel and publication has been realized with the support of the Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation in Sweden (2011) and IASPIS The Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual Artists (2012). Thank you: Hiroko Tsuchimoto, Hanna Wieslander and Sébastien Berthier (for layout and printing assistance), the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris (where part of the production was carried out). More information available here: www.malinpetterssonoberg.com

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