



‘Books on traditional architecture are most important to me’

Momoyo Kaijima of Atelier Bow-Wow values books that document vernacular culture.

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'Is she famous?' asks the curious manager of RWTH Aachen University's guest facilities on the way to the interview room. 'Atelier Bow-Wow is one of the world's most innovative architecture firms,' I reply. 'But you can ask Momoyo herself. She's studied and taught at ETH Zurich, and she speaks fluent German.'

The self-assured woman I meet prefers to be interviewed in English, however. Outside, Aachen lies beneath in a thick blanket of fresh snow; inside, we settle into classic black Barcelona chairs that murmur Mies van der Rohe and Poltrona. Momoyo Kaijima's deep-red mohair pullover contrasts sharply with the stark black-and-white surroundings. As I am to find out, the way she dresses reflects the way she thinks. Her use of language is associative. Her hands sketch lines in the air as she talks. At times her gestures reveal more than her words.

Spatial designs are not easy to capture in text, but Atelier Bow-Wow's publications prove that it's possible. The built work and the written word merge to become an architectural Yin and Yang. The entity is perfect; the union of opposites – theory and practice, literature and reference book, design and research – forms the basis of contemporary building innovation. It's like the disclosure of a magic trick: once you understand how it works, it seems simple, but not necessarily reproducible.

Atelier Bow-Wow is well known for inventing new ways to respond to users' everyday needs. How do you store your own books?

The house and atelier we designed for ourselves [built in 2005] has a 6-x-3-m set of bookshelves on the second floor. I haven't counted the books, but the wall is covered completely. In the lower section we store reference books on architecture, which we use for looking up details and getting new ideas. In the upper part are art and design books. On the highest shelves we have theory, literature and books that we have already read.

Have your reading habits changed over the years?

Well, I liked stories as a child. My mother loved English literature. She gave me many books to read, such as *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, the Canadian bestselling

'The different perspectives of contemporary writers help me to make up my own mind'

author. It's about a red-headed orphan named Anne. She gets to live with a brother and sister at the Green Gables farm. In her early years, Anne has a lot of trouble. She is very sensitive and complains a lot, but has a beautiful imagination. She observes landscapes and buildings, which she uses as a basis for imagining different stories.

I also liked *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. It's about a father, a mother and three children who live in some remote place in the USA. They build their house by themselves and cultivate the surroundings. The story includes many details of a farmer's lifestyle back then – how they butchered animals, preserved meat, churned butter, made cheese, played the fiddle. I still like these sorts of books.

What makes them so fascinating?

From my perspective today, it's not so much the human story but how they ate, cooked, cut down a tree or decorated the house. These books are full of such details. These were the stories I liked from when I was about ten up to junior high school.

What happened after high school?

After high school? Of course I started to read architecture books. [Laughs.]

Have you focused only on design and construction since then?

No, I read literature now, too, much of which is from Japan. Soseki Natsume is one of my favourite writers. He is considered the Japanese Charles Dickens. He's tried many narrative styles. In *Wagahai wa neko de aru* [English translation: *I Am a Cat*], the main storyteller is a cat living

in a professor's house, observing Japan's middle classes. It's an ironic piece. Written in a majestic plural, it's all about conversation, atmosphere and behaviour, as seen through the cat's eyes.

I also like manga. Japanese comics are really beautiful – like illustrated poetry. With some exceptions that are simple and funny, most manga are too difficult for children to understand. You have to know how to read between the pictures.

My partner [Yoshiharu Tsukamoto] and I have a favourite novelist: Kazushi Hosaka. His stories are about ordinary people living ordinary lives. This simplicity helps people to imagine their own lives as part of a similar story. Hosaka also gives the story a context – a place within the world – and explains the meaning of a novel. *Kusa no ue*



no choshoku [breakfast on the grasses] is about a father and son who live together. Each night the father cooks breakfast soup: it's a ritual, during which they talk. The book has a rather straightforward plot.

How do you decide what to read?

It depends. Mainly I go to the book store to find something interesting. Once I find an interesting writer, I try to follow his or her work. It's nice to compare what contemporary writers think of our times. Different perspectives help me to make up my own mind.

What's the last book you read?

A novel by the late Ryotaro Shiba, best known for his books on Japanese history. Originally he was a journalist; even as a novelist, he sort of 'reported'

on historical events. His novels are simple, strong and personal. He collected various historical facts, visited places, conducted interviews, checked historical documents and turned his findings into stories. Until recently, I didn't know exactly what he'd done, so I read *Ryoma ga yuku* [Ryoma moves ahead], a novel about a samurai who tries to change the empire – with its governmental restrictions – into a democracy during the Meiji period [1868 – 1912, an era that represents the first half of the Empire of Japan].

Which architecture books are most important to you?

The architecture book I value most is, without doubt, Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects*. It provides an insight into the

cultural and functional richness of vernacular architecture. Rudofsky is a kind of practical theorist. In *Now I Lay Me Down to Eat* he offers alternatives for everyday design problems. It's a random collection of old daily practices, and it shows that life can be easier than we make it. Why, for example, do we always design bathtubs that are impossible for adults to lie down in?

I just mentioned *Anne of Green Gables*. It helped me to understand how to relate life to space. For most people, literature is much easier to understand than specialized books, which also have their place, of course. From a theoretical perspective, I like Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*.

Venturi has an interesting view on the differences between architectural forms, as ▶

well as the causes of those differences. His comparisons are based on a broad range of examples – from traditional to modern buildings. Koolhaas documents his own observations. Like a journalist, he explains what's happening in today's architecture. According to Koolhaas, architecture can be read as a representation of society.

What kind of architecture books are you looking for at present?

When I'm abroad I try to find books on traditional houses, local cultures and relevant background information. The most important are books on traditional architecture. I love the bay windows that you find in wooden Ottoman houses in Turkey, for instance. Sometimes I find nice



monographs. My favourites are monographs I have on Le Corbusier, Lina Bo Bardi and Erik Gunnar Asplund. Also dear to me is Kazuo Shinohara's *16 Houses and Architectural Theory*.

Since Atelier Bow-Wow was founded in 1992, you have published 11 books. What is your driving force?

So many? I guess we like to observe and document in an architectural way and, through that, to say something with wider implications. Architecture is a universal language that communicates history, behaviour and habits. Take a window, for instance. A French window may differ from a Venetian window. But without knowing any French or Italian, we can touch it, open it and tell whether it's got a comfortable ledge. We can participate in another culture by

reading the architectural language. There may be misunderstandings, of course, but that makes it interesting.

We try to make this language visible and understandable in our books. *Made in Tokyo*, for example, shows the culture of the city as represented by architecture. I try to capture as much as possible by showing only buildings, but sometimes we add text, diagrams and descriptions of the local lifestyle to make it clearer for foreign readers.

We also like to include nice photos of our own work. We want to explain how people behave in the signature houses we have designed and why they decided on the exact design that we executed. Architectural forms, daily needs, lifestyle: it's interesting to include such things

when documenting how people live today.

Lastly, our books provide a framework for architectural thinking in a wider sense. Seen from our perspective, we design single projects – one at a time. But seen through someone else's eyes, an incidental house might lead to a new typology. Books like *Made in Tokyo* and *Pet Architecture* open our work to public scrutiny.

Do you consider yourself a theorist?

Well, a practical one, if at all.

How would you describe the impact of your publications?

They get an exchange of ideas started. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, holding a lecture on 'cliché architecture' at Aachen University. [Laughs.] Lectures prompt people to approach each other

Books that have influenced Momoyo Kaijima

Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*, L.C. Page & Co, 1908

Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, Harper & Brothers, 1932

Soseki Natsume, *Wagahai wa neko de aru*, Tuttle Publishing, 1905–1906; *I Am a Cat*, (English translation), Tuttle Publishing, 2002.

Kazushi Hosaka, *Kusa no ue no choshoku* [breakfast on the grasses], Kodansha, 1993

Ryotaro Shiba, *Ryoma ga yuku* [Ryoma moves ahead], published in eight paperback volumes between 1963 and 1966

Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art Press, 1964

Bernard Rudofsky, *Now I Lay Me Down to Eat: Notes and Footnotes on the Lost Art of Living*, Doubleday, 1980

Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art Press, 1966

Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Oxford University Press, 1978

Kazuo Shinohara, *16 Houses and Architectural Theory*, Bijuteu Shuppan-sha, 1971

and enter into a dialogue. Every time we are invited, I try to find out about the audience's interests. Once a Norwegian philosopher wanted to revitalize a stretch of seaside occupied by heavy industry. We presented *Pet Architecture*, hoping that smallness and art could provide a solution for bringing life back into the area. It seemed to inspire the Norwegians, who finally built a lot of small buildings along the water.

Your latest book, Behaviorology, is a more classic monograph.

Yes, it's a collection of our works – from single houses to big buildings – and includes documentation of the research that led to them. It's the first time we asked someone to write the foreword. We have contributions from an architecture professor, a sociologist and an art curator. They point out the similarities between our work and Japan's historical architecture, connect what we do to recent findings in cultural research, and explain why the art scene is close to our work, respectively.

Any new books in the pipeline?

There's one I prepared more than three years ago. It's about a design project I did in the studio: 23 houses in different cities. I wanted to show the condition of urban space through a single house in each city.

You used to teach at ETH Zurich, and currently you're an associate professor at the University of Tsukuba. As a teacher, do you see cultural differences in the way students use books?

Language is an important issue. In Japan we have a lot of architecture books that were translated into Japanese; in Switzerland they read more books in the original languages, mainly English, German and French. It's easier for Swiss students to sense a differentiation between backgrounds and to understand the subtleties involved. Japan is an island. We try to understand cultural differences through books. But travelling, talking, watching – cultural exchange by any means, basically – all are necessary to explain architecture. ◀

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