



Japan National Stadium. Photo by MARCOG/PIXTA

KENGO KUMA: RENOWNED JAPANESE ARCHITECT RECOVERS THE NATURAL AND LOCAL

Japan is preparing for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, placing the highest priority on delivering safe and secure Games for all.

Globally acclaimed Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, who was involved with designing the Japan National Stadium, a beautiful venue that will be featured at the Tokyo 2020 games, will share his design philosophy in a webinar presented by JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles on June 23.

Renowned for his embrace of natural materials and respect for local environments, Kuma believes that such “natural architecture” could transform cities like Los Angeles in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Los Angeles has a strong tradition of natural architecture,” he said. “What [American architect] Frank Lloyd Wright did in Los Angeles is a kind of benchmark of natural design.”

Kuma’s fascination with architecture began in childhood, when he visited buildings designed for the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics by celebrated Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. Like Tange, Kuma’s



Kengo Kuma. Photo by J.C. Carbone

traditional forms and materials with state-of-the-art technologies.

“In the 20th century, modernism architecture was trying to create isolated monuments, separated from environment,” Kuma explained. “That attitude destroys local culture and local tradition. Now, we should go back to locality again.”



The Cultural Village at Portland Japanese Garden. Photo by James Florio

design philosophy is rooted in a marriage of Japanese tradition to contemporary design vocabulary. Kuma’s work with Tokyo-based Kengo Kuma & Associates, and as a University of Tokyo professor, has consistently emphasized harmony, sustainability, and diversity in his fusion of

In his seminal 2008 paper *Anti-Object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture*, Kuma called for an “architecture of relations”, which respects its surroundings rather than dominating them. This thinking has informed everything from his glass/wood addition to a mid-

century modern house in a Connecticut, to designs for corporate headquarters and multiple international museums.

While the majority of Kuma’s work has been in Japan, his design philosophy is finding increasing global resonance. He opened a Paris office in 2008 and has worked on projects in Europe, China, Singapore, and North America, including The Cultural Village at Portland Japanese Garden in Portland, Ore.

For Kuma, whose practice won the Global

even in the most bustling urban settings.

Influenced by Japanese traditional architecture, Kuma seeks a close relationship between exterior and interior. He strives for seamless environments, often with unenclosed interiors, and avoids solid walls wherever possible.

“The weather of Los Angeles is ideal as a condition for that kind of ‘borderless’ building,” said Kuma. “I saw many experimental houses in Los Angeles, for example with the bedroom on the terrace.



Akagi Shrine

Award for Sustainable Architecture in 2016, concepts of sustainability transcend just the literal reduction of carbon footprints.

“As we work with local materials and local craftsmanship, we can create a natural circulation of the material [which] is the essence of sustainability,” he said. “In the 20th century, the concrete and steel destroyed that kind of connection. I want to go back to that kind of connection.”

Kuma prefers to work with natural wood and stone, but often in non-traditional ways. For example, cutting stone into thin slices to create a sense of airiness and lightness incongruous to traditional, heavy masonry.

“The natural order is very diverse. I want to recover that kind of diversity,” he continued. “Every building in the big city looks very similar. Instead, I want to find the uniqueness for each place.”

Kuma senses an ancient, if subconscious, spiritual and historical connection between humans and natural materials. Creating buildings that immerse occupants in natural woods and stone, as our ancestors once were in forests and other virgin landscapes, can instill a sense of comfort and relaxation

I’m really influenced by those buildings.”

As he’ll discuss in his JAPAN HOUSE webinar, Kuma perceives advances in information technology enabling a demotorization of cities that will only be accelerated by yet more people working from home during, and likely after, the current pandemic.

“This is a drastic, drastic change in working style that can change urban design,” he concluded. “We should change this urban design as fast as possible, and I think that kind of change will happen after COVID.”

To watch the JAPAN HOUSE webinar, please go to JapanHouseLA.com/happenings/events

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— Paul Rogers, Brand Publishing Writer