

# landscape architecture

THE MAGAZINE OF THE

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

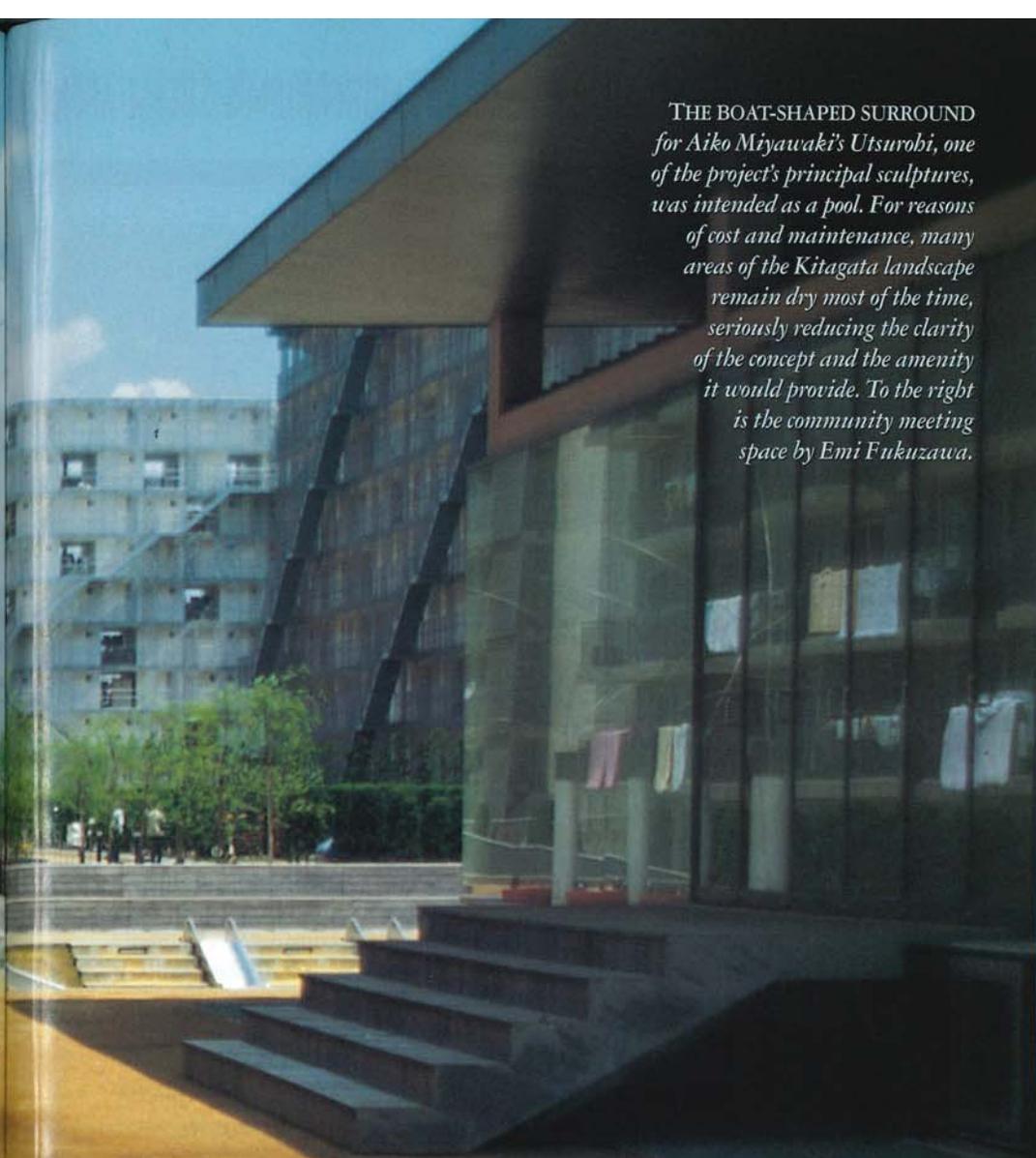
3/2002 US\$7/CAN \$9

received  
2/21

ASLA  
Information Resource Center  
636 Eye St NW  
Washington, DC 20001

The Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17 U.S. Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Transmission, reproduction, or publication of protected items beyond what is deemed a fair use of those items under copyright law requires written permission of the copyright owners.





THE BOAT-SHAPED SURROUND for Aiko Miyawaki's *Utsurobi*, one of the project's principal sculptures, was intended as a pool. For reasons of cost and maintenance, many areas of the Kitagata landscape remain dry most of the time, seriously reducing the clarity of the concept and the amenity it would provide. To the right is the community meeting space by Emi Fukuzawa.

For almost two decades, Martha Schwartz has occupied a position squarely on the periphery of mainstream landscape practice. In some respects, her practice more closely approximates the making of art than the design of landscape architecture, but this is less in terms of the actual product than the manner by which landscape production is conceived. To many, her *seeming* lack of regard for utility and ecology (seeming being the key word here) is troublesome, and I have heard more than one practitioner grunt *sotto voce* (in reference to her work), "That's not landscape architecture." To my mind, that has been one of her most important contributions to the profession. As a result of confronting her designs, perhaps for one moment the practitioner is forced to consider, "Well, then, what exactly is landscape architecture?" A good question, to be sure, and one not easily answered given the multitude of contemporary approaches and the value systems that lie behind them.

One of Schwartz's most recent projects, the landscape for the apartment house complex at Kitagata in Gifu Prefecture, Japan, continues an exploration—in water, willows, Plexiglas, and fiberglass—that began with bagels in Boston. As such it represents both a continuity and an extension, less a departure than a development and enrichment of prior ideas. Schwartz's Kitagata landscape is an agglomerative design that assembles a constellation of pieces rather than offering a singular distilled entity. Ironically, perhaps, it harks back to the Italian Renaissance garden, with its series of outdoor rooms and its gardens of delight and surprise—including a pink rock candy fountain that suggests the *giochi d'acqua* that wet the hapless visitor in prior times.

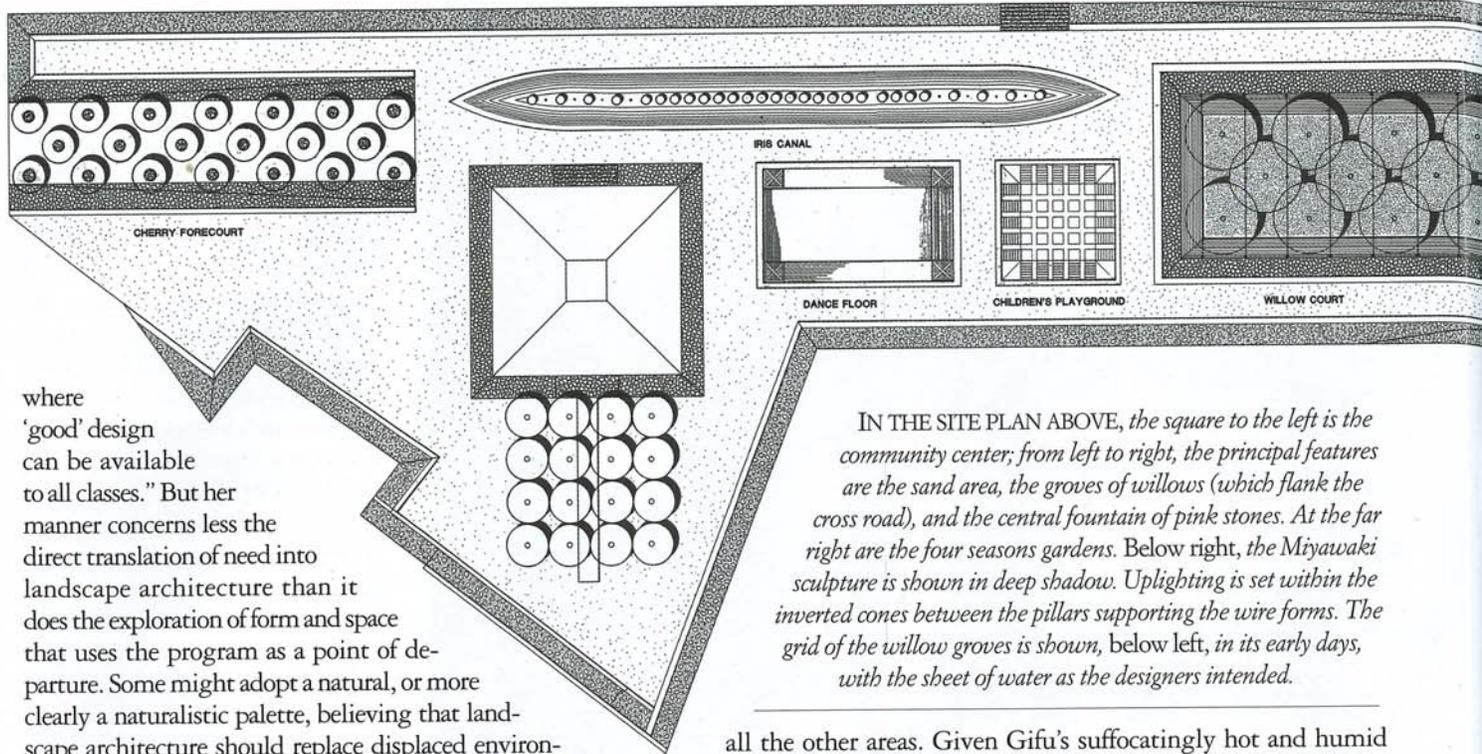
Despite the lack of resemblance to the vocabulary of pioneering 20th-century landscapes, Martha Schwartz believes she continues in the modernist tradition, sharing "modernism's social agenda, the basic optimism toward the future—

# A CONSTELLATION OF PIECES

*A team of women architects—and landscape architect Martha Schwartz—*

*assembled to design this Japanese housing complex. Did the all-woman team produce a more humane design? BY MARC TREIB*

# SCHWARTZ BELIEVES SHE CONTINUES IN THE MODERNIST TRADITION, SHARING "MODERNISM'S SOCIAL AGENDA"



where 'good' design can be available to all classes." But her manner concerns less the direct translation of need into landscape architecture than it does the exploration of form and space that uses the program as a point of departure. Some might adopt a natural, or more clearly a naturalistic palette, believing that landscape architecture should replace displaced environmental features and processes. While she would respect these efforts, she has chosen to follow a different road, one that acknowledges more directly the role of landscape architecture as an expression of contemporary culture. Thus, her palette remains freely ranging, at times relying on staccato stonework, colored gravels, gilded cement frogs, and yes, even trees. For the Gifu project she relied on a mixture of old and new references and materials, the rocks so basic to the Japanese garden, the willows that traditionally lined the river banks or streets of historical districts such as the Ginza in Tokyo, and strongly tinted Plexiglas.

The landscape program for the Kitagata housing project was left somewhat unspecific, allowing the designer to formulate her own response to the architectural, social, and climatic situations. There would be places for people to sit and converse, for children to play, a community space (which became its own building as the project developed), a small sports area, and significant amounts of parking that seriously impinged on the planning of

IN THE SITE PLAN ABOVE, the square to the left is the community center; from left to right, the principal features are the sand area, the groves of willows (which flank the cross road), and the central fountain of pink stones. At the far right are the four seasons gardens. Below right, the Miyawaki sculpture is shown in deep shadow. Uplighting is set within the inverted cones between the pillars supporting the wire forms. The grid of the willow groves is shown, below left, in its early days, with the sheet of water as the designers intended.

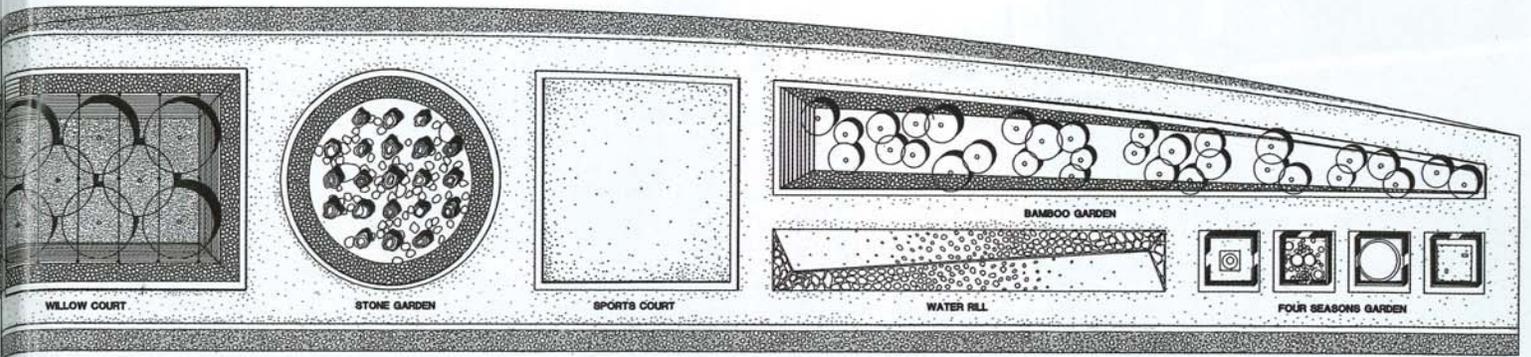
all the other areas. Given Gifu's suffocatingly hot and humid summer weather, shade was a necessity and outdoor places of escape were quite welcome. Given the considerable rainfall, drainage was also a priority. The functional need played nicely with Schwartz's first response to the site and program, proposing a river to run through the central space, cooling in summer, offering wading spaces for kids, and possibly collecting rainwater in some way. The idea of a walkway set high to better connect with the apartment entrances, with the corresponding depressed zones, also played off the rice paddies that occupied the immediate site prior to construction. The design road, alas, is never without bumps, and in the end—as discussed below—the water areas were seriously reduced in the final scheme (and as it happens, even those that were realized remain dry most of the time).

Behind the housing redevelopment was the prefectural governor's wish to see some tangible progress in social housing during his watch. The existing housing developments around Kitagata had been realized in the 1960s and 1970s, and a few years ago they



OFFICE OF MARTHA SCHWARTZ; MARC TREIB, PHOTO OPPOSITE

# THE BASIC OPTIMISM TOWARD THE THE FUTURE—WHERE 'GOOD' DESIGN CAN BE AVAILABLE TO ALL CLASSES."



were deemed unsafe by the recently upgraded seismic building codes. Primarily three-story walk-ups, the old blocks contained apartments tight by American numbers but normal by Japanese standards. In fact, the new housing would do little to increase apartment size. Instead, the rebuilt—not incidentally at almost three times the density of the existing housing—more structurally sound apartment blocks would constitute the primary benefit provided by the new Kitagata area. Not incidentally, landscape architecture was to play a prominent role as a part of the usable space for the residents, as counterpoint to the architecture, and as a mitigating means for setting off vehicular traffic and parking from pedestrian movement and children's activities.

The design and realization of housing areas such as these are normally the province of the large construction companies that dominate the building landscape of Japan. A distinct separation governs the commissioning of projects given to architects known for their

THE MODULATED SPACES of the screened parking areas (below) are among the most successful elements of the site's design. On the right, one half of the willow groves, now dry, with exposed river stones.

high design profiles (such as art museums, performing art centers, gymnasias, and concert halls) and to those who realize most of the country's infrastructure. For the bridges, the urban developments—and much of the housing—it is the vast workforce of white-shirted architects in the employ of the major construction companies who design the work. In many respects it is a question of design/build, although the managerial interrelationships of the various companies and their design staffs are opaque and rather difficult to unravel, especially to those not privy to internal corporate workings. Regardless of the system of design production, however, one aspect of these housing estates has remained fairly constant: There is virtually no landscape architecture of note beyond paved, gravel, or earthen surfaces, play equipment, and perhaps some trees. Kitagata, according to its brief, would be different.

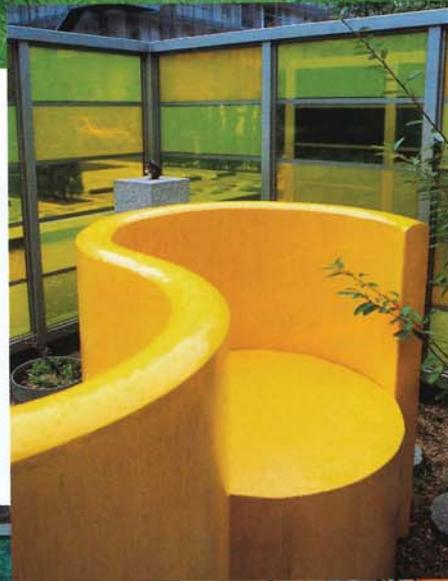
The housing authority's brief for the Kitagata project highlighted two key issues. First, the architecture of the apartment





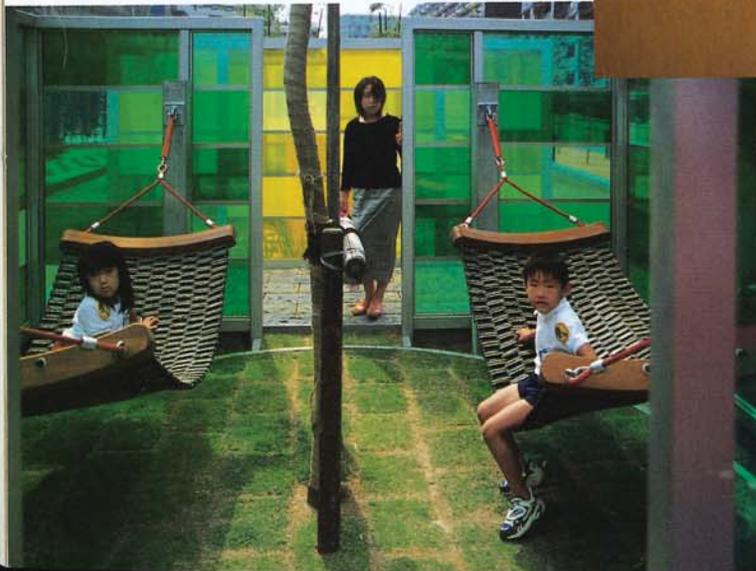
blocks, while building at increased density on the site, should have a more carefully planned and aesthetically advanced design than the norm. As a totality, the complex should provide a more enriched social housing environment than that offered by Japanese social housing up to this time. The prefectural government granted economic means about 20 percent above that typical for such construction.

Second, the project was intended to showcase an entirely female design team: four



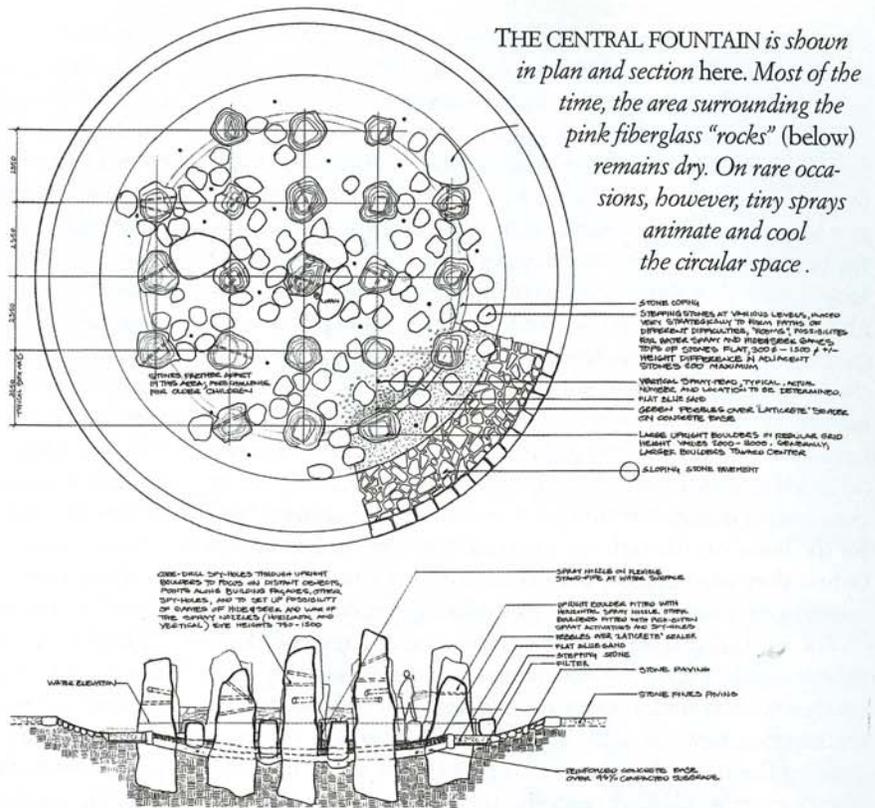
THE INTERIOR of the summer garden bedded with uncropped grass is shown above. Left, the S-shaped love seat in the spring garden welcomes passersby to sit and chat. A bronze chipmunk is barely visible on the post to the rear. During the warmer months, residents are invited to hang a hammock and enjoy a sense of camping out (below left). (Compare the newly planted lawn in this photo with grass shown in the image above.) An overview of the four seasons gardens is shown below right.

MARC TREIB, TOP AND MIDDLE; OFFICE OF MARTHA SCHWARTZ, BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE

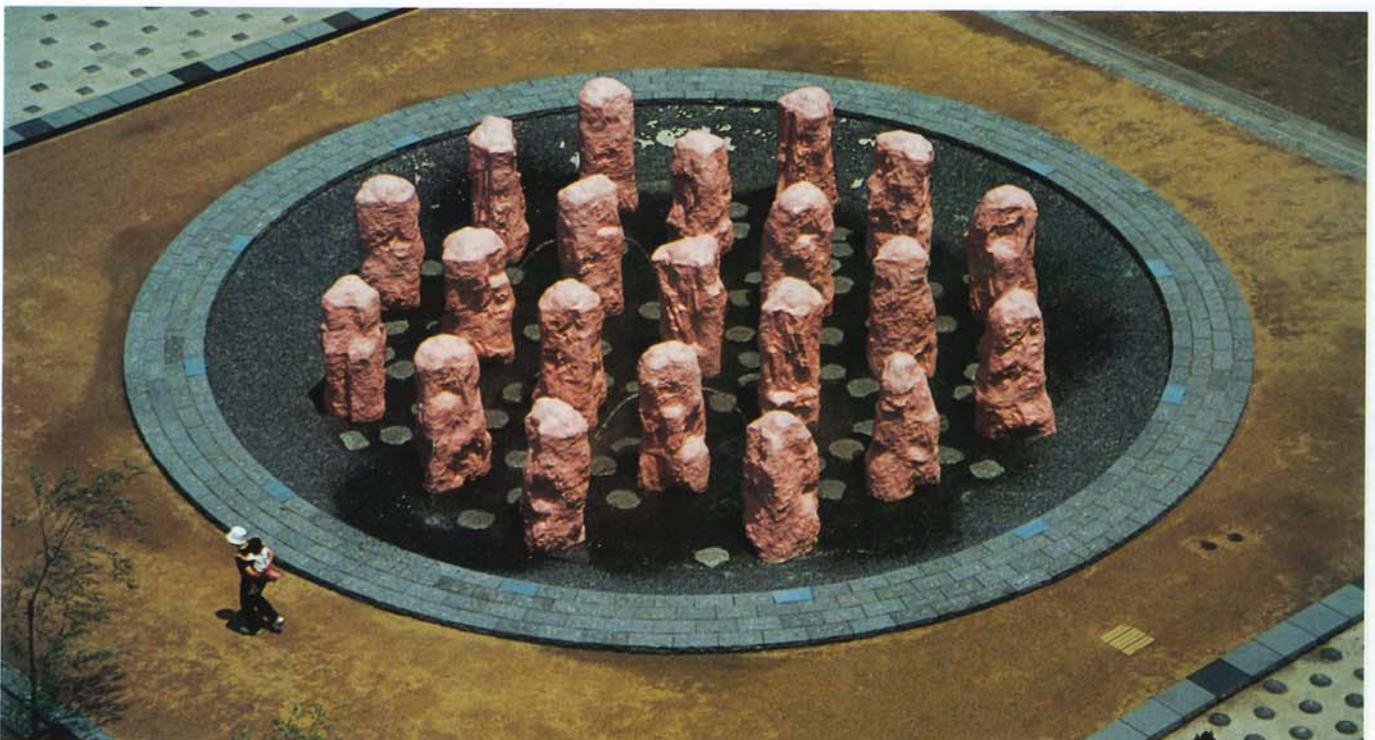


architects (two Japanese, two foreign), two artists, and a landscape architect. The reason for this choice, especially radical considering the long domination of architecture in Japan by males, was to increase the exposure of women architects and artists, and to test the possibility that women can design more humane interior and exterior places. At the outset, the sponsors held that women would be more sensitive to the needs of the residents, particularly in the design of the apartment interiors. This constitutes, in itself, a stereotype but remained an interesting proposition. Under the overall coordination of architect Arata Isozaki, architects Kazuyo Sejima and Akiko Takahashi from Japan, Elizabeth Diller from the United States, and Christine Hawley from the United Kingdom would team with artists Aiko Miyawaki and Emi Fukuzawa (who would ultimately design the community meeting space as a building set between the apartment blocks). Martha Schwartz would realize the common spaces as a respite from the confines of the concrete apartment blocks. While even a quick glance at the project as built would defy any feminist reading, the resulting architecture and open spaces possess a quality unusually high for social housing in Japan. This, perhaps, was Kitagata's greatest success.

The design process did not involve the architects, artists, and landscape architect working as a group, quite understandably perhaps given the wide geographic distribution of the team. Instead, the site plan was fixed and the relative parts of the site preassigned. To smooth matters, Isozaki sketched the master plan, which essentially divided the site neatly into four zones, each with its respective



architect. The height and number of floors were also established by the Isozaki plan, but the footprint, the configuration, and the materials were left open to the individual designers (of course, to some degree, these were dictated by economy and building codes). By the time Martha Schwartz began her proposal for the exterior spaces—which was required to include a high number of parking spaces that ate into the common space within the walls of residential units—the design of the buildings was more or less fixed,



precluding a greater contribution by the landscape architect upon the planning of the site and its open spaces as a whole. Perhaps this was a flaw in the process—if, sadly, a common one.

While elegant in its own way, the building architecture is far from friendly. The perforated mesh screens so beloved of architects are not read benignly by the inhabitants, to whom they suggest gray cages. There is virtually no color. The equal heights of the bent slabs of housing blocks produced a massing that would have benefited by some variation in heights, some lower. Perhaps a towerlike unit would have added to the legibility of places within the site. Of the four architects, Sejima produced the most aesthetically elegant design, with a clean south-facing facade and extended runs of stairs linking, in grand sweeps, the ground to the uppermost floors. That the glass on the south facades is left unsheltered makes (I was told) the apartments particularly hot in the summer months. At times of extreme heat the residents head for the holes cut through the structure that serve as breezeways (when they aren't filled with storage items from the apartments)—or, more significantly, to outdoor spaces on the ground.

The remaining apartment blocks use screens, staggered plans, or bent forms to develop visual interest, but these essentially dress up somewhat similar floor plans. Hawley's employ of two-story maisonettes, however, adds a variety to the flats that comprise most of the units. Keep in mind that this is social housing, despite an unusually large proportion of private auto ownership by residents who live in the development two to five years on average. (Uncharacteristic for Japan, the site is almost a kilometer from the nearest train station, and bus connections are still somewhat limited.) The character of the architecture and the number of apartments—about 450 in all—made the design of the outdoor spaces all the more important, and the contributions of the landscape architect all the more critical to the success of the scheme.

For the exterior courtyard spaces, Schwartz chose

to divide the site into bounded zones—a response to the singularity of the rigidly defined slot of space defined by the apartment blocks. Her original concept drew on a reference to Gifu's principal river, the Nagara. She proposed that a swath of water, executed in a series of water features, would conceptually link the site's landscape elements; these, in turn, would join the scheme's four principal buildings with a collective landscape surrounded by the apartment blocks. Considerations of safety and maintenance, but most of all economy, foreclosed on aspects of this idea, leaving in its wake zones left unfilled or built of disparate materials. (The original budget offered the landscape architect equal funding to one of the apartment buildings, but this sum was cut by about a third in the course of design.) The net effect is one of differentiation rather than unity, and a landscape that pants, rather than one that takes a single deep breath. Some of these zones are more loosely sketched, some more intimate in scale; but each is differentiated as an element possessing its own boundaries and identity.

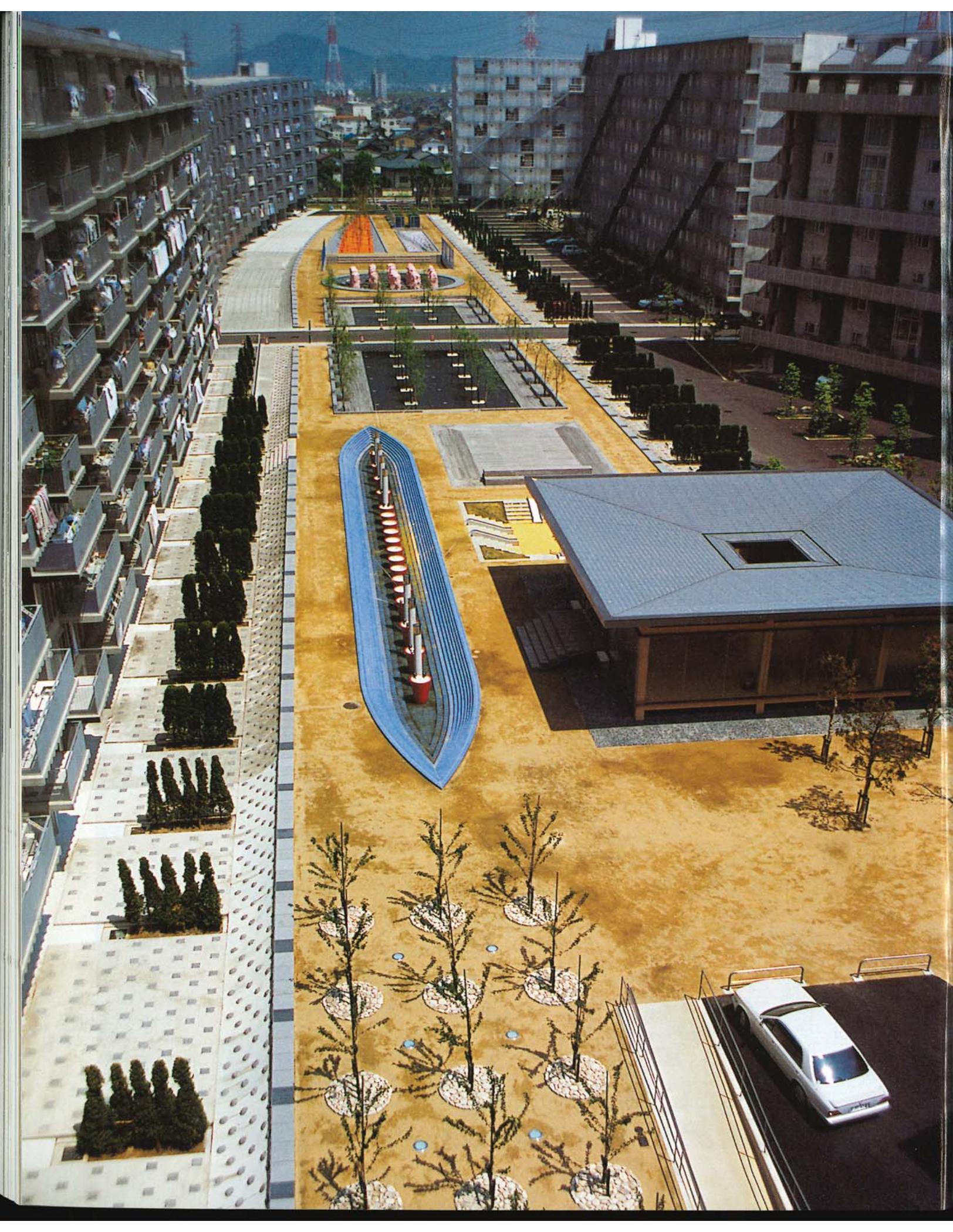
At the eastern end of the site—that is, at one main point of entry—four theme gardens greet the resident and visitor. Enclosed by walls of small Plexiglas panels in red, green, yellow, and blue, these small gardens were intended to evoke the four seasons. First encountered is the red garden (autumn) filled with a density of shrubs (burning bush) that thwarts entry, and featuring wooden birdhouses that rise well above wall height as sanctuary and sculpture. The green garden appears next, with its evocation of summer: It features a single tree amid a panel of grass left unmowed. Wall-mounted lugs welcome the intrepid resident to hang a hammock for relaxation, presumably with a friend, during the clement months. More overtly sculptural is the S-shaped loveseat that dominates the yellow (spring) garden, a strong visual accent within its compartment, and within the greater landscape.

Accompanying the chrome yellow seat are two square posts upon which sit two life-size cast-bronze chipmunks. As the chipmunk is not native to Japan,

THE SAND AREA resembles, in miniature, an atrium, with slides as tiny escalators.







WHILE THESE GARDEN ROOMS  
CONSTITUTE INTERESTING EXERCISES  
IN FORM, THEY ARE LESS INVITING AS  
SPACES OR AS PLACES TO BE USED.

acquiring the requisite art posed somewhat of a problem. Originally, Schwartz was drawn to the indigenous tanuki (a relative of the badger), with its folk associations with revelry and alcohol (ceramic tanuki are in front of shops selling sake, beer, and liquor). For whatever reason, the Japanese part of the team was less than thrilled with the choice (perhaps because of its somewhat dissolute associations), and in the end the chipmunk prevailed and the animals were installed. As of October 2001, however, one of them had departed for greener pastures. The blue garden spotlights a stone cylinder with a small depression (intended to freeze in winter), set in a field of gravel with bamboo spotted around the perimeter. It is the most elegant room of the suite, striking a curious contrast between the sophistication of the stone cylinder and the vernacular quality of the Plexiglas panels set around it in aluminum frames.

While these garden rooms constitute interesting exercises in form, they are less inviting as spaces or as places to be used. Like Schwartz's Davis Garden in El Paso, Texas, these are a series of rather small compartments that may be occupied but that offer little stimulus for their occupation. They are too small (about eight by twelve feet) to comfortably accommodate more than about two people at a time, and in all but the yellow garden there is no provision for seating. Interviews revealed, as one might suspect, that the rooms are enjoyed by children—understandable given their almost Lilliputian dimensions—but not so much by adults. Whether the theme of the seasons resonates in the designs is less relevant (one would hardly guess the theme without prompting) and, in the end, they must be regarded primarily as sculptural installations. One wonders, therefore, about the assignment of such care and resources to what is essentially an ancillary area.

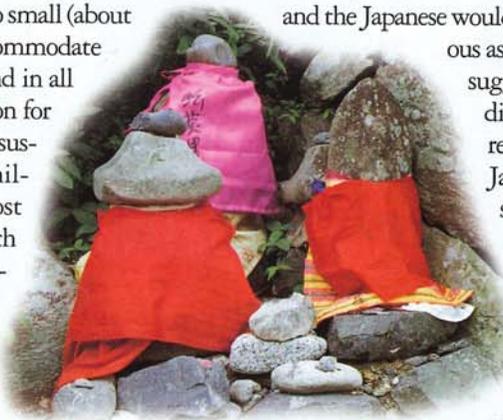
Adjacent to these gardens are two areas that have successfully retained the original concept for a linear sweep of water. For one, two inclined planes of concrete form a channel punctuated with stones set as opposing planes of large and small units. Water enters along the edge of the channel, flows down its sides, and descends in a linear drain that runs its length. (But even with advance notice, during my visit the water was not running.) The second zone relies on bamboo carefully positioned for sculptural effect (this is an interim reading as the bamboo is intended to fill out into a dense hedge over time) and sows its floor with an orange gravel whose brilliant color is much appreciated under the dismal light of overcast and stormy days. Moving westward, one encounters a small earthen playfield (it was designed to be planted in grass) adroitly set a few feet below the adjacent ground level, creating retaining walls that double as seating for supervision or just for cheering.

At the center of the site, and certainly the centerpiece and most audacious element of the design, is a field of erect stone forms (they were in fact cast in fiberglass) painted a fleshy pink. The original de-

sign called for pillars of rough-cut pink granite. Somehow during the development and cost adjustments, Schwartz notes, the soft pink tone of the granite became "stones" of fiberglass painted a vivid pink. The landscape architect, although surprised at the color, decided that it was quite acceptable, even if not what she had originally imagined. Although the footprint of this area is circular, the stones

themselves are arranged orthogonally. Larger stepping stones overlay the pebble paving within the circle, and among them are set misty jets that, when unleashed, convert this forest of synthetic stones into a fountain. Unfortunately, due to cost and concern for maintenance, they are not turned on very often; but the stones themselves remain a very popular destination for children nonetheless. Some of the pink pillars have holes horizontally penetrating them, allowing diagonal view corridors through various parts of the fountain area. These encourage close viewing, that is to say, voyeurism, or engaging in friendly games of peekaboo and hide and seek.

The stones recall the elements of Japanese gardens, although historically the horizontal was the preferred axis for rock arrangements, and the Japanese would have been loath to use any ordering as obvious as the grid. In character, in fact, the stonework suggests Chinese more than Japanese garden tradition. In some ways, the vertical proportions recall the cruder rendering of the Jizo deity of Japanese folk religion, in which two or three stones piled upon each other sufficiently serve to suggest the deity. (Jizo derives from neither the indigenous Shinto nor the imported Buddhism, although over the centuries aspects of many religions have blended in Japan. Jizo, the deity for fertility and children, and a supplication fulfilled—or to be fulfilled—may warrant an apron made and affixed around the neck of the representative sculpture, normally more than a foot high. A particularly effective image might display a pad of small cloth aprons.) These associations, however, may never enter the minds of the children who play there, or of their parents. In form, and especially in color, the fountain is striking, and it absolutely glows in cloudy weather as if illuminated from within. The instigation of its form is not transparent, but a committed Freudian would no doubt have



AN OVERVIEW of the space looking west to east is shown opposite. Compare the vegetal screens for the parking shortly after completion of the project. Above, the pink rocks of the central fountain recall the folk deity Jizo, seen here in rude form at the funereal forest at Koyasan.

a field day interpreting this design, especially within the context of an all-female design team.

The adjacent zone is more "normal" in materials and configuration; in fact one could read it as a single unit with two halves that flank the crossroad that divides the site. When precluded by concerns for cost and maintenance, the water as originally proposed became gravel, although the willows associated with the riverbanks were retained. In fact, all provisions are in place for flooding these two gravel panels to a few inches of depth—but they are never filled, leaving the willows set in gravel rather than water. Wooden side-walls provide seating, but there are no elements within each of the grids of trees that entice us to come within (Continued on Page 92)

## A Constellation of Pieces

(Continued from Page 67) (since it was proposed as a sheet of water), a condition magnified by the limited places for direct access. It's a shame that the two zones could not have been joined to mitigate the effect of the crossroad, particularly if the road surface itself could have been modified to effect the unification of the flanking parts. The wood detailing is direct but elegant, a property also applicable to the wooden dance terrace next to the gravel planes.

Aiko Miyawaki's heavy wire sculptures on posts (called *utsurobi* by the artist, who describes them as "a movement of movement") are set in a lozenge-shaped basin with stepped sides, lined in blue tile. This too was intended as a pool area into which planters as well as posts were set. But today there is no water. The sandbox for the children is small and well proportioned, with metal slides on each side that collectively conjure the image of escalators descending into an atrium space. Few kids were to be seen, but I was assured that was because my visit came during school hours and that, like most of the park, the sandbox was heavily used on weekends.

The walks that join the various parts of the site are well scaled, handsomely detailed in stone and concrete, and offer several routes and sequences of views. Evergreen hedges divide the parking areas into manageable zones, concealing the cars from view at ground level. Exceptional care was paid to the parking areas, including using unit pavers where possible, and they remain one of the most successful areas of the design.

The Japanese associate architects, Daiken Architects of Gifu, assumed responsibility for working with the office of Martha Schwartz, creating the working drawings, troubleshooting, and observing construction. As in so many other aspects of the design, the dimensions or materials first proposed by the landscape design team were reduced: The use of water was cut back, the depth of the sunken zones was reduced for safety and maintenance, and the night illumination was restricted. These are classic problems encountered when building in a country with code requirements and environmental attitudes different from one's own. And yet despite all these complications, Martha Schwartz regards her experience as highly positive. No matter the concerns for economy, or for re-

alizing a particular detail or finding a particular material, the Japanese associates were always concerned with the landscape architect's concept: If they must substitute, they should still maintain the original concept as best they could.

Disregarding the particularities of the design's constituent elements, the Martha Schwartz Kitagata landscape questions, once again, the approaches to landscape design today. Is there a single direction to be followed; for example, one based on use or ecology? Or is there room for a variety of approaches, each in accord with its site and clients but open to a variety of paths of exploration? That Schwartz's landscapes have been able to provoke such emotional responses—admittedly, at times negative—reflects on the clarity of her ideas and the strength of the formal vocabularies with which they are executed. They tend to rank idea over experience, the cognitive over the haptic dimension, mind over amenity. And yet despite these apparent limitations, the landscapes in most cases are well received and people do seem to enjoy them.

The critic may cite his or her dissatisfaction with the concept behind the design, the resulting landscape that feels, in places, over-articulated, the lack of places to sit, or sufficient shade, or even the choice of materials—which to some appear tacky. But these criticisms should not undermine the importance of the enterprise that Schwartz sets as essentially testing the limits of landscape practice, admittedly a practice more artistically conceived. Certainly, she is guilty of nothing that has not been accepted in the art world as public art of recognized quality. Perhaps the problem lies more with the respective definitions of art and landscape architecture, the first somewhat removed from any demands upon it for comfort and function. In this sense, Schwartz's landscapes are some hybrid of art and landscape in which the strong idea is tempered by local conditions. Most landscape designers, in contrast, operate with the opposite trajectory, that is from an examination of site conditions to the idea. But this reversal of design path does nothing to negate the validity of Schwartz's approach, even if we do not agree with some particularities of the design.

The prefectural government has been pleased with the attention (including publication in Japanese and foreign periodicals)

that the project as a whole has received—in all probability, one of its original intentions. Landscape architects in Japan regard the Kitagata project as significant. While a solicited criticism might begin and end (as it so often does in Japan) with a shake of the head and an uttered "*omoshibiroi*" (interesting), the professionals I confronted in Gifu, Tokyo, and Osaka unanimously acknowledged the importance of Martha Schwartz's contribution to contemporary Japanese landscape architecture. They could forgive the parts they did not understand and forget the parts they did not like. More consequential, the heightened visibility of the Kitagata landscape has provoked housing officials, builders, and architects to consider more fully the importance of landscape architecture in the realm of housing—and perhaps in all built work. This in itself validates the Kitagata experiment, and they are grateful. **LA**

*Marc Treib is a professor of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley and a frequent contributor to landscape and design journals. He is editor of The Architecture of Landscape 1940–1960 (University of Pennsylvania Press) and Thomas Church, Landscape Architect (Monacelli Press), both to appear in 2002.*

### PROJECT CREDITS

**Landscape architects:** Martha Schwartz Inc. Project team: Martha Schwartz, Paula Meijerink, Shauna Gilles-Smith, Michael Blier, Chris MacFarlane, Kaki Martin, and Don Sharp.

**Architects:** Daiken Architects, Gifu, Japan, Tomoko Suzuki and Eiji Suzuki, project architects.

**Translation:** Joon Nakatani.

### RESOURCES

Miyazawa, Takeyoshi, ed. *Aiko Miyawaki, Utsurobi*. Tokyo: Tessei Matsushita, 1986.

Schwartz, Martha. "Landscape and Common Culture Since Modernism." In Treib, Marc, ed. *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993.

Treib, Marc. "Modes of Formality: The Distilled Complexity of Japanese Landscape Design." *Landscape Journal*, Spring, 1993, pp. 2–16.