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PROJECTS

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Japanese Earth-ecture

Matteo Zambelli

The house-restaurant that Junya Ishigami built underground, via a process of subtraction, looks like a cave. Volumes with an earthy texture blur the line between natural and artificial

“When I gaze at a rock I become fascinated by its diversity and complexity. Rocks are solid structure, which are also sculptural. Is it possible to create an architecture that is like a rock?” To this age-old question of his, Junya Ishigami responds with an extraordinary new work dug into the ground. Chef Motonori Hirata, for whom he had already created the Tables for a Restaurant (2013) space, had asked him to design a house-restaurant “that will acquire added weight over time. Nothing light, such as prefabricated or steel-frame construction. Nothing too slick or glossy; a building with more of nature’s rough edges. Authentic cooking requires that sort of place.”

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Ishigami came up with a building that astonishes those who see it for its airy, ultra-lightweight architectures with impossible thicknesses. In Ube, in Yamaguchi prefecture, he materialises an 'earth-tecture', according to Ulf Meyer's definition, in other words, an architecture born from the earth. He made it using a complex subtractive approach, centred on the inversion of solids and voids, the planning of which lasted three years, while the realisation took six. First holes were dug in the ground, they were reinforced, then the concrete was poured and, once solidified, the soil between the structural elements was removed to obtain the internal spaces.



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At first Ishigami's intention was to reveal the grey of the reinforced concrete structure, but that effect of the red clay soil agglutinated with the concrete gave the house-restaurant a cave-like atmosphere, precisely the rocky and heavy appearance sought by the client and the architect. So, they decided to shore up the dirt, in order to prevent it from crumbling and showcase the cavernous aspect of the volumes. The architecture thus obtained responds to one of the objectives formulated by Ishigami in the essay *Freeness in Architecture*, where he argues that, "it is no longer possible for us to consider architecture in ways that distinguish between the natural and the artificial environment [...]. The boundary between the natural and the artificial environment is becoming increasingly ambiguous, allowing a new environment to emerge: a new environment that is neither natural nor artificial." Furthermore, he adds that "the image of architecture as shelter is unsuited to the environment that is gradually being conceived. Architecture should not be regarded as shelter but rather as the environment that surround us." The house-restaurant appears to all as a 'found' natural-artificial landscape, within which the spaces of the house, to the south-west, and the restaurant, to the north-east, have been created.



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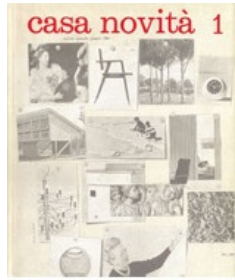
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