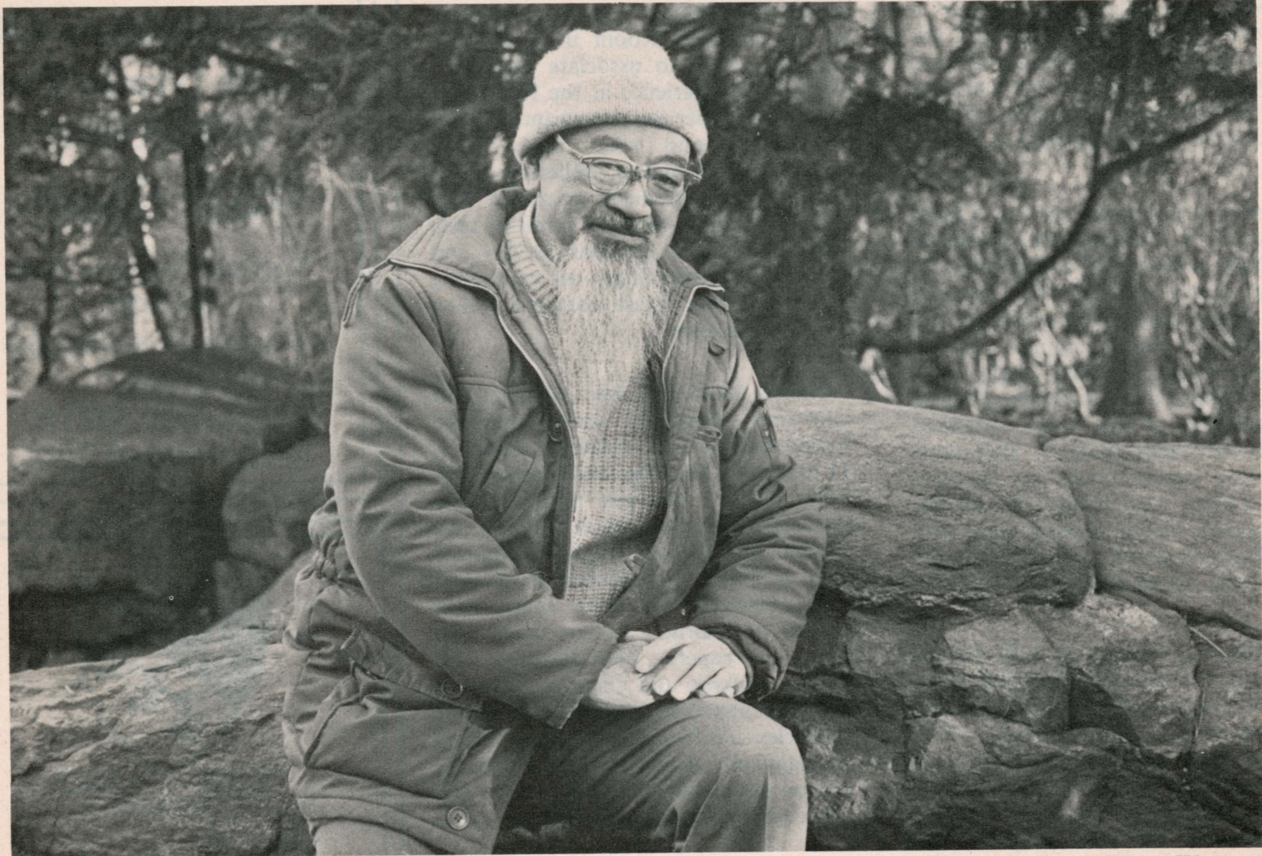
WESTCHESTER SPOTLIGHT

by Jamie L. Shenkman

ON KANEJI DOMOTO



(Photo by Susan Woog Wagner)

The yard in front of Kaneji Domoto's white stucco house in Sutton Manor harbors a few upended rocks, plenty of gravel, creeping ivy and a bonsai tree that needs pruning. An old Mercedes-Benz sportscar sits idly in the driveway waiting to be renovated. Under the portico is a grey wooden door with stained-glass windows inset on either side—the entrance to a house gutted by fire two years ago, shortly after Mrs. Domoto died. Since then Kan's children, nieces and nephews have repaneled the charred walls of the interior, but in Kan's tiny library all the bindings of his artbooks—out-of-print gems of inspiration—and his photographs, which at a first glance seem merely aged and valuable, are, upon closer scrutiny, scorched and crumbling.

The artist, sporting a brown wool cap and a long, grey beard, spends time designing gardens, swimming pools and homes for other people and little time perfecting his own surroundings. His seventieth birthday celebration last fall provided an impetus for friends and relatives to participate in home improvements.

The sound of a buzz saw cuts off. A nephew, who has been renovating an upstairs room, pushes through the ramma curtain across the library doorway to say goodbye.

After their farewells, Kan turns toward the window and looks out onto a view of a Con Ed power plant and a slip of the Sound. "I don't get a thrill out of it," he says. "I think, what am I doing sitting here with no effort? This house isn't my design, so I've been telling my neighbors that I'm going to move close to a mountain...start a village some place where I can find a view like Machu Picchu."

When Kan bought this house years ago, Sutton Manor turned out to be a convenient place to live and a good locale for bringing up children with its neighborhood beach and boathouse—a place for teenagers to swim and sail. Since then, his children have grown: Kathy is now a doctor married to an orthopedic surgeon. They live in Boston with their

Kaneji Domoto (holding camera) surveys the Usonia Homes Project with the master, Frank Lloyd Wright (left) and other participants, Pleasantville, N.Y. circa 1949.

two daughters, Kimiko and Emiko. Miki lives in Guatemala. Her husband, David Stebbing, is an economic advisor at the U.S. embassy. Anyo, Kan's only son, is an architect residing in Seattle. Finally, Khris, his youngest daughter, is a ceramicist and cellist living in Los Angeles with her husband, Giro. She, Kan says, is the most talented in the family.

There's little time to reminisce for a person as energetic as Kan, who arranges his schedule according to the weather. If it's raining, he stays inside and works out designs, sometimes with the help of an apprentice, on one of his three drafting tables. If it's sunny, he sees clients or travels to his favorite arboretum, Planting Fields in Oyster Bay, Long Island, or he drives up to Shemin Nursery in Greenwich to select trees for his latest landscaping project.

"I used to work in an office," says Kan, "where I would be working on a project for maybe ten or twelve months. Then, one bright day, I looked outside." Being cooped up inside was never Kan's idea of a harmonious working situation but neither was becoming a professional landscape architect, a job which would allow him to enjoy the outdoors. He didn't want any part of it even though his peers kept pushing him in that direction. They knew he had a background in landscaping.

Growing up in Oakland, California, Kan and his brother worked in the family nursery. Kan was resident propagator in charge of tending cuttings in the greenhouses. At that time, there were no automatic misters. The Domotos' livelihood depended upon nurturing the cuttings. "If you weren't there to mist the plants," says Kan, "to keep them moist when the sun came out, you'd lose a whole year's crop. I wanted to go out and play, but you had to be around in those crucial moments. It was like being on a dairy farm. You have to milk the cow twice a day."

One day while leafing through *Coronet Magazine,* Kan read an advertisement about Frank Lloyd Wright's school, Taliesin. Architecture sounded like a good way to break out of the nursery, but plans for studying it were temporarily shelved. When he entered Stanford University, Kan signed up for math and physics, subjects in which he excelled in high school. Then, after two years, with the onset of the Depression, Kan returned home to work for his father. During that period, the Domotos lost their Oakland property, "the largest greenhouses west of the Mississippi." Luckily, however, Kan's brother, Toichi, had established his own in Hayward, California.

Seven years passed before Kan returned to college. By this time he had decided to study architecture and enrolled in the only school that had such a program, the University of California. During registration, the line at the architecture department was too long for Kan. While waiting for it to dwindle, he spied a shorter queue by the landscape department and quickly registered for one course. "It was a good thing," Kan says in retrospect, "that I signed up for landscaping."

Kan soon left the university to experience landscaping gardens firsthand at the Japanese Pavilion in San Francisco and then at the New York World's Fair. On his way back from New York, Kan realized the dream he'd had as a boy in his father's nursery—to study with Frank Lloyd Wright. After a year at Taliesin, Wright's combination home and apprenticeship school, Kan returned to the Hayward nursery to help his brother. Then came the War.

With its outbreak, the American government issued a directive that all Japanese and enemy aliens should voluntarily evacuate certain areas of the West Coast. After several weeks of bureaucratic confusion where refugees were turned away, out of fear and prejudice, from places purportedly ready to accept them, the Japanese were first removed to "reception centers" and thereafter relocated in one of ten internment camps farther inland. Kan spent the next two years interned with his family at the Granada camp in Colorado on the Arkansas border.

The Japanese carried a minimum of belongings with them to the internment camps—to live behind barbed wire in converted horse stalls at some camps, former pigpens at others, to undergo the degradation of communal showers and toilets. Some were lucky enough to leave their valuables with neighbors. Others resorted to government storage. Many had to sell their homes at drastically undervalued prices. Jobs were lost. Educations were postponed. The Domotos were more fortunate than most. They left the Hayward nursery in a trusted foreman's care.

"I don't want to talk about it," says Kan, "because people ask us, 'You're American citizens, why didn't you say something about your rights?' " But traditional old-country values such as conformance, fulfillment of duty to the community and obedience to parents and authority, and the influencial Japanese American Citizens League's (JACL) credo of loyalty and cooperation, combined to further an atmosphere of acquiescence.

Although a community spirit developed in the camps over the ensuing four years, they were not without internal turmoil. At Granada, Kan recalls, "Only one or two of us spoke up and said, 'This is unconstitutional.' And, it's a funny thing, we didn't back them, we who were college educated people. We thought those people were unreasonable." After two years, many prisoners were sent back to the West Coast. The camps were expensive to run and manpower was needed, especially in farming, to

(Continued on page 36)

Kaneji Domoto
(Continued from page 29)

help with the war effort. Perhaps, says Kan, the government realized the injustices and that their fears were ill-founded.

"I'd say ninety-eight percent of us would like to forget about it. We're guilty of not even talking about it to our children. Soon we found that our children were the ones who found out about it, delved into it and thought it was a wrong." For a long time Kan was reluctant to involve himself with JACL efforts to push through legislation on reparations but his daughter, Khris, convinced him. "Most of our children," says Kan, "were not financially able to carry out the political campaign. They had to depend upon us to go along and work on the project.

"At first I paid no attention to it but after Khris talked to me for awhile, I thought it was a just thing to vocalize and come out of the shell to make an affirmation on this. And that if we didn't, historically nobody would know what happened, that such things do happen in a democracy—even the best of democracies—and that other minorities should be alert, know how to handle it or know where to get help to forestall such a thing. It's political and you have to be politically astute to make any headway or you're just banging your head against a stone wall. Many of us have abhorred politics but now the Japanese Americans have become a great deal more involved." With pressure from Japanese senators, congressmen, mayors and councilmen and the JACL, the government enacted the 1980 Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians Act, a commission for which $1,500,000 was appropriated to hear the claims of Japanese citizens.

After the war, Kan never went back to work at the nursery. He came East to work as an architect for firms like Philip Johnson and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in N.Y. and Perkins and Wills in White Plains. In the late 40's, he was one of nine architects who worked on Wright's largest cooperative, Usonia Homes in Pleasantville. Wright worked out the site plans for the fifty-odd homes to be built there. Kan designed four of them—two framed in wood, another in reinforced concrete, and the fourth in steel, following the Wrightian conviction that form should follow function and that the exterior structure should be harmonious with the building site. Domoto, like his mentor who utilized building materials which contrasted in texture, combined aluminum and wood, translucent plexiglass and wood in his designs. At that time, the landscaping around Kan's four houses was done as "an afterthought."

When Kan finally broke out of the confines of drawing up plans inside for architectural firms into the field of landscape design, he traveled about the country laying the groundwork for Food Fair shopping centers. Increasingly, he turned towards landscaping corporate properties: the Neptune building in New Rochelle, the AMF Building and the original sine curves of Schulman's Corporate Park on Westchester Avenue, White Plains. His protege, Edmund DeLaurentis, who had observed Kan's work for twenty-five years and who is now considered one of Westchester's finest landscape-architects, completed the design work for Schulman's.

Over the years, Kan has been a fount of inspiration to many. From Bob Siegel, owner of one of Domoto's Usonian homes, who retired from his photofinishing business at age fifty to study architecture; to the penguins at the New York Aquarium on Coney Island, who began to multiply only after Kan designed their natural habitat.

But it was Betty Marcus of Pound Ridge who further enhanced Kan's flair for "organic architecture"—a term which Wright coined for unity of structure, site and decoration—nearly thirty years ago. When she asked Kan to design the in-ground swimming pool for her Scarsdale home, Mrs. Marcus already had the concrete poured and simply wanted someone to place rocks around it below the water level for a more natural look. This was the first of Kan's many indoor and outdoor pool projects. "It worked so well," says Kan, "that I've used her technique on swimming pools ever since." The Marcus' recently sold their home in Scarsdale purchasing sixty acres in Pound Ridge in addition to their home in Palm Beach. Kan will design their sixty-acre garden which will take two years to complete. Also on the boards is a Japanese Garden for the home of James Frankel, owner of La Samanna, on the French side of St Martin.

"When I do my gardens," Kan says, "I like to have permission from the owner to come in any time and see them. There's a Swedish sculptor, I know of, who has work in the American Museum of Natural History and all over the world. But, when he casts his sculptures, he always casts two of them—one for the client and one for himself. Well, I can't make two gardens. I make one for my client and I barely have one of my own, so if I want to see some of my own work, I have to maintain good relationships with the owners to walk in and see the gardens. And, I have some very good friends now who have my gardens."□

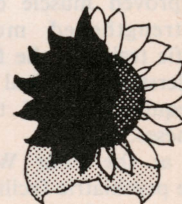
Spring Into Spring

- Packaged Seeds
- Perennials
- Annuals
- Vegetable Plants
- Fruit Trees

Free consultation with professional designer on premises. Bring us a sketch and we will help you plan a rose garden, flower garden, vegetable garden, rock garden, or redo a total landscape.

COOPER'S CORNER NURSERY

Garden Center



Mill Road & North Avenue
New Rochelle, N.Y. 10804
(914) 632-2647
Open Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.