

Temporal Architecture: Poetic Dwelling in Japanese Buildings

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A constant theme of modern Japanese architects is that Western architecture resists impermanence and aims to make buildings last as long as possible. On the other hand, Japanese architectural excellence is measured by a sense of fragility and ruination. Ironically, from a Japanese perspective, the will to permanence is what leads one to disaster.

Ando Tadao (1941-) writes in *Beyond Architecture*:

*Architecture is intimately involved with time. Standing amid time's continual flow, architecture simultaneously experiences the receding past and the arriving future.*¹

Kurokawa Kisho (1934-2007) describes the temporal dimension of Asian architecture with the slogan: 'Oriental cities have no squares or plazas while Western cities possess no streets'.

*The street has no clearly defined spatial function, but within the twenty-four hours of the day, it is at times used for private and at times for public activities. In that sense it is space without substance, space with many overlapping complex meanings. In the same way that sunyata is completely invisible yet possesses profound and dense meaning, so too is this 'street space' replete with meaning.*²

Sunyata is the Buddhist idea that ultimate reality is impermanence and lack of substantial identity. It is usually translated into English as 'emptiness' or

'void'; in Japanese, it is translated by *kū* which is also the word for sky.

In 1978, Isozaki Arata (1931-) organised an installation in Paris called 'Ma: Space-Time in Japan,' which was repeated the next year at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York. According to an article by Ono Susumu in the *Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms*, 'ma' is 'the natural distance between two things existing in a continuity'.³ But the same article also says the term means (1) a break or gap between things and (2) a pause or rest in a temporal succession. *Ma* is usually translated into English as 'interval' (literally, 'between the ramparts'), because this word equally applies expressions of space and time, but it fails to capture the Japanese sense of the unity of space-time. Isozaki himself usually uses the English word 'interstices' (literally 'standing in-between') because of its more positive connotation, but mindful of the Japanese connotations of 'break' and 'gap', he also uses the terms 'ruin' and 'rubble'. In common usage, it is the standard span between two pillars and the unpainted space of a brush-painting. It is a moment of silence in music and the pause before two swordsmen strike at each other.

When for Paris I proposed curating a show about the concept of ma, my concerns were various. ... I wanted to look into the deeper linguistic origins and later ramifications of ma—how the notion had been grafted onto both time and space when these elemental Western concepts arrived in Japan in the

*mid-nineteenth century. ... Was it really possible to translate this dualistic concept of ma to the language of speakers whose culture had two quite separate and unmediated concepts of 'time' and 'space'?*⁴

To realise his exhibition, Isozaki chose nine categories which were presented by an etymology of the key term, an installation by artists, designers and craftsmen and an ancient tale from Japanese literature. The narrative aspect is significant. Japanese architects often speak of the narrative of a building rather than its structure or form. In appraising a room, they think about the visitors passing from one room to another and what kind of story this passage will tell the guests about the inhabitants, the customers about the company and so on. They are also famously conscious of the play of sunlight and shadow, moonlight and gloom with the passage of time.

Purification and initiation

In 1993, on a moonless night during Japan's largest and most important Shintō festival, *Shikinen Sengu*, the sacred mirror *Yata no Kagami* was transferred in a shrouded portable shrine by hooded priests to a newly constructed treasury on a plot adjacent to the old treasury.

Afterwards, the old treasury was dismantled with the exception of the short 'heart pillar' over which the treasury used to stand. This was the 61st time that the ritual construction and deconstruction had been performed at the Ise Grand Shrine since the late 7th century. The mirror is one of the three regalia of the Japanese imperial line,⁵ and it symbolises the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu-Ōmikami*, the most elevated god in the Shintō pantheon.

The original motivations for this construction-destruction of the shrine are not recorded, but the website of the shrine explains that it is mainly a purification ritual and a means of sustaining traditional building practices. Nevertheless, this purification rite

probably harkens back to a more primary initiation rite. The Buddhas are ever watchful of this world, but the Shintō gods have to be roused to get their attention. As one approaches a Shintō shrine, it is customary to clap one's hands or rattle a bell for this purpose. In the pre-Buddhist age of Japanese nature worship, temporary shrines (*himorogi*) were constructed to summon the deity present in a stone, tree, pond or other feature of the landscape in order to offer prayers for a successful planting or thanks for a bountiful harvest. Even today, it is customary for the site of an ordinary construction project to be cleansed and prepared by the temporary erection of some sacred branches and the incantation of prayers by a Shintō priest.

Purification and initiation are among the oldest rituals by which humans have staked out the sites of human habitation. In legend and mythology, these actions were performed by heroic figures. The principal function seems to have been a harmonisation between the eternal, regular cycles of nature (e.g. the seasons) and the temporal, contingent incidence of these cycles (e.g. the arrival of the spring rains). Greek mythology has many stories in which a heroic figure rids the world of a monster but fails to initiate a properly sacred regime. Jason, Perseus, Theseus and Oedipus are all examples of this. The general lesson to be learned is that a purifying destruction must be complemented with an initiating construction. It is not enough to rid the past of mistakes; the clearing occasioned by the removal of monstrous aberrations must also provide the grace of mind to make good decisions about the future. Aristotle explains the mytho-poetic worldview by distinguishing these accounts from philosophic explanations in terms of two contrasts.

Some think that even the ancients who lived long before the present generation, and first framed accounts of the gods, had a similar view of nature; for they made Ocean and Tethys the parents of creation (geneseōs pateras), and described the

*oath of the gods as being by water, to which they give the name of Styx; for what is oldest (presbutaton) is most honourable, and the most honourable thing is that by which one swears. It may perhaps be uncertain whether this opinion about nature is primitive and ancient, but Thales at any rate is said to have declared himself thus about the first cause (prôtês aítias).*⁶

The first contrast has to do with the temporal sense of the two kinds of discourse. Aristotle says that names of mythic figures are invoked because they are 'oldest', whereas philosophers speak of 'first' causes. In both mythic and philosophic accounts, explanation depends on an appeal to the unconditioned, something that can change others but is not changed by others. In myth, the unconditioned is arrived at by working back from the present moment to the beginning (purification); in philosophy, the discourse works forward from the beginning (initiation). However, in practice, the difference is not so straightforward. The purifying power of myth depends on the poet or seer having an initial inspiration, while Aristotle usually finds it profitable to survey the positions of his predecessors. Thereby, Aristotle initiates his own discussion of a topic through a kind of purification of the tradition, and indeed, this is exactly what he is doing by contrasting the views of the ancients with the Ionian materialist philosophers and in turn subjecting this tradition to his own critical analysis.

Despite the intellectual purity of its foundation on the 'first', philosophy, as a historical tradition, is capable of making mistakes in its arguments which must be rooted out through analysis and judgment. In fact, Martin Heidegger points out that one of the fundamental sources of metaphysical errancy is the failure to appreciate properly the meaning of the 'first'. On the one hand, the 'first' may be thought as the beginning of a series: the 'arche', 'principia' or 'principle' of events; on the other hand, it may be thought as the leader of a procession, the law

giver: 'archon', 'princeps' or prince. In short, the *first* as a genuine origin (*Ursprung*) always functions simultaneously as both ground and order of beings. Metaphysical errancy arises when the origin gets separated into efficient and final causality.

Aristotle's second contrast claims that myth gives 'proper names' and explains things in terms of 'genealogies', while philosophy uses 'common nouns' and explains things in terms of 'causes'. Here, Aristotle is attempting to purge animism from the notion of causes.⁷ His arguments lead him to propose two kinds of causes.⁸ On the one hand, there are irrational, soulless sources which operate through oppositions that cannot inhere in the same thing at the same time. For example, a wholesome diet is capable of making a sick person healthy, but it cannot make a healthy person sick. On the other hand, there are rational principles which operate through contraries which can potentially inhere in the same thing at the same time. For example, medical science, through its expert knowledge of the body, is equally capable of causing health by developing a medicine or disease by making a biological weapon. These rational causes and principles are most evident in the productive sciences.⁹ For Aristotle, the mistake of mythic genealogies is to assert rational agency in cases which should be explained by efficient causality. He says that for purposes of 'persuasion or utilitarian expediency' myths attribute human or animal powers to natural causes.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there are enough cases of ostensibly natural causes which seem to exhibit the ambiguous double valency of rational agency, that is, one in which contrary powers are simultaneously present rather than mutually exclusive. This seems especially evident in architecture and city planning. We've all had the soul-enservating experience of being run through a modern grid of apartment blocks like a rat through a maze, despite the claim of these 'model communities' to super-rationalisation. On the other hand, experiencing the plenitude

of possible directions and encounters in a city like Venice seems to suggest that something else is at work. Martin Heidegger proposed a fundamental re-examination of this traditional understanding of design principles in two lectures given in 1951: 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' (*Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*), and '...poetically man dwells...' (*...dichterisch wohnet der Mensch...*).

Building and dwelling

On August 5, 1951, Heidegger delivered the lecture 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' to a convention of master architects and city planners. In the years just after the Second World War, Germany was faced with the enormous task of rebuilding cities that had been bombed by the Allied airforces: 2 million houses destroyed, 3 million homeless, and 13 million displaced as late as 1950. Given this situation, there was an especially pressing need to provide housing for the population in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. Heidegger took this opportunity to tell the architects and construction engineers gathered at the *Darmstadt Colloquium* that building was only incidentally a matter of enclosing space and devising construction plans.

He explained that the Old English and High German word for building (*bauen*) 'buan' is closely connected with the word 'to be' in usages such as 'ich bin' and 'du bist'. Further, he explained that the 'I am' and 'you are' in this connection mean to dwell (*wohnen*). The Old Saxon 'wuan' and Gothic 'wunian' that stand behind 'wohnen' mean not only to stay in one place, but to remain there in peace (*Friede*). In order to remain at peace, preservation and safety are important. From this, a dwelling place gains the meaning of shelter, something that saves and protects one from the elements and beasts. But peace is not simply a matter of physical well-being.

As early as 1925, in the *History of the Concept of Time (Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs)*, Heidegger had already explained that

'dwelling' has an important psychological dimension. He says that the archaic German word for 'domus' or 'house' is the same as the English word 'inn' and that this word comes from 'innan' which means 'to dwell'. 'This dwelling primarily signifies 'being familiar with' rather than anything spatial'.¹¹ In *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit, 1927)*, we learn that the experience of familiarity is most evident in our experience of instrumentality, where implements (*zuhandensein*) are simply used without much thought being given to the matter unless there is some kind of breakdown of intentional activity. Furthermore, this kind of Being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*) is fundamentally a matter of concern for (*besorgen*) and care of (*Sorge*) the Being of beings. Thus, dwelling has more to do with familiarity and preservation (*bewahren*) than with mere erection of shelters and interior spaces.

Heidegger's intent is to reverse the usual order of priority in production that has been dominant since Plato and Aristotle, that is: producers make products for consumers, for example, poets write dramas for an audience; architects design buildings for dwellers. In this model, responsibility for the presence of the work—and consequently, its reality—lies with the producer, since the author or designer actively imposes the structure or *eidos* on passive material [Plato] or the producer 'energises' the work (*ergon*) [Aristotle]. However, in Heidegger's view, this 'setting-the-work-in-motion' is dependent on a more fundamental activity of 'setting-the-work-to-work' that occurs in the maintenance and development of the building through dwelling. In short, rather than a manipulation of materials, design is a matter of letting the materials be released to the activity of dwelling.

As a concrete example of this, Heidegger points to a typical Black Forest farmhouse, where the maintenance of such a building over 200 years contributes much more to the architectural character of the building than the several months it took to

design and construct it initially:

[A]s long as we do not bear in mind that all building is in itself dwelling, we cannot even adequately ask, let alone properly decide, what the building of buildings might be in its nature. We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers.¹²

Nevertheless, scarcely two months later (October 6, 1951, at Bühlerhöhe) in ‘...poetically man dwells...’, Heidegger seems to argue the opposite:

[W]e think of what is usually called the existence of man in the term dwelling.

...dwelling rests on the poetic.

...poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling.

Poetic creation ... is a kind of building.¹³

Has he changed his mind? In the earlier essay, building is mainly thought as ‘designing and constructing’ in the mode of technological thinking, caught in the grip of the ‘enframing’ (*das Gestell*). In this case, it is necessary to turn the delusional aspirations of technological thinking back against itself, to make it confront human finitude. The perfectly planned communities envisioned by town planners must be checked lest society become as rigid as the concrete blocks used to construct the buildings. In the second essay, he is suggesting that dwelling can be a real ‘maintaining and preserving’ only if the dwellers have an active, responsible attitude toward the building, inspired by poetic voices that expand and break the measures of technological discourse.

But which comes first? Does one need an authentic (*eigentlich*) dwelling attitude in order to build properly, or a proper (*eigen*) building attitude in order to dwell authentically? Of course, in Heidegger, neither is first in the sense of beginning, middle and end. It is a hermeneutic circle. The question is how to leap into the circle in an appro-

priate (*Ereignis*) way. Already in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (‘Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, 1935’) Heidegger has raised the question of which side in the production process, the creating artists or the preserving public, is the origin of the work of art. It turns out that art itself is the origin of the work of art, which in turn is the decisive joint which cleaves creation and preservation.

The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people’s historical existence, is art. This is so because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical.¹⁴

Neither building nor dwelling is first, because both are equally an expression of the ‘first’ as a genuine origin: ground (*arche, principia*) and order (*archon, princeps*). Neither can be without the other and both occur in the event of art, which (1) startles a people (the artists as well as the public) as something ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘extraordinary’, (2) calls the people into an ‘open’ region of possibilities, and (3) simultaneously initiates a new historical order and leads the people toward their destiny.¹⁵ This originating role of art parallels the discussion of fear and anxiety in *History of the Concept of Time and Being and Time*, where the experience of ‘unfamiliarity’ is called ‘estrangement’ (*Umheimlichkeit*).¹⁶

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes human *Dasein* as generally absorbed in a pseudo-familiarity with things, living in ‘tranquilized self-assurance’.¹⁷ When *Dasein* comes face to face with its mortality, it is called back from an attachment to ‘curiosities’ by the experience of estrangement.¹⁸

Estrangement brings this entity face to face with its undisguised nullity, which belongs to the possibility of its ownmost potentiality-for-Being ... back to one’s thrownness as something possible which can be repeated. And in this way it also reveals the

*possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being.*¹⁹

In the terminology of the 1950s, authentic Being-in-the-world is called poetic dwelling. Here, 'poetic' does not mean something to do with literature; rather, it is an activity which underlies all of Aristotle's archetypal activities of productive science (*episteme poietike*): poetry, technology and cultivation.

This fundamental activity is 'taking a measure' (*Vermessung*). Heidegger explains that poetic measuring is not an attempt to capture the interval between two points. This kind of measuring is what technological thinking does by attempting to pigeon-hole everything into some kind of framework (*das Gestell*). Instead, poetic measuring is a spanning (*Durchmessen*) which stretches out the interval and blurs the boundaries. The argument of '...poetically man dwells...' is based on some lines from a late poem by Hölderlin, 'In Lovely Blueness.' Early in his career, at the time he was struggling to write the never-completed drama, 'The Death of Empedocles', Hölderlin rejected the possibility of synthesis between art and nature, mortals and divinities, the finite and infinite, but in his theoretical writings about the project of this drama, 'Procedures of the Poetic Spirit', he argues for another kind of resolution of these opposites:

*Place yourself, by free choice, in harmonic opposition with an extreme sphere, so as you are in yourself, by nature, in harmonic opposition (harmonischer Entgegensetzung), though in an unknowable way (unerkennbarewiese), so you remain in yourself.*²⁰

If the measure is unknown, mysterious, is our experience of place, building and dwelling thereby arbitrary? No, there is a sign by which its presence is made known. Hölderlin calls it 'kindness of heart' (*die Freundlichkeit noch am Herzen*). Heidegger equates kindness (*Freundlichkeit*) with grace (*Huld*) by way of claiming that Hölderlin means to trans-

late the Greek word *charis* (L. *gratia*) when he says 'kindness'. But Hölderlin's phrase is not simply 'kindness'; rather it is 'kindness of heart', which he intensifies with his peculiar German usage of '*am Herzen*' rather than the more usual '*zu Herzen*'.

In 'What is Called Thinking? (Was heisst Denken?, 1954), Heidegger translates the Greek word '*noien*' with the phrase 'taking-to-heart' (*in die Acht nehmen*).²¹ The translation of '*Acht*' as 'heart' would be somewhat surprising, except that Heidegger later in this work explicitly equates the two when he says 'nous means ... taking-to-heart' (*nous bedeutet ... sich zu herzen nimmt*).²² In other words, poetic dwelling cannot be understood by a logocentric framework, but it can be known as a noetic experience of kindness, friendliness, neighbourliness (*neahgebur*). Thus, Aristotle is correct in rejecting the early myth-makers for attributing a rational agency to natural events, but this may not be their poetic mission. Instead, the kind of measure-taking that poets do may be a noetic activity that speaks in poetic metaphors rather than rational analogies, because this is the only way that the unconscious experience of estrangement can be revealed.

Ruin and estrangement

In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake flattened much of Tokyo and Yokohama; 140,000 died, many because of the firestorms that broke out after the quakes. Twenty-two years later, American bombing raids incinerated as many people and eventually destroyed 50 percent of Tokyo, rendering millions homeless. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the atomic bombings were nearly as murderous in the initial attacks, but since nuclear radiation-related diseases continue to affect subsequent generations a final death toll is yet to be arrived at. Kyoto was scheduled to receive an atomic bomb because of its symbolic significance, but Secretary of War Henry Stimson took it off the list. He appreciated its world cultural value having honeymooned there several

decades before.²³

Whereas the US War Department hesitated, the Japanese development banks and conservative party have felt no such compunctions. Today, only fifteen percent of the wood and paper houses called *machiya* that defined the city of Kyoto before the Second World War are still standing.²⁴ For the most part, they have been replaced by Western-style office buildings and apartment blocks. This trend can be witnessed in all of the major cities in Japan. The new construction techniques and materials have allowed for more space to store the material gains of post-war prosperity. At the same time, these steel-framed concrete buildings are preferable because they insulate private life from the noise and pollution of the industrial powerhouse better than the old wood and paper, curtain-wall dwellings. The frenzy of building has transformed the way of dwelling, and the direction of modern life has reconfigured the urban and natural landscape.

This transformation is lamentable to Western tourists as it becomes ever more difficult for them to find the Japan that they expect to see. But for the Japanese, the question of restoration or modernisation was even more complicated than that faced by the German architects, engineers and city planners at the *Darmstadt Colloquium* in 1951.

For one thing, restoration would mean a repetition of an architectural style already unhappily infused with alien designs. In the first half of the 20th century, Japan's confrontation with the West and with Modernism was mightily contested, not only about which elements of Western architectural design to incorporate, but also concerning the origin and essence of Japanese architecture itself. In the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the leftist, internationalist line of Japanese architectural thinking had to cope with Bruno Taut's 1933 declaration that the Katsura Imperial Villa, the Kyoto Imperial Palace and the Ise Shrine exhibited the essence of Japan-ness in

architecture and simultaneously the ideals of functionalist modern design—an opinion later seconded by Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. On the other hand, the rightist, nationalist line organised under the imperial crest to expel Western influences from the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty sphere had to face the fact that Western technology in the form of fighter planes, battleships and mass-communication would be required to expel the Europeans and Americans from Asia. Isozaki Arata writes that Japanese architects came to see the question of tradition versus modernity as 'two sides of the same issue'.²⁵

*To us, such cities as were supposed now to be built had already decayed. The trauma of urban collapse had been so severe for us in Japan that we were uneasy in accepting urban reconstructions... Bringing the city to be constructed back to the city that had been destroyed emphasized the cycle of becoming and extinction.*²⁶

Despite Isozaki's connection of this sense of ruination with events of the 20th century, it really stretches back to the *Hojoki* (1212) of *Kamo-no-Chomei* (1155-1216), which thematises Being-in-the-world in terms of 'building' and 'dwelling'. The opening lines are memorised by every Japanese high school student:

*The streaming river
ever flows
and yet the water
never is the same.
Foam floats
upon the pools,
scattering, re-forming,
never lingering long.*

*So it is with man
and all his dwelling
places.*²⁷

*Yuku kawa no nagare
wa taezushite
shikamo moto no mizu
ni arazu
yodomi ni ukabu
utakata wa
kattsu kie katsu
musubite Hisashiki
todomaritaru tameshi
nashi
yononaka ni aru hito to
sumika to mata kaku no
gotoshi.*

These lines express the fundamental Buddhist idea that ultimate reality is transiency; rather than resisting impermanence, one should learn to accept and even appreciate it. The poem was written at a time when several great disasters destroyed Kyoto and decimated the population. These events serve as a backdrop for the steady decline in Chomei's personal fortunes. He began life in a well-placed family at Shimogamo Shrine (6th century), one of the most important in Kyoto. He enjoyed some success in poetry competitions and was favoured by the retired emperor Go-Toba (1180-1239), but when he was passed over for a position he desired at the age of 50, he decided to spend the rest of his life as a reclusive monk, living in a moveable mountain hut of his own design. Although extremely simple, measuring scarcely 10 sq. meters, it possessed the essential feature of the aristocratic residential design (*shoin-zukuri*): a *tokonoma* display alcove, built-in desk and shelves and *engawa* veranda.

The poem concludes with Chomei wondering whether his *fondness* for his simple mountain hut is not as great an error as his former striving to control one of the grand shrines of Kyoto. He wonders whether all his efforts to achieve non-attachment have only served to drive him mad.

In Sigmund Freud's essay on estrangement ('Das Unheimliche', 1919), which likely neither influenced Heidegger nor was influenced by him, the psychological details of the experience are elaborated more than in Heidegger's treatment. Following an insight of Friedrich Schiller, Freud explains how the German word '*heimlich*' can include the meanings of its apparent opposite '*unheimlich*'. The primary sense of '*heimlich*' concerns positive associations of homelife (familiarity and intimacy); however, the secondary sense of the word includes meanings such as secrecy, stealth, and estrangement, which is just what the word '*unheimlich*' means.

Freud explains that within the intimacy of family

life there are also secrets which must be kept from the outside world. In this way, the home is not only the place of the hearth and familiarity, but also the 'skeletons in the closet'. Family life is not only the source of the most intimate feelings of familiarity, but also estrangement. Freud's discussion in 'Das Unheimliche' is mainly intended to explain how modern, rational people can be frightened by horror or ghost stories. His answer is that irrational fears are hidden within the unconscious of a rational person.

Heidegger's view differs from Freud's in that the experience of estrangement and unfamiliarity is a precursor to authenticity or poetic dwelling occasioned by a confrontation with the fact of one's mortality or an artistic event respectively. On the other hand, for Freud estrangement is always co-present with familiarity; every creative act is permeated by a fundamental sense of ruination, or what he will call the 'death drive' (*Todestrieb*) one year later in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' ('Jenseits des Lustprinzips', 1920).

As Derrida points out in *Archive Fever*, every act of preservation provides the conditions for the destruction of what one is attempting to preserve because it is liable to transform a living experience into memory.²⁸ Once this occurs, the only way to move forward is through repetition, which provides the conditions for some misstep that is the only way that something new can occur.

*Of course, the unprecedented is never possible without repetition, there is never something absolutely unprecedented, totally original or new; or rather, the new can only be new, radically new, to the extent that something is produced, that is, where there is memory and repetition.*²⁹

In normal psychic life, this process of memory and repetition leads to wholesome results when some experiences (transgression, erotic desire, but also

ecstasy and rebellion) are recorded in a way that allows formal details to be forgotten; yet at the same time, allows psychic energy and tension to carry through to the next experience. For both Freud and Derrida, the introduction of destructive forces or violations of the proper order poses no threat to the unconscious because it does not think; instead it works.

We've all had the experience of entering hyper-rationalised places like hotel rooms. The logical and economic layout is all too familiar; in fact so familiar that it is alienating. One rushes to de-range the place by adjusting the curtains, re-orienting a chair, putting out one's own possessions. Only through this process of de-ranging the environment does it become familiar. Poetic dwelling is just as much a matter of making a mess as it is a task of straightening up.

Derrida explains that what repels us in such hyper-rationalised environments is the in-finite obsession with structure that occurs when memory (*mneme*) or the ability to remember (*anamnesis*) is supplemented by a memorandum, a notation, an aid to memory (*hypomnema*). Whenever any faculty of thought other than memory attends to a memory—reflection or naming, for example—the memory is transformed into a memorandum, the remembering becomes a notation. As memorandum, it is already something that memory is not, that is, something that can be completely forgotten.

For example, when a printed reproduction of a painting is used as an aid for remembering the painting itself, the experience of the painting can be forgotten. No reproduction, no matter how finely printed, can ever present the *luminosity* of a Vermeer or the *dynamism* of a Rothko. This forgetting can happen forwardly as well as backwardly when a genuine experience of any painting is pre-empted by a 'knowledge of art'. We know that many people pass through galleries as if they were

examination halls, delighted when they correctly identify a Courbet, disappointed when they get the date wrong. Finally, many museums are the worst enemies of art. Since paintings provide extraordinary experiences of luminosity and dynamism by tracing forms and colours on a canvass, it becomes important to preserve the canvass. This leads to the physical painting itself, perhaps worth more than the museum in which it is archived, being regarded as that which is possessed by the collection. The experience of luminosity or dynamism becomes secondary once the painting is established as an important work. Precautions are taken to keep the public at a safe distance and moving through the galleries in a timely fashion. The manifestos of most art museums proclaim themselves to be archives of cultural heritage and resources for education; few claim to be sites of visual ecstasy, but museums should be theatres not libraries.

Whether poetic dwelling is primarily a matter of being-familiar and preservation, or these two are essentially pervaded with estrangement and ruination is not something I wish to settle in this paper. Let it suffice to say that estrangement and ruination are the foundation stones of Japanese architecture. The main elements of traditional residential or commercial buildings are meant to provide experiences of ambiguity, transiency and asymmetry, for these are the true nature of reality and the ground of any possible transcendence of illusion.

Mystery and pathos

In early March of 1910, Nakano Makiko, the wife of a pharmacist whose shop was in the Gojyo pottery district of Kyoto, received a visit from the 'go-between' who was negotiating a wedding between a member of her extended family and a neighbouring family. The discussion was brief and so it took place in the vestibule (*genkan*) of her house. During the year recorded in her diary, Makiko received half a dozen such visitors on a daily basis and just as often paid visits to neighbours. Nearly all these

visits took place in the *genkan*; indeed, nearly all of the social intercourse of the household took place there. Only on special occasions, when a business associate or drinking companion of her husband, or a special friend or family relation was visiting from out of town, would the meeting take place in the drawing room giving onto the garden at the back of the house.³⁰

'*Genkan*' is composed of two characters, where '*gen*' means 'profound, abstruse, occult or mysterious', and '*kan*' means 'barrier, connection or turning point'. The range of senses of '*kan*' can be seen in other compound words such as '*nankan*' (difficulty, obstacle), '*kankei*' (relation, concerned with) and '*kansetsu*' (joint). Like the English word 'cleave', it means both 'join together' and 'separate'.

This is an example of what Kurokawa Kisho calls an 'intermediary zone', which according to him is the essence of Japanese, indeed, all of Asian architecture. In *Rediscovering Japanese Space*, he argues that Westerners construct buildings out of walls that clearly differentiate interior and exterior. By contrast, Eastern culture emphasises a 'gray area' where public and private life 'interpenetrate, exist in symbiosis and stimulate each other ... the concept of a clear-cut division between interior and exterior does not seem to have existed in the East'.³¹

At a minimum, the typical *genkan* has a grated, sliding door between the street and the *genkan* which has a roughly surfaced area at the same level of the street and a raised wooden platform which is separated from the interior by a sliding paper door or folding paper screen (*byoubu*). In a merchant house, the area ranges from 6 to 12 sq. meters. These may be augmented by additional gates, hedges or low walls in the street direction and a small *tatami* mat room (*deima*) beyond or to the side of the *genkan*. Various devices such as lattice frames or *noren* curtains are used to create asymmetrical lines of sight between the exterior and interior. All of these

devices are employed to construct an ambiguous 'intermediary zone' between public and private space. The *genkan* belongs to both worlds, which is shown by the fact that a visitor typically slides open the door, steps into the *genkan* and calls out: '*Gomen kudasa!*', (Excuse, me). The resident comes to the *deima* or raised wooden platform and greets the guest.

As in a Western vestibule or foyer, simple social transactions can be conducted in this space. What is remarkable about the *genkan* is that extended conversations can also take place, while drinking tea and snacking on cakes. In this case, the host kneels Japanese-style on the raised platform or in the *deima*, while the guest sits Western-style on the platform but with his/her feet on the lower area and shoes still on. This 'keeping one's shoes on' preserves a sense of transiency, that the visitor is about to leave, even if the two people spend quite a long time with one another.

Intermediary zones such as the *genkan* are required by Japanese social interactions because social life is determined by two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, there are powerful remnants of feudal stratification; on the other hand, there is an aesthetic taste for indirectness and ambiguity in social relations. Intermediary zones allow Japanese to leave the circumstances and discourse register of a social encounter undecided. If the visitor were to be invited into the deep interior of the house, a great many formalities would have to be observed. It would be quite burdensome for the inhabitant of the house to entertain the guest and the guest would feel uneasy because of the imposition. Social relations in the *genkan* allow for both familiarity and estrangement, intimacy and distance.

Whether or not one is in fact within a home is also ambiguous for the resident because interior and exterior are not defined by vertical walls. Tani-zaki Junichiro (1886-1965), in *In Praise of Shadows*,

written while he was trying to incorporate some modern conveniences into his house while retaining its Japanese aesthetics, says that the essence of a Japanese house is the roof (*yane*, literally 'house root').

*In making for ourselves a place to live, we first spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth, and in the pale light of the shadow we put together a house. There are of course roofs on Western houses too, but they are less to keep off the sun than to keep off the wind and the dew.*³²

Wherever the roof casts a shadow is part of the interior of the house. The eaves of a Japanese house have extraordinarily wide soffits, so the shadow extends some way into the street and garden. At the same time, 'in' in a Japanese house does not mean towards the centre; instead, 'in' is 'up' and 'deep back'. If the resident invites a visitor into the house, he/she says 'Step up' (*Agatte kudasai*), rather than 'Come in'. At this point, the guest removes his/her shoes and steps up to the raised wooden platform. But this is not the end of it. On the way to the deep interior, one is likely to 'step up' several more times. My house is a typical Kyoto merchant house. From the street, through the *genkan* to the dining room, there are four elevations; back to the most prestigious room, there are another three elevations; but at this point, one is at the veranda (*engawa*), another intermediary zone between the house and the garden. Thus, arriving at the ultimate interior, one is already passing out of the house into the natural world. Thus, we can say that 'in' is really to be in the shadow of the rear soffit with a view of the garden.

Thus, the feeling of 'being-at-home' (*Heimlichkeit*) depends on the season and circumstances, but most of all, it depends on a sense of indeterminacy and restlessness. Over the years, I have asked various guests to tell me when they think they are inside my house. Even the same person might give a different answer depending on the time of day,

season of the year or the reason for the visit. At the same time, this kind of ambiguity allows for a great sense of repose. One of the interesting features of a Japanese room is the flexibility of the space. Sliding paper doors and folding screens allow one to close off or open up the 'atmosphere' of a room, depending on how many people are to be accommodated. Rooms are not designed to contain the inhabitants and furnishings but rather to allow everything to be de-ranged until a harmony of relations is achieved. The *wabi-sabi* aesthetic of subdued tones and shadowy lighting that obscures the juncture lines of walls, ceiling and floor create a mysterious shadow world. Tanizaki explains:

*We do our walls in neutral colors so that the sad, fragile, dying rays [of the sun] can sink into absolute repose. ... A luster here would destroy the soft fragile beauty of the feeble light. We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface of a dusky wall, there to live out what little life remains to them.*³³

If there is an inner sanctum in a Japanese house then it is the display alcove (*tokonoma*), where the few objects of ornamentation of a Japanese house can be found. Usually, a hanging scroll and flower arrangement are placed in this alcove. Tanizaki says that it must be viewed in a very dim light so that the flowers will not look too garish in contrast to the simple black strokes of the calligraphy or painting. He praises the alcoves of the great temples of Kyoto and Nara, because 'we can hardly discern the outlines of the work; all we can do is ... follow as best we can the all-but-invisible brushstrokes, and tell ourselves how magnificent a painting it must be'.³⁴

Karatani Koujin writes in *Architecture as Metaphor*:

[I]n Japan, the will to architecture does not exist—a circumstance that allowed postmodernism to

*blossom in its own way. Unlike in the West, deconstructive forces are constantly at work in Japan. As strange as it may sound, being architectonic in Japan is actually radical and political.*³⁵

Instead of permanent structures, the emphasis has been placed on constructing spaces for transient, accidental encounters. Rather than building for the ages, the Japanese view has always been that it is better to be able to reconstruct quickly after a fire, earthquake or typhoon. Even today, some shopkeepers store a supply of pre-cut, pre-mortised timbers in another part of town, so they can be 'back in business in three days' if disaster strikes. And they are fairly certain that it will, since ultimate reality is transiency and permanence is benighted illusion.

Strangely, the myth of the origin of architecture given by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (c. 70 – c.15 BC) in his *De Architectura* also begins with an essentially tragic worldview. According to the myth, the impulse to build is deeply connected with an experience of destruction that is gained when a lightning strike sets off a fire that ruins the natural habitat of primitive humans. Of all the animals, humans alone return to witness the destruction. Remarkably, they find comfort in the warmth of the glowing embers and decide to throw another log on the fire. Due to their ability to manipulate the environment with their hands, this first act of climate control inaugurates the beginning of human culture. Language and the construction of shelters soon follow.

However, Vitruvius notes a second power of humanity. Because people stand erect, they are capable of gazing at the magnificence (literally, the great making) of the stars (*astrorum magnificentiam aspicerent*). This human capacity is the condition for any accomplishment in the technical mastery of materials. The hand may be the beginning of building, but the soul is the origin of architecture. The capacity for awe or wonder first brings humans back

to the site of destruction. The image of the magnificence of the stars inspires them to overcome contingency.

Exactly what is magnificent in the stars is open to speculation. It could be any one of the arts of the *quadrivium*: astronomy, arithmetic, geometry or music. For Vitruvius, astronomy is mainly concerned with making clocks, counting out the moments of time, an image of eternity to oppose to the destructive contingencies of earthly life. Arithmetic is mainly concerned with calculating costs and geometry is a matter of making accurate construction drawings. Music teaches the architect proportions and harmonies. Perhaps the first human to raise a roof was a Nietzschean inspired by an Apollonian dream of perfection, opposed to the Dionysian horror that individuation, identity and reason, can be and inevitably will be cast into the chaotic abyss.

In any event, Vitruvius declares that the essential elements of architecture are accommodation (*utilitas*), strength (*firmitas*) and delight (*venustas*), and the design criteria are order (*ordinatio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), proportion (*eurythmia*), symmetry (*symmetria*), elegance (*decorsitas*) and management (*distributio*).³⁶ It would be misguided to say that all of Western architecture conforms to the precepts of Vitruvius, but it is fair to say that Japanese architecture aims at the opposite, especially concerning the element of delight.

The basic Japanese aesthetic sensibility is expressed by the phrase *mono no aware*. It was coined by the greatest literary critic of the Edo period (1603-1867), Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and is based on two onomatopoeic exclamations, 'a' and 'hare', frequently used in the literature of the Heian period (794-1185) to express aesthetic delight. The phrase means a 'sensitivity to the pathos of things'. The famous example of this is the Japanese love of cherry blossoms, but Westerners should understand that it is not the blossoms in full flower, but the

falling petals driven like snowflakes by a last blast of Siberian wind that evokes the experience of *mono no aware*. Beautiful things are best when they are brief. Despite the fact that the falling cherry blossoms are a symbol of death, their appreciation is by no means a morose affair. Crowds gather after work to sit, eat, drink, sing and dance beneath the trees.

Initiation and purification, building and dwelling are the fundamental gestures that make possible all our ways of Being-in-the-world. In our daily life, we perform hundreds of heroic acts of preservation and destruction and thereby constitute a world that is both familiar and estranged. In the modern world, the destructive actions are often directed by a ruthless will to impose order through technological frameworks and a logocentric obsession to catalogue everything in an ultimate database. The resulting 'wasteland' of hyper-consumerism and throw-away products rendered obsolete every six months when a 'new' model comes out is just as omnipresent in the megacities of Asia as it is in the West. Nevertheless, there are still 'interstices' of traditional Asian culture, where another sense of ruination may serve as a way to transcend the dangers of global environmental and economic crisis. After all, the striving to accumulate ever more 'stuff' is ultimately a matter of fleeing from our own mortality. Ever higher and stouter ramparts to keep the barbarians out only increase the level of barbarity. Perhaps, following the example of Kamo-no-Chomei, we could learn to accept our own mortality and take delight in the passing of time. Things come and go. Any attempt to hold onto them is self-annihilation. Letting them unfold in the 'neither-here-nor-there' may be the best way to preserve them. Some final words from Hölderlin's 'The Journey' ('Die Wanderung'):

*If someone tries to grasp it by stealth, he holds
A dream in his hand, and him who uses force
To make himself its peer, it punishes.
Yet often it takes by surprise*

A man whose mind it has hardly entered.

*Zum Traume wirds ihm, will es Einer
Beschleichen und straft den, der
Ihm gleichen will mit Gewalt.
Oft überraschet es einen,
Der eben kaum es gedacht hat.³⁷*

Notes

1. Ando Tadao, *Beyond Architecture* (Tokyo/Osaka: Exhibition Catalogue, 1992), p. 110.
2. Kurokawa Kisho, 'Intermediary Space', *Philosophy of Symbiosis*, <http://www.kisho.co.jp/> [accessed 10 January 2007].
3. Ono Susumu, *Iwanami Kogo Jiten (Dictionary of Ancient Terms)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1982).
4. Isozaki Arata, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, trans. Kohso Sabu (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 93-94.
5. Besides the sacred mirror (*Yata no Kagami*), the other two are a sacred 'herb-quelling sword' (*Kusanagi*) and a 'comma-shaped bead' (*Magatama*). All three were supposedly given by the Sun Goddess to her grandson Ninigi-no-Mikoto when he descended from the Great Plain of Heaven to reign on earth.
6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983b25 ff.; all Aristotle quotations from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1968).
7. It should be noted that Aristotle is also keen to refute Plato's doctrine of a world soul.
8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1046b1-27.
9. A notable exception is the case of the 'first mover' (*proton kinoun*), the cause of the eternal circular motions of the planets, which is a rational principle. Having no magnitude, the 'first mover' cannot operate through local contact; instead, this principle functions as a final cause, that is, through the princely or leading function of first principles (*Metaphysics*, 1072b1-4).
10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1974b1-15.
11. Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U.P., 1992), Section 19.

12. Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), p. 148.
13. Martin Heidegger, '...poetically man dwells' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), pp. 214-15.
14. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), p. 78.
15. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), p. 75.
16. This word is usually translated as 'uncanniness' in both Heidegger and Freud, but 'canny' is connected with 'cognition' and is therefore inappropriate, since in Heidegger it belongs to *Befindlichkeit* (how-one-is) and in Freud it belongs to the unconscious. For this reason, I prefer to translate it as 'estrangement'.
17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 233ff., H. 188.
18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 320ff., H. 276ff.
19. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 333ff., H. 287ff.
20. Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Über die Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes', *Werke und Briefe*, V. II, eds. Friedrich Beissner and Jochen Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag), p. 671 (my own translation).
21. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 131.
22. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 204.
23. Edwin O. Reischauer, *My Life Between Japan And America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 101.
24. *Kyoto Journal*, no. 27, 1994, p. 7.
25. Isozaki Arata, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, trans. Kohso Sabu (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 12-21.
26. Isozaki Arata, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, trans. Kohso Sabu (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 88.
27. Kamo-no-Chomei, *Hojoki*, trans. and modified by myself based on the trans. of Yasuhiko Moriguchi and David Jenkins (Berkeley: Stonebridge Press, 1996), p. 13.
28. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 12.
29. Jacques Derrida, 'Nietzsche and the Machine,' interview by Richard Beardsworth, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 7 (1974), pp. 7-66.
30. Nakano Makiko, *Makiko's Diary: A Merchant Wife in 1910 Kyoto*, trans. Kazuko Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995),
31. Kurokawa Kisho, *Rediscovering Japanese Space* (New York: Weatherhill, 1988), p. 19ff.
32. Tanizaki Junichiro, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1988), p. 17.
33. Tanizaki Junichiro, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1988), p. 18.
34. Tanizaki Junichiro, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1988), p. 19.
35. Karatani Koujin, *Architecture as Metaphor*, trans. Kohso Sabu (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. xlv.
36. Vitruvius, 1.2.1: 'Architectura autem constat ex ordinatione, qua graece *taxis* dicitur, et ex dispositione, hanc autem Graeci *diathesis* vocitant, et eurythmia et symmetria et decore et distributione quae graece *oeconomia* dicitur'. *Perseus*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0072&layout=&loc=1.2.1> [accessed September 2002].
37. Hölderlin, Friedrich, 'The Journey', *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Oxford: Anvil Press, 1994), pp. 420-21.

Bibliography

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