

# A study on contemporary Japanese architectural design : ephemeral space and fragmented urbanity

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## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

The volume and quality of architectural production in Japan have long fascinated and puzzled all those who followed up the developments of this architecture in the past several decades. Recent events seem to reinforce such experiences. Building activity is extensive, while the variety of design encompasses the imaginable. Yet the striking phenomenon today is the speed with which the built environment, that is the city, is changing and in which architecture finds itself caught up.

No doubt, Japan has by now become a leading or driving force behind the fast growing worldwide network of our accelerated contemporary architectural production. As a result, it is now increasingly difficult even for the Japanese to define their own identity and the real nature of their culture. The raising question is to what extent it is still possible to talk about a specific Japanese architecture.

I tried, in this research, to unfold some of the hidden concepts of architectural design and urban environment in order to comprehend the causes of these architectural varieties and tendencies.

In Chapter 2, I started, as a reference point, by analyzing foreign reviews done by Western critics concerning contemporary Japanese architecture. I extracted some points of reference from their discovering, professional argumentation by going through the analysis done in three of the most famous architectural magazines: *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (France), *Architectural Design* (U.K.) and *The Architectural Record* (U.S.A.). These magazines offered a variety of levels of analysis concerning the subject. They were chosen for their widespread popularity and the various categories of their public target (students, professionals, critics, etc.). Also, they represent a western point of view, being American or European. The actual state of Japanese architecture revealed some variety and multiplicity of concepts emanating from a traditional embedded behavior and a respond to the changing urban environment.

In Chapter 3, I studied the actual state of Japanese urban environment, with all its fragmentation leading to confusion at first view. In order to do this, I drew some parallel concepts with the traditional Japanese understanding of urban space, which is still relevant today in many of its aspects. The main idea was to discover the hidden order behind the chaotic appearance of the contemporary Japanese architecture, which responds to the city structure and environment. The city interacts with people's culture, social behavior, economy, movement, etc., responds to them and offers them a frame of work. Architecture, in its turn, is the outcome of this interaction. Studying thoroughly, this apparent chaos becomes more understood. Beneath it lies a hidden order reflected by people's behavior and their social structure. The city becomes a temporal frame and architecture expresses that temporality.

In Chapter 4, the study of traditional rites (the *shimenawa* and the *Hakata Gion Yamakasa* festival in Fukuoka) revealed some certainties about the Japanese conceptualization of space, whether it is urban or vernacular, macro scale or micro scale. This helped us to understand more the hidden order, which is embedded in the social structure and the communities' activities. This behavior shapes the perception of space and human environment in Japan and, therefore, the expression of architecture.

When I first experienced the *Hakata Gion Yamakasa* festival in Fukuoka I was puzzled by this yearly event that makes people so involved. Every aspect of their daily life is suspended while this short event takes place. They become, and the place, detached from the actual configuration of the neighborhood and immersed in a different world. This world they create is full of memories, symbols, vivid colors, ceremonies in a theatrical attitude, and a high sense of order in the community. And during all this, the feeling of temporality is overcasting. Everything is built from temporal material, and all the energy fades away at the end, to restart the following year.

The comparative study between the traditional concepts and the actual state clear, to a certain extent, some of the ambiguity surrounding the understanding of contemporary Japanese design. This study might help to extract meaning-generating conditions shaping the built environment of the future in Japan.

Many researches have been done concerning Japanese architecture, the Japanese city (mainly Tokyo) and also the festivals. Links between architecture and the city seem a natural outcome and seem to consume a considerable amount of papers. The association between the city and the festivals is a logical one due to the obvious physical influence. As for the comparison and similarity of architecture with the festivals and traditional rites, it doesn't seem so evident. The relation being not physically visible, it is a conceptual and spatial relation. Very few researches have been done concerning this subject. Keeping in mind that the main target in this research being the analysis of architecture, an attempt to establish a relationship between all three phenomena, the city, the traditional rites and contemporary architecture, will be done.

The title, *Ephemeral Space and Fragmented Urbanity*, expresses the ambiguity of the identity of Japanese contemporary architectural design. Ephemeral space, or temporal space, is not seen in its materialistic built meaning. It is a feeling, specific to each architect, generated by various methods of design. It is also a general tendency in responding to the actual state of the city and its inhabitants. Fragmented urbanity reflects the feeling of chaos and disorder generated at first encounter with the Japanese urban environment. Throughout this research, an attempt to reveal a hidden order behind this chaos was made, and the prevailing feeling for the temporal, or the ephemeral, was overcasting.

The ephemeral has always been one main characteristic of Japanese concepts, going from things Japanese to religious philosophies. Architecture is no exception. The transient world in which eastern philosophies are embedded casts its spirit on many aspects of behavior and thoughts. However, the intent in this research is to analyze the temporal, of course, but also to see to which extent it defines new boundaries in design. Could it be a New World view, reaching further than Japan, extending to a new acceptable concept in this fast changing world that we live in? As everything is moving fast in our microchip technological age, ideas

are changing at such a great velocity that the built environment seems always hanging in the past. Could this ephemeral spirit in design be an acceptable one today and in the future?

I would like to point out that my main inspirations were researches done by Gunter Nitschke, Botond Bognar and Vladimir Krstic, among others. These are scholars who have lived in Japan for a long period of time, and whose researches answer many of the questions we, foreigners, raise when we try to understand the complex attitude of Japanese design.

Generated strategies by many architects will be developed in trying to understand the actual state of Japanese architecture. Some of these strategies, or concepts, are mutually exclusive, while some are closely related to others. That is to say, they reveal continuities. As each strategy is not conceived in a 'formula' type, it could not fall under a specific category or in a single chapter. Being interrelated, the examples, especially architectural works in Chapter 3, are discussed separately in the synthesis.

Throughout the text, The quotations in the texts are of two kinds: "...", which quote an author or a borrowed expression, and '...', which is a stress on certain expressions of my own.

Japanese names are usually written with the family name first. But in this research, in order to avoid confusion we will use the western order; the family name follows the given name.

Words written in *italic* are Japanese words written in Roman letters.