

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

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CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUSION

Japan eagerly embraces the 21st century and forges an architecture of transition, which is the expression of a technological, consumer society. Japanese architecture is inviting, fascinating, diverse, free in spirit, responsive to nature, and rich in emotion. Nevertheless, it is not always understood or assimilated correctly by visitors or observers abroad.

There are, perhaps, good reasons why the new Japanese architecture cannot easily be assimilated abroad. This is because it expresses a specific response to Japanese society. So it was clear that in order to understand the physical appearance of Japanese architecture we had to study concepts influencing it: the city and the traditional thoughts carried on.

In Japan, the age of the ephemeral building has dawned (again). Ephemerality also stimulates inventions and freedom and a shift away from the monumentalism of the past.

As Koji Taki explains: “Ephemerality, if taken in a positive sense, never means that architecture is short-lived, but new meanings are perpetually emerging.” In such ephemerality, in relation to the perpetually emerging meanings, there emerges a new space as well. This space comes into being as a result of human actions, events and various phenomena occurring. Space here not merely responds to phenomena but it becomes the phenomena themselves. This is a space that is evoked and is both phenomenal and illusory.

Yet there is a deeper meaning, a reference back to the ‘floating world’ of fashion, which hides deeper truths, and an implied inquiry of the consumer society. A whole new way of critical thinking is a condition to an understanding of Japanese architecture today. Impermanence is the essence of Japan today.

By the words of Toyo Ito: “I believe architecture today must reflect the city called Tokyo. Right now, in the Japanese city, life and architecture itself are gradually losing their reality. They are not down-to-earth. I often use the word ‘floating’ not only to describe a lightness I want to achieve in architecture, but also to express a belief that our lives are losing touch with reality. All of life is becoming a pseudo-experience. This trend is being encouraged by the consumer society, and architecture itself is rapidly becoming image- or consumption-oriented. This is a matter of grave concern to the architect yet, at the same time, architecture today must be made to relate to this situation. This is the contradiction we are confronted with.”

The new architecture in Japan looks beyond contemporary society. Its obsession with the ephemeral represents a vision of man and nature, which is a central theme in the new global architecture. It invites us to redefine the relationship between the world of nature and the world as created by mankind, which should be the central concern for humanity at the beginning of the 21st century. Japan offers a view of the architecture of the future: now.

Let’s recapitulate what we have discussed so far:

There are traditions that are both visible and invisible, the religion, philosophy, aesthetics, lifestyle, customs, psychological environment, emotional sensitivity and a sense of order are all clearly characteristics of the people and their culture, but they remain invisible, an intangible tradition. In contrast, architectural style, works of arts and traditional symbols and forms are given expression in concrete objects such as roof shape, decorative element and traditional performing arts, and these forms are a visible tradition. The Japanese traditions, compared to those of western societies, tend to place more value on the invisible tradition.

The combination of great wealth, the newness of the city's fabric and the near certainty of its destruction give the life and culture of the city a sharp emotionalism. Disasters precipitate drastic change. Trends that would normally take decades to mature are realized overnight. And the absence of older buildings, which means the absence of context in which a building has to fit, allows the significance of new buildings to receive the most imaginable expression in their design.

This temporality is not physical, meaning something that is short-lived and easily amended or added to, but something that is off-center, an architecture that purposefully rejects consistency. All of these represent temporality in a large sense. Life is defined as the process of continuous growth, both dynamic and stable.

Where the outline is clear, a distinct form emerges that possesses a certain artistic quality. Where the outline is unclear, form is random or amorphous, like a spontaneous organism or the branching of a tree. If there is a hidden order in such amorphous shape, then it cannot be said to be complete chaos, and architecture and cities characterized by it have a potential not sufficiently appreciated until now.

The coming 21st century will be an era of sophisticated technology. It will be necessary to lay optical fiber and lines for the information network system beneath the streets in our cities and to channel them to every part of our buildings. Perhaps we will all be compelled to re-evaluate the merits of the changeful character of Japanese cities.

It is certainly true that Tokyo is chaotic and lacking in artistic coordination as well as clear identity. Nevertheless, a tremendous urban population has managed to live in relative harmony, and has been responsible for achievements in economic development that have astonished the world. Cities in the West may give more priority to form than does Tokyo, but with its concern for content Tokyo thrives according to an order hidden within chaos. If there was no such order, how could the citizens of the world's second largest city lead the lives they do in such reasonable comfort?

In architecture, this decentralization and absence of a center or unique landmark sets new values. These values move towards the ephemeral. People's memory becomes more important to satisfy than the locale, or the physical space, itself being defined by people's activities rather than their visual order. Again, architecture responds to this further and goes on in fragmenting the city landscape and detaching itself from any visual and central order. It floats over the city and denies it any imposed restraints, thus becoming again a free-spirit architecture. A spirit because the physical body and material are ever changing in an ever-moving city

The urban realm now functions as a kind of large common living room of the citizens, where the city appears to have no exterior. This city being always on the move, restless, has

minimized the traditional notions of permanent residence and home whereby it can be considered as a continuously temporary “camp of urban nomads”. The fast changing urban realm as a point of convergence where the life of people is in flux and where the physical, spatial and formal permanence of the environment tends to lose its meaning.

In the fiercely competitive environment, profitability demands the continued attention and attraction of both the public and the media; therefore newness and imaging are often primary criteria in commissioning new edifices. Hence architecture and urbanism tend towards the quality of changeable signs and advertising, whose strategy of fascination is to exploit human desires. The ultimate purpose is to turn people into consumers who are irresistibly attracted to commodities.

Lightness, permeability, fluidity of space, a feeling for temporality and an ‘immaterial evocation of building’ characterize contemporary Japanese architecture. This is related to a new interpretation and application of technology, different from the idealized one, upon which Modernism was built. The reliance on new technologies has begun to disclose a new technological landscape

Now we have a new generation of architects like Toyo Ito and Itsuko Hasegawa who were born in Tokyo and have spent their whole life there. For them the artificial things like technology or concrete are nature. Actually the massive concrete city looks like a new mountain or river, and that is why the new tendency of the younger generation is easily making a high-tech architecture as second nature or their own nature.

Finally, these few interpretations should be made:

The space that we encounter in Sejima, Ito, Hara, and many others’ examples discussed in this research, is thus not a real space; first, it is only an imminent space, and with action or events arising, it is a space by performance.

1. The city, being a provisional domain, shows confusion and fragmentation. Yet, behind this chaos there is an order in the social structure and a certain adherence to the past traditions.
2. The fear of destruction due to repeated disasters and change strengthens the feeling of temporality and makes architects think of the future in its conceptual form rather than its physical permanence. The absence of a directory landmark gives no physical reference to the past.
3. The tradition of Edo, being a fragmented city viewed as a conglomeration of different towns is carried on in Tokyo today, as a modern version of *Meisho Sugoroku* game. The absence of a coherent system loosens the ties on architects and they tend to fragment the system further.
4. The age of signs, media and technological games is reflected in architecture. It responds to the consumer society by projecting this feeling into the construct. Architecture becomes the sign and technology is used as a mere sign language with no intention to forward a statement.
5. The similarities with nature are an escape and at the same time a return. An escape from the consumerist society that became a void technological expression, and a return to

mother nature through the use of the same technology as a mean to evoke images of nature.

6. Contemporary Japanese architecture is characterized by lightness, permeability, fluidity of space, a feeling for temporality and an immaterial evocation of building, reflective of the traditional idea of *shimenawa*, the tying of the sacred rope.

In this fast running of ours, we find that ideas change in a dramatically accelerated pace. Architecture and cities find themselves lacking behind these ever-new ideas. The new spirit of experimentation and the feeling for temporality in Japan could reveal to be something heading towards the future.