

Disruption in Tradition and Contemporary Japanese Architecture.

Research to aid in the design of the design projects "*The Artist Path*" and the "*Coffee Temple*".

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1. Abstract

There is the rough simplicity but a golden-red intensity in Japanese architecture. An architecture that speaks of the individual, of solitude, and one that vibrates with the united spirit of the people. Such contradictions are patterns that are not only seen through architecture, but in every cultural aspect of Japan. Japanese religion, politics, and philosophy, are all a proof of the constant struggle of a nation who roots in tradition, but is overwhelmed by its own international interests, and visitors with hopes of spreading their concepts into this unified nation protected by the sea. Throughout its long history dating back to 10,500 B.C, Japan has been overcome by a conflict between nationalistic and welcoming sentiments. An isolated island, Japan takes pride in its seclusion and highlights its traditions in the many aspects of its culture, including its architecture. Still, the influence of Japanese military intervention in China and South Korea led to the adaptation of architectural innovations and styles from these two countries into Japan's own. The west also had its contaminating force in Japan, being that the very term "architect" originated in the west. This paper explores the tension between tradition and adaptation to surrounding environments, in a country overwhelmed by nationalism, imperialism, and foreign intervention. Sources such as *Material and meaning in contemporary Japanese Architecture: Tradition and Today*, by Dana Buntrock, and *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, by Kenzo Tange, exploring the different turns that Japanese culture took as a result of international influences, will be used to analyze this subject.

2. Background Investigation

Beginning with the earliest form of Japanese architecture, the Jomon huts were created as a reflection of hunters and fishermen. Homes were built of humble materials such as clay and wood, and its appearance was far from the modern concept of sophistication and fine. These were homes of workers, those who had been only slightly affected by any outside influence at that time. Little remains of Jomon items and architecture, still, it can be inferred that they were primitive people with little thought of aesthetics and systematics, but rather of “vital pulsations of life...along with a strong sense of space and volume”¹. With the upcoming Yayoi period, the rough and organic were replaced by an elitist architecture, less concerned with humility. This was a period of high efforts to control nature and ease man-to-earth interaction. The aristocratic class gained influence and continued on through the Heian period, in which the natural re-gained its influence but instead of being interpreted through crude forms, it was abstracted poetically by the higher class. This led to the creation of open homes, and the tradition of Japanese gardens, displaying the seasons and celebrating nature elegantly. Eventually, a Japan that celebrated classism began to be replaced by Jomon ideals around the middle age. This time the lower class began to regain its influence, simple merchants acquired wealth and brought vibrancy into the refined aesthetics that had taken over the country. From the middle age, the concept of empathy to the poorer class led to a rise in popularity of the Japanese tea ceremony. A tradition that celebrated the pouring of tea, rather than the elegance of tea-wear and tea houses. Throughout this time the trend of a humble tea ceremony created an architecture of farmhouses and small tea gathering spaces, that celebrated the “unconscious vitality of the Jomon”¹.

Some may identify the Jomon huts as the true traditional architecture. Yet when temples, shrines, Japanese homes, and other “traditional” architecture associated with Japanese culture comes to mind, they only slightly resemble these primitive structures. This is because Japan has been overwhelmed by an integration of foreign culture into their own. Looking at the dynamic aspects of shrines, as well as the

technologic and capitalist environment of modern Japanese cities such as Tokyo and Osaka, it is hard to refer to them as humble and sensitive to the “peasant class”. The shift from the “original” tradition dates to the introduction of agriculture by the Chinese. Not only did they introduce such technology, but also spread their concepts of religion and aesthetics throughout Japan. The use of red, gold, and raised structures to represent power, for example, are all influences of the Chinese impact in Japan. The dynamic style was present even with the introduction of the western concept of architecture by the Europeans in the Meiji era. Students of the subject learned of classical architecture, and European styles such as the baroque. It was only until after and during the World War II that nationalistic sentiments increased. The population began to look to the past, to the archaic Japanese architecture of the Jomon people. Post-war architects took advantage of the new and universal technology that grew exponentially in Japan, as a method of aiding the come-back of an architecture that was crude and simplified. These ideals were translated to follow the present wealth of Japan, “no matter how much money has been spent on it, and no matter how luxurious...it may not give the impression that it is different from the way of life and characteristics of the general multitude”². A time of reminiscing the past, combined with modern and globalized western culture, further categorized Japan as a traditionalist society that has been engulfed by the foreign.

This battle between two sentiments, a global v. a nationalistic, does not occur for the first time in the post-World War II period. Such trend can be seen repeatedly throughout Japanese history. Before the Meiji era, during the Tokugawa period (Edo), nationalism was alien. Japan was divided and a sense of national unity was not present. The people dreaded military take-over and a dominant ruler, instead, an emergence of several powerful clans became the norm. This allowed for greater acceptance of outside forces, including Chinese intervention, “Painting had both Chinese and Japanese styles. Poetry was written in both languages. And if Chinese was the language of most government documents, Japanese served for the more popular form of prose”. During this time, the boundary of what was a Japanese tradition, as opposed to Chinese tradition was indistinctive. This led to future conflicts between the two

states, regarding who were the true originators of their practiced tradition, including the battle of which nation originated the concept of Tao, or “*The way*”. The Japanese gained so much influence from their bigger and leading neighbor, that they began to appear inferior to the sophisticated and advanced culture of the Chinese. Thus, beginning with the Meiji era, things began to shift to fit into nationalistic sentiments, and the view of a single powerful nation-state.

Imperial power, and Shinto beliefs gained strength throughout the Meiji era. The emperor, and the Shinto religion being the “true” Japanese, were advertised by the government as a way of increasing sentiments of loyalty towards the nation. This did not last, as the Japanese people were not welcoming towards an overbearing ruler and all-powerful gods used as tools to control them. Oppression was felt by the massive and upcoming peasant class, who began to revolt against the *samurai* class, a military and strong group of people who were not representatives of the country’s bulk. The discontent however, was controlled by the government as attention was drawn towards imperialism, and Japanese propaganda referring to Korean government as “stupidly unprogressive”³ and the Chinese as “viciously reactionary”³ directed public interest to outside conflict. This resulted in the Sino-Japanese war, which not only involved China and Korea, but also gained the involvement of Russia, officially spoiling Japanese isolation. The complications of the war made it difficult for the Japanese population to support its efforts, and soon inward discontent grew once more. This dissatisfaction with the system of the national government was turbulent for the years to follow. With shifting sentiments of the concept of nationalism, western foreigners and their technological advances could install themselves into the country. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, the west was welcomed in Japan, as its people accepted their innovations, as a way of progressing the country. It was not until WWII and the years after, that Japan regained national focus and began to highlight its own tradition and uncover the “*Japaneseness*” that had been lost through the imperialistic, and globalization efforts, that swarmed the country’s history.

The modern-day efforts of Japanese architecture is a combination of eastern architecture that was introduced after the archaic period, the archaic period itself, and western practices. Beginning in the

20th century architecture was inspired by “achromatism achieved by unpainted natural materials, modularity in a clearly articulated and simple structure”². The public had felt the need to prove their cultural richness, a richness that was powerful but never exposed to the rest of the world. Participating in several expositions around the world, including The New York World’s fair of 1939, Japan displayed structures that resembled Shinto shrines, and other long-established designs. What soon followed was a shift in the architecture education in Japan. Instead of the teachings of classical architecture the new schools of design focused on the history of the country; a history that had undergone several twists and undertaken a great force of outside “intrusion”.

3. Comparison of Sources

A tradition of changes and contradictions defines Japan’s architectural history. What is really celebrated? Is it simplistic, dynamic, raw, perfect, one with the natural surroundings, or controlling of it? Japanese tradition encompasses all. A constant internal conflict of whether it wants to be an introvert or become a part of the global scope. What is Japanese is not obvious. Shinto, of Japanese origin, stood closely to Buddhism, introduced by Koreans, in Chinese Confucianism stood the Japanese Bushido. The highly decorated shrines do not resemble the humble shelters of the indigenous people, but rather of the lavish Chinese architecture. Trains, advertisement overload, and influential buildings by western architects such as Anthony Raymond, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright, were welcomed and encouraged by the Japanese throughout much of the 20th century. Yet, Japanese connection to the ground never ceased to exist. In contemporary Japanese architecture there is a clear reference to the raw architecture of the Jomon people. The sloping and overbearing roofs of the 1997 Fuku Akino museum is hints at the primitive huts. The Japanese custom of blurring the boundary between the outdoors and indoors within homes is done also by famous architects such as Kengo Kuma with his design of the 2005 Lotus House. This close connection to the elements goes back to the building pillars of Shinto, a Japanese religion. An originator of its own traditions, and adaptor of foreign ones, Japan blooms in the creation of an unusual mix of external and native culture and architectural styles.

The Japanese were welcoming to the Chinese and extremely adaptive to its writings, art, architecture, religion, and overall customs. The technology of agriculture completely shifted the Japanese nomadic and earth-oriented culture, changing the architecture from passive and wild-like huts to a more sophisticated elevated structure. The Chinese introduced poetry, art, and shared their very own political system. Japan also formed close ties to the peninsula of Korea, which first introduced them to the Buddhism in 552 CE ³. Eventually there was a re-introduction of an awareness towards the soil and the elements into the sophisticated; as it was important to the Chinese Buddhist religion as well as to the Japanese Shinto (that can date back as far as the Jomon period). Not only did the Japanese welcome these outside forces but also mixed it into their own customs and beliefs, creating future conflicts; arguments of which nation was the true originator of concepts and traditions ⁴. The answer to that is not a question of major importance when analyzing the contemporary environment of Japan. Although Japan carried these Chinese and Korean influences, it embodied it into its own indigenous habits creating a new “traditional”. Which is why Japanese Buddhist temples have vestiges of Shinto beliefs, the tea ceremony is practiced just as it is in China, but in more modest ways¹. The tea ceremony becomes inattentive to opulence, and references to the Japanese blue-collar class, a class of popularity and abundance since the beginning of its civilizations. This happens again with the introduction of the western culture in present-day Japan. Although fast and vast transportation, efficiency, production, and the essence of capitalism, belongs to the western ideals, its modern cities are infested by such elements. Not only have the Japanese adapted to the ways of the west, but they have taken it to an extremity not seen in the west. So much so, that as one walks the streets of Tokyo, it is impossible to not come across a screaming advertisement or tall office towers packed with profitable workers.

Adaptation did not come without questioning, there has been a quest to find national identity that can be seen even through the Heian period. Before this time and after the introduction of outside technology, Japan had turned its back to much of the simple earthy qualities of the prehistoric period. Much of the architecture revolved itself around Buddhist ideologies and temples enjoyed an increase in

attention. Intricate worship places were raised such as the Kon-dō and pagoda at Hōryū-ji, a pagoda of three sloping roofs, raised on a platform, painted in gold, a space worthy of godly presence. With the upcoming Edo period the heavenly shrines continued to be built, yet, there was a common belief between the Shinto and Buddhism, its worship of the elements. As a result, Buddhist ideologies shifted to encompass the native Shinto. This was a way of the Japanese to celebrate their own creations rather than those introduced by the Chinese. Specially since the Chinese began to acquire a negative image, as a culture that believed themselves to be superior to that of the Japanese. It is not hard to imagine why the Japanese would take that personally, as they had their own religion, practices, and art, even before Chinese intervention. In the meiji period the farmhouses gained popularity as nationalistic sentiments grew. The farmhouses of course, were directly associated with the original Japanese hunter, fisherman, and farmers. It was the architecture of the people, at a time in which the people were not happy with all the intervention of the west in the Edo period and of their neighbors in the times before. Every time in its history, that an outside force shifts Japanese tradition, an urge to protect its own is soon followed. This happens in the Heian period, the Meiji, and again in the post-WWII period. After the western take-over in the late 1800's and early 1900's, the need to return to early and familiar roots was not unexpected. With the creation of the classical-style buildings such as the Kyoto National Museum, The Nakanoshima Library, and the National Diet Building, came the works of the Sea Folk museum, the Nago City Hall, and the Soda Pop Spa by famous architect Terunobu Fujimori.

The new architecture of Japan underwent several of its own shifts, but this time, architects began to consider Japan's own history and take inspiration from the already existing. The previous conflicts between nationalism and acceptance were the driving forces of the architecture and culture in Japan. In modern days architects such as Fujimori, Kuma, Tadao Ando, and Fuku Akino, constantly reference Japan's history, whether of "pure" Japanese descendance or not. Although Chinese-style temples are not native, it shaped much of the environment and introduced elements that have since become Japanese in its own terms. The Nago City hall uses reds and timber connections, animal sculptures, and

an “excessive” decoration for the modern taste. This project and has the splendor of an old Japanese structure that underwent an undeniable Chinese influence. The Izu Chohachi museum on the other hand, is as moving, and dynamic as it gets. The landscape makes reference to a Japanese stone garden. But when looking upon the façade of the building, a very strange image comes to mind, the view of a cupola and six white columns at its entrance welcoming the visitors. The clear use of classical elements end there, as this feature is squeezed by two massive walls with a single opening at its top and a few curving features. A wall that has mix of minimalism with dynamic lines that is often seen in American architecture, accompanied by an entrance that appears to have lost its context, clearly belonging in the streets of northern Italy. The Chuta Ito’s 1935 Yushima Seido has a roof commonly used in Confucian styled buildings such as temples. The Nago City Hall, as well as the Izu Chohachi museum, and the Yoshima Seido all speak of a corrupted tradition. These projects are undeniably Japanese, but only because of the past and reoccurring sentiment of welcoming and use of foreign styles.

Still the purity of the original vigor and feeling of strong relation to the natural world, has resisted through the long years of Japanese history, from the Jomon people, to the modern society. The rawness of concrete, aging wood, stones is still celebrated. The cracking, breaking, aging, and destruction is still praised. Architects created movements such as “metabolism architecture” that although belonging to the category of new and unforeseen, it rested on the basic beliefs of direct connection to the patterns of nature. Recent projects such as The Soda Pop Spa by Fujimori is rough and can be described as “shaggy and bristling, humorous and grotesque, uncanny and vaguely obscene”. Even the sketches made of this project appear primitive and simplified. Its elongated roofs and use of native woods give it a raw characteristic. Undeniably *Jomonesque*. Even seemingly un-Japanese structures such as the Jun Aoki’s Aomori Museum of art. Stripped of pitched roofs, elevated structure, and decoration, is the very definition of Japanese ideals. A minimalistic structure that is directly connected to the ground, as the soil is manipulated to become spaces. A roof spreads over the soil, repeating and reacting to its every move. A tie to the ground, exposure to the elements, and simplicity of the Japanese way.

4. Conclusion.

Quintessentially Japanese. It is unclear whether it exists in architecture today. Originating with a primitive people who had not the advancements of technologies such as agriculture, the Japanese have evolved beyond to becoming one of the largest hubs for innovation. But within those early tribes, began the close and unbreakable connection of the Japanese people to the beautiful surroundings that engulf the country. Lasting past the Yayoi period, the Heian and the Meiji period, standing to this day, is the sensitivity towards a humble architecture and of the “untamed force, with a barbaric earthiness, and an intuitive grasp of reality”². Spaces are driven by natural forces, not systematically organized. The elements, the ground, and the trees, were the original shapers of Japanese architecture. An attention to the virtues of their surroundings and a religion that praised such virtue allowed for the creation of structures that submitted to the elements. Structures that encouraged and understood ephemerality. World War II destroyed much of Japan, but the Japanese understood destruction to a higher degree. Years of coping with natural decay of everything that lives, allowed for flourishing even through piles of rubble and dust. Is this quintessentially Japanese? Fast, mixing, moving, ecstatic, brilliant opulent colors, and imperial palaces still fall under this category. They follow nothing of the earth, and care not to be shaped by the natural elements. They are sophisticated and well-planned. The Katsura palace for example, a traditional and old Japanese palace, originates from the “aristocratic tradition”¹ introduced by outsiders and embedded into Japan’s architecture. The vertical cities of Tokyo and Osaka pulse with capitalistic efforts. Shortly after the Jomon people, came the Yayoi people fixated with an “accommodation to nature and the increase of aesthetic order...[leading] to a diminution of vitality”¹. This is also Japanese. It is Japanese in the sense that its people had an eagerness to incorporate these unknown elements into their stillness. As noticed every period of nationalism was followed by a period of imperialism, which was followed by the desire of isolation. The political pattern of Japan is a direct reference to the cultural pattern. Which is why although the Katsura palace shows grandeur, it also “embodies something of the plebeian tradition”. It is the perfect example of the colliding tendencies of the

Japanese people. Tradition in contemporary Japanese architecture creates a diverse landscape, being shown through grand and sophisticated projects by Kuma and Fujimoto, but also through minimality and purity seen in Jun Aoki's Aomori Museum of art. The disruption of tradition and constant battle to re-gain identity have created the juxtaposed environment of a quivering city accompanied by a silenced farmhouse.

Endnotes

¹ Gropius, Walter, and Kenzo Tange. *Katsura*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1960.

² Buntrock, Dana. *Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Japanese Architecture Tradition and Today*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013.

³ Conroy, Hillary. "Japanese Nationalism and Expansionism." *The American Historical Review*, 1955.

⁴ Beasley, W. G. "The Edo Experience and Japanese Nationalism." *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 04 (1984)