Changing Interpretations of Otherness in English-Language Accounts of Japanese Architecture

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys foreign accounts of Japanese architecture published in English from the reopening of Japan in the 1850s up to the year 2000. It shows how European and American perceptions of Japanese buildings evolved from initial dismissal, through acknowledgments of merit, to positive admiration in less than fifty years. It is suggested that the consistent thread running through these shifting interpretations was an assumption of the inherent otherness of Japanese architecture, but that the nature of this perceived difference has frequently been adjusted to fit changing international architectural agendas.

1. Introduction

According to G.W.F. Hegel, human identity is constructed, and an important part of the making of the self is the notion of the Other. In the middle of the 19th century, geography and history combined to make Japan the perfect Other to a Europe looking for new inspiration. A better subject could hardly have been invented than an island nation at the opposite end of the globe that had deliberately isolated itself from the outside world for two and a half centuries. Indeed, Japan was so unknown in the West at the time that almost anything could be said of it without fear of contradiction by facts.

The constructed Other is, by definition, distinct from the self. Only differences matter, and these are judged as either inferior or superior. The former are typically ignored, but have often been used as a justification for imposing the values of dominant cultures on others through literal or cultural colonization. If the Other appears to have superior features, however, the tendency is to try to acquire them without losing one’s own identity in the process, and, as Hegel explained, this was a particular characteristic of the 19th century European outlook.

It is not enough for the self to recognize the Other, however. It also needs the Other to acknowledge it in return, and Japan duly obliged. Not only did Europe and the United States find the otherness of Japanese culture helpful as a means of affirming their own identities but Japan also reciprocated in a relationship of mutual othering.

2. Objectives and methodology

The objective of the research was an understanding of the historical development of foreign perceptions of Japanese architecture. The primary method used was a chronological survey of English-language publications on Japanese architecture written by non-Japanese between 1853 and 2000.

3. First impressions

Most of the early English-language accounts of Japanese buildings were written by non-experts who were generally unimpressed that they did match Western models. In 1861, for example, Lieutenant James Johnston of the US Navy set the tone for many subsequent accounts when he declared that “Architecture is not known among them as an art. Their temples, palaces and dwellings, being all low and temporary structures, generally of wood – the frequency of earthquakes preventing them from bestowing the care and expense upon their buildings which they would otherwise do.”

Two years later, the British diplomat Rutherford Alcock was similarly dismissive, again lamenting the lack of building height and permanent materials, and offering the following explanation: “They have...
no architecture. They live on a volcanic soil, the surface of which is affected with a tertian ague (‘marsh fever’), … imposing a law of construction fatal to all architectural pretensions or excellence.”

The next wave of foreign commentaries involved trained designers, and tended to be more objective. Having been recruited as the first professor of architecture at the Imperial College of Engineering in Tokyo, the British architect Josiah Conder was better informed than most Westerners of the time about traditional Japanese buildings, and in his report to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1877 he praised the famous shrines at Nikko as “the most splendid and attractive buildings to be seen.”

The Scottish designer Christopher Dresser spent four months travelling in Japan as an official guest of the Japanese government during the winter of 1876–77, and his book based on this visit, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures* (1882), likewise left no doubt about the architectural credentials of Japanese buildings in general – and those at Nikko in particular: “None could look upon either the great temples of Shiba or of Nikko without feeling that the architect of these glorious buildings understood perfectly the principles both of construction and of beauty” (Dresser 1882, 225, 243). While Nikko, a hundred miles north of Tokyo, was on every foreign tourist’s schedule by the 1880s, Dresser was one of the first Westerners to visit the Shinto shrines at Ise, which he described enthusiastically as “a series of buildings of the greatest possible interest,” and even illustrated in detailed hand drawings (Dresser 1882, 166).

It was a scientist rather than a designer who was to write the first in-depth analysis of Japanese residential buildings. The American biologist Edward Morse had been hired as the first professor of Zoology at the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1877, but had soon taken a keen interest in the Japanese dwelling. At the time of its publication in 1886 Morse’s *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* was unique among English-language accounts of Japanese architecture, not only in its detailed analyses but also in pointing out the ethnocentrism of previous European commentaries (Morse 1886 1876, 11, 12).

Morse was not only the first foreigner to analyze Japanese buildings in detail but also one of the first to suggest that they might have important lessons beyond Japan: “Within ten years some progress has been made among the better class of American houses in breaking away from this false and tiresome idea [of bilateral symmetry]. … In decoration, as well, we have made great strides in the same direction, thanks to the influence of Japanese methods. … many of these features [of the *tatami* room] might plainly be adopted without modification for our rooms” (Morse 1886 1876, 136, 141).

As late as 1890, however, Western prejudices were still apparent even in the accounts of several specialists on Japanese culture. The British Japan scholar Basil Hall Chamberlain, for example, then professor of Japanese at the Imperial University in Tokyo, had lived in the country for almost twenty years, but dismissed the Japanese pagoda as insufficiently tall, and the Tokugawa shrines in Nikko as “decorative art” rather than genuine architecture (Chamberlain 1890, 34, 35).

As the only detailed account of the Japanese dwelling available in English during first fifty years after the reopening of Japan, Edward Morse’s book had a major influence on American perceptions of the Japanese house. We can be reasonably sure, for example, that the young Frank Lloyd Wright had thoroughly digested *Japanese Homes* long before his own first visit to Japan in 1905. During that same year, Wright’s fellow American architect, Ralph Adams Cram, took Morse’s approach to another level in declaring that:

Japanese architecture is seen to be one of the great styles of the world. In no respect is it lacking in those qualities which have made Greek, Medieval, and Early Renaissance architecture immortal: as these differ among themselves, so does the architecture of Japan differ from them, yet with them it remains logical, ethnic, perfect in development.

Criticism of the shrines at Nikko, however, re-emerged in Cram’s account, in which they were dismissed as representing an essentially imported decorative style:

… the Nikko shrines, together with those of Shiba and Uyeno in Tokyo, are marvels of exquisite art. The decoration is masterly, the dramatic and pictorial effect triumphant, but it is the triumph of prodigal decoration, not of architectural achievement (Adams Cram 1905, 26, 54, 55).

The assessment of the buildings at Nikko as unrepresentative of indigenous Japanese design has often been associated with the German modernist Bruno Taut in the 1930s, but this view appears to have been commonplace among earlier foreign commentaries (Taut 1939a, 20, 21).

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1 Alcock (1863, 240, 243). Alcock was equally dismissive even 15 years later, when he stated that “In architecture, the Japanese, like their neighbors the Chinese, have produced scarcely anything – not even as much, indeed, as the latter, for these may claim the pagoda as a creation of their own … “ Alcock (1878, 15).
2 Conder (1878, 186). Reports by American architects of the time were similarly neutral and descriptive. See for example, Anon (1876, 26–27).
3 See, for example, Nute (1993, 36–46).
4 Adams Cram (1905, 29). Okakura Tenshin (Okakura 1906 1964, 30), for one, clearly appreciated Cram’s commentary more than previous ones, having commented in *The Book of Tao* that “To European architects brought up on the traditions of stone and brick construction, our Japanese method of building with wood and bamboo seems scarcely worthy to be ranked as architecture. It is but quite recently that a competent student of Western architecture has recognised and paid tribute to the remarkable perfection of our great temples.”
The American architect Ralph Adams Cram was equally critical of the shrines at Ise, which could hardly have been further removed from the richly-decorated structures at Nikko. Yet these paradoxes were dismissed for the opposite reasons “ugly and barbarous” (Adams Cram 1905, 85/86). Cram was effective, however, in his praise of the unusual staggered pagoda at the temple of Yakushi-ji in Nara, describing it as one of the most daring and original structures in Japan, and as “marking the birth of national Japanese architecture” independent of Chinese models (Adams Cram 1905, 38, 39). Like Morse before him, however, it was the Japanese dwelling that Cram believed America could learn most from as “a permanent lesson in the value of simplicity, of modesty, of frankness, of naturalness in art” (Adams Cram 1905, 136, 137).

European and American appreciation of traditional Japanese culture, including its architecture, reached a peak in the years immediately following Japan’s stunning victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. After the appearance of Cram’s Impressions in that year, however, there were to be no more full-length English-language books on Japanese architecture for almost three decades. By the time they reappeared in 1930s, the need to introduce Japanese architecture to foreign audiences had long passed, and these accounts were as much about promoting Western architectural agendas as they were about traditional Japan.

4. Projections: imposing the self on the other

Having seen what being associated with Japanese art had done for the careers of Avant Garde European painters half a century earlier, by the 1930s modernist architects began to seek similar credibility through association with the traditional buildings of Japan.

The first to attempt do so was Frank Lloyd Wright, who effectively claimed traditional Japanese architecture as his own by declaring it “organic.” The latter term had a long history in European aesthetics, but in the field of architecture it was most closely associated with the functionalism of Wright’s mentor, Louis Sullivan. In Wright’s hands, however, the word assumed multiple interpretations. Most notable among these was the notion of the organic whole, although this appears to have reached Wright, not through Sullivan, but rather via one of the leading Western authorities on Japanese art at the end of the 19th century.

In 1878 Edward Morse had recommended the young Harvard-trained philosopher Ernest Fenollosa to teach philosophy and political economy at the Imperial University in Tokyo. Much like Morse before him, however, Fenollosa’s interests quickly turned to Japanese culture, in his case classical painting, and with the aid of his former student, Kakuzo Okakura, he undertook the first comprehensive survey of traditional Japanese temple art.

In the 1880s Western knowledge of Japanese art was limited mainly to woodblock prints. The prints were considered more popular entertainment than art in Japan itself at the time, however, and in 1882 Fenollosa established his credentials as an expert on the subject when he dismissed the French writer Louis Gonse’s account of Japanese painting as a “Hokusai-crowned pagoda of generalizations” Fenollosa (1885).

Fenollosa subsequently embarked on a campaign to convince both the Japanese and his fellow Americans of the value of traditional Japanese art as an exemplar of what he argued was a defining characteristic of all artistic form: organic wholeness. It was an interpretation rooted unashamedly in classical Western philosophy, and more specifically in the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant.

When Fenollosa visited the United States as part of an official Japanese Fine Art Commission in 1887, the 19 year-old Frank Lloyd Wright was working at the Chicago office of Fenollosa’s cousin, the Shingle Style architect Joseph Silsbee, and Wright later suggested that he may have obtained his first prints through this personal connection.

Wright was certainly well aware of Fenollosa’s work in Japan, and there are indications that his own interpretation of the woodblock print as “organic” was influenced by Fenollosa’s similar interpretation of Japanese art in general. Wright’s description of the woodblock print, for example, centered on the Kantian view that, like the organic whole, all of its parts were mutually interdependent, giving it a formal “purposiveness” that could be appreciated aesthetically irrespective of any knowledge of its actual purpose.

Writing in 1891, Fenollosa had explained:

… A true synthetic whole cannot have a single part added or subtracted without destroying the peculiar character of its wholeness, without disturbing the perfect equilibrium of the mutual modifications. Thus such a synthetic whole is an individual, a separate entity, [with] a peculiar organic nature, an unchangeable possibility, a foreordained unit from all eternity. Now [the] Japanese feel that every case of artistic beauty is just such an individual synthesis. 

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8 See Wright, “The Print and the Renaissance,” tape transcript, Taliesin, November 1917, also Wright (1977, 228).
9 The parallels between Wright’s and Fenollosa’s organic interpretations of Japanese art are discussed in more detail in Nute (1993, 74–98).
10 Kant suggested that the aesthetic appeal of forms stemmed from a perception of their wholeness or apparent purposiveness: an ordered arrangement of mutually interdependent parts which appears purposeful, but which can in fact stem either from genuine adaptation to objective functions or be purely formal. On this basis he explained the special appeal of the organic form thus: “In such a product of nature every part not only exists by means of the other parts, but is thought of as existing for the sake of the others and the whole, that is as an (organic) instrument.” … An organised product of nature is one in which every part is reciprocally purpose [end] and means.” Kant, as quoted in Kant’s Kritik of Judgement, trans. J. H. Bernard (1892, 277, 280).
Twenty years later, Wright described the woodblock print in similar terms as “a thoroughly structural Art . . . . The word structure is here used to designate an organic form, an organization in a very definite manner of parts or elements into a larger unity, – a vital whole (Wright 1912, 5–6). Fenollosa had also directly applied this organic aesthetic to architecture (Fenollosa 1896a, 6).

Wright’s use of the term "organic" to describe Japanese art and architecture also encompassed a range of other meanings, including the notions of functionalism, environmental adaptation, and the honest expression of life:

... Japanese art and architecture really did have organic character. Their art was nearer to the earth and a more indigenous product of native conditions of life and work, therefore more nearly modern as I saw it, than any European civilization alive or dead (Wright 1945, 173).

Japanese buildings also matched another of the characteristics of Wright’s concept of organic architecture – adaptation to place:

... it is in the nature of any organic building to grow from its site, come out of the ground into the light – the ground itself held always as a component basic part of the building itself (Wright 1954, 41).

Look at the clusters of straw-thatched villages nesting in the nooks of the mountainous land like birds nesting in trees. Or clinging, like the vegetation itself to steep slopes.12

Wright also praised the Japanese house for its straightforward use of materials, which he contrasted with the typical American home of the time (Wright 1938, 196). While Wright saw all of these organic characteristics reflected in traditional Japanese buildings, however, most of them actually had their origins in Western thought. The notion of honesty in the use of materials, for example, was common in 19th century European architecture, where it was promoted by figures such as the Gothic revivalist Augustus Pugin and later by William Morris in the Arts and Crafts.13

The concepts of functional and environmental adaption, likewise, had their roots in Europe in the new science of biology, and reached American architecture in the late 19th century via the evolution-based theories of figures such as Herbert Spencer.14 Their European origins meant that many of the principles underlying Wright’s organic architecture were actually shared by several of the international modernists he often sought to distance himself from, some of whom also recognized these characteristics in traditional Japanese buildings.

The German modernist Bruno Taut, for example, had travelled to Japan in May 1933 to escape the growing oppression of Jews in Nazi Germany, and ended up staying for three years. Taut is best known in Japan as the first foreign architect to recognize the significance of Katsura Rikyu. In so doing, Taut was actually taking sides in an internal Japanese debate over whether or not Japanese architecture should abandon internationalism and return to its nationalist roots.

By preferring Katsura, with its seemingly “modern” appearance, over the highly-decorated shrines at Nikko, Taut was knowingly intervening on the side of the Japanese progressives. He did so in two seemingly contradictory ways, however: by pointing out the villa’s “universal” qualities, and at the same time the fact that – in contrast to the “imported” style of the buildings at Nikko – the “modern” aesthetics of Katsura were actually part of the native Japanese tradition (Taut 1939a, 20, 21). For Taut, the most important of the modern characteristics exemplified by Katsura was its straightforward response to its purpose:

I have stated on former occasions that the most important basis for the further development of modern architecture lies in function. My sentence, “all that works well looks well,” has been misunderstood, and at times misinterpreted as referring only to utilitarian necessities and actual functions. In Katsura I found in an ancient building, absolute proof of my theory, which I regarded as a valid base for modern architecture (Taut 1937, 291).

As with Wright before him, the idea that traditional Japanese architecture expressed universal design principles was central to Taut’s perspective. He was unapologetic in explaining that he was only interested in what Japanese shared with the world, and not in what made it uniquely Japanese: “The general public thinks Japan interesting because she is decidedly different, and it seeks and finds the very things which are least interesting to the architect because of their local significance” (Taut 1939a, 9, 10). Indeed, even differences were interpreted by Taut as simply the result of the same universal principles at work under changed local circumstances: “... what is different in the Japanese house and the Japanese way of living from that of

1Fenollosa (1891), BMS Am 1759.2 (54), 5–7, 13–14. Compositions by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa 1853–1908, the Ernest G. Stillman Papers, by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard.
11Wright, An Autobiography (1932), Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (1992, 244).
12On the history of the concept of honesty in architecture, and in particular its role in modernism, see Watkin (1977).
13Sullivan expressly admired Herbert Spencer’s explanation of the practical causes underlying the development of organic form: “in Darwin he [Sullivan] found much food for thought. The Theory of Evolution seemed stupendous. Spencer’s definition implying a progression from unorganized simple, through stages of growth and differentiation to a highly organized complex, seemed to fit his own case . . . .” (Sullivan 1924 1956, 254/5). Philip Steadman makes a good case that the American architect Leopold Eidlitz, who linked functional and environmental adaption, was similarly influenced by Spencer’s Writings (Steadman 1979, 147).
Europe and America is the simple consequence of the climate and nature of the country …” (Taut 1937, 97).

Three decades later, Taut’s compatriot, Walter Gropius, took essentially the same approach in explaining that what really mattered were principles that transcended individual cultures:

We should compare with each other the deeper motives of our existence, to be able to find out what unites us rather than what divides us. … East and West must adapt their attitudes and enrich each other, discarding what is weak and obsolete on both sides (Gropius 1968, 108, 109).

Again, the assumption was that the Japanese of the 16th and 17th centuries had come to many of the same essentially logical conclusions as modern European architects: “The traditional [Japanese] house is so strikingly modern because it contains perfect solutions, already centuries old, for problems which the contemporary Western architect is still wrestling with today” (Gropius 1968, 120).

A few years before writing his own account of traditional Japanese architecture in the late 1960s, Walter Gropius had been asked to introduce Heinrich Engel’s compendious study of the Japanese dwelling. Engel was clear from the outset that his objective was to correct the many false assumptions that had been made about traditional Japanese architecture through the projecting of outside agendas: “Many Western publications on Japanese architecture are strongly biased by the wish to find affirmation of current theories in architecture and do not show serious attempts to uncover the real backgrounds” (Engel 1964, 24).

Engel suggested that the main source of the misunderstanding of traditional Japanese buildings as “modern” was the assumption that similar forms must have derived from the application of the same principles, i.e., the central argument that had been advanced by both Taut and Gropius. Engel went on, however, to seemingly agree with them; stating that the similarities between modernist buildings and traditional Japanese architecture were to be found at the level of underlying thought: “The significance of Japanese architecture has been found on a much deeper level, in the discussion of cause rather than effect, of motivation rather than reaction, of source rather than product” (Engel 1964, 485).

The interpretation of medieval Japanese art and architecture in terms of 18th century German aesthetics by Americans such as Fenollosa was a clear instance of cultural universalism that ignored many of the unique characteristics that define Japanese culture. In their similar search for “common causes” the European modernists Taut, Gropius and Engel reflected essentially the same pursuit of the universal at the expense of the particular. To assume that the products of another culture are reflecting one’s own principles is a form of appropriation, and this brings us to the next phase in the West’s relationship with Japanese architecture, which involved efforts to acquire it more directly.

5. Acquisitions: procuring the other

When the Other is seen as having positive attributes which the self lacks the natural response is to want to somehow acquire those characteristics. The challenge, however, is to do so without losing one’s identity in the process. Both the benefits and risks involved in such efforts are evident in European and American attempts to acquire Japanese building forms and design principles.

Many of the first replicas of Japanese buildings constructed in Europe and North America were built by the Japanese themselves, and were generally seen as promoting Japanese culture. Structures such as the Japanese Dwelling at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the Phoenix Hall at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, for example, played a key role in encouraging Americans to attempt to recreate “Japanese style” designs of their own.15 Initially, at least, such imitations seem to have been considered harmless, and even flattering, as confirmation that Japanese culture was admired internationally.

The next stage of the reuse of Japanese building forms by foreign designers was more subtle. Rather than obviously Japanese-looking styles, this phase involved the use of simplified underlying forms, and was exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright. While very different in its three dimensional appearance, for example, the plan of Wright’s Imperial Hotel in Tokyo seems to have had at least part of its inspiration in the plan of the Japanese pavilion in south Chicago. The three-part plan of the Phoenix Hall, representing the body and outstretched wings of the mythical bird, reappeared in an extruded form in the plan of the Imperial , with the two wings being given over to guest rooms and the central spine to public functions (Figures 1 and 2).

The three-part plan that Wright used in several of his public buildings, likewise, appears to have had its origin in one of the Tokugawa shrines Wright saw at Nikko in 1905. The gongen-style parti of the Nikko Taiyu-in consists of three elements: the honden, a sanctuary reserved for the deity; the haiden, an oratory for worshippers; and a narrow intermediate corridor connecting these two primary spaces, which was originally simply a covered-way sheltering priests as they moved between the two main structures. The plan of Wright’s Unity Temple similarly accommodated two distinct but related functions that needed to be physically linked (Figures 3 and 4).

15The best source on American adoptions of Japanese style buildings is still Lancaster (1962).
The distinctive staggered section of Wright’s 1927 St Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie project likewise appears to have had part of its inspiration in the famous east pagoda of Yakushi-ji temple near Nara, so admired by Ralph Adams Cram. Although the St Mark’s Towers project remained unbuilt, its unusual staggered section was eventually realized twenty years later in the form of the S. C. Johnson Research Tower (Figures 5–7). If the cantilevered mezzanine floors of the Johnson Research Tower were in fact based on the pent roofs of the pagoda at Yakushi-ji, however, in this case the reuse of the form would have involved a radical change of purpose, from unoccupied outdoor sloping roof surfaces to inhabited flat interior floors.

There would seem to be two primary ways that the reuse of forms from another culture can potentially cause harm: by diluting that culture’s identity, or by causing offense to its members.\(^\text{16}\) To cause such harm, however, a form needs to be both culturally significant in its original context and recognizable in its new one. It could reasonably be argued that only members of the originating culture are in a position to judge cultural significance. But even leaving this question aside, it seems that few Japanese would have recognized the forms of any of the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings discussed here as having any connection to Japan, suggesting that their reuse would have caused little harm, either to Japanese sensibilities or cultural identity.

There remains the ethical issue of whether or not it was appropriate for Wright to use these forms – with or without the awareness of the Japanese – and even if it was, whether he should have acknowledged his sources. It is difficult to imagine who might have been in a position to have given him “permission” for the reuse of such forms, but acknowledging his sources was clearly within Wright’s control, and, initially at least, he chose not to do so.\(^\text{17}\) Viewed in the larger context of this paper, however, in abstracting the underlying forms of selected Japanese buildings, Wright appears to have found an effective way of absorbing the essence of the Other without either diluting Japanese culture or compromising his own identity as an American designer.

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\(^{16}\)On the issues surrounding the topic of cultural appropriation, see for example Malik (2017), and the response by Bradford (2017). Also Rogers (2006, 474–503).

\(^{17}\)Wright later hinted that he felt bad about this, describing Japan as “the great insulted.” See Wright (1970, 110).
6. Emulations: finding the other in the self

Following the pause in foreign publications on Japanese architecture caused by World War II, the Allied occupation of the country together with the rise of air travel combined to create a resurgence of interest in Japanese culture during the 1950s. Part of that process was the first acknowledgment that Western architects had not only recognized modern characteristics in traditional Japanese buildings but had also derived some of them from this source.

The first indication of this development came in 1954 when a traditional Japanese house was constructed on the grounds of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The catalog of the exhibit made it clear that “The Museum has chosen a Japanese building for its third House in the Garden because of the unique relevance to modern Western architecture of traditional Japanese design.” Indeed, the Museum’s director, Arthur Drexler, who published a full-length book on The Architecture of Japan to accompany the exhibit, directly linked several characteristics of the traditional Japanese house to developments in modern architecture (Drexler 1954).

Not all US commentators on Japanese design were comfortable with its association with international modernism, however. The year before the MOMA exhibit, Elizabeth Gordon, the editor of America’s leading popular home magazine of the time, House Beautiful, and apparently with the encouragement of its fiercely anti-communist owner William Randolph Hearst published, a famously controversial essay “The Threat to the Next America” associating the aesthetics of the International Style with left-wing totalitarianism (Gordon 1953). The article alienated many leading American architects, although not Frank Lloyd Wright, who applauded it, but appears to have drawn the approval of the US Statement Department, who, a few years later, invited Gordon to do a major feature on traditional Japanese design, apparently as part of a wider government effort.

Figure 5. Section of the east pagoda of the temple of Yakushi-ji, Nara, Japan, ca. 730.

Figure 6. Section of the St Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie towers project, New York City, NY, 1927.

Figure 7. Section of the S.C. Johnson research tower, Racine, WI, 1950.
at the height of the Cold War to have Japan reaccepted as an ally by ordinary Americans.

The August and September 1960 issues of *House Beautiful* were devoted to the Japanese aesthetic of *shibui* (Gordon 1960a, 1960b). The feature was based on three premises:

that this concept lay at the core of Japanese notions of beauty; that it was applicable beyond Japan; and that it represented a deeper alternative to the simple minimalism of European modernism.

In interpreting *shibui*, Gordon relied heavily on the advice of Soetsu Yanagi, widely regarded as the founder of Japan’s folk art movement. Yanagi had laid out six “elements of beauty” central to *shibui* that were reproduced in *House Beautiful*: simplicity, integral quality, humility; tranquility; naturalness; and yugen (often translated as mystery).18 Coming from such a respected source, no one could say these interpretations of *shibui* were incorrect, but the more adjectives that were attached to the term the less clear its essential meaning seemed to become, at least to many non-Japanese. In relying so heavily on Yanagi’s opinion, moreover, Gordon overlooked the fact Yanagi himself had been strongly influenced by the British Arts and Crafts movement, whose founder, William Morris, had in turn been an admirer of Japanese decorative design. In other words, more than a century earlier, traditional Japanese aesthetics had to a large extent already become woven into modern Western taste.

In order to demonstrate that the principles underlying *shibui* were relevant beyond Japan, Gordon and her staff listed examples of non-Japanese artifacts produced before the reopening of Japan that seemed to possess similar characteristics. These objects included Mexican Oaxacan black clay jars, American Shaker furniture, 18th-century European pewter, and German salt-glazed pottery. The implication was that the West had, at certain times and places, already developed an appreciation for the simple, honest use of materials, independently of Japan, and that these principles transcended culture. To prove her point, Gordon proceeded to develop a new line of “American shibui” products, from furniture and carpets to upholstery and paint finishes, which achieved considerable commercial success.

In their efforts to uncover the ideals underlying *shibui*, the 1960 *House Beautiful* issues marked a new attitude to Japanese design, as a source of principles rather than form. In explaining these ideals, however, they expressed the same assumption as Wright and the European modernists had: that the best design principles automatically transcend culture.

It was to be another three decades before the next attempt to interpret Japanese aesthetic principles for a non-Japanese audience. In the early 1960s almost no one outside Japan had heard of the term *shibui*. The world was very different, however, by the time Leonard Koren attempted to interpret the much better known but still only vaguely understood concepts of *wabi* and *sabi* in the 1990s, which he differentiated as “a way of life” and “an aesthetic ideal” respectively (Koren 1994).

Koren suggested that one of the reasons that the precise meanings of these terms had remained obscure was an unspoken reluctance among many Japanese to accept that they could or even should be translated. The implication was that the Japanese may have felt that these were not “universal” design principles at all, but rather intrinsic parts of Japanese identity. Undaunted, Koren proceeded to take up two of the themes Elizabeth Gordon had begun in 1960: that these traditional Japanese principles could be applied beyond Japan, and that they were distinct from modernist minimalism.

A decade later, Robyn Griggs Lawrence used the same hyphenated combination of these two terms, but similarly explained that *wabi* and *sabi* had quite distinct meanings. For Griggs, however, these were both clearly aesthetic: *wabi* was interpreted as “humble and simple,” and *sabi* as “rusty and weathered” (Griggs Lawrence 2004, 23). Griggs also took up the same contrast with modernism initiated by Elizabeth Gordon, explaining that “in recent years, traditional minimalism has begun to give way to a more *wabi-sabi*-like minimalism, a kinder, gender aesthetic that allows for some imperfection . . . .”19 Like Gordon and Koren before her, Griggs also cited a number of non-Japanese examples of *wabi-sabi*, including Shaker and Arts and Crafts furniture, as well as the work of the contemporary Japanese American furniture maker George Nakanishi, who was himself an admirer of both of these Western traditions.

Unlike most of the Japanese *forms* discussed earlier, the aesthetic ideals of *wabi*, *sabi* and *shibui* are are publicly associated with Japanese culture. Yet many non-Japanese artifacts that seem to reflect these qualities do not look obviously Japanese. So does appropriating across cultures at the level of principle rather than form render the process benign? Or is any deliberate effort to emulate the *ideas* of another culture inherently problematic, whether or not the end products seem to derive from that culture?

Parallel to these efforts to assimilate Japanese aesthetic ideals beginning in the 1960s has been

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18 Yanagi claimed he used the word *shibui* rather than the closely term related term *wabi*, because it was more commonly used in his era. For Yanagi the source of *shibui* was unselfconscious serendipity, and he believed that no other culture had a developed an equivalent, arguing that “The lack of the word will mean the lack of the idea and fact” (Yanagi 1972).

19 Griggs Lawrence, p.55.
a seemingly equal and opposite effort to keep Japanese culture at a distance by emphasizing its essential differences from the West. In the field of architecture, the subject of time has been central to these efforts. Although the notion that traditional Japanese buildings were designed to express time is now widely accepted, however, this interpretation has only emerged since the 1960s. None of the pre-war English-language accounts, for example, made any mention of time.20

A sense of responsiveness to time was certainly implied by the change and growth expressed in many of the Metabolist projects introduced at the World Design Conference in Tokyo in May 1960, but the word “time” itself never appeared in the famous manifesto Metabolism 1960.21

Three years later, however, a team of Japanese researchers led by the architectural historian Teiji Itoh and a young Arata Isozaki published an influential article on Japanese urban space in the Japanese architectural journal Kenchiku Bunka, in which, under the title “Space-Time Value,” Japanese space was apparently interpreted in terms of the temporal for the first time.22 The next major event in the linking of time and space in commentaries on traditional Japanese architecture was Gunter Nitschke’s well-known 1966 article in Architectural Design, “MA: The Japanese Sense of Place,” in which Nitschke acknowledged his reliance on the Kenchiku Bunka piece of three years earlier.23 The Itoh group’s earlier interpretation of activity-dependent spaces as essentially temporary places was effectively confirmed by Nitschke, who combined these ideas in explaining the notion of ma:

The Japanese sense of space is ma, best described as a consciousness of place, not in the sense of a piazza, an enclosed three-dimensional entity, but rather as Hans Scharoun used word ‘Platz’ in his first Berlin competition . . . places of central activates (Nitschke 1966, 117).

The conflation of the Chinese character for interval (±) with the notion of “space-time” was made even more explicit in Arata Isozaki’s 1979 exhibition at the Copper Hewitt Museum, Ma: Space-Time in Japan, in which it was explained that “the word MA does not describe the West’s recognition of time and space as different serializations. Rather, in Japan, both time and space have been measured in terms of intervals” (Isozaki 1979, 12). Five years later, in a series of English articles on “Japanese Spatial Conception” in The Japan Architec, the Chinese architect and critic Ching-Yu Chang further emphasized the fusing of space and time in the Japanese language – and, by implication, Japanese architecture – when he suggested: “Other Japanese words express space . . ., such as ma, meaning interval . . . ; tokoro, meaning place; ba, meaning field. These words express both time as well as space, a duality which is characteristic of the Japanese” (Chang 1984b, 70).

The idea that the traditional Japanese understanding of space was actually a sense of “space-time” has since become widely accepted outside Japan, together with the belief that many traditional Japanese buildings were consciously designed to express time. Some of the evidence used to support these claims has included:

1. The Notion of Activity-Dependent Places
2. Lack of any Concept of Space as a Positive Entity
3. Expression of Temporal Ideas in Terms of Space
4. Built Accommodations of Change

Japanese “activity-spaces,” as exemplified in terms such as kaiwai and himorogi, for instance, were described by Itoh’s team as temporary places created by a brief repurposing of space for a specific occasion. Event-based places in themselves, however, are by no means unique to Japan. Similar temporary transformations of space occur for street performances and festivals in many cultures.

One of the other arguments often used in efforts to establish the temporal credentials of traditional Japanese architecture has been the absence of any concept of space as a positive entity in Japan prior to the arrival of the English term “space” in the late 19th century, when a new Japanese word, kukan, had to be created from the existing Chinese characters for air (风) and interval (间). Since the 1960s, foreign commentators on Japanese architecture have repeatedly cited this to support the claim that in Japanese architecture the focus has traditionally been on time rather than space:

One concludes … from their best architecture that space as an entity does not exist at all.24

This notion of space … has never occurred to the Japanese … (Bognar1981, 135).

… it is doubtful that the idea of space had been a primary architectural concern (Chang,1984b, 62).

20Although Bruno Taut did not use the word “time” per se in any of his accounts of his visit to Katsura, Kengo Kuma has suggested that he does appear to have recognized its temporal dimension in a series of experiential drawings. See Kuma (2009, 23); Taut (1937, 271–291; 1939a, 6, 8, 19–21; 1939b, 139–158).

21The closest any of the Metabolist authors came to mentioning time was Noboru Kawazoe’s reference to “4-dimensional space.” See Noboru Kawazoe, Kiyoshi Azuwa, Kiyonori Kikutake, et al. (1960, 27).

22Itoh, Isozaki, Tsuchida, et al. (1963, 79). This was subsequently published as the book: Toshi Design Kenkyukai [Urban Design Research Group] (1968).

23Nitschke (1966, 117). Nitschke acknowledged that his article was indebted to the Japanese one “Nihon no Toshi Kukan” that had appeared in Kenchiku Bunka three years earlier, 116.

24Nitschke (1966, 117). For a more recent and slightly different view of the topic, see Snodgrass (2004, 65–85).
The tacit assumption underlying such contrasts was that most ordinary Western buildings in the 1850s were consciously designed according to a positive concept of space. Yet this was not the case. While the concept of space as a positive entity had certainly been explored by many Renaissance architects, and was adopted by several leading Western philosophers and scientists during the 17th and 18th centuries, it was far from common in everyday English usage of the word, and was not a primary design principle in the majority of ordinary 19th century European and American buildings. There were many obvious and important differences between traditional Western and Japanese buildings of the time, but these had more to do with their differing constructional systems than the presence or absence of any concept of space per se.

In efforts to establish the temporal credentials of Japanese architecture attention has also frequently been drawn to the conflation of space and time in the Japanese language:

In Japanese, the concepts of space and time have been simultaneously expressed by the word MA. . . . the word MA does not describe the West’s recognition of time and space as different serializations. Rather, in Japan, both time and space have been measured in terms of intervals (Isozaki 1979, 12).

Most Japanese words for space also express time (Chang 1984a, 61).

The use of spatial terms to describe temporal ideas is not unusual, however. In fact, most languages employ some form of space/time metaphor. English, for instance, is full of examples such as “It was a short meeting,” or “we’re still a long way from finishing.” Indeed, in its original usage the word “space” seems to have had much the same meaning as the Chinese character 空, as essentially an unoccupied interval between discrete events in space or time. The word space was a shortening of the Old French term espace, meaning “period of time, distance, interval” (12c.), which in turn was derived from the Latin word spatium, meaning “room, area, distance, stretch of time.” As Gerald Guest explains, historically spatial terms were routinely applied to intervals of time:

… across the centuries the very word “space” itself has intertwined the temporal and spatial. . . .

In the Divine Comedy Dante uses the word “spazio” to indicate both time and space. In Purgatory (11:106-8) the word indicates time: “Before a thousand years have passed – a span that, for eternity, is less space than an eyeblink for the slowest sphere in heaven, whereas in 29:106-8 the word refers to an area: “The space between the four of them contained a chariot – triumphal – on two wheels. . . .” (Guest 2012, 219)

The implication that Japanese is somehow unique in combining space and time, then, is simply not supported by the evidence of other languages. Indeed, if further proof were needed of the use of the idea of an interval to describe both space and time beyond Japan, in his account of Japanese Space, Ching-Yu Chang described how this concept not only previously existed in China but was directly imported from there via the Chinese character for interval, [ ] (Chang 1984a).

Examples of the accommodation of change in traditional Japanese buildings have also been presented as evidence of their expression of time. These have typically included some or all of the following characteristics:

1. Open Floors
2. Adjustable Wall Planes
3. Spaces that Acknowledge Events

The early development of furniture made unobstructed floors rare in both the West and in China, but they were a common feature in many traditional dwellings in the Asian Pacific. This is more than merely evidence that this characteristic was not unique to Japan. Many scholars believe that some form of tropical dwelling probably provided one of the archetypes for the traditional raised-floor Japanese house, which appeared in Japan during the Yayoi Period between 200 BCE and 250 CE. The implications of this go beyond just explaining the often-noted unsuitability of the traditional Japanese house to Japan’s cold winters. They also draw attention to other important parallels between early Japanese houses and dwellings designed for the humid climate of the Asia Pacific, including a lack of fixed partitions and the use of moveable mats. Prior to the end of the 13th century, floors, even among Japan’s elite classes, consisted primarily of bare wooden planks, with moveable straw mats temporarily spread where occupants

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25 On Roman and Renaissance interest in expressing interior volumes, see Giedion (1963, 523–24). A concept of space as a positive entity was held by some well-known European thinkers during the 17th and 18th centuries, including Descartes and Newton, but others, such as Leibnitz and Kant, rejected the idea. Kant, for example, argued that “Space is not something objective and real, . . . it is subjective and ideal, and originates from the mind’s nature.” Immanuel Kant, “On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World,” (1770), in Walford and Merbote (1992, 403).

26 On the ubiquity of the space-time metaphor, see, for example, Athanasopoulos, Samuel, and Bylund (2017, 295–321).

27 See, for example: Hirai (1998, 17).

28 The lack of suitability of the raised-floor dwelling to the Japanese winter was famously affirmed by the 14th century poet Kenko, when he described the Japanese dwelling as essentially a “summer house.” See Yoshida Kenko, Tsurezuregusa [Essays in Idleness], Section 55, as translated by Donald Keene in “Japanese Aesthetics,” (Hume 1995, 35).
sat or slept, much as they were in many traditional dwellings in Southeast Asia.

The development of a comprehensive system of sliding screens does, however, seem unique to Japan, although the use of moveable planes within walls is not. Operable doors, windows and shutters are clearly common in many cultures. The majority of these swing rather than slide, however, and most do not constitute an entire wall plane. Yet, in being manually controlled by occupants they are essentially similar in their temporal implications to the Japanese system, in anticipating and facilitating change, rather than consciously expressing time.

The tokonoma, butsuden, and kamidana have likewise often been used as examples of spaces in the traditional Japanese dwelling that are periodically changed to mark special occasions, and so, indirectly, express time. But again, similar spaces exist in Hindu, Confucian, and Catholic households. Indeed, events are widely considered to be an essential component of most manmade places.30

Japan is, however, almost certainly the only culture to have created an architectural form specifically dedicated to celebrating the present, one of the central motives of the wabi tearoom developed during the late 16th century. Yet this isolated enclosure was designed to disconnect its occupants from their attachment to the trappings of the world at large, including the illusions of both space and time.31 Although the relationship of the tearoom to the present is beyond doubt, then, many would argue that the moment itself actually lies outside of time.

The aesthetics of the tearoom formed the model for the Sukiya Style domestic interior developed during the Momoyama Period, which for many non-Japanese has become synonymous with “traditional Japanese architecture.” The question this raises, then, is the extent to which an architectural style derived from a model that was designed to deny the reality of time can then be claimed to be an expression of time.

With the notable exception of the tearoom, then, many of the characteristics of traditional Japanese buildings often cited as evidence of their unique expression of time are actually found in other cultures.32 Moreover, discussion of time as a conscious design objective in traditional Japanese architecture only seems to date back to the early 1960s, when time had become a popular topic among architects globally in efforts to move beyond the pre-war modernist preoccupation with space.33

Taken together, all of this would seem to suggest that time, per se, was not never actually a conscious subject of design in traditional Japanese architecture, any more than space was, and that its temporal interpretation may have been largely post-rationalized by commentators, both Japanese and non-Japanese, eager to maintain the otherness of Japanese architecture.

It might be more accurate, perhaps, to say that many traditional Japanese buildings were designed to accommodate change, but that in this they shared many characteristics in common with vernacular buildings from other cultures. Far from diminishing the significance of traditional Japanese architecture, however, this would only seem make it all the more relevant.

8. Reinventions: otherness maintained

1960 was to be a turning point in Western perceptions of Japanese architecture. It marked a clear change from a preoccupation with traditional Japanese buildings dating back to the 1860s, to a new interest in contemporary Japanese architecture. The siting of the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo was both a reflection of and a stimulus for this change. Not only was the awarding of the conference an important recognition that Japanese design was now considered more than just an illustrious tradition, it also provided the venue for the debut of a completely new kind of Japanese architecture that seemed to challenge all traditions, Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

By the time the Metabolists presented their manifesto at the opening of the Tokyo Design Conference in May 1960 many of their ideas were already known to some of the leading modern architects in Europe. In September 1959 Kenzo Tange had presented Kiyonori Kikutake’s “Sky House” and “Tower Shaped Community” projects together with his own Kagawa Prefectural Office and Tokyo City Hall designs to a gathering of Team 10 at the final meeting of CIAM in Otterloo, Netherlands. The first published Western response to Metabolism 1960, Gunter Nitschke’s article for Architectural Design, “The Metabolists of Japan,” was written four years later to coincide with the opening of the Olympic Games in Tokyo, an event that helped to spark even greater international interest in contemporary Japanese architecture (Nitschke 1964, 509–524).

30See for example, Relph (1976).
31The Buddhist sutra Vikramaditya, in which 80,000 disciples of Buddha visited Vikramaditya in his tiny hut, an allegory intended to demonstrate the meaninglessness of space to the enlightened, has often been related to the underlying meaning of the wabi tearoom. See for example, Okakura (1906 1964, 34).
32On efforts to claim uniqueness for Japanese culture in general, and their frequent foundation in the Japanese language in particular, see for example: Dale (1986), and Miller (1982).
33For more on this topic, See Nute (2019, 50–63).
Most of the contents of 1964 AD article on Metabolism were directly reprinted from the original Metabolist manifesto, which barely mentioned traditional Japanese culture.\(^\text{14}\) The opening and closing pages of the AD piece, however, were devoted to making connections to Japanese tradition, primarily using the Chinese character 異, which in some contexts can mean "change."\(^\text{35}\)

The AD article seems to have created a widespread perception, among non-Japanese architects at least, that there was a direct philosophical connection between traditional Japanese architecture and Metabolism, although the Metabolist themselves never made this claim. Efforts to create such a connection, then, seem to have been part of the same continuing desire on the part of European and North American commentators to maintain the otherness of Japanese culture. In the case of Metabolism, it was not enough that the proposals were technically and formally stunning. That could equally have been said of several European megastructure projects that had preceded the Japanese proposals, such as Corbusier’s well-known Plan Obus for example.\(^\text{26}\) The Metabolist projects could not simply be high-tech urban design proposals based on megastructures, they also, it seems, had to be firmly rooted in the tradition of Japanese otherness.

In May 1967, at a time when the political and social optimism of the early 1960s was evaporating in war and civil unrest, Architectural Design revisited Metabolism at Gunter Nitschke’s prompting, and concluded that its ideals never had been and probably never should be realized in practice (Jerome 1968, 208). Although not a member of the group, Kenzo Tange had been instrumental in its formation, and was one of the few designers to have completed any Metabolist-influenced buildings at this time. As a result, several of these buildings became the focus of criticism for not apparently living up to its promises. In a piece on the Shizuoka Press Center in 1968, for example, Gunter Nitschke was critical of the fact that the building seemed to contradict one of the basic tenets of Metabolism, that structures should be designed for the easy replacement of components that would become obsolete most quickly.

The single core not only acts as the main structural support for the building but incorporates all the services, thus that part of the architecture – the services – which is generally assumed to be the most likely to require early change is integrated with that part – the structure – which is most likely to remain in position until the building is demolished (Nitschke 1968, 201).

In 1975, historian Reyner Banham concluded that it was astonishing that the Metabolist proposals had ever been taken seriously in the first place by anyone with any knowledge of how real estate, city planning, or local governments actually work in practice. By the time Banham was writing this, architecture had moved on to a concern with people, rather than form and space, and the megastructure had come to symbolize the antithesis of these new values.

In their iconic commentary Learning from Las Vegas, for example, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were scathing in their criticism of the “heroic and original” megastructure as the worst kind of ego-driven design. In its place, they praised the bottom-up “ugly and ordinary” order of Las Vegas as a more authentic order generated by commercial logic and private ownership of small, independently owned lots. The circle, and the irony, was complete when, in 1999, Barry Shelton showed that the latter pattern was actually typical of urban development in medieval Japan (Shelton 1999). In other words, the megastructure was actually the antithesis of the traditional Japanese city.

In many respects, Metabolism had a far more lasting influence beyond Japan than it did in Japan itself. Not only did it stimulate international interest in megastructures, resulting in a number of realized buildings but perhaps even more importantly it was also instrumental in helping to establish the innovative reputation of contemporary Japanese architecture overseas. After Metabolism, it seems, Japanese architecture was expected to be different, not just from that of the West but also from all previous Japanese architecture as well. Japanese architects duly obliged with a seemingly endless supply of provocative designs that appeared to break all the established architectural rules, both inside and outside Japan. The otherness of Japanese architecture had in effect been recast yet again, this time as originality.

The idea of contemporary Japanese architecture constantly reinventing itself is reflected not only in the unusually large number of English language books on Japanese architecture published since the 1950s but also the proportion of these publications that use the words “new” or “contemporary” in their titles, which seem to have become almost synonymous in relation to Japanese architecture. No other culture has sustained such a constant flow of full-length

\(^{14}\)The article also included works by Kenzo Tange and Arata Isozaki, however, that did hint at connections to Japanese traditions. Although Isozaki had studied under Tange at Tokyo University and was working at his office during the 1960 World Design Conference, like Tange, he was not directly involved in the Metabolist group, but again, like his mentor, he produced several clearly Metabolist-influenced designs, including the “Joint Core System” (1960), and the “Clusters in the Air” project of 1962. For an excellent recent English-language account of the Metabolist group, told through the recollections of its original members, see Koolhaas and Obrist (2011).

\(^{26}\)Under the title of “the Oriental Mind” Nitschke connected this character and the notion of change to Chinese philosophy, Shinto, Zen, the teahouse and the traditional Japanese dwelling.

\(^{35}\)On the history of the megastructure, see Banham (1976). Banham considers the Plan Obus as the first deliberately designed architectural megastructure, but credits Fumihiko Maki with coining this term. See Investigations in Collective Form (St Louis, Mi: School of Architecture, Washington University, Maki 1964).
publications in a foreign language devoted simply to keeping up with its architectural innovations.37

And yet, with only a few exceptions, after Metabolism took the world by storm in the early 1960s, this perpetual “newness” has failed to establish even passing architectural fashions beyond Japan, let alone any permanent change in the direction of architecture internationally, at least, in anything like the way Metabolism did. The ambiguity of the word “original” may help to explain this. One of its meanings implies “serving as a model for others,” while the other means “personal, individual, or unique.”

Fascination with the unique has actually existed in Japanese architecture from its very beginnings, when Shinto invested unusual natural objects with special significance. This interest in the individual was largely suppressed in medieval Japan, yet still managed to find an architectural outlet in the aesthetics of the wabi tearoom.38

Okakura Kakuzo, for example, in The Book of Tea described how the choice of guest, utensils and art for each tea gathering, as well as the design of each tearoom, should express the subjective choices of the individual.39 He was equally emphatic that other Japanese buildings should express such originality:

Slavish conformity to traditions and formulas fetters the expression of individuality in architecture.

We can but weep over those senseless imitations of European buildings which one beholds in modern Japan. We marvel why, among the most progressive Western nations, architecture should be so devoid of originality…. (Okakura 1906 1964, 38).

Such respect for the unique contrasts starkly with the popular Western stereotype of Japanese culture as devaluing the individual. To what extent the constant newness of contemporary Japanese architecture reflects an innate Japanese fascination with the unique going back to early Shinto, or an unconscious desire to live up to the international reputation of Japanese architecture for otherness is impossible to say, but “other” it has remained, not only in image but also in reality.

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37These English-language books have included: Koike (1956); Kultermann (1960); Boyd (1968); Ross (1978); Frampton (1978); Bognar (1985,1990); Kurokawa (1993); Takahashi (2007); Bognar (2008); Sumner and Pollock (2010); Klanten (2011); Mehta and MacDonald (2011); Koike (1953); Kawazoe (1973); Suzuki and Banham (1975); (1985); Japan Foundation (1988); Meyhofer and Jodidio (1994); Steele (2017); Igarashi (2018).

38On this subject, see for example, Nute (2009, 569–575).

39Okakura suggested, “The name, Abode of Fancy,” implies a structure created to meet some individual artistic requirement. The tea-room is made for the tea-master, not the tea-master for the tea-room.” Okakura (1964, 37).
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