



# On Things to Come: What contemporary Japanese architecture should be like

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## On Things to Come: What contemporary Japanese architecture should be like

Benoît JACQUET

Architects are used to talk about the future, mostly because they build for the future and are asked to plan their constructions for, at least, one or two generations ahead. They think about how their buildings will age, and how they can anticipate the moment when they would be outdated. For them, as for many artists, being avant-garde has always been a prerequisite. At the same time, being “modern” (or “contemporary”) is an attitude or a statement that needs to be defined. Let’s agree, for a moment, that modernity is related to technical, cultural, esthetical and social progresses, although we may disagree about the expression of these terms. When I am asking, “What Japanese architecture should be like?” I am already supposing that we have a common understanding of what is Japanese architecture *per se*. And this is far from being evident. What is Japanese architecture is not evident because there are many kind of Japanese architecture: Buddhist temple (*jiin* 寺院), Shintō shrine (*jinja* 神社), city house (*machiya* 町家), country house (*minka* 民家), tea pavilion (*chashitsu* 茶室), teahouse (*ochaya* 御茶屋), inn (*ryokan* 旅館), architecture of Sukiya, Shoin or Sōan styles, the list of differences appears to be endless considering that each house, each space, cultivates their particular differences to other spaces.

But, the main problem that we are tackling here—what will be Japan in the future—is not the definition of what is Japanese architecture because historians have already described it. Actually, I think that the main problem of contemporary cities is not fundamentally how we will deal with the future, but how we should interpret the past. The future can be predicted from the

past. Historians do that all the time; they deal with the past while architects do mostly think about the future. The main problem is to understand why Japanese architecture can be important for the future, and to see, in this “past” thing, how we can understand the future.

Why is this important? The recognition of the historical, social, cultural and even environmental values of Japanese architecture have become crucial because Japanese cities, and most of Asian cities, have become chaotic. Traces of their history have been erased little by little; we really have to search to see what remains. This first picture was taken in the center of Kyoto (fig. 1). It could actually have been taken in another Asian city. This is one of the legacies of globalization: the “uniformization” of landscape. It is important to study Japanese architecture because it is disappearing. In Kyoto, like in Beijing, Hanoi, Jakarta, everyday many wooden houses are destroyed, and replaced by prefabricated houses, made of cheap materials, and they become objects of consumptions, things that we “use and then throw away” (*tsukai steru* 使い捨てる), like plastic dishes and disposable chopsticks.

But having a critical gaze of our surrounding space means that we also have to find what is positive in our living environment. In the case of Kyoto, some areas are still preserved and even well landscaped. Tourism is the first source of income in Kyoto, there were more than 10 millions foreign tourists in 2014, and they come to see an image of “Japan”. The city has been branding its image, creating new parks, like this ideal landscape



Fig. 1: Photography taken in the city center of Kyoto. Photograph ©Andrea Flores Urushima, Jacquet 2014.

of mountains and rivers (*sansui* 山水) along the Kamogawa (fig. 2). There are also more than 20 sites protected by the UNESCO. So, we do not really have to worry so much about great monuments, but it is more at a daily and domestic level that we may lose our contact with a Japanese sense of space.

### What is a Japanese space?

Let's start our enquiry with this simple question: is there still today something as a Japanese space, and is it still compatible with the universal spaces created by modernity? What is a Japanese space is an issue that can be questioned in relation to other

cultures and new spaces, especially those brought by modernity, which, in the case of Japan, has been imported from the West. Most of the time, a new space, a modern space, tends to alter or even overcome the previous one. In modern history, it is also when Japanese traditional cities started to disappear that we started to define what could be a Japanese space. For instance, we can see that already, in 1933, the first words of Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* go back to the origin of this issue. In 1933, Tanizaki, who left Tokyo after the Great Kantō earthquake in 1923, has been living for 10 years in the Kansai region. Between Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, he has discovered another region, with other customs and habits, a different culture, a different dialect, and a landscape that is, on many aspects, more traditionally "Japanese" than his native Tokyo. *In Praise of Shadows* starts with the typical problem encountered by a mid-life Japanese man



Fig. 2: View of the Kamogawa 鴨川 towards Kitayama 北山, the northern mountains of Kyoto, photograph taken from Kōjin-bashi 荒神橋. Photograph ©Andrea Flores Urushima, Jacquet 2014.

who decides to renovate a house:

What incredible pains the fancier of traditional architecture must take when he sets out to build a house in pure Japanese style, striving somehow to make electric wires, gas pipes, and water lines harmonize with the austerity of Japanese rooms—even someone who has never built a house for himself must sense this when he visits a teahouse, a restaurant, or an inn. For the solitary eccentric it is another matter, he can ignore the blessings of scientific civilization and retreat to some forsaken corner of the countryside; but a man who has a family and lives in the city cannot turn his back on the necessities of modern life—heating, electric lights, sanitary facilities—merely for the sake of doing things the Japanese way. (Tanizaki 2001 [1933]: 5)

In his essay on Japanese esthetics, Tanizaki exposes the problems that originates from a brutal confrontation between tradition and modernity, between a so-called traditionalist Orient and a so-called modernist Occident, and between esthetics and techniques which are overlaying one on top of the other. By announcing the destruction of the traditional Japanese esthetics, Tanizaki is also giving some elements of definition. Among them, the relationship to new techniques and to new spatial experiences, new technological devices, other kinds of lights, and the disappearance of shadow: these are all fundamental issues of architecture. From Tanizaki's words, we may understand that some features of Western modernity—especially those related to modern technologies—do not fit with the traditional aesthetic, as if there were a kind of essential incompatibility.

The disappearing of Japanese space, but also its re-definition, has become an even more crucial issue after the war, and modern architects started to pay more attention to their own tradition. In the thirties and forties, Japanese architects have come back, for ideological reasons, to traditional architecture—

in a neo-classical manner that we will not discuss here—, but after the war the reference to Japanese architecture has become less literal. Actually, for the contemporary architect, the reference to a so-called Japanese style (or *wafu* 和風) can be compared to the wear of a costume: it corresponds to aesthetical codes, but moreover to a social practice. And sometimes, clothes don't make the man. Nowadays, in the modern world, globalized, uniformed, when one dresses in an oriental manner it needs to have a particular meaning.

The above photograph (see fig. 3) depicts the German-born American architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969), together with his spouse Ise, wearing *yukata* 浴衣, and slippers (probably plastic ones) in the garden of a *ryokan* in Hiroshima, where they staid together with the Japanese architect Tange Kenzō 丹下健三 (1913-2005) in 1954. On this picture, there is a background, a scenery, but we can also see a rather funny situation, something that does not fit in the picture. There is probably a cultural shift because these persons are not Japanese, but there is also a kind of temporal shift because Ise Gropius is carrying a new camera (probably made in Japan) and this new technique seems to be at the center of the attention: it is something new that reveals the fake “traditionality” of the scene (together with the plastic slippers).

In this paper, I will present the evolution of Japanese contemporary architecture and how architects have been reacting, from the 1950s until nowadays, towards the issue of Japanese architecture—or vis-à-vis the identity of Japanese architecture—through some examples taken from



Fig. 3: Walter Gropius and Ise Gropius, Hiroshima, 1954. Photograph reproduced in Asano 1956.

three architectural practices. I hope that this historical flow will help us understand what contemporary Japanese architecture should be like.

## Modern views on tradition

The story of contemporary Japanese architecture starts with Tange Kenzō, who can be considered as the grandfather of most of contemporary Japanese architects. Born in 1913, he was actually born the same year as my late grandfather. Tange's first paper, published in 1936 of the journal of the Department of Architecture of Tokyo Imperial University is a reflection on "Things to Come" (Tange 1936). In this paper, Tange criticizes what modern architecture has become through the recent influence of industrialization and mercantilism. His reflection shows that he was aware of the fact that architecture is the materialistic expression of a society. Tange's architectural production has always been connected and adapted to social and political trends.

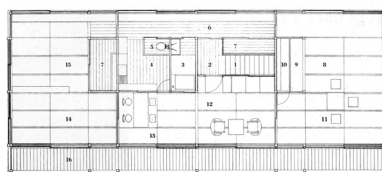
After WWII, Tange Kenzō has been one of the first architects to design a modern architecture that refers to a certain architectural tradition. Modern architects have chosen Katsura villa as a model of Japanese architecture that would bear, *per se*, some fundamental values of modern architecture. This type of architecture, photographed by Ishimoto Yasuhiro 石元泰博 (1921-2012) in the fifties, especially the Shoin style (*shoin-zukuri* 書院造り), made of thin squared columns, is probably the closest to a rational modern esthetic. Through the black and white pictures illustrating the famous bilingual book *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture* (Tange, Ishimoto, Gropius 1960), Ishimoto designs an abstract composition centered on the lines of wooden carpentry. It also shows how a photographic work can reveal architectural intentions. Photography prepares the architectural discourse: it shows what has to be shown. In this picture of Katsura Villa (see fig. 4, left), we see very thin pillars, a correspondence between the rhythm of these pillars and the façade modules, a



Fig. 4: Photographs taken by Ishimoto Yasuhiro, at Katsura Villa (left) and at Hiroshima Peace Center (right), *circa* 1953, adapted from Tange, Ishimoto, Gropius 1960 and Tange, Fujimori 2002.

clear and simple architecture, well-designed details.

These two photographs (fig. 4) have been taken by the same photographer (Ishimoto) at the same time, around 1953, at Katsura and at Hiroshima. By comparing these two images, we can understand that, for the building of the Hiroshima Peace Centre, Tange re-interprets with a concrete structure, the Shoin style of Katsura villa. We could say that he designed a concrete structure as if it was made in wood. Would we necessarily think about Katsura if we had not juxtaposed these two images? Probably not, but if we look at them carefully, we can see a



- |                |               |                   |                         |
|----------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 階段 staircase | 5 便所 toilet   | 9 床の間 tokonoma    | 13 居間・食事 dining r.      |
| 2 玄関 entrance  | 6 廊下 corridor | 10 書斎 bookshelf   | 14 居間 living room       |
| 3 浴室 bathroom  | 7 押入 closet   | 11 居間 客室 guest r. | 15 寝室 bedroom           |
| 4 台所 kitchen   | 8 書卓 desk     | 12 居間 living room | 16 縁側 veranda (nure an) |

Fig. 5: Tange Kenzō, Tange villa, Seijō no ie 成城の家, Tokyo, 1953. Main façade (photograph ©Hirayama Chūji 平山忠治) and plan adapted from Tange, Fujimori 2002.



correspondence. There are rather strange features in this building (called *honkan* 本館) of the Hiroshima Peace Center. For instance, we can wonder why the handrail is so low, it has not any functional value—would not prevent someone from falling—, but this is one of the small stylish details that connect it to the proportions of the classical architecture of Katsura Villa.

In this paper, I will focus on the works of three architectural practices in Japan, between the fifties and the present time. The first example is the house built by Tange at the beginning of the fifties, in Tokyo, in the district of Seijō 成城, where his spouse held a land. At that time, Tange was starting his career and he was working on the construction of Hiroshima Peace Center (1949-1955). This is the only house designed by Tange. He built it for himself, for his household, just after his wedding, and this work can be considered as a manifest for his capacity to design a Japanese modern architecture. It is definitely modern: the plan and the façade are free, the window is long and horizontal, the house is elevated on pilotis, the pillar and beam structure is visible. As for its general composition, it could be compared to Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (Sendai 2014: 266-267)

At the same time, the house features characteristics of Japanese architecture: like Katsura villa, it is built on thin squared pillars, an elevated floor, and it is covered by a protruding roof that extends over a veranda (*hiroen* 広縁 or *nure.en* 濡縁). It is mostly the roof and the wooden carpentry that give a Japanese traditional touch to the building, even the modern glazed façade, on which surrounding trees are reflected, fits in the whole scene. There is also a feeling of modernity: both aspects are blurred.

Inside the building, as we can see in the plan and interior photographs, Tange has created a new hybrid planning where he alternates tatami and wooden flooring—Japanese and western furniture. Both tatami mats and wooden boards have the same proportions; wooden areas are reserved for the use of western furniture. In this picture of the Tange family (fig. 6, right), the mother (Toshiko) wears a kimono, while the daughter (Michiko) and the father (Kenzō)



Fig. 6: Interior photographs of Tange villa. On the left, view of the guest room (fig. 5, plan, no. 11) towards the veranda (photo ©Ishimoto Yasuhiro); on the right, in the same guest room, behind the family scene, painting on *fusuma* by Shinoda Tōkō (photo ©Uchida Michiko 内田道子). Adapted from Tange, Fujimori 2002 and Toyokawa 2013.

wear western clothes.

Behind them, in what could be considered as a modern *tokonoma* 床の間—an alcove in the living room where is exposed a piece of art—we can see a work of Shinoda Tōkō 篠田桃紅 (b. 1913), an artist known for producing an abstract art that merges calligraphy and ink painting. By positioning glass panels under the roof structure, Tange gives the impression that the fixed and immobile building structure is detached from the unfixed and mobile elements. For instance, by the transparency of the glass panels, the roof, the sliding screens, the *fusuma* 襖 and *shoji* 障子, appear to be free standing elements. Japanese elements are revealed, magnified by a modern way of design.

## Towards an abstraction of Japanese space

The early works of the architect Shinohara Kazuo 篠原一男 (1925-2006) do offer a point of view on Japanese architecture that is slightly different from that of Tange. Shinohara was architect-professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology until 1986, at the time when design laboratories could also be a proper architectural practice. His laboratory focused on designing houses for about 30 years—while

Tange Kenzō, after completing his own house, moved to a bigger and more monumental scale. Like Tange and other architects did after WWII, Shinohara developed a discourse on the tradition (*dentō* 伝統) of Japanese architecture. He did attempt to define what are the characteristics of Japanese space mostly from the domestic scale of the house, by developing a particular discourse based on his study of housing (*jūtakuron* 住宅論), of the living space (*seikatsu kukan* 生活空間), and several studies on the “The methodology of Japanese architecture” (*Nihon kenchiku no hōhō* 日本建築の方法). Both his design and writings contribute to a specific discourse represented by emblematic aphorism such as “Tradition can be a starting point for creation, but not a retrogression” (Shinohara 1960) or “Housing is an art” (Shinohara 1962). Shinohara studied architecture after graduating in mathematics, and he always had a rather clear objective from his study of spatiality: that of being able to abstract some basic architectural elements in order to build up a particular vocabulary. The evolution of his work, until the end of the sixties, shows how he has progressively tried to design an abstract Japanese space. In other words, we can say that he attempted to interpret the different traditions of the Japanese house for creating contemporary houses that would represent an abstract, not figurative, reference to traditional elements. Let’s observe this evolution through the description of five houses.

Shinohara’s first work, House in Kugayama (Kugayama no ie 久我山の家), was built in 1954 in Tokyo. Tange’s villa could have been a rather influential design for this house—especially if we compare the photographs of their façade (see fig 5 and 7), taken by the same photographer (Hirayama)—but it is also a kind of variation on Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye main façade. The façade is modular, with binary division. There is no veranda on the second floor, it is on the ground floor. Structurally, the main difference with Tange’s villa comes from the use of a steel and concrete structure. The plan is simple, symmetrical, the kitchen and dining room are on the ground floor, and the rooms on the second floor. Looking at the plans, we can already see some particularities: the

absence of corridors, the direct connection between rooms, which are separated by sliding panels, and a clear distinction between two kind of spaces: serving spaces (kitchen and dining room, on the ground floor) and served spaces (living room and bedrooms, on the second floor), and a division between western and Japanese rooms, *i.e.*, rooms with western furniture (tables and chair) and tatami rooms.

For a house called Umbrella house (Karakasa no ie から傘の家), a small space of about 50 m<sup>2</sup>, Shinohara conceived a squared house plan, which is a bit like a detached tea pavilion, under an expressive roof structure. The house was built in 1962 in what was then a suburban area of Tokyo, in the district of Suginami. It is actually named after the tea pavilion Karakasa-tei 唐傘亭 at Kōdaiji 高台寺, in Kyoto, known for its roof structure that is similar to

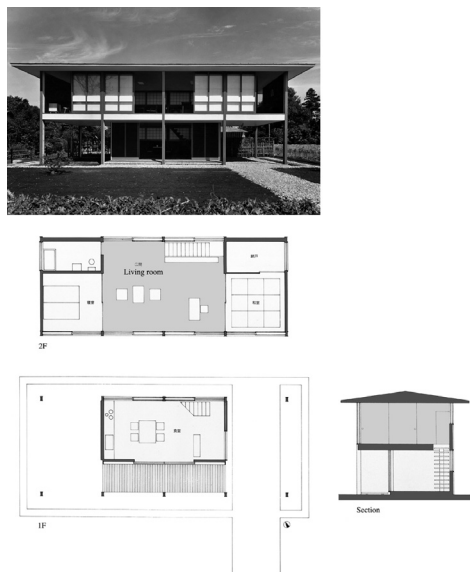


Fig. 7: Shinohara Kazuo, House in Kugayama, Tokyo, 1954. Main façade (photograph ©Hirayama Chūji), plans and section adapted by the author from Shinohara 1996.

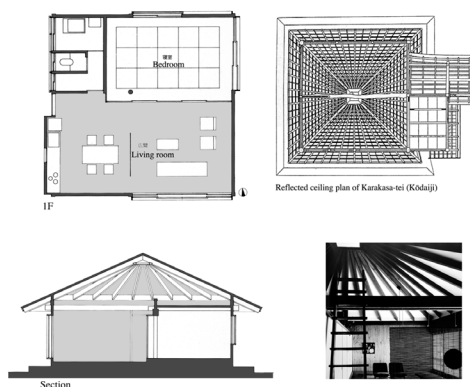


Fig. 8: Shinohara Kazuo, Umbrella House, Tokyo, 1962. Plan, section, interior photograph (©Murai Osamu 村井修), adapted by the author from Shinohara 1996.

umbrella frames, the frame being represented by the roof rafters (see fig. 8). The house is mainly divided into two kinds of spaces: there is a clear division between the tatami room and the rest of the house with a wooden floor. In the living room and kitchen, the roof structure is visible. There is a ladder, like in a farm, to climb on a mezzanine on top of the

tatami room. In the tatami room—the Japanese room (*washitsu* 和室)—, which is actually a bedroom (*shinshitsu* 寝室) there is a free-standing round pillar. This pillar refers to the traditional *Daikoku-bashira* 大黒柱, dedicated to Ebisu (or Daikoku), the god of Prosperity, which protects the household. The *Daikoku-bashira* is usually placed at the center of the house, it has a central role in supporting the roof structure, it is the biggest pillar, one of the first to be erected, and it symbolizes the vitality of the house. This central pillar will become a recurrent motive in Shinohara's architecture.

The House with an Earthen Floor (*Doma no ie* 土間の家), built in Nagano prefecture in 1963, is also a 50 m<sup>2</sup> squared plan house, divided around a central pillar. In the Japanese alps, Shinohara designed a kind of rural house (*minka* 民家) for the photographer Ōtsuji Kiyoji 大辻清司 (1923-2001). There is only one floor, with a full height until the roof. Here the space is also clearly divided between the tatami rooms and the Earthen floor (*doma* 土間). It is a wooden structure, with visible round pillars and beams.

After several years of study of Japanese spatiality, Shinohara designed a

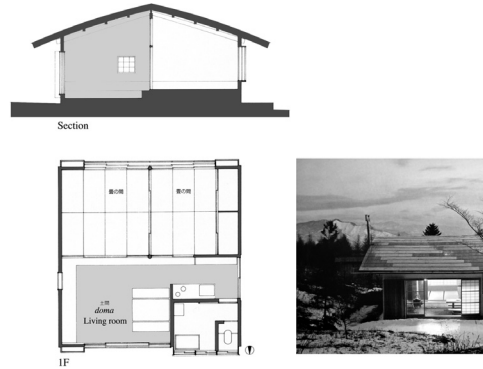


Fig. 9: Shinohara Kazuo, House with an Earthen Floor, Nagano, 1964. Main façade (photograph ©Ōtsuji Kiyoji), plan and section adapted by the author from Shinohara 1996.

house that he considered to be representative of his discourse on tradition: the House in White (Shiro no ie 白の家). For this house built in Tokyo in 1967, he defined a method for designing a Japanese space. Concerning housing, Shinohara considers that the conception of space is actually rather irrational (*higōriteki* 非合理的), and that a particular spatial language has been developed according to non-rational criteria. In a text on “The Japanese Conception of Space” (Shinohara 1964), he explains that from the beginning of the 17th century, while in the West the conception of space have integrated several scientific progress, such as the use of a three-dimensional perception due to the discovery of perspective, Japanese artists and carpenters were still creating spaces based on a two-dimensional perception. He has then defined several “coordinates of irrationality” corresponding to the creation of a Japanese space (see fig. 10).

First of all, Shinohara defines the “frontality” (*shōmensei* 正面性) as one particular aspect of Japanese architecture, mostly due to a two-dimensional conception of space. This impression is created by a frontal view projected on a plan. A space divided by sliding screens does usually generate this kind of frontality. When one enters the House in White, his first impression is a frontal view, facing the wall that divides the living space to the rest of the house.

The “division” (*bunkatsu* 分割) is another notion related to the conception of frontality. Shinohara considers that a Japanese space is made of division lines, while in the West rooms are designed



Fig. 10: Shinohara Kazuo, House in White, Tokyo, 1967. Interior photograph (©Ueda Hiroshi 上田宏), plans and section adapted by the author from Shinohara 1996.

with a “connection” (*renketsu* 連結). In western modern architecture, this connection between spaces is usually a corridor. In Japanese architecture there are no corridors, there are no spaces which only function is to do a connection between rooms. The division, *bunkatsu*, is the way of dividing spaces, and rooms, without connective spaces, without corridors. It gives the impression that the house is only one room, with divisions (usually, sliding screens).

Shinohara does also mention the presence of a “wasteful space” (*muda na kukan* 無駄な空間). He developed this concept in reaction to the modern notion of functionality. In contemporary housing where each space is designed according to a particular function and a precise surface, Shinohara propose to reverse this logic and to include, even in a very small house, a space that would not have a particular function and would be relatively spacious. This “wasteful space” is not purely functional; it is a void that gives a feeling of wholeness.

In the series of houses designed by Shinohara in his first period, until the end of the sixties, there is also a central pillar, which is a symbolical element of the construction and the support of the household, a reference to the *Daikoku-bashira*. In the House in White, the central pillar is part of the main composition; it is one of the first elements that are seen when entering the house. It is detached one step forward the frontal view on the division wall (see fig. 10). Shinohara designed an abstract composition: on a white wall, which is like a screen, the door, the window, the pillar, seem to be like objects; like an interior landscape or a still life composition. In this house, there is no garden; these elements are re-creating an artificial landscape. Shinohara wrote that he encountered “nature” in seeing this cedar log inside the high ceiling white box-like living room of the House in White, and that this was part of the “construction of a man-made nature” (*jinkō shizen no kōchiku* 人工自然の構築). The term “nature” employed by Shinohara does not only relate to the raw nature and to the organicity of the wood, it is an “abstract conception born as a result of the interplay between the simplified, abstracted, white painted squared box and the cedar bark” (Shinohara 1971, 161).

After working on the theme of tradition, Shinohara spent the next 10 years on different themes, but in some of his later works he developed his previous discourse in a more expressive way. In 1974, he completed a country house for the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō 谷川俊太郎 (b. 1931), for whom he had already designed a house in Tokyo in 1958. The house is located in a forest of Gunma

prefecture, North of Tokyo. For this house, the only request of the client was formed in a short poem:

*Fuyu no ie mata wa kaitakusha no koya (jūtaku)*

*Natsu no kūkan mata wa hanshinronsha no kyōkai (jūtaku de nakute ii)*

冬の家又は開拓者の小屋（住宅）

夏の空間又は汎神論者の教会（住宅でなくていい）

A winter house or a pioneer's hut (house)

A summer space or a pantheist Church (doesn't need to be a house)

(Tanikawa Shuntarō quoted in Shinohara 1976)

The house is built on an inclined land surrounded by beautiful trees. Shinohara did not want to recreate this nature inside the house but he tried to abstract some features of the landscape, such as the topography and the organicity of the earth. From the exterior, the house looks like a simple wooden cabin, but Shinohara designed two different spaces under one roof: a “winter”

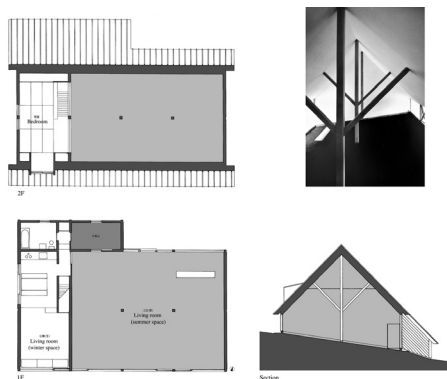


Fig. 11: Shinohara Kazuo, The House of Mister Tanikawa (Tanikawa-san no ie 谷川さんの家), Naganochō, Gunma Prefecture, 1974. Plans, interior photograph (©Shinkenchiku-sha) and section photograph (adapted by the author from Shinohara 1996).



space and a “summer” space. The winter space is equipped and furnished in order to provide a comfortable living; it looks like an archetypal log cabin. It is a small house on 2 floors with a tatami bedroom on the second floor. The summer space is an empty space (or a “wasteful space”), with a bench and 2 pillars in the middle, and the ground is left naked, as it is: an inclined earthen floor (*doma*). An architectural emotion, which Shinohara also calls an “anti-space” (*hankūkan* 反空間), is created through this contrasted encounter between the organic ground floor and the man-made geometrical space—the right angle roof, vertical pillars and their braces. It does not have any meaning in itself but it functions as a spatial machine, which allows the user to produce its own meaning. It is only when someone traverses this space, involving their own body in the space, that the void of the summer room acquires a vivid and vital significance (Shinohara 1976: 34)

For the House in Uehara street (Uehara dōri no jūtaku 上原通りの住宅), in Shibuya (Tokyo), the structure of the building becomes also an expressive element. It is a house built for the photographer Ōtsuji Kiyoji, the owner of the House with an Earthen Floor. His studio is on the ground floor, the living space is on the second floor, and there is a bedroom on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor (see fig. 12). As in the House of Mister Tanikawa, the structure of the house, the “naked realities” that make the house exist, is part of a spatial machine that has no meaning but to provide a space of experimentation for the dweller. This house is built in concrete, and the structure, made of massive concrete pillars and braces, emerges at the center of the house. The exiguity of the space and the overdimensioned size of the pillars enter in conflict and produce a tension inside the house, particularly on the second floor, in the living room, where braces divide the space like a wall. Shinohara designed this house after a trip in Africa where he was impressed by the vitality and strength of symbols and totemic expressions, and he wanted to express this power in his architecture. He was also influenced by Levi-Strauss’s *Savage Mind*, and decided to design a so-called “savage” (*yasei* 野生) space. For the House in Uehara, he designed a space made

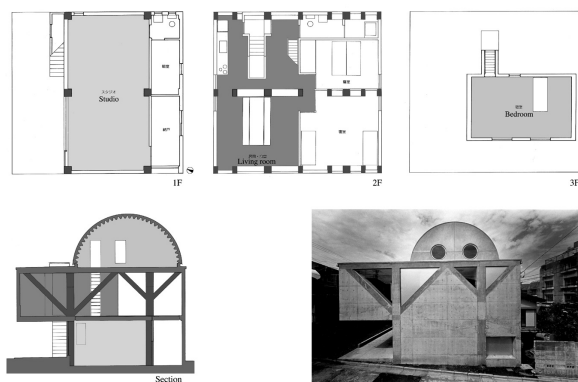


Fig. 12: Shinohara Kazuo, House in Uehara street, Tokyo, 1976. Main façade (photograph ©Taki Kōji 多木浩二), plans and section adapted by the author.

of “violent things” (Shinohara 1979), which is also a reaction to the “chaotic” urban context.

## How contemporary Japanese architecture should be like?

As an end point to this discussion on the fabrication of a Japanese space, I would like to conclude with a more personal experiment: the construction of the new building of the French School of Asian studies (Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, EFEO) in Kyoto, which was inaugurated in 2014 and was granted by an award from the Holcim Foundation for Sustainable Construction (<http://www.holcimfoundation.org/Projects/high-tech-low-tech>).

Compared to the previous examples, this building is not a house, but it has more of less the same proportions; it is a 300 square meters research center specialized in the study of Japan and Asian civilizations. The idea was to design a building that would be of contemporary Japanese style in order to represent the mission of this institution.



Fig. 13: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, main facade and plans.

The building was designed by Mikan—Mikan gumi (みかんぐみ) in Japanese—, which is a funny name because it is used in kindergartens, where each group of kids is called by a name (of fruit, flower, etc): these are the mandarin group (*mikan-gumi*). The main partners are 3 Japanese architects graduated from Shinohara laboratory, and one French architect, Manuel Tardits, graduated from Maki laboratory at the University of Tokyo. Maki Fumihiko 槇文彦 (b. 1928) was a student of Tange Kenzō, and it is interesting to imagine that this team of architects does well know the examples of works previously presented here.

In this building, there are 3 floors that show a different way to resolve the same structural problem: on the first floor the pillar beam structure is apparent in the library, on the second floor the structure is hidden by the office walls, and on the third floor the roof structure could be supported without pillars, by the use of braces (see fig. 14, right).

The building refers to Japanese architecture at different levels: the most visible level is that of the architectural details. Like in Kyoto's city houses (*machiya*), the entrance to is on one side of the building and we enter through a space that is

an interpretation of the *doma*: a paved floor that is like an extension of the exterior floor. From the entrance (*genkan* 玄関), one of the first view is oriented to a narrow and low window (fig. 14, left). It is a frontal view and this opening appears like a picture, a frame on the neighbor's wall. By



Fig. 14: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, entrance (*genkan*), 1F (left), and seminar room, 3F (right). Photographs ©Jérémie Souteyrat, EFEO.

its size and position, this window is also a reference to the tea pavilion (*chashitsu*) entrance, the *nijiri-guchi* 躰り口, from which one enters, literally, on their knees. The entrance is the first level of the staircase, which is treated as a room in itself, actually as a kind of tea pavilion. The walls are covered by OSB panels, which have been chosen for their raw materiality that reminds the rusticity of the tea pavilions made of “natural” elements. The staircase is separated from the rest of the building by sliding doors, *shoji*, which are not made of paper, *washi* 和紙, but of antique stained glass. Stained glass is also a material that is almost never used by contemporary architects, because it is not an industrial material, and because it belongs to an antique tradition that does not look “modern.” But do we, and will we, “in the future,” need to look modern, or will we just try to rediscover our past? Let’s think and go back to this question later. These stain glasses, which are hand-made (blown) from a technique established between the 17th and the 19th century, were one of the first to be used in Japanese occidental building in the late 19th century; they contrast with the electro-chromic glasses of the curtain-wall façade, which are high tech glasses that automatically filter the UV and the light intensity (fig. 15). The whole history of glass, from its most archaic to its most contemporary expression, is exposed within the span of this



Fig. 15: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, staircase, 2F. Photograph ©Jérémie Souteyrat, EFEO.

staircase.

The reference to Japanese architecture is also, at a more essential level, expressed by the structure of the building, by the use of wood and carpenter's techniques. On the first floor, in the library, where the structure is apparent, we can see how the building is constructed as a traditional standard carpentry work. The wood sections are rather thin because the span between pillars is only 1.8 meter long, this is a *ken* 間, the same length as a tatami. In traditional architecture, the *ken* is a standard measurement. In some extent it is also the minimal width for a room, a *ma* 間. Here the structure has a span of 1.8 meter in length and 3.6 meters in depth (fig. 16). It is economical, ecological, and it has the same resistance to earthquake as a concrete or steel building.

Seen from foreign eyes, the carpenter's work is particularly impressive. Once the concrete foundations are completed, the carpenters (about 5 persons) come and mantle the main wood structure in two days (see fig. 17). Every piece of wood is precut and numbered so that it adjusts perfectly on site. The cut and the design of each joint is more or less the same as what is done since centuries ago, they are precise and even rather beautiful (see fig. 18). Nowadays most of the standard cuts are made in factory, but for some less common woods, the carpenters do the cut by hand on site (fig. 19). This is the case for the Japanese



Fig. 16: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, library space.  
Photograph ©Jérémie Souteyrat, EFEO.

cedar (*cryptomeria*) logs coming from the North mountain of Kyoto. This wood is called Kitayama *sugi* (北山杉, “cedar of the North mountain”) or Tennen Kitayama *sugi* (天然北山杉 “natural cedar of the North mountain”) since it has dried naturally after being cut in the mountain. I first heard about it in Kawabata Yasunari’s novel on Kyoto, *Koto* 古都 (1962; *The Old Capital*), in which Kawabata compares the rectitude of this tree’s trunk to the rectitude of one’s mind and heart. “The cedars all stand there straight and beautiful. I wish human heart grew like that,” says Chieko, Kawabata’s heroine (Kawabata 2007, 65). Intrigued by this wood, and the way it is cultivated, I went there, to the place of its origin, in the village of the Nakagawa Kitayamachō 中川北山町. The village of Nakagawa-chō, belongs,



Fig. 17: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, the wooden structure mantled in 2 days, September 2013. Photographs ©Benoît Jacquet.



Fig. 18: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, joints between two beams, September 2013. Photograph ©Benoît Jacquet.



Fig. 19: Mikan, EFEO Centre Kyoto, carpenters at work, September 2013. Photograph ©Benoît Jacquet.

administratively to the northern ward of Kyoto, it is a typical linear village, following the river. It is a bit desolated, and one may wonder if can still have a “future.” There, the person who sold us the 4 central pillars of the Centre, Nakata Osamu 中田治, told us that his company (Nakagen 中源株式会社) is the last one that is still drying the logs according to the traditional method, and he explained us, by an interesting sketch (fig. 20), how this is done.

The *sugi* (cedar, *cryptomeria*) is one of the most used Japanese woods in construction, because its trunk grows rather fast and straight, because it is



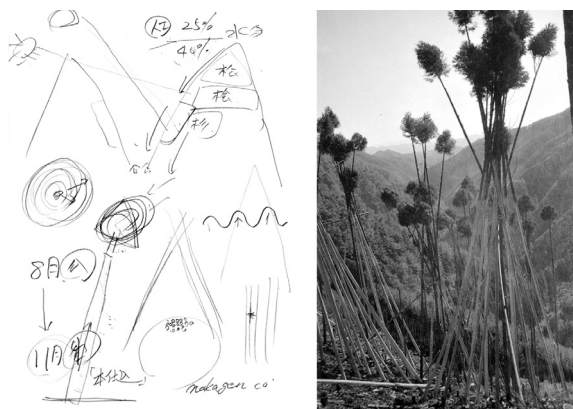


Fig. 20: Explicatory sketch and photograph of Kitayama *sugi* (*cryptomeria*) cutting and drying, by Nakata Osamu.

rather tender and then easy to work (especially for small pieces of wood such as sliding doors frames), because it has been widely planted around cities for the reconstruction of houses after WWII—actually causing, from the 1960s, a source of disequilibrium of the ecosystem, and producing massive allergies to pollen (*kafunshō* 花粉症, pollinosis of cedar) during spring. On the mountain, the *sugi* is planted on the foot, the cypress (*hinoki* 檜) are planted of the middle part and the pines (*matsu* 松) are on the top (see sketch, fig. 20). *Sugi*'s branches are always cut so that they produce clean trunks, and there is only the crown remaining on top of the tree. In winter, for the trees that are situated deeper in the valley, there is only the crown of the tree that receives direct sunlight. As Kawabata wrote it, “one reason the famous cedar logs were raised here was that the area received ample rain and little sunshine. It was also protected from the wind” (Kawabata 2007, 62). The trees are cut in summer when the sunrays are more vertical and the temperature is high. Ritually, the trees are cut at the time of the first full moon of August, if it is not raining on that day. The timber men climb on the trees and take out their barks. The trees are cut in a circular area, and their crowns fall down towards the center of this circle, inclined like the poles of a tipi (fig. 20). Their, in the forest, the trunks remains under the sun



for one week. The crown of the tree is still “alive” and continues sucking the liquid that is inside the trunk, thus naturally drying it through its veins, like a straw. In one week the tree loses 40% of its water, it becomes lighter and can then be easily transported in the village where they are polished with sand and water and finish drying in the storehouses, after 3 months, from October, it can be used for construction. In comparison, an artificial drying takes 6 months, but this technique that uses electric heating does not produce the same quality of wood; instead of losing water from its veins, the wood does sweat mostly laterally and does not only loses its water but also most of its essential oils, those that naturally protects it. Nowadays, these logs are only used for the traditional architecture, the construction of tea pavilions, of architecture of Sukiya style (*sukiya-zukuri* 数寄屋造り), for the pillars exposed in the *tokonoma*. From one same variety of seed, a trunk can have about 50 different kind of expression, and 3 meters high pillars have a price varying between 1 to 1,000 times more expensive. These are values that most of people do not notice.

It is therefore important to notice that the works presented in this paper are very particular in Japan and are not representative of most of the architecture build in this country. Actually, like everywhere else in the world, the cities and most of the buildings are not designed by architectural practices. As for individual houses only, 50% of them are built and designed by big general construction firms, 45% by contractors specialized in carpentry (*kōmuten* 工務店), and there is only about 5% of them that are actually designed by architectural practices. For the EFEO Centre in Kyoto we decided to employ a local carpenter, instead of a bigger construction company in order to show that it is possible to build a contemporary architecture with a traditional knowledge.

In conclusion, I just want to come back to the image of the river crossing Kyoto, the Kamogawa (fig. 2), as a wish for the future. When we have the chance to see an image like this we are not only facing a beautiful landscape, which is as natural as it is artificially shaped. We are also facing both the past—things that were born before us—, and what we will possibly become, when

we will disappear in nature. The mountains and the river are symbolically representing this notion of limit (*kyōkai* 境界): the limit between gods and humans, between death and life, but also between the past and the future. We can see our future in the past.

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(日本語レジュメ)

この後に来る日本的なものについて：  
どのように現代日本建築を作るか

ブノワ・ジャケ

建築家は常に彼らの建築物の未来について関心を持ち続けてきた。現代の作品はアバンギャルドであるために、すぐに時代遅れにならないように、そしてこの後に来るものの創造のために、自身の現在性を乗り越えなければならない。同時に、建築家はしばしば彼らの伝統と地域アイデンティティに直面する。1950年代から今日に至るまで、日本建築の進化は、どのように建築家が彼らの作品と言説を急速な都市と社会の変化に適応させるか、そして「日本的なもの」を作ることによって、どのように新しい日本のアイデンティティを発明するかということをあらわしている。