



CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

TRACING THE NEXT GENERATION

JAMES STEELE

Contemporary Japanese Architecture

Contemporary Japanese Architecture presents a clear and comprehensive overview of the historical and cultural framework that informs the work of all Japanese architects, as an introduction to an in-depth investigation of the challenges now occupying the contemporary designers who will be the leaders of the next generation. It separates out the young generation of Japanese architects from the crowded, distinguished, multi-generational field they seek to join, and investigates the topics that absorb them, and the critical issues they face within the new economic reality of Japan and a shifting global order. Salient points in the text are illustrated by beautiful, descriptive images provided by the architects and from the extensive collection of the author. By combining illustrations with timelines and graphics to explain complex ideas, the book is accessible to any student seeking to understand contemporary Japanese architecture.

James Steele is an architect who received both his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, and practiced in the Philadelphia region before accepting a position at Dammam University in Saudi Arabia where he taught for eight years. He then served as Senior Editor at Academy Editions, and taught at the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture in London before relocating to the University of Southern California School of Architecture in 1991, receiving a PhD in Urban Planning and Development at USC in 2002. Professor Steele has taught history and theory as well as design studio, and also organized the first Foreign Studies Program for architecture students in Malaysia in 1998. He administered it up through its fifteenth and final session in 2013 and then founded and became the director of a new undergraduate program in South America, based in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He has written extensively on contemporary architecture and has been a guest critic and speaker at numerous universities in the United States and internationally.

“James Steele has written an immensely well researched, insightful and scholarly work on the genealogy of contemporary Japanese architecture and in the process of unravelling this, he demystifies the architecture and explains in depth the ‘whys’, the ‘hows’ and the ‘whats’ of modern Japanese architecture since the Second World War. The book is not just invaluable for architects seeking to understand Japanese architecture, it is *sine qua non* for those in the humanities seeking to understand the Japanese mind and culture through the medium of architectural studies.”—Ken Yeang (Dr.), Principal, T.R.Hamzah & Yeang Sdn. Bhd. (Malaysia)

Contemporary Japanese Architecture

Tracing the next generation

James Steele

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*For my sons Christopher and Casey
and
my granddaughter Remi*

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The USC School of Architecture had no foreign studies presence in Asia and very little cultural diversity of any kind in its curriculum when I first arrived there in 1991, and so it seemed necessary to establish a base in that region, and to include more relevant material on it in the history-survey sequence and by creating several elective offerings. Although financial, logistical and linguistic issues finally dictated that the new full semester Program in Asia be based at the University of Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur, it also included a substantial segment in Japan.

For the next 15 years, from its inauguration in 1998 until it ended in 2013, the first two weeks of that program were spent exploring Japan, seeing and analyzing significant architecture of all periods there as well as visiting architects' offices, and generally immersing

myself in its richly textured history and culture. These annual visits were augmented with several additional personal trips each year and as connections increased, cultural knowledge did as well, in a multi-layered way. Yo-ichiro Hakomori was instrumental in helping to organize the early phase of that program in Japan.

A preparatory course was one of the required prerequisites for the Asia Program, to familiarize students with each of the countries they would experience prior to departure. In teaching this as well as the history-survey series with its added content on Japan, and a new elective on contemporary Asian architecture, which I introduced when the Foreign Studies initiative in the region was launched, it became obvious that no overarching text existed that covered all of the material that had to be taught. This extended to include the dearth of comprehensive coverage of the youngest generation of Japanese architects as well, which interested and engaged the students most. It became necessary to patch together readings from a variety of sources, as well as articles and field notes from office and site visits that started to accumulate, and these became touchstones for this project.

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Introduction

The (dis)continuities of Japanese architecture

Japan entered the modern world in 1868, with the advent of the Meiji Restoration, which was initiated in response to the very real threat of foreign colonization. Although the word “feudal” is controversial among historians today, the nation had operated under a social structure that fits our conventional understanding of that word during the Tokugawa Shogunate, and remained deliberately isolated and unchanged for hundreds of years. In rapid succession over the course of the next two generations, it careened through social, cultural and technical transformations of unprecedented speed and scope, starting with an embrace of Western ideas and values, followed by a reflexive, xenophobic retrenchment enveloped in hyper-nationalism and militarization, a devastating World War, the foreign occupation it had originally feared, rapid recovery and re-building, an economic bubble, a stock market collapse, and finally regression, stagnation and self-doubt.

The power of the media

A new generation now confronts an unbounded but also uncertain and troubling future, along with the possibility of equally dramatic upheavals, due to the geopolitical shifts now underway in both the region and the world, as well as within their own country. The young architects of that cohort, at the bottom of an inflexible ancestral hierarchy, are the standard bearers of a proud, carefully conceived heritage, incrementally

crafted during these previous periods of unprecedented change, as a collective expression of difference. That fragile image, in turn, is also rooted in a profoundly complicated national tradition, overlaid by what is undoubtedly the most technically advanced and densely saturated information society in the world.

Multiple forms of media constantly bombard the senses in endless competition for visual and mental attention in this “empire of signs” that French theorist Roland Barthes has described so well. It is evident that its youngest generation of architects are extremely proficient in using its latest digital iteration to both separate themselves from the crowded field of new personalities that enter the profession each year, and in leveraging the smallest, seemingly insignificant projects into larger ones, with incrementally extensive global reach. By strategically using the Internet and social media, as well as the surprisingly effective device of mini-exhibitions that now seem to be constantly on offer throughout Tokyo and other major cities in Japan, they are able to amplify the typical range of small, entry-level projects available to young architects into substantial reputations and international fame.

While the use of the media is a time-honored way for architects to get noticed, ever since Adolf Loos launched *Das Andere*, and Le Corbusier followed suit with *L'Esprit Nouveau*, this phenomenon of capitalizing on the nexus between electronic hype and a complicit curatorial underground that provides frequent, small, pop-up exhibitions certainly is.¹

The latest generation that is the final focus of this investigation must navigate an incredibly complicated cultural landscape, but they also stand a chance of finally being able to break free of many of the most repressive parts of its gravitational pull, which have ancient roots but started to coalesce at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration a century and a half ago. To bring the challenges they face into proper perspective and in order to fully appreciate the disjunctions that confront them, it is necessary to analyze the complex legacy of the entirety of the proud public consciousness that they represent. Among the many other, less daunting options available, this elusive goal inevitably indicated a roughly chronological, historically based framework, to position the next generation within a wider context, culminating in a review of the most legible issues that seem to characterize the work of young architects in Japan today. The dendritic path of discovery that ensued uncovered several recurring themes, which in no specific order include the following.

Sempai-Kohai: senior–junior relationships and professional genealogy

While apprenticeship continues to represent an important part of an architect's education throughout the world today, it is especially important to consider the aesthetic and stylistic lineage that derives from such relationships in Japan when trying to critique individual projects within the context of the culture they represent. Japanese architects continue to observe the age-old *Giri-On*, or superior-subordinate protocol, between a teacher, or *Sensei* and student or a master and an apprentice, which have remained intact in spite of the rejection of the past fostered by the Meiji Restoration. In fact, it has now become evident that the well-established, deeply entrenched hierarchical relationships between those engaged in the building trades not only survived this sudden, profoundly radical collective bifurcation, but have also provided a critical framework for future change.

This narrative of the venerable practice of apprenticeship in all trades and crafts has also extended to architects, because of the unique way that the profession has evolved over time and is still viewed in Japan today. Architects have historically been considered to

be just one of the many categories of *Kenchikushi* or construction trades, and there is still no legal distinction between them. While expressing respect for this traditional habit of designers becoming builders, the Japan Institute of Architects has voiced its concern about the dangers posed by what could be construed as a conflict of interest, eerily echoing a similar debate that raged within the American Institute of Architects until very recently, in which architects that also participated in the building process were considered to be somehow tainted by commercial interests and suspected of compromising their values.

Giri-On relationships, as one of the hierarchies that continue to both compartmentalize and standardize social experience in Japan, are still perpetuated through mutually reinforcing rituals, and it will be instructive to track the ways in which they guide future careers.²

Doken Kokka: the Construction State

Another closely related challenge facing the next generation is how to navigate the seemingly implacable legacy of the trilogy of politicians, financial institutions and contractors commonly referred to as the *Doken Kokka*, or Construction State, which can be traced back to the Meiji Restoration, and the fact that Japanese architects have evolved, over the last century and a half, in a symbiotic relationship with the political and economic forces that have transformed their nation. The so-called “big five” group of general contractors in Japan today, who are part of this triumvirate, are the Kajima Corporation, Shimizu Kentetsu, Obayashi Gumi, Taisei Kentetsu and Takenaka Komuten, who counted 70,000 employees between them in 2006, all have very large design departments and all started as carpenters' guilds at the end of Tokugawa rule, or soon afterward. Kajima Iwakichi started his “Kaisha” or firm in 1840, Shimizu Kisuke in 1804, Obayashi Yoshigoro in 1892, Taisei begun as Okura Kihachiro in 1887, and Takenaka, which is the oldest, established by Takenaka Tobei Masataka, in 1610.³ Each of these, and other smaller firms that were formed at that time and have thrived as their country has developed, were able to quickly adapt from using traditional methods of wood construction to the industrial material, such as steel, glass and concrete, which the new, modern buildings that were in demand required.

Because Japan tied its economic, if not its existential fate to the rising American star right after World War II, it quickly became the first developed nation in the Asia Pacific region. Due to Article 9 in its newly adopted Constitution, which limited its defense budget to a token amount to be spent for domestic protection, Japan was also able to funnel the majority of the money that would have otherwise been spent on a defense budget into development. As soon as the Occupation ended, architects were needed to re-design and re-build an urban landscape that had essentially been eradicated by war, and they were soon surfing on the providential wave of prosperity provided by this deficit as well as economic windfall provided by the Marshall Plan, and were able to convert its war-time industries, the *Zaibatsu*, to the production of military supplies that the United States needed in the Korean War.

Within a mere three decades, and in spite of a chronic shortage of raw materials of its own that forced it to become an export economy, trade deficits disappeared and Japan managed to leverage these advantages into becoming the world's second largest per capita GDP, with an average annual economic growth rate of 4 to 5 percent and a reputation as a global leader in technological excellence. In a scenario that echoes Chinese growth today, trade surpluses increased and the real estate market not only expanded domestically, but Japanese investors also began to purchase foreign properties on a large scale. This “miracle” was realized incrementally through three periods of Post War expansion. The first was the “Iwato Boom” or “high economic growth period” of the late 1950s, of 10 per cent per year, that occurred once basic infrastructure was finally established, and the national focus shifted to technology. The second boom was fueled by Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's “Re-modeling the Japanese Archipelago” Program, which was launched in 1972 but cut short by the “oil shocks” that followed soon afterward. The third phase of this expansion was the Heisei Boom from 1987 to 1990, followed by the crash of the Japanese “Bubble Economy” the next year.⁴

The *Doken Kokka*, or Construction State, evolved exponentially during these three phases of growth, from initially addressing the essential need of replacing and improving missing infrastructure to a financial behemoth supporting the entire Japanese social safety net. Despite a radically altered economic landscape during the “Lost

Decade” that followed this collapse, in which surpluses morphed into huge deficits, a well-established pattern of massive public works projects continued, mostly because they were seen as a way to reverse decline and stave off unemployment. At the beginning of the crash, more than 40 percent of the Japanese annual national budget was being funneled into construction.⁵

Due to their close, essentially indistinguishable association with contractors, and their mutual reliance on official approvals and largesse, architects were inextricably caught up in this addictive cycle as it transitioned from infrastructure to “extra-structure” as a make-work system that continued to enrich all concerned. The latest generation of their number has inherited this nightmare, which threatens not only financial but environmental disaster as the relentless leveling of the archipelago rolls on.⁶

Revisiting the future

Modernism is another recurring issue that has once again engaged the next generation of architects in Japan, just as it seems to have absorbed their predecessors and many others throughout Asia today. Those who rebuilt Japan after World War II may have literally had to begin from the ground up, but they did have the benefit of a sound theoretical framework to start with. Modernism, with both a large and small “m,” along with the wholesale adoption of Western styles and values that accompanied it, had been introduced almost 80 years earlier, during the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and to contextualize that framework, the debate that followed between the advocates of tradition and those for change is presented in some detail here. Modernism, with a capital “M” was eventually deemed to be too liberal and revolutionary to serve a war-time Imperial purpose, but after that enormously destructive period ended it re-emerged as not only the symbol of progress that it had been during the Meiji era, but also as a political statement about the victory of freedom and democracy over Fascism.

The choice of Kenzo Tange, along with Sachio Otani and Takashi Asada, to design the Hiroshima Peace Center and to rebuild this devastated city, and the selection of Tange to also design the Olympic Complex in Tokyo for the Games that were held there in 1964 underscored the unmistakable national message

that not only a modern re-birth but also recovery had finally been achieved and that Japan had finally returned from the ashes.

Modernism permeates the architecture that followed as well. Historian Ioanna Angelidou has perceptively noted that the Giri-On ritual also played an important role in this transition since, rather than resisting Western innovation, “the relation of master and disciple fostered the acceptance of modernist principles as representative of progress and the subsequent idealization of modern architecture” and, subsequently, “the discussion over tradition and adaptation nurtured an architectural culture of dialogical manifestation through a combination of practice and representation.”⁷

That intense and obdurate sense of national pride, and the competitive hope of finally being able to technically and economically prevail over a Western foe, not only seems to have softened considerably, but has arguably disappeared entirely. There is a new level of sophistication in evidence that indicates that both the memory of traditional constructs and the envy of foreign forms is now irrelevant and that the seemingly relentless cycle of assimilation and rejection of Western values and aesthetics has finally ended.

A noticeable indicator of this new self-confidence is an almost unanimous rejection of parametric modeling, in favor of the less predictable heuristic discoveries made possible by graphic investigation. The child-like joy found in the first sketches that many young Japanese architects use to reveal their ideas to themselves and others, regardless of the technical difficulty of the final scheme, is noticeably absent in the impersonal computer graphics and lack of conceptual investigation that seem to pass for design elsewhere in the developed world today. They have courageously resisted the lure of the electronic imperative in the early stages of project evolution, in spite of the high level of technological skill they possess, in the understanding that algorithms do not easily equate with tradition, and are unable to translate the rich cultural heritage they represent.

New environmental imperatives: re-inventing nature

Empathy with and a reverence for nature and sensitivity to its rhythms, further enhanced by geography that

heightens the poignancy of each of its four seasons, is an integral part of that heritage, and has historically inspired and informed both the spiritual and aesthetic life of the Japanese people. That leitmotif also runs throughout each of the chapters that follow, culminating in a polemical, structured commentary about the very real prospect of a future in which, in spite of this awareness, technology wins and nature is gone for good. The early twentieth-century American poet Joyce Kilmer famously said that “only God can make a tree,” but that hasn’t deterred many of the young architects presented here from trying to create suitable metaphors of their own in anticipation of a time when real trees disappear.⁸

The historical imperative

All of these topics revolve around one of the biggest issues confronting Japanese architects today, which is their own history and how to assess, unravel and negotiate it, and how to assimilate it in a way that allows them to confront outside influences as well. And, since this is Japan, where events that took place thousands of years ago, and the architecture that resulted from them are a daily source of discussion and reference, no serious critique of the ways in which they are managing to do that would be complete without at least an annotated overview of that complex past.

As this narrative unfolds, it eventually becomes obvious that no matter how distanced the work of any of the architects discussed here seems to be from that collective legacy, it remains to be discovered, in various permutations, at different depths just below the surface, and in spite of denials it can be shown to inform all of the creative decisions they make.

This proof is more challenging with the latest generation, who ostensibly seem to be the most distanced from their heritage and talk and write far less about it than their predecessors have. And yet, it is there, and open to discovery to those with a critical eye and willingness to look for it. The danger here, of course, is falling into the trap of confirmatory bias, in which one seeks information that is consistent with personal beliefs or stereotypes, and selects accordingly, to confirm them. And yet, the evidence presented speaks for itself.⁹

Notes

- 1 Ioanna Angelidou, "Intertwinements," *MAS Context*, 9, Networks.
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- 5 Gavan McCormack, "Breaking Japan's Iron Triangle," *The New Left Review*, 13, January–February 2002, p. 11.
- 6 Gavan McCormack, *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence*, M.E. Sharpe, 2001, p. 62.
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- 8 Joyce Kilmer, *Trees and Other Poems*, New York: George H. Doran Co., 1914, p. 19.
- 9 Raymond Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 2, 1998, pp. 175–220.



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PART I

An enduring cultural
framework



CHAPTER 1

The land and its people

History is never far away in Japan, to an extent that is rare elsewhere in the world. A thousand years seem like yesterday and the past is always foremost in the national subconscious. This keen awareness of a unified memory is even more evident among each generation of its architects, who constantly refer to it, making at least a rudimentary understanding of the entirety of their cultural recollection an absolute necessity.

A belief in divine origins

An essential component of any cohesive cultural entity is a binding foundation myth, and it is difficult to surpass a belief in a divine origin as a collective claim to authority. As in other mythologies, such as the Hindu *Ramayana*, or the *Theogony* by Hesiod, which codified the Hellenic pantheon or the *Prose and Poetic Edda* and Icelandic sagas, which did the same for the Norse and Germanic cosmology, the deities described in the Japanese equivalent, *The Kojiki or Record of Ancient Matters*, have a tantalizing combination of supernatural and distinctly human traits, making it seem almost possible that the stories are partially based on real people.

The collective narrative in the *Kojiki* begins with a God and a Goddess on a bridge (*Ama-no-uki-hashi*) who have descended from *Takama-ga-hara* or “the high plain of heaven.”¹ They are named Izanagi (he who invites) and Izanami, (she who invites) and after they dipped a lance into the primordial ocean below them,

the droplets from the tip formed *Onogoroshima*, which they then inhabited and populated.

Kagu-tsuchi, the God of Fire, who was the last of their children, fatally burned Izanagi during childbirth. This and the subsequent journey of Izanami to the “Land of the Dead” mark a critical turning point in the *Kojiki*, from creation to destruction, similar to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the Judeo-Christian tradition.²

The descent into Yomi

In passages that also echo similar motifs in other myths, Izanagi followed his wife to the underworld, to bring her back, but found she could not return because she had “eaten at the hearth of Yomi.” He begged the Gods to release her, but then, when he finally saw her horribly disfigured body he ran away.³ A chase ensued, first by Izanami’s female followers, then by the Goddess herself, but Izanagi reached the gateway of Yomi first, and rolled a boulder across it, sealing them inside. In washing away the stench of death, Izanagi gave birth to the Goddess of the Sun, *Amaterasu Omikami* (literally: “shining over heaven, great spirit”) the God of the Moon, *Tsukiyomi-no-mikoto* (Moon Counting, or Moonlit night), and the God of Summer Storms and the Sea, *Susano-o-no-Mikoto* (“his swift, impetuous, male-augustness”).

His father banished *Susano-no-Mikoto* from *Takama-ga-hara* for both his neglect of his duties and