

MODERNITY FROM FAR EAST

Kazuo Shinohara's Fourth Space

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Abstract

Since, according to Kenneth Frampton, 'regional or national cultures must today, more than ever, be ultimately constituted as locally inflected manifestations of "world culture"', contemporary Japanese culture would be in this sense the 'world culture' par excellence, structured on two important cultural imports - the first occurred between the 6th and 7th centuries when from China was introduced the ideographic writing, Confucian model of society and along with them Indian Buddhism; and the second one, during the late 19th century, when for the rapid modernization of the country Western politics, science and technology were adopted. Having soon faced, and deeply questioned, the possibilities and problems of a global dimension of the thought, Japanese culture could be considered an original synthesis of universality and local identity where, although the many contradictions, the meeting with the stranger allowed to discover what 'not to be', rather than what to be. Starting from the other side of modernity, and tracing the different aspects of the adoption of Modern Movement in Japan, aim of this paper is to introduce the figure of the Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara (1925-2006) who unveiled the plurality and richness of our spatial structures, the universal and the particular in which we are immersed, most of the time, without consciousness.

Keywords: Japanese architecture, Kazuo Shinohara, Space

Toward the end of the Meiji era,¹ a period in which Japan's rapid modernization process was scattering traditional forms of culture, and during the Taishō one,² when the adoption of all Western things was at its end, many Japanese intellectuals became increasingly critical about the applicability of Western frameworks to Japan and they started to feel the need to reformulate the values considered more traditional of Japan, especially in the arts. At that time, the long and thorny issue of 'unequal treaties' between Japan and the United States had been solved and Japan, already emerged victorious in two international conflicts, was trying to expand its influence further abroad by engaging in the same colonial struggle of Western nations. The growing aspiration to show the

¹ Japanese historical period corresponding to the reign of Emperor Mutsuhito, from 1868 to 1912, when Japan from an isolated feudal society changed into its modern form.

² The period from 1912 to 1926, corresponding to the reign of Emperor Yoshihito, son of Mutsuhito.

limits of a thought modelled on European civilization was translated into practice by Kakuzō Okakura,³ the initiator of the first Japanese movement of art criticism. Interpreter of Ernest F. Fenollosa, teacher of Hegel's philosophy at the Tokyo Imperial University, Okakura had realized that things, made opaque by consuetude, were able to emanate a new light through the alchemy of translation. Indeed, to introduce from a different perspective what was still perceived by foreigners just as an esoteric practice, in 1906, Okakura wrote in English his *The Book of Tea*, a modern celebration of the traditional Buddhist tea ceremony.

The attempt to revitalize an ancient culture while not renouncing in taking part to universal civilization was later shared also by writers, poets and philosophers, among them we remember Kitarō Nishida and Tetsurō Watsuji, two figures that distinguished themselves by their need to investigate the relationship between people and their land, the religious traditions, and the meaning of being Japanese and Asian. Although the reading of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, had encouraged these philosophers to share the attempt to create universally valid concepts, the awareness of being in a place geographically and spiritually distant from the unity presented by western aesthetic led them to reflect on the originality of their culture through 'space', a concept able to synthesize the values considered more traditional of Japan (Marinucci, 2014). In 1919 Tetsurō Watsuji, publishing *Koji Junrei*, a book that collected the chronicle of his pilgrimage to the ancient capital Nara and its temples, celebrated Japan's international character by tracing back the cultural and ethnic origins of Japanese culture to Korea, China, India and even Greece. Because of its narrative quality of a journey into the history of a common space, over time, Watsuji's text became a reading considered essential for all people who wanted to immerse in a place that, for its social and religious dimension, was able to embrace the entire Japanese civilization (Nara, 2012). Consequence of a modern tension between East and West, Watsuji's concern was to promote the research on the forgotten Japanese culture, as we can read in a letter dated 1920 and addressed to his wife:

³ In Japan the written and spoken order of names is family-name first and given-name second. Since in fields others than Japanese area studies the order are Westernized, I have chosen to follow this convention, therefore give-name precedes family-name.

The ancient history of Japan is not as great as that of Greece or other European nations. But I feel very attached to the ancient history of Japan, particularly when I think of the fact that this history represents our ancestor's souls and it runs, unbeknown to us, in our blood. And the other thing that interests me is that studying about Japan is not unlike excavating buried objects. The reason I say this is that, in the past, world culture invariably referred to Western culture, but, recently, Eastern culture has been gaining momentum, so much so that it now stands opposite Western culture. [...] insofar as the study of Japanese culture is concerned, no Westerner is a match for the Japanese. In this field, a Japanese can do world-class research. So the more Japan is spoken about, the more this research will have enduring meaning. (Watsuji, 2012, p. xiv)

The retrieval of Japanese identity was a matter on which also Kitarō Nishida deeply reflected on. In 1927, to introduce into the philosophical discussion the experience of Buddhist thought, considered capable of affirming the relevance in the world of the different Asian countries that it bounds, Nishida had written:

It goes without saying that there are many things to be esteemed and learned in the brilliant development of Western culture, which regards form as being and formation as the good. However, at the basis of Asian culture, which has fostered our ancestors for over several thousand years, lies something that can be called seeing the form of the formless and hearing the sound of the soundless. Our minds are compelled to seek for this. I would like to give a philosophical foundation to this demand. (Nishida, 1990, p. x)



Figure 1. Bronze figure of the Supreme Goddess of Void. India, Andhra Pradesh, 18th-19th century. G. Berger private collection. Anthropomorphic throne formed as a square frame over a stepped base and surmounted by a shaped pediment representing hair with a pointed final, flanked by pierced ears, extended arms and legs. The frame denotes the formless transcendence of the deity.

With respect to architectural design, the yearning to elaborate a modern aesthetic of Japanese tradition was animated by a group of young architects who wished to resize the sense of inferiority of their compatriots, as well as their wicked tendency to imitate all Western models. The early 20th century, indeed, had been characterized by certain eclecticism in style, where Japanese and Western architectural components were intentionally combined into one building. The prototype of this new Japanese style was developed by the architect Kikutaro Shimoda when, in 1919, he received a formal request for a complete study for the rebuilding of the Tokyo Imperial Hotel. Returned to Japan from the United States, where he was a draftsman in Frank Lloyd Wright's office, in his preliminary design Shimoda proposed a Japanese style roof set on a low-profile masonry building. Surprisingly enough, following Shimoda's submission, in 1922, the project was assigned to Frank Lloyd Wright, who revisited Shimoda's design

plans by replacing the Japanese roof with a Prairie House roof style. Although Shimoda claimed that his design had been appropriated and plagiarised by Wright, his petition was ignored and Wright completed the construction of the Tokyo Imperial Hotel in 1923. In 1920, Shimoda proposed another project in which a Japanese roof style was assembled on top a neoclassical building for the Imperial Diet building competition. Despite Shimoda's proposal design was not successful, his various projects and petitions had drawn the attention of the government, as well of his professional colleagues and of the public in general, so much that between 1930 and 1932 the entry guidelines for the Tokyo Imperial Museum competition stipulated that submissions should have followed Shimoda's eclectic style, or what by the time became known as Imperial Crown Amalgamate Style (Isozaki, 2011).

As mentioned above, the decision to adopt as national symbol this architectural eclecticism raised the objection of a group of young architects who, soliciting participants to boycott the competition, wished to demonstrate the independence of Japanese architecture from the Western one, and thus to affirm that Japanese elements could be assumed as models for a local and more modern architectural composition. To reach the goal, in 1927, the architect Isaburō Ueno, recently back from his studies at the Wiener Werkbund, established in Kyoto the so-called Japan International Architectural Association⁴ which, among other Japanese architects, included ex-officio International Style modernists like Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn and Gerrit Rietveld (Isozaki, 2011). Taking advantage of the Japanese stay of Bruno Taut, refugee in Japan in 1933 to escape the racial persecutions, Ueno had the brilliant idea of bringing Taut to visit the Katsura Imperial Villa and the Ise Shrine, two main examples of traditional architecture in those years hardly accessible to the public. Comparing the cultural relevance of the Ise Shrine to the one of the Acropolis and declaring that the Katsura Imperial Villa could be interpreted as a masterpiece of functionalist architecture, sensing his role, Taut inaugurates a discourse on architecture capable of outlining the elements common to traditional Japanese architecture and to the modernist one, thus subverting the predominant eclecticism of the period (Isozaki, 2011). Although Taut's influence

⁴ The Japanese name of the association is Nihon Intānashonaru Kenchikukai.

as spokesman, also the architect Hideto Kishida, professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, during the same period was encouraging to suppress the temporal distances separating tradition from modern times by publishing, in 1929, his *Composition of the Past*,⁵ a photographic essay in which traditional Japanese architecture was presented from a modernist gaze.⁶ The same photos of ancient Japanese buildings were then used by Kishida to illustrate his *Japanese Architecture*, a volume part of a series of pamphlets published between 1936 and 1948 by the Board of Tourist Industry of the Japanese Government Railways to explain important aspects of Japanese culture and national life to visitors from overseas. As a matter of fact, before and after World War II the flow into Japan of foreign tourists was constant. They went to those topsy-turvy shores to seek the romance of the Far East, thrilled in expectation of dipping into the secrets of the Land of The Rising Sun (Kishida, 1936). To the eyes of Western architects, the compositional simplicity and the constructive clarity of Japanese architecture, with its opening towards the natural, the great transparency, the fluid circulation and the regularity of the partitions, appeared characteristics similar to those yearned by modernist architecture, and thus they began to be assumed as new sources of teaching for the space revolution (Shinohara, 1958). While in Western countries the fascination for Japanese traditional architecture was growing more and more, in Japan the modernism architecture was finally establishing itself. Indeed, the 1950s was a decade characterized by the demand for inexpensive and efficient homes for the housing boom caused by the end of the war. Like the so-called *Case Study Houses* sponsored in the United States from 1945 until 1966 by the *Arts & Architecture* magazine, which commissioned major architects of the day to design and build low-cost model houses, also in Japan the magazine *Shinkenchiku*,⁷ as early as 1948, supported a competition for minimal-type wooden housing. Among the most noteworthy works were the ones built by the architect Kiyoshi Seike, professor at the Tokyo Institute of

⁵ Since has never been translated into English, I have chosen to transcribe the English translation of the title to facilitate the lecture. The original title of the book is *Koko no Kōsei*.

⁶ Kishida had the possibility to survey the finest examples of Modern architecture during one-year government-funded trip in Europe and North America; a survey published, between 1929 and 1931, in seventeen volumes under the name *Gendai kenchiku dai kan* (General Survey of Modern Architecture).

⁷ First published in August 1925, it is one of Japan's leading architecture journals, whose issues are translated into English under the name of *The Japan Architect*.

Technology, and by Kenzo Tange, Kishida's pupil at the Tokyo Imperial University. Initiated by Seike in 1951 through the design of the Mori House, and continued through the Saito House of 1952, the Miyagi House of 1953, and Tange's own house of 1953, as a group, these series of open-plan houses characterized by raised islands of *tatami* mat marked by *shoji* screens that could be opened or closed at will, recalled Marcel Breuer's house in New Canaan of 1947, Charles and Ray Eames's Case Study House in Los Angeles of 1949, and even Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House of 1950 (Stewart, 1987). Despite the formal vocabulary of these houses became widely considered the models of the time, these countryside palace style dwelling, although their relatively small scale, do not seem to have truly solved the problematic of tradition, and neither the one of modernity. Indeed, in those years the balance between urban growth, suburban development and natural surrounding was not idyllic at all. As the well know Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa has documented in his movie *A Wonderful Sunday* of 1947, in those years the massive urbanization of the population had led the industry to develop a market of prefabricated houses deprived of what was commonly considered the spirit of domesticity. Evident in the uncontrollable disappearance of the most characteristic amenities of Japanese cities, actually, the antithesis between local and universal civilization was showing architects the urgency of answering questions till that time largely ignored.

The hope of discovering new design possibilities related to the intrinsic structure of Japanese architecture led the architect Kazuo Shinohara,⁸ researcher at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, to start in 1953 a series of studies entitled *Methods in Japanese Architecture*.⁹ Those were the years following World War II and the capability to glean the inner life of things had been renewed by the recent discovery of many archaeological finds revealing a hidden beauty in the depths of the stratifications of history. After the existential anxiety born from the violence of the war, the '*mysterious and disquieting*' force expressed by the objects of the Jōmon culture, the oldest community of Japan, had reinvigorated

⁸ During the same period, at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, Shinohara was also the teaching assistant of Kiyoshi Seike's laboratory.

⁹ Since this series of papers has never been translated into English, to facilitate the reading I have translated the title. The original title is *Nihonkenchiku no hoho*.

the idea to defend and safeguard the history of the origins (Kawabata, 2018, p. 99). In the general intent to create an account of national identity, while historians were concentrated in a rigorous study of the development of distinct styles of art and architecture, with the purpose of studying traditional formal structures not only in terms of vertical sequence, the flow of history, but also in terms of horizontal, social spread, Shinohara realized that to preserve the ability to generate vital forms the local culture, more than an immutable datum, had to be assumed as the particular inclination of a more general *world culture*. Flowed into his broader doctoral thesis on *The Study of the Spatial Composition in Japanese Architecture*,¹⁰ Shinohara's research had unveiled that 'space', a universal concept still perceived as peculiar to Western and Modernist architecture, was actually the most reliable benchmark to propose contemporary Japanese architecture and, at the same time, to reveal its uniqueness.

Indeed, in 1952, when Frank Lloyd Wright, during a conference held in New York entitled *The Destruction of the Box*, recalled how much had been influenced by the reading of Okakura's *The Book of Tea*, in which the famous verses of the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tze were quoted, Japanese architects understood that the traditional conception of space had been misinterpreted by Westerners (Isozaki, 2011). According to Okakura:

'He [Lao-Tze] claimed that only in vacuum lay the truly essential. The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves. The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is all potent because all containing. In vacuum alone motion becomes possible. One who could make of himself a vacuum into which others might freely enter would become master of all situations. The whole can always dominate the part'. (Okakura, 1906, pp. 59-60)

¹⁰ Unfortunately, Shinohara's doctoral dissertation has not been preserved. However, the synthesis of his doctoral dissertation was resumed inside Shinohara's book *Jūtaku kenchiku* (Residential Architecture) published in 1964. The English title of the PhD dissertation is reported in Shinohara biography inside his book *16 House and Architectural Theory*, Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, Tokyo, 1971.

Wright's confidence in declaring that Lao-Tze's exemplification of an omnipresent vacuum could be compared to his design theory of a space objectified by the 'destruction' of architectural enclosures could be a confusion that confronts all architects, so used to the excitement that arises when it seems to touch the most intangible of all concepts. However, it is fundamental to look at things from the right point of view and to remember that, for long time, 'space' had been a specifically Western concept, antithetical to the Buddhist idea of emptiness. While the West has always treated space as something real, Eastern thought had focused on the doctrine of 'non-reality', or Impermanence, expressed by Buddhism through the words kū 空,¹¹ 'void', 'emptiness', and kokū 虚空, 'mutability' or 'where things could be everything without obstacles'. Therefore, while Modern architecture, as Sigfried Giedion stressed in his *Space, Time and Architecture*, was the plastic expression of the space-time concept developed by modern sciences, it is logical to assume that traditional Japanese architecture, rather than the demonstration of a spatial awareness, was the celebration of the beauty of emptiness. Indeed, when walls vanished as walls, replaced by screens and corner windows, Modern architecture had set a new vision as indicative of a new sense of structure, in which space was no longer something that converges to culminate into a point, but something that from a point or a line radiates to infinity (Giedion, 1941). This sense of spatial extension and continuity, however, did not correspond to the traditional Japanese sensing of space expressed through certain flatness in which depth had been constructed of layers of parallels planes that do not take into account human movements or gradual prospective.

¹¹ Japanese translation of the Sanskrit *śūnyatā*.



Figure 2. Jiko-in temple. Japan, Yamatokoriyama, Nara Prefecture, 1663. The image represents the intimate space dedicated to the *cha-no-yu* (tea hospitality), a vast *tatami* room that seems to flow into the garden and valley below. Stone step at the edge of the veranda leads to the zen garden of massive camellia and azalea hedges and topiary, inspired by the shapes of tea fields.

According to Shinohara, the perception of '*condensed immobility*' that characterizes traditional Japanese architecture could be compared to the Japanese art of garden (Shinohara, 1964). In particular, the art of *shakkei*, whose meaning is that of a 'landscape captured alive', a term that Japanese use to indicate the art of incorporate different vistas into a single scenography (Itoh, 1973). Like the art of Noh theatre, where the protagonist's firmness captures the audience's subconscious level of mind by a rigid formal aesthetic, Japanese gardens will surprise the visitors by moments of steadiness carefully designed by the monks to produce effects of serenity and wonder. Following the path of one of the many gardens in Kyoto, for example, the one of the Katsura Imperial Villa, the visitor, concentrated at looking down to the irregular rhythm of the stones that mark the route, all of a sudden, will be surprised by the appearance of a wonderful landscape that opens up through the vegetation. Through these special moments or vistas, in Japanese gardens what is contemplated is not a continuous, organic space but the '*non-continuity*' of the landscape (Shinohara, 1964).



Figure 3. Detail of the map of Jingo-ji temple in Kyoto, 1230. In the possession of the temple. From the plan, it is evident that the temple and its grounds were not conceived as a geometric space designed according to a single coordinate system, but as a space in which the visitor while walking could continually meet new scenes.

Reflecting on the compositional method of Japanese art, Shinohara attempted to construct a mental model of modern and traditional architecture to compare different spatial conceptions. Shinohara has in fact imagined to introduce a camera in one of the houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and one inside the Jiko-in,¹² a temple famous for its meditation room from which it is possible to contemplate a wonderful garden that contrasts with the distant view of the Yamato plains and hills. Shinohara considered that, since in Wright's houses several rooms are connected one after the other through thin folds of the ceiling, floor and walls, in this case, space, organically developing, can be perfectly understood through the cinematographic technique that, sliding the camera on a track that runs along the floor or the ceiling, perfectly capture the space in its entirety. Shinohara had thus imagined that the cinematographic technique could be assumed as the spatial model itself of Wright's houses. Imagining then to introduce the same camera inside the Jiko-in temple, Shinohara had observed that to capture this space in its entirety it would be sufficient to place the

¹² Founded in Nara in 1663 by tea master Katagiri Sekishû, this temple belongs to the Rinzai sect of the Zen Buddhism.

camera in a low point on the floor and rotate it on itself. With respect to the previous case, then, in the Jiko-in temple the cinematographic technique would not have the same representative effectiveness. Shinohara had thus concluded that the more the cinematographic technique is used as a spatial model of traditional Japanese architecture, the more this model moves away from its true essence (Shinohara, 1964). In light of this, it is interesting to bring to the attention the questions arisen in Shinohara following these imaginary cinematic experiences. According to Shinohara:

Space of contemporary architecture is like Wright's space, that is, a space recorded by the movement of the human eye, comparable to the world narrated by the protagonist who speaks in first person, the 'I' of literature. Since Renaissance, space is constituted by the presence of the 'I', so it is natural for us to think that the point of view is the human one. But, in the architecture of the previous eras what points of view existed? There was not a different mechanism of the point of view? Looking at the particular composition of traditional Japanese architecture, such as that of Jiko-in, it shows us a completely different mechanism of the point of view. The point of view there does not belong to man but to architecture itself, as if in literature the world was described by the third person, that is, a universal person who embodies history. Reflecting on these different mechanisms of the point of view I began to think that by freely changing the first, second and third person we can find a new way of recording space. Or, perhaps, that introducing the point of view of a fourth person, who has nothing to do with the previous three, we could describe a 'space without point of view'. (Shinohara, 1964, p. 180)

Like Janus, the Roman god of doorways and transitions, that with his double faces at the same time looks the inside and the outside, the past and the future, so Shinohara began to assume tradition and modernity as two stances of a single issue through which criticise both. Indeed, trying to understand the compositional logic that distinguishes two different realities, a local and a global one, rather than a technician, Shinohara seems to have lived that agitation

typical of artists or, more generally, of all intellectuals who deal with emotions and human feelings. A disquiet, that of Shinohara, which in my opinion resembles the one that moved Paul Ricoeur to write, in 1961, his famous essay *Universal Civilization and National Cultures*, quoted by Kenneth Frampton in 1980 to open his reflections *Towards a Critical Regionalism*. The 'space without point of view' of which Shinohara speaks about could then be the confirmation of that will of 'real dialogues' between civilizations that, renouncing to exercise 'the dogmatism of a single truth', attempt to meet 'different civilizations by means other than the shock of conquest and domination' (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 277). This is the reason why *The Fourth Space* had become the title of the last chapter of *Residential Architecture*, a short essay published in 1964 where, encouraging a return to the theme of housing as a design opportunity for a critical relationship between mental, social and physical space, Shinohara wished the advent of a 'new irrational space' that architecture of Japanese society could have accomplished by offering the eye a multitude of possible perspectives that are always coherent yet always new (Shinohara, 1964, p. 181). *The Fourth Space*: the metaphor of an inner dimension that turns on imagination.



Figure 4. The Tanikawa Residence by Kazuo Shinohara, 1974. Photo by Koji Taki. The image depicts the 'summer space' of the house, where the slope of the terrain had been left in its bareness and covered by a 45-degree pitched roof. The different coordinates that generate this space are accentuated by the many 'point of view' of the people in the photo.

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