

Japan-ness + suchness: seeking to seize an understanding of an ethereal elusive ethos

Dr. Brian R. Sinclair

University of Calgary + sinclairstudio inc., Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT: Japan is in many ways a mysterious society with a rich history and complex culture. Informed by longstanding traditions and deeply-rooted values, contemporary Japan struggles to chart paths forward while retaining strong threads binding yesterday to tomorrow. Modern planning, architecture and design in Japan, and perhaps most notably in its capital city of Tokyo, in many ways illuminates the tensions that exist between the authority of the past and the promise of the future. Inspired in part by pervasive spiritual paths, fundamentally Shintoism and Buddhism, design embraces notions of ephemerality, impermanence and non-attachment. It also characterizes the pursuit and acceptance of perfection through imperfection. Wabi-Sabi and similar approaches highlight a high degree of comfort with the uncertain, the flawed and the incomplete. That said, remarkable advances in high-technology and an aggressive uptake of digital media counter this acceptance of the indeterminate, both in social and physical spheres. People are increasingly connected and informed, yet ironically disconnected and unaware. While society writ-large is shaped by intense formal and informal expectations to conform (the nail the stands out gets hammered down), it also permits ample latitude for the proliferation of subcultures and the acceptance of the extraordinary. Metabolist Architecture, for example, demonstrated an unbridled openness to utopian vision, bold departures and iconic gestures. The present research, through meta-analysis of the literature, case studies and logical argumentation, critically examines the notions of 'Japan-ness' and 'suchness' in light of current turbulence and transformations. The author, an architect and psychologist with extensive first-hand experience of Japan, considers a spectrum of dimensions that serve to distinguish and define the country and culture. Viewed through scholarly lenses that include architecture, education, spirituality and homelessness, the paper delineates and interprets the many qualities of Japan that continue to uphold its interwoven veils of mystery, sensuality, advancement and atmosphere. The paper seeks to demonstrate how architecture and urbanism in Japan embodies historic, spiritual and cultural values & practices. Using Tokyo as one window into such aspects, the author explores a variety of facets of the metropolis that illustrate those qualities that contribute to 'Japan-ness'. Discussion includes implications/impacts to an annual study abroad program in architecture and planning whereby graduate students search for contextual understanding and cultural meaning prior to embarking on dramatic and diverse urban design projects. Designing, in a studio setting, in such a complicated and charged milieu demands a willingness to know and a commitment to connect. The deliverables of the research include the portrayal of a series of features of Japan-ness woven into an approach for understanding the conditions, complexities and characteristics of this leading nation and its incomparable culture. The systems-oriented multi-pronged tactic, and its underpinning information, proves valuable for researchers, educators, students and visitors examining, discovering and engaging Japan.

KEYWORDS: Japan, Buddhism, architecture, education, systems thinking, holism, pedagogy, culture

PRELUDE

"It is through creating, not possessing, that life is revealed." Scudder¹

Japan is an enigmatic and alluring nation with a rich history that is both complex and convoluted. In many ways contemporary Japan has been shaped by a myriad of factors both

traditional and contemporary, from the honor and restraint of the samurai ways to post-war unbridled consumerism and frenzied materialism. It is a culture overflowing with contrasts and contradictions, with many aspects of life paradoxical and puzzling to outsiders. That said, there are many forces that deeply underpin the society, that profoundly shape thought and that guide action. Such forces, while often implicit and residing beneath the surface, nonetheless dictate many moves within the culture. The author has written extensively about variables of Japanese culture that define and delineate many features of the environment, the society and behavior. These explorations have ranged from research into homelessness, dwelling and the city to critical considerations of modern architecture and inherent flexibility in building design.

The present paper examines a number of aspects of Japan that contribute meaningfully to a deeper understanding of its culture. This investigation has developed over the author's many years of conducting research (e.g., agile architecture, open building, prefabrication, homelessness, traditional arts, etc.) in Japan as well as through delivering an environmental design study abroad semester program in Tokyo, Japan's capital city and the world's largest metropolis. Central methods include invocation of case studies of three seminal architectural projects, intentionally drawn from dramatically different historical periods (Taisho: traditional home, Showa: Metabolist tower, Heisei: modern project). The research explores dimensions of Japanese spirituality and philosophy that serve to inform, influence and inspire these diverse projects – while concurrently illustrating common threads that give character to architecture and design. Through these case studies, together with logical argumentation and the illumination of principles of Buddhism, Shintoism and associated practices, the author reveals qualities of Japan-ness that are valuable in grasping rather ethereal constructs that undergird the society and that dictate views, define values and delimit activities. Such understanding is worthwhile to students and practitioners who endeavor to design in this enigmatic ethos.

1.0 JAPAN

"The Japanese society approaches much of life with a respect for space and a critical eye to efficiency. Take clothing, for example: kimonos are designed to be folded then stored flatly, tightly, and efficiently. The bento box for food is another example where the focus is on space: attention to delivery, designed presentation, concern for aesthetics, and no waste. Cemeteries are another example of high efficiency, effective use of room, and the appreciation for scale, mass, surface, and space. As regards design and space, Japanese culture so often places tremendous value on beautiful functionality, on quality, on keeping, on maintaining, on preserving, on innovating, and on appreciating." *Sinclair*ⁱⁱ (2015)

Japan is an island nation with limited resources, restricted space and relatively high population. A major portion of the Japanese reside in one city – Tokyo. Tokyo is a remarkable urban conurbation, with intense population, compact development, extraordinary character and an exceptionally high quality of life. With a resident count exceeding that of all of Canada, the Tokyo Metropolitan Region embraces an impressive array of parts key to a well-crafted, well-designed and highly-functioning city. Tokyo is regularly acknowledged as a leading global city, with metrics underscoring abundant amenities, walkable streets, diverse neighborhoods and extraordinary attention to design + planning. From a world-class multi-modal transportation system and vibrant mixed-use communities to pedestrian-oriented fabric and design innovations, Tokyo demonstrates how an urban centre can be colossal and intricate while proving demonstrably dynamic, accessible and livable. For those looking from outside the city Tokyo proves paradoxical – it is massive in size, and incomprehensible in scope while functioning at high levels, running smoothly and relatively free from serious problems. Convenience is high, crime is low, efficiency is unprecedented, design is pervasive and a sense of community is ubiquitous. Tokyo's success is in many regards without parallel. As an urban phenomenon it is worth critical examination, not only to cull out reasons for such achievement but also to better grasp the features and facets of the city than contribute to its Gestalt. In many regards Tokyo affords environmental design theoreticians and practitioners an outstanding exemplar for study, for experimentation, for inspiration and for best practices. While without question the context and culture of Tokyo and Japan is unique and nuanced, the

author contends that many lessons learned are of demonstrable value and potential application well beyond the present geographical boundaries. Japan exudes mystery with many facets of the ethos seemingly ethereal, elusive, puzzling and perplexing. Newcomers often struggle to make sense of a society that on one hand is very regimented and highly regulatory while on the other hand defies conventions and feeds the fringe. Under the societal shroud of sameness and conformity lies a kaleidoscopic milieu that permits experimentation, encourages innovation and accepts deviations. This is not only the case in fashion, entertainment and art, it also holds true for architecture.

1.1 Japan-ness

“Japanese attachment to the physical/material entity of a building has been less prominent than to the symbolic quality of its form.” Bognerⁱⁱⁱ (2013)

In Buddhism a seeker aspires to grasp the true essence of a moment and acquire a deeper understanding of existence. The notion of ‘suchness’ conveys such attainment – an ability to discard the superfluous in order to see to the heart of a situation. Such clarity often requires hard work and repeated effort on the part of the adherent. In many ways understanding the essence of Japan – seeing beyond the tourist brochures and transcending the buzz of Shibuya – requires effort, energy and time. To comprehend ‘Japan-ness’ is to see the culture in an unvarnished manner. Such attainment, while not on the minds of most visitors, does matter for those who aim to reside, to be accepted, to work, to learn and to design in this milieu.

In the quest to appreciate Japan in deeper ways it is important to look beyond stereotypes and move beyond the superficial. In many ways such comprehension arrives not only by examining the culture but by experiencing the place, the people, the practices and the principles that comprise Japan-ness. The author has hosted many students in Japan within the structure of a semester long study abroad program. Charged with the execution of demanding design projects it becomes vital for students to quickly get beyond a bus-tour awareness of place. Students must assertively encounter the culture in ways that equip them to get deep fast – to overcome the tendencies for thin assumptions, knee-jerk responses and drive-by design in order to better understand the who, what, where, when and how of design in a foreign world.

As a part of the deep dive it is helpful to consider philosophical features of three fundamental tenets of Japanese spirituality, followed by an exploration of these features within three prominent architectural projects. The following Buddhist principles are worth considering in more detail when trying to understand Japan and Japan-ness.

1.1.1 Ephemerality

Ephemerality is in some ways the opposite of being concrete, being fixed and being set. It implies a lightness of existence and an ethereal quality. In the West our architecture often aims at being grounded, at conveying stability and communicating certainty. In Architecture schools we often witness the intense pursuit of iconic, monumental and over-bearing structures. Seldom in such settings do we see students encouraged to include changeability, to foster user-driven design roles, and to relinquish the architect’s ‘divine authority’ to create and control. In contrast Open Building, in the eyes of the author who has extensively researched this field, strives to address all of these qualities. Hence, especially in the West, the movement towards Open Building and Agile Architecture is viewed with suspicion, concern or even outright denial/dismissal. In Japan, however, such lightness of being is commonplace.

1.1.2 Impermanence

Impermanence is a core principle of Buddhism, which holds that all of reality is in constant flux. To assume that any circumstance, object or being is truly fixed is truly folly. Life is a journey of constant motion and ever-changing situations. Each moment is distinct from those preceding and those proceeding. Uncertainty is a certainty. In Western approaches to design and architecture we are most comfortable, on many counts, with total predictability. Financing models, for example, are aimed at costing out projects at a fixed moment in time based on a set bill of materials. In many cases project capital costs exclude less rigid components such

as moveable walls and furniture. Such narrow views then serve to limit any embrace of uncertainty and tend to preclude more agile, flexible models of development (including, for example, modularity and sometimes prefabrication). With skepticism abundant, and the role of architects and architecture rather entrenched in notions of permanence, it is easy to understand how the environment in North America has proven hostile to more mutable buildings. The author argues, in light of an urgent call for greater sustainability, that a deeper understanding of impermanence is important. Approaches aimed a design for disassembly, deployment of modular building systems, and empowering users to modify their spaces and places, seems timely and worthwhile.

1.1.3 Non-attachment

Non-attachment involves our ability to distance ourselves from the material world in an effort to more fully understand ourselves and our reality. In the West our obsession with consumption and consumerism (albeit now growing rapidly in the East as noted previously in the paper) make non-attachment an allusive concept. North American marketing efforts tell us that “We are what we own”. In design this translates into the role of buildings as status symbols, of products as instruments of power, and of Architecture as object. Non-attachment, as a concept of Buddhism in Japan, serves to weaken the link between the object as precious, as unchangeable and as primary. With space seen as ultimately changeable and the material world viewed as transient and detached (or detachable), architects and end-users are far more willing to accept buildings that might morph, shift, subside, reform and resurface.

1.2 Waxing philosophical

In Japan there is an important concept known as *shibumi*, which in essence translates as an unassuming elegance and conscious reserve. When *shibumi* is elevated it invokes what is called the beauty of *wabi sabi*. *Wabi* is about the wretched, forgotten and forlorn while *sabi* is about the ‘rust’ of age. It is arguably in the union of *wabi* and *sabi* where Japanese design becomes most compelling and aesthetics most remarkable – where the simple, the unaffected and the elegant coexist. We find this search for beauty, and the invocation of *wabi sabi*, deeply rooted in the traditional Japanese arts of *ikebana* (flower arranging), bushido (the way of the sword), and perhaps most notably *sado* (also referred to as *chado* or the way of tea). For the purposes of this paper, each of these ‘arts’ include strong temporal, and ephemeral, qualities. While preparations and reflections are inherent and valuable, it is the moment that proves especially critical. Certainly such concepts loom large in the efforts of Japanese architects and landscape architects, especially in their search to impart beauty, tranquility, mutability and meaning in an ever-escalating modern milieu of technology, urbanity and uncertainty.

One critical aspect of Japan, that informs and inspires design, is the deeply rooted spiritual history that underpins the culture. Shintoism and Buddhism are inextricably intertwined in the society, with ramifications witnessed over a spectrum of endeavours from business and the arts to education and politics. The Zen notion of *mushin*, or ‘no mind’, is a good example. Without a mind one is rendered without a self. Without a self one is afforded great freedom from the many trappings and seductions of common existence – inching ever closer to escape from the vicious cycle of suffering Buddhists call *samsara*. Ideas around and implications of ‘non-attachment’ loom large. Japanese design and architecture often seeks such release from trappings and clutter, electing instead for the simple, the austere and the unadorned. The Japanese term *kanso* acknowledges the importance of simplicity of design, akin perhaps to German modernist architect Mies van der Rohe’s famous dictum “less is more”.

Modern Japanese architecture, perhaps most notably in the work of the Metabolists and inspired by deeply-rooted philosophies (Kurokawa^{iv}, 1995), pursued ideas of reconfigurable form and space in a new era of technological, material and societal revolution. Coupling simplicity of design and economy of means with the need for fluidity and mutability in environments, Japanese architecture has historically, and continues to, acknowledge and respond to the need for users and their built realm to exist synergistically, to transform as

conditions shift, and to be less about solidity and more about fitness. Spirituality adds substance and sets a trajectory for design pursuits in Japan.

1.3 Suchness

In Buddhism there is strong awareness of the illusion of permanence – that is, we construct and perceive our lives in a manner that suggests solidity, stability and predictability. All of this understanding of permanence however is mere folly, for the world and our lives are in constant change. What we accept now as reality is merely our best interpretation based on available knowledge, stimuli, past experiences and guesswork. Japanese culture accepts that life is ever-changing, and that a path that acknowledges the frailty & vulnerability of our journey, and the uncertainty of our path, is wise and reasonable. Zen teaches that in the midst of unpredictability, disorder and delusion one is well advised to make things as simple as possible. The goal of reducing one's environment down to its basics, to limit exuberance and seek the most minimal essence, is indeed noble. A key objective is to cut through the glitz and glamour to grasp the essence of the circumstance, the condition and the context – to understand 'suchness'. With the superficial left behind we grip that which seems necessary.

While we see this search for simplicity, austerity and restraint in contemporary Japanese design, from Tadao Ando's awe-inspiring concrete churches to Kengo Kuma's masterful collages of glass, steel and wood, it is also clearly evident in far more modest fabrications, including the constructions of the homeless. The author (Sinclair^v, 2010) has previously written about Japan's informal sector, delineating the 'temporary' housing of the day-labour class. Such 'architecture' is unquestionably accepting of uncertainty, mutable in nature, light on the land, efficient in operations, and effective in the provision of shelter that protects, nurtures and provides a rightful sense of dignity.

Japanese architecture, from both historical and contemporary perspectives, has encountered strong inspiration & influence from Buddhist thought. Spiritual notions of impermanence & ephemerality (*mujo*) impart a sensibility into design. Such impact is seen in the employment of cardboard and paper as building materials in the projects of contemporary architect Shigeru Ban. Concepts of layering, lightness, change, transience and the transitory can also be seen in the work of Arata Isozaki, Rei Kawakubo, and Metabolist master Kisho Kurokawa (notably his Nakagin Capsule Tower in Ginza). Taro Igarashi (2005), in his article "Kisho Kurokawa: Buddhism and Metabolism", noted that the architect's "... global view that creation and destruction run fluidly into one another has its roots in Buddhist doctrine." He adds that, "In the original language of Buddhism, *samsara* means 'to flow', and also means the combination of various states, expressed through the process of reincarnation." It is clear that the work of numerous modern Japanese architects celebrates many spiritual dimensions – most impactfully of Buddhist thought – including demonstrably the inevitability of change, a lightness of being, and the cycle of suffering common to all sentient beings.

1.4 Musashi's Five Rings

"Harmony and disharmony in rhythm occur in every walk of life. It is imperative to distinguish carefully between the rhythms of flourishing and the rhythms of decline in every single thing" Musashi^{vi}

Beyond the guidance and influence of Buddhism and Shintoism, also core to the Japanese psyche and the Japanese people is the Way of the Samurai. *The Book of Five Rings* was written in 1643 by Miyamoto Musashi, an acclaimed Samurai, undefeated warrior and enlightened teacher. While in the first instance aimed at aspiring students of the sword, this seminal text also had profound implications and applications for people of all walks of life struggling to find balance, success and mastery. Musashi^{vii} observed that "... the true Way of the Martial Arts is to train so that these skills are useful at any time, and to teach these skills so that they will be useful in all things." Schooled in the art of combat Musashi subscribed to two relatively simple principles on his path. Thomas Cleary^{viii}, a noted translator of Musashi, emphasized "The first of these principles is keeping inwardly calm and clear even in the midst of violent chaos; the second is not forgetting about the possibility of disorder in times of order." Considering the nature of higher education, with its sea of independent minded scholars

struggling to cope in times of drastic change and significant upheaval, such principles seem to hold promise. No doubt there are benefits to a bold reconsideration of the culture and context within which such change might and should transpire, including the deployment of more unconventional ways of seeing, thinking and acting. In *Five Rings* Musashi delineates strategies for triumph & mastery, including the need for a resounding grasp of the environment and forces at play.

Through *The Book of Five Rings* wise Musashi paints a picture of an interconnected ethos of being that captures tenets of Buddhism, using the iconic five-tiered pagoda known as *sotoba* (tower of five rings). The *sotoba*, in its full collection of components, represents the essence of our universe and provides us with an approach (both practical and esoteric) to its deeper understanding and more skillful navigation. In an interpretation of Musashi's classic treatise Wilson^{ix} notes the *sotoba* is usually constructed in a prescribed manner: "a square stone at the bottom represents the Earth element, or stability and the fundamental element of physical being; next, a round stone represents the Water element, or permeation and fluidity; a triangular stone represents the Fire element, or purity and unobstructed activity; a crescent-shaped stone represents the Wind element, or growth and perfect awareness; and at the top, a stone in the shape of a *mani-jewel* (wish-fulfilling gem) represents the Void element, space, or in Buddhist terms, Emptiness." Taken in its entirety, and pursued as an interwoven set of postulations on our essence, the five elements (or rings) present a path to deeper understanding, a method of transcending *samsara* and a vehicle to realize enlightenment or *Nirvana*. Our lives are always clouded with confusion and shrouded in illusion. The Way offers an approach to achieve clarity and rise above delusion – to grasp a means for negotiating existence, in its detailed moments and across its greater play, with strategy and to success.

While Musashi's life and our times are eons apart, there are profound lessons to seize that might shape our views and guide our actions in ways much more connected, compelling and constructive than are presently in place. Contemporary education, including in the field of Architecture, while arguably not a battlefield in Musashi's sense, is nonetheless a milieu rich in conflict, ripe with struggles and in dire need of steadiness, concord and harmony. In this sense perhaps *The Book of Five Rings* can offer illustration, illumination and inspiration. Looking into and grasping the lessons of *The Book of Five Rings* brings us closer to understanding Japan and Japan-ness.

1.5 Three complementary architectural cases

To better understand these core principles of Japanese spirituality, and by extension to more fully grasp Japanese society, culture, design and construction, it is instructive to explore how such qualities manifest in Architecture. Each of the following case studies were chosen from within unique historical periods in Japan – the Taisho (1912-1926), Showa (1926-1989) and Heisei (1989-present) eras. Each project is a well-known building that has seen strong embrace and appreciation within its time and place. Each project, in different and in similar ways, celebrates what it means to be Japanese.

Ephemerality: Yamamoto-tei | early 1920's (Architect unknown) | *Taisho*

The traditional Taisho period Japanese house, Yamamoto-tei, is located in Shibamata in the Katsushika Ward of Tokyo. This unique and impressive home, standing nearby the Edogawa River, is registered as a Tangible Cultural Property. Its prominence and attraction arrives in large part due to its exceptional design quality coupled with the top-ranked Japanese Garden contained on the property. The building has been described as follows: "The wooden two-story structure of Yamamoto-tei has an area of 400m² on the first floor and 50m² on the second, and features a living room, Nagaya-mon gate, warehouse, tea ceremony room and drawing room. The living room displays characteristic shoin design elements such as chigaidana (set of staggered shelves) and akarishoji (paper screen doors for admitting light)."^x



Form and materials are important in Japanese design, interplaying in balance with the significance and meaning of space. On the material side, Japan is known as a ‘wood’ culture due to the historical access to timber as a primary building material. The structural qualities of wood, with its limited spans, gave way to a post and beam construction system. The manner of building homes and temples, with complex joinery and regular grid layouts, fostered the rectilinear geometry that is so prevalent in historic Japanese architecture. From this building approach arose many aspects of Japanese design that are now well known in the West, including perhaps most significantly the interconnection and mutability of spaces, the use of infill panels (most notably the shoji screens), and the creative control of perspective to shape perceptions. Nishi and Hozumi^{xi} (1983) describe qualities of architecture arising through reliance on post and beam construction: “There is, moreover, a fluidity in Japanese architecture between inside and out. Though fixed walls are frequently used, the distinction between wall and door is very elastic, and whole facades in both temples and residences can be opened to the elements at will by folding open or swinging up the panels between posts or by sliding open, or even removing entirely, the wooden or paper screens.” Such historically embedded understanding of space has had demonstrable impacts on modern architecture in Japan, including on designers willingness to pursue agility.

Yamamoto-tei profoundly captures the qualities of the ephemeral so vital to Buddhist principles and practices. In true Japanese form the boundaries of space soften and disappear. Rooms that seem set quickly blur and merge. The inside and the outside intermingle. Views from the living room into the garden blend resident and landscape. The defined geometry of the architecture and the permanence of the material world are soon abandoned as spaces overlap, perceptions shift and demarcations dissolve.

Impermanence: Nakagin Capsule Building | 1972 (Architect: Kisho Kurokawa) | *Showa*

The Nakagin Capsule Building, an icon of modern architecture, stands proud in the streets of Ginza, Tokyo. Nested among the urban streets of Tokyo are some unusual and beautiful buildings by the famous Japanese Architect & Metabolist Kisho Kurokawa. His unique approach to the Metabolist movement generated a few of the most creative buildings the world has witnessed. Moreover, the Nakagin Capsule Tower, completed in the early 1970’s, is no exception (Lin, 2011). A masterpiece of Japanese architecture, the Capsule Tower design was greatly influenced by the Japanese design culture’s celebration of beauty, functionality, quality, innovation and appreciation (Sinclair^{xii}, 2016). The 14 story apartment building comprises 140 detachable and replaceable concrete pods (300-square-feet each), stacked and rotated at varying angles. This building remains a classic representation of the Metabolist style, with all of its aspirations around agile, adaptable, recyclable and moveable modular units —it stands out as a form of liberating architecture wrapped in a cloak of modularity.



Kurokawa aimed to design a project that concurrently acknowledged and accommodated the busy lifestyle of Japanese business people. With space at a premium, and real estate at record highs in post-war booming Tokyo, the Nakagin Capsule Tower offered an innovative option. Centered on a structural notion of two service cores, a beehive of small prefabricated dwellings were fixed into place with several anchor bolts per unit. The concept was to have units swap out in a relatively dynamic and on-demand fashion. Rather than the staid and solid substance of much international architecture of the Modern Age, Kurokawa envisioned a 'living' building where form and composition could morph based on circumstances and conditions. The vision was one of adapting and adjusting as needs dictated. The transient nature of the project – its looseness and mutability -- was in keeping with Buddhist notions of impermanence. It is interesting to note that the architect's vision was far ahead of technology's ability to meet the challenge. Over the years not a single unit has moved or been replaced.

Non-Attachment: Mokuzaikaikan | 2009 (Architect: Nikken Sekkei + T. Yamanashi) | *Heisei*



Located in Shinkiba, in the Koto Ward of Tokyo, Mokuzaikaikan is a beautifully-crafted skillfully-articulated building that is home to the wood association. Celebrating the warmth, resilience and texture of wood, the project is disciplined and detailed in remarkable ways. In many respects this contemporary project proves an innovative manifestation of and respectful tribute to Japan's historically wood-based building industry. The project is in many ways humble and understated, illustrating and showcasing the power and potential of wood without being glamorous or flashy. It is through attention to detail, rigor in design and thoughtfulness in execution that Mokuzaikaikan achieves such strength and success.

Mokuzaikaikan has been described as follows: "This project involved the relocation of the offices of the Association of Wood Wholesalers in Tokyo. It serves as a showcase to demonstrate the possibilities of wood as an urban construction material. Engawa, or Japanese terraces, allow a natural breeze to enter while shutting out strong sunlight for a comfortable indoor environment. Lumber were integrated into the building's structure, and architectural

exposed concrete was cast in cedar formwork. Since the building uses a large amount of wood, great attention was given to fire safety measures. The design focused on creating spatial continuity with the use of layering and natural light.”^{xiii}

The project, through its humility, warmth and human scale, demonstrates the Buddhist values around non-attachment. Rather than being a centerpiece that demands attention and claims predominance, the building provides a comfortable and comforting milieu that holds and facilitates. The grain, texture, color and character of wood serve to envelope users in an unassuming manner – cultivating an environment where the users take predominance over the uses and where the contained looms larger than the container. Skillful deployment of lighting, in keeping with the messages of Junichiro Tanizaki’s^{xiv} ‘In Praise of Shadows’, creates many intimate and sensitive moments in the building. From a Buddhist vantage point the building dissolves into the background permitting people to attend to less material-focused concerns – such as interaction with others or introspection on their own. Several traditional Japanese rooms prove the jewels of this project – each executed with great attention to scale, perception, nuance and meaning.

1.6 Studio realm

“In spiritual education the world comes alive. Living and education become inseparable. Self and the world become inseparable. Something is always happening that can be learned from. The only things that are required are openness and attentiveness: the allowing and examination of direct experience”. Steven Glazer^{xv} (1999)

The author’s Japan-based Semester-long Senior Interdisciplinary Studio annually considers the rich, complex and multifarious urban realm of Tokyo – the planet’s largest urban settlement. Students, working in teams of two are engaged in observation and study of the city’s fabric, with an initial goal of gaining some familiarity and comfort with space and place. Following from this base overview, teams conduct more detailed analyses of selected areas of the metropolitan region, with a particular emphasis on districts and sites in proximity to major waterways and bodies (river, canal, lake, sea, etc.). Critical analyses, coupled with study of international precedents, reveal some common features and design dimensions that characterize ‘typologies’. Some typologies reflect commonly accepted space/place types (e.g., streets, squares, parks, etc.) while others charted new ground. The objective of this analytical component of the studio is to gain, as a broader cohort comprising all teams, a deeper understanding of approaches to urban design and development in the greater Tokyo area. Building from this shared understanding, individual teams then consider one or more interventions into the urban fabric, with a goal to synthesize, propose and delineate a conceptual urban design response. The intervention is not necessarily a detailed design of a building nor the shaping of a finite plan, but rather tends to demand a more holistic, creative, comprehensive and integrated urban design proposal that considers figure and ground, solid & void, streets, landscapes + buildings, and space & place at preliminary conceptual levels. The urban design responses seek a healthy balance of people/place, process/product, creativity/innovation, context/culture, integration/provocation and viability/ sustainability.

In order to deepen and enrichen the learning, and to have students create projects that are ‘of Japan’ (not merely ‘in Japan’) there is a push to immerse within and understand ‘Japan-ness’. The emphasis of the Tokyo Studio is especially on the cultural, social and environmental (i.e. sustainability) potential of explorations and interventions of and in the urban fabric. The studio explores the relationships between the public realm, architectural form, compelling landscapes, cultural identity and sense of place. The basic curricular objectives incorporate a deep and meaningful exploration and analysis of the complex fabric of Tokyo as well as taking steps to develop one or more interventions that prove challenging, effectual, meaningful and appropriate. Consideration must be given to user needs and human dimensions, including environmental perception, symbolism and meaning, ergonomics and adaptability, cultural sensitivity and place-making. To reach such objectives it is crucial for students to move beyond the point and posture of tourists in order to tap into what it means to be Japanese. From a pedagogical perspective this goal is equal to or greater than any educational aspirations on technical and professional fronts.

2.0 CONNECTING THE DOTS – GRASPING THE ETHOS

The present paper seeks to delineate a rather diverse set of characteristics and circumstances, ranging from Buddhist thought and Samurai ways to graduate education and architectural design, in an effort to link and learn. Living in Japan for the first time is both exhilarating and overwhelming. Foreigners, or *gaijin*, bring with them experiential baggage and pre-existing assumptions. While on one hand this 'freshness' is to be welcomed and harnessed, on its own it proves risky and insufficient. The *Gaijin*-ness must be coupled with and countered by Japan-ness. The studio pursues this balance throughout its course – an unending mission to open eyes, minds and hearts to new ways while acknowledging and building upon the strengths that come from coming from afar. In order for outside students, and professionals, to effectively design in Japan they need to comprehend and come to terms with what it means to be Japanese. To grasp such a complex and convoluted society is daunting for certain, yet essential for sure. In order to become successful in design challenges in Japan the newcomers need to see through the eyes of the other – to view the design setting and to develop any solutions via lenses of culture, values, history and spirituality.

2.1 Lessons learned | implications to education and design

As our world gets smaller, and students/professionals increasingly explore, reach and work beyond their homes, communities and countries, the pressure mounts to be responsive, responsible, sensitive and sensible. In educating architects in our current times, it is vital to prepare them for practice that transcends national boundaries, that embraces difference, and that responds in ways that prove both appropriate and effective. In order to reach such objectives educators need to consider far more than technical content, curricular conventions and book learning. In many ways the educational enterprise must assume greater risk, innovate boldly and stretch beyond current comfort. Study abroad is a crucial tool to complement the learning toolsets that we deploy in educating architects. Short-term tourist-type trips might provide some insights into novel cultures, however they tend to be superficial and not life-altering. Longer term immersion, to the contrary, affords students the chance to see with greater clarity, to feel with greater empathy and to design with more certainty. In a country like Japan, whose ways and means stand in stark contrast to Western modes and methods, it is imperative to dive deep.

2.2 Envisioning an approach

"If there is to be any order of beauty in the age of life principle, it will be in a dynamic balance that maintains its order, while always moving, roaming and changing."
Kurokawa^{xvi} (1995)

The present paper has examined various aspects of Japanese culture that shape the soul of the nation. In such an elusive, mysterious society it is essential to understand what drives thinking, informs values and shapes behavior. Buddhism and Shintoism loom large in any equations for comprehending the ethos. Samurai ways continue to influence thought and deed in modern Japan. Spirituality serves as a major force in the design of interiors, buildings, landscapes and cities. While this array of forces and factors is only part of a multifarious milieu, it presents a reasonable starting point for foreign students/practitioners charged with the design of spaces, places, buildings and communities in Japan. Seen from a pedagogical perspective, the present paper calls for the equal attention to matters cultural, spiritual, technical and social. In striking a balance between these four pursuits, students are better able to grasp notions of 'suchness' and 'Japan-ness' that are undeniably crucial to successful design.

3.0 Conclusions

"The essential difference between life and a machine is that a machine eliminates all idleness and ambiguity. It is constructed entirely on the basis of physical connection, functional, rational principles, and efficiency. In contrast, life includes such elements as uselessness, ambiguity, the unknown and idleness. It is a flowing interrelation continuously creating a dynamic balance." Kisho Kurokawa^{xvii} (1995)



Educating architects in our demanding and turbulent times is increasingly a tough challenge. Pluralism proliferates, mobility heightens, communication improves and exchange escalates. That said, conflict grows, confusion spreads, differences amplify and uncertainty materializes. The education of architects needs to be reconsidered, reformed and redesigned in a manner that ensures future professionals are equipped with the theories, tools, techniques and wherewithal to cope, overcome and succeed. A part of this charge must be to wade courageously into the cultural ethos where values reside, history dwells and the future is cast. While the world is in many ways getting smaller, and global norms are on the rise, the importance and impact of the local remains high. Architects need to be versed in international standards and must capitalize the power of science -- they must also be attuned to regional qualities and respect home-grown attitudes. As Architects are called upon to design in foreign jurisdictions they should be prepared to respond in thoughtful, informed and appropriate ways. The present paper looked specifically at the country of Japan, considering how foreign architecture students and practitioners might better prepare themselves for acting in realms novel and circumstances unknown. The author delineated a number of historic, spiritual + cultural dimensions that provide substance to Japanese society and that serve to shape and guide the conception, construction and occupation of spaces and places. The Buddhist notion of 'suchness' and the philosophical construct of 'Japan-ness' stand as targets for newly-arrived students and architects, offering a means of understanding a complex ethos in ways that encourage more sensitive, applicable and efficacious design.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱⁱ Scudder, Vida D. In *Wabi Sabi: The Art of Everyday Life*. Diane Durston Editor. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing. 2006. pp 106.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sinclair, Brian R. (2015). "Integration | Innovation | Inclusion: Values, Variables and the Design of Human Environments". *Cybernetics and Systems: An International Journal*, 46:6-7, pp 554-579.
- ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Bogner, Botand. *Japan: Architectural Guide*. 3rd Edition. Berlin: DOM Publishers. 2013.
- ^{iv} Kurokawa, Kisho. (1995) "From the Age of the Machine Principle to the Age of Life Principle". *Introduction to The Master Architect Series: Kisho Kurokawa*. Images Publishing, p 11.
- ^v Sinclair, Brian R. (2010). *Urban Japan: Considering Homelessness, Characterizing Shelter and Contemplating Culture*. Bi-Annual Joint Conference: Architectural Research Centers Consortium + European Association for Architectural Education, Washington DC. 2010.
- ^{vi} Cleary, Thomas. (Translator). Miyamoto Musashi. *The Book of Five Rings*. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. pp. 21
- ^{vii} Wilson, Sean M. (Adaption). Miyamoto Musashi. *The Book of Five Rings: A Graphic Novel*. Boston: Shambhala, 2012.
- ^{viii} Cleary, Thomas. (Translator). Miyamoto Musashi. *The Book of Five Rings*. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. pp. xxi
- ^{ix} Wilson, Sean M. (Adaption). Miyamoto Musashi. *The Book of Five Rings: A Graphic Novel*. Boston: Shambhala, 2012.
- ^x <http://www.katsushika-kanko.com/yamamoto/eng/>
- ^{xi} Nishi, Kazuo and Hozumi, Kazou. (1983) *What is Japanese Architecture: A Survey of Traditional Japanese Architecture*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- ^{xii} Sinclair, B. R. (2016); *Japanese Spirituality, Flexibility and Design: Influences and Impacts on Agile Architecture + Open Building Architectural Research Addressing Societal Challenges*. International Research Conference: Architectural Research Centers (ARCC) / European Association of Architectural Educators (EAAE), University of Lisbon, Portugal

-
- ^{xiii} <https://www.archdaily.com/778844/mokuzaikaikan-nikken-sekkei>
- ^{xiv} **Tanizaki, Junichiro (1933) In Praise of Shadows. English Translation. Leete's Island Books. First Edition, 1977.**
- ^{xv} Glazer, Stephen. *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc. 1999.
- ^{xvi} Kurokawa, Kisho. (1995) "From the Age of the Machine Principle to the Age of Life Principle". Introduction to The Master Architect Series: Kisho Kurokawa. Images Publishing
- ^{xvii} Kurokawa, Kisho. (1995) "From the Age of the Machine Principle to the Age of Life Principle". Introduction to The Master Architect Series: Kisho Kurokawa. Images Publishing

Note: All photographs by the author.