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# Redefining the Edge

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Traditional Settlements and Dwellings Working Paper Series

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The background of the cover features a large, faint watermark of the University of California seal. The seal is circular and contains the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" around the top and "1868" at the bottom. In the center, there is a shield with a book and a sun, and a banner below it that reads "THERE BE LIGHT".

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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**REINVENTING TRADITIONS FOR THE  
MODERN WORLD**

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**REDEFINING THE EDGE**  
**THE CHANGING SENSE OF *EN* IN**  
**JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE**

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*Robert Brown*

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## REDEFINING THE EDGE THE CHANGING SENSE OF *EN* IN JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE



*En (edge) is a distinguishing feature of traditional Japanese architecture; simultaneously inside and outside, the multi-layered external envelope performs a multiplicity of functions and embodies indigenous aesthetic and experiential sensibilities. The traditional form of en has however disappeared from contemporary Japanese architecture. This paper will frame en as a physical element and the roles and values it carries, and examine contemporary Japanese architecture's move towards a more Westernised, conceptually-based, symbolic and introverted language. It will then consider some wider questions this raises on Japanese life and tradition, as well as the future of architecture in Japan.*

'Japan, China, India, and other developing countries have been trying to close up what they see as a gap between themselves and Europe and lessening this distance equates with success. But what happens after a hundred years of pursuing this line? The whole world will be European! For me this would mark the loss of diversity...'

Kisho Kurokawa<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

*En* – literally “edge” – is a formative construct in traditional Japanese architecture. It refers to the multi-layered space found at the periphery of both domestic and non-domestic structures, whether those of the most everyday farm or shop in town to a palace or a Buddhist temple. It is an element which was developed and refined over centuries, as part of a relatively unchanging vernacular and gives a distinctive quality to traditional architecture. Indeed, as Botond Bogner argues, “among all the elements in the (traditional Japanese) building, (external) walls have the most complex role, being directly responsible for the special quality of Japanese architectural spaces.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet its distinctiveness is about more than visual appearance, as *en* plays a multiplicity of roles, including environmentally and socially, reflecting what Gunter Nitschke has noted as one of the characteristic features of traditional Japanese architecture: the multifunctional use of built space.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps more significantly however is how Japanese aesthetic values and spatial awareness were emplaced in this space.

While once a central component of the vernacular, there is a suggestion that *en* has disappeared from contemporary architecture. The landscape of Japanese cities today gives testimony to this. Why has this changed? With the demise of the traditional sense of *en*, what has happened to the meaning embedded in it?

Do the values and beliefs underpinning its original physical representation now linger on, cognitively and emotionally re-emplaced into new spaces and forms? Or has the meaning of this condition disappeared simultaneously with the original form? Does it signal the “end of tradition” in a land long associated with its history but now cited as a society leading the way in establishing a new globalised world?<sup>4</sup>

These questions frame the intent of this paper while exploring developments in contemporary architecture (and culture) in Japan. Referenced against a framework of vernacular architecture, it will consider the role of tradition in current practice, and whether it represents a form of cultural re-engagement or the generation of new traditions.

### EN AND ITS MEANING IN TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

In traditional Japanese architecture<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1 and 2) a massive roof extends outward beyond the face of the building, framing a space underneath; at ground floor level this is further defined by a wooden platform raised up from the ground to clearly define a veranda (*engawa*). Together they form what Nitschke identifies as the *noki-shita*, literally the sphere under the eaves.<sup>6</sup> Within this interstitial space is the outer physical skin of the building, which is typically composed of three separate though intrinsically related and moveable layers of varying permeability, framed within / around a timber post and beam structure:

- *shoji* – sliding translucent rice paper screens as the innermost layer,
- *amado* – sliding solid wooden screens as the middle layer,
- *sudare* – sliding perforated timber screens or bamboo blinds rolled down from the eaves as the external layer.

It can be argued that the structure of the *en* is a direct physical response to very practical considerations of materials and technology, and terrain. The structural system of posts and beams and non-load bearing screens is responsive to the resources of the surrounding landscape and the technical knowledge which evolved in making these structures. Moreover, this system is more earthquake-resistant than bearing wall structures such as masonry, and when necessary can easily be rebuilt in case of damage from an earthquake or the often resultant fires.

In a similar sense, the *en* also provides a clear physical response to the climate and the simultaneous need for light, views and privacy, with each of the elements noted above having a distinct pragmatic function. The roof, *sudare* and *shoji* filter the light thus reducing heat gain, important in the very hot Japanese summers. The *shoji* and *amado* in particular control the amount of air movement and provide protection against the cold,

while the roof and *amado* protect against precipitation. Equally the various layers of the *en* offer social control, with the *amado* restricting views in from outside while allowing views out; the *shoji* provides further privacy while still allowing light to enter, while the roof and various layers place the interior in shadow thereby reducing the visibility of activities inside when seen from outside. When manipulated together, the variable screens and over-hanging roof act in concert to establish a sophisticated system of environmental and social control.

As an architectural construct, the articulation of *en* is however more than just a physical response to pragmatic needs; indeed, it is a concretisation of aspects of Japanese attitudes towards public and private life, their relationship to nature and their aesthetic and spatial sensibilities. This understanding reflects Rapoport's thesis that:

'...house form is not simply the result of physical forces or any single causal factor, but is the consequence of a whole range of socio-cultural factors seen in their broadest terms. Form is in turn modified by climatic conditions...and by methods of construction, materials available and the technology...We can say that houses and settlements are the physical expression of the *genre de vie*.'<sup>7</sup> That is, house form is a response to the way of life of a people which '...includes all the cultural, spiritual, material and social aspects which affect form.'<sup>8</sup>

*Shikii wo matagu*, meaning "crossing over the threshold", is one way that the *en* acts to give physical form to traditional Japanese behaviour and with it how they see the world. In the traditional Japanese building entry involves a sequence of: approaching from outside; moving into the *en* (either through a sliding screen into an antechamber (*genkan*) at ground level, or up onto the *engawa*); turning around to face outwards and sitting down to remove one's shoes; and then standing back up and turning around to face inwards again (and possibly sliding back more screens). Only at this point does one then cross over the threshold and enter in the home, stepping up onto the raised inhabited ground floor. As Bogner notes, the house is "...entered vertically not horizontally...to enter means to remove one's shoes and step up."<sup>9</sup>

In a physical sense this vertical and horizontal definition and *shikii wo matagu* help to separate the outside, which is perceived as polluted with dirt and germs, from the inside which is clean. To bring shoes soiled from outside into the interior of a home is taboo. Yet this space and accompanying ritual also represent a transitional marker for how the Japanese relate to and structure the world, notably in the distinction that is made between inside (*uchi*), i.e., traditionally the family group (*ie*) that one belongs to, and outside (*soto*), i.e., the outside world or groups to which one may belong. This structuring is further reinforced by the constructs of *bonne* (one's private feelings, or private "face") and *tatemaie* (one's public face). With each realm comes a

clear understanding of one's responsibilities and codes of behaviour towards family and the community.<sup>10</sup> This comprehension is further reinforced through "...ritualised phrases of greeting or parting..." which are used when entering or leaving the home.<sup>11</sup>

There are several key points regarding the relationship between the structure of the space, the ritual and accompanying language, and the meaning that they together represent, that merit further elaboration here. The first is that the meaning of the ritual is emplaced in the setting,<sup>12</sup> and that through interacting with the environment, the participant conceptually re-schematises the environment<sup>13</sup> and further orients him / herself towards the experience beyond the ritual and setting.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the practice of ritual is embedded in the body. Various actions produce a ritualised body "...invested with a sense of the ritual"<sup>15</sup> In *shikii wo matagu*, the range of movements involved in entering the building explicitly engage the body, prompting the participant to be more aware of their own body in the context of the setting. Thirdly, The embedding of the body and place inform each other with what Bell cites as "critical circularity"; the body's actions and embodied meaning redefine space, while simultaneously through generating this space the body's movements are structured.<sup>16</sup>

These considerations speak of the importance of the body in traditional Japanese culture. In contrast to Western philosophical tradition, which privileges the mind and the intellect, Japanese philosophy emphasised the body and feelings. Thus what was valued was immediate and physical experience of space informed by the involvement of all the senses, and not reliance solely on the visual or on a conceptual interpretation (i.e., abstraction) of it.<sup>17</sup> This sensibility is further evidenced in the construct of *mono no aware* (sensitivity to things), a direct engagement with the world unmediated by language or other discourse and suggested as an essential trait of Japanese culture.<sup>18</sup>

The prioritising of engagement with the physical world is echoed in how Japanese people have traditionally related to the natural environment. Coming out of an agrarian past and the Shinto tradition which arose out of this life is an affinity with and a reverence for nature.<sup>19</sup> "There is no dichotomy between man and nature; rather, they mutually imply each other. We are constituted by nature as much as it is constituted by us."<sup>20</sup>

*The en* condition in traditional architecture plays a substantial role in reinforcing a connection between man and nature. (Fig. 3) Unlike in Western architecture where traditionally there has been a singular external edge to clearly divide inside and outside – the multi-layered envelope of the *en* dissipates the sense of boundary, allowing the exterior and interior to penetrate and overlap.<sup>21</sup> In this sense the *en* acts not only to separate but

more significantly to connect; perceptually and experientially it is both inside and outside simultaneously.<sup>22</sup> Nitschke suggests that the ambiguity of this space is reflective of the ambivalent sense of being traditionally felt by the Japanese people, and of the interdependence of things.<sup>23</sup>

The ambiguity of *en* – a sense of both-and, of an in-between, is reflective of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities and spatial awareness. As the architect Hiroshi Hara has noted, “Asian thinking has always taken the ambiguity of life into account.”<sup>24</sup> While this feeling extends across all aspects of Japanese life, it is particularly present in traditional arts, notably in *No* theatre in which the performance depends as much upon the pauses between sounds and movement as it does upon the sounds and movements themselves.<sup>25</sup> *En* is all evidenced in other arts such as *ikebana* (flower arrangement); often misinterpreted from a Western bias as minimalist through mistakenly focusing on the flower as ornament – in the Japanese tradition *ikebana* serves to give depth to the shadows created between the flower and the wall or within the alcove where it is sited. Important here is the sense of depth, and more notably the notion of in-between (*ma*). Indeed, this understanding of in-between conveys the Japanese sense of space.

Though sometimes interpreted as void, as adopted by Japanese Buddhists to express notions of emptiness, *ma* is more sophisticated than mere nothingness. Inherently ambiguous, it is neither one thing nor another, but rather a ‘...dynamic balance between object and space, action and inaction, sound and silence, movement and rest.’<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Western conceptions of space as objective, static and three dimensional,<sup>27</sup> *ma* is more suggestive and dynamic, existing both temporally as well as spatially. As Isozaki writes, *ma* is what happens in the mind of the inhabitant as they experience a series of related events in space and time.<sup>28</sup> Returning full circle, Bogner notes that the transitional space of the *en* approximates ‘...in architecture the concept of *ma*.’<sup>29</sup>

## TRANSITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

‘Three-dimensional existence is dissolving into abstract, image-like surfaces.’

Noriaki Okabe<sup>30</sup>

Given the signature role *en* has in vernacular architecture and concurrently in the traditional Japanese world view, it is perplexing that as a spatial / experiential element it has disappeared in contemporary Japanese architecture. Even a cursory examination suggests that much of what has been built over the last 60 years in Japan has moved away from the traditional form and space of *en* and the meaning and values it embodies. Once a permeable, multi-layered ambiguous space, it has today devolved into a singular, hermetically-sealed



and clearly defined boundary.

Various pragmatic factors have been suggested as the forces behind its demise. Prompted by structural considerations and modern buildings codes, reinforced concrete has replaced timber as the primary construction material, being more resistant to earthquakes and damage from fires. The ubiquitous air conditioning present and expected in modern day Japan, combined with the development of new materials and manufacturing processes, notably of glazing / window components, have supplanted the multi-layered screens once needed for environmental control. The need for disabled access, a critical factor given Japan's aging population, has prompted the need for easily accessible, level access at the entry to buildings. Another factor cited is the pressure to utilise every last square foot (or metre) of floor area in incredibly dense and highly populated urban centres<sup>31</sup>, thus eliminating the seeming luxury of relatively deep and yet underutilised spaces at the building envelope.

All of these factors certainly have played a part; yet again positing the thesis that building form is a response to a people's way of life, the disappearance of the traditional *en* is not simply explained away by only such pragmatic considerations. Indeed what of the social and cultural behaviours, beliefs and values emplaced in this form? To gain a better understanding of this, it is necessary to briefly review something of the history of Japan since its opening up to the West in 1853.<sup>32</sup>

The eminent Japanese architect Arata Isozaki has suggested that a primary factor in the development of modern Japanese architecture is the relationship between '...the modern (primarily foreign) and the traditional (primarily Japanese).'<sup>33</sup> Various examinations of its architecture since 1853 support this contention. Moreover, following the forced opening of Japan's ports to the West, Japan's development has been marked by mediation between external and social forces not only in architecture but in all areas of the arts and culture, as well as in technology and social conditions.

When Japan first opened up the government quickly realised that they were behind the West scientifically and technologically, and that they had to catch up; otherwise they ran the risk of being colonised by the West, a fate that befell other Asian countries. This prompted a massive engagement with Western ideas, known as *bunmei kaika* (adopt Western civilization and enlightenment). In the following years Japan sent various scientists and professionals to the West to learn, and imported Westerners to teach in Japan; in architecture this was reflected in the importation of Western technology and techniques of building, reinforced by Japanese architects who went to work with architects in the West, and Western architects invited to work in Japan. It is important to note however that Japan didn't just send people to West to study science and

technology – they also sent them to study Western philosophy and the arts.

The impact of this cannot be underestimated; as Parkes notes:

‘There is really no equivalent in the West to the shock caused by modernization in Japan. A country with a two-thousand-year-old tradition cuts itself off from the rest of the world for a period of a dozen generations, and then is suddenly forced into the wholesale adoption of a totally alien set of values – a process that necessitates in large part a radical break with indigenous traditions.’<sup>34</sup>

Over time it was inevitable that not only Western technology but also Western sensibilities would make inroads. While there was a swing back to traditional values in the 1930s with the rise of nationalism, attitudes quickly returned to engagement with the West, notably with America, following World War II. This ambition to modernize was paralleled by a growing desire for the lifestyle of the West, which represented being modern. Echoing Bauman, being local at a time of modernization was a sign of backwardness and deprivation.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s there was again a brief interlude of trying to reconcile traditional Japanese and Western ideas, which is regarded as having reached its completion in architecture by the 1960s. This synthesis was ultimately rejected however as architects clearly moved away from any engagement with the past and traditional values, which were perceived as regressive and still associated with the rightwing movements of the 1930s; in place of this reconciliatory stance between tradition and modernism, new more discursive trends began to emerge.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, architects instead sought to move beyond any explicit sense of indigenous identity and to position themselves in relation to the West; ‘...the issue is not the architectural possibilities of “unique Japanese-ness”, or even only of the peculiarly Japanese urban environment...the real issue is whether or not works can stand up to global or universal standards of evaluation... the emphasis being not on any ‘unique Japanese-ness’ but rather on ideas that obtain universality.’<sup>37</sup>

One of the key trends echoing Western architectural theory that began to emerge following the 1960s and continuing to this day is an approach to architecture as a critical cultural practice; in this sense the design of buildings becomes a means to critique contemporary urbanism and cultural, social and technological conditions, and with it the underlying beliefs and values of space, form and architecture.<sup>38</sup> This approach has been reflected in not only the work itself, but equally the rhetoric which surround the work as posited by both Western observers and the Japanese architects behind it; e.g., Bogner’s synopsis of contemporary architects refers to their pursuing ‘...a critical path of practice that *destructures* Form and Meaning in order to

reinscribe them in a way that frees us from the authority of literal facts while denying the idea of a privileged mode of representation within a privileged aesthetic realm, under the rule of a privileged 'centre.'<sup>39</sup>

This trend parallels the predominance of Western philosophy generally in Japan today. As Parkes notes, while the appropriation of Western philosophy has enriched Japanese culture, the zeal with which it has been undertaken has all but precluded any on-going engagement with indigenous traditions of Japanese thought. Indeed, he posits that most of the current population are distanced from the underlying ideas and traditional practices of Buddhism, and are unaware of their connections to the arts and other disciplines. As an example, he suggests that if one wants to undertake an academic study of Buddhist philosophy today one has to go to a department of religious studies, as most university philosophy departments are focused on studies of European thought and Anglo-American (analytic) philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

The movement towards criticality and Western ideas in contemporary Japanese architecture has fostered (as in the West) a greater emphasis upon conceptual and abstract thought, and less accent upon the notions of feeling and the engagement of the body which underpinned traditional architecture. As one observer noted in reference to a number of Japanese architects' discussion of their own work, what comes across is that they conceive of their architecture as exemplars of theory;<sup>41</sup> equally the intentions in their work '...reflect many aspects of contemporary Western philosophy, including post-structuralism, and deconstructionist criticism.'<sup>42</sup> Notably sparse in the architects' rhetoric is a valuing of any traditional sense of a phenomenological experience of space; if acknowledged at all it is only briefly as part of a new sense of 'body and mind dualism'<sup>43</sup>, though generally all traces of such experience have been displaced by '...a complementary value: scintillating symbolic existence.'<sup>44</sup>

Symbolism, it is argued, has become the most significant current in Japan's contemporary architectural scene.<sup>45</sup> The use of metaphor, communicated through an imagery of symbols and signs, has become the basis upon which architects formulate design. As architect Toyo Ito has noted, 'Architecture can function in a similar way to an installation' giving priority to the display of instantaneously and visually-absorbed information...'<sup>46</sup> rather than a haptic experience of space and time. (Fig. 4)

This emphasis on the symbolic extends to the relationship of the buildings to their surroundings. Where buildings were once seen as an integral part of nature, relating to site and climatic factors, and nature was seen as intrinsic to the building, nature in its traditional form of a cultivated landscape is now no longer intrinsic to the building; indeed its inclusion has come to be dismissed as being sentimental and gratuitous, and moreover reflective of a capitalist culture which commodifies everything.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, given Japan's traditional

identification with it, nature has become yet another aspect of the context on which to make some form of critical commentary.

In place of an intimate and interdependent relationship with nature *vis-à-vis* the ambiguous character of the *en*, nature is re-presented as a modified and reductive entity, intended not as something to be lived with but rather as an expression of resistance against present-day life. The work and words of Tadao Ando, a contemporary Japanese architect who has made a significant impact on both Japanese and Western architecture, is telling in this respect. (Fig 5) As Ando writes: ‘Such things as light and wind only have meaning when they are introduced inside the house in a form cut off from the outside world.’<sup>48</sup> Bognar further notes that in Ando’s work:

‘...nature is signified as ‘void’ rather than represented by ‘naturalised’ images of nature...’, and through devices such as “framed sky”, ‘...shapeless, formless manifestations of our natural world when directly exposed to the realm of habitation are capable of continuously challenging our utilitarian and materialistic aspirations.’<sup>49</sup>

The work of Itsuko Hasegawa is another manifestation of the reduction of nature’s place in everyday life, though being more overtly metaphorical and symbolic. In her work the natural world is represented by the shapes of mountains, clouds or trees, articulated in modern materials such as perforated metal screens and aluminium structures, or buildings which evoke over-sized pieces of fruit. Hasegawa writes, ‘I architecturalise images of nature because I want to express a view of the contemporary world...I use architectural and technological details to evoke nature...’<sup>50</sup>

In this sense, nature isn’t what it is, but rather what the architect conceptualises and literally re-configures it to be as part of a critical cultural practice. It makes a stark contrast to traditional architecture, in which nature was aesthetised to celebrate its qualities, not critique them. Even where nature is not symbolised and signified, it is only the idea of nature, not an actual connection with it; nature is reduced to an image as perceived from behind a sealed window.

The re-transformation of nature, and the intrinsic reduction of an actual physical interaction with it, is mirrored in contemporary urban architecture by its relationship with the city. Today buildings turn inward, sealing themselves off from their surroundings. Where traditional buildings once had what Bognar calls a “soft architecture”<sup>51</sup>, composed of a skeletal framework and layered permeable screens, they now have a more clearly defined and sealed boundary intended to protect the inhabitants from what has been called the chaos of the urban landscape.

The Japanese city has become, in the eyes of most indigenous and foreign observers familiar with it, an un-unified landscape, over-populated by self-referential and idiosyncratic buildings which have no relation to each other and a plethora of signs, lighting, electronics and infrastructure which overwhelms the inhabitant. (Fig. 6) It is a context in which seemingly anything is possible and permitted. The generation of this landscape is attributable to the incredibly rushed pace of development that sprung out of the Japanese economic miracle; as capital poured into the country through a growing trade surplus much of it was redirected into the built environment. The speed at which this development was driven was further exacerbated by the limited amount of land available and the extensive scale – the “megapolitan project” – at which architects, developers and the government operated in order to address pressing needs.<sup>52</sup>

The resultant urban landscape produced in this climate was not the organic, intimate and participatory condition of the historical European city, nor was it based on the model of the rationally organised modernist city, but rather was ‘...an increasingly irrational, often hostile, environment...’<sup>53</sup> As an opposition to (or as some would suggest a critique of) the chaos of city, the buildings retreated and deliberately turned inward, hermetically sealing themselves off to protect the inhabitants within.<sup>54</sup> (Fig. 7) Frequently focused around an internal courtyard and protected by an external boundary of impenetrable concrete or metal panels with only slits for windows, their introverted nature limits engagement with the street outside. As with the reductive re-conceptualisation of nature as an idea, interaction with the urban environment is presented through symbols offered up to the streetscape, instead of a direct multi-sensual experience of the environment.

Another response to this condition has been to reject any traditional sense of urbanism in which buildings have a relationship to each other or are developed within a wider urban fabric. Considerations of either continuity or of complimentary gestures utilizing scale, form or materiality are rejected, as are working with any organising principles that might create a recognizable sense of coherent texture; instead, each building becomes a reference unto itself. Such an approach is however rationalised in the context of the Japanese city; in the face of the chaotic contemporary urban condition, it is argued that ‘...there is no sense in trying to harmonise with the Japanese city...’<sup>55</sup> and that ‘...architects hardly need take account of established structures’<sup>56</sup>, but rather that the only viable response is ‘...to add to the restless image of the city.’<sup>57</sup>

The nature of the fragmented city, and the conceptualisation of design by architects within self-defined limits of a single, isolated building towards what Yatsuka describes as a metaphorically and metonymically transformed show piece<sup>58</sup> (Fig. 8), corresponds to a current transition in Japanese social values. In traditional society where the identity of the individual was subordinate to the group (e.g., identification with one’s family group – the *ie*), there was an emphasis on consideration of others as practised through reciprocity (i.e., do as

you would be done by) and hierarchy (i.e., recognising and respecting elders).<sup>59</sup> Today however, it is suggested that this sense of duty to others (*giri-ninjo*) is not as strong today as it once was.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the sense of community founded in a past rural, agrarian society, in which all traditionally worked in cooperation to harvest crops or take care of places of worship, most Japanese now live in urban areas in which interaction with other people is based as much if not more on the people you meet through work, or in bars, than it is on the immediate neighbourhood in which one lives.<sup>61</sup> In this context, and with the ever-increasing embrace of all things Western, the primacy of the community has decreased while the construct of the individual has gained importance; this is further evidenced in the embrace of the cult of celebrity and an increased admiration and respect for those who do their own thing and don't subordinate themselves to the group. Mirroring society as a whole, contemporary architecture reflects the emergence of the individual in Japan. A concern for the wider public, and indeed even of a sense of social responsibility, seems as Yatsuka notes, to have faded away, with architects making more personal work.<sup>62</sup>

On the whole then, *en* as a multi-layered, multi-functioning element with a multiplicity of meanings has all but disappeared from the contemporary Japanese built landscape. Modern versions of *do* exist; these are however too often merely pastiche re-creations of the original. Very few contemporary architects engage with *en* in a meaningful way, trying to reinvigorate its traditional pattern and sensibilities in the context of present day life.<sup>63</sup> Where it does exist in more contemporary architecture, it typically has been reduced to a metaphor, one example being the work of Fumihiko Maki, in which the articulated skin of metal panels are meant to evoke *shoji*. (Fig. 9) Indeed, any sense of edge has been reduced to a thin skin that is an object in itself, in which the capabilities of Japanese technology and craftsmanship are celebrated, and materiality (e.g., colour, texture) and geometric composition are fetishisms. Any evocation of a true sense of connection with nature or of an in-between as spatial and temporal experience has disappeared, supplanted by a growing emphasis on the abstract and symbolic.

## SOME WIDER CONSIDERATIONS

It is taken as a given that all cultures are in a state of flux; they are not a bounded domain having '...authentic and timeless traditions with internally consistent essences.'<sup>64</sup> As Menon further notes, '...all cultures are continually in a process of hybridity.'<sup>65</sup> This process which has arguably always existed has however significantly accelerated in our increasingly connected, globalised world; the mass media, telecommunications and modern transport serve to circulate ideas and goods, notably those Western, at a pace at which the local condition is not only flooded but is overwhelmed. In this context, notions of belonging to a particular national culture, especially for those in industrialised countries, are open to question; as Mathews posits, we

live in an age of a “global supermarket”, where we can pick and choose the aspects of our lives which we would like. Personal identity may thus be tied less to a particular region or culture than to those who share similar tastes, interests and beliefs.<sup>66</sup>

Such considerations prompt the question of what it means to be Japanese today. Previous discussion in this paper has highlighted how society in general, and architects in particular, are looking outside Japan for ideas and measuring themselves against the West. Concurrent with these mental excursions has been a displacement of traditional values and sensibilities. Foremost amongst the latter is what has been identified as the most essential characteristics of Japanese identity and its vernacular architecture, that is an interdependent relationship with nature. As even Ando acknowledges:

‘After World War II, when Japan launched on a course of rapid economic growth, the people’s value criteria changed...Such social alternations as concentration of information and places of work in cities led to overpopulation...overly dense urban and suburban populations made it impossible to preserve a feature that was formerly most characteristic of Japanese residential architecture; intimate connection with nature and openness to the natural world.’<sup>67</sup>

This shift in attitudes away from a sense of ‘...consciousness of a unity with nature...’<sup>68</sup> can be attributed to many causes: the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake which devastated Kobe; the sense that the rural landscape is disappearing under the seemingly relentless spread of Japan’s cities; as well as the influx of Western ideas and ways of living. Also particularly notable is the environmental disaster of the mercury-poisoning of the sea at Minamata caused by the dumping of untreated waste from chemical plants, which it is argued, ‘...made people aware for the first time of the hitherto unsuspected environmental construction that had accompanied the rapid economic growth of the country.’<sup>69</sup>

Another primary contributor to the sense of disconnection the Japanese people have from nature is that they have become an urban people, making a marked contrast with their rural, agrarian past. In a critique of the assumption that Japanese culture today still retains a closer relationship with nature distinct from that of the West, D. P. Martinez posits a number of challenging arguments. Firstly, he points out that even in traditional culture nature was never something experienced in its raw form, but rather that it was worked on to best express aesthetic qualities. Thus, there was always a certain sense of disengagement with nature. Secondly, he suggests that the urban dwellers’ experience of nature is limited to occasional visits to “nature”, and that even in such instances nature is often reduced to the scenographic image of a single cultivated tree, and that this is enough. Thirdly, he argues that the Japanese urban dweller is now completely alienated from nature on any

meaningful, everyday basis, and that in this respect their experience of nature has more in common with city dwellers throughout the industrialised world than in does with any inhabitants of any current day rural areas or indeed with any mythologized past.<sup>70</sup>

Martinez' arguments, in which nature is apparently conceived of in a very limited form as some Arcadian landscape distinct from the city, are open to question. Recent reformulations of landscape theory by landscape architects and urbanists have posited an understanding of the environment in a more holistic sense; city and country are no longer conceptualised as distinct entities, but rather as interdependent.<sup>71</sup> There is however some veracity to his arguments; in the context of this move from an agrarian past to a modern urban identity, suggestions that there is a new type of nature become plausible. As Hasegawa proposes, 'in cities in particular, we now live in completely man-made environments, so we have to deal with that environment as a new "nature."<sup>72</sup> Un-stated but implicit in this proposition is a turning away from the "old nature."

Concurrent with the dislocation of Japanese society from nature is a distancing from their indigenous forms and practices. Traditional Japanese culture remains, but it is now something that many Japanese see as being preserved primarily to show the tourists and foreigners, with traditional festivals packaged as cultural events.<sup>73</sup> Extending this further, Gordon Mathews cites how 'a number of anthropologists have commented about how traditional Japanese culture has become exotic in Japan today.'<sup>74</sup> The place of tradition in all this is thus open to question.

## CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS

In traditional Japanese architecture *en* is a loaded space, performing a complexity of various pragmatic functions in a clear response to structural, environmental and social considerations. Yet the *en* fulfils far more than only such prosaic concerns, and is emplaced with a multiplicity of meanings. Operating within traditional Japanese culture at both a phenomenological and ontological level, the traditional *en* enriches their experience of the world and structures how the Japanese schematized the world and placed themselves within it.

An examination of discourse on the development of contemporary Japanese architecture reveals a displacement of both the traditional formal qualities of the *en*, and the aesthetic values and sensibilities it expressed. In a challenge to assertions that contemporary Japanese architecture has moved on from paying homage to the heritage of its "unique Japaneseness" and become more "sophisticated" and "mature"<sup>75</sup>, it might be countered that *en* was a highly complex and sophisticated cultural-environmental-social- technical-spatial mechanism. Gone today are the emphasis on the body and multi-sensory engagement – notably with



nature – as exemplified in the construct of *mono no aware*, a sense of both-and ambiguity that provided for richness and depth (literally and figuratively) of spatial and temporal experience, and a valuing of the interdependence of things; these have been supplanted by an emphasis on conceptual abstraction and symbols based in a virtual, cognitive-centred realm of meaning and experience, an either-or reductive approach in which visual prioritisation reduces experience to that which you can see through the frame of a hermetically-sealed window, and a glorification of the self-referential.

It would appear that the demise of the traditional sense of *en* has been accompanied by a disappearance of the meaning embedded in it. The values and beliefs underpinning its original physical representation no longer linger on, and have not been re-emplaced into new spaces and forms. Indeed, there has been a wholesale questioning of the place of tradition in contemporary Japan and a contingent adoption of modern (i.e., Western) ideas and sensibilities, as evidenced in both social practices and discourse. Any reference to “edge” is today more reflective of an attitude of avant-gardism than it is of any traditional formal, spatial condition.

It is perhaps all too easy then to lament the loss of the traditional sense of *en*, an element which had such a formative role in the overall quality of indigenous Japanese architecture and life. As Dixon notes:

‘For the Westerner visiting Japan in the 1950s the most profound lessons in architecture lay, of course, in its glorious architectural heritage... It is harder for me to appreciate avant-garde work that rebels against these traditions – that is based almost entirely in Western tradition...’<sup>76</sup>

Yet taking such a stance poses a challenge in the context of what contemporary life has become in Japan; does such a critique amount to a form of neo-imperialism, an act of imposing onto another culture’s present a quality from its past that has (mistakenly?) come to personify that culture to the outside? As the Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima relates, ‘I do not specifically look at traditional architecture. It is probably in my blood somewhere, but I believe that it is Westerners who analyze Japanese architecture in these terms more than we do.’<sup>77</sup> Moreover, there is a long history of Westerners going to Japan and getting it wrong, the prime example being the German architect Bruno Taut; while his writing did much to draw attention to traditional Japanese architecture, he had a Western-biased, modern view of it, seeing its buildings merely as ‘...logical constructions, achievements of a purist and functional-rationalist attitude...’, and failing ‘...to recognise the ambiguity of spaces...’<sup>78</sup>

It is of course possible to counter that, in spite of the pluralistic culture that has evolved in current-day Japan, a sense of national identity still exists. Traditional practices persist – e.g., genuine and active participation in

community events and coming-of-age ceremonies for children, or following everyday rituals such as *shikii wo matagu* – even if sometimes it requires an outsider to remind the Japanese of the distinctiveness of these traditions. Alternatively, it might be suggested that Japan continue to borrow from the West, and in so doing assert their Japanese-ness through their choices in the global supermarket, a response Mathews suggests is part of today's younger generation's forging of their sense of identity.<sup>79</sup> The final answer on this however will ultimately, and can only, come from the Japanese themselves.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Kisho Kurokawa, cited in Christopher Knabe and Joerg Noennig, "Kisho Kurokawa", in *Shaking the Foundations – Japanese Architects in Dialogue* (Munich: Prestel, 1999) p. 20.
- 2 Botond Bogнар, *Contemporary Japanese Architecture – Its Development and Challenge* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985) p. 58. Words in parentheses added by author of this paper for purposes of clarity.
- 3 Gunter Nitschke, "Architecture and Aesthetic of an Island People", in *Japan – Architecture, Construction, Ambiances* ed. Christian Schittich (Basel: Birkhauser, 2002) p. 17.
- 4 Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society* (London: Routledge Curzon 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).
- 5 This discussion of the physical characteristics of *en* and the pragmatic functions it fulfils draws upon two key texts: Guenter Nitschke, "En – Transactional Space", in *From Shinto to Ando* (London: Academy Group, 1993) pp. 85 – 93; and Bogнар (1985).
- 6 Nitschke 1993, p. 85.
- 7 Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p 47.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Bogнар 1985, p. 60
- 10 Hendry.
- 11 Ibid, p. 48.
- 12 Satsuki Kawano, *Ritual Practice in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).
- 13 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 109.
- 14 Kawano, p. 7.
- 15 Hendry, p. 98.
- 16 Bell, p. 99.
- 17 Graham Parkes, "Ways of Japanese Thinking", in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. Nancy Hume (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) p. 79; and Bogнар 1985, pp. 32 and 61.
- 18 R. Hooker, "Aware", Japan Glossary [Online]: <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/GLOSSARY/AWARE.HTM> (accessed 25 April, 2007).
- 19 This is not to be misunderstood as nature worship; rather, in Shinto tradition nature was traditionally seen as a place where one would go to purify oneself. Tangentially, the strong affinity that the Japanese have for nature is reflected in cultural attributes such as the ideogram for "rest" in traditional script (*Kanji*), being composed of the character for "person" and "tree".
- 20 Bogнар 1985, p. 29

- 21 Ibid, p. 58
- 22 This sense of connection is not just limited to 'nature' in its commonly perceived form, nor to rural settings or structures set within gardens. Nitschke notes that machiya (Japanese townhouses) are equally open to the street, so that activity on the street becomes part of the life inside the structure and vice versa. Nitschke 1993, pp. 85.
- 23 Ibid, p. 86.
- 24 Hiroshi Hara, cited in Philip Jodidio, "The Sun Also Rises – Japanese Architects in the 1990s", in *Contemporary Japanese Architects Volume 2* (Köln: Taschen, 1997) p. 44.
- 25 Gunter Nitschke, "Ma – Place, Space, Void", in *From Shinto to Ando* (London: Academy Group, 1993) p. 56.
- 26 Ibid, p. 56 and 58.
- 27 Ibid, p. 52.
- 28 Arata Isozaki, *Space-Time in Japan – "Ma"* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1979) p. 13.
- 29 Bogner 1985, p. 58.
- 30 Noriaki Okabe, "Slow Transition", trans. Andrew Barrie and Ayako Wakasugi, in *JA Yearbook 2000*, p. 4.
- 31 Bogner 1985.
- 32 Unless otherwise specifically noted, the synopsis which follows draws upon the following texts: Botond Bogner, "Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape", in *Japanese Architecture*, ed. Botond Bogner (London: Academy Group, 1988) pp. 15 – 25; Jodidio, pp. 6 – 64; Katsuhio Kobayashi, "Currents in Contemporary Architecture", in *Contemporary Japanese Architecture*, ed. Dirk Meyhofer (Hamburg: Taschen) pp. 7 – 22; Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture / Individual Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 30 – 75; Parkes, pp. 77 – 108.
- 33 Arata Isozaki, foreword to *Contemporary Japanese Architecture – Its Development and Challenge*, by Botond Bogner (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985) p. 9.
- 34 Parkes, p. 98.
- 35 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, (Cambridge: Polity press, 1998) pp. 95; cited in Mathews, p. 179.
- 36 Isozaki, p. 11.
- 37 Koji Taki, "Fragments and Noise – The Architectural ideas of Kazuo Shinohara and Toyo Ito", trans. Alfred Birnbaum, in *Japanese Architecture*, ed. Botond Bogner (London: Academy Group, 1988) p.32. Problematic in any discussion of Japanese-ness is the often asserted contention that the Japanese assimilate things foreign and make them Japanese. Defining in the context of this statement what is distinctly Japanese, foreign, or Japanese-or-foreign influenced presents a challenge that is beyond the scope of this paper. Further problematizing the discussion is that Taki's comments must be considered in light of *Nihonjinron* – "discourse on Japaneseness", which as Mathews has observed remains an on-going inquiry in Japan. Mathews, p. 34 – 35.
- 38 Botond Bogner, "Urban Architecture in Japan", in *Japanese Architecture*, ed. Botond Bogner (London: Academy Group, 1988) p. 6.
- 39 Bogner, "Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape", 1988, p.20.
- 40 Parkes, p. 97.

- 41 David Steward, foreword to *Shaking the Foundations – Japanese Architects in Dialogue*, by Christopher Knabe and Joerg Noennig (Munich: Prestel, 1999) p. 7.
- 42 Botond Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape – the New Avant-garde of Urban Architecture in Japan”, in *The New Japanese Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) p. 21.
- 43 Toyo Ito, cited in Christopher Knabe and Joerg Noennig, “Toyo Ito”, in *Shaking the Foundations – Japanese Architects in Dialogue* (Munich: Prestel, 1999) p. 97.
- 44 Kazuo Shinohara, cited in “Shinohara”, *LAUS 17*. (Rizzoli, New York, 1982) p. 115; cited in Lynne Breslin, “From the Savage to the Nomad – Critical Interventions in Contemporary Japanese Architecture”, in *Japanese Architecture*, ed. Botond Bogнар (London: Academy Group, 1988) p. 27.
- 45 Kobayashi, p. 17.
- 46 Toyo Ito, cited in Knabe and Noennig, p. 97.
- 47 Kenneth Frampton, “The Work of Tadao Ando”, in *Tadao Ando*, ed. Y. Futagawa (Tokyo: ADA Edita, 1987) p. 20; cited in Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape”, 1988, p.20.
- 48 Tadao Ando, “From Self-Enclosed Modern Architecture towards Universality”, *Japan Architect*, May 1982, p. 9; cited in Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape”, 1988, p.20.
- 49 Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape”, 1988, p.20.
- 50 Itsuko Hasegawa, “Thin Membraneous Boundaries”, *Japan Architect*, Nov / Dec, 1986, p. 54; cited in Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape”, 1988) p.21.
- 51 Bogнар, 1985, p. 58.
- 52 Bogнар 1990, p. 12.
- 53 Hajime Yatsuka, “An Architecture Floating on the Sea of Signs – Three Generations of Contemporary Architects”, in *Japanese Architecture*, ed. Botond Bogнар (London: Academy Group, 1988) p. 7.
- 54 Botond Bogнар, “Archaeology of a Fragmented Landscape”, 1988, p.18; and Dirk Meyhofer, “Currents in Contemporary Japanese Architecture”, in *Contemporary Japanese Architects*, ed. Dirk Meyhofer (Koln: Taschen, 1994) p. 37.
- 55 Kazuo Shinohara, cited in Taki, p.34.
- 56 Christian Schittich, “Japan – a Land of Contradictions?”, in *Japan – Architecture, Construction, Ambiances.*, ed. Christian Schittich (Basel: Birkhauser, 2002) p.10.
- 57 Bogнар, 1990, p. 14.
- 58 Yatsuka, p. 7.
- 59 Hendry, p. 52 - 53.
- 60 Ibid, p. 240.
- 61 Ibid, pp. 65, 70.
- 62 Yatsuka, p. 7.
- 63 A notable exception is Kengo Kuma, who in some of his work has sought to explicitly use traditional forms and materials, though producing them in combination with modern building technology and manufacturing processes.
- 64 Sibel Bozdogan, “Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey”, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 1999, May 52 / 4, pp. 210.

- 65 A. G. Krishna Menon, "Thinking Indian Architecture", in *The Discipline of Architecture*, ed. A. Piotrowski and J. Williams Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) pp. 83 – 102.
- 66 Mathews.
- 67 Tadao Ando, cited in Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism", *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, Volume 20, 1983, p. 158.
- 68 Nitschke 2002, p.16.
- 69 Wilhelm Klauser, "Introduction – Rules and Identities" to *Shaking the Foundations – Japanese Architects in Dialogue*, by Christopher Knabe and Joerg Noennig (Munich: Prestel, 1999) p.12. This man-made devastation of the environment is it would seem in direct contrast to the Japanese people's traditional sense of an affinity with nature; however, as D. P. Martinez notes, '...throughout the industrialized world, profit-making and caring for the environment have long been at odds...It should be no paradox, then, that having accepted the challenge to industrialize during the Meiji Restoration, and having striven to succeed in a global business world, Japanese industrialists have shown a similar callousness toward their environment.' Moreover, '...the drive to modernize was a much more powerful discourse than that of any dissenting voices. The promise of a better life for a large portion of the peasantry and town dwellers could also not be ignored as being attractive, particularly in the aftermath of World War II.' D. P. Martinez, "On the "Nature" of Japanese Culture, or, Is There a Japanese Sense of Nature?", in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) pp. 194 – 195.
- 70 Martinez, pp. 185 – 200.
- 71 See for example: James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape – Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999); Charles Waldheim, ed., *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).
- 72 Itsuko Hasegawa, cited in Christopher Knabe and Joerg Noennig, "Itsuko Hasegawa", in *Shaking the Foundations – Japanese Architects in Dialogue* (Munich: Prestel, 1999) p. 74.
- 73 Mathews, p. 71; Scott Schnell, "The Rural Imaginary: Landscape, Village, Tradition", in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) p. 213.
- 74 Mathews, p. 34.
- 75 Bogнар 1990, p. 8; Jodidio, p. 42.
- 76 John Morris Dixon, "Introduction: Japanese Avant-garde Architects" to *The New Japanese Architecture*, by Botond Bogнар (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) p. 10.
- 77 Jodidio, p. 62.
- 78 Bogнар, 1985, p. 82.
- 79 Mathews, p. 73.