

Wabi sabi and Ukiyo: Tradition in Post-war Japanese Architecture

Neil Jackson

University of Liverpool

Let's start by reminding ourselves what is understood by *wabi sabi* and *ukiyo*.

The first, *wabi sabi*, is a Japanese world view where beauty is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It is central to the Japanese view of aesthetics in the same way as the Greek concept of beauty and perfection is central to Western art. Thus, it could be said that the two ideals are diametrically opposed. The famous Zen garden of *Ryōan-ji* in Kyoto, particularly when gloomy and wet, can bring on feelings of melancholy which the Venus de Milo, despite her unfortunate amputations, will probably never do.

The second, *ukiyo*, is the floating world. This alternative culture developed during *sakoku* when, for over two hundred years during the Edo period, Japan was a closed country and entered or exited only on pain of death. Thus *ukiyo* signified notions of pleasure and escape beyond this 'chained country' and the control of the ruling *Shōguns*. In this floating world, the naked, almost stoic Venus de Milo would have had no part. For like the wood-block prints, known as *ukiyo-e*, *ukiyo* had its origin in the evanescent, impermanent world of *kabuki* theatre, of geisha, brothels and *chashitsu*, the tea ceremony.

In this paper I would like to suggest that it is these concepts which serve to link to modern Japanese architecture what we might call the politics of the past. For in the mid-1950s there developed, in Japanese architecture, a debate between Tradition and Modernity. The difficulty was that the traditionalist *teikan yōshiki* (the Imperial Crown Style) recalled the great disaster of the War while Modern architecture, on the other hand, was Western and represented the conqueror, the American occupation having ended only in 1952. This dichotomy was apparent in two buildings completed by Murano Tōgo in 1958, the New Kabuki Theatre in Ōsaka and the public hall in Yonago: the first was overtly traditional and the other was explicitly Modern, but both were built in reinforced concrete

Yet at this time there was emerging, largely through the writing and architecture of Tange Kenzō, a third way. In 1949, Tange had won the commission for the Peace Centre at Hiroshima. The building was, as the Australian architect and critic Robin Boyd wrote in his 1962 book on Tange, 'a long, strong pavilion that looked entirely modern and yet had a curiously evocative Japanese touch.'¹ The Modernism is easy enough to recognize: the board-marked *pilotis* and the suggestion of the ribbon window in the great louvred façade are clearly Corbusian. These references would have come from photographs, for it was not until 1951, when Tange and Maekawa Kunio attended the eighth CIAM (Congrès Internationale d'Architecture Moderne) meeting in Hoddesdon, England, that he had an opportunity, through Maekawa, to visit Corbusier in France and to see his architecture first hand. What impressed him there the most was the Unité building at Marseilles, then nearing completion. It had, as he later told Maekawa and Ikuta Tsutomu during a dinner-table discussion at the Nakamura-ya restaurant in Tokyo, published in *Kokusai Kentiku*, 'humanity in the roughness of handicraft.'²

This roughness of handicraft is explicit in the *pilotis* at Hiroshima, yet to immediately attribute them to Corbusier's influence is to forget the Japanese tradition of timber architecture. Tange was acutely aware of tradition and in a paper entitled 'Creation in Present Day Architecture and the Japanese Architectural Tradition', published in *Sinkentiku* in June 1956, he said:

The realities of present-day Japan while part of historically conditioned world-wide reality, are at the same time given their unique shape by the traditions of Japan ... Only those with a forward-looking attitude realize that tradition exists and is alive. It is therefore only they who can confront and overcome it. This means neither elaborating grandiose schemes for the future nor being fatefully involved with the past, but awareness that the most vital task for today is creativity to elevate both past and future.³

Thus the board-marked *pilotis* at Hiroshima might be more usefully compared to the Todai-ji at Nara where, within in the largest timber building in the world, 32 great timber columns support the roof. Each is about 14m (46ft) high and comprises sixteen vertical planks, 275mm (11 ins) wide and held by nails and great iron bands at 3m (10ft) intervals. Indeed, the reading of these supports at

Hiroshima as *pilotis* is teleological, for, as Tange pointed out in that same paper, 'In Japan, there has been no tradition of using *pilotis*,' adding, 'we must ... never confuse the essential significance of *pilotis* with the high-floored style houses born of the adaptation of Japanese architecture to a damp climate, just because of the seeming similarity between the two.'⁴ This distinction, as characterized by the *Shousouin* or treasure house built in the *azekura* style at Nara, is significant for it adds weight to Robin Boyd's observation made fifty years ago:

When "the smell of tradition" enters Tange's work in the involuntary sort of way that it has a habit of doing, he is probably contributing more than he realizes. On the other hand, when he allows the Le Corbusier influence to dominate too strongly, he is *not* notably assisting Japan to find its own popular branch culture in the modern world.

The use of board-marked concrete soon became a trope in Tange's work. The Kagawa Prefectural Government Offices in Takamatsu, completed in 1960, seem to avoid any Corbusian suggestions and read like a concrete interpretation of a great wooden temple, such as the Todai-ji at Nara. There, in the gateway building, great beam ends overhang and protrude in the same way as the reinforced concrete structure does at Takamatsu. Here Tange's obvious expression of timber construction is not drawn from Le Corbusier but from Japanese sources.

To say that Tange was here adopting *wabi sabi* in a traditional or historicist sense would be incorrect. In his 1956 article on the Japanese Architectural Tradition, Tange criticized the expression of *wabi sabi* when it represented the fatalistic, passive, Japanese view of nature which he deplored. 'Traditional Japanese methods of environmental control' he argued, 'such as the eaves, *en[gawa]* and *shoji* have often been repeated from the sentimental standpoint of "wabi", "sabi" etc. However, in order to carry on Japanese traditional methods and to develop contemporary methods in the right direction, we must be aware of and reject such attitudes.'⁵ At Takamatsu, the unrefined, raw nature of the concrete, the absence of strong colours and the presence of "nothingness" in the landscaped areas around the building certainly evoke *wabi sabi*, but there is nothing fatalistic or passive about the architecture; in fact, quite the opposite.

A similar approach was taken by his friend and former employer, Maekawa Kunio, in his Prefectural Art Museum at Okayama, built in 1964. Here the building nestles into the landscape, its rustic, rubble-stone walls extending beyond the structure which contains, at its centre, a small, melancholic garden of rocks, bamboo and apparently discarded pottery. What is noticeable here, in the roughness of the materials which make up this building, is a primitivism which recalls the Maisons Jaoul, built a decade earlier in Paris by Le Corbusier for whom, it should not be forgotten, Maekawa had worked.

In a second paper of 1956 entitled 'The Architect in Japan: His Outer World and His Inner World', published in *Sinkentiku* that October, Tange extended his criticism of (what he called) 'this fatalistic outlook that is close to resignation'⁶ which he felt had been handed down as an unconscious heritage. For him tradition had to be something which was completely conscious, something which could be used positively. As he said, 'The architect should not automatically drift with the current of history but should participate in the historical process of creation with his creative strength as an architect'.⁷ His criticisms might have been intended for the Hasshokan restaurant at Nagoya, known as the *Miyuki-no-ma* — literally the Emperor's house. Built in 1950 by Horiguchi Sutemi, one of the leading protagonists of Modernism in the inter-war years, it was in the *sukiya* style and would have represented, to Tange's way of thinking, that fatalistic outlook which was close to resignation. What he would have preferred, perhaps, would have been Sakakura Junzō's Museum of Modern Art at Kamakura, completed a year later. Here, in a similarly melancholic setting, an equally fragile building appears resolutely modern.

The 1949 competition for the Hiroshima Peace Center had, in fact, produced no winner. Tange was awarded second prize while the third place was taken by Kikutake Kiyonori, then still a very young man of twenty-one. A decade later, in 1959, Kikutake presented his Sky House to what turned out to be the final meeting of CIAM at Otterloo in the Netherlands. Like Tange, he too drew on the Japanese tradition of timber architecture, incorporating traditional features which are explicitly modern, such as the overhanging eaves, the circumferential *engawa* and the sliding *shoji*, as well as four supporting walls — I will not say *pilotis* — which, placed mid-way along each elevation, raise

the house above the ground. There is nothing sentimental in Kikutake's use of these features nor in his use of board-marked concrete externally.

Kikutake's representation of tradition in his contemporaneous Shimane Prefectural Museum at Matsue is equally modern. The dark screen, folded in 21 panels across the east end of the galleries, for example, is both a *byobu* and a *shoji*, yet at the same time is neither. Meanwhile the hefty board-marked columns which elevate the main galleries two storeys above the ground taper, tree-like, as they rise from a bed of textured concrete and inlaid pebbles where a single rock is set into the gridded floor. Inside, 200mm (8 in) square tiles of black slate clad the walls and another rock, now large and flat, provides the stepping-off point for the main stairs. These rough and rustic elements are as much *wabi sabi* as the rocks and gravel which make up the Zen garden of *Ryōan-ji*.

In his article of 1956 on the Japanese Architectural Tradition, Tange had drawn attention to the historic *Shōin* and *sukiya* styles.⁸ These styles were further promoted by the book which Tange, together with Walter Gropius and the photographer Ishimoto Yasuhiro, published the following year, 1960, on the detached palace of Katsura in Kyoto. Entitled *Katsura: Tradition and creation in Japanese Architecture*, the book held, as Tange wrote in the foreword, 'a rather special view of the tradition that underlies Japanese architecture and gardens, particularly of the formalized tradition that has been created by the upper levels of society.'⁹ This was that every element in that tradition was, as he said, 'originally inspired by a personal experience or emotion, by the way something felt or looked or otherwise affected the senses.'¹⁰ Tange credits Gropius, who first visited Katsura in 1954, with recognizing many modern qualities in its architecture and thus, perhaps, a solution to what he called 'the troublesome present-day discrepancy between Japanese tradition and the facts of modern Japanese life.'¹¹

As well as recognizing in the modular construction and moveable wall-panels of traditional Japanese architecture the justification for his own current approach to architecture, Gropius also saw at Katsura that, as he put it, 'The aesthetic effect is a pure, architectonic one, achieved by simple contrasts of bright and dark, smooth and rough and by juxtaposition of plain squares, rectangles, and stripes.'¹² These he interpreted not as aesthetic abstractions but as meaningful

realities, related to daily life. 'This,' he said, 'is the lofty abode of man in equilibrium, in serenity.'¹³

But for all the equilibrium and serenity, Katsura had served another purpose. It was essentially a pleasure garden for what Tange had called the upper levels of society, a place where *ukiyo*, the 'floating world', could offer a release from the confines of *sakoku*. Here at Katsura, this was achieved both physically and spiritually through *chashitsu*, the tea ceremony. The tea houses at Katsura are gentle affairs where *wabi sabi* is as evident in the roughness and simplicity of the materials as it is in the emptiness of their space; yet in this context the highly structured protocols of the tea ceremony were enacted with hand-made utensils amidst the rustle of rich silk kimonos.

The Meiji restoration of 1868 succeeded in opening up Japan to the West but did not sweep away the floating world of *ukiyo*. On the contrary, it became an object of fascination, and enjoyment, for the Western visitors and the new technology of photography, *shashin satsuei*, soon provided an alternative medium to *ukiyo-e*, the woodblock prints, and an encouragement to Western artists.

Central to *ukiyo* was *kabuki* theatre and this, of course, remains a major part of Japanese culture. The most recent incarnation of the Ginza *kabuki* theatre in Tokyo, now I believe demolished for redevelopment, was built by Yoshida Isoya in 1951. But this building, where reinforced concrete immitates timber, is, like the actors' costume, no more than a façade. There is nothing of *ukiyo* about it.

Not far away, the regimented concrete façade the Nippon Life Assurance Office hides the Nissay Theatre, built in Tokyo's Marunouchi district by Murano Togo in 1963. Only the rather mannerist windows and the extraordinary *piloti*, if we can use that term, suggest anything of the fantastic world within. From the entrance hall, with its rough granite columns with chamfered corners dividing the space, the grand marble stairs leads upwards to the foyer where the curving walls are of tessalated marble blocks and the red-carpeted stairs suspended on stainless steel hangers. Yet this is small preparation for the auditorium. Here glass tiles of gold and white cover the swelling walls and thousands of pearl oyster shells are set in to the blue, pigmented plaster of the ceiling. It was perhaps appropriate, if not ironic, that the first production here was Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the story of

Florestan, a political prisoner languishing in chains in some deep dungeon where he dreams he sees his wife come to rescue him. The parallels with *sakuko*, the chained country, and the floating world of *ukiyo*, cannot be missed.

However much one might seek to recognize the presence of tradition, in whatever guise, in post-war Japanese architecture, there seem to me to be architectural expressions which have less to do with traditional Japanese architecture than with cultural stereotypes. Take Motoo's Public Auditorium, built in Nagasaki in 1962, is a case in point. As a modernist building it could be found in London, Liverpool or even Buffalo, except, perhaps, for the concave balcony wall, the inset lantern and the suggestion of a Shinto arch and *shoji* screens in the trabeated elevation. These, I would suggest, are, or have become, cultural stereotypes, if not clichés, which root the building firmly in Japan.

More subtle is the influence of the armoured *samurai* warrior, an image made familiar first through *Yokohama shashin*, the hand-tinted photographs which became so popular in the late nineteenth-century, and more recently through movies or *manga*. In closing I want to ask, rhetorically, whether Tange, in his National Stadium built in Yoyogi Park, Tokyo, for the 1964 Olympics, or Katayama Mitsuō, in his Prefectural Government Offices, built at Nara the following year, are playing with this national image.

For both buildings were, and are, in locations frequented by thousands of visitors, the one being the setting for the Olympics and the other a UNESCO World Heritage Site with seven ancient shrines and temples. Each, it seems, has adopted, in a semiotic way, the armour of the samurai: for the extraneous concrete panels along the skyline of both buildings, which appear to have little practical use, suggest to me the helmet or the neck and shoulder guards of the samurai warrior.

If this is a representation of tradition in post-war Japanese architecture, it is not that of *wabi sabi* or *ukiyo*, but perhaps more that of Robert Venturi and Las Vegas.

¹ R. Boyd, *Kenzo Tange* (New York, 1962), p. 9.

² 'Anon, Western Society and Current of Modern Architecture', *Kokusai Kentiku*, December 1951, pp. 2-13

³ Kenzo Tange, 'Creation in Present Day Architecture and the Japanese Architectural Tradition', *Sinkentiku* (June 1956), p. 25

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kenzo Tange, 'The Architect in Japan: His Outer World and His Inner World', *Sinkentiku* (October 1956), p. 7

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁸ 'This *sukiya* expression was born during the evolution from the original *Shoin* style to the farm house or merchant house style, absorbing in the process their *wabi* qualities.' See Tange, 'Creation ...' (June 1956), p. 29

⁹ Walter Gropius, Kenzo Tange, Yasuhiro Ishimoto, Herbert Bayer, *Katsura: Tradition and creation in Japanese Architecture* (New Haven, 1960), p. v

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. vi

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹³ *Ibid.*

The Traditions in Japanese Art. The long history of Japanese painting can be understood as a synthesis of several traditions that make parts of the recognizable Japanese aesthetics. Wabi, which means transient and stark beauty, sabi (the beauty of natural patina and aging) and yugen (profound grace and subtlety) are still influential ideals in Japanese painting practices. Finally, if we focus on picking the ten most famous Japanese masterpieces, we have to mention ukiyo-e, which is one of the most popular art genres in Japan, even though it refers to printmaking. The painting is executed in the tradition of ukiyo-e. All Images used for illustrative purposes only.

Follow These Artists. Although the concept of wabi-sabi is around 500 years old, modern Japanese designers and artists across a variety of disciplines -such as architecture (such as Kengo Kuma and Tadao Ando [3]) and fashion design (such as Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo [5]) -continue to be influenced by the tradition, incorporating raw materials into their works and creating shapes. The Classic Tradition in Japanese Architecture. October 1974 Pacific Affairs. Arthur Erickson. This part of the book starts by stating that the Japanese and Korean traditions of philosophy, when compared with other Asian traditions, present distinctive features. Divisions in Japanese and Korean schools of philosophy are employed and maintained for "practical" reasons.