

The 'Mondrian' in the Japanese Room

VINAYAK BHARNE
Woodbury University

"All material shape should be seen by perfect intuitive wisdom as it really is"

Buddha

"The emotion of beauty is always obscured by the appearance of the object. Therefore the object must be eliminated from the picture"

Piet Mondrian

There is a 'Mondrian' in every Japanese room. It is visible only to those that understand the futility of walking around, only to those that quietly compose themselves in front of a wall.

Aroused partly by textural irregularities or simply out of boredom, one occasionally engages oneself by drawing imaginary pictures on the wall facing him. The wall being concentrated on assumes autonomy and acting as a screen for one's mental fantasies, becomes the composing element of an abstract 'metaphysical' space defying physical definition. Through the dissociation of a frontal element from all the others making a room, one enjoys a new ocular perception of reality, comprehending space not through size, shape and scale, but through immateriality, abstraction and metaphor.

In experiencing 'De Stijl'¹ paintings by Van Doesburg and Mondrian, one observes in their abstractions, a search for the laws of equilibrium and harmony applicable to both art and life. In their quest for an expression of clarity and order that also apparently expresses their religious and philosophical beliefs, the artists eliminate all components of representational realism, reducing the compositions to their most basic elements – straight lines, plane surfaces and rectangles. Likewise the walls in a Japanese room engender through our subjective

mental fantasies the reduction of their austere and rectilinear modular compositions to their simplest harmonies, transforming the physical built form of the wall into an abstract compound transcending the conventional visual regimes. Reading a Japanese room by autonomous concentrations on its composing walls results in an unconventional experience – one sees the biggest 'Mondrian' one could ever dream of².

FRONTALITY

The Western tendency to photographing Japanese rooms at an angle is understandable. In the West the image of a room showing two walls and a corner is far more interesting than the frontal photo of a single wall. The furniture and objects of art that adorn the Western room are best seen in their three-dimensional complexity when viewed at an angle. The Western room has always been a spatial experience of volume rather than surface, the walls serving as backdrops to define the spatial boundaries within which one can associate with autonomous objects shaping space between and around them.

The traditional Japanese room on the other hand is visually far more pleasing when viewed frontally. In comparing frontal versus angular photos, it is apparent that the visual calm and stability of a frontal wall composition is lost when one attempts to capture the corner. The *tokonoma* (alcove), the only delineated 'ornamental space' of a traditional Japanese interior appears most pleasing when one sees it head on, reading the scroll and the objects on the baseboard as a unified framed composition. The paintings on the *fusuma* panels are best read when one sits perpendicular to them. And

the garden composition that may capture a distant mountain as part of the frame can only be perceived when one views it frontally through the opened *shoji*.



Fig 1. Views of a Japanese 'shoin' – angular versus frontal (photos – Michael Greenhalgh)

This contrast in spatial perception is no coincidence. Japanese rooms were designed through the process of *Okosheizu*,³ each of the walls conceived as independent two-dimensional compositions that were then 'tilted' up under the already erected roof to make an enclosure much like a paper carton. Further, Japanese rooms were never entered at an angle, and there was no plan in Japanese architecture that entertained a diagonal entry into an interior space. A room was entered at right angles to a wall, and every entry into any adjacent room also occurred in the same manner. With no fixed furniture to imply any definite seating

pattern, and no field of objects to walk through, it was the *tatami* pattern of the floor with its right-angled black tapes that became the structural organizer of the room interior, the implicit order for its wall compositions as well as the seating in relation to their specific elements such as a *tokonoma*. As Arthur Drexler observed "If the floor is imagined as an abstract picture composed of rectangles, it will be seen that the divisions on the 'frame' enclosing the picture – the walls of the room – are affected by the floor pattern itself. The black lines dividing the floor surface not only suggest to the architect the placement of columns and those intervals of *shoji* which will best relate a room to its garden, but also tie together wall and floor in a harmony as varied as it is consistent."⁴

Japanese space was frontal space. Unlike Western space, with no furniture on the floors and no objects on the walls, it was more about surface than volume, more about ambiguity than arrangement. The built form of the room, physically measurable through length, breadth and height was nonetheless spatially perceived as an empty void. In its emptiness there was nothing to associate with, nothing to imply a sense of scale, the only constants being the surfaces that enclosed it. The Japanese room began and ended with its 'walls'.

FLATNESS

The Japanese room could be likened to a paper box, each of its six faces representing a fold in the sheet glued together to form a cube. Looked at this way, the consistent flatness of its composing surfaces is easily apparent as an overall theme. The flat expanse of the *tatami* floor was typically accompanied by flat ceilings. Made of a lattice of lightwood strips about 18 inches apart and fastened to the wall by a ledge called *mawaribuchi*, they were held aloft by poles hung from the rafters, with 1/8-inch thick boards nailed on top making the finished ceiling a lattice of parallel lines. Enclosing this flat top and bottom were the main composing elements of the room – the walls.

These walls had peculiar qualities in comparison to those of the West. No acute or obtuse angle ever broke their strictly perpendicular relationships to each other, and no curve ever entered the Japanese interior. Even with the walls freed from structural constraints, the same Japanese that insisted on curves in their

roofs seemed averse to any kind of curvilinear surface within their rooms. Japanese walls were perpetually flat.

So great was this affinity to the flat surface, that the openings within walls with *shoji* and *fusuma* were also always sliding. Unlike the Western door and window that opened ajar, thereby introducing a vanishing point and hence a perception of depth into the visual frame, the flat composition of the Japanese wall was never disturbed, the sliding panels ensuring that there was never a vanishing point to disturb the dominance of the frontal surface. Japanese walls overlaid the idea of spatial depth with that of frontal overlap.

RIGHT ANGLE

The frontal compositions of Japanese walls were made up of strictly horizontals and verticals, no diagonal ever disturbing this rectilinear order. Structural braces and ties were not always horizontal, and though it is known that traditional Japanese buildings occasionally used diagonal bracing, they were invariably concealed within the thickness of a plaster wall, never bringing a diagonal into the visual composition. The vertical elements of the wall were the supporting columns of the structural timber cage dominating the visual rhythm by their fixed and conspicuous locations, yet hardly escaping modification by their horizontal structural counterparts.

It was indeed these horizontal members that established the scale of Japanese interior. Approximately 1 ken (6 feet) above the floor was a beam called *nageshi*, serving as the structural brace to tie the columns together while bearing the tracks to slide *shoji* or *fusuma* panels. The portion of the wall above the *nageshi* ranging from 18 inches to 3 feet in height was filled in with white plaster or a *shoji* when along an exterior wall or a sometimes ornate wood lattice called *ramma* when between interior rooms to help in air circulation. The *nageshi* was always revealed on both sides of a wall, even in cases where it did not support sliding panels. In all cases this tie beam remained the dominant horizontal member of the wall composition.



Fig 2. Wall compositions of Japanese rooms showing consistency of flatness, right angles, horizontals and verticals, with complete absence of diagonals (photos – Michael Greenhalgh)

So pronounced was this persistence for horizontals that Japanese carpenter-architects hardly hesitated to introduce superfluous horizontal elements as part of the structural cage. For instance the intersection of the wall and ceiling was a horizontal member called *tenjo-nageshi*, often appearing like a major structural element. Yet *ramma* when plastered typically detracted the visual strength of this horizontal, making the ceiling to seem weakly supported. To remedy this effect, a strip of white plaster 6–8 inches high was inserted just below the ceiling, making the wood ceiling to appear to hover above the room. The *tengo nageshi* was thus deprived of any structural function and remained a purely decorative line in an overall composition⁵.

Similarly, the *nageshi* was visually scaled beyond its practical requirements, and the thin grooved plank flanked by two boards was made to appear like a solid beam. When it spanned 3 or more ken (18 feet) – typically between rooms under a *fusuma* wall – it was divided into two lengths, caught at the center by a post hung from the beam above. This post was smaller in its dimensions than the normal column, ensuring the horizontality of the *nageshi* as visually prominent a place as the columns themselves. Even at the cost of redundancy Japanese walls were compositions of exclusively horizontals and verticals. There is no rationale to explain why the Japanese never hesitated to shroud anything that was visually unwanted to adhere to that strict order of the right-angle.

AUTONOMY

Nothing could be more antithetical to the corner of a Japanese room than a Modernist 'corner window'. The idea of the 'free corner' wherein two planes of glass meet at a right-angle, authenticate their non load-bearing walls and create a wall to wall continuity, extending the space of the corner into the one beyond. In the Japanese tradition despite the walls having no structural value, the corner of two walls has never been anything more or less than a structural post. Even in rooms facing gardens, when the infills are completely removed, the corner of the rectangular plan was never left as an open space between two posts.

That is not to say that the Japanese have not entertained the concept of wall-to-wall continu-

ity. The *fusuma* paintings that adorn the walls were often conceived as a single gigantic mural surrounding the space. When the scene reached a corner, it simply slid behind the post and jumped onto the next perpendicular wall continuing the narration. Landscape themes were typically the main subject of room interiors and when one looks through the composing members of a wall, it seems as if one is viewing a surreal garden surrounding the room.

Yet this perception of continuity through the *fusuma* paintings does not last too long. Even with the narrative backdrop, it is difficult to read the room as continuous a composition not so much due to the corner post, but rather the distinction between the adjacent wall compositions themselves particularly above the *nageshi*. No two walls in a Japanese room were ever the same, almost seeming like they were composed independent of each other. On two meeting walls, the *nageshi* were typically at slightly different heights – from one half to two or three times the depth of the *nageshi* itself – as if the plane of the wall continued into the space beyond the room. The consequent difference in the height of the *rammas* above the *nageshi* only reinforced the non-continuity of the two horizontals. As such Japanese walls were read easier one at a time as autonomous compositions enclosing the room as a physical whole while diminishing their appearance as a continuous enclosure .

ABSTRACTION

The transition from the early *shinden-zukuri* rooms with their *shoji* and *fusuma*, to the *shoin-zukuri* prototype adding the three-dimensional *tokonoma* (alcove) and *chigaidana* (shelves)' to the *sukiya-zukuri* Tea Houses with their abstract wall compositions' represents among other things the Japanese quest for an aesthetic rubric of rectilinear and modular affinities⁶. The evolution of the Japanese interior is in this sense the evolution of its abstract Mondrian-like walls.

To understand the relationship of these walls to a perceiver, it is important to mention a traditional Zen technique of meditation. Zen adherents practice *Zazen*⁷, sitting motionless in contemplation, often directly facing a wall. Associating with the frontal plane whilst dissociating with the rest of the composing surfaces, the mentally segregated frontal element becomes a screen for one's contemplative movies transcending size, shape and form. Likewise

one of the ways to comprehend the Japanese room is through successive concentrations on its autonomous walls, one at a time.

If one were to sit at an angle to simultaneously perceive two walls and a corner, the birth of a diagonal and hence a vanishing point would bring about a perceptual tension, and the repose of the frontal composition would be mysteriously lost. But if one were one to understand the futility of perceiving a Japanese room in the Western three-dimensional sense, and quietly alight in front of a wall, one would undergo an entirely new spatial experience. With the wall perpendicular to the visual axis, that is, with the wall at an absolute 'frontal' relationship to the observer, the right-angled relationships of the modules, visible only from a frontal standpoint, the perpetual 'flatness' of the wall composition, its pure horizontals and verticals in space and the absence of diagonals and vanishing points - would be perceived as an abstract compound suggesting calm and repose.

And therein one would encounter a wondrous assemblage of squares, rectangles, right angles, lines that can "move with the force of a thunderclap or the delicacy of a cat"⁸, engendering one the one hand a compact imaginable pictorial accord, and on the other the perceptual subjectivity - like a Mondrian painting - of becoming that what one makes it to be. Perhaps one would see the infinite expanse of the horizon, or the outstretched plain of the Pampas grassland, or an urban grid, or the intangible force fields of a tree, or simply an intricate superimposition of Universal order that is beyond physical comprehension.

MONDRIAN

The evolution of De Stijl's most outstanding painter Piet Mondrian, clarifies these tendencies. His earliest paintings such as *'The Mill Under The Sun'* (1908) begin as a confrontation with this classical hollandaise theme. By 1912 with *'The Blooming Apple Tree'* (1912) the initiated cubism denies all figurative influences attempting to depict the significant structure of the represented object. In *'Komposition Nr. 6'* (1914) the surface is structured on a delicate equilibrium of vertical and horizontal lines with a few curves. In *'Komposition III'* (1917) the image is not limited to the center of the frame, but cuts off at the edge going further than the frame limits. *'Farbkomposition*

A' (1917) is based on Mondrian's own elements of "neoplastic" vocabulary of black lines, squares, rectangles, and primary colors displaced in space. In the composition, from 1922, the elements are asymmetrical and dynamic allowing Mondrian to achieve an "unbalanced equilibrium". And by the 40's his work breaks away from the austere patterns of the black lines substituting their continuity with a series of small rectangles coalesced into a rhythmic flow of vertical and horizontal lines in masterpieces such as *'New York City I'* (1941) and *'Broadway Boogie-Woogie'* (1942-43)⁹.

"The purer the artists' 'mirror' is the more true reality reflects in it" Mondrian once noted. For him the naturalistic world had veiled us from the reality that lay behind. As such he abandoned it refusing to paint anything that look life-like and representational, abstracting what he saw to its core "essence" - manifested for him in lines horizontal and vertical, the primary colors red, yellow, and blue, and three different tones white, gray, and black. "We must free ourselves from our attachment to the external" he wrote in the 1920's "for only then do we transcend the tragic, and are enabled consciously to contemplate the repose which is within all things". He seemingly found this repose in the energy of the object recognizing the forces flowing out of them and seeking the need to objectify them in another way. He thus sought the infinite through finite shapes - through the straight line and the open-ended space between two parallel straight lines stretching them far beyond the borders and making them a fragment of a larger cosmos that through a perceptual illusory scale seemed measurable in miles. As an outstanding feat in the history of Modern Art foreshadowing what would later be called 'geometric abstraction', Mondrian's work surpassed the aesthetic limitations of art, seeking the harmony and salience rooted in the strict puritan tradition of Dutch Calvinism.

NEXUS

There is no evidence to suggest any direct tie between Mondrian and Japan, or between the similarities of their austere compositions separated by over half a millennium. Yet the traditional Japanese notion of additive horizontality is analogous to the Mondrian's (and De Stijl's) tendency of overlapping space. Arthur Drexler notes that traditional Japanese rooms were arranged like boxes of various sizes packed

unevenly in a carton, his observation exemplified through paintings showing several rooms in a Japanese house without any vanishing point, extending into infinity – like a series of Mondrian rectangles juxtaposed on a canvas. And with the consistent absence of perspective and the distant vanishing point and with spatial depth achieved through planar succession (one's eye leaping from a lower to a higher plane across a misty void), the Mondrian canvas - like Japanese space, with its abstract language of ordered geometry, clarity and ethical force - has no perceptual beginning, middle or end.

Perhaps the most profound nexus of Mondrian's work and the Japanese wall compositions lie in their eventual goal - one that transcends realism to manifest the power of subjective visual perception as a guide to humanity. The Buddha's claim that "All material shape should be seen by perfect intuitive wisdom as it really is" suggests the pluralism of the physical world, ordinary knowledge being only relatively true. This distinction resembles Mondrian's notion - "The emotion of beauty is always obscured by the appearance of the object. Therefore the

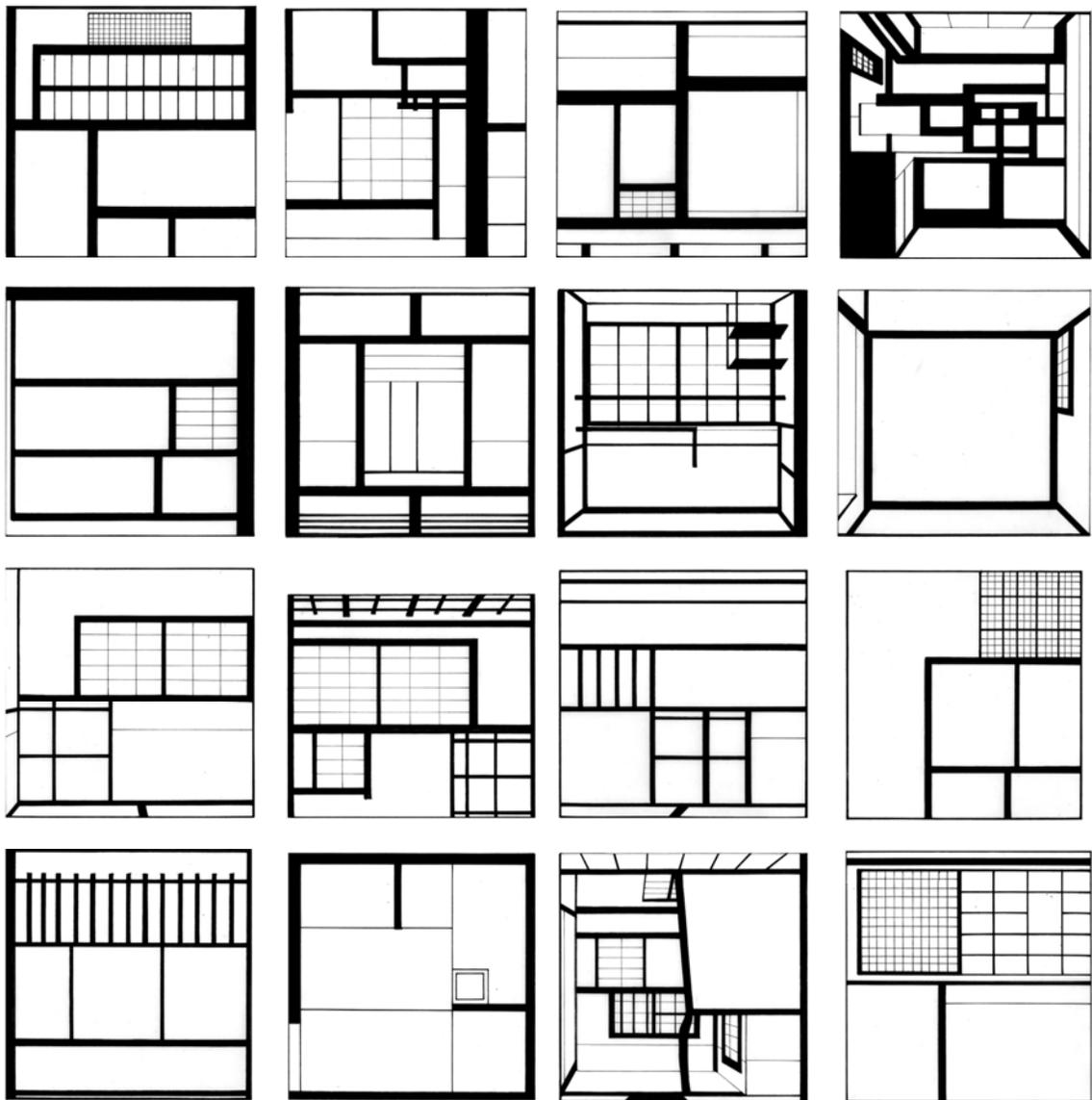


Image 3 – Abstractions of Japanese walls into Mondrian-like compositions. (drawings by Jennifer Bailey)

object must be eliminated from the picture" affirming his complete rejection of artistic objectivism. When in 1920, he dedicated his booklet 'Le Neo-plasticisme' to what he called 'future men', he encouraged the substitution of the conventional and literal facts of appearance with a new harmonious cogitation of life, in an attempt to understand "a true vision of reality" – space not as an empirical object, but as a transcendental ideal, a key to a higher world of knowledge. There was nothing in the present which was not in the past, nothing in the future that was not in the present. In the cosmos, one stage followed upon another until it became void. Then a new cycle began - just like the stages - in a timeless, endless succession. The Universe was timeless. It was without boundaries. It was an infinite Universe.

Endnotes

I wish to thank Michael Greenhalgh for the generous use of his photographs. I also wish to thank Jennifer Bailey for her drawings of the Japanese room compositions.

¹ 'De Stijl' literally means 'The Style'. This Dutch arts movement started in Amsterdam in 1917, was dedicated to abstraction that would generate a universal response from all viewers based on a quest for harmony and order. Among the founders of the movement were the painters Piet Mondrain and Theo Van Doesburg, who also established its journal, *De Stijl* (1917-1932). The spare, abstract style that they advocated was also called neoplasticism. De Stijl principles also influenced the decorative arts, especially architecture, exemplified by the austere clarity of the Schröder House (1924) in Utrecht, by architect and industrial designer Gerrit Thomas Rietveld.

² The similarity of Japanese walls to Mondrian compositions has been mentioned in other writings such as Ferras Gorge, *Frontal Perception in Japanese Architectural Space*, published in *Process Architecture 25*, Process Architecture Co. Ltd

³ The method of Okosheizu involved the composing of walls on the ground as planar compositions that were then manifested vertically. In this sense the Japanese room was like a paper box, made of various folds of paper. For more on Okosheizu, see Ferras Gorge, *Frontal Perception in Japanese Architectural Space*, published in *Process Architecture 25*, Process Architecture Co. Ltd

⁴ See Drexler Arthur, *The Architecture of Japan*, published by the Museum of Modern Art (1955)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Residential dwellings of the nobility first appeared in the Heian period with the shinden-zukuri style emulating T'ang dynasty bisymmetrical Buddhist worship halls that were typically interconnected by roofed corridors and passageways. The closest example of this style is the 19th century version of the Imperial Palace in Kyoto. The next residential paradigm was the shoin-zukuri, the 'shoin' (literally library or study) originally being the name given to the abbot's quarters in a Zen temple. It evolved from the shinden prototype with the increasing influence of Zen eventually manifesting as large, ornamental settings for the pomp of the feudal warlords. An existing example of this paradigm is the Ninomaru Hall of Nijo Castle in Kyoto. The third type of residential interior was the sukiya-zukuri, stemming from the Azuchi-Momoyama period Zen idea of the Cha-no-yo (Tea Ceremony). Sukiya referring to the building in which the tea ceremony was performed stood in direct contrast to the grand and magnificent settings of the shoin-zukuri, with the smaller, simpler, natural and un-ornamental considered superior, and some tea huts going from six tatami down to 1 3/4 tatami in size. It is best exemplified in the Katsura Imperial Villa built in the mid to late 1600's.

⁷ 'Zazen' is a Zen technique of meditation. 'Za' implies sitting without moving, like a mountain. 'Zen' is neither a theory nor an idea, nor an intellectual concept, its practice said to bring about an 'interior revolution': a deep wisdom whose essence is unattainable through logical thought alone. To practice zazen, the adherents sit on a thick, round cushion (zafu), legs crossed in a 'lotus' or 'half-lotus' position. The pelvis is tipped forward, so that the knees push against the floor. From this base, they straighten the spinal column, 'push the ground with their knees, the sky with the top of the head'. The chin is tucked, back of the neck stretched, shoulders naturally relaxed. The eyes are half-closed, the gaze resting on the plane one meter in front of you.

⁸ See David Sylvester, *About Modern Art : Critical Essays, 1948 – 1997*, Yale University Press; 2nd edition (November 1, 2001)

⁹ For more see Bax Marty, *Complete Mondrian*, Lund Humphries Publishers (January 2002)