

Deliberate Dusk: Darkness and the Experience of Japanese Space

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If Modern illumination could represent the brilliance of the Sun, then traditional Japanese illumination could be said to abet the tranquility of the moon. For part of the beauty of traditional Japanese space lay in that soft, subdued light that engulfed it in ambiguity; that dim shadowy world that complimented the textures of the 'tatami' and 'shoji'¹. The West flooded their spaces with light, but the Japanese shrouded their spaces in dark. The West reveled with the colors of the Sun, but Japan contemplated the monochromes of dusk. The West had known times without electricity, gas or petroleum, yet from candle to oil-lamp to gas-light, the quest for a brighter light never ceased. But in Japan, if light was scarce, it was scarce – they simply embraced that surreal realm where darkness and light was mutually undistinguishable.

Japanese illumination before the introduction of kerosene oil was of the most meager means. The feeble light emitted from tiny wicks, or the dim and unsteady flame of a vegetable-wax candle was all the more feeble when filtered through a paper lantern. It was something of a boon then, when kerosene oil entered Japan among the many things brought in by the West². Yet amidst this cultural exchange, the incandescent bulb was anything but innocuous for Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. Within decades it would virulently proliferate engulfing the ancient Japanese nexus between light, darkness and shadows and the various esoteric rituals that formed part of their daily life.

When Junichiro Tanizaki confronted this in the 1930s he knew he was witnessing an inundation of Japanese traditions by Western ideas.

Traditional building materials and appliances were being replaced with glittering Western inventions - gold-flecked lacquer-ware was being rendered garish by electric light, and flood-lamps had turned the Kabuki into a "world of sham". He poured his lamentation into an essay 'In Praise of Shadows'³ which, had it been written later might well have blasted the glitz of Ginza along with his list of the moribund.

DARKNESS

From ancient Shinto mythology stemmed the concept of 'Yami' (darkness), a peculiar notion implying a mysterious feeling of something hidden in space. Darkness believed to be the abode of the 'kami' (spirit) was revered as sacred space, and thus at a Shinto shrine one progressed from light into the darkness shutting out all worldly distractions to enter the 'kami' world. Even today at the Ise shrine, the 'Shin no mihashira hoken' ritual (during which the heart pillars are installed in the ground under the center of the 'shodens') in keeping with the ancient Shinto concept of concealment, is held at night, and the 'Sengyo', Ise's most solemn and dignified of all rituals during which the 'kamishintai' is carried from the old shoden to the new is celebrated at night in total darkness, with only a few torches lighting the procession⁴.

In his fourteenth century essays *Tsure-Zure Gusa*, when the Zen monk Yoshida Kenko emphasized "Night is the best time also to go to worship at the Shinto and Buddhist temples, especially on those occasions when others do not go", he was affirming this ancient reverence for darkness and its idea of purification

translating into a dark path to the Japanese shrine. Thus the Zen 'Roji' - with trees carefully planted to create the impression of walking through a dark forest, with no lanterns hanging from branches and stone lamps placed on the ground to reinforce a dark above - was not just a path to the Tea Hut but a meticulously designed realm to elicit self-purification⁵.

Space the Japanese believed emerged from shadows. It was experienced as much through darkness as light; as much through emptiness as matter. It was 'transient' defined momentarily by the specific activity for particular occasion. It was less about reading size, geometry and form (like the Western reading of space) and more about the perceptual ambiguity of minimal light playing in a void. Like the traditional 'Noh' theater where darkness served as the backdrop to express the actor's emotions by changing the shadows on their masks, the Japanese room was like "an ink wash painting, the paper-paneled shoji being the expanse where the ink is thinnest, and the alcove where it is darkest."⁶ (*Image 1*)



Image 1 - Dim, gloomy and monochromatic interior of a typical Japanese room. (photo – Asano Noboru)

GLOOM

"The little sunlight from the garden that manage(d) to make its way beneath the eaves and through the corridors.....lost its power to illuminate seem(ing) drained of the complexion of life." wrote Tanizaki⁷. He was not lament-

ing, but eulogizing the genius of Japanese architecture that layer by layer, cut down the glare of sunlight and brought it in as a subdued gloom.

Nowhere was this more evident than the manner in which the Japanese made their living places. Susanoonamikoto, the brother of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu attributed as the first person in Japanese mythology to build a temple is said to have composed the song - "Many clouds appeared; and clouds covered my house like many fences. Having my wife surrounded by the clouds making the fences. Many many fences were made." It is implicitly similar to what Tanizaki noted many centuries later: "In making for ourselves a place to live, we first spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth, and in the pale light of the shadow we put together a house."⁸ From simple dwellings to grand temples the first act of building was the erection of the roof supported on wooden columns, the most conspicuous architectural feature being this dominant sweeping 'parasol' made of thatch or tile, with a space beneath engulfed in gloom. Sunlight, blocked by the eaves, entered the room only after being reflected off the surrounding 'engawa' (verandah) and traveling in an upward direction became less bright as it filtered through the 'washi' of the shoji. Even from the brightest outdoors, one could not transcend the gloom of the Japanese interior rendering the walls, columns and appurtenances hardly visible to the eye.

As such, contrary to the significance of light for the formal comprehension of Western architectural space, Japanese space with its shadows and gloom produced the 'in-ei' space - "the mystical, sensual world in which literature and logic were viewed in a shadowy light" - this non-formal spatial understanding brought about through emotional notions that evolved through the Japanese mind. For instance, one of the great themes of Heian aesthetics was the almost untranslatable concept of 'mono-no-aware' implying an emotional sensitivity to all things animate and inanimate, unifying them with a sense of impermanence, and thereby expanding the concept to acquire an undercurrent of profound melancholy within the subdued gloom of the room.

With the advent of Zen, the notion of austerity - where one had to accept what was given and

evoke it subjectively - was heightened through two moods of expression, 'Sabi' and 'Wabi'. 'Wabi' implied humility and an abstinence from the fashions of society, to cultivate within the presence of something of the highest value, transcending time and social status. Architecturally, the dark forest like approach to the Tea Hut was significant to prepare in the visitor a sense of progressing solitude, a Wabi state of mind. 'Sabi' celebrated age and patina, referring to individual objects and environments with a rustic unpretentiousness or an archaic imperfection eventually extending to the utmost forms of minimalism. The rusticity of the Tea Hut suggested Wabi-Sabi through the emulation of a dark, rustic hermit's hut deep in the mountains.

Thus from the time he came to serve as tea master to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Sen no Rikyu's (1522-91) distaste for garish color achieved widespread following along with his verses advocating 'wabi' austerity. Through his instruction, the color gray enjoyed great popularity and this "ash-dyed neutral hue came to be known as 'Rikyu gray'. In the latter part of the Edo period, gray was much favored by aesthetes, their tastes ranging from silver, indigo, scarlet-tinged, dove and plain grays, thereby permitting subtle variations in color balance. In the rustic metaphor of Rikyu gray "its contradictory elements collide with and neutralize each other, producing a state of continuity and discontinuity, a contrapuntal coexistence that disallows sensual appreciation. It is as if this blend temporarily freezes space-time, through the medium of color perception, into a two-dimensional world."⁹

There is thus another quality to Japanese spaces than that purely formal. In their gloom is a fullness of spiritual import that is quite overpowering. As Ralph Adams Cram noted "They breathe mysticism and abstraction, they are dreamlike and visionary. Under their shadows alone (can) one understand a little of Buddhism"¹⁰.

DIFFUSION

The soft daylight diffusing through the 'washi' (rice paper) paneled 'shoji' is the quintessential traditional Japanese illumination. As such the 'shoji' has come to represent for Japan what glass has for the West. The evolution of the 'shoji' began in the early Nara period

when boards were used as room dividers. With the addition of thick opaque paper these boards developed into the 'fusuma' panels. According to Atsushi Ueda with the samurai houses of the Kamakura and Muromachi periods liberating architecture from the hitherto Chinese influences, this paper began to get increasingly translucent and evolved into the light 'akara shoji' with 'washi' (rice paper) stretched across a grid of wooden pieces. Neither transparent nor opaque, this unique membrane took the light in, enveloped it and brought it in "like a soft surface of a first snowfall."¹¹

The epitome of such diffused lighting was the 'Soan' (Tea Hut) that housed the Tea Ceremony. Here window placement was calculated not only for ventilation and visual effects on the walls, but also to create just the right contemplative ambience when the ritual was performed. Sen no Rikyu and his school used fusuma in the tea-room papered in a 'shoji'-like manner called 'Fukuro-bari' but with white paper pasted on both sides instead of one. "A tea-room should neither be too bright nor too dark inside. A room that is too bright is not suitable for concentration, for the mind is likely to be disturbed, but on the other hand if it is not lit enough a sense of gloom and melancholy may be felt, which is worse. The outer windows and overhung shutters must be arranged according to the position of the sun so that a happy medium can be obtained"¹² he noted. Thus some Tea Houses had windows that could be propped open at various angles to vary the quality of seasonal light and therein the mood of the interior, the Yuin Tea house in Kyoto for instance having a hatch on its eaves to let in starlight for the same purpose.

The Japanese affinity to diffused lighting then represents the antithesis of the Western preference of bathing space in light. Like a 'haiku' where words were at best to be felt not rationalized, Japanese shadowy space was a 'metaphysical' realm to be evoked in time, not rationalized through the parameters of its form and shape. As Tanizaki explained - though the ancient Japanese knew perfectly well it was mere shadow, they were overcome with the feeling that in that small corner of the atmosphere there reigned complete and utter silence; and there in the darkness immutable tranquility held sway.



Image 2 – Lighting and spatial contrasts: left – Chartres Cathedral, right – Todaiji Daibutsuden (photos –Michael Greenhalgh)

CONTRAST

The Daibutsuden of the Todaiji temple in Nara was one of the largest wooden structures in the world. Its towering interior spans a length of 188 feet, a width of 166 feet and a height of 157 feet, housing a colossal 53 feet high statue of the Buddha. Yet on the inside there was nothing to celebrate this voluminous space. There were no windows high up in the walls, no light pouring down from high above. The Western cathedral where the openings were perched at soaring heights to let light flood its towering verticality may have an awe-inspiring majesty, but Japanese space shutting the light from above to making a low, horizontal, gloomy interior, has its own quality of dusky splendor. (*Image 2*)

But then it is also true that spatial qualities can be transformed by differences within the natural light of the day and the artificial lighting used at night. In the Hagia Sofia in Constantinople for instance, during the day, light descends from openings around edges of the dome and from the windows high in the walls.

The vertical space is perceived in all its grandeur. At night the spatial impression of the Hagia Sofia is quite different: the suspended lamp fittings from the high ceiling are brought into play and since they hang only a few feet above the ground, they define a low space that is closed off by the darkness above. But in Japan the vertical interiors of the worship hall or the horizontal interior of the domestic room always maintained a horizontal profile, the intricate wooden network of the towering roof perpetually wrapped in darkness. The spatial configuration of the Japanese edifice was hopelessly consistent, day or night.

Nothing could be more antithetical to the traditional idea of Japanese lighting than the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp where Le Corbusier used light as a means of accentuating the various spatial realms. The characteristics of the main spaces were underlined by small openings cut in the massive south-faced wall with clear and colored glass. The side chapels in contrast were illuminated from above, receiving light that descended through the openings on the top of the towers. Cor-

busier differentiated the side chapels from the main space not only in terms of form, but also by the nature of their lighting. Moreover, he used light to distinguish elements of the building from each other separating the shell shaped roof from the wall by a narrow horizontal strip of light.

The Japanese however were never concerned with such accentuation and spatial hierarchy. In a typical 'Shoin'¹³ the study bay was originally a 'Shitomido', a projecting window built to provide a place for reading. It gradually evolved as a source of light for the alcove, but it really served not so much to illuminate the alcove as to soften the sidelong rays from above. Even the 'Tokonoma' (the scroll alcove), by far the most important part of a room, and usually placed closer to an exterior wall, was always part of an unbiased illumina-

tion that enveloped the space rather uniformly. And at night the darkness of a room was broken by domestic lighting devices that were always placed on the floor, this low illumination complimenting the traditional Japanese custom of sitting on the floor with tables and other appurtenances also horizontally proportioned.

GLINT

Gold has a peculiar relationship with darkness. It never loses its gloss like silver and other metals. It always retains its brilliance absorbing every available photon and draping it like a ghostly veil to create an illusion of depth. The glint of gold lacquer in a gloomy interior is as distinct a Japanese trait as the subdued light filtering through the shoji.



Image 3 - Gold gilded Buddhas within the dark interior of the Kofuku-ji Temple (photo- Michael Greenhalgh)

There is evidence to suggest that lacquer was used in Japan from the Stone Age 6000 years ago as an adhesive to attach the arrowhead to the arrow. From about 4000 years ago, vermilion and black lacquer were being coated on tableware, utensils as well as weapons and accessories. About 100 years ago, a guild specializing in lacquer art called 'Urushi-be' was known to have been established. The point is that among Japan's traditional arts, while dyeing and hand made paper came through the influence of China, lacquer ware was born and nurtured within the climate of Japan itself.

The oldest surviving lacquered object in Japan is the Tamamushi-no-Zushi of the Horyuji Temple. This miniature shrine was made by a

guild craftsman towards the end of the sixth century, modeled after a wooden palace. By the Heian period, lacquer was being used to clad the colossal wooden statues that adorned Japan's Buddhist temples. At Todaiji, the 50 foot sitting copper and gold Buddha (smaller than the two original ones), is adorned with a magnificent gold canopy of smaller Buddhas that surround him. At the Byodo-in, the colossal 25 foot wooden Buddha is adorned with gold leaf and lacquer with its 40 foot canopy inlaid with mother-of-pearl. These lacquered giants sit in the dark, "their florid patterns reced(ing) into darkness, conjuring in their stead an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery, of overtones but partly suggested. The sheen of the lacquer, set out in the night, reflects the

wavering candlelight, announcing the drafts that find their way from time to time into the ¹⁴" (*Image 3*)

The golden exterior of Kinkaku-ji is an exception in Japanese architecture, but the regal appeal of gold's luminescence has never been discouraged by Japanese villas on their inside. Often, the paper used on the opaque fusuma panels separating rooms was embossed with small gold or silver designs. As Drexler notes "In the great sixteenth-century efflorescence of palace and temple building fusuma carried a weight of mural painting in black ink, or in color on a gold or silver ground, that may be said to surpass in its subtlety and its invention the greatest achievements of architectural decoration in the Italian Renaissance."¹⁵"

At the Audience Hall in the Ninomaru of Nijo Castle, the unique quality of the interior is determined by the careful juxtaposition of wood, color and gold. Color is applied to the ceilings, but not the structural frame, and gold is applied to the ornamental nail-coverings and other hardware, providing the structure with a unifying background tone illuminated by highlights. And incorporating all these aspects are paintings used in concert with the horizontal and vertical structural grid. These paintings, attributed to Kano Tannyu, have gold leaf rubbed with white for their background, along with brown, copper green, cobalt blue and black India ink dominating the specifics. In the gloom of the interior, the effect with the 'golden' walls is one of subdued luminescence, bringing in an illusion of depth as the gold absorbs the light from the space around it.

The Konjikido Hall of the Chusonji Temple represents the epitome of the golden Japanese interior. Built in 1124, both the interior and exterior of the hall is plated with glittering gold. A gorgeous altar and eleven gold Buddhist statues arranged in a row occupy this space embellished with gold leaf and lacquered 'makie' adorning its pillars and dais. Nothing could be more contradictory to the monochrome rustic Japanese interior, than the dazzle of the Konjikido, reflecting the desire for eternal glory by three generations of Fujiwaras.

GLITZ

Half a century after it had discovered the incandescent bulb between 1869 and 1882, Ja-

pan stumbled upon the neon. In around 1926 the first Japanese neon signs were made public at Hibiya Park in Tokyo, about two decades after their perfection by the French scientist George Claude was first presented to the public at the Paris International Exposition. The colored light bulb as the prevalent illumination device, was little match for the glitz of neon now ushering a revolution in light sources for outdoor advertising. Thus the 1964 Tokyo Olympics - not just an event, but a symbol of high economic growth in Japan - was dominated by visuals of this newfound 'noen-ism'. With the increasing demand for outdoor advertising and complex forms of communication, along with technical innovation in many related fields, the neon sign became for Japan a means to express its development towards the 21st century.

In December 1979, Japan held its first examination for neon sign installation engineers, in April 1992, the formation of the Association of Qualified Neon Sign Engineers, and in June 1998 a series of events to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the All Japan Neon Association including the "Ginza Neon Light Extinguishing Performance" and the "1st Neon Art Competition." This was 'post-incandescent' Japan, where pachinko parlors reigned supreme and where neon displays became part of a bright, zesty nightscape unapologetically contradicting the delicately diffused lanterns of the few surviving traditional streetscapes.

Thus emerged Ginza – a new prototype of Japanese place making and the antithesis of the dim narrow alleys of Pontocho. The Ginza of the daytime is more than a little ugly, and little more than a skeleton for the Ginza at night. The contorted, poker-like irons that form the frames of the winding neon signs are disheveled in the day, but come sundown and they transform into a riot of electro-urbanism. Here neon far from being an eyesore is as much an essential ingredient of the commercial urbanism as the ultimate manifestation of Japan's overwhelming consumerism, a Vegas-like world of complexity, contradiction and multiculturalism, and a mutated offspring of its nocturnal symbolism and technical fetishism. (*Image 4*)



Image 4 – ‘Neon-urbanism’ at Ginza (photo- Oliver Thereaux)

‘DELIBERATE DUSK’

The traditional Japanese affinity to darkness had no definite rationale, yet it seemed to be everywhere. Perhaps it did not stem from the religious influences of Shinto and Buddhism, rather the subconscious influence of the dense and misty natural surroundings on the psyches of a people. It must seem endearing to the West that their dominant spatial associations with darkness and gloom – from a ‘Bergmanesque grimness’ to an ‘eerie macabre’ - have nurtured other qualities in Japan - from ‘mono-no-aware’ to ‘wabi-sabi’ - notions that despite their non-existence within the English linguistic palette has hardly stopped it from trying to describe Japanese space – from ‘melancholy’, ‘somber’, ‘morose’ and ‘mysterious’ to ‘profound’, ‘tranquil’, ‘placid’ and ‘reposed’.

But words will never bring to life the emotional perceptions of Japan’s ‘deliberate dusk’. Even Tanizaki was unable to express them with precision, his writings only evidence of his culture’s inherent desire to express them. “I am aware of and most grateful for the benefits of the age. No matter what complains we may

have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind” he concluded. “But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the color it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied. I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved....I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly, I would strip away the useless decoration. I do not ask this be done everywhere, but perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them.¹⁶”

The issue of course is not a simple one. More than a century has passed since Japan adopted the incandescent bulb, more than seven decades since it fell in love with the neon. While the precious remaining slice of that ‘dusky’ Japan may seem to be gradually re-growing with lighting companies showcasing diffused lighting fixtures for commercial and residential interiors, and contemporary electric lamps as reinterpretations of traditional paper lanterns, on the other hand, Mrs. Tanizaki once told a story of when her husband decided to build a new house. When the architect proudly claimed to have read ‘In Praise of Shadows’ announcing that he knew exactly what his client wanted, Tanizaki replied “But no, I could never live in a house like that.” There was as much reticence in that response as an inevitable nostalgia, and perhaps one that might best represent Japan’s own ongoing emotional roller coaster between darkness and light.

ENDNOTES

I wish to thank Michael Greenhalgh and Oliver Thereaux for the generous use of their photographs.

¹ ‘Tatami’ are modular reed mats that make the surface of the traditional Japanese floor. ‘Shoji’ are sliding latticed doors, almost ‘movable walls’, typically with rice paper panels that diffuse the exterior light.

² The Western influence on Japanese culture began with the end of the Tokugawa Era and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in 1867-68. The new government aimed to make Japan a democratic state with equality among all its people. In order to transform the agrarian economy of Tokugawa Japan into a developed industrial one, many Japanese scholars were sent abroad to study Western science and lan-

guages, while foreign experts taught in Japan. On the political sector, Japan received its first European style constitution in 1889.

³ See Tanizaki Jun'ichiro – *In Praise of Shadows (In'ei Raisan)*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, published by Leete's Island Books, Inc. (1977); an essay on Japanese aesthetics elucidating the losing significance of darkness in the Japanese tradition. It was first published in the December 1933 and January 1934 issues of *Keizai orai*.

⁴ The Ise Shrine is an ancient Shinto shrine complex, and one of Japan's holiest sacred spots. It is famous for its thirteen-hundred-year-old reconstruction tradition, the *Shikinen Sengu*, in which the most sacred structures are completely rebuilt every twenty years. The event incorporates some thirty Shinto rituals that mark important milestones in the construction process.

⁵ The 'Roji' (literally dewy path) is a garden through which one traverses in order to reach the 'Chashitsu' (Tea Hut) where the 'Cha-no-yu' (Tea Ceremony) is performed. The Tea Ceremony originated as a Zen technique of meditation and spiritual training involving a host preparing tea for a guest. Today it has evolved into a secular ritual.

⁶ See Tanizaki Jun'ichiro – *In Praise of Shadows (In'ei Raisan)*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, published by Leete's Island Books, Inc. (1977)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ See Kurokawa Kisho, *Rediscovering Japanese Space*, Chapter 2 – Rikyu Gray: An Open-Ended Aesthetic, published by John Weatherhill, Inc. (1988)

¹⁰ See Cram Ralph Adams, *Impressions of Japanese Architecture and the Allied Arts*, published by Charles E. Tuttle Company (1981)

¹¹ See Tanizaki Jun'ichiro – *In Praise of Shadows (In'ei Raisan)*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, published by Leete's Island Books, Inc. (1977)

¹² See Kurokawa Kisho, *Rediscovering Japanese Space*, Chapter 2 – Rikyu Gray: An Open-Ended Aesthetic, published by John Weatherhill, Inc. (1988)

¹³ With the establishment of Zen monasteries in the thirteenth century, the room interior began to be designed as a 'shoin' (writing room) gradually crystallizing its predecessor, the Kamakura era 'kaisho' (Assembly Hall for festivities and gatherings) into the Shoin-style of architecture. The 'tsuke-shoin' (a low wooden desk built into an alcove with a window) now became the central feature of the monastic interior along with the 'tokonoma' (alcove), the 'chigaidana'

(built-in shelves), the 'chodaigamae' (painted sliding doors), the 'fusuma' (opaque room to room partitions), and the 'shoji' (latticed outdoor to indoor partitions). Beyond these sliding 'shoji' was a verandah that overlooked an enclosed garden.

¹⁴ See Drexler Arthur, *The Architecture of Japan*, published by the Museum of Modern Art (1955)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ See Tanizaki Jun'ichiro – *In Praise of Shadows (In'ei Raisan)*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, published by Leete's Island Books, Inc. (1977)