

# An Architecture Tradition/A Craftsman's Tradition: The Craftsman's Role in Japanese Architecture

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Fig.1 Katsura Detached Villa

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese architecture has been the subject of scrutiny and envy by architects and scholars from around the world. Contemporary Japanese architecture seems to define the cutting edge while traditional architecture is said to have set a precedent for our modern way of thinking about buildings. Looking at Japanese Architecture through the lens of the contemporary western

building industry with the separation of design and construction it is easy to overlook important factors that went into its making. Factors that could help us improve our own building industry.

For the contemporary Japanese architect it is easy to take for granted a building tradition that has held quality as the top priority for centuries. As a result, there is a story about the Japanese building process that goes largely untold. It is only fairly recently

since litigation has crept into a once informal problem solving process; economics have begun to take priority over quality; and the allure of the good life has drawn the young away from working with their hands that Japanese architects themselves have started to notice and value the ever shrinking resource of skilled craftspeople that they had taken for granted for so long. In America where craftsmanship is all but a thing of the past it's difficult for architects to imagine that Japanese architecture may not be entirely the work of talented star architects and engineers in the western tradition but that the craftsman might play an equally important role.

The narrative of modernist architecture scholars since the western fascination with Japanese architecture started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century shaped our understanding of it in a way that has overlooked its most important component. Another look at Katsura Detached Palace, the building chosen by early western scholars to serve as a model for modern architecture helps to illustrate how the role of the craftsman was overlooked in favor of a self serving formalistic interpretation that shapes our understanding of Japanese Architecture to this day.

### WHO DESIGNED KATSURA?

In 1935 after traveling extensively in Japan and surveying its architecture Bruno Taut wrote about Katsura Detached Palace, *"That which is peculiar to Japan, the local, is insignificant; but the principle is absolutely modern and of complete validity for any contemporary architecture."*<sup>1</sup> With an agenda to promote the precepts of modern architecture Taut initiated an international dialogue about Japanese architecture that extracted and abstracted aspects which support modern theory at the exclusion of more fundamental, structural characteristics of Japanese society *"the insignificant"* which are critical to the evolution of Japanese architecture. Bontond Bogner writes that beyond Taut *"recognizing their greatness along a somewhat biased modernist view he saw them only as simple and logical constructions, achievements of a purist and functional rationalist attitude. As such for Taut they were designs that coincided with the similar intentions of the modern movement."*<sup>2</sup> Arata Isozaki elaborates many years later that far from Taut's simplistic interpretation Katsura is actually *"a complex mixture bound up with a literary genealogy, architectural styles, political sentiments, and the relationship*

*between all these."*<sup>3</sup> Still, to this day, architects equate Japanese architecture with a minimalist tendency, flexibility of interior space and continuity of interior and exterior space. One element that is conspicuously missing from the conversation is the role of the craftsman and collaboration in the creation of the rich Japanese architectural tradition. Even Taut's revelation that *"whatever the facts may be, the Katsura Palace is conceivable in Japanese History only as the superior creation of an ingenious artist."*<sup>4</sup> acts to further muddy the water about the real origins of Katsura and its relevance to the Japanese building tradition. Although the simplistic image of an artist conceiving the design of Katsura encompassing completely modern ideals captured the imagination of 20<sup>th</sup> century architects the real story of the Japanese building tradition is a much more complex and organic story of the collaboration of artisan craftsmen. The exclusion of the craftsman from the dialogue about what is significant and relevant in Japanese architecture is an unfortunate irony because until the 20<sup>th</sup> century building design and construction were both in the realm of the craftsman. The buildings that Taut was writing about were not the product of the modern separation of design and construction but were built instead by a class of master builders who worked seamlessly in collaboration with each other.

Several Japanese scholars and architects of the 1950's who were inspired by a revived interest and confidence in their own culture sought to clarify the history and dynamic involved in the creation of Katsura. Their research seems to support the idea that Katsura was built by a collaborative effort instead of the genius of one artist. Architect and University Professor Sutemi Horiguchi writes in 1953 about the creation of Katsura *"Often it is difficult to single out any one or two actual persons as the designers or architects...Something similar may have happened in the case of the Katsura Villa. Especially as the buildings were constructed on two or three different occasions before they were completed in their present form. Very likely we should not try to regard the completed whole as one man's creation. Rather we should accept it as the product of a period, not of a single person."*<sup>5</sup> Later, in 1960, Kenzo Tange in his book, *Katsura*, addresses the question of its creation in this way *"Did not the building result instead from a combination of ideas which included on one hand the Princes [Prince Toshihito] nostalgia for the past and on the other*

*the approach introduced by the townsmen and artisans involved in the work?"*<sup>6</sup>

The next western architect to comment extensively on Japanese architecture, Walter Gropius, in his introduction to Tange's book *Katsura*, reiterates Taut's earlier interpretations calling the simplicity, modularity, and indoor-outdoor relationships in Japanese architecture, "the answer to many of our modern requirements."<sup>7</sup> Gropius's statements, however, written 25 years later and possibly influenced by Tange and the mood of the time, are tempered by a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and appreciation for the crafts traditions than those of his predecessors. Gropius acknowledges the role of the craftsman as he writes "*They [Japanese houses] represent a still living culture which in the past had already found the answer to many of our modern requirements of simplicity, of outdoor-indoor relation, of modular coordination and , at the same time, variety of expression and had thereby attained a common form language uniting all individual efforts; all this based, of course, on handicrafts...*"<sup>8</sup> Gropius was also careful to reiterate the findings of Horiguchi and Tange and acknowledge the importance of the integration of design and construction in the building of Katsura. Gropius wrote "*the teamwork on the Katsura villa for, which the records still exist, shows a sound integration of designer and builder when compared to the fatal separation of design and execution from which our present architectural profession suffers.*"<sup>9</sup> These observations of Horiguchi, Tange, and Gropius, three of the most influential and respected architects and educators of their time all allude to the collaborative aspect of the Japanese building tradition.

### THE SEPARATION OF ARCHITECT AND BUILDER

The official separation of the design and building professions implemented in England in the mid eighteenth century didn't come to Japan until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the first engineering school, which also included an architecture course, was established. The first Japanese architect to have his own practice was not until after the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until that time building design and construction were both in the realm of the craftsman. In fact, during the Meiji Era [1868-1912] when Japan opened its ports for the first time in 200 years and began importing western culture, the first

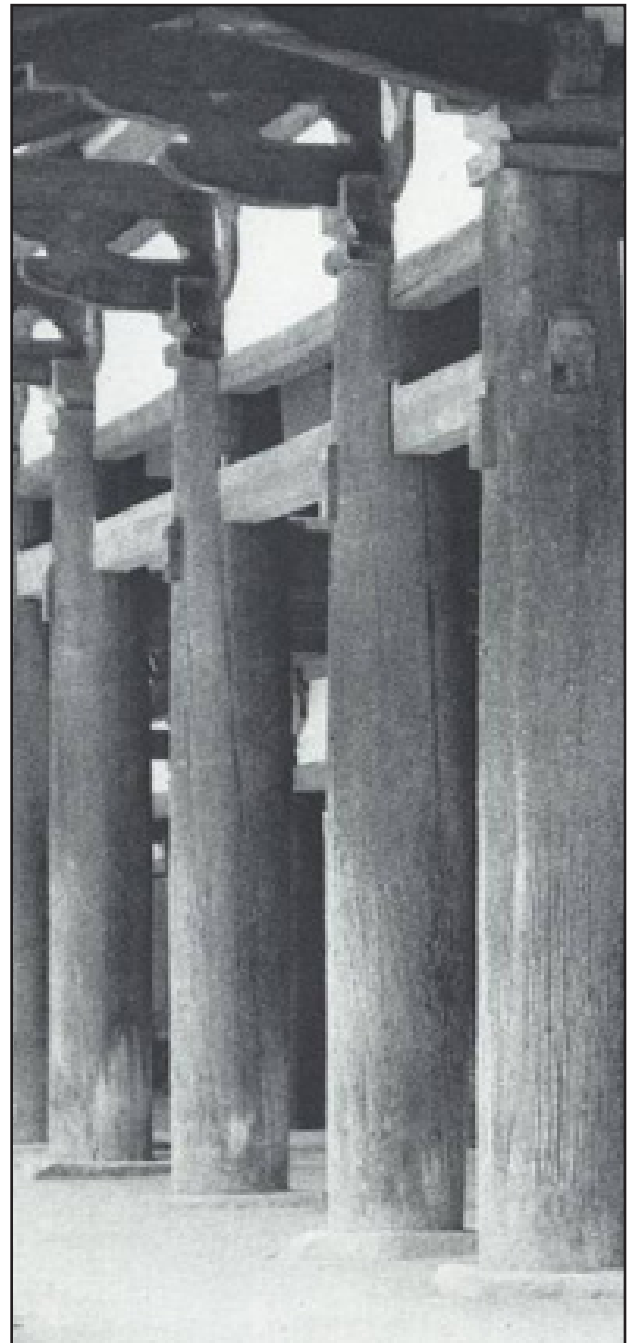


Fig.2 Early Temple Architecture

western style buildings built in Japan were designed by Master carpenters. Even later when the early graduates of the first architecture school started to design, they primarily oversaw large scale commercial, industrial and institutional projects while the construction of smaller scale, wooden buildings

remained in the hands of the craftsmen. While the rationality of the machine age all but eliminated the craftsman's tradition from buildings in the west, the deep rooted Japanese tradition was not immediately eclipsed by the new modern era and the official split between architect and builder. Edward Morse writing in the 1880's gives an important insight into the level and prevalence of craftsmanship at that time. *"Everywhere throughout the empire we find good work of all kinds, and evidence that workmen of all crafts have learned their trades,- not "served" them,- and are employed at home. In other words, the people everywhere appreciate artistic designs and the execution of them... The distribution of such artisans is far more wide and general than with us.... Throughout the breadth and length of that land of thirty six million people men capable of artistic work and people capable of appreciating such work abound."*<sup>11</sup>

### THE CRAFTSMAN'S TRADITION

The Craftsman's tradition that was at its zenith at the time of the building of Katsura Imperial Villa had its roots in very early times. Examples of pottery from several thousand years BC speak of an artisan society which was already well developed. While there are no remnants of the wood used to build houses from those early times depictions in clay and etchings in metal from the early years AD show architecture very similar to the farm houses in Japan's recent history, some of which still exist today. Many of these images imply a high level of craftsmanship [particularly in the roof forms] already being practiced at the beginning of the first

millennium. The revolutionary change in building construction came with the influx of Buddhism to Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century when Carpenters from the Korean peninsula brought advanced wooden building techniques to Japan to build the first Buddhist temples of Asuka. Many of the building traditions and trades still active in Japan had their beginnings with these temple projects. The importation of architectural styles from abroad, indigenous innovation, availability of raw materials, and innovations in tool design and technology all contributed to the evolution of the practice of carpentry from the Asuka period until its peak in the Edo period. From the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, when successive shoguns were gradually bringing the country under a central rule, there was a rapid increase in demand for buildings in the burgeoning new capital of Edo. Elite Master Carpenters became the architects of the military and imperial family and were in charge of the building of some of the most noteworthy buildings in Japanese history. Intense competition for work in the highly populated capital of Edo led to a high level of skill and specialization.

In all of the trades, craftsmen were subjected to a rigorous apprenticeship. Because they used tools from a very young age carpenters developed a high degree of manual dexterity and through years of immersion in the building process they developed an intuitive sense not only for their tools but also for materials, structure and proportion. It could be argued that more than any professional today Japanese carpenters were holistic building experts in the technology of the day. William Coaldrake writes in *The Way of the Carpenter*, *"The carpen-*



Fig.3 Carpenter's Apprentice

ter, therefore, must be seen as both artisan and artist, architect and builder. Like the medieval mason of Europe, the Japanese carpenter designed and built in a single, organic process."<sup>13</sup>... Coal-drake was writing specifically from the perspective of the carpenter but he is quick to emphasize, "The essential point to make is that the carpenter is only one of the many craftsmen engaged in the building process. Japanese architecture is the composite of multiple trade traditions, each of which developed over many generations. In addition to the carpenters there were stone masons, plasterers, roof tillers, copper sheet roofers, thatchers and shinglers."<sup>14</sup> Edward Morse during an era when the crafts culture was still very strong wrote "A somewhat extended experience with the common everyday carpenter at home leads me to say, without fear of contradiction, that in matters pertaining to their craft the Japanese carpenters are superior to American...the Japanese carpenter has an immense advantage over the Americans, for his trade, as well as other trades, has been perpetuated through generations of families."<sup>16</sup>

During the Edo Era when Katsura was built specialization of the trades became more and more pronounced as the demand for goods increased and competition between craftsmen led to innovation and higher quality work. Japanese architecture had reached its pinnacle and even the relatively modest residential scale buildings were result of the collaboration of highly skilled craftsmen from many different trades. Each trade was dependent on the other and there was a spirit of mutual respect.

During the Meiji Era with western culture came western fashion and architectural styles. In the case of Architecture, the style arrived before the technology necessary to build it. As a result, during the early Meiji period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, western style architecture was built by craftsmen with the same wooden technology that had been used in Japan for centuries. It was not until western steel and masonry technology were fully adopted in Japan that the role of the traditional craftsman was substantially reduced. Just when it seemed that traditional crafts were in danger of becoming obsolete, circumstances surrounding the Second World War and shortages of modern materials helped to keep the influence of the craftsman vital well into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Influential Architects of the time like Kunio Maekawa, Kazuo Shinohara

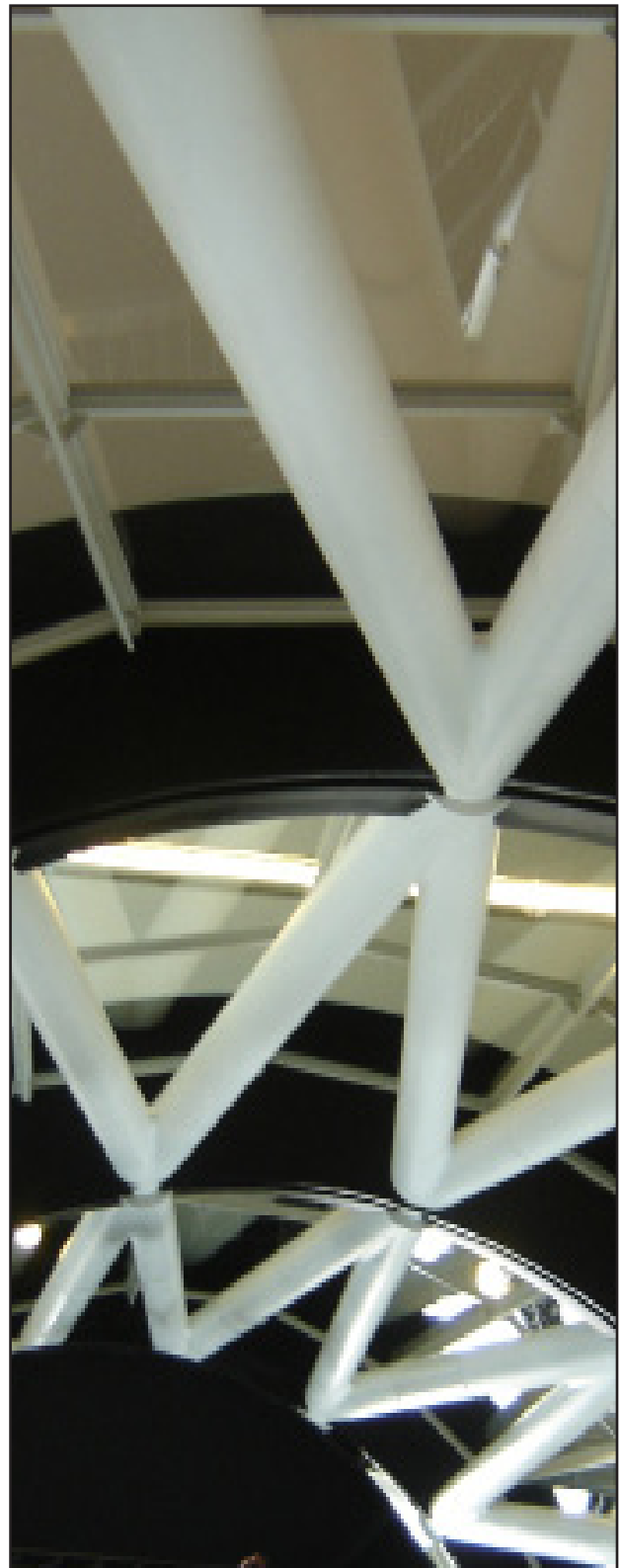


Fig. 4 Mediatech Library



Fig. 5 Public Toilets

and Kiyoshi Seike were rediscovering the Japanese vernacular during this period and the work of the craftsman was once again in demand.

From this brief overview and the findings and observations of scholars we get a sense for the magnitude of impact that the craftsman had on the formation and perpetuation of the Japanese architecture tradition all the way up until the present. It is unfortunate that tradition was overlooked by the early modernists Western and Japanese alike. There is much to be learned from the Japanese collaborative process and a building culture based on the pride of the workers and an expectation of quality. Fortunately, it's not too late to see that process in action although it is getting more and more difficult for the crafts tradition and the craftsmen themselves to survive in contemporary Japan.

### CRAFTSMEN IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY JAPAN

Fumihiko Maki reminisces about his childhood in Tokyo in the foreword to Dana Buntrock's book *Japanese Architecture as a collaborative process* "The sounds of men at work echoed pleasantly in

*the otherwise quiet residential district. The air was filled with the fragrance of fresh wood shavings. The carpenters wielded their tools with steady hands and, from time to time, examined intently their own handiwork.*"<sup>17</sup> Maki goes on to assert that although the materials and methods of construction have changed since his childhood in the 1930's "that culture lives on"<sup>18</sup>. In the technologically advanced Japan of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it seems incredible that the crafts culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century could live on but Maki seems to be speaking in broader terms when he elaborates "I believe it lives on in the pride people take in the work they do and the things they create, no matter how small."<sup>19</sup>

In contemporary Japan the craftsman is employed not by a master craftsman but by a contractor who is increasingly pressured to have his project meet a budget. This results in a shortened construction period and the hands-on work of the craftsmen is often replaced by automated processes. We have become familiar with the systematic dismantling of craftsmen's traditions around the world and Japan's situation does not seem unusual or surprising. However, even in technologically advanced 21<sup>st</sup>

century Japan there are visible signs of the craftsman's influence on the quality of contemporary architecture. The work of high profile architects like Kengo Kuma, Itsuko Hasegawa, Toyo Ito and Tadao Ando and many others rely heavily on the contributions of skilled crafts people.

## CONCLUSION

Early modernists described Katsura in strictly formalistic terms that overlook its most salient aspect, the process by which it was made. As many Japanese scholars have noted Katsura was not the design of a single person but was the product of a period and was designed and built by skilled craftsmen from many different trades working effectively in collaboration. Traditional Japanese Architecture reached its high level of refinement in this way.

Materials and technologies have changed over the years but, as Fumihiko Maki makes clear, the craftsman's attitude has not. Today in Japan, 130 years after Edward Morse's writings, there is still an appreciation for art and artisan's across the country. As new technologies have been introduced into the Japanese building industry there continue to be new fields of craftsmen in glass, steel, and concrete who adopt these technologies not merely as business endeavors but in the spirit of the artisan. Even at the scale of large commercial and civic buildings the largest Japanese construction companies to this day have their beginning as carpenter's guilds from the Edo and Meiji era and craftsmanship is a part of their history.

With the narrative in architecture periodicals and websites focused on star architects and engineers, its easy to overlook the importance of craftsmanship in contemporary Japanese architecture. But to ignore the role of the craftsman's tradition and collaboration in the making of contemporary Japanese architecture is to miss the most important lesson that Japanese Architecture has to offer.

## ENDNOTES

1. Taut, Bruno. *Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture*, 2nd ed. Tokyo, Kokusai bunka shinkokai (The Society for International Cultural Relations) [1937] p.20
2. Botond Bogner, *Contemporary Japanese Architecture* [New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1985] pp.82
3. Arata Isozki, *Katsura: the ambiguity of its space* [New York, Rizzoli, 1987]

4. Bruno Taut, *Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* [Tokyo, Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai (The Society for International Cultural Relations), 1937] p.20
5. Sutemi Horiguchi, *the Katsura Imperial Villa* [Tokyo, Mainichi, 1953]
6. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, *Katsura; tradition and creation in Japanese architecture* [New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972]
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8. Ibid
9. Ibid.
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11. Edward Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* [Rutland Vermont, Tokyo Japan, Charles E Tuttle Company 1972] p.172
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13. William Coaldrake, *the way of the carpenter* [New York, Weatherhill, 1990] p, 14
14. Ibid. p13
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16. Edward Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* [Rutland Vermont, Tokyo Japan, Charles E Tuttle Company 1972] p.35
17. Dana Buntrock, *Japanese Architecture as a Collaborative Process* [London, New York: Spon Press 2002] foreword
18. Ibid. foreword
19. Ibid. foreword