

The Paradox Of Tradition: Cosmopolitanism and the Dream of a Recognizable Cultural Particularity

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In the current frenzy of reflection, of hype and excitement accompanying a simple coincidence of ones and zeroes, a meditation on one of Japan's most profound practitioners of the century should probably seek to place the man and his work in some sort of historical perspective. Yet what if Shirai's particular vision caused him to perceive a basic aporia in the notion of a historical perspective itself? While "history" continued to unfold all around him at a disturbing pace—as of course it still does—and while his colleagues and followers seemed to take for granted that historical unfolding, Shirai sought to grasp that unfolding in its essence rather than its moment. How then, as one reflecting back on a set of moments, should I begin to reiterate those moments for you? Furthermore, as architects, our concern would appear to be primarily a spatial one. How does a historical perspective come to bear in more than a merely intriguing manner with regard to the creation and manipulation of space itself? In short, why do we need to understand now what Shirai understood then?

Shirai's critically formative years fell before the Second World War. As with the rest of his generation, the body of his work and writings were completed in the wake of it. Shirai's reflections span the years of Japan's phenomenal growth and development. Among his generation, then, what specific aspect of his thought and work is so unique that he remains fascinating to us, yet largely opaque to our common sense?

First of all, as an architect, his knowledge is architectural and therefore not equivalent to the knowledge of the engineer, the historian, the writer, or the philosopher. Yet his background is in philosophy as well as architecture. He studied with Karl Jaspers in Germany and was part of an international circle that included painters, poets, critics and political theorists. He was, as were many of his Japanese colleagues, as much a part of the 'esprit nouveau' as the spirit of his homeland.

There was obviously no easy reconciliation between the two: With Shirai, as with his compatriots, we recognize a host of cosmopolitan concerns, derivative critiques of progress inherited from romanticism, and populist themes which sought to develop the identity of a people as much as the identity of a class. Yet each of these themes, evoked singly, lead us only

to confusion in interpreting Shirai.

It is the intent of this essay to interpret meaningfully the disparate concerns and strands of Shirai's thought, and to articulate the relevance of his insights for our own intellectual challenges.

COSMOPOLITANISM, ROMANTICISM, AND SHIRAI

In an essay entitled "Tradition's New Crisis: Our National Theatre," Shirai complained that:

"...we have not had, thus far, an architecture which speaks and expresses clearly to the world its ethnic foundation. If the symbol of civic culture ends up being the reconstruction or transformation of the Heian and Momoyama ages, or mimicry of European 'headquarters' upon unconditional faith, it would go against the progress of creation and the given opportunity, and merely become a construction which robs the people of the ground."¹

Shirai, in this paragraph, expressly denies the 'traditional'. Who in his right mind would not define 'traditional' architecture as expressive of its ethnic foundation? If traditional architecture does not express its ethnic foundations, what does? How are we to understand this explicit denial of the 'traditional'?

Shirai championed a cosmopolitan approach. Cosmopolitanism may be understood as an attempt to define an essential 'Japaneseness' with respect to a multi-cultural understanding—one where the essential quality of 'Japaneseness' maintains its originating characteristic and is not diminished in the face of a dominant (foreign) discourse. That discourse was history, and specifically, "time as history." Shirai was not the only one of his contemporaries to engage in this attempt. We see variations on this idea in Watsuji Tetsuro's *Climate* (Fuudo, 1935)², as well as Yasuda Yasuro and the *Nihonromanha*. Watsuji sought to extend the Western ontology to include the specificity of place as well as time, but the attempt remained a dialectical inquiry and therefore did not address the essential characteristic of that European ontol-

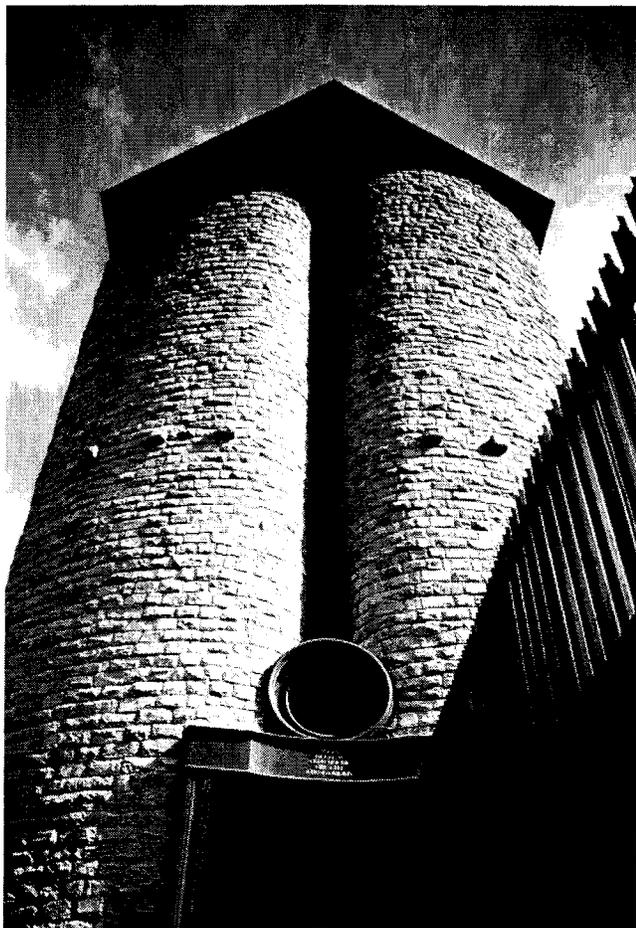


Fig.1. Shirai. Shinwa Bank, Sasebo

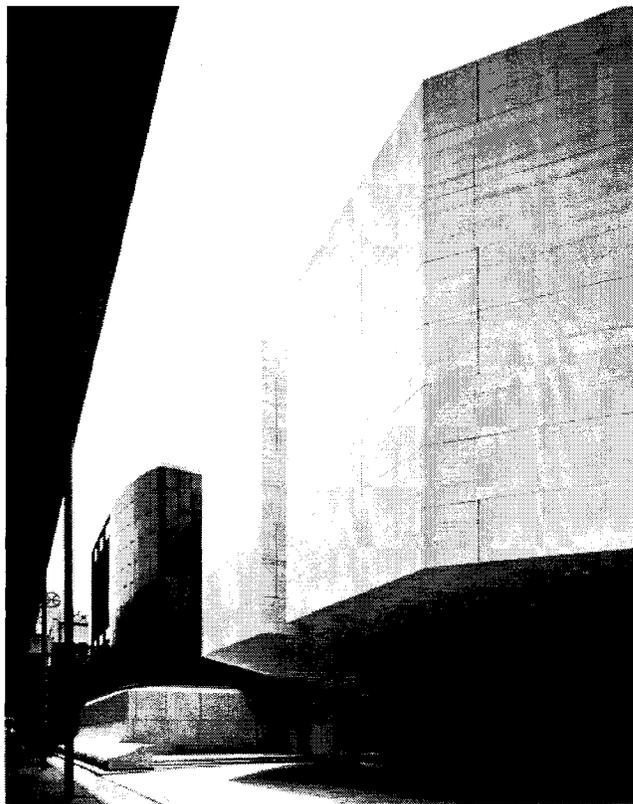


Fig.2. Shirai. Shinwa Bank, Sasebo

ogy—precisely that which rendered it an epistemology rather than an ontology and therefore defined both time and place in terms of a naturally given subject. In other words, Watsuji did not attempt to engage the dependence of the concepts, time and space, on history itself. While both Shirai and the romantics appreciate Watsuji's concern for Japan's health in the rush to modernize, without a sense of irony his critique remains too similar to the object of its criticism.

The idea of Cosmopolitanism emphasized not just the importance and specificity of place, but the insistence on a specifically Japanese identity. It was more than a universal notion of difference in which all nations maintain their unique horizon; it explained specifically why the Japanese escape the identity-stripping effects of modernity. The notion was to describe and capture a difference beyond anything which can be dialectically negated and consumed by the encroaching Other.³

But this does not address the problematic issue which Cosmopolitanism seeks to reconcile in the first place: the issue of the universal. In other words, for Shirai's Romantic colleagues—both those overtly associated with the Japanese Romantic Movement and those who sought more direct modes of political action—Japan is fundamentally different from the West but irrevocably tied to it. What pervaded

recognition of this difference was a sense that, without a suitable means of articulating this difference, the culturally castrating effects of modernization were a foregone conclusion. One either denied the very historical/dialectical nature of Western techniques themselves (i.e., the head-in-the-sand approach of "Eastern Values, Western Techniques") or redefined one's culture in terms of a historical dialectic. Either alternative cut the tradition off from the ground which had nurtured it in the first place.

The Romantic Movement's solution was irony: the vague understanding that the presence of poetry could render meaningful the "prosaic modern." Art, in its universality, somehow lifted the political, in its particularity, above that particularity and subsumed it within the universal. Yasuda's irony could be defined as the "creation of an irretrievable past." However, while recognizing the importance of irony in subverting the dialectic, the Romantic solution merely furthered the dialectic. It engaged the future by way of the past surreptitiously rather than explicitly as in the case of the European Enlightenment. Irony functioned ultimately to clothe power in a (modern) myth, thus making those wielding power even less accountable. Neither a national socialism nor an international socialism were satisfactory solutions to the problem of a Japanese identity. What was essential in the Romantic critique was the understanding of irony in relation to a historical dialectic, and its corollary in the relation of art to the political.

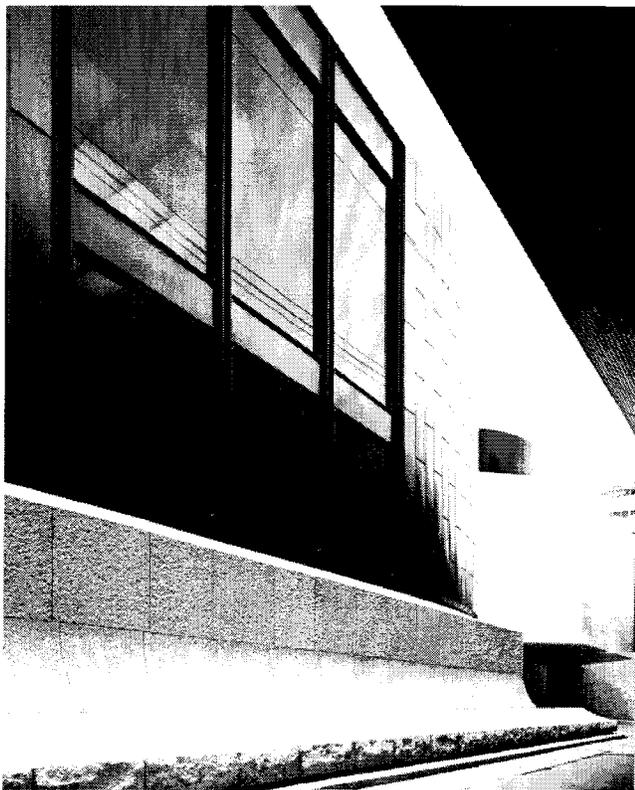


Fig.3. Shirai, Shinwa Bank. Sasebo

Shirai, like Yasuda and his Romantics, accepted the irreversibility of modernization, as well as the necessity of understanding history in order to avoid its pitfalls. For Shirai, apropos of his training with Jaspers, the issue was not one of using history romantically (i.e., using the past to engage the future) but of understanding history as a poetic endeavor to begin with.⁴ The issue was not so much curing Japan's immanent decline of its Western ills as establishing self-knowledge through an understanding of the process of history. Ironically, given Yasuda's political stance as well as his stance towards poetry, the difference between Shirai and Yasuda's understanding of history would be analogous to that of Vico and Marx. Where Marx would say "we can only know that which we have made (history)", Vico would say "we can only know that which we have made, BUT that making is poetic." The crucial difference lies in the locus of meaning. For both Marx and Vico, history is man-made, therefore it is the proper object of science. For Marx the results are measured concretely, and therefore the locus of the human is placed within the natural. This, however, is a contradiction. Vico's qualifier clearly understands history within artifice, therefore grounding the political within the realm of the imagination. Since meaning grounded in the natural would reduce the human to a historical dialectic, any attempt to circumvent that dialectic must address the relation of the human to the natural. While the romantics may have intuited this, given their predisposition for the ironic, but hampered by their loathing to enter politics, they could at best derive a definition oscil-

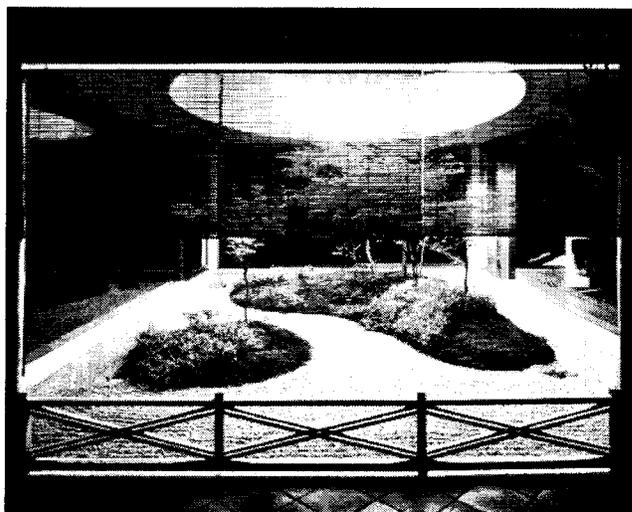


Fig.4. Shirai, Shinwa Bank (Interior Garden)

lating between nostalgia and political irresponsibility.

Shirai wished to ground cultural self-knowledge within the process of political imagination itself, thus explicitly confronting the relation between politics, making and creativity. Let us return to the article quoted above to consider how this works. Our objective is to derive an understanding of Shirai's sense of irony and how it informs an architecture grounded in the political imagination.

"The cultural experience of Europe can be described as a complication and development of essentially contradictory elements of openness and closedness. In architecture, it developed from the closedness of Egypt to the openness of the Greek colonnade, from the closedness of Rome, the Middle Ages and Renaissance, developing into Modern infinite space.

What we have to learn of creation, we who have little experience in the practice of creation, is the process indicated in this history, the process of growth in which the tradition of rationalism has developed within which the mechanism emerged with flowing blood—2000 years of Mediterranean culture overcoming the numerous walls of creation thus creating the essence of the so-called European sensibility. Even now in Japan, as a pattern, the study of Katsura or Ryoanji can be considered as a seeking for tradition. Jomon artifacts as the potential of the race lose authority and the imported abstract and peculiar object gains power as if overcoming the tradition. Do we just observe this as a reflection of this generation with its stabilization of conservative politics and the amendment of the police act from an eye for an eye.⁵

We noted earlier on that Shirai dismisses any "traditional" architecture as expressing the ethnic foundations of a people. This is further corroborated here by the observation that the

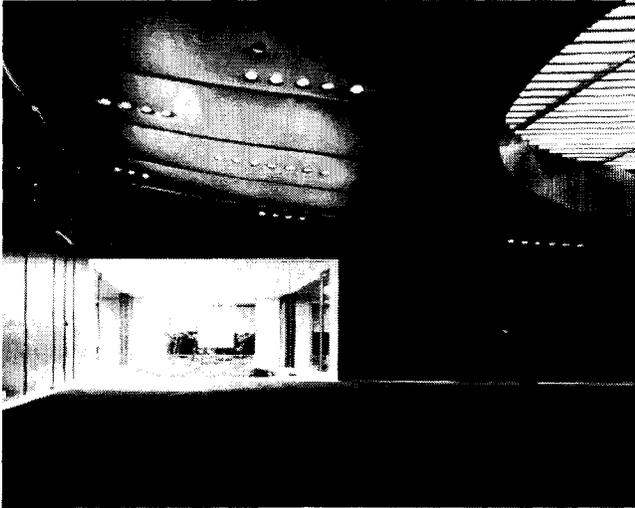


Fig.5. Shirai, Shinwa Bank (Interior Garden/Anteroom)

study of Ryoanji or Katsura is, at one level, an inauthentic and futile seeking for tradition. How are we to understand this assertion?

First of all, the word “tradition” is a Meiji invention. The word is coeval with the crisis of history introduced by Japan’s modernization. This is not surprising. One would not need to identify something which was identical to its horizon of meaning. Yet being faced with a certain ‘Other’, tradition becomes a recognizable entity. The West, however, is far from being Japan’s first encounter with an Other. What is so specific to Japan’s encounter with history that its traditional means of encountering the Other is fundamentally undermined?

Japan, Shirai tells us, lacks a historical sense. Japan’s conception of creativity and the creative process is linked to its (mis)understanding of history as much as its experience with the Other. The connection between the problem of creativity and the emergence of the word “tradition” is the problem raised by “progress”. Progress refers to a recognition that one moment is critically different from another—each moment stands as a criticism to be applied concretely to each moment before it in the production of all future moments.⁶ Now what constitutes progress is debatable. The content of progress is a matter of will and can be contested. What goes uncontested is the fact that progress must be actualized in order to occur. In other words, if progress (i.e. a conceivable future) is valued, and that future can be actualized, then it is only a matter of making it. Possibility is tethered to the political is tethered to making. And since what can be actualized (made natural) stands equally to be used by anyone, it transcends cultural bounds as much as it undermines them, and the only remaining standard for judging what can be made is whether it works or not. The standard is pure use itself. We now recognize the reason for Watsuji’s concern with history (time), and the similar concern among his colleagues: history empties any discussion of cultural identity of meaning and renders it subject to a standard of universality (“objective”

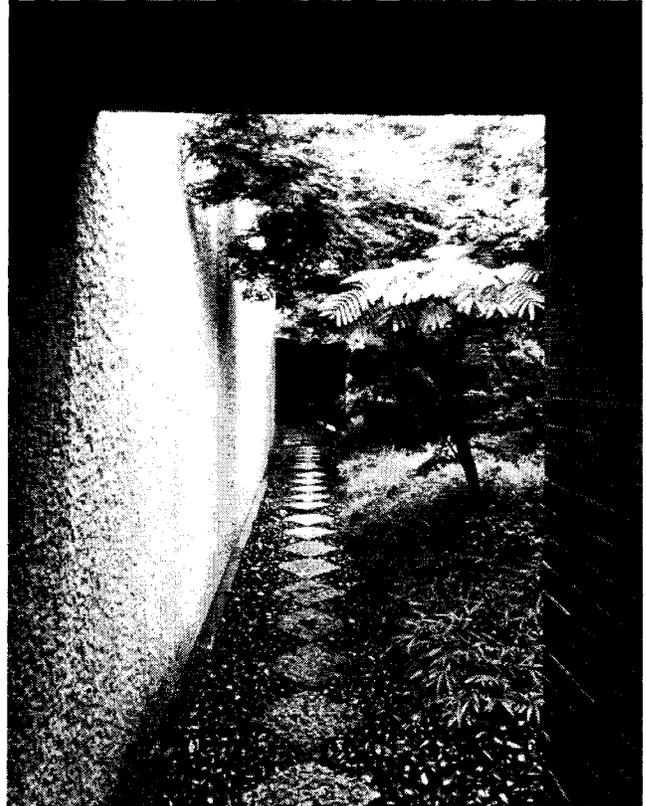


Fig.6. Shirai, Kyohakuan (architect’s own residence)

truth). The paradox is, if Shirai shares this concern, why is he advocating creativity? Has he not advocated developing a creative sense, and shown the creative talent to be tethered to a historical temperament?

The paradox (wry smile?) in Shirai’s counsel recognizes the following: If action and judging are now tied to making, conversely making is a way of thinking and judging. Shirai obviously sees the irony so desperately sought by the romantics to lie in the relation of making to thinking, and, moreover, thinking concretely.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND THE DIALECTIC OF HISTORY

The crisis brought on by “history” changes the relation of judgment, making and acting by changing the ground of “universality.” The authorities by which one previously judged, communicated and understood—the very universals bounded by culture—are suddenly recast as historical universals which are culturally mute—incapable of giving rise to the cultural authorities by which the historical universals could be cast in the first place. Where cultural universals referred specifically to a shared ground of language and culture, historical universals necessarily exclude these as subsequent to the truth of history: a technical universal whose “truth” lies in the fact that it works, and doesn’t interest itself in who or where.

Shirai gives us two insights into the nature of the crisis.



Fig.7. Shirai, Kyohakuan (entrance)

One, it is a modern problem, and therefore must be confronted on modern terms. Two, the attitude required for this challenge is no less than heroic. This heroic modernism, in order to distinguish itself from internationalism, must somehow manage to reconcile a world spirit with cultural development. In other words, the task of architecture (or making/thinking in general) is to reconcile the irreconcilable in a manner explicitly different from a dialectical overcoming of history. This is to be accomplished through true creativity. Shirai further tells us that, "What we have to learn of creation, we who have little experience in the practice of creation, is the process indicated in ... history."

Shirai is yoking history to creativity. That the two are related is fairly obvious, but what exactly does it mean? For a start, once Japan seeks to enter the community of nations, the consequences of history—whatever or wherever the event—apply equally to Japan. Japan cannot pretend to shirk the burden of history as if it were a Western problem. Whatever the specific content of history, all instances may be yoked and ordered as a consequence. Conversely all instances, having taken on the potential consequence of world historical import, are politically accountable to that import. Simply put, architecture, heretofore undifferentiated from building, now becomes explicitly building + logos.⁷ This is identical to *techne* + logos. It may help to recall the argument alluded to already which interprets technology as being historically given, i.e., technology as the concept of history made real, or again, technology as the historical actualization of freedom, i.e. "historically accountable in terms of progress." This onus

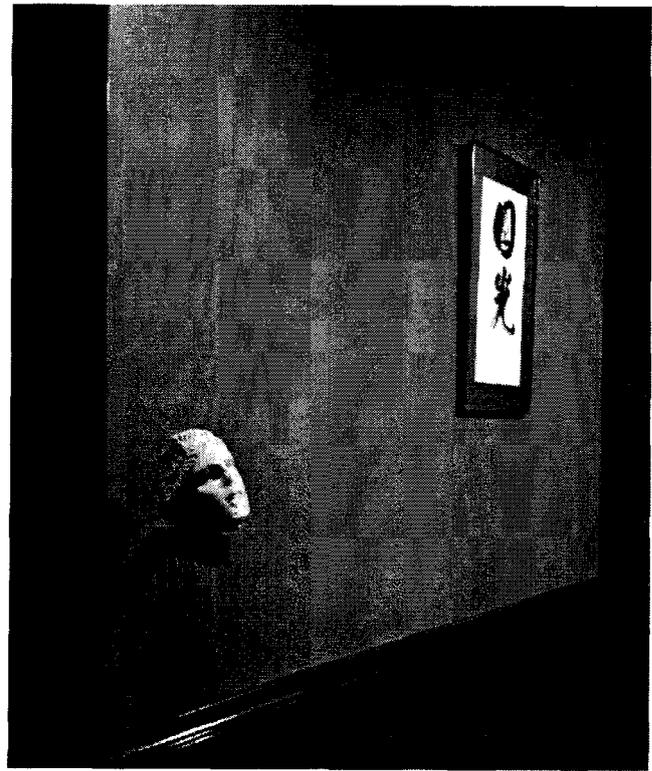


Fig.8. Shirai, Kyohakuan (entrance hall)

is resolved in one of two ways. Either judgement of all architectural "production" is accorded to history and its transcendent meaning, in which case the architect concedes the right to create as an individual; conversely, the architect assumes the role of social legislator (the law giver), in which case all architecture becomes paradigmatic and therefore must be able to stand the test of generalization, or "theory". The net effect is that building is irreversibly linked to thinking and action. Architecture, as with all making, is now conversely a mode of thought. The ancients' model of making vs. action vs. thinking has given way to the confounding of all three within the same mode of being. Hence, faced with the risk of deteriorating into worker drones ceaselessly carrying out historical tasks (architecture as historical production), where all action is reduced to the most banal form of making/laboring, Shirai phrases the problem directly in terms of political responsibility. However Politics is now NOT about the social (a "natural" conception of the human realm) but refers to the cultural imagination. The issue for Shirai is not what one builds, but how one conceives of the role of building in the first place. Shirai says as much when he tells us that "As true as it is for every art, it must be the author's belief that architecture also is the channel for thought."⁸

To say creativity is integral to the historical process is another way of saying artistic creativity is part of progress. As obvious as this may sound, there is nothing self-evident about this without a prior acceptance of progress as an authority in itself. Progress implies movement toward a goal whose meaning is known. If this is the case, and creativity is the means of actualizing that goal, then implicit in the realization of the



Fig.9. Shirai, Kyohakuan (study)

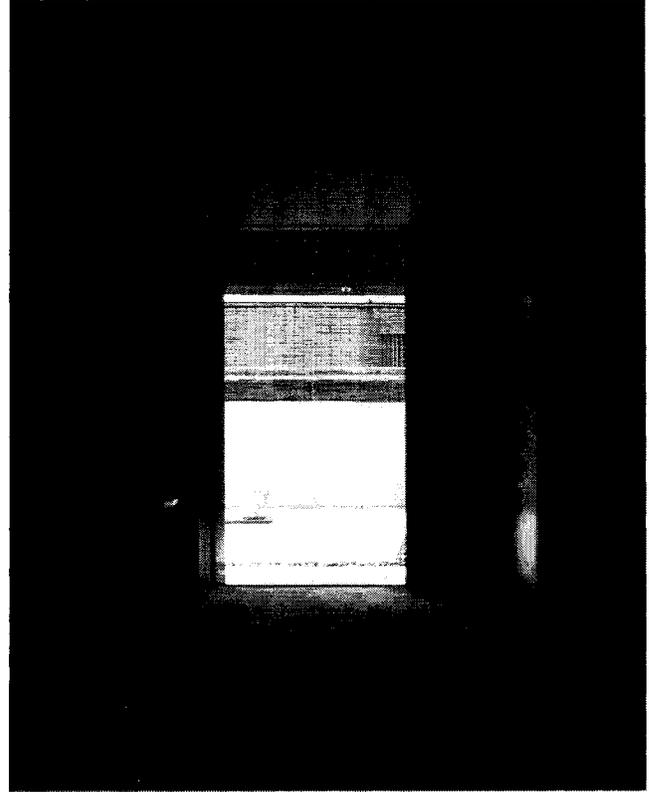


Fig.10. Shirai, Kyohakuan (living room/garden)

goal is the removal of the conditions which make the goal possible. In other words, creativity would contain its own self-overcoming. In fact if creativity is the *sine qua non* for action, creativity would have to oscillate between a rebellion against the necessity of progress, and a rebellion against the need to rebel (the impetus for willing against necessity in the first place). In other words, linking creativity to history, in its simplest conception, seems to result in one of two crises: the eventual undermining of creativity itself, or the undermining of the being that creativity opens up. The former results from a primacy of progress, the latter from the primacy of the new. Either way is perilous, but in fact constitutes the most basic understanding of history as dialectical. Let us consider the possibilities for a 'naive' dialectical understanding as it applies to architecture concretely.

Historically, we are already aware of the attempt in modernism to engage directly the notion of progress, and its dismal failure in the realization that there was nothing absolute about the content of progress, and moreover, there was no reason that history should have meaningfully emerged at all. This is the simple evolution of what we commonly identify as modernism/post-modernism/deconstruction. But before we jettison the notion of progress completely, let us rethink the necessity of the terms which constitute this dialectical understanding.

According to Isozaki, indeed the crisis at the end of the 18th century does precipitate a split in architecture between architecture as building, and architecture as idea. Isozaki

writes:

Already at Durand's point in time, architecture and building have become separated. Building as thing, more so as commodity, and architecture as metaconcept are considered as separate. As a matter of fact, all architectural theory from the 19th century on proceeds from an attempt to ascertain the distance between these two conceptions.⁹

A number of difficulties are inherent with this understanding. To start, if the architectural idea and the building are separated, and theory is merely a third term which attempts to ascertain the distance between the two, the question arises, 'what is architecture?'

Isozaki's attempt at deflection, 'architecture as metaconcept', is problematic for the following reason: As Hegel clearly demonstrated, a concept differs from a notion—an undemonstrated (unbuilt) proposition—in that the concept follows the negation of space. The 'meta-concept' upon its articulation is no longer a notion, but may be appraised and judged actually. In other words, a concept (meta or not) is already past, and therefore is synonymous with an articulated understanding. If meaning is given historically, building and concept are equivalent in terms of actualizing meaning. Theory = building. If indeed architecture alternates between building and concept, we are faced with the following dilemma: Architecture oscillates between the real and the ideal: i.e., a problematic and unhappy tension between the actual



Fig.11. Shirai, Kyohakuan (living room)

and the 'in principle'. If this is the case then the meaning of theory is not the simple measuring of the gap, but is in fact the labor of closing it. Any understanding which does not recognize the loaded implication of closing the gap can do more than oscillate between nostalgia and political irresponsibility.

In fact one remains within the dilemma made explicit in the 18th century, and nowhere is the crisis resolved. Architecture in its more common form resolves the tension between theory and practice by reducing architectural meaning to concepts accommodated within mathematical or formal proofs. Examples of this range from functionalism to typology, behavioralism, post-modernism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. In fact the endless parade of movements can easily be demonstrated as attempts at constructing or imposing new 'systems' of meaning. In other words, all are attempts at resolving the tension between practice and theory. Thus despite the claim that theory is simply measuring the distance, we have nothing but examples to the contrary. This is not a semantic quarrel. Simply denying dialectical overcoming does not make the historical dialectic disappear. In fact, what we can learn from this is precisely the recognition that it is not a question of merely holding a dialectical understanding of history (Hegel, Marx, etc.) which is problematic, but recognizing the persistence of a dialectical movement despite our attempts to disavow it.

If we are to resuscitate the link between creation and history (which at any rate, is inevitable), we would do well to

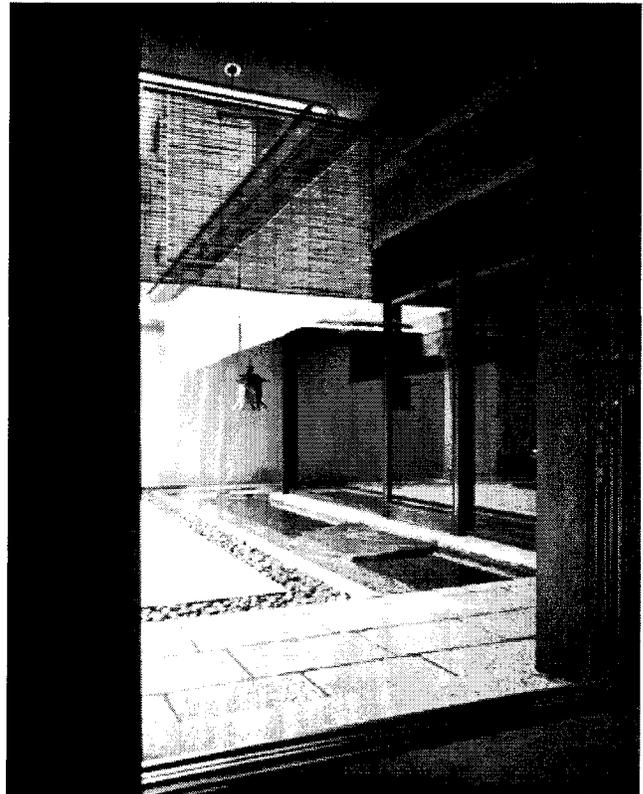


Fig.12. Shirai, Kyohakuan (living room/garden)

rethink the relation between progress and dialectic. This is, in fact, Shirai's intention.

SHIRAI'S ENDEAVOR: TECHNOLOGY, IRONY AND THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM

Progress as a political means of creating and judging, and progress as technical advancement, are two separate and in fact contrary modes of being. They must be separated from the start in order to elucidate the inherent devaluation of meaning which plagues progressive, or "modern" societies. This is the crisis inherent in the devaluation of the cultural universal's end by virtue of the technical universal's absence of ends.

Technical universals apply to rational beings with no particular ground. Political (cultural) universals are cultural phenomena limited to the cultural ground which gives rise to them. The crossing point between the two types of universals lies in the shared being of the culturally produced artifact: the things of the world (speech as much as science, architecture, painting, sculpture and poetry). It should be noted that while things come to share both universals, the universals themselves are mutually irreconcilable but mutually dependent. One can conceive of them in the following way: The technical universal refers to mathemata, or the intelligible—what is already known—while cultural universals are predicated upon the imaginative (only partially known).

But both types of universals begin from a speculative standpoint, and therefore from a standpoint where meaning is

given a priori. While both types of universals thus share the characteristics of the other, the objects they give rise to are in fact opposite. The point is that the speculative standpoint of each is implicitly creative: both perceive and de-monstrate meaning in its appearance. As described already, if the objects they give rise to are taken as finite in their givenness (i.e. purely natural), fabrication, production and political action are all confounded as part of the same process. However if we think of "objects" and "objectivity" as embedded in a historical horizon, and we recognize our relation to that horizon as a speculative but mimetic one, then the problem changes. The issue becomes one of cultural authority. Hence the first problem of science—first as in radical—is itself the problem of imagination, and the imaginative origins of speculative thinking. As this speculative imagination arises out of a common understanding and in fact legitimates that common sense, it is the basis of authority. Hence its appellation as a "universal". As it refers to the cultural ground by which thinking and knowledge are in fact possible, it is a "cultural universal."

To return to our discussion of progress, an understanding of "for what sake is progress" obviously precedes the means of progress itself. But this means separating judging from action and making. Attaining this critical distance is not easy, for the simple reason that technical progress not only presents its own set of possibilities, but also provides the internal authority of its "truthfulness" (i.e. certainty). But Shirai's contention is that in fact this authority is incapable of supporting the ground whereby one objectifies and creates in the first place.

For this reason, the only mode of action possible may indeed be historical and dialectical, but profound qualifiers now modify this understanding: The necessity of history results from the need to judge one's actions in the face of infinite possibility and an absence of historically given ends. Irony then is no more than the ability to account for historical authority in the face of this infinite possibility. The task of reading history is (already) ironically given as a creative, interpretive task of authentication where one is required to construct the ground. The dialectic of meaning (as in the original meaning of the word) is limited to accountability and dialogue and for the sole purpose of allowing right judgement.

For Shirai, this self-conscious circularity and the necessity of irony are not mere tools that we may choose to use or not to use, but in fact constitute the very terms of our condition. One cannot simply decide irony is no longer necessary since anything which can be negated—conceptually or concretely—would in fact be historically dialectical. This is the basis of Shirai's understanding of a modern "heroic" architec-

ture: it is useless beyond a specific articulation. There is nothing "International" or universal about it, except to the degree that a culture is articulated and legitimated through it.

We cannot create by relying on others, even if we have a Japanese model or a European model. There is no other way except to discover the universal language upon this ground and within the autonomy of life and thought. This can be described as an ethics of creation.¹⁰

Shirai has two main concerns for architecture. One is that, as a member of the international community, the onus on any culture is in seeking the origin of human culture, only out of which one can extend one's own culture to begin with. The second concern is specifically with respect to the case of the Japanese. This is what is meant by the absence of any ethnically-derived architecture which speaks to the world. Japan must—as it had never had to do before, either for itself or for others—articulate self-consciously the meaning of its *sensus communis*. This is the historical imperative, and for Shirai this amounts to a heroic task. The articulation of the *sensus communis* is nothing short of establishing the ground.

A matter of the human spirit—*kokoro*—cultural certitude broadly conceived in terms of various historical and aesthetic verifications has served to frame technology within what is known for sure. Cultural self-knowledge, in other words, must be firmly grasped as a prior condition if technology is to acquire proper grounding. Culture precedes and frames technology, informs its ideology, grants it power, and alternatively, generates contests over its own meaning.¹¹

These words belong to Tetsuo Najita writing on the ambiguous relation of technology to Japan. Najita infers a reconsideration of the Cosmopolitan aim of subjugating technology to the cultural primacy of a people. In the light of Shirai, and his patient search for an ethics of creation, the implications are obvious. Self-knowledge is the prior condition to acting humanly, to grounding our (technologically given) actions in a creative manner. Shirai's creativity refers not only to the new, but to the culturally recognizable. It is the act which authorizes and legitimates the *sensus communis* and slips back into in its subsequent self-overcoming. Irony is no more than this articulate self-knowledge which sees its own self passing.

Self-knowledge was never a tool to be used and discarded with the discovery of a new set of tools. We can no more do without it than language or water. It is an understanding no less critical today than when Shirai articulated it earlier this century.

NOTES

- ¹ Sei'ichi Shirai, "Tradition's New Crisis". Without Windows (MuSou) Tokyo: 1979.
- ² Tetsuro Watsuji, *Climate* (Tokyo, 1935)
- ³ This idea of difference, inherited from the romantics, remains so pervasive now as to go completely unquestioned as an aspect of the Japanese identity. See Kevin Doak, *Dreams of Difference*, (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1994)
- ⁴ Jaspers is a Kantian. Neither of the two explicitly elaborated a political theory based on the imagination. This was begun by Hannah Arendt, Jasper's student and Shirai's senior, and she only did this towards the end of her life. I do not claim that Shirai was following similar lines of thinking, only that he began with a Jaspers/Kantian question as to the nature of the universal citizen, and approached the problem from the perspective of the fabricative.
- ⁵ Shirai
- ⁶ See Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*, (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1974) for a succinct description of modernity's debt to Romanticism.
- ⁷ This is identical to *techne + logos*. It may help to recall the argument alluded to already which interprets technology as being historically given, i.e., technology as the concept of history made real, or again, technology as the historical actualization of freedom.
- ⁸ Shirai
- ⁹ Arata Isozaki, Preface to the Japanese edition of Durand (1996) (trans. Recueil et parallele des edifices de tout genre anciens et modernes...)
- ¹⁰ Shirai
- ¹¹ Tetsuo Najita, On culture and technology in postmodern Japan, *South Atlantic Quarterly* v 87, Summer 1988, p.401-18.