

# The Invisible 'East': Fletcher and the Unseen Ho-o-den

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1893 Banister Fletcher went to Chicago to visit the World's Columbian Exposition. He wrote a report on the architecture of the Exposition for the Royal Institute of British Architects, and a series of articles on the same topic for *The Builder*. But one of the most famous buildings of the Exposition, the Japanese government's Ho-o-den, is not mentioned in any of these writings. In this paper, this troubling omission will be examined alongside Fletcher's treatment of non-Western architectures in his *A History of Architecture* so that the complexity of his subordinations of other building traditions can be considered.

In the conclusion to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes of Frantz Fanon's performance of his marginalised identity: '...Fanon opens up an enunciative space that does not simply contradict the metaphysical ideas of progress or racism or rationality; he distantiates them by 'repeating' these ideas, makes them uncanny by displacing them in a number of culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations.'<sup>1</sup> Bhabha's terms - progress, race, rationality, the uncanny, and performance - are all relevant here. Fletcher locates the authority of his historiographic work in the staging of his travels: knowledge is actively created through encounter and authorised by experience. The Columbian Exposition was also performative, staging Chicago's claim to progress and high culture. Within that context, Japan enacted a tricky game of difference and sameness, of an identity of its own among other nation states. It made a claim to a modernity that could be described as uncanny, or as Bhabha's '...culturally contradictory and discursively estranged....'

Fletcher's historical work can be understood as the culmination of a nineteenth century tradition of historiography that is still influential today, certainly in curricula: a special centennial edition of the book was published just five years ago. It was on the publication of the fourth edition of his *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, in 1901, that Fletcher introduced a small, new section at the back, under the problematic title of "The Non-Historical Styles". This addressed those architectural traditions that are independent of Western culture. Fletcher wrote with regard to these traditions: 'From an architect's point of view, these non-historical styles can scarcely be so interesting as those which have progressed on the solution of constructive problems, resolutely met and overcome, as was the case in Europe.... In India and the east, decorative schemes seemed to have outweighed any such problems.'<sup>2</sup>

But the fabrication of the Ho-o-den just eight years before these words were written generated a degree of attention contradicting Fletcher's description of non-European architectures as lacking interest. Indeed, *japonisme* was not an unusual enthusiasm in Europe and the United States at this period, cultivated in part at the great exhibitions.

It has frequently been surmised that Frank Lloyd Wright (the key architect of Fletcher's generation) developed his particular interest in Japan, for example, after encountering the Ho-o-den.<sup>3</sup>

The putative inability of Eastern architecture to 'progress' is made clear in Fletcher's Tree of Architecture, a drawing which formed the frontispiece to his *A History of Architecture*, editions 5 (1905) to 16 (1954). The Tree proposes a natural history for architecture, based in a kind of racial Darwinism. Mexican, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese architectures, depicted as decaying lower branches, are extinct or bound for extinction. The Darwinian theme is explicit in another of Fletcher's texts, *The Influence of Material on Architecture*:

*It is by destruction, and modification akin to destruction, that architecture has always developed and progressed. By resuscitation and evolution, and only by such means, has it survived as a living art. To quote Darwin, 'From the war of nature, from famine, and from death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely the production of the higher animals, directly follows.... From so simple a beginning, endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful, have been and are being evolved.'*<sup>4</sup>

Fletcher's conception of the racial - which is to say natural - determinations of cultural progress is set out in the text of a talk he gave about the Tower of London in 1912. He says the Tower is '...invested with the grandeur of a succession of dramatic developments and identified with the continual struggles for the freedom of a dominant and progressive race, which has gradually developed, and still maintains, a world-wide Empire.'<sup>5</sup> But at the top of his Tree, Fletcher would place not a British building, but rather an American one: Daniel Burnham's Flatiron Building of 1907. Burnham had been the architectural Commissioner of the World's Columbian Exposition. It was he who had given the Ho-o-den a key and sought-after site in at the centre of the exposition grounds, in particular because of its beauty....<sup>6</sup>

## FLETCHER'S PROMENADES

Fletcher's Tree depicts a space as much as it does a chronology, the space of a catalogue. All architecture is there, present together on the page, available for architects to pick from to use in their own compositions. In his own design work, Fletcher wanders in the space made by his Tree. Fletcher is an advocate of eclecticism: 'In whatever style - Greek, Gothic or Renaissance - the architect works, he should use it in an eclectic manner so as to answer the requirements of his client, and he should not be fettered by style, if it does not coincide with convenience.'<sup>7</sup>

Fletcher's wanderings are more than metaphorical. He bases his historiographical practice in travel. It is Fletcher's excursions which facilitate the first-hand experience of the buildings he describes in *A History of Architecture*. In the preface to edition 6 he writes

*This edition differs from previous editions, which were published under the joint names of my father, the late Prof. Banister Fletcher, F.R.I.B.A., and myself; for I have now entirely rewritten and recast the book from cover to cover. I have not relied solely on other authorities, and my descriptions are largely the result of personal observation of the world's greatest monuments from ancient Troy to modern Chicago.*

There follows a long paragraph describing the staging of these journeys and the sights he has seen on them. But such travels do not take him further west of London than Chicago or further east than Troy. The architectures that he introduces into the sections of the non-historical styles have not been visited on their own geographical yet alone cultural ground.

Nevertheless, Fletcher has travelled to see them. He has gone to the sites of the great exhibitions. It is at Paris in 1889 and at Chicago in 1893 that he becomes familiar with some semblance of them in person. Thus in the articles Fletcher wrote for *The Building News* on the 1889 Paris Exhibition, a whole series of exotic pavilions are described in a kind of picturesque promenade: Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Hawaii, India, China, Morocco, Egypt....<sup>8</sup> Many of these buildings were devised to be thematic architectural representations of these places, or simply exotically detailed pavilions for samples of the wares commercially available from them. But among the buildings along Paris's Esplanade des Invalides were also a number of buildings from French colonies that were examples of indigenous architectures that Fletcher noted would otherwise be seen by most architects only on paper.<sup>9</sup> He noted also that these were buildings not so interesting constructionally to an architect as were the great, modern buildings of the Champs de Mars - his articles on the buildings of Dutert in particular were fulsome in their praise of innovative constructional detail.

In his texts on the Columbian Exposition in Chicago - the RIBA report and the series for *The Builder* - Fletcher again uses the device of a specified path of movement. The buildings are carefully described in turn, the principal ones first, and the exotic ones later, or on the way, tracing a procession through the exposition's architecture and grounds, around the great set pieces of Burnham's axial plan and past the displaced 'villages and model structures of various uncivilized peoples...'<sup>10</sup> To start, however, Fletcher's Chicago documents both offer an overview of the grounds as a whole. He describes them for the RIBA as follows:

*...Mr Olmsted cut two canals or basins, the main basin, around which the principal buildings are grouped, running east & west & adjoining Lake Michigan at its eastern end, & another canal of less width running north & south & crossing the main canal. This second canal is taken for a considerable length northward & surrounds a wooded island, at its northern end, laid out in a wild picturesque manner.<sup>11</sup>*

The northern end of this wooded island was the site of the Ho-o-den. This is not mentioned by Fletcher in either of his texts. But he could hardly have missed it: this location was 'the Exposition's prime site'.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the itinerary entailed in his methodical, sequential descriptions of the buildings and exhibitions goes around the body of water - variously described as canal or lagoon - where the Ho-o-den stood on its wooded island. From the entry to the exposition, Fletcher moves to the Administration building, to Machinery and Agriculture, which are indeed well away from the Ho-o-den site. But then to Manufactures and Liberal Arts, Mining, Electricity, and Transportation at the southern end of the lagoon. Then Horticulture on the west of the lagoon and the US Government on the east (with the obvious connecting route being across two bridges and a path along side the Ho-o-den).

Then to Fisheries, with a good view of the Ho-o-den from its western end, to the Art Gallery, and then the Womens' Building, with the Ho-o-den clearly visible to the south-east.

In fact, the last of Fletcher's articles for *The Builder*, "Japanese Art at the Chicago Exhibition", surely took him into the Ho-o-den. For though none of the items Fletcher specifically discusses in his article are identifiable in the lists of artefacts in the Ho-o-den catalogue, it was there that a good deal of the Japanese art shown at the Exposition was located.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, he could not see the Ho-o-den even then. His blindness is remarkable.

## STAGING PROGRESS AT THE EXPOSITIONS

The great exhibitions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based fundamentally on the idea of progress. Asserting national identity and imperial destiny, they demonstrated the advancement of their hosts over their own histories and differentiated those who had advanced from those who had not. At the same time as they encouraged identification with progressive and unitary nation-states in the subjects who visited them, they promoted a new kind of public space given over to leisure and consumption. As Michael Wilson has written of the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, the exhibition '...produces its meanings by positioning its spectators within the imagined communities of nationalism and within the imagined identities of mass consumption.'<sup>14</sup> Architecture was party to this re-engineering of the self as both citizen of a national power and as consumer. Early architectural modernity is in part to be construed in these terms. Architecture was a necessary means by which the exhibitions - operating before the advent of cinema and electronic media - could orchestrate the spectacles of the commodity on one hand and of the advancement of national culture on the other.

To the degree that they participated in the same panoramic strategies, general architectural histories such as Banister Fletcher's were congruent with the enterprise of the world's fairs. They, too, were concerned with demonstrating progress. It is precisely its development through time that differentiates Western architecture from the others, according to Fletcher. He argued explicitly that this progress is based in structure and construction: 'In any true architecture form is not the result of caprice: it is only the expression of structure.'<sup>15</sup> This attitude connected Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* and his lesser known technical books on architecture and building.

But however architecture may advance through structural and constructional innovation, it can not be reduced to these things alone. The great skeletal assemblage of the 1889 Eiffel Tower was nearly as invisible to Fletcher as the Ho-o-den was four years later. It, too, was not to be admitted as architecture: '...the Eiffel Tower...besides being ugly and out of scale, was practically useless with the sole exception that it formed a landmark...'<sup>16</sup> Architecture is not made of structure alone. Another necessary characteristic of a progressive architecture is one attribute altogether absent from the Tower: the surface.

Though Fletcher paid a great of attention to the constructional aspects of the exposition buildings at Chicago - reporting on these issues in depth both to the RIBA and *The Builder* - he was disappointed. Behind plaster facades, structures at Chicago were generally timber and less advanced than the iron and terracotta at Paris in 1889. Their construction was that of the stage set: they were, after all, sets for the staging Chicago's claim to be a centre of 'civilization'. Nevertheless, though Fletcher later worried that the committed recuperation of classical styling at Chicago might be too retardataire, he also believed that it '...will do much for the real progress of architecture... and it may possibly be a starting-point on which the Americans will find an expression of their national aspirations for a higher and nobler phase of architectural art.'<sup>17</sup> Progress, then, involves examining the past to look forward to the future. It is on the building's surface that this is played out.

Fletcher's interest in the surface involves a risk, of course: the risk of a loss of the rationality of architecture that he locates in the structural. Mark Wigley has alerted us to the allure that the paradoxical surface held for the early moderns.<sup>18</sup> But the architectural surfaces which concerned Fletcher were not only those exterior ones across which were arrayed variously transformed historical motifs. He was also interested in the question of the surfaces of the building interior and with the need for them to be hygienic: like the architects and theorists Wigley discusses, Fletcher desired a certain blankness. Cleanliness is almost an obsession in his technical writings, which include works on English domestic building and on sanitation. 'Filth' and germs gather above suspended ceilings, on the porcelain of poorly designed sanitary fittings, behind unnecessary panelling around bath tubs, in drapes, fitted carpets, and flock wall-paper. Even antimacassars are dangerous: '...all such dirt collectors should be avoided, as they are injurious to health'.<sup>19</sup> Progress is also measured by the purging of these things and the filth they harbour: 'In sanitary science there is no lagging behind, no stopping on the forward march'.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, far more than the resolution of the technical difficulties involved in the building of the Eiffel Tower, Fletcher is interested in 1889 in an exhibition of a sanitary Paris house and its unsanitary counterpart.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, he attends carefully to the sanitary wares exhibited at Chicago, intriguingly split between the Manufactures and Liberal Arts exhibits, and those devoted to anthropology. Among the latter was '...a beautifully-executed model of the Imperial Quarantine Station at Shimonoseki, Japan, showing the disinfecting furnaces, hospitals, & c'.<sup>22</sup>

## PERFORMING JAPANESE IDENTITY

The principles that motivate the progress of Western architecture in Fletcher's view - the pursuit of constructional coherence, transformative and eclectic redeployment of historical motifs, the surface both disciplined and historically representational - can be shown to have motivated the Ho-o-den as well. As it was built during the winter preceding the World's Columbian Exposition, the Ho-o-den drew a great deal of public attention in Chicago because of the unfamiliar construction techniques being used by Japanese carpenters and other craftsmen imported for the purpose. The design was based on that of the Ho-o-do in Uji, near Kyoto, of about 1052, a key building in the history of the culture of Japan.<sup>23</sup> But incorporating architectural attributes from three important periods of Japanese culture, it was an eclectic transformation of a sacred (pre-modern) building into one that was secular, in fact domestic. While some of the spaces within the Ho-o-den featured richly painted walls and ceilings, others were relatively unadorned. Moreover, the objects of daily Japanese life with which the Ho-o-den was sparsely furnished were very far from the clutter that Fletcher apparently disliked in contemporary English houses.

Indeed Fletcher refers to Japanese domestic interiors when trying to promote restraint in the houses and flats of his compatriots. In *The English Home*, having stated that the keynote of all household decoration should be simplicity (but not strived for as an affectation) Fletcher suggests that 'There is much to be learned in decoration and furnishing from the Japanese, whose marvellous and intuitive skill is evinced, not only in their articles of *virtu*, but also in the decorative treatment of their homes'.<sup>24</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright admired Japanese houses for much the same reason, because they had eliminated both dirt and ornament.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Fletcher intimates in a brief reference in his Chicago articles that he believes Japanese architecture should be able to advance on its own terms. Among the German entries to the architectural drawing exhibition, he is very critical of some images for Parliament House and a Court of Justice for Tokyo: 'It is a pity the Japanese have not sufficient patriotism to execute something in their own style instead

of the heavy and coarse design'.<sup>26</sup> But it was precisely patriotism and a plan to be modern that motivated the presence of the Ho-o-den at the Columbian Exposition. Japan was performing its modernity, its identity. Japan was promoting sanitation, and the manufacture of commodities. It was constructing itself and the identity of its citizens as coherently Japanese. It too was to be a modern nation state. It too would have an empire whose rapid but disastrous expansion fifty years later would necessarily change the nature of British imperialism.

It was the necessity to stage identity that motivated the construction of the Ho-o-den in Chicago. The building was an ambassador, an assertion both of Japan's difference and its equivalence. It was a gift to the United States, a cross-cultural exchange on terms which would not be altogether clear.

## CONCLUSION

But why was Fletcher in particular blind to this building? For the architectural historian who travels to see, at the end of his longest trip sees the goods, sees the possibility of development, sees the evidence of the sanitary installations, but apparently sees no architecture worth reporting. However, his is not - I think - a classical case of Orientalism: his scant comments do allow the possibility of a Japanese modernity. But perhaps for him the uncanniness of this modernity slips into that which cannot be acknowledged.

Much about the Ho-o-den and many of its strategies must have been familiar and admirable to the young architectural scholar. Yet it was also strange. At the level of the building's form, we could surmise that it was a certain *blurring* between the surface and the structure that had to be disallowed. Among the Japanese sculptural works shown at Chicago that Fletcher discusses in his final article in *The Builder* is a large wood carving by Takamura Koun. It was a free-standing piece, apparently in the Western manner, of a baboon. But Koun was also responsible for the carving of the ramma in the central hall of the Ho-o-den. Symptomatically, these important pieces could not be characterised by the differentiation of ornament and structure traditional in the west. Incorporated directly into the fabric and the functioning of the building, the ramma were ventilation grills and simultaneously outstanding sculptural works.<sup>27</sup> They are not mentioned by Fletcher.

But it is a broader possibility suggested by the uncanny familiarity of the Ho-o-den that must more urgently be suppressed than the lack of distinction between surface and structure, ornament and essence. This is the possibility that if the architectures of Japan and England - of the west - are not sufficiently distinguishable then perhaps neither are their racial and political destinies. Curiously, though they are not supposed to progress, Fletcher's Tree of Architecture shows that history is one of the roots of the architectures of Japan, China, Mexico, and so on, as much as it is for any others. And the sections on each of the 'non-historical styles' begin like all the other sections of the book with a survey of the roots, the conditions that influence architecture according to Fletcher: geography, geology, climate, religion, 'social and political', and history. The examples that are discussed after the root inspections are organised by building type, and then by history again.

But it is not Fletcher's inconsistencies regarding the historical or non-historical character of non-western architectures that I wish finally to focus on here. Rather, it is another of the roots. In edition 5 of his *A History*, Fletcher writes of the geography of Japan:

*Japan presents many points of resemblance to Great Britain: both have highly indented coast lines with good harbours; both are insular empires well situated for commerce and lying opposite populous continents; both are at the head of great oceanic waterways, the one of the Pacific, the other of the Atlantic; and both are warmed by oceanic currents producing equable temperatures.*<sup>28</sup>

Japan is strangely like Britain, then. And so to a degree its architecture must be also. Or it might be put that the Ho-o-den is not a European building, or an English building, but it is what those buildings *could be*. Perhaps then, it is precisely because it is so rigorously constructed, so clean, so historically self aware, so beautiful, and so centrally located, so foreign and so familiar that the Ho-o-den cannot be acknowledged. To see the Ho-o-den would be to acknowledge its historicity and thereby avow things and their histories in general could be different. They could be other to their construction by dominant discourses.

Instead they could be '...culturally contradictory and discursively estranged....'

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 237

<sup>2</sup>Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 4th ed (London: B T Batsford, 1901): 438. Since Fletcher's death in 1953, successive editors have struggled with the contradiction of the containment of the 'non-historical' within the 'historical' in his book. On this see Paul Walker, "Vagrancy: Asia and the Pacific in Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*" in Stephen Cairns & Philip Goad editors, *Building Dwelling Drifting: Migrancy & the Limits of Architecture*, proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Other Connections Conference (Melbourne: Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning, University of Melbourne, 1997): 356-362; Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu, "Writing Postcoloniality in Architecture: Discovering Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture*", *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture* 1 (1996): 3-11; and Nalbantoğlu, "Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture*", *Assemblage* 35 (1997): 6-17.

<sup>3</sup>Kevin Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1993): chapter 3

<sup>4</sup>Fletcher, *The Influence of Material on Architecture* (London, BT Batsford, 1897): 17-18

<sup>5</sup>Fletcher, "The Tower of London", *The Architect & Contract Reporter* (22 March 1912): 194

<sup>6</sup>Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*: 53

<sup>7</sup>Banister Flight Fletcher & Herbert Phillips Fletcher, *The English Home* (London: Methuen & Co, 1910): 38

<sup>8</sup>*The Building News* (19 September 1890): 391-392; (26 September 1890): 426-427; (17 October 1890): 531-533; (24 October 1890): 570; (31 October 1890): 604-605.

<sup>9</sup>*The Building News* (26 December 1890): 885

<sup>10</sup>*The Builder* (16 September 1893): 205

<sup>11</sup>Fletcher, "The Godwin Bursary 1893. Report by the holder on the Chicago Exposition 1893" (manuscript, R.I.B.A., London): 6

<sup>12</sup>Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*: 53

<sup>13</sup>See Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ho-o-den* (Tokyo: K Ogawa, Publisher, 1893). My thanks to Christopher Vernon for making a copy of this available to me.

<sup>14</sup>Wilson, "Consuming History", *American Journal of Semiotics*, vol 8 no 4 (1991): 133.

<sup>15</sup>Fletcher, *The Influence of Material on Architecture*: 19

<sup>16</sup>*The Builder* (15 July 1893): 40

<sup>17</sup>*The Builder* (1 July 1893): 4; Fletcher & Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 5th ed (London: BT Batsford & New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905): 601-602

<sup>18</sup>Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (London & Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995)

<sup>19</sup>Banister Flight Fletcher & Herbert Phillips Fletcher, *The English Home* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1910): 221

<sup>20</sup>Banister Flight Fletcher & Herbert Phillips Fletcher, *Architectural Hygiene*, 5th ed (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd, 1921): 4

<sup>21</sup>*The Building News* (19 December 1890): 850-851

<sup>22</sup>*The Builder* (14 October 1893): 276

<sup>23</sup>Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ho-o-den*: 10

<sup>24</sup>Fletcher & Fletcher, *The English Home*: 221

<sup>25</sup>Wright, *An Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945): 175

<sup>26</sup>*The Builder*, (2 September 1893): 169

<sup>27</sup>*The Builder* (11 November 1893): 349-350; Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ho-o-den*: 29. The ramma survived the burning of the Ho-o-den in the mid 1940s and are now in the lobby of the Department of the History of Architecture and Art at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

<sup>28</sup>Fletcher & Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 5th ed: 634