

Translations From Memory: Architectural Anecdotes from Three Months of Travel in Japan

REBECCA M. DUDLEY

University of Washington

The paper that follows has a narrative, free-associative structure that is intended to represent the cultural landscape of contemporary Japanese architecture while actively working with the authorial voice of the narrator. In a situation of cross-cultural translation, it is very easy to objectify the “other”, to quickly fix Japanese identity by differentiating it from one’s own presumed identity as American. Nonetheless the question of understanding and representing the character and texture of something equivalent to a “Japanese” cultural context, is necessary for an appreciation of an architecture. I address this problem by foregrounding my own voice in the process of differentiating cultural identity. The resultant text is simultaneously autobiographical, analytical, critical and documentary.

I have done this in order to address the fundamental problem of authorial subjectivity, especially in a situation of conversational cross-cultural translation.

JAPAN’S POPULIST ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Godzilla does not like modern architecture. In the first Godzilla film his birth is shown as the result of an unholy union of modern technology and nature: radiation contaminates the new-laid Godzilla egg. Godzilla destroys modern things, in particular, modern architecture. Power lines, trains, cars and modern buildings are the things he destroys. People take refuge from the destruction and flames in the tree-covered hills overlooking their little town. As subsequent Godzilla films are released he grows in size, to match the scale of the buildings he is driven to destroy. In the final Japanese Godzilla film he destroys Tange’s new city hall, a building 797 feet high. At his original height he would have reached only the fourth floor.

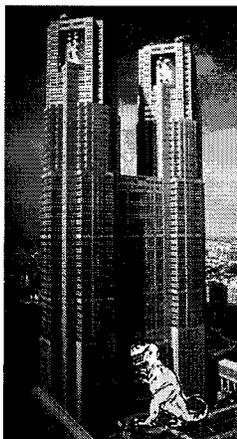


Fig. 1. Godzilla circa 1956 with Tange's New City Hall

In every film Godzilla leaves standing in his path of destruction only small traditional homes, low, wood, with ceramic tile roofs. Everything else, everything modern is in flames.

Godzilla is not killing the thing that created him in order to get on with some brave new world. Rather Godzilla, Japan’s populist architectural critic, knows that there is something wrong with modern architecture in Japan, something inherently unauthentic about it. He knows that the appropriate incremental, evolutionary (not revolutionary) steps have been skipped and the missing steps must be completed prior to continuing the modern project.

MODERN BEGINNINGS

Japanese architects Sutei Horiguchi and Tetsuro Yoshida went to Europe in the mid 1920’s. They returned to Japan in a state of despair sensing that Japan could “never catch up, due to the difference in their blood”.¹ They make an effort to ‘catch up’ by trying to reconcile Western style architecture and the living styles in Japan of sitting and sleeping on floor. Yoshida tries to incorporate modern bits, the wrapped window for example, into otherwise traditional Japanese buildings. Horiguchi juxtaposes the two with no effort to incorporate them into each other, part of the building is Western, part is traditional Japanese.

From the influence of the International Style grew two new types of homes in Japan: the *yofu-jutaku* (Western style) and *wayo-kongo jutaku* (combined Western and Japanese style).² The question that needed to be resolved before choosing from these two styles was: will you be sacrificing all of your Japanese customs of cooking, dining, sleeping and sitting, or just a few?³

At the same time that Corbusier was writing about a singularity of architectural purpose and “enthusiasm for [modern] building” that was so powerful it could and should be used to effectively avert revolution.⁴ Horiguchi and Yoshida were struggling to combine “two radically different ways of life” in a single building.⁵ The question at the beginning of modern architecture in Japan thus became ‘what should be compromised?’⁶, a stark contrast to the visionary manifestos of the West, and Corbusier’s architecture of revolution.

THE NAIL THAT STICKS OUT

Modern Japanese architecture is described as: “highly individualistic”, “figurative”, “discordant”, “indecipherable”, “confusing”, “fragmentary” “incongruous”, disjunctive”, “fractional”, and “futuristic”.⁸ One architectural guide warns travelers of the architectural “shock” they will experience upon landing in Tokyo.⁹

I had chosen Japan as the destination for my traveling fellowship precisely because of the ‘object-oriented’ quality of so many modern buildings there. I had assumed that what appeared to be disregard for

the physical context meant that some *other* context had been given priority over the physical. I believed that upon speaking to architects I would come to understand these buildings as much more than attention-hungry design one-upmanship.

Was it not possible that these buildings had been unilaterally misunderstood? Is it not possible that critics who make positivist, formal criticisms do not have the insight necessary to judge architecture fairly? It was my contention that because "Tokyo as a modern city began amongst ruins, in the absence of the kind of historical context that exists in most other metropolises"¹⁰, that the 'badly behaved' buildings were, in fact, driven by function and were "freed from all conceptions of what [their shapes] should be".¹¹ I believed that the most eccentric modern buildings in Japan demonstrated a seamless relationship between function and form and in that respect were more *evolved* than had ever been possible in the West.

It is hard to believe that in a place famous for conformity where the general population has an "intense preoccupation with beauty"¹² it is easier to be a willful architectural individualist than in the United States, but it seems to be true. Kisho Kurokawa tells a parable about how in Japan "the nail that sticks out gets hit". How can he tell this parable in front of a wall of photographs of buildings that have a profoundly uncompromising quality about them?

One Japanese architect is particularly interested in shedding some light on this issue. He describes himself as having a special ability to go back & forth between a Western point of view and an Eastern point of view. Why in Japan where citizens are so eager to fit in, why are architects the exception: "This thing I am going to say - this is not very Japanese, this thing I am going to say is much more like something an American would say: Japanese are 95% normal. They like traditional buildings. The other 5% of Japanese people are weird. That 5% is made up of artists and architects".¹³

Therefore, architects are celebrities in Japan. A stranger I meet on the bus tells me that she is very excited that I have been in touch with the offices of Kurokawa and Ando. In Japan this doesn't seem remarkable, but how many people on a city bus in the United States could name two living architects?

In spite of the bleak first moments of Modernism in Japan and however obscure, misunderstood or unwanted Japanese architects believe themselves to be it seems that architects are to Japan what rock stars are to the West.

Architects in Japan even warrant an evening soap opera. The drama is extremely popular and its actors are mobbed everywhere they go. It is a story about two architects in a love triangle with a beautiful young woman.



Fig. 2. The love triangle

One is "sensei", teacher, one is the student. They compete for commissions and recognition as well as the heart of the beautiful woman. In one episode the younger architect discovers a flaw in the construction of a building they are both working on. He bursts into "sensei's" office pleading him to stop construction in front of a group of reporters.



Fig. 3. "Teacher, forgive me, but your building is not built well!"

The older architect is cool and reassuring, but later when he discovers there is a flaw in the construction, driven by Howard-Roarke-Heroism he takes a sledgehammer to the part of the building in question. When I describe the drama and the theme song to my only woman architect friend in Japan she says that the recurring Burt Bacharach musical theme is "classic Japanese architectural machismo sentimentality"¹⁴: 'What's it all about [...]? Is it just for the moment we live, what's it all about when you sort it out [...]. . . and if only fools are kind, then I guess it is wise to be cruel.'

The story feels familiar: idealized and romantic in the same way as soap operas at home, predictable boy-meets-girl stories. But evening soap operas in the US seem sloppy by comparison. On Melrose Place and Beverly Hills 90210, characters take meaningless shopping trips and boat rides, only for the purpose of providing a colorful backdrop for an argument, a bonding experience or a first kiss. But in this Japanese soap opera about architects there is economy and intentionality about everything that happens: every place they go, every look, every touch, every stroke of a pencil, every blow of a sledge hammer, nothing irrelevant happens, ever. Everything points to the next thing. On the occasions when the architects leave their office it is to look at important buildings from which they can learn valuable lessons, or to attend an awards ceremony where the hierarchy between "sensei" and his student is poignantly and suddenly reversed. Every location brings with it a potent lesson or humiliation. Everything that happens is entirely *inevitable*. "Sensei" loses respect for himself and the business side of architecture, which forced him to be involved in a scheme to build badly. The young architect wins the heart of the beautiful young woman and architectural recognition in the form of a prestigious prize. The story is designed with such care that it is a pleasure to watch the inevitability unfold. Everything everyone does in this world is important. Anything anyone does could shift the balance of their fate one way or the other, because there is something bigger than the three of them and their egotistical needs. That something is Japan, and the way Japan knows things should be. Japan knows that there is pleasure in inevitability, and that the best surprises are planned.

A DIRTY LITTLE SECRET?

Is it an impossible responsibility, to re-interpret a place with a sense of identity that has remained in tact for centuries? If Horiguchi & Yoshida had not revealed their disappointment upon returning home, would the Japanese have found their own way to modernism? Maybe the secret of the most experimental and tortured forms is that architecture is *unimportant* here, a trifle, having so much less value than the land it sits on that deferential or austere projects would make too much importance of the whole effort. Could it be that compared to the earth it sits on modern architecture in Japan is *disposable*? In all of the things that make Japan work — the prompt trains, the ubiquitous tangle of power, information and telephone lines overhead, the perfectly coordinated timing of traffic signals and pedestrian prompts, each accompanied by a cheerful tune — there is a profound consciousness of what is required to make its densest cities navigable and efficient. If you ignore the modern Japanese architecture, which of all these things is the most recent and most transient, would Japan still work? Could it be that “In the midst of an infrastructure of bracing reality, architecture is seen as only a half-melted cream topping”?¹⁵

AUTHENTIC KYOTO

Is it possible that, as the non-architects will tell you, the only important buildings in Japan are the *old* ones?¹⁶ Without exception, the non-architects are surprised that I chose to spend any time in Tokyo. The non-architects want me to leave Tokyo and go to Kyoto as soon as possible and definitely by the first day of November. A travel agent explains that there will be few Westerners there at this time, but many Japanese travel to Kyoto to see the autumn leaves surrounding their favorite temples. So this will be an opportunity to do things authentic Japanese tourists do. The day I arrive in Kyoto the small trees lining the street are still green, even though it is early November. Three days later the trees have been stripped of all their leaves. Is it by governmental decree that the leaves be changed by tourist season in Kyoto? If the leaves have not changed naturally by the first weekend in November, does the government change the leaves - strip the green leaves and replace them with artificial orange leaves?



Fig. 4. Preparing Kyoto's trees for the tourist season

A map could be drawn of Kyoto that reduces the city to two parts. Part One would be “Ancient & Admirable”. Part Two would be “New & Unworthy”. People walk quickly by the new buildings, slow down at the old ones. At the parade that marks the beginning of foliage season the paraders *run* past the new buildings to get to the intersections in the

city that are bounded by old ones. This is where the crowds gather. The paraders pause, smile and wave. Then they run past the next series of new buildings to the next oasis of old ones. A map drawn of these two areas of Kyoto would be a drawing of tiny inlets as well as the broad expanses surrounding the Imperial Palace. The “zoning” is the responsibility of the individual who establishes the comparative value of every building each time they pass. It is possible to tell the character of the part of the city I am about to enter by looking at the people - faces in a grimace, heads down, walking briskly, or faces serene, heads up, gliding more than walking. The collective history of the people I see on the street is as transparent as independent histories are impenetrable. Thirteen centuries of building in a prescribed manner may be a weight that bears on the architects of Japan, but for the non-architects this history is a cause for levitation.

The non-architect citizens of Kyoto know so completely what architecture *should* be like, they re-affirm it every time they see it, honoring it by surrounding it with serenity. If they do not see it they still carry it with them not as knowledge so much as faith, as something that requires no explanation. No one ever explains to me *why* I should spend all of my time in Japan in Kyoto. It is self-evident to them, something they understand with their heart — modern buildings offend their aesthetic sensibility and deepen their resolve in what they know to be true: old buildings are better than new ones.

The dance that Kyoto-dwellers do in response to the two Kyotos mapped here re-establishes each citizen's national identity as designer and critic.

It is as if the new buildings are there as an act of violence, as if they were hastily rammed into position, and they are still moving a little due to the initial violent act that created them. Everyone knows they are transitional, moving as all modern buildings in Japan move, towards their inevitable fate: oblivion. The old buildings are part of the landscape, mounds of earth that have found their natural angle of repose.

Of course Japan does not have a monopoly on architectural nostalgia — in the United States and Europe it is common for cities to rebuild themselves in the image of what they once were or imagine they once were. Motivations range from the desire to boost tourism to obliteration of evidence of foreign occupation and war. Is the Japanese motivation to rebuild itself as it was before occupation by Western *architecture*? If this is the case is it because modern architecture is inextricably associated with the West, or is it as my non-architect hosts suggest, that these buildings are objectionable for reasons that are purely physical?

START ARCHITECTURE OVER BEGINNING AT 1868

When Emperor Hirohito died in 1989 the Showa period ended, and Japan began the Heisei Period. This new period required the disposal of tens of millions of calendars. Japan literally started over from year one.¹⁷

Instead of starting over at year one, perhaps the non-architects would prefer that Japan start over from year when assimilation began: 1868. Is it possible that the modern buildings are not welcome here because the non-architect Japanese believe that Japan reached architectural perfection centuries ago?

What was it exactly about their trip to Europe in 1923 that Horiguchi & Yoshida were so disturbed by? Was it the technology? The apparent freedom from styles of the past? The artful application of rational systems and the sense that they had been beaten at their own game?¹⁸ Had architecture in Japan evolved well beyond the West's modern movement centuries earlier, and historian predilections to organize events sequentially and develop clear, singular cause & effect relationships obscured this true historical fact?

A SITUATION OF THINKING

The Westerners I meet who are living in Japan have read Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*. They are impressed by how beautifully and accurately Barthes has 'captured' Japan in his writing, but in the first sentence of *Empire of Signs* Barthes describes the observations and analyses that follow as 'fictive' and 'fantasy'. The Japan described here he says, is one of his own creation.¹⁹ When I refer to *Empire of Signs* during an interview with a Japanese architect he reminds me: "Barthes was writing about Barthes, you know, not about Japan".²⁰ The Western readers on the other hand see the first pages of *Empire of Signs* as an unnecessary disclaimer - they believe they have experienced the Japan Barthes describes. If Barthes' cross-cultural analysis is fiction which cross-cultural analyses are *not*?

At the end of *Empire of Signs* when Barthes writes of Japanese space "there is nothing to grasp" is he suggesting that Westerners are not invited or allowed to get close enough to Japanese space to be effected by it, or have an effect on it? This is what even contemporary travel guides suggest with their charges of "Japanese inscrutability"²¹. But there is plenty to 'grasp'. Could it be that only the *relationship* of Japan to the West is hard to 'grasp'?

This is an agitating proposition to anyone in search if simple relationships, clear oppositions, or evidence of who reached architectural rationalism first. It is infinitely easier to think of Japan as a different version of the West. It makes trajectories of investigation more apparent, for example: If Japan has a predilection for asymmetry²² does the West have a predilection for symmetry? A question like this is itself evidence of such a predilection, and will therefore probably not yield a body of research that discovers anything unexpected. A question like this will probably not allow for a genuine inquiry into the nature of a situation.

What if it could be proven that modern Japanese architects are right, and Godzilla is wrong? Simple oppositions are a way to describe a relationship, but they are more often a way to avoid one. In 1888 Percival Lowell who eventually became best known as a propagandist for the idea of life on Mars, wrote of the Japanese "We seem as we gaze at them to be viewing them through some mirth-provoking mirror of the mind — a mirror that shows us our own familiar thoughts, but all turned wrong side out".²³

Rather than limiting an inquiry of Japan to evaluations of it in relationship to the West is it possible to 'grasp' Japan on our own terms? Does this reduce our inquiries abroad to exercises in unproductive relativism? This can only be determined by the quality of the questions that our inquiries incite in others.

If Japan has afforded Barthes a "situation of writing"²⁴, it has afforded me a situation of thinking: Do myths of a building propagate, solely because a building is old? Could my architectural practice begin from 'year one'? What would be the ramifications for architecture in the United States if everyone we sat next to on a city bus knew two living architects? Which mascot could be adopted to critique the architecture of American cities; What are the unauthentic buildings in Chicago, New York, Seattle or Boston?

NOTES

¹Hajime Yatsuka, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

²David B. Stewart, *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture* (New York: Kodansha, 1987), p. 124.

³Hajime Yatsuka, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

⁴Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 281.

⁵David B. Stewart, *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture* (New York: Kodansha, 1987), p. 126.

⁶Hajime Yatsuka, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

⁷Botond Bogнар, *The New Japanese Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 8.

⁸Botond Bogнар, *The New Japanese Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 18.

⁹Botond Bogнар, *The New Japanese Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 7.

¹⁰Noriyuki Tajima, *Tokyo* (London: Ellipsis London Limited, 1995), p. 7.

¹¹Tetsuro Yoshida, *The Japanese House and Garden* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), p. 193.

¹²David B. Stewart, *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture* (New York: Kodansha, 1987), introduction.

¹³Kei'ici Irie, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

¹⁴Kathryn Findlay, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

¹⁵Kei'ici Irie, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

¹⁶Tokyo is the modern seat of power, the imperial capital having been relocated there from Kyoto in 1868. Moving the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo coincided with the "era of assimilation", known as the Meiji era which was marked by unprecedented enthusiasm for all things foreign — thus, Tokyo, is considered Japan's most international but least Japanese city.

¹⁷Gunter Nitschke, *From Shinto to Ando* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), p. 9.

¹⁸Norman F. Carver Jr., *Form and Space in Japanese Architecture* (Kalamazoo: Documan Press, Ltd., 1993), p. 33.

¹⁹Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 3.

²⁰Hajime Yatsuka, Author and Architect, Interview, Tokyo, December 1995.

²¹Malcolm B. Davis, *Japan: Toward a More Scrutable Japan* (Singapore: Hofer Press, 1995), p. 21.

²²Norman F. Carver Jr., *Form and Space in Japanese Architecture* (Kalamazoo: Documan Press, Ltd., 1993), p. 27.

²³Frederick L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan* (Berkeley: Stone bridge Press, 1996), p. 33.

²⁴Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 4.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland. *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Bognar, Botond. *The New Japanese Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.
- Carver, Norman. *Form and Space in Japanese Architecture*. Kalamazoo: Documan Press, Ltd., 1993.
- Davis, Malcolm. *Japan: Toward a More Scrutable Japan*. Singapore: Hofer Press, 1995.
- Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1986.
- Nitschke, Gunter. *From Shinto to Ando*. London: Academy Editions, 1993.
- Schodt, Frederick. *Dreamland Japan*. Berkeley: Stone bridge Press, 1996.
- Stewart, David. *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture*. New York: Kodansha, 1987.
- Tajima, Noriyuki. *Tokyo*. London: Ellipsis London Limited, 1995.
- Yoshida, Tetsuro. *The Japanese House and Garden*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958.