ON RESEARCH ACROSS CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Questions for streets with no names, where eyes never meet

INVITED ESSAY

Darko Radović
Keio University, Tokyo, Japan
Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana
radovic@keio.jp
Non basta guardare, occorre guardare con occhi che vogliono vedere.
(It is not enough to look, one must look with eyes that want to see.)

Galileo Galilei

0. ON THE QUESTION OF WORDS

Research needs clarity, accuracy and use of definite terms, starting from keywords and research questions. Finding and formulating the right focus demands rigour. Ideally, one begins by asking what seems obvious and, as such, might remain unchallenged. The complexity of our theme here demands precisely such, fundamental yet seemingly simple questions. In this discussion, we need to first ask what does the term “architecture” mean and what do we think about when the word “identity” gets uttered, before entering any inquiry into their intersections. Then – what do we really think of when we say “Japanese architecture”, and so on.

That points at critical importance of language, at the question of words. Research gets communicated in languages. It, logically, follows that research conducted and presented in Japanese language uses Japanese terms. It also makes sense to assume how terminology used by these researchers captures the meaning identical to that used by their international peers. Particular words get chosen precisely in order to facilitate accurate communication and ensure the equivalence of meaning. But, are accuracy and equivalence possible?

1. THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

Our keywords here, architecture, identity, Japan, are complex and loaded with meaning.

The need for an equivalent of the Western term “architecture” came up in Japan only in the late 19th century, during the tumultuous Meiji Era (1868-1912). After 265 years of an almost total self-isolation (1603-1868), the newly promoted elites of Japan sought ways to connect, catch up with (and, not much later, to overcome) “the West”. Those efforts included modernisation of language, with numerous and fast borrowings, translations, or kanji transliterations from European and American vocabularies, or from the historically and culturally better grounded, but less appreciated near-West, China. As elaborated by Norihito Nakatani (2006), while seeking the synonym for architecture, “the word 建築, kenchiku was accidentally created when Japanese translators
saw a Chinese text containing two adjacent kanjis with a rather similar semantic content: ken meaning ‘building’ and chiku ‘construction’. Thus, “architecture’ in modern Japan began from this ‘blank’ space carved out by the term ‘kenchiku’ which, for some reason, prevailed over an equally wrong (or, an equally right) permutation – chikuken. The history of that moment and debates that followed are well documented. One can only agree with Nakatani that translation of the term “architecture” into Japanese language remains impossible. Accepted neologism simply lacks the historically established associative field of ideas which frame term architecture. Over time, kenchiku has certainly created its own, equally culture-specific world of connotations, but what gets understood in Japan when “we” say “architecture” is not the same as what “they” mean by saying kenchiku.

The situation with our second keyword, “identity”, in Japan is even more complex. That term encapsulates a set of profound philosophical and metaphysical themes which take us into the realms of id, as in Latin identitas, and dialectics between the sameness and difference. In his Identity and Difference, building upon Leibniz and Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, Martin Heidegger has declared how “the principle of identity is considered the highest principle of thought” (1969). Yet, our inquiries confirm how in Japan that concept has attracted some interest only over the last 2-3 decades. Most often as the closest to “identity” is considered jikodoitsuisei (自己 identical sex), which is commonly used in administration, for pragmatic, mundane purposes (such as personal details, addresses, accounts). For Japanese understanding of identity, that was – sufficient. As in the case of kenchiku, the connotative field of jikodoitsuisei is purely practical and, thus, dramatically different from what identity means within the cultural sphere of its origin, close to the original fabric of myths, histories and memories which are, logically, irrelevant to the East. As again Heidegger puts it succinctly, “translating and translating are not equivalents if in one instance what one is concerned with is a business letter and in another instance a poem. The former is translatable, the other is not.” (Heidegger, 1957). In other words, the pragmatism of ken, chiku, construction, and building gets translated easily, while terms such as architecture and identity do not.

An awareness of difficulties with translation (which we have elaborated elsewhere, cfr. Radović 2020a, 2020b, 2021) is necessary to set stage for further discussion. Here we will present only some peculiarities of relevance to our third keyword, Japan and its culture using a rather long, briefly annotated quotation. That is an extract from Michael Marra’s essay “On Japanese Things and Words” (2004), in which the linguist makes “a fictional reconstruction of
an actual meeting that Heidegger had with Tezuka Tomio [...]. In the dialogue the Inquirer (Heidegger) formulates a central question that, in my opinion, should be of fundamental interest to anyone seriously concerned with the study of Japan. The question is deceptively simple, at least compared with the difficulty of coming up with the answer - an answer that, as a matter of fact, the reader will not find fully formulated in the dialogue. ‘What is the Japanese word for ‘language’?’

That is equivalent to asking our deceptively simple question – “what is the Japanese word for ‘architecture’?” (which should be of equal interest to anyone concerned with the study of culture and production of space in/of Japan). We need to also note Marra’s point that the reader was never going to find Tezuka’s fully formulated answer to Heidegger’s question.

Marra continues describing how “the Japanese visitor (Tezuka in Heidegger’s recollection) appears to have been caught off guard, as we can see from Heidegger’s parenthetical remark: ‘after further hesitation.’ Had Heidegger posed the same question to a Frenchman or an Italian, the answer would have been immediate: ‘langue’ or ‘lingua.’ The challenge for Tezuka was definitely higher since he had a variety of words from which to choose. He could have used, for example, the expression gengo, a combination of two Chinese characters indicating ‘the speech of words’. Instead, he used an ancient Japanese word derived from the native Yamato vocabulary: kotoba, which literally means ‘the foliage of speech’.”

Several important aspects of relevance to Japanese identity feature in that paragraph. As the hesitation noticed by Heidegger suggests, in a rather deliberate way, over some easier and culturally closer Chinese and vernacular local alternatives Tezuka Tomio considers what his target should hear, aiming at nothing less but (production of) an image of Japan in the philosopher’s eyes. He reaches beyond straightforward functionality (as in our pragmatic ken, chiku, or jikodoitsusei), to delve deep into the strata where the reality and desired images of Japanese uniqueness blur. After all, the famous philosopher is also a human being.

Marra opines how “there should be little doubt that Tezuka’s choice was prompted by his desire to please Heidegger by playing the philosopher’s own game – something that Tezuka totally succeeded in doing, as Heidegger’s dialogue attests. Tezuka introduced a term that lent itself to etymological play – an enterprise very close to the heart of Heidegger, and one that was also very popular among Japanese thinkers. In fact, the expression kotoba incorporates the word koto, which means both ‘thing’ and ‘word [...] Heidegger points out
that never has the distance between things and Sein been as great as in modernity, when all distances in space and time have shrunk. Given the unflattering position that Heidegger had taken on the notion of ‘things,’ Tezuka was forced to come to the rescue of the Japanese word kotoba by endowing koto with the meaning of two Heideggerian keywords: ‘event’ (kotogara) and ‘affair’ (Sache). The thingly component of kotoba was not simply an objectifiable presence that can be counted, analyzed, and disposed of, but rather a poietic ‘act’ that has the power to create a reality by transforming the named thing (koto) into a real thing (koto).

In what he sees as of fundamental interest to the study of Japan, professor of literature and hermeneutics Marra here points out that the translator has power to manipulate meanings by selection of “words from which to choose”, and he does so both because of his “desire to please”, and in order to come to “the rescue of the Japanese word” by bringing the answer that would be “close to the heart of Heidegger”. An expert translator has chosen a source-language term and finetuned its meaning towards a particular effect in the mind of his target, the Inquirer. His desire to tailor and to (re)present Japanese collective self in favourable light is obvious to Marra the Japanologist, as certainly was not the case with a total, and fascinated gaijin Martin Heidegger. The reasons for doing so include our keywords, identity and nation(alism), along with the commonly associated pride and (always depicted as deep, and as ancient as possible) roots – which have, in not so distant past, made issue of (collective) identity in German and Japanese cultures intersect tragically. In any case, what Tezuka has said and what Heidegger has heard was double-manipulated – first, when the translator took role of the creator of meaning, and then at the moment when the Inquirer was reduced from the one who asks to a mere recipient.

While our keywords “architecture” and “identity” do possess cultural charge that makes them special, there is nothing unique in their untranslatability. Much of the 20th century translation theory has been established precisely in recognition to, and in dealings with innumerable and, as pointedly formulated by Barbara Cassin in her book (2004) significant untranslatables. In sharp opposition to cultural arrogance and domination through simplification (Debordian Spectacle, 1988), translation theories provide ways to understand and deal with the blessings of cross-cultural (mis)understanding. Since my own early immersions into cultures of radical Other, I align with Antoine Berman’s demand for translation grounded in “the desire to open up the Stranger as Stranger to his own space of and in language [and] to recognize the Other as Other [my italics], which beautifully encapsulates what the ethics of cross-cultural encounter needs to be(come)” (Worton 1998; Radović, 2003, Radović et al. 2007).
In the very opening of her *Text, Typology and Translation*, Anna Trosborg (1997) states sharply that “equivalence can hardly be obtained in translation across cultures and languages, and it may not even be a desirable goal” (our italics; Radović, 2007). Our research confirms Derrida’s position that “what is lost in translation is often the best that can be found” (1998; Radović 2021). In dealing with complexity, the recognition and celebration of (non)equivalence are of critical importance.

### 2. The Question of Equivalence

Tezuka Tomio has decided to lead his willing collocutor to the chasm, to a meaningful gap of non-equivalence.

What he did during that respectful discussion was neither (mis)translation nor a mistake. His “desire to please”, combined with fine, erudite ability to reach deep into the repertoire of his language and come to “the rescue of the Japanese word” which he considered essential, only point at that ultimate, fascinating impossibility of qualitative *identification* between the source and target languages. Japanese researchers have (at least) equal right to reach into murky waters of cultural mythology of Japan as the Westerners (say, Anglo-American researchers) do when invoking ancient and geographically distant Greek cultural origins as their own.

Discussions of identity are broad, ranging from that of being *same* (as in mathematical equation $A = A$, captured as Latin *identitas*), or being *exactly* alike, to a seemingly opposite quality of being *distinctive*, individual (*L. individuum*) identical to one’s own self only. The title of Heidegger’s book *Identity and Difference* succinctly captures the very essence of that pair, an inseparability of components and their limitless, dialectical productive capacity. When it comes to culture, non-equivalence points precisely at such capacity, at the innate value of difference in comparison to mere equivalence and sameness. Here we say “mere” equivalence in order to point at the critical moment when *culture* enters the equation, the moment of value judgment. Values and (ethical) positioning are central to critical thinking and, thus, to research. Tezuka offered to Heidegger not less, but more than factual translation; he has opened the way for Heidegger to enter the “text”.

Here we do not have space to discuss the multiple crises facing critical thought within current globalising trends. It suffices to reinstate the insightfulness of Guy Debord when he, more than five decades ago pointed at, and named the
Society of Spectacle (1988; originally published 1967) – or, let’s update and call that phenomenon Metaverse – as the reason for dramatic loss of experiential depth (Harvey, 1990) which we are living today precisely because, as lamented by Heidegger in 1954, the distance between things and Being has grown larger than ever. “The only sense which is fast enough to keep pace with the astounding increase of speed in the technological world is sight” (Pallasmaa, 2005), as best exemplified by ubiquitous, consumable and all-consuming “smart” gadgets. That was possible only by radical reduction (of experiences and quality) of life. The only power capable to simultaneously (re)produce and reduce itself to the perpetual catching up was an unrestrained, “free” market (Žižek, 2005). Meta glorification of “the world of the eye” indeed is “causing us to live increasingly in a perceptual present, flattened by speed and simultaneity” (Pallasmaa, ibid.), in the world of artificial realities which brutally reduces and simplifies the rest. In such world, where the “best-seller” status or the number of clicks define what quality is, banality rules. The depths of life captured by the shadows of Tanizaki, Rembrandt or Caravaggio vanish.

In order to question and to put an end to dystopia of the Spectacle, we need to regain precisely fuzziness of the “foliage of speech”. But, when seeking to combine accuracy and fussiness aren’t we contradicting ourself? Well, yes we are. In search for a new, inclusive paradigm, for exploration of culturally complex terms which include sharp internal contradictions – such as identity and architecture do – we need robust intellectual apparatus of matching complexity. Using her field of life sciences as an example, Sandra Mitchell (2009) explains how, until recently, much of science was unable to deal with complexities of their fields of investigation precisely because they “adopted strategies involving reductive explanations designed to simplify the many complexities of nature, in order to understand them”, pointing that “many complex behaviors in biological and social sciences seem not to yield as well (as they do in physics) to a reductive approach” (ibid.). In architecture and urbanism, especially when dealing with spaces used, inhabited and lived, the complexity of investigated phenomena exceeds that of life sciences. Due to their inherent political and ideological charge, disciplines involved in production of space suffer from strict imposition of restrictive and reductive research strategies developed by and for “the world of the ¥€$ regime” (OMA, 2003).

Critical thinking is in relentless search for questions, including inquiry into the reasons why certain positions never get questioned.
3. THE QUESTION OF QUESTIONS

Complex issues need (seemingly) simple questions.

Complex thought seeks freedom to move beyond an expectation of equivalence, towards the opposite – the likelihood of non-equivalence, towards difference which might possess the paradigm-shattering charge. That includes radical repositioning of approaches to the world of cultures, kaleidoscopic plurals in themselves which involve unpredictable, irrational forces of creativity.

Henri Lefebvre’s *Metaphilosophy* (2016) confidently navigates through these challenging and fascinating fields. His dialectical coupling of Power and Residual points precisely at an impossibility of equivalence between unequal terms, at Heidegger’s “translating and translating” of the simply factual, and of the simply complex creative thought do. In my own explorations of cultural difference, conducted over the years of thinking and living Japan, the opus of François Jullien has provided for some of the most rewarding contextualisations of knowledge(s) acquired and developed elsewhere. In his *Book of Beginnings*, Jullien gives a simple formulation of one the most complex truths of cross-cultural research (and diverse realities of immersion and being-with there), combined with a blunt acknowledgment how, when exploring the cultures and thought of the Other, “only crossing thresholds and ‘entering’ might be possible” (Jullien, 2015). Such act of humility in front of (cultural) difference amounts to a much needed, formidable acknowledgment, an explicit act of appreciation of and respect for distance, of that gap which needs recognition over submission to simplification and reduction (to money, technology, or any other pitiful means of globalised uniformity).

In order to move beyond words and instrumentalise such sensibility Jullien introduces écart. Écart gets explained as the exploratory divide between cultures (ibid.), adding itself to our feast of untranslatability-as-complexity. In one of the footnotes to his *Landscape of unthought, or the Unthought-of in Reason* (2018; an irreducible title *par excellence*), Jullien’s delicate translator Pedro Rodríguez (whose job is to translate the untranslatable) felt obliged to further elaborate that écart (which he has translated as “divide”) “stands in contradistinction to the notion of comparison as practiced in cultural studies (e.g. comparative literature). Rather than set cultures side by side, Jullien places them on either side of an exploratory divide, so that they can ‘reflect’ each other. In so doing, they reveal each other’s biases – or, to use another of Jullien’s images, they discover each other’s cultural headwaters – and thus bring forth new possibilities. According to Jullien, “the headwaters of
a particular culture lie too far upstream to be attained with the tools that the culture itself can fashion, because of the biases that flow out of those very headwaters“ (ibid.). In cross-cultural encounters of any kind, which include research, that has to be kept on mind.

Thus, adding to Mitchell’s reflections on investigations into complex phenomena of life sciences, Jullien elaborates that “in parallel with the rise of science and its new apparatus, there was the ever so powerful subject-object relation. Indeed, it came first. It was the original bias. In the definition of science, the ‘observer’ is on one side and ‘nature’ on the other. The two are separate, established in a vis-à-vis” (Mitchell, 2009). Using his approach to (Chinese, thus also Japanese) landscape, Jullien goes on to propose that one “must first distinguish between divide and difference. Difference merely classifies and specifies by distinction (as in the vast erudition of a naturalist, the erudition that goes into a herbarium). It puts things in order, sets them side by side in accordance with their appearance and properties, and arrives at various kinds of trees, minerals, flowers, and even clouds. A divide is a wholly different matter. Rather than a distinction, it introduces a distance. It sets in tension what it has separated. And in so doing opens an interspace, but the “interspace” is not a matter of the “in-itself.” It is in, or by, the interspace that opens between the high (of the mountain) and the low (of the water) – between the immobile and the shifting, the opaque and the transparent, the manifest and the rustling – that landscape deploys.” Precisely that is that chasm, the gap of non-equivalence to which Tezuka Tomio has brought Martin Heidegger, écart where the discussion of our triad – identity, architecture, Japan – finds itself best placed.

In research, one should seek equivalence in the questions asked (from the opposing sides of the chasm), not necessarily expecting it from answers. That should be kept on minds open to the possibility that the best answers, sometime, might indeed whisper from “the foliage of speech”.

P.S.FROM OUR INVESTIGATIONS OF ARCHITECTURE,IDENTITY, SPACES,GESTURES: INFRAORDINARY TOKYO

Research could be seen as the process of (establishment of) communication between the opposite sides of écart.

Asking questions about the other (side) is logical. But, what about questioning the side on which one stands, asking questions about our own position, with an awareness of, and the view of and from the other (side)?
Our work is about spaces and people, places and practices.

When we switch the language off, other ways of communication, other “languages” (need to) emerge. For instance, without spoken word our sensitivity to gestures increases. Those other, different languages open to, and they can even become an advantage for the foreigner. That is precisely how Japan has opened itself to the keen eye of Roland Barthes. “The murmuring mass of an unknown language” which to him (as it, in Japan, also does for me), “constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner … in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue: the regional and social origins of whoever is speaking, his degree of culture, of intelligence, of taste, the image by which he constitutes himself as a person and which he asks you to recognize” (Barthes, 1982) helps observe. In order to, as Galileo’s epigraph to this essay asks, learn from what one sees, following Franco Ferrarotti I “decide that I prefer not to understand, rather than to colour and imprison the object of analysis with conceptions that are, in the final analysis, preconceptions” (Dale, 1986). Doing that is never easy but, over time, one does get better.

In Japan, Barthes notes his thoughts down as they come, as fresh reflections about the unthought, of what he has never thought about before. He lists chopsticks, food decentered, the interstice, pachinko, center-city/empty-center, no address, the station, packages, the three writings, animate/inanimate, inside/outside, bowing, the breach of meaning, exemption of meaning ... Those words became the contents page of his Empire of Signs (1982), elements for an informed, entitled even when naïve, often intuitive but always credible insights into an identity sought. To that, in making of our method the thought of Henri Lefebvre (perhaps precisely because he did not have a concrete experience and much to say about Japan as such) adds a critical awareness of accuracy of projections of society onto the ground; how (urban) spaces are simultaneously and relentlessly conceived, perceived and lived (especially that universally human, yet ever different vécu); significant irreducibles in the residual, which open superb infraordinary realities to our senses (Serres, 2008) directionally, towards an ultimate jouissance (Lefebvre, 2017). In research, such base demands fine, Perecean tactics of observation (Sheringham, 2006) which, in turn, invite sharp political edge of Debord and Situs ... and so on.

Our theory in the practice of urbanity begins there. For almost two decades now, our own research (the most significant of which was conducted at Keio University, 2009-21; Radović 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b) has dealt with diverse scales across which the lives of Tokyo seek their expressions. From
those explorations emerges *Tokyo – the one*, the largest urban conglomeration in the world, the grotesque size of which makes any comprehension possible only when reduced, to numbers, to images, to abstract expressions of diverse systems that make it function. While that Tokyo objectively does exist, it stays beyond the reach of human, subjective experience. Personal engagement with the city begins when metropolis dissolves into towns, with immersion into smaller scales. Those clusters make another plural Tokyo (Radović, 2008; 2021), *Tokyo – the many*, which in my early encounters with Nezu, Yanaka, Sendagi, Hongo, Marunouchi, Harajuku, Shibuya, Ginza, made this city feel as an archipelago of urbanities (Radović, 2008), which corresponds precisely to Kengo Kuma’s explanation of Kisho Kurokawa’s sense of this metropolis as an assemblage of 500 villages (see: Radović, with Kuma, Jinnai, 2021). That is where objective comprehension of Tokyo starts to overlap with and begins to fit into subjective sensations of its diverse characters. And then, there is the third and the finest of scales, *Tokyo – the infinite(simal)*, Tokyo dissolved. That is Tokyo lived, Tokyo loved, Tokyo loved-in, a concrete fabric of houses, homes (including our own and those of our neighbours), ubiquitous *afuredashi*, fine oases of micro greenery and other miniscule gestures intended to protect privacy, rich or bland sensorial stimuli, irreducibles, comprehensible realities including that (for a *gaijin*) precious, Barthesian murmur; then – the subjectivity, the familiarity, a smile or deliberate avoidance of my eyes by the neighbour.

That Tokyo speaks and whispers *to me*, it communicates, and it responds to *my* presence, in opens up or closes itself to *my* gaze and questions. That Tokyo can be generous with answers. The communication happens in strange “languages”, but it does happen – and much of my research of various expressions of urbanity of Tokyo (and beyond) sought openings and was receiving conclusions precisely there, in these deceivingly simple expressions of ordinary, infraordinary *vécu*.

... 

On that basis, if I had to touch the grand and slippery theme of identity of Japanese society and its projections in space, I would certainly be seeking answers there, at the level which empowers not only the speed of thought and that of the eye, but also the slowness of touch, smell, taste ..., as Michel Serres would put it, of our “six senses or more” (ibid.). I would not seek identity in extraordinary features of the Spectacular Tokyo, but in these infraordinary, dominant forms of life and their diverse spatial projections on both actual and metaphoric grounds of living *there*. That is not Tezuka’s self-conscious Japan, that is not a shop-window (capital *A*) Architecture, not the “superior” Nippon
in its World City, but my normal Japan, Tokyo, Meguro-ku, Midorigaoka, our street with no name, our neighbours, our house and our balcony there. My mamachari.

Japanese contribution to the world of architecture is, simply, formidable. Some of the best (known) Japanese architects have an ability to take the foliage of speech in, to translate it and bring to global, yet (somehow) still palpably Japanese heights. That is a fascinating (endlessly discussed, never explained) ability to find (dis)continuities of expression and innovate, while keeping recognisable cultural charge. Regardless its complexity, such architecture, to a significant degree remains architecture of, and for the eye.

While I might like much of that production, for a researcher in me of true identity of Japanese architecture remains in that unselfconscious Japan, shaded by the forest of speech and its silences. Those modest spatial projections of everyday life offer themselves to numerous registers of communication, which can help us open new questions. Some of the globally best recognised Japanese architecture also seeks its roots there – as often in Kuma’s emphasis on materiality (in the lightness of shoji, or the earthiness of doma), the perfection of detailing (chidori ... for instance). Precisely there, as in the third of our three scales of Tokyo, the infinite and infinitesimal, the limitless and incalculably small coexist.

If asked to be even more concrete, I would still (have to) think not one, but across those three scales, with responses reaching me from the very concrete spaces and practices of living in: (1) the neighbourhoods (especially the ones in which I have lived long), and local relationships (such as those which still reflect the strictures of mukōsangen ryōdonari, 向三軒両隣; (2) the streets with no name, where eyes never meet (reflecting, through education internalised, dotoku, 道德, strictly enforced morality rules); (3) prefabricated buildings which create dominant, anonymous, introverted low-rise high-density urban fabric; and (4) interiors, their innate horizontality (still, wherever possible, with no chairs or beds, with tatami and futons, where the walls can slide away).

Those are concrete spaces where concrete lives get lived, the spaces shaped by everyday life. In them, an unmediated identity simply – is. Our seemingly simple questions start, and the answers might be also found there. As in Beckett’s “Fail better”, knowledge comes through return, repetition, the same “re” as in research, which asks us to search – again.
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