A PRAGMATIC VIEW ON JAPANESE ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY: DEMYSTIFYING A MONOLITHIC CONSTRUCT

ABSTRACT

Why is Japan’s architectural legacy and practice, seen from within, very different from its perception abroad? A country’s architectural identity is shaped by several aspects, including its tangible heritage, relationship with the other arts, construction technology, and everyday professional practice. The result is a layered product whose appearance can be remodelled to suit particular contexts and audiences. This paper shows how certain aspects of Japanese architectural identity, considered quintessential and monolithic overseas (atelier-style firms, minimalist aesthetic, technological drive), are instead only one half of dichotomies. Who is responsible for this process of curation? Is it a conscious or unconscious effort? Should the receiving end (i.e. both expert and lay audiences abroad) be more critical in their reception? First, the paper introduces the zenecon model, a fundamental and native component of the Japanese AEC industry, consistently underrepresented in the international construction and architecture discourse. Second, it clarifies how the minimalist zen aesthetic is counterbalanced by a more exuberant and haptic tradition tracing its roots back to the Neolithic Age. Third, it shows how technological advancement in certain specialised construction domains contrasts with the average performance and comfort level of (residential) buildings.
1. INTRODUCTION

What I am about to communicate to you is the most astonishing thing…the most talked about, and the most secret up to this day.

—Mme de Sévigné (1670)

Gates at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines usually feature a pair of statues, being guardian deities or (mythological) animals: one character has its mouth open, the other shut. They represent the wholeness of the world by uniting two opposites, Ah (the open mouth) and Un (the closed mouth), deriving from the Sanskrit Ah and Om, the beginning and the end, alpha and omega. Despite the two concepts being inseparable and of equal importance, for some reason only the mantra Om has become known in the West. Much like passing through the gates of a shrine to enter its precincts, I would like to introduce a set of three opposites to reflect on the identity of Japanese architecture and construction from a pragmatic, practice-oriented standpoint. As is the case with ah-un, only one of the opposites has become familiar to the non-Japanese (non-Asian) audience; I would argue that this is a consequence of both cultural infatuation and purposeful projection of a curated image of the country abroad. The dichotomies addressed in the following sections relate to the aspects of firm size and workstyle, aesthetic traditions, and approach to technology. We will see how internal dynamics are only partially and selectively conveyed to audiences outside Japan.

While the overarching geographical and cultural distinction between outside and inside refers to the colloquial Japanese terms of kokunai (国内/domestic) and kaigai (海外/overseas), it is worth clarifying that the subject of this paper mainly addresses the socio-cultural relationship between Japan and the so-called West, with the addition of Commonwealth countries. The ties to other Asian countries—most notably China—are complex, long, and contested, and we cannot possibly account for such regional differences in this paper. Moreover, we do not imply that Japan is particularly unique in exhibiting what Kriska has called an “us vs them” mentality; even though geographical insularity plays an undeniable role, this pattern can be seen in any society and at any scale, albeit at different degrees.
2. SCALE MATTERS: ATELIER VS ZENECON

The way the AEC (Architecture, Engineering, and Construction) industry in Japan thinks of itself contrasts sharply with the narrative it projects abroad. This is both a conscious and unconscious attitude, depending on the actors involved. First, let us examine how Japanese architecture is perceived overseas.

From an aesthetics point of view, the international architectural community and laypeople alike largely equate Japanese buildings with simplicity, permeability, openness to nature, spatial flexibility, and overall minimalism. This is consistent with the imagery projected by the other arts, where the cultural and philosophical connections to zen Buddhism and its supposedly “clean” and rigorous aesthetic ideals have been exploited in an effective effort of collective branding and marketing. This partly relies on a certain naivety of the international audience, often won over by a pinch of orientalism here and a supposedly untranslatable Japanese word there.

The impression of a rigorous, clean, and creative architectural environment is reinforced by the typical size and character of architectural firms featured in international media: a small-scale atelier with recognisable leaders who are usually the firm founders. Moreover, the short average lifespan of buildings (about 30 years for detached houses), the widespread use of timber construction, and the moderate construction costs compared to land costs create the condition for the proliferation of experimental projects, reinforcing the image of a small-scale industry.

The social status of architects in Japan can be described as ambivalent. On the one hand, seasoned star architects (e.g. Ando Tadao) enjoy broad popularity among the general public, drawing crowds to exhibitions of their work and appearing in popular media. It is a trend started in the aftermath of WWII: ‘from the late 1950s to the ’70s Japan’s media lionises its architects with full sincerity’, focusing especially on Tange Kenzo and the Metabolists. These architects feature on the cover of popular magazines, and Kurokawa Kisho even ran, unsuccessfully, for governor of Tokyo in 2007. An anecdote shall suffice here. I have once seen on a train the advertisement for a funeral house designed by Kuma Kengo; next to an interior and exterior photograph of the building was the face of the architect, extolling the virtues of the facility. To be sure, there are well-known architects in other countries too, but the way individual professionals are celebrated in Japan is special.

On the other hand, staff architects in atelier-style offices have to toil more often than not until late, receiving meagre compensation and no benefits, hoping
to establish their own firm someday. This pattern is consistent with a master-apprentice mentality, where one must sweat her way through learning the craft. Unfortunately, such a situation can quickly become exploitative if seen as the norm, and is increasingly ill-fitted to a profession where collaboration and critical thinking are crucial and where the role of technology and innovation puts more and more pressure on small firms.

While atelier-style firms represent the country egregiously abroad, they are only a part of the Japanese AEC industry. As a means of comparison, we can readily equate complex, high-rise projects in America, the UK, etc., with large firms having considerable specialised know-how, workforce, and corporate profile. In Japan, high-rise buildings abound and the local seismic conditions call for high-level engineering and applied research. How can small, atelier-like firms deliver such projects?

To understand what is missing from the equation, it is necessary to remember that Japan is considered a “construction state”, a term coined by McCormack based on the Japanese expression *doken kokka* (士建国家). Japanologist Alex Kerr has reiterated its foundational implication on the built environment, popularising the concept in a provocative publication: in simple terms, the industry is both prominent and influential. According to the United Nations, the Japanese construction industry was the third largest in the world in 2018.

As Ogasawara & Yashiro have remarked, in ‘Japan, “General Construction Companies” (GCCs) and “Design Firms” (DFs) are the two dominant players in designing large and complex buildings.’ The bedrock of this system, largely unknown abroad, is the *zenecon*. This portmanteau shortens and combines the words *general* (*zene*) and *contractor* (*con*) and is used to designate construction companies. It is often employed, though, in reference to the five main general contractors in the country (e.g. Obayashi), sometimes known as “super zenecon”.

These companies have thousands of employees, deal with large-scale and technically challenging projects, carry out considerable amounts of applied research, and tackle any typology, including civil engineering and infrastructure. It can be argued that they are the greatest force in architectural design and construction in Japan, being deeply embedded into the bureaucratic and political apparatus. Literature in English on the subject is scarce and it mainly addresses the role of the *zenecon* as a general contractor, leaving aside design work, which is a virtually unknown topic outside Japan (exceptions are Ogasawara & Yashiro, Buntrock).
Two factors set the *zeneco* model apart from general contractors in other countries: their longevity and the large design department they host. All five leading *zeneco* firms were founded before 1900 and have been continuously in business since then. This not only testifies to the remarkable stability of the construction industry, but also to the unavoidable deep connection between these large general contractors and the establishment over the decades. In fact, the bulk of medium- to large-scale buildings in the country in the last 120 years has been built by one of these five firms. As such, they have literally constructed the architectural identity of the nation.

A second peculiarity is the large and high-quality design department hosted within a “super *zeneco*”: in fact, the architectural design division of any of these firms is larger than the largest design-only architectural firm in Japan, Nikken Sekkei.10 A major portion of a *zeneco*’s work is the design development, construction documentation, actual construction, and construction management of projects that design-only firms have schematically designed. In the case of foreign designers, *zeneco* often play the role of local architects. However, Japanese general contractors increasingly work on design-build (DB) projects rather than the once-standard design-bid-build (DBB). A historical explanation is that ‘Japan has a long tradition of master builders. They [were] in charge of both design and construction in woodwork. [...] As a result, Design-Build has been a well-received project delivery method in Japan. [...] Design-Build has either a contractor-led or a designer-led approach. In Japan, the contractor-led approach is far more common than the designer-led approach due to technical and financial capabilities assured by the general contractors’.'11

To be sure, this is in line with a global trend in the AEC industry to shorten project schedules and reduce costs by streamlining and overlapping project phases or to employ a so-called front-end loading, where contractors are taken on board early in the project so that details can be worked out in advance. However, if general contractors overseas tend to team with design architects external to the firm or to respond to an external project manager, a *zeneco* has a large design division composed of permanent employees in-house. It comprises any professional architectural figure, including structural and mechanical engineers. As such, it may be more fitting to describe such an approach as being close to the so-called integrated delivery model, where project stakeholders are on equal footing. Moreover, there is a high degree of collaboration between architects, contractors, and manufacturers, so that design decisions are not the exclusive responsibility of the architect.

In the case of complex and challenging projects, atelier-style firms usually
develop an initial concept and carry it through to the end of schematic design. In contrast, a zenecon usually carries out the detailing, design development, documentation, bidding, construction, and construction management. As we have mentioned, though, there seems to be a trend toward design-build project delivery, so that zenecon are increasingly trying to leverage their own design capabilities to tackle project design from the conceptual stage onward.

Until recently, the credit for innovative and original architectural projects showcased abroad or on international media platforms exclusively went to the project architect, i.e. the star architects we are familiar with. Since general contractors usually were not involved in the early design stages, their architectural contribution has been completely overlooked abroad. Without them taking care of the detailing, development, and technical design aspects, though, atelier firms would likely not be able to carry out the complete design package for bidding in the case of large and complex projects. Compounding this is a certain attitude of design-related media to snub corporate-style firms in favour of independent professionals.

While in Japan even lay people are familiar with the five main zenecon and their work, until the 2000s these companies have not invested in public relations and marketing overseas to promote their design skills and services. However, a declining population, tighter labour market and the ageing workforce have prompted the AEC industry to look for other construction markets, primarily in south-east Asia and the United States, calling for the creation of a brand-new identity abroad. From this point of view, it is telling that 130- to 150-years old firms, known by virtually everyone domestically, are just now starting to shape their image in new markets.

3. THE RED AND THE WHITE: JOMON VS YAYOI

As we have seen, from an aesthetics point of view in the past few decades Japan has been equated abroad with zen-inspired minimalism and a strong connection with natural elements. While this is arguably true, it represents only one side of the story, the well-known om: this is the so-called Yayoi tradition, referring to a specific pre-modern historical period.

From an archaeological perspective, Yayoi (named after the Tokyo neighbourhood where artefacts of this era were first uncovered in the late 19th century) spanned a period between 500 BC to 300 AD (this is still up to debate) and has been described in aesthetic terms as having apollonian and feminine qualities. This is what (western) audiences have been familiar with: the refined architectural tradition later merging with zen that is at the root of the so-
called white school, represented by figures such as Ito Toyo, Sejima Kazuyo, or Fujimoto Sou. As Buntrock put it, the white school is ‘purist bent: spare structures, state of the art, smooth and swooping, scholarly and scientific’; it prefers ‘sparkling aluminium, steel and glass – stable durable and predictable’ materials, and it ‘appeals to the intellect in its crisp geometry.’

What is usually overlooked—the ah—is the Dionysian, masculine side of the aesthetic tradition in the country, going back to the archaeological Jomon period (10’000–300 BC). On an anecdotal level, it shall suffice to examine a typical Japanese advertisement layout found in newspapers: the packed arrangement, jamboree of fonts, sizes, and styles could not be further away from the minimalistic image that Japanese visual arts project abroad. In contemporary architectural terms, the Jomon tradition is represented by the “red school”, including architects as diverse as Fujimori Terunobu and Atelier Zo. Borrowing again from Buntrock, this is ‘a rolling roster: raw and robust, raffish and ragtag, rambunctious and reckless, rough and rudimentary, refreshing and resplendent, risky and risqué, recalling Rikyu, regionally responsive. The Red School rots and inclines to ruin; it is made of rust, rammed earth, red brick, random rock rubble or recycled rubbish. It is about being rooted and having a roof. It is a rich rhapsody.’

During the modernisation, industrialisation, and postwar development of Japan, it was only natural that the white school became predominant, to the point that an architectural historian like Fujimori would pursue a parallel career in practice, designing extravagant structures with the self-appointed mission of keeping the red tradition alive. In fact, his practice is known as Jomon Company, and he has referred to himself as a sort of “neolithic daddy”.

FIGURE 1: Typical Japanese print advertisement layout (scanned by the author).
The dichotomous ah-un or Yayoi-Jomon tradition in Japan has been noted since the late 19th century, with figures such as American biologist Edward Morse writing that ‘the objects from Japan divided themselves into two groups, — the one represented by objects [...] with a refinement and reserve of decoration; the other group, characterised by a more florid display and less delicacy of treatment.’\(^1\) Morse, who hailed from Boston and was part of a group of highly-educated professionals having early, official interactions with Japan—known as the Boston Circle, later influencing the career of F.L. Wright—played a pivotal role in the (re)discovery of the Jomon identity. In fact, he was the first to lead an excavation of Jomon artefacts in Tokyo in 1877, after noticing a mound while travelling by train.

FIGURE 2: Bruno Taut’s sketch intended to represent the dual genealogy of Japanese architecture. On the one hand is the zen way linked to the imperial ruling power, starting with the Ise shrines and the pragmatic farmhouses in Shirakawa village, fusing with the tea ceremony culture epitomised in Katsura Villa, leading to a modern ideal of refinement. On the other hand is the decorative, kitschy way connected to the shogunate and related to the Chinese aesthetics of Buddhism (Taut 1936:25).
Other prominent figures have remarked on such aesthetic duality during the 20th century, although not strictly in *Yayoi-Jomon* terms. Above all Bruno Taut, who spent three years in exile in Japan from 1933 to 1936,\(^{16}\) slapped what he considered a spurious influence from China on the local architectural tradition. He thus remarked about the temple grounds built in honour of shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu in the 1630s: ‘an excess of such bad art, executed at the order of the dictator, are shown in the Nikko structures. […]. [T]here is an over-abundance of ornamentation and ostentation which replace the missing architecture.’\(^{17}\)

On the other hand, he had the following remarks about Katsura Villa on the outskirts of Kyoto, built about the same time as the temples in Nikko: ‘all the simplicity and delicacy of Japan together with differentiation of crafts and the philosophic refinement of thought […] is epitomised.’\(^{18}\)

His well-known sketch traces the origin of pure (i.e., akin to European modernist ideals) Japanese architecture down to the Shinto shrine of Ise, the thatched farmhouses of Shirakawa village and the tea-culture aesthetics. In contrast, the origin of a kitschy strand would derive from the shogunate and its Chinese-influenced Buddhist flair.

4. RAISING THE BAR: HIGH-TECH VS EVERYDAY-TECH

Coexisting with the image of a culture that cherishes the relationship with nature, Japan is generally considered a high-tech country. This is due to the lasting impact of its technological advances in the second half of the 20th century and the well-known rigour and dedication associated with Japanese professionals. Popular culture has compounded this with an emphasis on robotics and futuristic representations.

To stay in the realm of the built environment, Japan offers valuable lessons in high-tech for earthquake resistance (a necessary measure), structural and constructive solutions (think of the 634m-high Skytree communications tower in Tokyo), and transportation (e.g. the shinkansen bullet train). Nevertheless, any architect who has worked on or examined construction details, or anybody with experience living in the country, would likely point out their puzzlement regarding the apparent backwardness of mundane aspects, such as the average level of insulation performance of buildings or their durability.

Architects often wonder how it is possible to design certain simple, clean, light details in Japanese buildings. Without undermining the level of mastery of local designers and contractors, one straightforward answer is the relatively
lax regulations of building environmental performance, specifically those regarding the building envelope. This goes hand-in-hand with an ingrained view of buildings as products with limited durability. It is thus not unusual to examine a detailed drawing of a building designed by prominent architects showing insufficient insulation, lack of weather protection, or outright disregard for maintenance. While there are exceptions, this is a noticeable pouch of low-tech, as Buntrock has exposed in a brilliant lecture. This is an issue that goes back to the early 20th century when Modern western architecture and construction were imported, giving precedence to form rather than to local adaptation and performance: even Japan-enthusiast Taut had to remark how poor the indoor conditions were in many university lecture halls, turning professors and students alike into “sweat fountains”. Meanwhile, the recollections of his and his partner Erica’s living in a tiny house in rural Takasaki offer vivid hints into the level of comfort in traditional Japanese homes: while many aesthetic aspects relating to materiality and construction mastery were deeply appreciated, the couple had to grapple with the cold, lack of a proper kitchen, effort to keep the myriads nooks and crannies clean, and nasty rodents.

The low-tech *ah* contrasting the high-tech *un* is also visible in everyday life in matters such as payments (the transition to digital payment methods seems at last underway at the point of writing) and the ubiquitous use of print seals to stamp official documents instead of signatures (after the coronavirus pandemic, the government has decided to phase out their use gradually).

5. DISCUSSION

We have argued that selected aspects of Japanese architectural identity (in its full spectrum, from construction to aesthetics) have been privileged over others. This is, on the one hand, the result of both conscious and unconscious projections abroad of a curated image, resembling a branding effort, and an often naïve attitude at the receiving end on the other. Cultural dichotomies seen from within tend thus to appear as monads when seen from the outside: as such, this paper intended to shed some light on lesser-known traits integral to understanding how architecture is conceived and practised in the country. We shall speculate at this point whether a metaphorical pendulum, now in the *un* position, is indeed swinging back toward the *ah* side. The following are intuitive predictions, and I fully subscribe to planner John Friedmann’s view that ‘the world is a slippery place’, whose future remains unknown, no matter how expert we are.
Enter maximal

Over the past few decades, zen-inspired minimalism has been the hallmark of Japanese architectural aesthetics. The genealogy can be traced back to the early Meiji period, when the first foreigners to engage with the local culture after its period of isolation started reporting on craftsmanship and construction methods. Afterwards, Bruno Taut and other modern architects saw a parallel between their own ideals and traditional sukiya-style buildings, most prominently the Katsura Villa on the outskirts of Kyoto. In the aftermath of WWII, rapid standardisation and technological development favoured the high-tech-looking, sleek, and functional aspect of construction, merging with the increasing appeal of zen Buddhism. More recently, we have been witnessing a move from “cool” minimalism toward “warm” minimalism by switching to wooden structures in mid-rise and low-rise/large-scale buildings or using wooden and matte/natural finishes. This is not just an aesthetic move but rather entwined with a renewed environmental sensibility. Might this signify the beginning of a shift from the white school (minimal) to the red school (maximal) as the upcoming best fit to the changing sensibilities of our time?

Exposure of the zen econ model

Compared to the current standards in American architectural practice, the overall AEC industry in Japan lags behind in terms of automation of design processes, especially in adopting Building Information Modeling (BIM). The situation is rapidly changing, though, while owners and governmental institutions increasingly appreciate the benefits of integrated project delivery, a trend that has been unfolding in the US since the late 1990s. While there will always be a place for design-only architectural firms of any size, a renewed emphasis on efficiency and performance, and an ever-increasing complexity of design to balance environmental and technical aspects of construction will increase the scope of work of the zenecon. Considering the recent successful and unsuccessful attempts in the US to integrate design and construction into single, large “vertical” or “horizontal” entities, once the stigma toward corporation style is broken and some of their work receives proper media exposure, I suspect there will be much interest abroad in the peculiarities of this business model.

Fixing the basics

The 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games were arguably a coordinated national attempt to reframe the image of Japan abroad from a techno-centric to a more down-to-
earth and environmentally conscious culture. There was a (largely unsuccessful)
attempt to lower costs, reuse existing facilities, and build more sustainable
architectural programs with natural materials. While there will still be a need
for daring, technologically radical projects, the key will be to pragmatically
push the constructive and regulatory boundaries of traditional materials, such
as wood, to meet the requirements of different building programs and sizes,
which have been the almost exclusive realm of concrete and steel construction
for the past half-century. Moreover, simply changing the mindset toward more
reuse, refurbishment, and renovation of existing structures, fixing the basics of
energy efficiency and consumption, will redefine the meaning of contemporary
Japanese architecture, its local understanding and projection abroad.

FIGURE 3: PortPlus is Japan’s first fully wooden and fire-resistant high-rise structure:
it is a 10-story building in Yokohama completed in 2022, designed and built by
6. CONCLUSION

We have examined how the image of the Japanese AEC industry and the legacy of Japanese architecture have been the product of both conscious and unconscious selective narratives at play domestically and overseas. We have used the concepts of *ah* and *un/om*—the Buddhist equivalents of alpha and omega, the beginning and the end—as an epistemological metaphor: even though the two are inseparable and of equal importance, only the mantra *om* has become popularly known in the so-called western world. Similarly, the Japanese architectural discourse, essentially dichotomous when seen from within, appears monolithic to most external observers.

First, we have introduced the *zen econ* model, a fundamental and native component of the Japanese AEC industry, consistently underestimated and underrepresented in the international construction and architecture discourse. Second, we have clarified how the minimalist zen aesthetic is counterbalanced by a more exuberant and haptic tradition tracing its roots back to the Neolithic Age. Third, we have seen how technological advancement in certain specialised construction domains contrasts with the average performance and comfort level of buildings, especially in the realm of prosaic residential architecture.

For future research, we suggest a tighter approach between theory and practice, as architecture and the AEC industry have a fundamental pragmatic component; this does not diminish in any way the symbolic, socio-cultural role of the built environment, but it would ideally ground it so that observed phenomena can be better interpreted when cross-examined from multiple sides.
NOTES


D. Buntrock, “What Could Go Wrong?”. School of Architecture, Georgia Tech, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Kj8m_R8x60](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Kj8m_R8x60)


‘Die Hörsäle von Universitäten liegen oft nach der schlechtesten Himmelsrichtung Japans, der Westseite; die heiße Nachmittagssonne und dazu keine Möglichkeit gründlicher Durchlüftung erzeugen eine brütende Hitze und wahre Schweißfontänen bei den Studenten und dem Professor.’


One explanation for the half-hearted adoption of BIM in Japan is the high skill of carpenters and construction workers compared to that of other countries. Since major construction mistakes are uncommon, there has not been a real incentive to transition from 2D drawing representations to three dimensional BIM on the construction site. The declining number of skilled workers, though, is bound to propel automation and robotisation processes.

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PRAGMATIČAN POGLED NA JAPANSKI ARHITEKTONSKI IDENTITET: DEMISTIFIKACIJA MONOLITNOG KONSTRUKTA
Marco Capitano

Zašto se japansko arhitektonsko nasleđe i praksa, gledano iznutra, veoma razlikuju od njegove percepcije u inostranstvu? Arhitektonski identitet jedne zemlje oblikuje nekoliko aspekata, uključujući njeno materijalno nasleđe, odnos sa drugim umetnostima, građevinsku tehnologiju i svakodnevnu profesionalnu praksu. Rezultat je slojevit proizvod čija pojavnost se može preoblikovati u skladu sa određenim kontekstima i publikom. Ovaj rad pokazuje kako određeni aspekti japanskog arhitektonskog identiteta, koji se u inostranstvu smatraju kvintesencijalnim i monolitnim (firme u stilu ateljea, minimalistička estetika, tehnološki pogon), čine samo polovinu dихомомија. Ko je odgovoran za ovaj proces selekcije? Da li je on svesni ili nesvesni napor? Da li primajuća strana (tj. i stručna i laička publika u inostranstvu) treba da bude kritičnija u svom prijemu? Ovaj rad, pre svega, uvodi zenecon model, fundamentalnu i izvornu komponentu japanske AEC industrije, dosledno nedovoljno zastupljenu u međunarodnom građevinskom i arhitektonskom diskursu. Zatim, rad pojašnjava kako je minimalističkoj zen estetici protivteža bujnija i haptička tradicija čiji koreni dosežu u period neolita. Takođe, rad pokazuje kako je tehnološki napredak u određenim specijalizovanim građevinskim domenima u suprotnosti sa prosečnim performansama i stepenom komfora u (stambenim) zgradama.

KLJUČNE REČI: JAPANSKI ARHITEKTONSKI IDENTITET, JAPANSKA GRAĐEVINSKA INDUSTRIJA, BRENDIRANJE KULTURE, ZENECON