

## The Way of the Detail in Japanese Design

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**Abstract:** *When considering the growing interest in the ideas of internationalisation and globalisation, the phrase 'Japanese Design' has always captured the inspirational pulse of designers. This paradoxical world of Japan provides the impetus for vast and varied design outcomes. These outcomes range from the traditional design of tearooms, to the youth fashion phenomena in Harajuku. Design in Japan demonstrates a controlled approach to the subtle nuances that express the design spectrum between excess and austerity. This paper explores the idea of the intricacy of Japanese design as not only being a clear expression of their masterful handling of material and form, but also a demonstration of the amalgamation of cultural paradigms displayed in these various design outcomes. This is no more clearly expressed than in the examination of details used within Japanese design, in particular, the details in traditional Japanese architecture.*

*The methodology involved with this research is mainly focussed on literature reviews of text and journal articles, as well as, review of appropriate exhibitions. But the original journey began years ago with my own education and exposure to the ideas of Japanese design and architecture. Numerous travel tours and design tours to Japan helped to reinforce the connection and unfold their paradoxical world.*

**Keywords:** *details; cultural symbolism; spatial impermanence*

### Introduction

The understanding of the physical and aesthetic properties of materials permits the designer to have a clear design vocabulary, regardless of the discipline. A longstanding respect and admiration for the natural world has led Japanese designers to express themselves with a highly refined confidence in the use of materials. They demonstrate this confidence in materiality through their skills in creating interior space, architectural space, landscaped space, product, packaging, and fashion designs. Each discipline has champions that delineate the subtle nuances of design ideas, and link these detailed parts to the whole design. This is an evolutionary process that has allowed the Japanese designers, from the early period of the Heian era, to the modern period of the Heisei era, to demonstrate design outcomes that represent the 'wisdom' of design rather than just 'knowledge' of design.

### The way of the detail

All designers need to balance the primary design principles of function, economy, form, aesthetics, ritual, and meaning when they produce their work. These principles are expressed

in all design, but the more successful designs express this balance in the macro and micro levels. Clearly defined details are as much a part of Western design and architecture as it is in the east. Designers use details to establish continuity in their design; safely construct the design; and, explore the minutiae of their design scheme.

Stanley Abercrombie (1990) identified the two main categories of details as those being part of the building fabric, and those that are added to the space that can be removed without any damage. The Japanese would see that both are part of the whole and that neither should be secondary in nature. In his comprehensive study of the theoretical premise behind the idea of details, Marco Frascari (1996) described details as being: material joints, the connection between materials; and, formal joints, the connection between the interior and exterior. Here again, the Japanese designers would want the idea of *ma*, the Japanese principle of the space between, to be added, as Frascari only emphasised the positive space. A material is either there or another material is there, the sense of negative space is not considered in his basic definitions, but only the idea of connection. Tadao Ando (1991) came closer when he stated 'Architectural details are not just matters of technical treatment or arrangement. In designing, one begins with a search for an architectural logic that will permeate the whole, and eventually one always returns to that starting point. Within that cycle, one must consider the relationship between the whole and the parts, and between materials and forms' (pp. 10-11). The paving pattern by Kuryo Akira at the entrance to the Byodo-in Museum represents a wonderful relationship of material joints, formal joints, and also the contemplative space of *ma* before one enters the museum (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Paving pattern at the Byodo-in Museum, Kyoto  
(Photography: Author)

## The cultural and contextual relationship to Japanese detailing

Alejandro Zaera-Polo and Farshid Moussavi argued, in a recent issue of *Japan Architect*, that architecture is based on the engineering of material life and is not a plastic art. They include in their definition of material: ideas and effects; but they do not include planning and programming (Zaera-Polo & Moussavi, 2002). Equally so, others have focussed their efforts on just the architecture of ideas and negated any need to express these ideas in a tangible manner. This illustrates the polarisation that continues in the West where designers see architectural outcomes as either space versus form, or material versus program, or excess versus austerity. Separation of this kind has led to a fractured approach to spatial resolution, with the polar extremities honoured and the sense of *betweenness* discounted. In his discussion of place, J. Nicholas Entrikin described both centred and decentred approaches in cultural geography and highlights *the space between*. 'Our awareness of the gap between the two perspectives is a part of the perceived crisis of modernity' (Entrikin, 1991, p. 1). To work between is not to adorn the concept of the mediocre, but rather to see balance in a world and to draw equally from each pole. This symbiotic relationship of extremities allows for mutual definition of each other rather than conflict or opposition.

The binary opposition of excess versus austerity is discussed in Botond Bogнар's essay 'The Japanese Order of Things', and establishes a core foundation of ideas to be investigated in this paper. In this essay, Bogнар (1988) briefly described the foundations of western metaphysics being based on the search for immutable laws that govern the universe that has led to western thought splitting the world into binary oppositions such as being versus *nothingness*. He then stated, that by contrast oriental cultures, in particular the Japanese, have been uninterested in this dichotomy, as the search for universal laws was largely deemed as being of little importance. Japanese culture has evolved to be simultaneously heterogeneous and homogeneous; and its seemingly contradictory, or more appropriately paradoxical, and complex approach to design stems from a number of well established factors. 'The Japanese have become a culture of 'both/and', wherein old and new, native and foreign, traditional and modern are complementary aspects of the same thing' (Bogнар, 1988, p. 148).

The wisdom of design rather than the knowledge of design is best described by György Doczi in the *Power of Limits*: 'the West seeks knowledge by taking things apart and looking at each separately, the East takes another approach which is to put things together to look for the holistic nature of design, The East seek wisdom instead of knowledge' (Doczi, 1981, p. 127). This is not to say that one side is wise and the other is not, as the history of the world has clearly shown, but rather, that the inherent approach to the world is different.

As we review these thoughts in terms of design, and with particular emphasis to the world of Japanese design, we shall see that the relationship of the whole/part is carefully considered. The detailing explored within Japanese design clearly expresses the range of excessive and austere design outcomes. From the fashion 'Fruits' of Harajuku to the brutal minimalism of Tadao Ando, and from the traditional Shoin architecture to the exaggerated Kabuki faces, the complex world of Japanese design is undeterred by dealing with the extremities. To understand this control, one must look at the contextual issues that have had an effect on Japanese design.

### **Effects of nature and religion on design**

The geography and climate of the numerous islands of Japan, located on the edge of the Eurasian continent, are central factors in much of Japan's customs and relationship to nature. The rugged geography is that of uninhabitable mountainous regions covering 80% of the country, with the remaining land covered with plains and rivers that are scattered between these mountains and powerful cliff formations. The climate ranges from sub-tropical in the southern islands to semi-frigid in the north; causing a range of weather conditions from snow to high humidity, which are combined with earthquakes and typhoons (Thompson, 1985). These continual and uncontrollable natural upheavals occurring over thousands of years have left the Japanese with the utmost respect for natural phenomena. It has also left them with a lack of choice regarding their actions, as the entire environment is in a state of dramatic conditions. As this ability for the Japanese to clearly make a selection in their environment is deprived, they would then choose the non-physical state of imagination and symbolism to be explored. Since they felt that they had no choice in their environmental conditions, they moved away from the European dichotomy of 'either/or' to that of 'this-and-that' (Stierlin, 1977). Again, this fluidity of their ethos is essential to understand in relationship to their approach to design.

Shinto, the native religion of Japan, has a central theme of respect for nature in which divine beings or *kami* are honoured in public and private shrines. In Sherman Lee's excellent compendium of Japanese Design he discussed the relationship between nature, religion, and design by stating: 'The Shinto faith particularizes nature with its many thousands of *kami* personifying selected individual units – rocks, noble trees, streams...Rather than organizing all this into a grand design, the Japanese accept this uniqueness of individual units, the natural order of motifs. With this there is a respect of the motifs and for their composition' (Lee, 1981, p. 11). However, this deeply embedded relationship to nature is not only focussed on the various entities honoured in nature, but also on the transitory relationship of continual

natural change. As an island people, basically isolated, the Japanese have continuously focussed for over 2000 years on wood as a medium for design and construction, mostly for non-load bearing efforts. The Japanese in every aspect of their culture have exploited wood and paper, materials with a low thermal capacity, ideal for the warm and humid climate. 'This indicates a deep-seated preference on the part of the Japanese for the living and the transitory, for the change of seasons, indeed for things in their raw state, as also is seen in Japanese cuisine' (Nitschke, 2002, p. 15).



*Figure 2: An older Shinto shrine at Ise  
(Photography: Author)*

### **Influence from the Japanese concept of impermanence**

The transitory nature of the Japanese ethos is also embedded in their concepts of time. History in Japan is not noted in terms of the Gregorian calendar, but rather, as in medieval times, on the rule of the Shogun, or later, on the coronation of the present emperor. The Shinto religion also extends this sense of renewal, as witnessed through the continual disassembly and construction every 20 years of the Ise Shrine, one of the most sacred Shinto shrines (Figure 2). Also within the Shinto beliefs system, there is the reaffirmation of the passage of time with the movement through a Torii gate that symbolises an entry into a sacred precinct, which in turn symbolises a rebirth and renewal that connects both nature and society (Nitschke, 2002) (Figure 3).

This Japanese concept of impermanence is depicted in other areas of their culture. An examination of *kanji* characters, the Japanese writing system borrowed from the Chinese, convey the characters for house and other buildings as the topmost element, clearly



Figure 3: Torii gate at Miyajima Island  
(Photography: Author)

symbolising a roof structure (Yagi, 1992). This symbolism of a solid roof with space below is typical of Shoin architecture, and will be discussed later. However, the Japanese language is a complex system that often breaks its own rules, with various grammatical conventions not being retained in a sentence that could even see the subject or object, or even both, being omitted or just being implied in the context of the sentence (Bognar, 1988). This linguistic attitude is carried through to the popular *haiku* style of poetry. The *haiku* style demands that you engage in the poem and contemplate the spaces that could mean as much as the words. 'The unique linguistic characteristic of the Japanese language lies in a non-structural approach in which words do not necessarily have a logical relationship to one another, but where the words spoken have a number of invisible meanings and *ma* or silent beat from which the listener is expected to extract and interpret the meaning intended by the speaker' (Miyoshi, 1985, p. 101,103).

This notion of change that is part of the transitory nature of Japanese culture is rooted in their comprehension of cyclical natural changes, with the land and the building site being the only things that virtually have lasting value (Nitschke, 2002). Buddha sitting firmly on the ground under a Bodhi tree, in which the open canopy overhead protects but also permits a transitory space below can be seen as a strong symbolism of this spatial paradigm. The traditional Shoin house is a clear manifestation of Buddhist beliefs in which the house is seen as a temporary dwelling (Evans, 1991). In Buddhist philosophy, the term *ma* refers to the in-between realm, and has many spatial meanings such as room, space, place, interval or activated void (Nitschke, 2002). Michihiro Matsumoto described this pregnant pause used

in the Japanese art form called *Haragei*, 'Ma is that moment unbridled by contradictions – contrast between part and whole; it is the moment that allows one to be aware of and part of his surroundings' (Matsumoto, 1984, p. 38) (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Abbots' residence and gravel garden in Koya-san  
(Photography: Author)

In the golden age of the Azuchi-Momoyama era, this concept of awareness was clearly established. It was during this period that a Zen tea master and not a Buddhist teacher, was most influential. Sen-no-Rikyu was the cultural advisor to the samurai rulers Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi during these great cultural changes. Sen-no-Rikyu developed the simple natural tea ceremony, *wabi-cha*, and more importantly, managed to develop a refined meditation process based on everyday activities. This contemplative and mediative approach to everyday experiences is the foundation of the Japanese ethos that permeates all aspects of design and other cultural activities.

The concept of the symbolism used in *kanji*, and the open nature of Japanese architecture, has already been mentioned with reference to roof construction. The majority of Japanese architecture was focussed on the horizontal flow of spaces that used wood as the main building material. It was during the Muromachi era that Shoin architecture, and particularly Shoin interior design, developed different elements that would form the basis of what is commonly referred to as traditional Japanese architecture. The traditional roof construction consists of first constructing the roof on the ground, and then the entire roof is lifted and placed on top of columns (Figure 5). Walls are then used to fill in the spaces. This method of post and beam construction leads to the possibility of completely opening up the interior

space to the exterior, and establishing a redefinition of the hierarchy of spaces: interior, intermediate, and exterior. The traditional Shoin houses all had veranda spaces that acted as the intermediate zone between the interior and the exterior, a formal detail of Shoin architecture. The blurring of the edges and boundaries creates a sense of vagueness that is an ingrained approach to many aspects of the Japanese culture. 'The ambiguity of boundaries as layered 'envelopes' (*ma*), is closely related to the ambiguity of a center (*oku*) in architecture, urbanism, and other cultural forms' (Bognar, 1988, p. 152).



Figure 5: Small thatched roof in the gardens of Nishi Hongan-ji  
(Photography: Author)

### The space between

As it has been described as 'the space between', *ma* could easily be referred to as the *gap* between two phenomena and is as much shaped by the space as it shapes the space (Bognar, 1988). Japanese verandas best describe this relationship between two phenomena, in particular the relationship of the whole to the part, as expressed in the detailing (Figure 4).

'Having spatial and temporal connotations, *ma* is one of the most significant features in Japanese culture, human awareness, and conduct; it is in this sense that Japanese art is the art of "invisible" boundaries. "Designing" in Japanese originally meant *ma-dori*, or the grasping, creating, activating of *ma*' (Bognar, 1988, p. 150).

One of the most characteristic aspects of all periods of traditional Japanese architecture is the empty interior space without noticeable freestanding furniture. Most furniture was portable and often stored away. The other most characteristic element was the masterful demonstration of control of materials through the detailing of design elements (Figure 6 and



Figure 7). The relationship of space, or *ma*, has already been discussed, but the relationship of details to *ma* is also essential. This relationship can be seen in other aspects of design, from the asymmetrical layout of traditional flower arrangements, *Ikebana*, to the layout and placement of sushi on the plate; both small but elegant spatial compositions. Here the relationship of the part to the whole, or the space to the detail, is considered in the overall composition.



Figure 6: Warehouse interior in Oharai-Machi, Ise  
(Photography: Author)



Figure 7: Post detail in the gardens of  
Nishi Hongan-ji  
(Photography: Author)

### Codes of aesthetics

As Japanese spatial compositions varied according to the natural environment, they became experts at dealing with the changes needed to deal with the site. This ability to detail subtle nuances of design, led them to consider details at all scales. In the effort to affirm their relationship with nature and comprehend their existence in society, various concepts developed over time, such as the notions of *wabi*, *sabi*, and *iki*. These combined with *ma* and *oku* provided essential elements in the Japanese cosmology. *Wabi* is the aesthetic sense. It is focussed on naturalness and reserve, and of simple quietude. It is the highly individual aesthetic of simplicity, and was originally promoted by the Zen tea master Sen-no-Rikyu. *Sabi* deals with simplicity, but of an aging simplicity. It is an imperfect and quiet sense of subdued taste. *Iki* deals with the worldly tastes, urban and often subversive. It is an aesthetic that favours decoration (Dunn, 2001). Lastly, *oku* is a spatial term, much like *ma*, but instead deals with the centre, the point that extends itself deep to the core of the entity (Bognar, 1988). Consideration of these elements is essential when discussing detailing. Besides

the high level of detailed dexterity and controlled restraint witnessed in a tea ceremony, nowhere else are the principles of *wabi-sabi* more evident than in gravel gardens, and in the horticultural craft of bonsai trees, in which nature is delicately controlled into a miniature composition (Figure 8).



*Figure 8: Gravel garden in Ginkaku-ji  
(Photography: Author)*

The austere world of the Japanese Buddhists and Samurai warrior class followed strict rules to cultivate the mind and body. This self-discipline and rigid austerity by the warriors led to them enforcing these ideas upon other levels of society. This Zen code of aesthetics, called *Shibui*, maintained that ‘...objects intended for everyday use should reveal the nature of their materials, and their form should be dictated by their function. If the artefact fulfils these criteria and performs well, it is considered to be beautiful’ (Evans, 1991, p. 55). This code was able to be imposed by the establishment of the Sumptuary Edicts. With these edicts, the population was categorised into 216 different classes, with the rigid system dictating colours, forms, materials and food. However, within any caste system the individual would seek out the highest quality of the particular item available to them (Evans, 1991). As a consequence of the two hundred years of *Shibui* and Sumptuary Edicts, Japanese craftsmanship has developed and evolved the ability to handle design and detailing at a highly refined level.

### **Conclusion**

When referring to the Sukiya style of architecture, Kazuo Nishi and Kazuo Hozumi stated, ‘Intimacy and caprice were the hallmarks of this type of Shoin...style’ (Nishi & Hozumi, 1985, p. 78). This range is also true for other forms of traditional and modern Japanese design that

exercise the *ma* between the extremes of excess and of austerity. Comprehending the depth of the contextual relationships helps to understand the many layers of symbolism tailored to produce a highly refined outcome in mass and detail (Figure 9). These details are mostly isolated elements that work with the *ma* to form a cohesive whole, and they stand in a grand sense of quietude on the building fabric, waiting patiently for the mindful observer.



Figure 9: Entrance detail in Kyoto  
(Photography: Author)

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