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Architecture as a Verb and the Japanese Insularity: (a)Metamorphosis as an Act of Creation

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ABSTRACT: The relationship between Japan and the rest of the world has been observed based on the view that they oppose each other. Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks of the existence of a symmetry. In the case of architecture, that idea is clarified further by Ryue Nishizawa, when he says that the architecture of the eastern islands, including Japan, is a “verb” and that the architecture of the west is a “noun”. Creation in architecture is intertwined with the idea of metamorphosis. However, in Japanese architecture, the idea of symmetry makes it possible to understand architectural creation based on an idea of (a)metamorphosis. That possibility is strengthened by the singularity of Japanese architecture, to which the country’s insularity and the fact that its architecture is based on the reiteration of long-standing conceptual and building principles and the relationship between humans and nature all contribute. As a “verb”, Japanese architecture has no form and is accordingly alien to the possibility of metamorphosis.

This paper seeks to explore the consequences of the crossing of the principle of architecture as a verb proposed by Nishizawa with the idea of the dissolution of boundaries between architecture and the environment, linking both said principle and that idea with the condition of Japan’s insularity. For Japanese architecture, (a) metamorphosis is an act of creation.

Keywords: Japanese architecture, Japanese insularity, Otherness, Metamorphosis, (a)Metamorphosis

1 JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE, METAMORPHOSIS AND CREATION

The relationship between Japan and the rest of the world has been observed for a long time because they oppose each other as if Japan and its singular universe could only be fully understood if explained as the inverse of everything else. The first manifestation of that idea of opposition is to be found in the testimony of the Portuguese Jesuit missionary and Japanologist Luís Fróis (1532-1597) formulated in *Tratado das contradições e diferenças de costumes entre a Europa e o Japão* [Striking Contrasts in the Customs of Europe and Japan] (Fróis, 2014). The text is from 1585 and was a precursor to the observation of the relations between the Western world, at the time European only, and Japan. More recently, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), in his text “Apprivoiser l'étrangeté” [“Domesticating Strangeness”] from 2011, asserts that Japanese modes and customs are symmetrical to those of the rest of the world (Lévi-Strauss, 2013, p. 8). It is significant that Lévi-Strauss’s text was originally published as the preface to the French-language edition of the work by Luís Fróis in 1998 (Lévi-Strauss, 2012). The

idea of opposition extends to architecture. On the differences between the two forms, the architect Ryue Nishizawa (b. 1966) says that the architecture of the eastern islands, including Japan, is a “verb”, while the architecture of the west, including China, is a “noun” (Nishizawa in Bêka & Lemoine, 2020). The notion of a flux, of something that has movement in itself, is set against the idea of affirmation and permanence, or something that seeks perpetuation in time.

Creation in architecture is intertwined with the idea of metamorphosis. The act of creation means transforming, whereby said transformation takes on a dimension that is, at once, conceptual and material. Evolution in architecture is based on its capacity to metamorphose and its development is rooted therein. In Japanese architecture, however, the idea of opposition that marks the relationship between Japan and the rest of the world, particularly when that notion is explained as symmetry, as Lévi-Strauss (2013, p. 8) indeed does, raises the possibility of observing creation in architecture based on the notion of (a)metamorphosis. The (a)transformation this implies takes on a dimension that is, at once, conceptual and material as well. Said possibility is backed by the understanding of Japanese architecture as a “verb” (Nishizawa in Bêka

& Lemoine, 2020), for which it is necessary to think of Japan's condition as an island nation. Acknowledging the existence of (a)metamorphosis therein means viewing creation in Japanese architecture as a process where reiterating long-standing, but not immutable, conceptual, and building principles co-exists alongside a singular relationship of humans with nature and its impulses, from which the Western notion of the limit or boundary is lacking. It is possible to recognize an aqueous dimension in the Japanese architectural space, particular in traditional architecture.

For Japanese architecture, (a)metamorphosis reveals itself as an act of creation.

2 IN THE FLUX OF THE MASSES

I, Yasumaro, do say:

When the primeval matter had congealed but breath and form had not yet appeared, there were no names and no activity. Who can know its form?

However, when heaven and earth were first divided, the three deities became the first of all creation. The Male and the Female here began, and the two spirits were the ancestors of all creation.

Whereupon after the going in and coming out from the seen and the unseen worlds, the sun and moon were revealed in the washing of the eyes.

After the floating and sinking in the sea-waters, the deities were revealed in the washing of the eyes.

Thus, though the primeval beginnings be distant and dim, yet the ancient teachings do we know the time when the lands were // conceived and the islands born; though the origins be vague and indistinct, yet by relying upon the sages of antiquity do we perceive the age when deities were born and men were made to stand. (Anonymous, 1968, pp. 37-38)

2.1 The creation of the Japanese Islands

In Japanese Shinto mythology¹, the islands that make up the Japanese archipelago were born after the gods Izanagi-no-Mikoto (伊邪那岐神, "He who

invites") and Izanami-no-Mikoto (伊弉冉神, "She who invites") had copulated. Before that, the land was not formed; it floated, adrift, like oil upon water. The primordial deities tasked the pair of gods to bring order to the world, that is, to give it *firmness* – "[a]t this time the heavenly deities, all with one command, said to the two deities IZANAGI-NŌ-MIKOTO and IZANAMI-NŌ-MIKOTO: 'Complete and solidify this drifting land!'" (Anonymous, 1968, p. 49).

From a floating bridge – *Ame-no-ukihashi* (天浮橋) – Izanagi and Izanami agitated the liquid masses with a sacred spear – *Ame-no-nuboko* (天沼矛) – and then threw the spear at the masses. When they took the spear out, some drops of saltwater fell from it. As the drops coagulated, they formed the first island – *Onogoro-shima* (淤能碁呂島). The two gods then descended from the heavens. They erected a heavenly pillar – *Ama-me-hashira* (天御柱) – and a spacious palace – *Yahiro-dono* (八尋殿). Around the pillar, they gyrated in ecstasy, eventually giving birth to the islands and deities – *kami* (神) – which went on to make up the archipelago of Japan.

In his text of 1953, "L'île déserte" ["Desert Islands"] (Deleuze, 2004), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) refers to a fortuitous meeting of science and the imagination. According to him, geographers distinguish between two types of islands: continental islands and ocean islands. This distinction confirms what was already known to the imagination. The fortuitous meeting led to an exchange of values between science and mythology, resulting in the idea that "science makes mythology more concrete, and mythology makes science more vivid" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 9). Ocean islands, which are the original islands, result from, among other things, underwater eruptions. Continental islands are accidental because they are separated from the respective continental mass by "disarticulation" and deformation. Deleuze writes that continental islands remind one that the seas cover the earth and that the latter is always ready to take advantage of shifts of solid matter. As for oceanic islands, he points out that they remind one "that the earth is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength to punch to the surface" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 9).

This whole universe derives from enormous tensions, almost repulsion between elements, whereby the presence of humans is only made possible by a certain calming of the natural forces. The islands of the Far East, especially those in the Japanese archipelago, do not offer this calming. Their robust fragility gives those who live there a particular world, where impetuosities vibrate almost constantly. In its mythological creation, Japan's archipelago has an image dedicated to the water masses and their crystallization at certain points – the islands. Deleuze's own description makes it possible to imagine the Earth as something that is pulled, only to later fall, dripping off the point of a spear. Everything moves; everything vibrates.

1. Please see *Kojiki*, the oldest compilation of historical texts in Japan. The texts were written beginning in the 6th century AD and were likely completed in 712 AD under the auspices of the Imperial Court. The word *Kojiki* literally translates as "Record of Ancient Things". This compilation of texts is a court testimony on the origins of Japan as a nation, its imperial family, its most notable families and Japanese mythology (Philippi, 1968, p. 3).

2.2 The Omnipresence of the Water

In this idea of vibration there come together singular notions that are associated with aspects of nature and aspects of culture. In Japan, “nature”² (*shizen*, 自然) and “culture” (*bunka*, 文化) are very much intertwined and interdependent (Rots, 2014, p. 447). The strength of the relationship between them helps one to accept, as elements of reflection on a Japanese reality, certain mythological aspects that come close to the imagination aspects proposed by Deleuze. Islands, both the continental and the oceanic kind, remind one that the water is the planet’s final frontier. So, the fact that Shinto mythology offers an image of the creation of Japan in which everything is still in a liquid state – land floated, adrift, like oil upon water – is important. Water (*mizu*, 水) is one of the great natural resources of the Japanese islands. Precipitation in Japan, *kōsui* (降), or “fallen water”, is one of the highest in the world, particularly for mid-latitudes. The geographic position of the Japanese islands, which function as a latch between the Eurasian continental plate and the vaster oceanic plate of the Pacific, means that Japan lies between the masses of cold air from the North Pole and warmer air from the Tropics, which are activated by currents from the west. Precipitation in Japan is formed thus.

Water, in all its forms – vapor, mists, snow, ponds, waterways, rivers, the sea and even rice paddies – is a characteristic of the Japanese space and landscape (Pelletier, 2014, pp. 339-340). Aqueous masses are a decisive factor in the Japanese identity. These masses are not indifferent to land masses, those that have taken on a shaky firmness. While waters fall, run, and move in volumes that can be overpowering, earth masses are subject to vertical and horizontal forces that make them shake, vibrate, and release an energy that is so often huge and overwhelming. However, the sea (*umi*, 海), the mountain (*yama*, 山), the forest (*mori*, 森), and all living creatures (*issaishujō*, 一切衆生), even those that people the myths and imagination, seem to form a unit that has survived over centuries. Although at times dramatic, the transformations that have taken place over time do not ignore the intertwining and interdependence that marks the relationship between nature and culture. The term “chorology” takes on particular meaning when applied to the spatial categories that structure the Japanese territory (Berque, 2014, p. 529).

2. The first edition of the *Daijisen* Dictionary in 1998, in accordance with the Japanese view of nature, defines the word *shizen* as: “[e]verything between heaven and earth, including humans. The cosmos.” (Asaka, 2009, p. 1). The underlining is in the original text. The *Daijisen* is an important Japanese language dictionary.

3 ARCHITECTURE AS VERB

Japanese architecture could not have been the unfailing source of self-evaluation, validation, and inspiration that it has been to the West, then, had it not been first made, and then made to remain, essentially other. (Nute, 2021, p. 105)

3.1 The Unfaithfulness of the Mirror

In his book, *The Constructed Other: Japanese Architecture in the Western Mind*, Kevin Nute (2021) brings together several texts on Japanese architecture written by Westerners, seeking to formulate a perspective on looking outside Japan, in relation to a culture that is illusive in terms of accessibility and reachability. Many times it is a view based on enchantment. Referring to the book, Kengo Kuma (2021) says that Nute demonstrates that such outside views lack a unique essence of being able to describe Japanese architecture. What such texts reveal is the recourse to the idea of the mirroring of cultures. Kuma writes (2021, p. vi):

[m]irrors, of course, do not produce faithful recreations of their subjects. They alter them, most obviously by reversing their images. And this was often the way that Japan was represented in the West, as a mythical place that seems to turn Western norms on their head.

Ironically, this view of being “other” – “otherness” – played an important role when Japan had to rebuild belief in its traditional architecture. Reflexes of the isolationist policies of the *sakoku* (鎖国, “closed country”) period, which lasted for more than 200 years, were crushingly felt in Japan. The opening to the world forced upon Japanese ports in 1854 led to unabashed Westernization, leaving the country with an identity crisis. The problems of the resulting political strategy were to culminate in the destruction and chaos of the Second World War. In his book, *In’ei Raisan* (陰翳礼讃, *In Praise of Shadows*), published in 1933 (Tanizaki, 2019), Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965) reflects somewhat resentfully on the westernization of Japan and its consequent loss of rooted customs, of which giving up traditional architecture is one example³. Although it was ambivalent

3. In the Introduction to *Vocabulaire de la spatialité japonaise* [Vocabulary of Japanese Spatiality], Philippe Bonnin and Masatsugu Nishida argue that, by referring to Japanese refinement and sensibility, Tanizaki peremptorily places the western world and Japan in opposition to each other. To them, said opposition did not make sense, as it was unnecessary and the fruit of an attitude rooted more in a “phantom” notion of the west than the result of real knowledge of its identity (Bonnin and Nishida, 2014, p. 29).

and, often, problematic, looking in from outside, for which Arata Isozaki (1931-2022) coined the term “Japan-ness” (Isozaki, 2006), helped in the internal recognition of the intrinsic values of an architecture that was *sui generis*, particularly at a time of self-doubt. Isozaki points out (2006, p. 3):

[f]rom its inception, the problematic of “Japan-ness” has belonged to an external gaze, that gaze directed towards Japan from beyond this insular nation. It has not emerged *causa sui*. Were an insular nation merely a closed, self-sufficient community, it would have no need to solicit its proper characteristics, or the essence of its culture. Any such query would be halted in a circle of self-referentiality. Only when a gaze from without supervenes has a response to be formulated in an effort of introspection bound to shape aesthetic tastes. Throughout history, the problematic of Japan-ness surfaces whenever an encounter has occurred on the archipelago’s perimeter, that is, at the age of the lapping ocean.

3.2 Verb and Noun

Isozaki’s heartfelt words are important because they are thought and written on the basis of “looking outwards.” In this perspective of interiority, or self-assessment, in Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine’s film *Tokyo Ride* (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020), Ryue Nishizawa makes a curious statement: the architecture of the far Eastern islands, including Japan, is a “verb,” and the architecture of the West is a “noun.”⁴ According to Nishizawa, in this context, China belongs to the West (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020).

This separation line proposed by Nishizawa is reminiscent of the demarcation line of symmetry found somewhere between insular Japan and the Eurasian tectonic plate advanced by Lévi-Strauss (2013, p. 8). Once again, the matter of the gaze of the “other” is raised. At a certain moment in time, this image of symmetry was understood as a superficial cataloging, much along the lines, for example, of that described by the British Japanologist Basil Hall Chamberlain⁵ (1850-1935) in his book *Things Japanese; Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan for*

the Use of Travellers and Others, which was published in 1890 (Chamberlaine, 2014). The book was written very much in the style of Luis Fróis (2014) witnessing his reaction to the strangeness of Japanese culture. In his text, “Lévi-Strauss’s heroic anthropology facing contemporary problems of the modern world”, Albert Doja (2020) reinterprets Lévi-Strauss’s claims and reassesses the role of the “other”. In his view, the notion of the other, the opposite side, can be seen as something that unites instead of separating – as if, despite its unfaithfulness, the mirroring effect obliged one to look at the self, placing one in the position of acceptance of the other, a kind of duplication of the “otherness”. Doja writes (2020, p. 14):

[h]owever, because Japan has so often played the role of a backward world in the European imagination, Lévi-Strauss’s reflections on similarities and differences encourage us to view people of cultures different from our own as equals who bear striking similarities to ourselves. To understand the incomprehensible means of the recurrent and arrogant West European opinions, Lévi-Strauss’s insight is to “domesticate strangeness” thanks to a certain approach respectful of otherness and a resourceful advocacy for the recognition of a symmetry between two cultures, which unites them by placing them in opposition.

Once more, Nishizawa’s observation is an observation of someone who reflects on their place in the world, whereby the respective architecture is included. In this sense, the observation is more a quest for an identity that combines a geographic area with its own cultural ideals than a differentiation of the principles of Japanese architectural thought in relation to the West⁶. To become a “verb,” architecture needs to move away

4. Transcription from the film (1:22:19). “The European architecture belongs to the continental culture. Chinese too. They are really... For me, like noun. Noun. Their language is really made of nouns, like bricks stuck on each other. It’s very logical, the relationship between each part. It’s really noun. But Japanese and South Asian architecture is more verb, I think. In the language that they use. More... How do you say? Elusive. More like... Moving. A moving feeling.” (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020).

5. Basil Hall Chamberlain traveled to Japan in 1873 and stayed there until 1911.

6. The observation formulated by Nishizawa also reflects on the “other”, in this case, the west. Transcription from the film (46:33): “I appreciate very much European culture, because people are strong. And very brutal. The way people behave and then the cities are very strong. And the architecture too is very strong. Like Le Corbusier, I’m really amazed by his way to create architecture. It’s really brutal. It’s kind of addition. He adds on... He makes something and then he adds something new on it. It’s really an addition. It’s like... History of... Like the Roman city. The European history is about new things built on old things. It’s like the history of addition. The way they add things on something old, is very... Strong and brutal. And architecture is very monumental in Europe. This is something I am really impressed by. The city is made of monuments. When a historical poet appears in the city, people celebrate him giving his name to a street. Each street, each temple or house is a kind of monument, in the European city. So, when you walk in a city in Europe, they understand the history, they understand how the city has been made. That’s a really great way to make a city.” (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020).

from the mass to become a flow, a constant flux. The presence of the water – steam, mist, snow, lakes, waterways, rivers, sea and even rice paddies – is instrumental for this understanding of architecture. Architecture as a “noun,” on the other hand, is presented as something that is built in layers, vertically, through addition. The layers are laid vertically on each other to have all their weight unloaded but in the opposite direction. In this differentiation between verb and noun, Nishizawa claims that the verb belongs to the “culture of the oceans” and is one of that culture’s greatest inventions⁷. Nishizawa gives the example of the Japanese poets and their concern with describing the year’s seasons. Said description is fundamental because the seasons are always “on the go,” in movement, with everything in constant transformation. According to Nishizawa, describing that instability, as if it were a large wave, belongs in the universe of the verb⁸.

Although he makes no specific reference to the idea of architecture as a verb, in an interview for *El Croquis* magazine (Onishi, 2020a) on the work conducted with Kazuyo Sejima (b. 1956), Nishizawa does speak of one of the fundamental differences between European and Japanese architecture:

[w]e believe that in architecture, essence and appearance are the same. In other words, the structure of a work of architecture and its presence are of a piece. As for the question of whether monuments are sculptural, I think that depends on the cultural context. It may have something to do with the difference between Japanese and European architectural cultures. European architecture is about walls, whereas Japan’s is about columns and beams. They are very different. (Onishi, 2020a, p. 11)

3.3 Two Radically Different Architectures

In the Western tradition, architecture figures as a type of defense from the elements. In the Japanese tradition, on the other hand, it is a means of connecting with said elements. In the extreme, it is possible

to think that Japanese architecture – particularly traditional architecture – as a cultural fact, intertwines with nature, establishing an interdependence. Once again, one thought of a whole that flows like a verb. It is a movement, more than an affirmation.

Nishizawa and Sejima have been discussing an architecture that is one with the environment (Onishi, 2020a), reinforcing the idea of a dissolution of boundaries. Recently, Sejima has been interested in the execution of drawing that once again emphasize the dissolution of boundaries between, for example, architecture and nature. In these drawings, points can move towards and away from each other, either forming large masses or diluting them. Sejima goes on to say (Onishi, 2020a, p. 9):

[r]ight now I’m interested in “pointillism.” Why pointillism? Because if everything in the universe is made of points, a high density of points can be something like a wall, and reducing the density of the points in the wall can turn it into a space. If you think about things in this way, interior and exterior don’t have to be separated entities, they can blend together, in harmony.

These drawings are linked above all to the designs that Sejima has been producing for the Inujima “Art House Project”⁹. Inujima is a very small island in the Seto Inland Sea. “Sejima says that after embarking on this project, she came to view the entire island as a single work of architecture.” (Onishi, 2020b, p.293) The island and the design projects are an architectural whole, a whole that emerges as a living entity in harmony. In this idea of harmony, everything contributes to a flux, as if it were a great liquid mass, reminding one “that our world is always in motion” (Onishi, 2020b, p. 295). Like the idea of “verb.”

4 (A)METAMORPHOSIS

In *L’Évolution créatrice* [*Creative Evolution*], a book from 1907, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) alludes to a kinesthetic scenario in which sugar and the water in which the sugar will dissolve are the protagonists (Bergson, 1922, p. 10). In *Cinéma 1. L’image-mouvement* [*Cinema 1: The Movement Image*], originally published in 1983, Gilles Deleuze (2013, p. 10) added a spoon to Bergson’s glass of water:

7. Transcription from the film (1:22:06): “Ocean architecture means like archipelago. Countries like Japan or Indonesia, these are countries and cultures of the ocean.” (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020).

8. Transcription from the film (1:23:49): “Japanese people, like Japanese poets, try to describe something moving. Like seasons. They try to describe the seasons because it’s going away. It never stays the same. It’s not possible to describe in a noun way. So, verb is one of the most important inventions, from the ocean culture. Like the ocean... There is movement and a wave in the climate. There is a wave in the water. It’s like a big rotation.” (Bêka & Lemoine, 2020)

9. The Inujima “Art House Project” is part of the “Benesse Art Site Naoshima”, which is based on the islands of Naoshima, Teshima, and Inujima in the Seto Inland Sea, Setouchi region. The origins of the setting up of the art site date back to the 1980s at the behest of Tetsuhiko Fukutake, founder and chairman of Fukutake Publishing, and Chikatsugu Miyake, then mayor of Naoshima. For more on the Inujima “Art House Project”, please see: Benesse Art Site Naoshima (n.d.).

[i]f I stir with the spoon, I speed up the movement, but I also change the whole, which now encompasses the spoon, and the accelerated movement continues to express the change of the whole.

The spoon can be seen as the sacred spear Izanami and Izanagi throw. The islands of the Japanese archipelago, whose mythological formation is rooted in watery masses and their crystallization, lead one to imagine a whole in constant dissolution and alteration, an (a) metamorphosis creation process. Everything moves, everything vibrates.

4.1 Perenniality

Deleuze writes (2004, p. 10):

[t]he *élan* that draws humans toward islands extends the double movement that produces islands themselves. Dreaming of islands – whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter – is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew.

Occupying islands, as in the Japanese case, has for centuries meant placing oneself on the margin of a distanced world, and finding in that insularity the bonds that define one's own identity. This insular condition or marginality, which becomes subject to the elements, leads to a unification process that is constantly mutating, a kind of endless rumination. In that sense, that constancy is a factor that furthers both metamorphosis and ametamorphosis. Nature, which contains everything, is, at the same time, beautiful and destructive, giving rise to a sense of impermanence. The ephemerality of the blooming of a flower (*hana*, 花) is precious. There is aesthetic emotion in watching the rapid decline of its splendor. Perenniality is interlinked with ephemerality, as Jacques Pezeu-Massabau points out in his work “Exprimer Le beau: Les arts et les lettres” [Expressing Beauty: The Arts and Letters] of 1989 (Pezeu-Massabau 2017a, p. 21).

In traditional Japanese architecture, the notion of perenniality is present in the spatial and building system defined and established a long time ago, and applied in the most humble dwelling to the most complex of buildings. The history of the Japanese traditional built environment, particularly the house, is characterized by a remarkable inertia, above all since the Middle Ages. That inertia seems to have ruled out the emergence of radical changes. Things have evolved, but the evolution was gradual through the slow adoption of new processes¹⁰. The peculiarities and building techniques associated with the tea room building type (*chashitsu*¹¹, 茶室), the origins of which date back to the 15th century¹², were

incorporated into residential architecture – both aristocratic and bourgeois – and into sacred architecture, to be later reflected, in a top-down movement, in the architecture of the ordinary people, both urban and rural (Pezeu-Massabau, 2017b, p. 200). Japanese traditional architecture is the result of a slow evolution of conceptual and organizational principles. Those principles manifest themselves in certain formal, and, above all, spatial aspects that together create a specific esthetic character and socially oriented matters, in which the notion of standardization plays a fundamental role.

4.2 Ephemerality

Paradoxically, the idea of ephemerality in traditional Japanese architecture comes from the same principles as the idea of perenniality. That architecture's standardized, modular nature has as much flexibility as it has variability. As it is constantly vulnerable to earthquakes and fires, traditional architecture is constantly in the process of reconfiguration and reconstruction, which relativizes its material existence and its configuration as an architectural “object”.

In 1990 Tadao Ando (b. 1941) stated categorically in an interview that traditional Japanese architecture consisted of non-geometrized space. The space was irregular, lacking in form (Ando, 1990, p. 5). Ando stood by using the term “non-geometrized” and the incredulity it could generate. He later wrote (Ando, 1999, p. 219) that the assembly of the geometric forms of the Pantheon in Rome, and the vertical orientation of Piranesi's spaces, contrast greatly with traditional Japanese architecture. For Ando, the contrast came from the incontestable horizontal orientation of traditional architecture and its “a-geometric” character, thus giving rise to *non-coordinated* spaces. As Ando described, traditional Japanese architecture is an architecture without form – as it has no demarcated form – that generates spaces that merge with nature and form a unified body with it. Decades later, Nishizawa refers to Western box-type architecture and traditional Japanese architecture:

10. Kengo Kuma alludes to this process in his text “Toward a Japanese-Style Architecture of Relationships” (Kuma, 2010).

11. The term *chashitsu* first appeared in 1609 in *Nanpo-bunshū* (南浦文集), a collection of texts by the monk Nanpo Bunshi (1555-1620). Up until then, various words had been used to designate the spaces associated with the tea-drinking ceremony (Marès, 2014, p. 73).

12. From the Muromachi (室町時代) period onwards, roughly between 1336 and 1573, the ritualization of tea drinking became a more sophisticated and more disseminated practice. As part of this development, there emerged in 1486 the Tōgudō (東求堂) in the Jishō-ji (慈照寺) temple in Kyoto, the oldest known tea pavilion in Japan (Marès, 2014, pp. 73-74).

[b]ox-type architecture is exactly that – the outer skin provides the structure, forming an empty space inside, just like a box. Traditional Japanese architecture, on the other hand, has a structure that extends across the entire floor plan, and is therefore essentially endless – by which I mean it has no defined exterior, no façade. The difference between box-type architecture and this endless architecture is apparent in their structures, both interior and exterior. Asia is full of examples of architecture that is monumental, but not sculptural – structures that are monumental even though they have no façade. (Onishi, 2020a, p.9)

In encountering the a-geometric architecture referenced by Ando and the facade-less architecture to which Nishizawa refers, one has to understand that the Japanese architectural landscape built until recently derives from procedures associated with the *daiku* (大工), or master builders or carpenters. The *kiwari* (木割) – the stereotomy or proportions system of the wooden bone structure – was passed on orally from carpenter to carpenter up until medieval times. In the early 17th century, *kiwari* received its first written representation in the *kiwarisho* (木割書), *kiwari* manuals (Sendai, 2014a, p. 61). However, the use of the system went beyond the material questions of a proportions system, given that the term *kiwari* also assesses the esthetic value of an architectural construction (Bonnin and Nishida, 2014a, p. 257). So, there was a certain ambivalence in using the term: good verification of the exactness of the *kiwari* required ponderation that could never be exact. The *kiwari* is based on the spacing between pillars (*hashira-ma* 柱間, or *ken*間). However, the emergence of the tea pavilions, which were so close to the body, meant that certain mannerisms from the era of the emergence of the tea houses gradually disappeared, and architecture adapted to the inherent gestures of the human body.

In this adaptation, the role of the pillar/beam bone structure (*hashira-hari*, 梁) remained a constant, and the pillar (*hashira*¹³, 柱), the main element of spatial organization, did not lose in terms of value. The modular systems and specific trends determined by certain building types, regions and periods depended on the “refinement” of the carpenter or master builder, the *daiku*. It is like a space opened up for individuality within a typified system. To this end, the “illumination” of a master calls for a sort of counter-argument

to the instituted rule. Although it comes from a modular and, accordingly, geometrized basis, even though it too has no form, the “deviation” supported by its mastery guarantees the singularity of the *daiku* and his work. That singularity is revealed without form and a-geometrically more than non-geometrically. It takes place within the standard, but deviates from it almost imperceptibly. The singularity of traditional Japanese architecture is rooted in its subtlety.

That singularity and its value are central issues in defining the opposing positions Western and Japanese cultures have adopted. Western culture is based on the fact that it is geometrically assumed; Japanese culture is based on a non-fact that it is geometrically not assumed. As a non-fact, i.e., almost negating a thing to have a foundation as a concept, traditional Japanese architecture dissolves itself into nature in a very particular partnership.

The informality of the traditional Japanese architectural structures originates in a standardized system, which was gauged according to its esthetic worth. The path so that the body, in motion, can flow endlessly in space and time¹⁴ is opened up. Because it is formless, as it is in a constant state of mutation, architecture (*kenchiku*, 建築) is a verb. It is constantly changing, but is not transformed. Its condition is that of a constant (a)metamorphosis.

5 VERB – (A)METAMORPHOSIS AS AN ACT OF CREATION

This paper proceeds from the recognition of the Lévi-Strauss idea of symmetry as a means of observing the relationship between Japan and the rest of the world. The notion of metamorphosis, a constant value in Western architectural creation, thus opens up a path to a notion of (a)metamorphosis, the fluid mainstay of creation in Japanese architecture. Japan’s insularity takes on new meaning, with the *aquosity* that runs through its architecture taking its roots there.

The arguments follow each other with growing speed, which is, at the same time, the mirror and primordial value of the creation of the Japanese archipelago. Deleuzian imagination reminds one that Izanagi and Izanami erected a heavenly pillar – *Ama-me-hashira*. *Hashira* is the organizing element

13. In Japanese culture, *hashira*, conceptually speaking, is a unique vertical element that houses divinity. This idea has survived until today. Before building a house comes the act of erecting the pillar (Sendai, 2014b, p. 168). The architecture of Kazuo Shinohara (1925-2006) is an example of the value given to the pillar, or *hashira*, in contemporary Japanese architecture.

14. The notion of space and time is closely linked to the word *ma* (間) in Japanese culture; indeed the word is of Japanese origin. In short, *ma* is an implied interval in a constant time-space relationship. For more on *ma*, please see Harata Isozaki’s text of 1978 “La notion d’espace-temps au Japon” [Japanese Time-Space Concept], which was included in the catalogue to the exhibition, *Ma: Espace-Temps du Japon* [Ma: Space-Time in Japan] at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs Festival d’Automne in Paris, from 11 October to 11 December 1978 (Isozaki, 1978).

that is the bone structure of traditional Japanese architecture. Deleuzian imagination furthermore reminds one that both Shintoist mythology and science provide aqueous explanations for the emergence of the islands of the Japanese archipelago – it is a fortuitous encounter where mythology makes science more vivid. In this vividness, it is possible to encounter a world in a torrent, with architecture's arms around it, so that both become indiscernible. Kazuyo Sejima's "pointillism" is an accomplice in said indiscernibility. The points she diligently places from her wrist are the grains of sugar that move in the kinesthetic scenario proposed by Henri Bergson and revised by Gilles Deleuze: in the glass of water, the spoon/spear moves quickly, forever changing the whole water and sugar concoction. Everything moves, everything vibrates, even if, to the less attentive eye, everything seems to be resting.

Because it is a "verb", because it contains movement, Japanese architecture is formless; i.e. it lacks a stable and fixed form, and is therefore oblivious to the possibility of metamorphosis. What does not have limits/boundaries does not have a form. Only that which has a form can metamorphose itself. Japanese architecture is "elusive" (Figure1) (Nishizawa in Bêka & Lemoine, 2020).



"Elusive," says Ryue Nishizawa. Still from the film *Tokyo Ride* by Bêka & Lemoine (2020) (1:23.04). © Bêka & Lemoine.

Hence, for Japanese architecture, (a)metamorphosis reveals itself as an act of creation.

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