Ritual

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How does architecture facilitate ritual practice within the context of the Japanese archipelago?
Although there are many similarities to ceremonies exercised around the world, Rituals remain social practices which are closely linked to a community's view, history, and perception of place. During my time in Japan I encountered many of their own ritual practices, from daily activities to religious ceremony. As a result, I investigated elements of the vernacular architecture, not only the physical attributes of the construction [and making] but the philosophies and atmospheres, namely the metaphysical qualities, which underpin these Japanese spaces.

Pertaining to this UNESCO states that: “Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

Cultures transfer with people. This semester was an opportunity to better understand Japan’s long history with ritual practice and as a consequence how [or indeed, if] it has influenced my architecture. During that time I engaged with several parameters which I believe compose the framework for Japanese Ritual Practice: Place, Craft, Control, Containment, and Objects.

This essay outlines these parameters. Unlike the binaries which underlie Western architecture, these frames overlap; they do not exist apart from one another but coexist as one. A characteristic, I believe, unique in Japanese space making.

Place

“There is no greater way for appreciating beauty than through its use in our daily lives, no greater opportunity for coming into direct contact with the beautiful. It was the tea masters who first recognised this fact. Their profound aesthetic insight came as a result of their experience with utilitarian objects. By going beyond the visual to practical use, the tea masters made deep inroads into the search for beauty. Their world of craft, not art. They gained their profound knowledge of beauty by seeking it in the utilitarian objects deeply rooted in daily life.

It is true that, with the passage of time, this beauty was confined to the teahouse. But the tea masters’ true aim, I believe, was to experience the world of tea in the everyday use of ordinary objects in our personal life.”

Spaces and objects are not inherently ritualised but are a result of place.
Byojo-tei, meaning the beauty of everyday life, highlights the unique fascination the Japanese have with turning everyday activities such as walking, bathing, and tea into sacred practice. This was reflected in my Final Design Thesis, *Taxonomy of a Japanese Landscape* [2019], which investigated the Japanese walled garden, tea garden, temple and bathhouse as a means to explore the relationship between Man and Nature within the context of Japan.

"The material culture of a society can tell us much about its creators and the environment in which it developed."

Yale University Art Gallery
architecture and how they are arranged together to enclose space I gained a greater understanding of the craft which underlies space making.

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 Control

 "A ritual implies a near-frozen relationship between space and event. When it becomes necessary to mediate the tension between events and spaces and fix it by custom, then no single fragment must escape attention. Nothing strange or unexpected must happen. Control must be absolute"[10]

 Another important framework for Ritual is control. Ritual practice involves sequential actions conformed to a prescribed order. This implies a deliberate attempt to establish order from disorder and this in part, I believe, is deep-rooted to the idiosyncratic nature of Japan; a stratovolcanic and archipelagic geography, in which uncertainty and confinement are foundations.[11] Ergo through repetition of complex sequential actions, the ritual mandates a balanced environment.[12]

 The Japanese garden is a vision of ideal nature, one that intentionally represents
order, harmony, and balance. To achieve this, the master garden maker navigates the line between natural chaos and order. The space between objects, the sky above, the blank wall, and ground function like unpaired areas of landscape painting within the three-dimensional space providing tension to hold the composition together.

Sequence is a set of related events, movements, or items that follow each other in a particular order. The path, as a confined element, is manipulated so that each step becomes a catalyst which activates the ritual procession through the garden. Likewise, just as the careful placement of stepping stones are a locomotive device, architectural space is conceived to enable strict adherence to the sequence of events that make up the ritual. Here the garden, tearoom or even bathhouse is regarded as a series of carefully composed objects which together form the space for ritual practice.

Architecture can be used to enact movement and thus instigate ritual through the placement of walls, barriers and objects. Within the Bathhouse the amorphous arrangement of the various baths are experienced as a series of sequential vistas and places following the Japanese idea of viewing fixed entities sequentially from various perspectives whilst never allowing an entire view of space. The method of Miegakure, meaning hide-and-reveal, is used
to create sequential vistas which gradually reveal elements within the ritual sequence.\[^{iv}\]

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Containment

A set of actions that make a situation, place or an object ritualised, is the suggestion of separation from everything else. Seclusion is central to the creation of a ritual wherein convention can be suspended.\[^{v}\] *Shima*, Japanese: meaning ‘island’ does not by definition denote a geographical island surrounded by water, but can imply a field separated from its village and surrounded by someone else's property.\[^{vi}\] The idea of island spaces [through separation and containment] are crucial to Japanese ritual ceremony and thus ritual and ritual spaces are directly linked to the essence of Japan as an isolated Island nation.\[^{vi}\]

Interestingly, inclusion and exclusion is the primary datum in the concept of ‘paradise’.\[^{vi}\] A suggestive illustration of this idea is Athanasius Kircher's *Topographia Paradisi Terrestris* in which a lush garden, separated from the arid land outwith the enclosure, is defined as a geometrically perfect form in contrast to the natural chaos that surrounds it.\[^{vi}\] Paradise bears a strong

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\[^{iv}\] Dance as a predetermined sequence of movements within a courtyard.

\[^{v}\] Shima, Japanese: meaning ‘island’ does not by definition denote a geographical island surrounded by water, but can imply a field separated from its village and surrounded by someone else's property.

\[^{vi}\] The idea of island spaces [through separation and containment] are crucial to Japanese ritual ceremony and thus ritual and ritual spaces are directly linked to the essence of Japan as an isolated Island nation.
resemblance to the concepts underlying the Japanese Garden and by extension Ritual buildings. In the Japanese garden, each garden is surrounded by a form of wall. Enclosure serves to screen unwanted visual aspects, protect the garden from physical intrusion, ultimately limiting and defining the island within; elements of uncertainty are eliminated, paradise is created.[25] The Ancient city plan of Kyoto [Heian-kyo] was an orthogonal form nestled on three sides by low rolling mountains, not dissimilar to that of Kirchers paradise. The Ancient capital city's of Japan were planned on the rationale of a North-South East-West grid pattern known as the Jo-Bo System adopted, like many concepts from the continental neighbour, China which led a ritual procession from the southern gate to the Imperial Palace in the North.[24] The regularity of the grid plan and the precise division of the enclosed area was a visual expression of control to what was a Tabula Rasa. The city plan was a palimpsest to the controlled forms developed in my Thesis. The structural grid in the instance of the Bathhouse provided order and hierarchy in the enclosed space.

Indeed, walls are a visual device. Hiding the imperfections of the external world convey an impression that the perfection enclosed by the walls also extends infinitely beyond its confines, the metaphorical world outside being
part of this ideal heaven. In the Ritual of the tea ceremony, the Chashitsu [or Teahouse] is a container for personal introspection. In this instance, the wall acts as a barrier to outside distraction. Upon arriving at the teahouse one enters through a small opening at the corner of the teahouse for which you must duck to enter. This final move humbles the occupant and compresses the space allowing the final reveal of the tearoom.

Individual Tatami, as the smallest scale within the plan of the teahouse, act as islands for the participants of the ceremony. The arrangement of tatami has the effect of keeping the eye within the space and emphasises the centre of the room, the hearth.

Japanese spatial configurations are the result of its island nature; constrained site proportions aimed at creating depth of space within a limited site. The sense of enclosure fundamental to the Japanese is the defining characteristic of the Genius Loci. Comfortably contained within steep valleys and between inland seas, nothing is unbound and limitless.

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Pathway
Individual elements; uneven pathway.
4 This surface provides locomotion of a stable slow rhythm; because of the round form of the stones.
Objects

“This chair is about ritual. In groups of two or four, the chair creates an interior place where experiences of a more silent nature may occur. A wall with an impenetrable face is presented to those who arrive. A bronze grill serves as a window for those who are already present. A future dais, described by the grey/gilt base, serves as platform to the plush lining of the seats. When the chair is considered as a single piece, its asymmetry suggests rotation and the fragmentation of the protective cabinetry of the back. This is a cubistic deformation of the “throne” archetype.

The chair is a palanquin, a refuge, a room, a confessional, a mystery, a building.”[4]

In their submission titled, Club Chair, architects, Todd Williams and Billie Tsein deconstruct a simple chair to its primary components, by doing so each element is studied and the ritual of sitting is thus understood. Undertaking this study transformed the everyday object of the chair into something profoundly architectural, and the act of sitting ceremonial.[29]

Pertaining this Yanagi Sōetsu concludes that the fundamental principle underlying the beauty of the tea ceremony is not its concept or actions but the "concrete objects" that act as intermediaries which he states as, the teahouse, the garden path, the utensils.[30] One can deconstruct these elements further in a similar manner to that of Tsein and Williams to dissect and understand the events within the ritual sequence. In this manner, threshold, tatami and screen fall under the umbrella of the teahouse, each element forming part of the architectural narrative. Chawan [tea bowls] share equal value to the wall when considered in a sequence of events, thus the individual components are sanctified in a way that pertains to the philosophies supported by Yanagi-san.

“I still think that there is probably no country like Japan whose people live in surroundings composed of specially composed objects.”

Yanagi Sōetsu, the Beauty of Everyday Things
This semester was an opportunity to better understand Japan's long history with ritual practice and how it has been applied within my architectural design.

To gain an understanding of Japanese spacial concepts it was of value to draft using more Eastern illustrative devices. Traditional Japanese prints show an innate convention for the use isometric projection, which may be because of the orthogonal nature of Japanese traditional architecture. The lack of three-dimensionality in this method of drawing amplifies the quality of the space. In particular, I was inspired by the traditional isometric projections by traditional carpenters that I encountered during my travels, these simple line drawings honour the immense complexity involved in traditional timber building construction and the skill of the maker. Craft and complexity of draftsmanship, therefore, can be an implication of skill and complexity in craftsmanship.

Worms-eye projection was also particularly important in this drawing set. Chris Dyson states on James Sterling's design process that: “The plan was the originator - initially quite diagrammatic, it was then fleshed out using the axonometric, the worm's eye, the split up view and the single-point perspective. [...] The worm's eye, latterly called the 'up view' [...] was a method of showing off dexterity in drawing skills.” In like manner of Sterling, worms-eye isometric projection allowed the expression of how the structural and programmatic components work together in the design for my Bathhouse. Beyond this, through the process of physically producing each drawing in a sequence of subjective lines, the essence of control and craft became apparent. With each intersecting line, columns began to merge; interlocking like they were newly carved at a carpenters' workshop.

The work by Josef Albers, as a Western painter, was a notable inspiration for this drawing set which uses this technique in an interesting way. Albers', Structural Constellations 1950 are two-dimensional renderings of three-dimensional objects, the central idea of this body of works appears to stem from experiments on visual ambiguity. These spatial patterns' elusive and contradictory nature is only possible through isometric projection.

Although many were bemused by worms-eye projection with the Royal Fine Arts Commission secretary Norman St John Stevas requesting Sterling present “understandable drawings”, he persisted to be an advocate for this underused illustrative method. Like Albers, the ambiguity I believe is what gives the drawings interest. I wanted to elicit the same ambiguous nature which both Albers, and laterally Sterling through the worms-eye, explored. By doing so the rudimentary puzzling nature gives one time to study the drawing and let it
unfold as one would unlock a timber puzzle box.

The concept of enclosure can be drawn through the use of a closed-form composition. In much of James Sterlings drawings, the building was devoid of context, in this way the buildings became objects. Similarly, Japanese architect Shin Takamatsu’s pencil renders, free of context, is an affirmation to the way the Japanese treat their buildings within the built environment.

By drawing the architecture in complete isolation, one can gain a sense of its insularity. The white space of paper representative of the enclosures ability to exclude the external world. Free of context, the ritual space becomes an ideal heaven.

Uki-e, is a woodblock print in which the three-dimensionality of a scene is emphasised by using the western convention of one-point perspective. Although linear perspective as a spatial device was mainly developed in Western culture, the secondary set of perspective drawings were an assimilation between Eastern space making and myself as a Western architect.

By setting the view toward the lattice ceiling these drawings were a focus on the complexity of the spaces in terms of craft and construction as well as emphasising the orthogonality of the building’s form on multiple scales of design, firstly through the structural grid and on the micro-level the lattice

grid.

Drawing became a tool to evaluate if indeed that place, craft, control, containment and objects were clarified as parameters which compose the framework for the Japanese Ritual. The line drawing as a objective and precise tool did not fully evoke the objective phenomenological qualities which Soetsu Yanagi advocated.

In light of this, I constructed a partial model to display the atmospheric nature of space within the Bathhouse. Through the act of constructing the model the human hand was in contact with the material, which reignited a rudimentary interest which began at the start of this semester. The quality and importance of the lattice ceilings are only apparent when light is introduced and shadow is produced on the surfaces.

In a similar way to the methodology to German Sculptor, Thomas Demand, by removing the model the photograph remains the subjective artefact, the eidetic response [or memory] to the space in contrast to the objectivity of the orthographic drawing form an interesting relationship between perfection and imperfection.
Tale of Genji
Chapter 50: Eastern Cottage
Isometric wood-block print

Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany: Worm’s-eye axonometric
James Sterling, 1977
28.5 x 27.0 cm
Canadian Centre for Architecture

Structural Constellation, Alpha
Joseph Albers, 1954
Incised vinyl, 44.0 x 65.5 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
Framework for a Japanese Ritual

[1] Intangible Heritage. Social practices, rituals and festive events. UNESCO


[16] ibid.


[18] ibid.


[22] ibid.

[23] ibid.


[26] ibid.

[27] ibid.

[28] ibid.

[29] ibid.


[31] ibid.


[33] ibid.

[34] ibid.