arq (2017), **21.3**, 203–207. © Cambridge University Press 2018

Experiments in housing new ways of living

The ongoing Western fascination with Japan

The Japanese House

Luke Tozer

Western fascination with Japan and Japanese design is long established. The popularity of the recent exhibition *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life After 1945* at London's Barbican illustrates that this fascination remains. This 'blockbuster' review of postwar domestic Japanese Architecture, supported by The Japan Foundation and previously hosted at MAXXI, National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome, responds to an enormous challenge: to try to account for the range and diversity of architectural approaches to domestic design within the broader contexts of traditional Japanese architecture and national life after 1945.

The seven decades covered in the exhibition span postwar reconstruction, rapid economic expansion, bubble-era boom and bust, and deflationary stagnation, brought up to the present day. Material is organised 'genealogically' rather than chronologically, drawing together certain threads and traditions. It makes connections across time periods to suggest how the design of the Japanese house has dealt with sociological changes over this period, from the fracturing of the nuclear family and an increase in single-person households to an ageing population.

The sheer diversity and experimentation in architectural expression manifest in the design of the home remains fascinating and this is what the exhibition seeks to decode. Multiple media from multiple sources – including



1 *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945*. Installation View. Barbican Art Gallery, London. 23 March–25 June 2017. Photo by Miles Willis / Getty Images.

doi:10.1017/S135913551700032X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551700032X Published online by Cambridge University Press

models, films, photographs, and drawings – help to contextualise the influences on the designs and explain their origins to visitors without spoon-feeding them. The danger inherent in this approach, with such a diverse range of ideas, is that it could result in a cacophony of material. *The Japanese House* certainly faces this dilemma. And perhaps the uninitiated may leave with their stereotypical sense of Japanese design being strange, other, alien, and unintelligible to the Western sensibility reinforced rather than reduced.

Postwar reconstruction and Japan-ness

Half of Tokyo had been destroyed at the end of the Second World War with incendiary bombing across the country resulting in the loss of an estimated 4.2 million houses. Postwar Japanese reconstruction was thus a huge challenge to the construction industry and the architectural profession. Prefabrication, and industrial-scale production, was applied to single-family dwellings in an effort to address this housing crisis. Architects Kunio Maekawa and Junzo Sakakura, both of whom returned to Japan from a spell working for Le Corbusier, developed designs for prefabricated system built houses imagined as 'maisons minimum'. Despite the relative unpopularity of these designs among the public, who perhaps preferred greater choice, the industrial production of housing in Japan subsequently became well established. This expanded beyond individual dwellings to condominiums, contributing – for example – to the 920,000 dwellings built in 2015, which, relative to a population of 126 million, is more than three times the rate of the UK in the same year (which built 150,000 dwellings for a population of 66 million).

In the immediate postwar era, the notion of tradition in Japanese architecture was tainted with wartime nationalism and was subdued while more prosaic matters of reconstruction were prioritised. This changed in 1955 when a public debate ensued, following the end of the seven-year Allied Occupation in 1952 and the restoration of Japan's national sovereignty. Two alternative interpretations of Japanese tradition were posited as appropriate for contemporary



2 *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945*. Installation View. Barbican Art Gallery, London. 23 March–25 June 2017. Photo by Miles Willis / Getty Images.



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Japanese architecture. One was *shinden-zukuri* – associated with palace architecture, such as the Imperial Palace at Katsura, characterised by raised floors, open space, and sliding screens. The other was the rural house, the *minka*, which contained earthen floors, sturdy columns and large roofs, with origins in ancient times as an authentic basis for Japanese architecture.

Kenzō Tange and the editor of *Shinkenchiku* (*New Architecture*) Noboru Kawazoe championed *shinden-zukuri* and drew out its parallels with the geometry, transparency, and spatial adaptability of Western modernism. A photograph of Katsura Imperial Villa by Yashuhiro Ishimoto 1953–4 was highly influential, with its almost De Stijl-like composition. Antonin Raymond, who came to Japan with Frank Lloyd Wright, also picked up on many of the elements of this tradition, using them in his house. Tange fused traditional elements with modernism in his own house, where a raised first floor on timber columns recalled the *piloti* of early modernism and extensive verandas (*engawa*),

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551700032X Published online by Cambridge University Press

sliding screens (*shoji*), and tatami-mat flooring seemed to chime with the universal spaces and grids of modernist space. This reawakening of Japan-ness in architecture, and its fusion with Western modernism, perhaps ultimately culminated in the Yoyogi Stadium designs by Tange for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Meanwhile, the *minka* tradition was taken up by Sazuo Shinohara, who produced a series of houses in pursuit of his declaration that 'a house is a work of art' that provides a form of cultural criticism, and a reaction to the notion that architecture is a functional translation of a brief into built form.

Inhabiting the experimental

Postwar domestic architecture in Japan was a crucible for experimentation resulting in numerous theoretical treatises. The influence of repeatability and modularisation, derived from notions of industrial production, was further developed in the 1960s in the Metabolist group's theoretical work. The most well known built example of their ideas was Kisho Kurakawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, 1972. Here, a basic unit, the capsule, provided a one-room dwelling with an ensuite bathroom to meet the needs of salarymen commuter workers during the week. The building contained 144 capsules arranged around a central core of stairs and lifts. It represented his answer to the inhabitants of what he proclaimed was an emerging society based upon perpetual movement: '*homo movens*'.

The gallery spaces at the Barbican are a challenge to occupy effectively; raising difficult issues about how to give an exhibition a clear narrative structure over two floors. The curators deftly used this as opportunity to give life to the exhibition by occupying double-height spaces with 1:1 'models' of two buildings: Ryue Nishizawa's Moriyama House of 2005 and a newly commissioned teahouse and garden by Terunobu Fujimori.

The Moriyama house model was the more successful of the two. This Tokyo house is formed of 10 units laid out over a plot, ranging from the smallest – a shower – to the largest – a three-storey living wing – aiming to disassemble domestic functions into a loose collection of internal and external spaces. The brief included a separate rental unit to give the owner enough income to stop working. The separate elements relate to each other across external spaces without necessarily defining the edge of the plot or of their function. In doing so, there is an ambiguity over where the house starts and finishes, where the city enters the home, and where the boundaries lie between house and city. Underpinning the design is a relaxed pragmatism borne of conceptual rigour and simple affordability that reminded me, in an entirely different urban and spatial configuration, of Lacaton & Vassal's house for a railway worker.

Entry to Fujimori's elevated teahouse required crouching through the low door and up a few steps: a reference to the traditional requirement for samurai to remove their swords before entry into the ceremonial space of the traditional teahouse. While the teahouse was a pleasure to experience, it was given little explanation and – especially given the long tradition that it sits within – further information would have deepened the visitor's understanding.

This reflects a weakness in the exhibition, which was the lack of emphasis on ceremony and ritual in Japanese domestic architecture. This extends from the simple



4 *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945*. Installation View. Barbican Art Gallery, London. 23 March–25 June 2017. Photo by Miles Willis / Getty Images.

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6 *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945*. Installation View. Barbican Art Gallery, London. 23 March–25 June 2017. Photo by Miles Willis / Getty Images.



7 *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945*. Installation View. Barbican Art Gallery, London. 23 March–25 June 2017. Photo by Miles Willis / Getty Images.

removal of shoes within the entrance and the putting-on of slippers, to the unrolling and rolling of a futon to make and unmake a bed, to bathing and the importance of the ground plane in Japanese domestic architecture. The perspective of sitting on the floor, on *tatami*, around a *kotatsu*, a low wooden frame covered by a futon with a table on top to dine, gives an entirely different perspective on a room than sitting at a Western dining table.

Experimentation and tradition

No exhibition of postwar domestic Japanese Architecture would be complete without Tadao Ando's Row House in Sumiyoshi, 1976, with its laconic – now iconic – two-storey in-situ concrete street elevation with just one negative 'hole' for a door. It features as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional '*machiya*', or townhouse, developed in the Edo period (1603–1868) as a two-storey wooden structure built on narrow, deep plots. A scale concrete model allows visitors to view the small internal courtyard garden, '*tsuboniwa*', and imagine crossing from living spaces to bedrooms 'in the open' with an umbrella in the rain. Working in London, a city defined by its terraced houses, this notion of external circulation, later picked up by Nishizawa, still feels radical and represents an inspired use of a long deep plot to create an inwardly organised family home.

Ando's contemporaries, Toyo Ito and Itsuko Hasegawa, who had worked for Shinohara, developed houses that pursued a different sensibility while also starkly rejecting the immediate context in which they were situated. Toyo Ito, in White U of 1976, created a house of stark simplicity for his sister, a musicologist, and her children. Private cellular spaces were provided within a rectilinear geometry, but the social living spaces comprised a single, continuous U-shape lit by rooflights. Hasegawa, meanwhile, produced a series of small houses that were complex in their spatial composition, often including a void that could provide an interior where functional and non-functional uses could be flexibly incorporated. Toyo Ito went on, in his own house next door, Silver Hut of 1984, to develop a more complex relationship between interior and exterior

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551700032X Published online by Cambridge University Press

spaces and domesticity, with a vocabulary of industrial elements alongside 'found' and reclaimed objects. These components were combined with a lightness that clearly influenced Kazuyo Sejima, who worked for Ito before producing houses of extraordinary lightness like House in Plum Grove, 2003.

Emerging in the 1990s alongside the collapse of the bubble economy, as a younger generation returned to urban centres, were houses on leftover plots and awkward pieces of land designed to critique the typical suburban Japanese house that characterised the postwar landscape. Waro Kishi's House in Nipponbashi, Osaka, 1992, was built on a site 2.5 m wide and 13 m deep. Its careful use of a limited palette of materials and spatial sophistication was widely praised at the time. I was first made aware of it when I lived in Kobe and worked in Osaka in 1993. Later, when finding the site for my practice's own Gap House in 2005, it was a definitive reference for how to optimise a narrow site.

The experimentation evident in Atelier Bow-Wow's Mini House of 1998 was taken to extremes in Sou Fujimoto's House NA, 2011, whose stacked series of interior and external spaces challenge our notions of domesticity and what constitutes a 'home'. Likewise, Nishizawa's Garden and House, 2013, with its extraordinary stacked garden spaces and lack of walls on an infill site, makes it seem to the Western observer that Japanese houses are built without regard to planning and Building Regulations.

This, along with the notion that homes are temporary in Japan, and the often-repeated statistic that houses last an average of twenty-six years, gives the impression that Japanese domestic architects operate with a freedom unavailable to their contemporaries in the West. It is this sense of experimentation, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a home, that gives Japan's architecture such a freshness. This is what ultimately makes the subject so fascinating and the exhibition such a crowd puller. From an observer's point of view, the genealogical curation and lack of a defined chronology tends to make you question the selection of projects and their relative prominence. Yet, in the final analysis, while the exhibition is inevitably partial and selective in scope, it is to the curators' credit that they created such a compelling exhibition worthy of multiple readings and multiple viewings.

The Japanese House: Architecture and Life After 1945 *ran at MAXXI: National Museum of Twentieth Century Art, Rome, from 9 November 2016 to 26 February 2017 and at the Barbican, London, from 23 March until 25 June 2017.*

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551700032X Published online by Cambridge University Press