Threshold and temporality in architecture

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Part VI

Beauty in space and time
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Practices of movement in Japanese architecture

Ray Lucas

The threshold in architecture is, much as Eisenstein argued for montage in film, one of the key sites of creativity. Often considered simply to be the pragmatic entry into a building or room, thresholds can be much more than this, handled in subtly different ways across the world, and representing a key practice element of architectural space: what behaviours are encouraged or required by architectural agency?

Mediating between one spatial condition and another, the threshold is a crucial element of architecture, representing a much more subtle beauty than the decorative arts or geometric acrobatics which can be argued to be borrowed or appropriated from the other arts. Threshold is a condition wholly of architecture, and is often when the building sings, has something to say in a uniquely architectural manner.

Understanding that the spatial conditions are subject to change is important when considering thresholds. This discussion often begins as a series of dichotomies: inside, outside; public and private. There are of course more than these polarised on/off conditions to consider – and crucially, this is one of the areas where architecture such as Katsura Rikyu excels. By managing a gradated series of spatial conditions from the exterior to the interior, this villa constructs an architecture of threshold, of liminal spaces: whilst at the same time articulating each space as it is encountered.

That one encounters these spaces is at once obvious and fundamentally important: thresholds must be passed through, must be experienced, and it is perhaps a frustration (understandable though it is) that Katsura is inaccessible to the visitor, hints of its qualities passed by. Other sites, do, however, give access: controlling the movement of visitors in a carefully arranged series of steps, doorways, glances outwards, and surface treatments (see Plate 17).

It is well established that there is a mediation of surface in Japanese architecture which persists through to modern examples. The regard for the ground plane is an important aspect of this: the mediation of the ground is treated with a sophistication grounded in both practical and cultural materiality.

The use of tatami as an interior surface is a case in point: the material is strong and durable, but only if shoes are not worn indoors. The mats also have a regular module, which structures space according to a set of dimensions (which vary...
a little by region: Kyoto’s tatami are 955mm × 1910mm, Tokyo tatami being 880mm × 1760mm), allowing rooms to be measured in terms of how many tatami mats they contain. This removal of shoes requires an elaboration of the entry to the home: a stepped area where one can comfortably remove and store outdoor shoes, changing into softer interior slippers. This extends the simplest of entrances, as the habit of leaving shoes off is deeply embedded as a practice of being indoors.

This is present in the humblest of Kyoto ryokan, modern reinforced concrete apartment blocks, and the simple pavilions and grand residences of Katsura villa. Other sites, such as Saiho-ji (also known as Kokedera or the Moss Garden), construct a careful set of practices and behaviours around entry.

Saiho-ji presented me with a particular problem as an architectural writer, representing perfectly the notion of the sublime: about which a great deal has been written, often as an opposite to beauty. When attempting to produce a lecture for students of architecture, I ended up avoiding the topic, finding little to say other than the recommendation ‘you must visit’. Similarly, whilst photographs are helpful records, they do little to communicate the overwhelming sense of green around the slightly damp moss that the garden cultivates so carefully. It was after a more straightforward architectural history lecture on Katsura, that the practice of visiting contributes greatly to its beauty: and that such practices can in general be said to contribute to a general notion of architectural beauty divested from problematic ideas of function and ornament, the consideration of architecture as
a dialogue between people and their environment producing an alternative, non visual sense of beauty.

It is with this in mind that the process of visiting Saiho-ji begins months in advance with an application to the monks who maintain the temple and garden. Notice of permission is later received, giving an appointed date and time. Visitors are greeted at the gate to the sacred precinct, a low rustic timber structure with gravel and stone underfoot. As one is guided towards the Buddhist temple, shoes are removed and slippers worn in an area exposed to the open air and elements, the modest fee is paid, and visitors are handed a map of the site before being encouraged to enter the temple area.

We are then seated, some small concessions being made to the needs of Westerners unaccustomed to sitting cross-legged with a ledge at the rear of the room. It is not significantly more comfortable in my experience than sitting in the main floor, as space is just as constrained per person. In front of each visitor is a small calligraphy table in rose wood, an ink stone, water, stick of ink, and a brush. A sheet of paper with ghost lines of a Buddhist sutra lies on the table, which visitors are prompted to complete.

This sheet is, in itself, an interesting practice: copying a model calligraphy, even in this modest way by retracing established steps.

The monks chant, in a pattern that gradually increases in intensity with drum and bell accompanying the sutra being read out. Those who can follow along do so, carefully copying the marks on the paper. It is only once visitors have completed this task that they are permitted to enter the gardens, freely walking the route. This preparation is essential for entering the garden itself, which defies description in so many ways.

Practices are embedded deeply in Japanese architecture. One of the classical examples of Japanese architecture, the Ise shrine, could be considered to be practice above all, as the structure is hidden behind fences and never open to the public. We know of its existence, of course, and have drawings and photographs of this origin point of Japanese architecture, considered to be without the influence of their great regional power, China.

Ise is rebuilt every 20 years. The shrine has two sites, Naiku and Geku, some 4km apart, and every 20 years, the Shinkinen Sengu ceremony is held where a new shrine is built from freshly felled timber, the old shrine dismantled, and the relics processed from one site to the other. The Ise shrine is almost purely practice, maintaining the right forests for the timber, the skills necessary for felling and construction, and the memory of the ceremonies: all indicate an architecture of practice rather than form, a kind of quantum state in slow motion.

**Katsura Imperial Villa: an open and ambiguous paradigm for architecture**

Paradigm. Thanks to Katsura Imperial Villa at Kyoto, Japan is one of the rare countries in which a major historical monument is a house. In the twentieth century, whereas America and Europe may certainly have produced numerous
domestic architectural masterpieces, Japan alone has attempted to bring about – and indeed achieved – a real and permanent architectural revolution based on a profusion of houses.

(Manuel Tardits 2011: 318)

Katsura Imperial Villa, on the outskirts of Kyoto, is a complex consisting of a villa, various tea houses and pavilions for music, moon viewing, and contemplation all set along a meandering path around a landscaped lake. The meander is deliberate and contemplative, the lake designed for boating and fishing. The combination of austere ascetic elements with rustic features and material use speaks volumes about the ambitions of the complex, which is often discussed as a prototype for Japanese architecture and as a precursor, key paradigm for the development of modernism in the 20th century.

When visiting the villa, I felt that the famous accounts by influential modernist, critical regionalist, and postmodern architects Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius, Tange Kenzo, and Isozaki Arata which I had read had got the place wrong: and that it was instead a prime example of the experiential nature of architecture. My focus was on the careful placement of stepping stones, the variety of ground surfaces which encourage visitors to walk and pause and stand in particular ways in specific places: the sound of the rustling bamboo grove against the cawing crows; the dampness in the air with a carefully maintained, seasonal palette; a calm and isolated oasis. Each transition is careful: paths are designed to engage all of the

Figure 18.1 A range of paving stones from the strolling path highlighting a shift of ground conditions which has an impact upon the body of the visitor
Figure 18.2 The Shokatei pavilion, lifted off the ground and with incremental thresholds described by the various floor treatments.

Figure 18.3 One of the thresholds of the Old Shoin with a transition from smooth and untreated materials towards the carefully planed and orderly modularity of the building. This can be seen as a series of adaptations to interval, from the analogue nature of the raw state of materials towards the measure of the regular timber columns.
senses and to encourage an embodied, peripatetic thinking: this is a poet’s walk, a philosopher’s meander.

This clearly responds to some of my own research interests in the sensory perception of space, the phenomenological experience of being in a given context, the anthropological interest in architecture as it is now, rather than in historical context.

It occurs to me that I was every bit as wrong – and indeed as correct – as Tange, Isozaki, Gropius, and Taut. They each imprint their pre-existing research interests on this philosopher’s path, seeing what they want to see. In many ways Katsura is all and none of these things: it is an open matrix for whichever interpretation you wish to impose.

The point of the current essay is to appreciate Katsura, not as a transparently and systematically organised space in the sense of the modernists, but as a contingent, confused, ambiguous, over-layered, and opaque composition . . . Defined as ‘gorgeous humbleness’.

(Isozaki 2006: 30)

Isozaki furnishes us with some of the key facts of the villa in his essay, noting that it was a staged construction, built in the middle of the 17th century, over the course of around 50 years. The villa was built for the Hachijo Imperial family, princes Toshihito (1579–1629) and Toshitada (1596–1680).

Like many buildings in both Japan and Korea, the history is one which includes some rebuilding and reconstruction: architecture is conceived of as less permanent and fixed, with the reconstructions often hastened by periodic fires, wars, and earthquakes.

One figure who is a part of the story is the garden designer and tea master Kobori Enshu, whom many accounts credit with the design of the villa; but most recent scholarship attributes the site to a disciple or pupil of Enshu: as Enshugomi – being after the taste of Enshu himself. It is safe to assume that the princes of the Hachijo family who commissioned the villa had a role in determining much of the character of the site.

Isozaki further identifies Katsura as stylistically ambiguous, straddling two distinctive periods, and offering opportunity for the many multiple readings of the site which are possible.

Indeed, it is this multiplicity of meaning which drives my interest in the Rikyu, the detached palace. As a series of pavilions set within a stroll garden, the villa invites the visitor to think, to consider poetry and philosophy whilst walking its carefully articulated paths. Katsura, together with the Ise shrine, the great gate at Nara, and the Tokugawa shrine at Nikko, are held up as the classic works of traditional Japanese architecture.

One of the key factors in bringing Katsura to wider interest is its role in the formation of modernism. Two key figures visited the villa: Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius. They found in Katsura an alternative model for architecture to those found in Europe: and one which would prove highly influential.
This influence was highlighted in publications of the work of photographer Ishimoto Yasuhiro. Several publications have edited the same set of photographs in radically different ways: editing out the sensuous curved roofs, demonstrating only the austerity of surface, horizontality, and clear geometry. As we shall see later, this is contentious – particularly with the photographer, who republished the entire set after Tange Kenzo, a key Japanese modernist architect, edited and cropped Ishimoto’s work to better fit his own narrative, when Tange had initially been asked by the photographer to provide an essay to contextualise the importance of the villa rather than to take charge of the entire publication as he did.

I would like to treat Katsura as a textual space and therein detect a polysemy of architecture . . . I would especially like to take up the elements that stressed the flamboyant and acrobatic design tendency of the later renovations. Though hated by modernists, these elements are indispensable to Katsura.

(Isozaki 2006: 10)

The idea of the building as a text is crucial to understand here: it is a common form of theorisation of architecture and particularly helpful for understanding architectural history as operative and embedded in the design process rather than a sequence of verifiable facts. Each reader of the text can take their own meaning from it, interpreting it in ways appropriate to their argument.

Bruno Taut visited Katsura in 1933, a much larger undertaking than it would be today, as Japan was only relatively recently opened up to the West from its period of sakoku, ending forcibly in 1858. This was not a journey to be taken lightly, arriving from Siberia, and gaining access to the site which was not open to the public, but which he was taken to by the nascent and embattled Japanese International Architectural Association, devoted to the propagation of modernist architecture against the prevailing teikan style preferred by the Nationalist government of the time. Modernism wasn’t to fully take hold in Japan until after World War II with the unique version. Katsura was to dominate Taut’s thoughts throughout his three and a half years in Japan.

Japan offered an opportunity for understanding otherness and difference quite different from exoticism and Orientalism.

Taut studiously avoids declaring Katsura as the model directly. Isozaki finds a single example:

The entire arrangement, from whichever side one might care to look at it, always followed elastically in all its divisions the purpose of which each one of the parts as the whole had to accomplish, the aim of being that of common and normal utility.

(Taut in Isozaki 2006: 13)

The politics of modernism are bound up in Taut’s approach to Katsura: that he fled Germany due to the left wing associations of modernism alongside the anti-historical stance taken by the Japanese chapter of the movement. Taut’s intervention
Ray Lucas

changed the path of modernism, leading to Tange Kenzo’s postwar interest in Katsura as a foundation for the new Japanese architecture.

Some of the terms of Japanese architecture are useful in understanding the interplay of styles within Katsura. In the early 17th century, two styles are noted as coexisting by Isozaki:

*Shoin Zukuri* was developed in the medieval period, based on the temple quarters of samurai and a priest classes. This style has a distinctive proportioning system called *kiwari*, noted for its rigour and often compared to the classical orders.

*Shoin* = orderly

*Sukiya* = disorderly

*Sukiya Zukuri* by contrast was a commoner style, a vernacular architecture more often found in tea houses and homes. The relationship with the carpenter is more collaborative in this style, which is less rule based and more open, more free.

Katsura employs both styles freely. Interestingly, it is not the case that one building is peasant style and another noble, but rather a building might appear in plan as *shoin* whilst the elevation has elements of *sukiya*. The major buildings of the villa complex are named *shoin*, and conform to the proportioning system in plan. Elevationally, however, there is often a freedom and wilfulness in decorative approach. Japanese aesthetics has numerous ways of describing the interstices described by a proportioning system such as is found in *shoin* architecture.

*Ma*: interval, such as a silence between notes in music or the gaps in between lines of poetry. It could relate to montage, and is said to relate to the stepping stones, *tobiishi*, found in aristocratic gardens.

*Ken*: related to the alternative reading of the kanji ideogram for *ma*, this is. A more practical measure of length: approximately 1.8m centre to centre between posts. This measure can vary depending on the region and tradition, but is most closely associated with Buddhism imported from China and later adapted into Japanese variations.

*Tatami*: the familiar bamboo matting which is used as a floor covering. Rooms are often measured in terms of how many tatami mats they consist of. A tea house is typically four and a half tatami, the *kokonoma* (nine-ma) reception room for a palace consisting of nine mats.

*Kūkan*: space, volume, considered by some architectural thinkers to be absent in Japanese thinking about architecture. Kūkan is conceptualised as an assemblage of planar elements which offer the potential for collapse and dismantlement: a different term from the flighty kokū.

*Kokū*: fleeting emptiness, an impermanent notion of space which includes the temporality of occupation, the duration of presence within a space. This concept has a relationship to absence – that a presence is notably missing.

(adapted from Tardits [2011: 287–290])
Tardits goes on to state the difference between Japanese concepts of space and those of the West as follows:

Japan developed a system of building made up of static units, each one a parallelepiped, independently linked in horizontal series but based on a sequence of related intervals, or *ma*, able to scan the room itself but also the positioning of room to room within the whole; spacing that also extends, naturally and seamlessly, well beyond the individual structure.

(Tardits 2011: 290)

This is more than an academic discussion of aesthetics: it speaks to the wider politics of the time, with the Imperial family weakened by the power of the Tokugawa shogunate in Edo (now Tokyo). The struggles for power between the Samurai class and the aristocracy of the Imperial family have marked Japan’s military, social, political, and artistic histories. Indeed, in 1615, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate decreed that the activities of the Imperial court be restricted to the arts and sciences.

Saito insisted that Katsura could not be deemed a development from one style like *shoin* to another, but a pure cohabitation or mix. He defined Katsura as ‘soan-like shoin’ or ‘handsome tatami parlor’ (*kirei zasheki*), which basically means a *shoin* with improvised decorative elements.

(Isozaki 2006: 18)

The plan of the *shoin* at Katsura reflects its iterative construction, an accumulation rather than a single architectural act.

1  *Koshoin* – with moon viewing platform (*tsukimidai*)
2  *Chushoin* – transparent *shoji* screens and ink painted *fusuma* screens
3  *Gakkinoma* – music pavilion
4  *Shingoten* – *chigaidana* shelves and cabinetry: opacity of space

These major moves all face the garden, but in a staggered arrangement in plan as well as section – with steps up and down enhancing the threshold effects between wings of the *shoin*; this arrangement, similar to the placement of utensils in the tea ceremony, is known as the *flying geese (ganko) formation*. Each room has a main space and a service area: a hidden route for the household servants and attendants being used to conceal their movements from the nobility. The arrangement is produced to enhance the views of the pond and reflections in the water, with the setbacks themselves also producing a depth and prospect distinctive from that of Western axial perspective: the effect here is one of layering. *Shoji* screens are used to carefully demarcate space and allow temporal occupation and are translucent enough to allow light into the plan.

The strategy of vistas is particularly important to the garden. Each of the tea houses and pavilions is designed to frame the gaze, to encourage or afford a certain view of the garden and the other villa structures. The garden is deliberately
constructed so that one cannot grasp it all at once. This recalls the terminology for describing space in Japanese aesthetics which always includes a notion of temporality or direction: space is a kind of trajectory or line of flight rather than an abstract concept.

Nezu Museum as a threshold

The Nezu Museum in central Tokyo is a private collection of premodern works including Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, lacquerware, pottery, and sculpture which opened in 1940, later housed in a new building by Kuma Kengo Architects in 2009. Kuma’s new building has a relationship with the site’s mature garden which showcases many of the religious sculptures collected by industrialist Nezu Kaichiro during his lifetime.

The building’s context is important, being the grounds of the family residence, complete with landscaping, iris pond, and several tea houses. More than this, however, is the wider neighbourhood of Aoyama, which is home to a large concentration of Japanese and international designer clothing brands. The boutiques which line the street towards the museum have been designed by a roll call of contemporary architectural stars, with statement-piece spectacles being the order of the day: two storey structures which serve as brand identity for client and architect alike.

The Nezu Museum must thus quieten things down substantially, opting for a modest gateway which immediately turns the visitor 90° to the right, down a dark bamboo lined grove with heavy eaves overhead. A second turn, to the left, presents the visitor with the entrance to the museum itself: already separated from the bustle of Tokyo. The museum itself is a kind of transitory zone which mediates between Tokyo and the gardens beyond, however. The thresholds often employ turns here, deflecting the path of the visitor and directing their gaze in a carefully choreographed manner, all until the garden is reached. It might seem that paths are more prescribed in the undulating garden, but the paths fork in a pleasing manner, giving some agency back to the visitor in terms of what to look at and how long to linger.

Similar to the gardens at Katsura, this is a garden for reflection and contemplation. Frustratingly, the pavilions are off limits, but the site resists a totalising image, and cannot be apprehended all at once. The garden, then, demands an ambulatory exploration: it once again has an embedded practice. The careful placement of flagstones, uneven steps, and winding routes all contribute to ensure the visitor is mindful of every footfall. All the while, other visitors make their own way around, never remaining in sight for long.

Conclusion: architecture as social relationship

The idea of an architecture of practice and agency is clearly not restricted to Japanese architecture, and certainly not to those cited as classical examples by key architects and theorists: but they do represent particularly strong examples of a long tradition of architectural design which embeds this attitude through thresholds and paths. Architectural aesthetics has long been considered as a branch of
art history, as a sequence of styles and influences: biographies of key figures and movements. Whilst this remains an important activity, further differentiated by histories of ideas and materials, the recent trends in tracing the effective epidemiology of modernism and shifts in architectural knowledge production from carpenters, masons, and monks through to the development of the studio and professional practice are increasingly specialist and narrow in focus. Alternative discussions of architecture and beauty must take place in anthropology, and this is where a discourse of people and their habitual and practiced interactions with space over a period of time must be held: a spatial or architectural anthropology in which the issues of how we construct places both materially and socially are the central concern.

Such spatial practices are most clearly visible in threshold spaces and paths: the connecting routes around a space and assemblages for altering the nature of space from one side of a gate, step, or doorway to another. Stretching these conditions out embeds more into the practice, a wholly architectural beauty which describes the subtle formal cues which differentiate one sense of place from another.

Saiho-ji establishes a clear and formal ritual element in its threshold where visitors must participate in a set of activities before gaining access to the Moss Garden. Katsura has a more bureaucratic procedure ahead of an arranged tour, but the carefully managed ground plane and stopping points still offer breathtaking and careful architectural qualities stripped back to their most clear and simple roots. The care with which steps into the main villa buildings are handled demonstrates a discipline tied to material understanding and careful stratification of space beyond the simple inside/outside, public/private dichotomies which dominate Western writing on the topic. Learning from these lessons, contemporary architect Kuma Kengo demonstrates a continuing concern for the threshold condition in his recent works. The Nezu Museum is a case in point, as it uses devices of deflecting, turning, translucency, and occluding to take the visitor out of the city of Tokyo and into a self-contained garden. This references Japanese traditional architecture in form and material, but in a distinctively modern manner, unafraid of bringing the tradition of architecture up to date.

Notes
1 See, in particular, Eisenstein (1991) where this theory of montage is explored through a series of essays establishing the foundations of film theory for years to come.
3 Masuda Susumu gives a detailed catalogue of these in his ‘Anatomical Chart of Homes’ (2009), part of a practical series of handbooks for designers which gives the appropriate dimensions for the various parts of the home: including the shoe closet and step arrangement common to Japanese houses.
4 It is worth noting that the moss growth was not initially intended, but the result of an earlier Zen rock garden being left untended due to lack of funds: the resulting moss was so highly regarded as to be maintained in its meticulous current form since the Meiji era.
(19th century). The temple itself has a history of building and rebuilding, with a Nara era temple (eighth century) superseded by Soseki’s Rinzai Zen monastery of 1339. The temple buildings have been rebuilt several times due to war, fire, and floods. See Treib & Herman (2003:110–117).


6 Notably the recent 62nd shrine rebuilding photographed at every stage from the felling of trees through to completion by Masaaki Miyazawa (2015).

7 Japanese names are written in original order throughout: Surname, Forename.

8 This is elaborated further by Saito Yuriko (2013), describing the stepping stones as ‘invitations’ to both slow down and to appreciate the feel of the garden underfoot.

9 The spaces of the actual museum are relatively conventional, behaving rationally and displaying the objects in a controlled manner. The palette of materials is noteworthy, however, as Kuma experiments with bamboo screens, fabric, and paper for different types of translucency, all against dark grey metal and slate coloured tiles. The building does not offer an ‘iconic’ view, and is not visible as a totality, rather necessitating a meander, a walk.

References


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