Inescapable Tradition: Discursive Constructions of Japanese Architecture

Indicative of the period, Robin Boyd launched New Directions in Japanese Architecture (1968) considering “the inescapable tradition.” Using frameworks that continue to inform accounts of Japanese developments, Boyd reinforced understanding of Japanese architecture as a mediation of modern technologies and approaches with Japanese traditions, techniques and sensibilities. This paper combines Michel Foucault’s discourses and archaeologies with Hayden White’s narrative structures and Irit Rogoff’s criticality in a critical historiography of the discursive construction of tradition in English language accounts of Japanese architecture after World War II. It examines how a cross-section of key survey texts have narrated Japanese architecture through tropes of tradition, across the congealing of discourses in the 1950s and 1960s, perpetuation in the 1980s and diffusion at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This study foregrounds discursive practices and representational strategies that continue to shape expectations for and readings of modern Japanese architecture. Historiographic traditions may be institutionalised through repetition and naturalised thorough reception, becoming “inescapable,” but following Stanford Anderson “we should acquaint ourselves with our traditions – in order that we may use those traditions more eloquently or free ourselves from them as we see fit.” Regardless of whether Japanese architects can escape incorporation of native traditions or architectural historians and critics can escape the conventions of discursive traditions, familiarisation can facilitate freedoms and foster eloquence. While focused on Japanese architecture (hi)stories the paper raises issues with broader implications for the institutionalisation of discursive practices within architectural history.
Discursive formations and frameworks

Discursive analyses introduced by Michel Foucault and Hayden White provide a foundation for investigating the post-World War II discursive construction of Japanese architectural history in surveys disseminated in English. Irit Rogoff helps frame this critical historiography, which illuminates a prevailing trope of tradition shaping historical representations of Japanese architecture. Examining a cross section of key modern Japanese architectural surveys highlights discourses that have been institutionalised in the accounting of Japanese architecture and provides a platform for questioning alternatives.

Following Foucault, discourse identifies “the forms of representation, codes, conventions and habits of language that produce specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings.” While discursive practices provide “historically and culturally specific set of rules for organising and producing different forms of knowledge … [and] allow certain statements to be made.” Foucault introduced archeological and genealogical methods for examining discourses. Drawing on Colin Koopman’s assessment of Foucault, this analysis follows archaeologies in exploring the specific production of a discourse shaping architectural knowledge production. This examination does not follow genealogical ambitions to explicate convoluted relations of power and knowledge animating discourses of Japanese architecture or why discourses assume certain forms.

Panayotis Tournikiotis’ The Historiography of Modern Architecture (1999) and Anthony Vidler’s Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism (2008) represent two fruitful examples of applying Foucauldian lenses. The texts elucidated how various architectural historians constructed modern architecture from their particular subject positions and reinforced that the discipline of architectural history has been formed through discursive practices. Foucault helped raise awareness of how knowledge was formulated and perpetuated through disciplining and discursive practices. These efforts provide a basis for examining how knowledge of Japanese architecture disseminated in English has been repeatedly organised in relation to tradition, forming a discourse that has institutionalised particular understanding of Japanese architecture within its (hi)stories.

Hayden White provided a complimentary form of discursive analysis. White examined the rhetorical and narrative structures forming historical discourse. He identified typologies of narrative forms used as the backbone of historical explanations. He equated historical writing with storytelling parsed into modes of emplotment, modes of argument and modes of ideological implication. He subdivided mode of emplotment (story forms) into romantic, tragic, comic, and satirical approaches. Mode of argument (the point) was split into formist, mechanist, organicist and contextualist positions. Mode of ideological implication (relations to social change) included anarchist, radical, conservative and liberal outlooks. Through an examination of nineteenth-century European historical texts White further demonstrated that explanatory strategies relied on established poetic structures, identifying Metaphor (representational), Metonymy (reductionist), Synecdoche (integrative) and Irony (negational) as the primary tropes employed in historical explanation. White argued:
the historian’s problem is to construct a linguistic protocol, complete with lexical, grammatical, syntactical and semantic dimensions, by which to characterise the field and its elements in his own terms (rather than in the terms in which they come labeled in the documents themselves), and thus to prepare them for the explanation and representation he will subsequently offer them in his narrative … the historian both creates his object of analysis and predetermines the modality of the conceptual strategy he will use to explain it.5

This paper demonstrates the consistency of predetermined explanatory strategies with sensitivity to their rhetorical structures, considering the discourses and discursive strategies shaping the (hi)stories of Japanese architecture. Expanding White’s notion of trope, following a broader understanding of the term as a commonly recurring rhetorical device, this paper argues that the mediation of tradition in Japanese architecture is a consistent trope that has shaped the historical imagination of Japanese architecture.

Highlighting the importance of considering the form and content of historical writing, Réjean Legault provided one of the few applications of White’s productive frameworks to architectural history. Legault reinforced that architectural history is constituted through discourse “in the text of the writer and its manipulation of literary language and conventions” and stressed production of history as a construction.6 He contended: “a critical reading of historiography in architecture would then have to take into account not only the factual and interpretive position of the work, but also its literary dimension: the plot, the characters, the narrative conventions, and its rhetoric of argumentation.”7 In our media saturated contemporary context, we might also add images to the list, demanding critical attention to content, textual and visual forms of historical argument and explanation. White raised awareness of how narratives of history were constructed and represented. Applying his discursive categories illuminates the narrative construction of Japanese architecture accompanying the institutionalisation of discourses and tropes.

Foucault and White both exemplified Rogoff’s championing of criticality, which informs this examination of the discursive formulation of Japanese architecture as a critical historiography. She described:

the project of ‘critique’ which negated that of ‘criticism’ through numerous layers of poststructuralist theory and the linked spheres of sexual difference and post colonialism, has served as an extraordinary examination of all of the assumptions and naturalised values and thought structures that have sustained the inherited truth claims of knowledge. Critique, in all of its myriad complexities has allowed us to unveil, uncover and critically re-examine the convincing logics and operations of such truth claims.8

She further argued for advancing beyond the external position of critiquing to a more complex engagement of “criticality” in which “we are both fully armed with the knowledges [sic] of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the
very conditions which we are able to see through." Rogoff reinforced the need to maintain criticality of historical constructions while actively participating in their production. In addition to supporting the need for reflexive criticality, the paper shares Foucault’s aim of illuminating “how we have contingently formed ourselves so as to make available the materials we would need to constitute ourselves otherwise.”

Similarly, the primary motivation for this exploration follows Stanford Anderson’s consideration of the notion of tradition in architecture and his conclusions: “we should acquaint ourselves with our traditions – in order that we may use those traditions more eloquently or free ourselves from them as we see fit.” Discourses on tradition have played a major role in the truth claims constructing Japanese architecture, exemplified by Arata Isozaki’s Japaness in Architecture (2006) and Robin Boyd’s “The Inescapable Tradition” in New Directions in Japanese Architecture (1968). Regardless of whether Japanese architects can escape incorporation of native traditions or historians and critics can escape the conventions of discursive traditions, familiarisation with such traditions can facilitate freedoms and foster eloquence.

Rogoff’s critical approaches combined with Foucault’s questioning of what is an author?, prods continual reflection on the disciplinary construction of architectural historians. However, unlike the readily identifiable figures in Tournikiotis and Vidler’s examinations of modern architectural histories, the specialist subset of Japanese architectural historians is a very small group. The majority of authors writing surveys of modern Japanese architecture were not trained (disciplined) as architectural historians. White’s narrative conventions may still apply despite the fact that the English language (hi)stories of Japanese architecture have been forged by diverse authors – architects, curators, critics, historians, journalists et al. – who collectively contributed to the historical discursive construction of Japanese architecture.

Tropes of tradition in modern Japanese architecture

Modern architects, such as Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius, discovered and promoted kernels of modernism they identified in traditional Japanese architecture. Conversely, since World War II, international publications have sought inherent traditions in Japanese modern architecture, drawing influence from the global reception of Junzo Sakakura’s 1937 Paris Expo pavilion, which famously integrated modern styles and technologies with abstractions of Japanese traditional elements, and texts such as Kenzo Tange’s Ise Prototype of Japanese Architecture (1965). This paper examines how authors of modern survey texts have discursively constructed Japanese architecture through tropes of tradition, focusing primarily on congealing of discourses in the 1950s and 1960s, perpetuation in the 1980s and diffusion at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Architecture of Japan (1955) by Arthur Drexler, who was the curator of the associated exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was one of the earliest post-World War II Japanese architectural histories in English. Drexler highlighted both kernels of relevant
modernism in traditional Japanese architecture and the incorporation of tradition in the emerging Japanese modern architecture. The catalogue traced developments from ancient times to the present (c.1952). The text was organised into four sections covering 1) cultural background including environmental and religious influences; 2) principles of structure and design; 3) exemplary buildings and gardens from shrines, temples and palaces to fifteen recent projects; 4) introduction of the full scale Japanese house constructed in the MoMA courtyard as part of the exhibition. In White’s terms, Drexler’s (hi)story was formist demonstrating unique characteristics and contextualist relating works to religious practices, environments and customs. The narratives were tragic ending on a somber note and a conservative documentation of slow progressive change culminating in current conditions.

Drexler reiterated Taut and Gropius claiming the relevance of Japanese architectural traditions to modern Western practice is well known, from skeleton frames to open interiors. He noted that modern architecture in Japan developed following Western precedents, but that recently younger architects were sympathetically returning to traditional values. He argued “in Japan more than in other countries the tradition of pre-industrial building offers much that the modern architect finds sympathetic and useful,” while suggesting that Japanese architects had an easier time maintaining continuity with the past. Yet, Drexler selectively bracketed past Japanese architecture to highlight the simplicity lauded by Taut while glossing over and belittling the ostentatious traditions exemplified by the Nikko Toshogu. Drexler upheld particular traditions and demonstrated their integration in the first three generations of Japanese modern architects represented by Sutemi Horiguchi, Junzo Sakakura and Kenzo Tange.

*Contemporary Architecture of Japan* (1954) by Shinji Koike represented an early Japanese author in English and set precedents for presenting Japanese architecture. Professor Koike was an academic member of the *Werkbund* inspired *Nihon Kosaku Bunka Remmei* group promoting Japanese design. His text focused on post-World War II examples prefaced by a historical account of architectural developments since modernisation in the Meiji period (1868-1912). The bilingual tome was organised by building type with several examples of public, commercial, social, cultural and residential projects. He also included brief biographical sketches of the architects. His historical narrative was contextualist, a romantic portrayal of transcendence and a liberal orientation to future improvements based on technology and rationalism.

In the preface, Koike noted that Japan possessed hereditary aspects of modernism that might assist in advancing modern architecture, but cautioned “old things cannot be used as they are; it would require a great deal of creative power in order that full justice be done to old tradition in our efforts to derive new meaning therefrom [sic].” Koike maintained that the projects he included represented new Japanese approaches to modern society and revealed “the Japanese reflection upon her geographical condition and cultural tradition, that was reached only after the minute study of Western technics [sic],” concluding “here we see the courageous steps toward the creation of Tradition of Tomorrow.” Whereas Drexler strategically traced distant past traditions culminating in modern Japanese approaches
Koike outlined an abbreviated context and exemplified the advancement of contemporary architecture and society tethered to and transforming traditions.

*New Japanese Architecture* (1960/67) by Udo Kultermann, who was an art and architecture historian examining a variety of topics, represented an early contribution to serialised documentation of global architectural developments. Kultermann followed Koike in organising projects by building type and introducing a range of architects, but Kultermann included a broader range of types contextualised with an introductory essay framing the development of each type and included extensive biographies for contributing architects. Kultermann echoed Drexler in threading his synoptic historical overview back to ancient times, dividing his introductory text into “fundamentals” and “problems and solutions.” Kultermann’s narrative was contextualist and organicist linking particular events to synthetic processes. His story was comic, culminating with a healthier balance of influences, and maintained a liberal orientation to future improvements.

The cover flap summary of the book noted that the pre-World War II process of “adapting new techniques to national tradition” was resumed after the war when young architects “relearned the lessons of the international masters and reinterpreted their own heritage.” Kultermann argued that Japanese architecture exemplified a sensitive regional modernism and was “the expression of Japan’s dual condition, of the ties with what are now recognised as feudal and Imperialist traditions and the expression of the search after new unfamiliar forms of a socially committed imagination.” While enforcing the tradition-modernity dichotomy, Kultermann sought to break the dichotomy of simplicity and ostentation upheld by Drexler, claiming Japanese architects were drawing from both the refined tradition exemplified by tea houses and Katsura and from the traditions of majestic temples exemplified by Nikko. While broadening the repertoire of relevant traditions Kultermann continued to reinforce connections to native urban and architectural heritage.

*New Japanese Architecture* (1969) by Egon Tempel, who was an architect/critic that also wrote *New Finnish Architecture* (1968), continued the model of typological presentation of post-World War II developments set in a context linked back to ancient shrines and temple developments. Expanding Koike and Kultermann, the bilingual English/German volume distinguished between single and multi-family dwellings and added a brief section on town planning. Tempel also eschewed including biographies celebrating individual architects. His text recounted a familiar narrative of architectural development from Meiji westernisation through pre-war modern German and Corbusian influences to post-war reorientation and Metabolism. His story was formist, romantic and conservative.

The cover flap summary of the book began “Japanese architecture since the 1950’s has been remarkable for its successful synthesis of Japan’s ancient indigenous architecture and the modern architecture of the West.” The introduction, written by Norio Nishimura and Tempel, outlined the 1910 debates on architectural traditions and appropriate Japanese style, and contended that increasing attention was paid to Japanese traditions in the post-war period. However, they upheld a distinction between progressives synthesising modern and
indigenous traditions and conservative traditionalists prone to historicist cliché. Throughout the text they highlighted ways specific architects drew on tradition including: Togo Murano’s mix of functionalism and native motifs, Kiyoshi Seike’s adoption of spatial concepts, Tange’s reinterpretation of construction techniques and Isozaki’s allusions to construction systems, which was visually demonstrated by juxtaposing images of Isozaki’s 1962 housing project and a detail of brackets from a Buddhist temple.

New Directions in Japanese Architecture (1968) by Robin Boyd, who was an Australian architect/critic that had previously written on Tange at Gropius’ behest, broke with the tradition of typological expositions of Japanese architecture. Instead Boyd’s book presented three thematic essays followed by an introduction of 14 architects and their exemplary projects. The architects were not organised in chronological order but were grouped by Metabolists, “anti-Metabolists” (Yokoyama, Shinohara, Ashihara), elder pre-war modernists (Yoshimura, Sakakura, Maekawa and Murano) and Tange as a pinnacle of Japanese architecture. Boyd’s essayist style differed from White’s historical narratives, but could be classified as formist identification of unique attributes with added generalisable implications, romantic portrayal of hero architects and liberal belief in future improvement.

The cover flap summary of the book explained that Boyd discovered reasons for the growth and international recognition of modern Japanese architecture in “the inescapable if indirect influences of Japan’s great architectural traditions.” Boyd argued “almost every step the modern Japanese takes shows his awareness of tradition and his deliberate attempt to rid himself of shallow imitation of it.” For Boyd, Murano was a pioneer in combining traditional and modern and Tange a master. Though Boyd favored the modern simplicity identified in Japanese traditions by Drexler, and others, he followed Kultermann and expanded the range of relevant traditional influences to include forms, shapes, techniques, textures and character shaped by historical, social, religious or geographical factors. Boyd acknowledged diversity amongst the architects he carefully curated, but maintained that they represented “an aesthetic kinship” demonstrating “Architects’ Modern or the new Japan Style.”

Echoing the post-war proliferation of interest and publications, the next wave of modern Japanese architectural (hi)stories emerged in the 1980s. Contemporary Architecture of Japan 1958-1984 (1985) by Hiroyuki Suzuki and Reyner Banham, both architectural historians, continued the tale of evolving architecture and tropes and discourses of tradition. Their volume contained two introductory essays followed by exemplary projects by leading figures and culminated with extensive biographies of the architects included. They organised 92 projects, of varying types, roughly chronologically to represent shifts from the “Aureate Generation” to the “Taking-off Generation” to the “Superficial Generation.” The framing essays could be characterised as contextualist, comic and liberal.

Suzuki’s introductory essay set the context of historical developments since 1955. From the outset he positioned Tange and Hiroshi Oe as the edges containing the diverse flow of architecture related to tradition. Tange represented the proliferation of major projects extending traditional values and shaping Japanese modernism. Oe reflected steady stylistic
development in the quest for formal expression combining traditional culture and modern civilisation. Suzuki also identified a global shift to interest in history and style, local, popular and play that accompanied postmodern developments and speculated on their implications. Banham’s essay speculated on Japanese influence on world architecture. He invoked various notions of tradition, even noting “the word tradition has unavoidably occurred several times in this essay,” followed by further use of the term. For Banham Japan’s traditions of timber architecture and associated concepts of harmony of parts, logics of structure and symbolic strategies were distinguishing features that enabled Japanese architects to think and create stimulating alternatives that advanced world architecture.

Suzuki and Banham also located their tracing of generational shifts in relation to tradition. The Aureate Generation was described as destined to pursue modern and traditional Japanese architecture and vigorously debated the expression of tradition in the 1950s. They explained the Taking-off Generation did not have a formalistic view of tradition and believed in reducing tradition to abstract and spatial relationships. They claimed the Superficial Generation “acquired the ability to impartially blend and balance Japanese and international architectural styles.” Suzuki and Banham upheld discursive practices orienting to tradition across the evolution of modern Japanese architecture.

The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture (1987), by architectural historian David Stewart, provided an episodic chronological account of architectural developments from Meiji to the mid-1980s focused on style and space. Across ten bracketed chapters, Stewart traced 100 years of modern history from the Victorian foundations of Meiji westernised architecture to Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan to pre-war modernism to comparisons of Arata Isozaki and Kazuo Shinohara. His narrative was contextualist, tragic and conservative. Stewart’s narratives emphasised evolving style debates and spatial configurations, but was unable to escape from tradition. He elaborated on the pre-war contestation of appropriate Japanese style, briefly introduced by Tempel, and the negotiation of native traditions and international modern developments. He traced new dialogues with tradition in post-war architecture through architects such as Tange, Kunio Maekawa and Kiyoshi Seike, echoing Suzuki and Banham’s Aureate Generation. He also examined the development of approaches to traditions of Japanese space through Isozaki and Shinohara, who represented Suzuki and Banham’s Taking-off Generation and Botond Bognar’s New Wave.

Bognar’s Contemporary Japanese Architecture (1985) was the first chronological historical narrative of post-war Japanese architecture, even though Bognar was a writer/architect. Echoing Drexler, Bognar began with a section on cultural traditions that covered religious, aesthetic, residential, architectural and urban traditions. He set the context for contemporary work, briefly surveying the development of modern architecture from Meiji to pre-war European influence and from post-war revival of traditions via Sakakura and Tange to the decline of CIAM. Bognar traced reactions to modernism in Japan since the 1960s across functionalism, structuralism, Metabolists, contextualism, symbolism and mannerism. Then he introduced a diversity of approaches representing the pluralism of
“postmodern” architectural production since the early 1970s. Bognar’s narrative was formist and contextualist, tragic and had a liberal orientation to the future.

Bognar oriented his narrative to the evolution of modernism, but discourses on tradition remained operative. In the foreword, Isozaki highlighted an ongoing relationship between “the modern (primarily foreign) and the traditional (primarily Japanese)” noting that mediation of these was an architectural goal since the 1930s.27 Isozaki declared: “achievements stem from the recurring mediation between modernisation and tradition in Japan. This is the one and only way to understand, without exoticism and mystification, contemporary architecture in a peculiar but great country, Japan.”28 Bognar reiterated: “the present architectural evolution … is to a large degree derived from tradition” and “the generation of the New Wave is in the self-conscious process of retaining or reestablishing … a subtle link with the past.”29 The foreword and introductory chapters framed all subsequent developments in relation to traditions and Bognar drew connections between contemporary, modern and traditional practices throughout the text.

Although the production of modern architectural surveys slowed, prominent discourses on tradition continued to shape Japanese architectural (hi)stories. For example, New Architecture in Japan (2010) by Yuki Sumner and Naomi Pollock extended the legacy of building type surveys and began with a framing essay “The Residue of Japan-ness,” which was formist, romantic and liberal.30 Dana Buntrock’s Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Japanese Architecture (2010), subtitled “tradition and today,” continued the curatorial approaches of Boyd, Suzuki and Banham. Her focused analysis of architects’ positions and projects followed formist, romantic and liberal narrative structures. The volume, as noted on the back cover, examined “how tradition is incorporated into contemporary Japanese architecture … offer new insights into expressions of tradition.”31 Acknowledging pluralism and a gradation of approaches, Buntrock introduced a range of twenty-first century architects and exemplary projects “embodying a reflective response to tradition, establishing a range of regionalisms, representing differing perspectives on the relationship between past and present.”32 From post-war modernism to postmodernism to contemporary pluralism the discursive practices of tradition have persisted.

This survey of key survey texts illuminated a tradition of tradition discourses in the historical construction of modern Japanese architecture. Tange believed tradition “should act like a catalytic agent to create something new, but the traditional form or inspiration should not be visible in the finished product.”33 However, Boyd astutely noted: “to a Western viewer, the big question of modern Japanese design is whether certain qualities of traditional Japanese architecture have been retained, developed, or neglected by contemporary architects.”34 Since World War II the same questioning continued, institutionalising particular discursive constructions. The cross section of texts examined in this paper illuminated the prevalence of formist and contextualist arguments and liberal orientation, and demonstrated that regardless of author, organisational strategies or narrative structures forming the (hi)stories the discursive practices surrounding tradition have organised the production of knowledge on modern Japanese architecture. Highlighting the prevalence of the tradition discourse
exposes naturalised values, thought structures and inherited truth claims sustaining historical accounts. Illuminating these discursive constructions provides resources for re-examination and constituting things otherwise. For those documenting the development of Japanese architecture tradition may not be escapable, but at least tradition should be used self-consciously with criticality.

Broadening implications

This organicist, satirical, radical (in White’s terms) brief historiographic narrative showed that tradition is an institution in the discursive construction of Japanese architecture, with limited change. Examination of this particular discursive practice in the historiography of modern Japanese architecture in English also raises generalisable questions. What alternative discursive frameworks might be useful to illuminate developments and open other ways of thinking and knowing Japanese architecture? Is the Japanese experience with the institutionalisation of tradition discourses indicative of Asian or non-Western architecture (hi)stories? For any given period, style or region what are the key discursive frameworks shaping their historical analysis and reception? How can we acquaint ourselves with our disciplinary traditions and institutions with criticality so that we can recognise discursive practices and structures and use them more eloquently, or free ourselves to construct our (hi)stories differently?

4 Similarly, Sarah Williams Goldhagen has argued for reframing understanding of modern architecture from style to discourse, but relied on Habermasian notions of discourse rather than Foucault. See Sarah Williams Goldhagen, “Something to Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style” JSAH 64, no. 2 (June 2005): 144-166.
7 Legault, “Architecture and Historical Representation,” 204.
9 Irí Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality.”


For example, the same publisher produced volumes on new German, Italian and British architecture. Similarly, Kultermann wrote *New Directions in African Architecture* (1969) in the same series that Boyd wrote on Japan.


See also Philip Goad, “Robin Boyd and the Post-war ‘Japanization of Western Ideas’,” *Architectural Theory Review* 1, no. 2 (November 1996): 110-120.


