

Studies on Small Architectural Practices in Japan



Project summary:

The field of Architecture within the Asian region has always been significantly decorated with names from the land of the rising sun. We are proud to have known names like Kenzo Tange and Fumihiko Maki amongst others, and looking towards the near future, there are many emerging architectural practices that are paving the way towards the next generation of Japanese contemporary architecture.

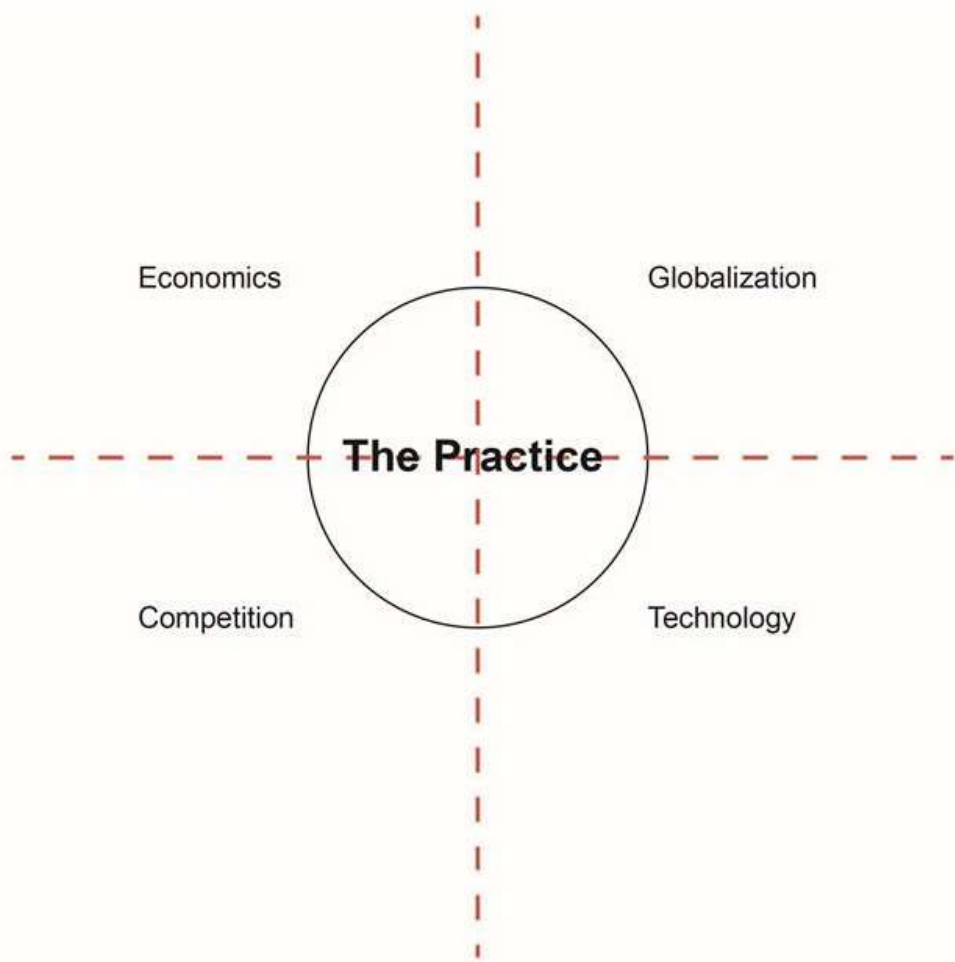
The project aims to shed light in the inner workings and thinking of architecture practitioners in Japan, by understanding what drives them forward within the context of the 21st century contemporary Japanese Architecture. The outcome of this project should be used as a guide for other architecture practices across the Asian region.

So why are we looking to Japan?

As we move into the 21st century, the economics and environment of the region began to see significant changes. Issues of cross referencing, open-sourcing, and the economics of sharing has become the driver into ushering the economics of the new millennia.

The question now is how does new architectural practice can still be relevant to this different climate within the architectural profession?

Looking back into history, with the proud list of an overall 7 recipients of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, we can confirm that Japan has the most successful and well recognise architectural practices within the region. All of these renowned names started out as small practices across cities in Japan, and they eventually grew to become one of the pioneers within the respective field of Architecture.



Architectural Practice in the 21st Century

The Practice: Hypothesis of the Small Architectural Practice in 21st Century Contemporary Architecture

Economics : The volatile economy within the worldwide (and local) architecture and construction industry means that the bigger cooperate architectural practices will continue to strive by taking over jobs from various scales, how does this affect the smaller establishments?

Competition: How does small practices face the Competition not just amongst similar size practices, but also from the bigger cooperate players in the industry?

Globalization: With the ever changing era of globalization, how does it effect these small practices? Do they adapt to the new thinking from abroad? Or do these small practices decide to look inwards and be inclusive towards the local context and environment?

Technology: The rapid technology within the Architecture, Design and Construction industry brings new possibility and ideas. The question again, do these small practices embrace the up and coming technology in construction? Or do they prefer to be traditional in-terms of thinking, design and construction methods?

What are the research questions?

1. Understanding the state of the current contemporary architecture practice in Japan
2. Understanding the system of architectural practice in Japan
3. Understanding (if applicable) how small practices in Japan diversify their practice to various other design (or non-design) related fields
4. Understanding the design process within the respective practices

Plans to publish / disseminate results

Publishing the result is the most vital component within the mentioned research. Preliminary planning now is to organize an exhibition to share the findings and possibly compile all the data into a publication. The results could also be a topic for a forum, debate or discussion amongst the participating offices; this is in order for us to further understand the implications / possibilities of the research's results.

Interviews

Interview

Overview of the interview: Questions are divided into 3 Sections.

Part 1: Questions on the practice of Architecture in Japan

Part 2: Questions on Architecture and Design in the context of Contemporary Japanese Architecture

Part 3: Questions on Architecture Education

All 4 Architects will be given similar questions; the idea behind this is to look at how different their responses might be. The questions are also very generic, and this will help the Architects to further have their own input, upon responding to the questions.

Interview 01 – 07/02/2019

Mr Kazuki Wakahara of Atelier Kazuki Wakahara and Ms Nahoko Wada of Access Point Tokyo

Mr Kazuki Wakahara – Architect

Ms Nahoko Wada – Curator, Architecture historian

Before we started the interview, Ms Nahoko Wada guided us through the area of Ginza and we visited landmark buildings by notable architects such as Ricardo Bofill, Kenzo Tange, Shigeru Ban, amongst others. We also visited several art galleries within the area of Ginza where one particular exhibition sparked my interest. It was at the Shiseido Gallery by the UK based architect collective Studio Ensemble. They constructed a temporary pottery workshop and asked the public to participate in making potteries. After about 2 hours of walking around and visiting various other buildings, we proceed to the office of Ms Nahoko Wada, which is shared with Mr Kazuki Wakahara, the director of Atelier Kazuki Wakahara.



Image 01: Guided tour of Ginza, overlooking the Shizuoka Press and Broadcasting center by Kenzo Tange

The office consists of Mr Kazuki Wakahara and his partner Mr Masaharu Nagamine, and was established back in May 2000. They specialized in building residential houses and small commercial projects. This fits perfectly within the context of the research topic.

The interview session lasted for about 2 hours and we proceeded by exchanging ideas and thoughts about the condition and situation of Architecture practices in both Japan and Malaysia. Mr Kazuki Wakahara is also in the process of writing a book about Japanese Contemporary houses.



Image 02: Interview session with Mr Kazuki Wakahara, showing samples of materials he used in one of his housing project in Tokyo.

Summaries I have gathered from the interview session with Mr Kazuki Wakahara are as follows:

He strongly felt that the future of architecture in Japan lies within the small / medium architecture practices. Even after practicing for almost 19 years, he still has hope for the future of Architecture in Japan and specifically his practice, even in this fluctuating global economy. Moving forward, he still wishes to concentrate on working to develop more private houses and to work on various small projects. He also strongly felt that the Internet played major role in changing the landscape of global Architecture. When he first started his practice back in the early 2000's, it was so hard to receive information other than looking at books and other source of publications. Now, the world can access information in real-time, and this has affected the way we design and think about architecture, both in a positive and negative way. The published work of Japanese Architects on the media does not represent the overall façade of Contemporary Japanese Architecture Japanese Architects are not aware that they are creating “the Japanese Aesthetics”, as they might, be doing it subconsciously. The Japanese Aesthetics lies in the attention to details, in designing, building and thinking.



Image 03: The office of Atelier Kazuki Wakahara

Atelier Kazuki Wakahara

Number of employees: 2

Office: 2-20 Ichidanado-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo building 302

<http://www.wakahara.com/>

Access Point Tokyo

Office: 2-20 Ichidanado-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo building 302

<http://accesspoint.jp/en/>

Interview 02 – 11/02/2019

Mr Ryukichi Tatsuki of Design Team Architects

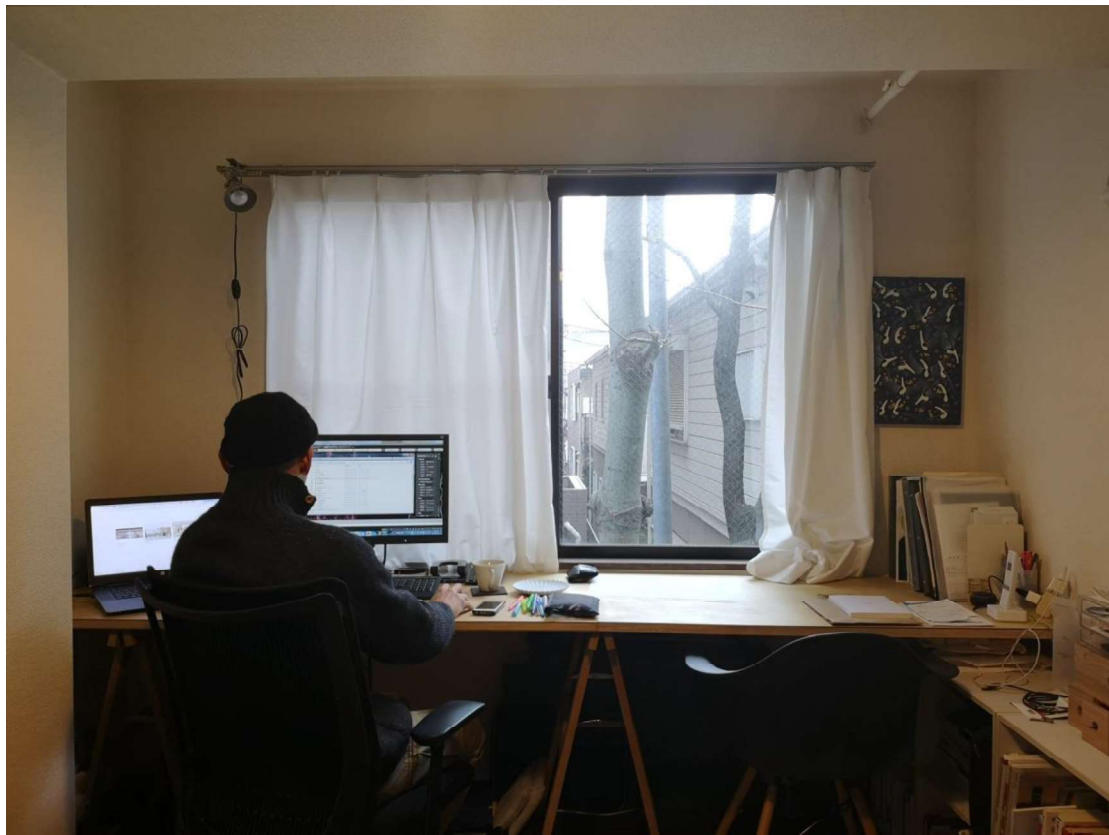


Image 04: Office of Mr Ryukichi Tatsuki of Design Team Architects

The interview session was done in Mr Ryukichi Tatsuki's office in Shinjuku, Tokyo. It lasted for 1 hour 45 minutes.

Summaries I have gathered from the interview session with Mr Ryukichi Tatsuki are as follows:

After spending a large amount of time working abroad and travelling, Mr Ryukichi decided to come back to Tokyo in early 2018 to start his own practice. He has worked in London and also became partner in Kengo Kuma and Associates before starting his practice, Design Team Architects. He currently runs this office on his own, and has worked on 3 interior design projects in Taiwan that is nearing completion. His experience includes building wide range of projects during his tenure working for both Rafael Vinoly in London, and Kengo Kuma in Tokyo. These experiences to him are very important, especially for someone who's just starting a practice. He also doesn't believe that small practices should only focus and take on small projects, he is willing to take up bigger projects and believes by collaborating with other practices, it is possible to take on such jobs. He also felt that young architects who started their practices without having proper experience will deprive themselves from gaining further knowledge, because there will be certain limitation in-terms of projects that they can acquire. He has travelled to over 154 countries, and believes that

the experience he gained from travelling is very important towards shaping his architectural thinking. He aims to create experience in his buildings, experience that will eventually shape the building's form. He also believes that within the new age of digital technology and the ease of communication, it has affected the way architects and students of architecture think. This again could be viewed in both positive and negative way.



Image 05: Interview session in Mr Ryukichi Tatsuki's office

Design Team Architects

Number of employees: 01

Office: 2-18 Ichigaya Karabe-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-0856 Village Asai 203

<http://designteam.jp/>

Interview 03 – 15/02/2019

Professor Satoshi Okada of Satoshi Okada Architects

Born in Hyogo, 1962, Satoshi Okada graduated at Waseda University, Tokyo and at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University, New York, in 1989; later on he conducted research as a visiting scholar under Kenneth Frampton's mentorship. Later on he conducted research as a visiting scholar at Columbia University and received his Ph.D. from Waseda University, Tokyo in 1993. Satoshi Okada had been appointed research fellowships by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, by the Japan Fashion Association (1992-93), by the Ministry of Education (Fellowship for Distinguished Researcher, 1993-96) and by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (Fellowship for Distinguished Artists, 1996 -97).

In 1995 he founded Satoshi Okada architects Inc. in Tokyo.

Along with the design activity, Satoshi Okada pursues ongoing research: he taught at the Design Institute for Architecture and Environment, University of Shiga, Japan and, since 2006, he is Associate Professor of Architectural Design and Theory at the Graduate School of Architecture, Chiba University, Japan.

Okada has been visiting professor and lecturer in several universities and cultural institutions both in Japan and abroad (e.g. IUAV, Venice, Italy; TU Delft, The Netherlands; Ajman University of Science and Technology, UAE; ETH Zurich, Switzerland and others).

His achievements have been acknowledged internationally with the Grand-prix Dedalo Minosse 2005-2006 (IT), The Chicago Atheneum International Architecture Award 2010 (USA), The International Property Awards Asia Pacific, Best Architecture – Single Residence 2012 (UK) and others.



Image 01: Interview session with Professor Satoshi Okada.

Summaries I have gathered from the interview session with Professor Satoshi Okada are as follows:

He strongly felt that the younger generations of Japanese Architects should be intrepid and not to focus on developing architecture just within Japan, but to continuously venture outside of Japan. His interest is mainly within the European context, particularly in Italy because of his Phd thesis that revolves within the topic of classical Italian architecture. He felt that the shifting of thoughts within the European context very intriguing. Moreover, he recently opened a branch office in Milan. This office will than focus on projects within the European continent. Professor Satoshi Okada also believes that the current (and past) generation of architects is too focused on regional architectural developments. His early experience working and learning with timber craftsman played a big role in his development as an architect and designer. He particularly loved classical Endo buildings in the areas of Kyoto, especially the details in the timber joining's. He is also interested to know about history of buildings, the story behind it (in terms of design process, construction period etc) He felt that the lack of understanding is prevalent in the younger generation of Japanese architects. He always felt that the beauty of architecture is within the design process, the concept. And often times, the final outcome tends to be different. This is the beauty of architecture. For him, beauty is also an enigma, and he constantly thrives to create architecture that is beautiful. He's main concerns with regards to the current educational system are the lack of critical thinking within the local Japanese universities. Students are not asking enough critical questions towards the topic of architecture. This he felt needs to change in order to develop more progressive thoughts in the next generation of Japanese Architects.



Image 02: The office of Satoshi Okada Architects

Satoshi Okada Architects

Office: 1-6-31-4F K S Building, Higashi Kunitachi, Tokyo 186-0002, Japan

<https://www.okada-archi.com/>

Interview 04 – 11/03/2019

Mr Ryo Abe of Atelier Ryo Abe



Image 03: Interview session with Mr Ryo Abe of Atelier Ryo Abe

The interview session was done in Mr Ryo Abe's office in Shibuya, Tokyo. It lasted for 2 hours

Summaries I have gathered from the interview session with Mr Ryo Abe are as follows:

After establishing his office for over 24 years, he felt that the shift of projects within the architecture industry is very interesting. He has worked with wide ranges of clients, from private, to cooperation's and communities. He is particularly interested in the developments within rural areas of Japan. He also felt that with the issues of migration, city dwelling and the aging population of Japan, Japanese architects should address and try to incorporate themselves in finding solutions to these issues. Looking towards the near future, he is interested in developing projects with rural communities in Japan, and he is already starting to work on several projects within this context. He also believed that architects should be involved in the creation of programs within the buildings. Gone were the days where architects are just involved in creating the hardware, he believes that the next generation of architects should also involve in the creation of the software of the buildings. He

also believed that the working condition and context of the architecture profession is gradually changing globally, and architecture is a profession of adaptation and adoption. The profession itself needs to be constantly grown with the industry. Next generation of Japanese architects should prepare themselves with content creation and ready to get involve with variety scale of projects, not just within the architectural norm, but also to the extent of culture, arts, and science.



Image 04: The office of Atelier Ryo Abe

Atelier Ryo Abe

Office: 4-2-22-201 Shibuya Shibuya-ku Tokyo, JAPAN 150-0002

<http://www.aberyo.com/>

Appendix

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Visits

Visits to Architectural sites

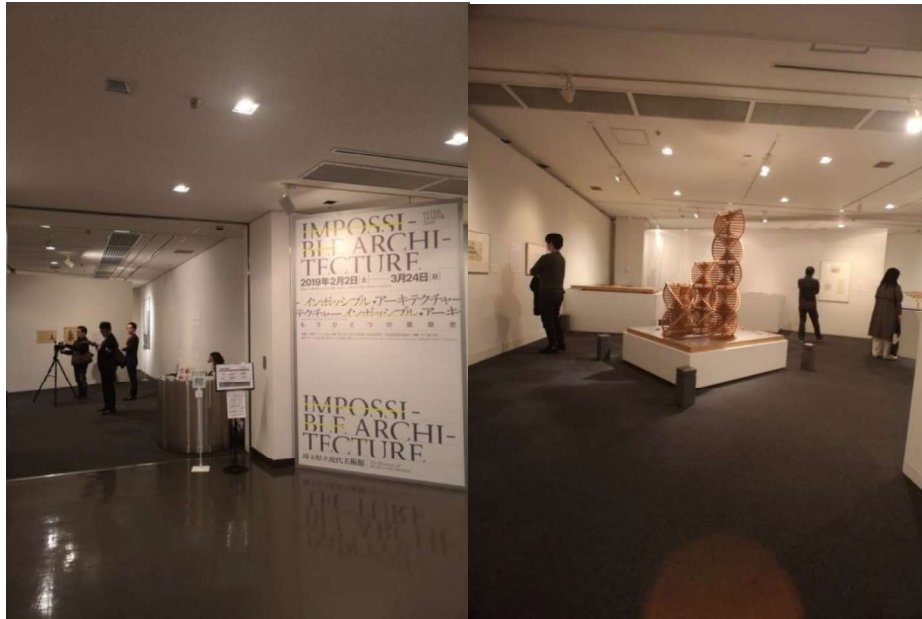
01: Naoshima & Teshima Art Islands (Naoshima & Teshima)



The highlight of the trip was a visit to Shima Kitchen designed by Atelier Ryo Abe. The architecture and program of Shima Kitchen created this hybrid of programs where the locals are involved with the everyday business of the café.

The building won the award for Emerging Architecture in the 2010, World Architecture Festival.

02: Museum of Modern Art, Saitama (Impossible Architecture Exhibition)



Excerpt from exhibition brochure:

When we look back over the history of architecture, we find so many wonderful schemes that failed to see the light of day, and myriad exciting ideas that were kept safely locked away as nothing more than lifeless proposals. Architectural dreams for the future; designs that although technically possible, could not be built due to the social conditions and systems of their times; or proposals more focused on challenging an established system, rather than realizing an actual building. All these schemes are the aptly-named unbuilt architecture, and uncompromisingly express the dreams and ideas of their architectural creators. This exhibition featuring an array of international unbuilt architectural designs of the 20th century and onward, has the working title “Impossible Architecture.” The word “impossible” in this context does not mean “impossible” simply because of any radical or unreasonable demands of the architectural design, but refers to the restrictive boundaries of each project’s social time and place, and encourages us to revisit and re-examine the possibilities lying at these architectural frontiers. By placing the focus on the impossibility of this architecture, paradoxically their extreme possibilities and rich potentials come to the fore, abundantly fulfilling the very aim of this exhibition. Through a diverse mix of plans, models, and other related materials, the “Impossible Architecture” exhibition closely analyzes the extraordinarily imaginative projects of some 40 architects and artists, and casts the spotlight on new forms of architecture that have never been seen before.

Exhibited works by:

Makoto Aida, Tadao Ando, Archigram, ARAKAWA + Madeline GINS, Yakov Chernikhov, Yona Friedman, Sosuke Fujimoto, Pierre Jean Giloux, Zaha Hadid Architects + Architects JV (Nikken Sekkei, Azusa Sekkei, Nihon Sekkei, and Ove Arup & Partners Japan), John Hejduk, Hans Hollein, Junya Ishigami, Arata Isozaki, Renshichiro Kawakida, Kiyonori Kikutake and many more.

Conclusion

Japan is regarded as a country that is full of history and rich in culture. Its people are well respected throughout the world and are known for their high level of discipline. These factors played an important role in developing their thinking towards the development of their community. The constant thrive for excellence has benefited Japan in many ways. These philosophies also constitute within the development of their architectural and design thinking.

Having to meet and interviewed 4 selected architects, my preconceived view towards the development of contemporary architecture in Japan has gradually change. The main aim of this research is to understand how small practices in Japan thrive within this complex financial climate, however the interviews have led me to further questions on how relevant their thinking, towards the future development of contemporary architecture in Japan.

The Practice

All the interview subjects are very optimistic in regards to the future of architectural practices in Japan. As mentioned by Mr Kazuki Wakahara, he believes that the future of the profession lies within small practices. Japan is a country with the most registered architects per capita. According to the International Union of Architects, Japan has almost 2.5 Architects per 1000 residents in comparison to the UK, where they only have half an architect per 1000 residents. The US has only 0.33 architects per 1000 residents and Canada has 0.22%. Japan, in other words, has 11 times as many architects per capita as Canada. This reflects the number of small and medium scale practices in Japan. If we were to look at projects done by these small practices, it mainly consists of private houses and then a mixture of other various scale projects. The value of a house in Japan is very much different from other countries. Rather than appreciating in value as it gets older, it is the opposite. An average lifespan of a house in Japan is 26 years to 30 years, after which the house will be demolished to make way for a new one. Reason being is to ensure that buildings comply and regulate to the governments safety standards and by demolishing these buildings, high costs of maintenance can be avoided. This gives opportunities for architects, especially those running small practices to thrive. For example, Mr Kazuki Wakahara has built over 23 private houses to date. Furthermore, If you are wondering why there is abundance of Japanese experimental housing projects, the answer lies in this logic of value depreciation. Without worrying on the value of the house, potential client and the architect are able to design these houses according to the clients specific lifestyle and taste. Most of these “experimental” houses are designed together with the client, with the client's approval and in most cases, the clients are young, adventurous first time Japanese homeowners.

The Japanese Aesthetics

From an outsiders point of view, we seem to understand the Japanese aesthetics through its attention to detail and the sense of “pureness” the design gave to the end user. All elements were designed in a specific way, for a specific function, and again, this can be reflected from the understanding of their beliefs and culture. I remembered reading Junichiro Tanikaki’s book “In Praise of Shadows” which he speaks about understanding the history of the Japanese aesthetic tradition, architecture and materiality. He contends that buildings from the West are often times design in a way that it exists by the virtue of cloistering, and it had to distribute lights through artificial light sources so that they can eliminate shadows. In comparison to this, Japanese buildings value shadows. A Japanese room values shadows as a separate object that should not be removed, but strapped to its boundaries with respect to the object that is casting it. This shows how the Japanese aesthetics are beyond than just

objects or physicality. The merge between materiality and the natural context plays an important role in defining the Japanese aesthetics. Furthermore, the origins of the Japanese aesthetics can be traced back to the Japanese beliefs of Shinto. Shinto is a traditional religion of Japan that consists of a collection of rituals, native beliefs and myths. The attention to detail, the cultivation of nature and the understanding of the “Wabi-Sabi”.

“Wabi-Sabi is “a way of life that appreciates and accepts complexity while at the same time values simplicity,”

---- Richard Powell, Wabi Sabi Simple

To understand this, in the Zen philosophy, there are seven aesthetic principles in achieving Wabi-Sabi, Kanso (simplicity), Fukinsei (asymmetry or irregularity), Shibumi (beauty in the understated), Shizen (naturalness without pretense), Yugen (subtle grace), Datsuzoku (freeness), and lastly Seijaku (tranquility). These points are often times translated to the everyday life of the Japanese, consciously or subconsciously. And often times, it is translated into the development of Japanese design and architecture.

“The Japanese view of life embraced a simple aesthetic that grew stronger as inessentials were eliminated and trimmed away.”

---- Tadao Ando

Speaking to the architects, when they were asked, “What defines Japanese Aesthetics?”, their answers was particularly interesting. It seems like Japanese architects are unaware of the aesthetics that they are creating, it can be said that the Japanese “forms and spaces” are created within this subconscious mind of theirs. This philosophy are deeply embedded within their understanding of life and how it is related to their way of thinking, the understanding of relationship between nature and man-made.

“The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends.”

---- Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows