

Room for Change

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

A nation's culture is reflected in its architectural structures. Originally, culture may have determined architectural form but, these days, it seems like the opposite is occurring. The developed countries appear to be merging architecturally. The same sort of hotels, fast food joints, convenience stores and condominiums are being blended into so many countries that the once prevailing "charming differences" are becoming the exception.

The variety of housing styles around the world – igloos, tents, cliff dwellings, mud, brick, wood and stone structures – originally were created with indigenous building materials and adapted to suit the needs of the users. In the long run, the type of spaces within which a population lives influences its behavior. Ubiquitous similar-design housing may be weakening existing culture throughout the world.

The wooden dwellings and thatched roofs of old Japan reflect its abundant forests and verdure. Japan's architecture developed in an outwardly expanding way. Wooden one-story structures spread outward as the need

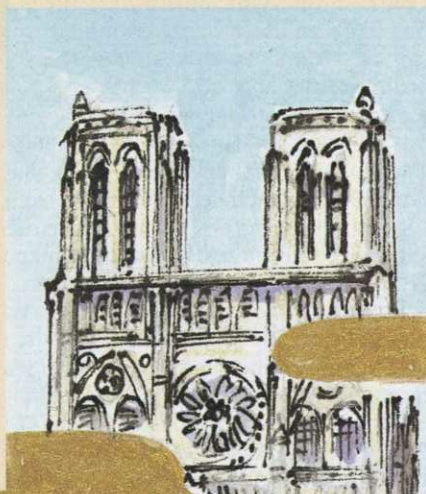
for indoor space increased. In western countries spaces tended to develop upward to a second, third and more floors. According to Takashina Shuji, professor emeritus of Tokyo University, a distinct type of "stairway culture" developed in the West.

Notre-Dame Cathedral in France, for example, is a solid stone, three-story structure which is representative of Western built-to-last, enclosed stone spaces. Completed in 1250, it expands

upward vertically, reaching for the sky. In Japan, the Byodoin in Uji – also a religiously inspired piece of architecture – makes a startling contrast. This is the one story wooden structure that is featured on the back of 10-yen coins. It spreads outwards horizontally into three separate buildings. It was built in the 11th century, and represents the finest example of Japanese aristocratic art.

The expansive open nature of Byodoin contrasts sharply with the solidity and height of Notre-Dame. The Cathedral is enclosed by solid walls. Byodoin, on the other hand, provides less of a separation between outside and in. The Buddha's serene face can be observed from the other side of the pond. In effect, the surroundings are part of the architectural space and there is no real clear-cut division between them.

Another dominant feature of Japanese architecture is the expansion of the roof beyond the columns or supports, as seen in Ise Shrine. The deep eave space, or "noki," overlaps the space beyond the building itself. Old



houses dating from the Taisho period and earlier feature this characteristic. The overhanging eaves serve as protection from the rain and heat of the sun, while at the same time connecting those inside with the outdoors beyond.

Traditional Japanese architecture provides a natural connection between humans and nature. In the sweltering months of summer, the outside *fusuma* could be removed, opening up the space to breezes outside. There was a minimum of solid walls. Interior and exterior was marked more by symbolism – the removal of shoes, the hanging of *sudare* screens, and the like – than by physical barriers.

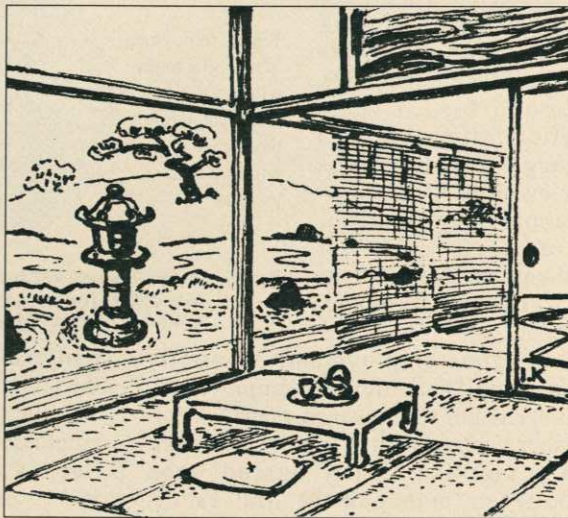
Whereas Europe and the US developed separate rooms – dining rooms, living rooms and bedrooms, each with its specialized furniture and appointments – traditional housing space in Japan is all-purpose. The same tatami mat room that was used as the dining room could also be used as a guest-room, a study or bedroom. Theoretically, one room could comprise an entire house.

These simple tatami rooms have been routed by materialism during the late 20th century. Today, most citizens have too many possessions to be able to use a room for multiple purposes. Heavy, stationary furniture is the norm. But the idea of all-purpose space is ultra-practical, due to the capability of expanding rooms by removing wall panels. Two 6-mat rooms can be combined to form one 12-mat room for a celebration, and then broken back down in time to go to sleep.

I regret that this flexible use of space has been abandoned in Japan. To be able to adjust the actual size of your rooms within a limited space is certainly an ingenious idea that would suit today's lifestyle.

I live in an 80-year-old "nagaya," a two-story wooden apartment building in the center of Tokyo – one of a

very few left. Thanks to the building's design, I experience everything going on around me. I can hear what's happening on the street, I feel the seasons acutely and my alarm clock is the "ton-ton-ton" sound of my neighbor's knife as she prepares her breakfast. I know my neighbors - all of them. This is in stark contrast to the modern condominiums and the "new towns" of Japan, where little contact exists between neighbors.



In my old-fashioned area, we are all jumbled together, rich and poor, young and old. The narrow streets are lined with plants, stalked by cats and filled with neighbors talking to each other. The vitality and human focus comes from the design of the old homes that we live in.

The current generation is the first ever in this country to be brought up living apart from nature. Modern life lived within solid walls leaves fewer chances to experience a connection with nature and other people. Insulated for air-conditioning, new housing can't really open up to the outside. Fewer experience the use of Japanese sliding doors, doors that make the foyer into a small social area where visitors can stop and chat.

Traditional housing enhances socialization more than it protects its occupants from weather or other people. It enables neighborhood communi-

cation. Foyers are for chatting; the public baths keep everyone meeting and greeting on a daily basis. *Sudare* screens allow doors to be flung open in the evening – offering just a touch of privacy, yet the potential for communication with people outside.

Japan's new homes are western clones – with solid walls, synthetic roofs, individual bedrooms and so forth. The direct conversion to western style condominiums, without adjusting for climate or culture or paying attention to the physical properties of building materials, has caused a pervasive problem with mold that isn't experienced in the west.

New building regulations are now being considered to require outside insulation to prevent the mold problem, but how, and to what degree, will the core Japanese customs weaken or vanish with the direct westernization of its housing? Shoes are still taken off at home, but the family bathing tradition seems to be waning. Most families still issue each member his or her own chopsticks and rice bowls. Will the use of forks and spoons change this?

I also wonder how the closing in of rooms and living space is going to affect Japanese society in the long run. Ironically, some Americans and Europeans use tatami-mat panels and sleep on futon. Wouldn't it be nice if, instead of being influenced, Japan could do more to influence other countries to take up the best parts of its traditional housing and lifestyle? *Shoji* screen indirect lighting and moveable tatami panels are beautifully suited to high-tech life. Why limit them to Japanese-style rooms? Traditional Japanese housing could be surprisingly modern. JJI

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Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.