Uninterrupted Space

By Shuji Takashina

A gate-like structure known as a *torii* usually stands on the path leading to a Japanese Shinto shrine. Although it is referred to in English as a "gate," it has no doors and is a simple structure consisting of two pillars joined at the top by two horizontal beams. Visitors to the shrine pass through the *torii* to enter the sacred precinct, the place where the god resides. Because there is no door to cut off the sacred precinct from the outside world, people can go in and out freely. In fact, people do not necessarily have to pass through the *torii* to enter the sacred precinct. The *torii* is ordinarily built on the approach to the shrine, but on its sides there are neither a fence nor a wall, making it possible to walk around the *torii* to enter the sacred precinct.

The *torii*, though the entrance to the sacred precinct, does not serve as a physical division of space. It merely symbolizes the dividing line between god's world and the outside world. The Japanese people take it for granted that once they have passed through the *torii* they have entered god's world which is different from the mundane world outside. However, the *torii* does not function as a practical barrier separating the inside from the outside. The inside and the outside form a single uninterrupted space.

The distinctiveness of the *torii*'s function becomes even more apparent when the Shinto shrine and the Christian church are compared architecturally. Although the character of the Christian and Shinto divinities differs, the church building and the Shinto shrine are similar in that they are god's place, a sacred space separated from the mundane world. In order to secure the sacred space, the Western church uses walls to separate distinctly the inside from the outside. All entrances to the church are fitted with doors. When the doors are shut tight, the church becomes a secluded space cut off completely from the outside. God's space in the church is clearly separated from the outside world by means of the physical barriers of walls, ceiling and doors.

This concept of separating space with walls and doors seems to be basic to the Western perception of space. This concept is not confined to church building but is extended to ordinary structures whose inside and outside are very clearly defined. Each room inside a building, too, is separated from the others by walls and doors and forms an independent "secluded space." The "lock" is the symbol of the seclusion and independence of each room. When locked, a room becomes completely isolated from the other rooms and becomes a space which rejects intrusion.

An independent, secluded space is exceptionally rare in traditional Japanese architecture. A Japanese-style building naturally contains rooms, but they are separated by fragile partitions, the sliding doors known as *shoji*, *fusuma* and *karakami*, made of paper pasted on slim wooden frames. These sliding doors can be removed easily, even by a child. Very often, they are deliberately removed to link more than one room and create a single space. In the traditional Japanese house, the interior is essentially a single continuous space, which is partitioned off into rooms, merely for convenience, by the simplest of means. Historically, the Japanese never dreamed of locking rooms. Even today when many Western-style buildings are being constructed, it is not at all rare for a guest in a traditional Japanese inn to have to sleep in an unlocked room.

This openness of the Japanese is not confined to buildings. It is also seen in the layout of entire towns. In Europe, towns were originally enclosed by castle walls. Towns were places outsiders could not enter once the castle gates were closed. (Paris, for instance, was actually surrounded by castle walls until the mid-19th century.)

In the West, Saint Peter is regarded as the custodian of the key to the gate of heaven, and Christian paintings often depict him with a large key in his hand. In the European perception, even the imaginary world of heaven is surrounded by a wall and its door is tightly locked; it is a place which cannot be entered without a key. It is probably very natural for people who live in towns distinctly separated from the outside by walls and gates to assume that heaven must be the same.

In contrast, in Japan, no towns were enclosed entirely within castle walls, not even those known as castle towns. When Kyoto, known as a city which preserves to this day many things traditionally Japanese, was planned as the national capital 12 centuries ago, it was patterned after the Chinese castle town of Chang'an (today's Xian). The wide avenue which runs north to south through the center of the city and divides it into the western and eastern parts, the orderly checker board arrangement of the street blocks, the location of important structures, and many other aspects were all imitations of Chang'an. There was, however, one major difference. The entire town of Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynastry, was enclosed within castle walls, but Kyoto, then known as Heiankyo, had no castle walls. Chang'an, like the towns of Europe, was a community closed to the outside, but Heiankyo was an open town. The Rashomon Gate which stood in the center of the southern side of the town was, in the case of the original Chinese city, the gate through which one had to pass in order to enter the town. Kyoto, too, had its Rashomon Gate, but it served only a symbolic purpose, just like the *torii* of the Shinto shrine.

In the Japanese perception of space, the inside and the outside are not distinctly separated by physical means but are continuous. The border between the inside and outside in traditional buildings has such sections as the *nokishita* (place under the eaves), *nure-en* (open veranda), *kairo* (ambulatory passage) and *watadono* (connecting corridor), all of which defy definition as part of either the interior or the exterior. By means of this intermediate area, the inside space merges naturally with the outside space. These intermediate sections may have been made necessary by climatic reasons or may be architectural contrivances. At the same time, however, they seem to be deeply related to the Japanese way of thinking.

Shuji Takashina, 51, is professor at the University of Tokyo and one of the leading art historians in Japan. He studied at the Institute of Art and Archeology of the University of Paris and at the Louvre Museum from 1954 to 1959. Takashina, who is the author of various books, has won a number of awards, including the Minister of Education Prize, for his works on art.