

The in-between

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O-House (Kyoto, 2009)

by Hideyuki Nakayama

Have you ever wanted to live in a hotel corridor?—I often think to do so. That fluffy carpet that absorbs all the sounds, the modest lightning, doors that go on forever, throwing out the bed and lamp from the room into the corridor and calling for wine and sandwiches in a shiny stainless steel room service wagon. This must be more exciting than any ordinary suite! Such random imagination is important to me; O-House, for example, is such a house.

(Images: EN pp. 40–41)

Hideyuki Nakayama

Split Machiya (Tokyo, 2010)

by Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, *Atelier Bow-Wow*

The neighbourhood of the house is characterized by blocks of small houses surrounded by ten-story-high urban architecture that would stop the extension of fire in the case of an emergency. Most of the two- to three-story-high buildings of the inner core are detached single-family houses. This context is typical for many Japanese architects to work in, especially the young generation. In the 1980s, the price of land increased significantly, and since the Japanese law asked for a very high percentage of inheritance tax, a subdivision of property happened and led to the development of these small house types.

One special character of the Split Machiya comes from its site profile: narrow and long, the front of the building is facing the street and the back is facing the neighbours and a beautiful garden with large trees. For the design we tried to fully utilize the special qualities of this building type, as well as the almost one-story-high terrain difference of the site. We translated this level gap and the length of the property to a design which has two buildings and a garden in between. This middle garden could be read as a part of the interior, but without a roof and containing a lot of earth to bring the nature into the spatial sequence of the house. This generates a lot of different relationships—not only within the perimeter of the site but also to the neighbourhood and the environment. This brings more qualities to the interior.

Compared to Switzerland, Tokyo has a stable, mild climate. This stimulated us to investigate the type of a nice interior garden, half interiorized by the wall between the two buildings. At the same time, it stays an outdoor space, which could be a special room for the family.

(Images: JP pp. 40–41)

Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto

Atelier Bow-Wow

THE IN-BETWEEN

with Momoyo Kaijima, Hideyuki Nakayama, Cathelijne Nuijsink, Eizo Okada,
Laurent Stalder, and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto. Moderated by Erwin Viray.

Viray Both projects in this session are characterized by an exceptional, almost spiritual central space. In the Split Machiya it is the courtyard—an open-air, in-between space where the seasons are staged as an extended interior. In the O-House it is the so-called “empty space” which is the largest room in the building and acts as an unoccupied transitional zone. Both houses are embedded in the body of the city and incorporate the topography in their conceptual approach.

Mr. Okada, how do you include the empty space in your everyday life, and why did you choose the placement of the O-House at the edge of Kyoto near a Shinto shrine?

Okada The long and narrow space on the ground floor is used in different ways at different times. It is a place to eat and relax and for the kids to invite their friends to play video games. Sometimes my friends visit and sleep in this space at night, and sometimes my wife uses it for gatherings. It’s quite a modest floor area, but it has a high ceiling. The space is connected to the outside through a large glass wall, so visitors feel as if they are in a half-public space rather than visiting a private house.

Concerning the placement: originally I owned land to the west of the Imperial Gardens, but I wanted a quiet environment. So I asked a real estate agent to introduce me to the eastern part of Kyoto. We decided to build a house on this site next to the shrine because the surrounding atmosphere felt good and stable.

Viray How do you experience the transition from the sacred space to your everyday space?

Okada From the upper floor, we can see the main shrine and the small mountain behind it. For the children, the shrine area was more like a park than a sacred space, and they use to run around there when they were little. I myself felt sacred when I was purified as a *uji-ko*¹ during festivals, but not so much on a daily basis. Rather, I am more aware of the transition from the street in front to the back of the house. It’s like going from the entrance of a cave to its interior.

Viray The video showed a rather profane scene of being in a hotel room, ordering food and drinks and enjoying the space itself. Do religion and spirituality have a role in your architecture, Mr. Nakayama?

Nakayama It is very difficult to read the O-House as one simple concept. Of course, the location beside the Shinto shrine is significant, but it is not the only factor. Shinto is a religion contrary to the anthropocentric worldview because every single being or object, even a fence, has a life. This is the concept of Shinto that has probably influenced me the most deeply in my design. On the other hand, the site Okada-san bought has strong landscape regulations because Kyoto is a very traditional city. There are different regulations for each situation. For example, on our site, we must follow the regulation that prohibits the obstruction of view of the mountain behind, which defines the triangular shape and the gray color of the roof. We really strictly followed all the given regulations. The elevation shape of the house is similar to the old-fashioned storage for mikoshi.²

Viray And what led you to the bent shape of the floorplan?

Nakayama First we placed the house in the middle of the site and revived this in a model from a distance—at the beginning without reflection. But the character of the site completely changes if you go around the house: the northern part faces a public road, the eastern part forms with the neighbouring building a narrow cave, and the western part faces a nice tree in the shrine garden. Inspired by this analysis, we located the different functions according to the varying qualities of the site: the table in the garden, the bath tub on another side, a nice cosy reading space, and the dining area. The shape is the result of the relation between its center and its surroundings. But the empty space in the center did not have a specific purpose.

Viray Momoyo and Yoshiharu, could you share your approach working with the context of Tokyo and the interpretation of the *machiya* house typology?

Kaijima We started to work in suburban areas in the 1990s. At that time, the outskirts of Tokyo were revitalized slowly because young families wanted to have a house. But it became costly and difficult, so around the 2000s, families wanted to move back to the center to establish a life in a tiny space without a car. But as Yoshiharu just mentioned, a new family could only buy a third or half of the original plot, so they needed a different strategy to design a house. With the chance to renovate a historic townhouse, we were encouraged to bring the townhouse type back to Tokyo. Of course, this type was present there in the Edo period, but today it is almost forgotten.

Viray If we study the section, it is not the usual *machiya* typology. The traditional *machiya* would be a single story, but yours develops out of the condition of the topography. What were your visions for living in such a space?

Tsukamoto We decided to split the house into two parts because the site is relatively narrow and deep and has two different levels. The total size of the property is only fifty-eight square meters. Therefore, we divided the area to accommodate two twenty-nine square meter, two-story houses. We imagined them both as incomplete: the front house has a bathroom but no kitchen, and the other house has a kitchen but no bathroom. Consequently, the inhabitants themselves are completing the building by the act of moving from one house to the other. They are forced to pass through the garden, which is a reinterpretation of a *tsuboniwa*, a light courtyard in the middle of the *machiya*. Another strong characteristic of *machiyas* is the penetration from the front deep into the house. We reinterpreted this characteristic by positioning the window frames at the same height within the arrangement. Thus, you can look through both houses at the same time.

We also envisioned the Split Machiya to create a critical dialogue with the Row House in Sumiyoshi (*Sumiyoshi no nagaya*) by Tadao Ando. It is also split into two parts, and the residents have to pass through a courtyard—on a rainy day, they need an umbrella to go to the next room. This is appreciated a lot by the residents, and the building is definitely an iconic piece of modern Japanese architecture. We tried to play with this reference in our own way.

In the point cloud video, you see a dark black mass under the building. For us, it was crucial to introduce soil in the middle of the house to give the possibility to host other types of life beyond human beings: trees, flowers, birds, and frogs. They also can participate and enjoy their life in the middle of the house. All these elements contribute to the quality of living there.

Viray What was your response to the point cloud video? How does it compare to your representational technique of graphic anatomy?

Tsukamoto Graphic anatomy is built on the accumulation of lines, but the point cloud is constructed on an accumulation of points—this is very different. I think the point cloud is a kind of digital impressionism, focusing on the appearance of light. In that sense, the method of point cloud is different from our graphic anatomy, which works heavily with lines. For me, lines are essential to connect writing, drawing, and thinking. The line is crucial for us to relay between thoughts and the physical space.

Kaijima For me, the point cloud is like a map of a landscape, which creates a continuity between outside and inside, capturing the light and the garden. Each point collects the information of several senses—sight and sound mapped onto a 3D construct. And this is a way to transmit the experience of the space, which creates a subversive imagery.

Since I've lived in Switzerland, I have experienced European culture as object-related. Japan is more like *ma*—in between, relational. At Atelier

Bow-Wow we always try to explain with lines the relation between different things.

Viray Cathelijne, what are your experiences of invisible transitions in your research on Japanese houses? How do you see architectural photography as a medium of representing Japanese architecture, and could you see a possibility of the digital scan in understanding these spaces?

Nuijsink The Japanese house was westernized largely in the postwar era, although some important rituals, for example removing one's shoes, are still present. This conversion led to subtle height differences in many houses, marking different kinds of space. As a visitor, you could miss this subtlety easily, but it is very clear for the resident of the house. These are not only present at the entrance but also in the sanitary spaces and living spaces. Interviewing architects about their designs, I figured out that many had taken their ideas from traditional Japanese houses but revisited their concepts in contemporary ways. When pointing out this observation, they felt proud and had the urge to speak again about these well-known transitional spaces such as *engawa*.³

In my research, I have always worked with the output of professional photographers. First Japanese, then foreign photographers started developing their own interest and approach to the documentation. They started to introduce people in the composition. This was a positive aspect because images in Japanese architectural magazines previously always showed empty houses, devoid of people and sterile. Especially for these houses that were designed for one specific family, it was so much better to finally see real life in them. But nobody knew the stories behind the pictures, especially editors overseas. With my interviews and visits, I tried to fill this gap.

I think the strength of the point cloud lies in the simultaneous experience of inside and outside. Especially in the video of the Split Machiya, we can feel the proximity of the neighbours in that tiny gap space. In the videos you have the feeling that the walls are dissolving, which echoes the desires of contemporary architects: they no longer want to design rigid rooms and structures; it is more about softer divisions.

Viray Those divisions might appear as a kind of threshold. Laurent, what is so unique about the transitional spaces in Japanese architecture and culture? In what sense is the understanding of threshold in Japanese culture different from Western culture?

Stalder In an abstract, anthropological sense, if we understand the threshold as an intermediate space, which allows passing from one space to another and separates and connects two spaces at the same time, you see that there's a clear distinction between what the border is and what the threshold is. The

threshold is defined as a space that belongs to neither one nor the other and in which a rite of passage takes place. Then there is the ethnographic point of view, which was perhaps the view I took when I was in Japan, where you are able to determine specific elements in the traditional culture—for example the *genkan*, a typical place where through different rites, you make the transition from the public to the *engawa*.

In contemporary Japanese architecture, there is a series of spaces that seems different from those in Europe. One of the most visual, which became important in contemporary Japanese architecture, is the gap space (*ma*) that Bow-Wow mentioned. Also, the fire escape spaces between high-rise buildings have many encounters because they are neither inside nor outside. At the border between the two, a certain negotiation happens. The last element to observe as an ethnographer is that there are a lot of shared technologies and in-between spaces in both Europe and Japan, but the ways they are used are entirely different. Barthes describes it well by saying that Japan is an empire of signs of incredible subtlety, very difficult for strangers to perceive.

With the Split Machiya, I began to learn about the possibility of sharing what for Europeans would be considered the most intimate of spaces. Another aspect is that the house doesn't end with the boundary—some uses are outside the house, such as the public baths. This is a typical example for a housing activity that can take place outside the house. In the O-House I liked very much how the threshold works on many different layers: the material glass, which mirrors and at the same time is transparent; the movable elements; the spatial layout geometry.

The point cloud is interesting because it is a technology that measures and maps what is invisible. Yoshiharu spoke about impressionism, about light, but there is also sound, and perhaps there will be a smell in the future. Somehow it is the possibility to have a hyper-individualized perspective and to fix chronologically a precise moment in time. Second, I think it is important to point out the difference between movie and point cloud because the viewpoint can move in every direction and can take any position in space. It combines perspective and axonometry and allows us to see everything in a detailed way.

For me, there are two problematic points. One concerns transparency: I have the impression that there is a metaphorical transparency in these images. We are not able to look through massive walls, but looking through a plastered wall is possible due to the lower density of points, which is a confusing dimension for me. The other one is the hyper-personalized perspective combined with the incredible classical section.

1 Uji-ko is a person who is protected by the local Shinto god. In order to become an uji-ko, one needs to undergo a ritual at a local shrine.

2 Mikoshi is a mobile shrine for festivals.

3 A traditional Japanese house has an area called *engawa*, the so-called edge of the house. Used as a type of veranda, an *engawa* has the role of connecting the inside of the house with the outside.

