

# Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Luisa Overath, Myriam Uzor

When I call space a “room” I am not imagining the building itself in a fixed format. I am imagining a situation that connects to the future, while leaving room for many different possibilities. I am using the word “room” with the meaning of a space or environment that is flexible enough to handle any changes. Architecture does not just deal with hard objects; rather, it functions as space that is developed through the relationship to people.<sup>1</sup>

– Itsuko Hasegawa

In dense cities such as Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo, a precise organization of architectural space is essential. The natural settings of Japan and the different speeds with which its metropolises emerged led to specific approaches on how to distribute and subdivide space. Understanding invisible boundaries or contact zones seems to be deeply anchored in Japanese culture, not only at an architectural level but also through social interchange, religion, and customs.

In Japanese culture, a philosophy of space appears in all facets of life: there is a concept of negative space, where not the object or form itself but the space around or in between becomes most important. According to Isozaki Arata, “In Japan, the concepts of space and time have been simultaneously understood by the single word of *ma*. *Ma* can be defined as ‘the natural interval between two or more things existing in a continuity’ or ‘the gap between two things, an opening, [...] the natural pause or interval in which phenomena arise through time.’”<sup>2</sup> The kanji symbol for *ma* (間) combines the symbols for gate (門) and sun (日), suggesting a place or a moment of transition. Conceived as continuous, *ma* forms a container for the past and gives room for what potentially is to come. It is a place where energy is created through the presence of absence.

*Ma* is strongly linked to the Japanese thinking and design of architectural space. The morphology of big Japanese cities combined with a strong spiritual connection to nature led to types of small residential houses, whose spaces both are nestled in the public realm and positioned to let nature enter into their most intimate core. Despite being small, certain spaces are intentionally left without function and remain as such “unoccupied” to enable multiple relations between people and things.

Examples from both historical and contemporary architecture mirror the complexity that dwells within this spatial concept of *ma*. Materialized as small

microcosms, Japanese houses are hard to capture. However, they all seem to be composed around a shared narrative core; as though they were revolving around the same secret, they all appear in different guises of ambiguous clarity.

On a joint trip entitled *Transitions* in autumn 2019, students from the Kyoto Institute of Technology and the ETH Zurich Chair of Landscape Architecture used audiovisual recording tools to investigate a selection of Japanese residential houses and their relationship to the immediate urban landscape. Through on-site workshops, the small architecture projects were documented using sound recording and laser scanning. The recorded material was subsequently processed into audio-visual 3D point cloud models and reproduced in short videos.

A virtual traversing of the researched houses became a basis for discussion at the online symposium “Transitional Space—Japanese Houses Through Digital Scans,” organized in May 2021 by the Chair of Landscape Architecture of Professor Christophe Girot. The symposium offered a rare opportunity to explore the material collectively and exchange in a virtual plenary session. Participants from Japan and Europe were invited to contribute and participate, giving insight into their own personal experiences in the areas of architecture, landscape, art history, photography, and sound design.

This issue of *Pamphlet* documents a critical discussion that attempts to capture a moment, or rather a movement, accumulating positions and thoughts through different vantage points.

In the symposium, the point cloud video clips were accompanied by short video statements by the architects or the residents of the houses, which are included in the *Pamphlet*. The discussion circled around questions of the inherent nature of transitional space in Japanese architecture both inside and out. It touched on issues of public and private realms, the body and the environment, and the house understood as a compact universe and as a “zone of transition” in itself. A repeated topic was the representation of this space in architecture, addressing potential methods that could help explore and experience the physical realm of architecture not only visually but through all our senses. Through juxtaposition of selected architectural examples in the cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo, this issue, “Transitional Space,” unveils design approaches resulting from a culture that is comfortable creating infinite space in little place.

1 Itsuko Hasegawa, “My Theory of Architecture,” *Japan Spotlight*, January / February (2004), 44–47.

2 Ken Tadashi Oshima and Arata Isozaki, *Arata Isozaki* (London: Phaidon, 2009), 156.

