

From a different angle : three Japanese houses

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From a different angle

Three Japanese houses

Hubert Holewik



fig. a Atelier Bow-Wow, House and Atelier Bow-Wow, Tokyo 2005, Entrance, state in 2016. Photographed by the author, 2016

If space, in the Japanese understanding, refers to a *void*, then it is not only conceptual, but also a ‘concrete thing’¹ manifested in architecture. To perceive so, requires an artistic approach where the aesthetic sensibility can only be expressed through the abstraction of a substantial form.

The three houses by Shinohara, Sakamoto, and Atelier Bow-Wow follow this logic where the conceptual framework and architectural element merge into a symbolic entity. In such case the house is not merely a typological categorization, but defines an epistemological object that triggers architectural discourse within a specific socio-cultural context.

Tsukamoto (Atelier Bow-Wow), a student of Sakamoto, and Sakamoto himself, a student of Shinohara, represent an important academic line of continuity and development in Japan that one would discuss accordingly in chronological order. My proposition is to start with the more recent project by Atelier Bow-Wow and move backwards in order to revisit different aspects in their designs.

House and Atelier Bow-Wow, Atelier Bow-Wow, 2005

The House and Atelier Bow-Wow is located in a dense residential district near the central Shinjuku area of Tokyo. Blocked from the street, it hides discreetly behind other buildings and volume stacks. The strategy on such a flagpole site is to treat the facade with minimum articulation, achieving a state of *blankness*. The brown-orange asphalt surface of House and Atelier Bow-Wow evokes a sense of detachment and thus escapes the oppression of its surrounding. While in the interior, a large continuous space writhes vertically upwards from ground to roof due to the very limited and restricted footprint. Selective windows, balconies, and benches reconnect interior and exterior spaces, establishing a very conscious affiliation with the neighborhood.

Rapid changes in lifestyles, family structures, economy, and legislative regulations in the last fifty years in Tokyo enhanced a general subdivision and fragmentation of plots and favored private ownership. Approaching such social condition, Atelier Bow-Wow denies an architecture of individuality and proposes instead an architecture that integrates or establishes ‘commonalities’². They put forth that each house in their design firstly, ‘must have places commonly used by members outside the family;’ secondly, ‘must have parts that extend outside, like half-exterior spaces (verandas, porches, balconies or loggias);’ and most importantly, thirdly, ‘must not be to the things in their interiors. They must also include things from their surrounding environments.’³

Through research on public spaces and the urban morphology, Atelier Bow-Wow constantly catalyzes new insights and thoughts that are vitally reflected in their working method. Throughout this time, ‘behavior,’ or ‘behaviorology’ emerges as a recurrent theme and conceptual framework, which Atelier Bow-Wow imposes onto their architecture. However, what is ‘behaviorology’?

‘Behaviorology’ is a method of study and correlation of different behaviors⁴. In contrast to the prefiguring idea of function in architecture that always exerts a specific and isolated determination; behavior defines a more interwoven subject from different fields. Atelier Bow-Wow categorizes three types: the behaviors of human beings in their daily activities, whereby the focus lies neither on the individual nor a large mass, but on a group, a countable number of persons with shared customs and habits. The behaviors of natural elements like light, heat, water and wind that follow basic physics. Lastly, the behavior of the build-

- 1 Kazuo Shinohara begins his most prominent text ‘The Three Primary Spaces’ with the following statement, which he will develop further in a discourse: ‘There are three types of spaces all of which must be regarded as ‘concrete things’. [...] The three primary spaces are functional space, ornamental space, and symbolic space. I am opposed to the generalization that space is an abstract concept [...]’

Kazuo Shinohara, ‘The Three Primary Spaces’, in: ‘The Japan Architect’, JA 101, Tokyo 2016 [1964], p. 8.

I would like to project this idea of the ‘concrete thing’ generally onto Japanese architecture. From a European point of view, Japan never properly developed a concept of space as a separate entity to form, which evolved in accordance to scientific research. In this context, the term *void* is not the negation of such an entity, but defines something completely opposite—a ‘concrete thing’. It is consequently the origin of such thinking, as I believe, that architects in Japan implement in their design.

- 2 ‘Commonalities’ is a recent term developed by Atelier Bow-Wow in continuation to previous works, that best expresses their intention to focus on collective life outside of institutional frameworks: ‘Focusing on the character of collective interest, it is a direct response to the depletion of the public space across the globe, overcoming the eccentricities determined by private interest.’

Felipe De Ferrari, Diego Grass, ‘Commonality versus Commodity’, in: Atelier Bow-Wow, ‘Architectural Commonality—An Introduction’, Santiago de Chile 2015, p. 8.

- 3 Atelier Bow-Wow, ‘House and Atelier Bow-Wow’, in: ‘The Japan Architect’, JA 85, Tokyo 2012, p. 60.

- 4 ‘Behavior’, here defines an action or act; a concept that originates from psychiatry, psychology, economy, sociology, or anthropology, and enters here in to the realm of architecture.

Atelier Bow-Wow, ‘Architectural Behaviorology’, in: ‘The Architectures of Atelier Bow-Wow: Behaviorology’, New York 2010, pp. 9-12.

- 5 «Rhythms» in analogy to Henri Lefebvre's «rhythmanalysis». Henri Lefebvre, «Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life», London / New York 2004.

In the case of Atelier Bow-Wow, «rhythmanalysis» defines not just a tool of analysis, but takes up also the role of a synthesizer in their architectural practice.

- 6 To develop this idea even further I would like to turn to Yoshikazu Nango's comment on Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Theory in the practice of Atelier Bow-Wow: «In The Production of Space», Henri Lefebvre identifies three methodological percepts: *spatial practice* (physical space, perceived space); *representations of space* (conceptual space, conceived space), and *representational space* (lived space). Before Atelier Bow-Wow, Lefebvre's spatial theory was always discussed using schemas of binary oppositions: *representations of space vs. representational space*, architect vs. user, *creating vs. using*, and so forth. However, Atelier Bow-Wow offers a different interpretation of Lefebvre's theory. [...] They view both *representation of space* and *representational space* as mediators of *spatial practice* (i.e. physical space).»

Yoshikazu Nango, «Atelier Bow-Wow's Approach to Urban and Architectural Research», in: «Architectures of Atelier Bow-Wow: Behaviorology», New York 2010, pp. 321-341.

For us, this only means that in the case of Atelier Bow-Wow's «behaviorology» the acts of *creating* and *using* are fundamentally inclined to a physicality of the spatial practice—eventually, one can regard them through the «concrete thing».

ing itself, observed in a wider context or through typological investigation which bases on a common and shared knowledge. The final role of architecture is the global synthesis. Based on specific timescales and «rhythms»⁵ all characterised elements are combined into a single form.

For example, the long shallow top window in the basement of House and Atelier Bow-Wow opens up a view to the neighbor's little garden, where from time to time you can see him watering his plants. However, he would never be entirely exposed to the viewer's gaze. Through the accurately defined opening, only a small part of him is visible. Nevertheless, it is enough to provide natural light for the interior and be a reminder of his eligible existence simultaneously. A different window on the first floor opens towards a blank, orange, plastered wall. However, when it is opened for some fresh air around lunchtime, you can hear the other neighbor working. Those small details valorize the single architectural element and its surrounding through the formulation of precise relationship, and thus generate meaning for the whole. The narrow gaps, that separate the houses so typically for Tokyo, are reversed here into connective spaces.

In the interior, the house splits programmatically and structurally in two, articulated through plan and section. In plan, the central supporting columns mark the transition between *stairs*—access / functional space and *floor*—the actual working / living space, which are shifted half a level. It enables diagonal visual connections and emphasizes a sense of vertical continuity. Section-wise, the basement and the first floor are spaces for atelier and architectural production; the second floor is a kitchen and a living space which is either used by the staff or family members for meetings and visitations with an entrance to a small balcony; and finally, the third floor is a private room with a direct access to the rooftop and is exclusively for the family. Only few, essential pieces of furniture are positioned thoughtfully in each space and a simple composition of dust-proof clear paint on the floor, paulownia wood panels on the ceiling, and white plaster on the walls, filled with drawings, evoking a well-balanced atmosphere. In this sense, the simple layout of House and Atelier Bow-Wow creates a complex and lively interior that reflects inner-life organization and processes. The combination of architectural office together with a family house was, on the one hand, a simple idea to reduce commuting time and travelling, but on the other hand, it reflects a very true condition of today where the distinction between life and work diminishes. To give concrete expression to such an ambiguous lifestyle is perhaps the most fascinating aspect about this house.

It was surprising, that during office hours, it seemed like a common architectural studio whilst, on the weekends, when the office was closed, it appeared to be a very typical house. Remarkable was also the entrance. When approaching the house from afar, you would already see people working and studying on their projects. On arrival, you would be requested to take off your shoes as you entered the foyer, which is a courtesy unique to Japanese households, but less so in architectural offices. You place your shoes on the shelf and put on a pair of slippers, triggering a home feeling.

Both family house and architectural office, abstracted through behavior, find common expression in House and Atelier Bow-Wow, at the same time questioning their very own nature. Further, the conceptual framework of behavior establishes a particular environment—it is a «concrete thing», which is not just a simple matter of materialization but permeates the house as such.⁶

Kazunari Sakamoto engages directly on a more abstract level of meaning. He positions his architecture in a condition of ordinary life, from where he approaches the dwelling. In the introduction to an essay he writes:

«Today, in 1976—actually, even before that—I feel irritation at my inability to express directly or simply the basis of residential architecture, that is «what is a dwelling» or «what is an ideal dwelling», as well as what should dwelling be. It must be thought that I cannot convey what a dwelling should be unless through the dwellings I have designed and the method of their design.»⁷

After constructing his first six houses, Sakamoto develops in the mid-70s the *house-type* as his conceptual framework, which refers to a rhetorical manipulation of images and forms commonly established in society. By definition, it follows more the abstraction of a concrete form coded in people's memory and coming from an internal impulse, rather than a superficial iconization of the gabled roof. In the context of Japan, which shifted rapidly from an agricultural-native organization to a consumer-based industrial society, his *house-type* formulates a very interesting reflection:

Referencing Jean Baudrillard's system of objects, Sakamoto splits the house as a «concrete thing» into an *object of use* that is based on its value for use and into an *object of possession*, which carries semiotic or symbolic value. The more the house positions itself as an *object of possession* the more it accepts a semiotic form and enters the realm of image—here referred to as a field of representations. This means, the more importance we place on the semiotic or symbolic value, the more the dwelling transforms into an object of consumption and is commodified. Sakamoto realizes that we do not live because of the act of living, but we build in order to establish an «image of living». He argues that we do not belong within the active sense of living but more in the passive mode of living in the image.⁸

However, in order to escape this situation, Sakamoto does not directly address the house as an *object of use*, but turns first to the *house as possession* or «house as image». In the subtraction or alienation of its symbolic, semiotic value, he pushes the dwelling back into the direction of a «functional sign».⁹ In such manner, Sakamoto encompasses the passive mode of living in a condition of mass consumption and reestablishes a more active nature in his dwellings by challenging the overall perception.

The House in Sakatayamatsuke, erected in 1978 at an outer suburb of Tokyo, is an example of such an approach. The residence was designed in a very ambiguous scale and proportion with the inclination of its roof starting at one and a half stories. No extending eaves visible from the front—a very untypical detail in Japanese architecture—and the facade, all covered in calcium silicate board, expresses a very pure stance that gives the house a strikingly different appearance to its surrounding. The emphasis of a symmetry, underlined through alignment and similar proportions of entrance and main window, enhances the particular presence of the house, which he condensed to the most essential elements.

Sakamoto's House in Sakatayamatsuke is also his first example where the upper floor is entirely occupied by the main room, whilst all the other individual rooms are located on the ground floor and based on a relationship of adjacency. By denying any functional definition of spaces, Sakamoto reconstructs their

7 Kazunari Sakamoto, «Architecturality in the dwelling», in: «House: Poetics in the ordinary», Tokyo 2001, p. 45.

8 Sakamoto marks it very clearly that the realization of the «house as image» is kitsch: «These are not images of real dwellings, they are merely the realisation of the «image of the house». And that is the illusion of the house, the palace, the western home, that, like the amusement park that fulfils the dreams of children, or the sightseeing district that promises fun and fulfils the hopes of people, it entertains and gives enjoyable happy feeling. This is the kitsch of the residence. The «house as image» can be nothing more than kitsch.»

Kazunari Sakamoto, «Transcending the residence as an object of ownership», in: «House: Poetics in the ordinary», Tokyo 2001, pp. 103-109.

9 If we define a place to live as a house, it determines a functionality, which is unrelated to a specific form. Sakamoto, rather, pursues to express through the concrete object the relationship on various levels, which construct the concept of the house, that is a «functional sign».

Kazunari Sakamoto, «The memory and desire for the House form—The House as a functional sign», in: «House: Poetics in the ordinary», Tokyo 2001, p. 89.

10 I do not claim that Sakamoto directly refers to Corbusier's Cabanon, as there is a structural difference between the two designs. It is interesting to note that while Corbusier makes no distinction in materiality in exterior and interior appearance, making the house one form, Sakamoto builds up a dialectic. He switches from the alien expression of the exterior in aluminium to a more natural presence of the wood panels on the interior, maintaining, however, for both the same logic.

11 Shinohara structures his work into four consecutive styles, where each phase embodies conceptual differences. In the Japanese context style can be interpreted in two ways—*tsukiri*, as a distinct way of building, according to traditional canons, and *yoshiki* that defines more arbitrarily a palette of forms, patterns and colours.

David B. Stewart, 'Kazuo Shinohara's Three Spaces of Architecture and his First and Second Style', in: 2G, N.58/59, Barcelona 2011, p. 20.

However, being aware of both meanings, Shinohara uses style rather with reference of particular spatial and conceptual frameworks that he develops over time.

12 'Machine' represents a basic concept of Modernism that was formed in Europe in the 1920s, which determined a form of functionality and aesthetics in their architecture. However, Shinohara, refers to the 'machine of zero-degree-meaning' in a different way. His focus lies on the operability of the machine itself, which consists of internal parts and essential elements in order to perform. It is a neutral device, which assembles things on a zero-degree plain, which are stripped away from any kind of connotation or meaning—they are *naked elements*. It is a conceptual device that produces *naked space*.

13 In an essay Shinohara quotes a small passage of Deleuze's enquiry into Marcel Proust's work from where the architect develops his idea of traversing: «C'est elle qui permet dans le train, non pas d'unifier les points de vue d'un paysage, mais de les faire communiquer suivant sa dimension propre, dans sa dimension propre, alors qu'ils restent incommunicants d'après les leurs.» The section of his text that I have quoted deals only with one of his [Deleuze] several important ideas: that of traversal.

Kazuo Shinohara, 'Traversing the Third Person', in: 'The Japanese Architect', JA 1976, Tokyo 1976.

Shinohara puts forth that the moment of traversing a space should not happen in the first or second person, in order not to feature under phenomenalism, but in the third person, as an impersonal voice that produces an objective reality—*naked reality*. Shinohara's focus is not on the internal alternation of the human that examines the space, but the space itself which alternates because of the human's presence. In this sense, it is not about the meaning itself, but about the production of meaning. The alternation in the third person is what Shinohara puts as the basis of his conceptual thinking.

topological relations. Bathroom, toilet, kitchen, living room—all differentiated simply into main room, room, connecting room or exterior room. Sakamoto consistently composes the whole out of mutual dependency; this means that the outside appearance and the interior do not necessarily correspond to each other. They are separated, pushing the dwelling into a mere ambivalent condition, symbolized for example through the exposed column in the entrance and the window.

A central stair as the core of the house connects the ground floor with the upper main floor. The idea of placing the main living room on the second level is a common Japanese residential type in traditional architecture. However, in this case the main room resembles a basic attic space—especially with respect to height, scale and proportion. Further, covered all in lauan plywood, with no distinction made between furniture, wall, and structure, it evokes a very homogenized or unified expression, and results in something that reminds strongly of Le Corbusier's Cabanon.¹⁰

Eventually, for Sakamoto the interiority of a house is a *closed world*, which defines a stage for the ordinary, daily life, however, an idea that the architect is to challenge. He imports elements from outside of everyday life, a form of exteriority, into the interior space, alienating the outcome. It is thus a constant balance between the already stated everyday life and not-everyday life, between expressing and suppressing of this thematic issue in his architecture. Considering the dwelling in Sakatayamatsuke this applies not just to the interior, but also to the exterior appearance, where inside and outside establishes a dialogue that goes beyond the concrete matter of the single house.

House in Uehara, 1976, Kazuo Shinohara

In his 'third style'¹¹ houses, like the one in Uehara, Shinohara declines meaning completely through geometry. His focus lies solely on physical structure and things with 'naked forms' that he assembles logically through an abstract compositional 'machine of zero-degree-meaning'.¹² This does not mean that Shinohara neglects meaning per se. His idea of naked objects aims to reveal something deeper, intrinsic in the structure of things, and consequently, to discover new meaning in the moment of traversing the physical space—based on a Deleuzian conception. In the moment of passing, the subject generates a lively connection between the fragments, constructing a new imaginative totality. Each naked element then becomes a representative for the whole.¹³

The house, based on a square in plan, was designed for an art photographer and his family at the beginning of the 1970s, when architects in Japan were gradually turning to direct symbolism. On the ground floor there is a small atelier with a dark room and a span-covered parking lot. The second floor is a large living space shared with a small kitchen, seemingly separated through an imposing trussing pillar, next to two individual rooms and behind a small bathroom. This is a divisional method that Shinohara was already using in previous houses. Finally, the third floor, a half-cylindrical vault that used to be the children's room, now the family's bedroom, was added on top of the house after Shinohara was almost finished with the design. It is structurally independent. The complete composition imitates the chaotic dynamic of Tokyo, where forms, object, and volumes just clash onto each other, forming a complex organization. For Shinohara, city and house stand in opposition to each other, but it is possible to simulate through the dwelling the life in the city.

Shinohara developed the structure of the House in Uehara together with Toshihiko Kimura, one of his favorite engineers. Due to building regulations, the height of the street facade on the small plot could not extend over five meters, thus a beamless slab that provided enough ceiling height was required. In this case, the usual function of the crossbeam was transposed into three planes of posts running parallel to the main facade with massive 45 degrees braces, defining interior and exterior life of the house. The second-story floor is of wood which enabled constructing all bearing walls in only one single pour. All colossal structures follow anti-seismic structural regulations rather than subjective design choices. Consequently, they allow for only few and simple pieces of furniture and force the inhabitant to move around.

Strangely, however, with a simple table in the living room, the main space still retains a very typical format of traditional Japanese farmhouses, neglecting its very cold expression. In this sense, the House in Uehara evokes an emotionality that goes beyond its rational and functional determination. In accordance with the concrete nature of this house, Shinohara develops his idea of *savagery*, which he will pursue also in later designs:

«When I saw a model for the interior, with the braces thrusting through the floor, I remember joking that this was a jungle. This thought was related to the research of ‘The Savage Mind’ by anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, who found in the lives of tribal peoples in Brazil the vibrant functioning of abstract and concrete ideas that have been lost in developed societies. But I knew full well that the appearance of this residence would also strike some as being *violent*...»¹⁴

Whilst Claude Lévi-Strauss discusses the power of arbitrary bricolage in native societies, Shinohara perceives and works with a different kind of order. All his designs are from the beginning subordinated to an overall conceptual framework, which he bases on a precise mathematical geometry. In order to explain this more extensively, if the house consists of a system of concrete things, *naked elements*, then the superimposition of an abstract, conceptual framework will effectively cause the ambivalent conformation of the abstract framework through the concrete thing. Further, it will reverse the definition of the abstract and concrete implied by the architectural concept and that by the Japanese context, as Shinohara claims. The concrete thing and abstract framework merge, are indistinguishable, with the House in Uehara as an example. In this case, it does not mean that Shinohara dismantles architectural thought at all, from our European point of view, but rather that he reorganizes the architectural thought through an artistic endeavour.¹⁵

As it appears, it is not only true for Shinohara, but it applies for all three Japanese architects. The motives—*behaviorology*, *meaning*, and *geometry*—discussed through the ‘concrete thing’ provoke a heightened consciousness for various aspects and engage through complexity. Hence, to reverse abstract, spatial concepts in ‘concrete things’ may help to reflect on our architectural practice from a different perspective.

If we go back to the initial idea of *void* in Japanese architecture, it only proves, that *void* does not mean simply a lack or abundance, but defines an austerity and simplicity in Japanese architecture as a peculiarity of their culture, that we often misconceive as the beautiful Japanese space.

14 Kazuo Shinohara, ‘House in Uehara, 1976’, in: ‘Street with human shadows / Selected works’, Tokyo 2007.

15 Koji Taki, ‘Oppositions: The Intrinsic Structure of Kazuo’s Shinohara Work’, in ‘Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal’, Volume 20, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1983, p. 48.

Shinohara perceives the house as a work of art, that must establish a very individual character and attaches to the human emotionality.

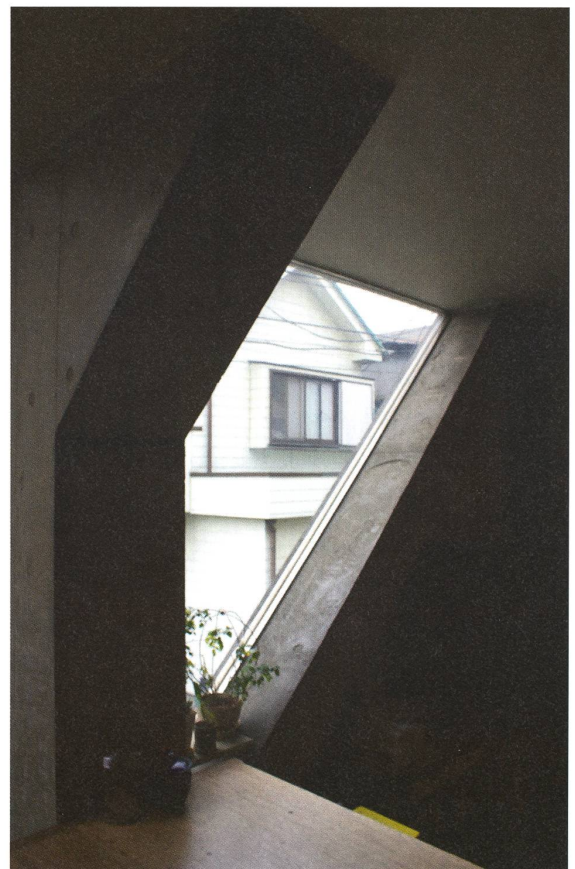


fig. b Kazuo Shinohara, House in Uehara, Tokyo 1976 Window and Pillar, state in 2016. Photographed by the author, 2016

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