

## Learning through Ritual: An Exploration of the Tea Ceremony Provides Insight into Japanese Sensibilities of Design

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### Abstract

This paper considers how *mitate*, the act of drawing an analogy between two seemingly unrelated things, was used to give students a 'way in' to designing an addition to the main hall of a Shinto Shrine in Japan. The challenge of the project was to create places that celebrate local identity; yet without the opportunity to visit Japan, how then to avoid external preconceptions or misinterpretations, and to develop an awareness of another culture's sensibilities towards the built environment, particularly concepts alien to a Western perspective?

Using *mitate*, students engaged with Japanese beliefs and values through an exploration of the Japanese ritual of the tea ceremony. This ceremony introduced certain key concepts, including: the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic; the emphasis upon feeling in Japanese philosophical tradition; the concept of one-time one-moment; the construct of 'in-between' in the Japanese conception of space; and the notion of purposefulness. This paper will review how this grounding informed the students' work and prompted them to critically re-examine their own *a priori* thinking and established practices.

This paper posits the use of an experientially-based exploration of ritual as a means of inquiry, in juxtaposition to the visually-biased investigations that tend to prevail in the design studio. Drawing upon the tradition of participant observation in social anthropology, by engaging directly in ritual we can come to understand how others see and experience the world. As this project demonstrates, such an approach can be particularly effective in revealing complex and unfamiliar concepts. It can also serve as an effective means for raising awareness of design as a holistic inquiry of place, inhabitation and tectonics; the project also suggests that the experience of crossing boundaries can prompt critical reflection upon one's own design practices.

**Keywords:** Experiential Learning, Participant Observation, Critical Reflection, Design Studio, Creativity

## Good Practice Points

### On learning through ritual

- The first-hand experience of ritual enables experiential learning.
- This experience can introduce and broaden awareness of subject matter, both of architecture and of new disciplines (e.g. anthropology, cultural studies) and especially of unfamiliar and complex concepts.
- It provides a means of engaging with another culture and developing an understanding of their beliefs and values (and by so doing address concerns of preconceptions and visual, aesthetic-based judgements).
- It provides a means of engaging with another culture across boundaries of time and place.

### On working across boundaries

- It reflects the realities of contemporary practice.
- It enables students to develop awareness of the relevant issues and the skills relevant to engaging with others.
- It is vital to recognise that all sorts of boundaries exist, and that learning gained in crossing one boundary can be transferred to crossing other boundaries.

### On pedagogy generally

- Students' existing knowledge and experience provide a valuable base from which to explore.
- Stepping outside of our habitual ways of working and thinking can enable new insights to be revealed.
- Learning can be enabled through dialogue with others, not only with fellow students, but with fellow learners from outside the institution.
- Fellow learners brought into the process need to be thoroughly briefed regarding the project's aims and methods, as well as on the position from which the students are starting.

## **Mitate: the act of drawing an analogy between two seemingly unrelated things**

### **Introduction**

'How are we supposed to explore Japanese sense of place when we aren't even going to go to Japan?' asked one student. Equally perplexing was how to explore Japanese sensibilities of design related to inhabitation [i.e. how people move through and dwell in spaces and relate to other inhabitants] and tectonics [i.e. the nature of construction, notably its craft].

These were questions raised following the introduction of a four week architectural design studio project run at the University of Plymouth. The project asked students to design an addition to the main hall (*haiden*) of a Shinto Shrine (*Jinjya*) in Japan, effectively doubling its size; this brief drew upon an actual project for *Achihayao Jinjya* in Osaka, which was planning an addition to its *haiden*, a place where special ceremonies led by the Shrine Master (*kannushi*), such as christenings or weddings, are held. Explicit in the proposition posed to students was that in working on a project sited in another culture, could they draw upon an understanding of this culture so that they did not impose, but rather respect; so that they did not mimic, but rather re-invigorate? [While part of the project's agenda, this proposition is also reflective of Shintoism; while Shintoism values continuity and respect, there is no requirement that an addition to a Shrine be of the same materials or style as the existing structures. The essential thing is that it must convince visitors it is a Shrine building (Terazono, Matsunori, Shrine Master of *Achihayao Jinjya*, 2004, interview with author, 1 August).]

There were several key aims in terms of student learning, namely:

1. To raise students' awareness of the notion of working across boundaries, in particular to expose them to the challenges this poses and to develop means to address these challenges.
2. To challenge students' formal preoccupations, and raise their awareness of the potential for enriching their understanding of architecture and their own design propositions, through a simultaneous inquiry of place, inhabitation and tectonics.
3. To prompt critical reflection by the students on their own design practices.



**Figure 1:** Main hall (haiden) at Achihayao Jinjya, Osaka, Japan

To consider how these aims were achieved, and in particular how student learning was enabled by exploring one subject through another, this paper will discuss:

- The contextual background of the project, namely the underlying concerns that these aims were addressing, and the distinct challenges posed by locating the project in the context of Japan.
- The approach taken [of learning one subject through another] to develop students' awareness and understanding in order to address these contextual concerns and challenges.
- How the approach taken evokes not only Japanese ways of thinking, but is also underpinned by Western educational discourse and social anthropology.
- The understanding of Japanese sensibilities of design towards place, inhabitation and tectonics that this approach enabled, which is discussed in depth to illustrate the value of this approach.
- How this understanding informed students' work.
- An analysis of student learning that came out of this project, and the pedagogic lessons it suggests.
- Limitations on the approach taken.

## Context

The concerns raised by this project are relevant to practice today as architects are increasingly working across boundaries, notably in this project those boundaries are cultural. In crossing boundaries, it is likely that beliefs and values will be encountered not only unfamiliar but also fundamentally disparate from the designer's own schemata. Yet it is critical that the meaning these have for people in that culture is understood; otherwise, there is a danger that design driven by external preconceptions [at best] or external values [at worst] may overwhelm local identity.

Working within this context is problematic however; Tuan (1974, p 31) suggests that we interpret environments in another culture through our own prior experience. He also notes that the visitor's primary means of evaluation relies upon aesthetic characteristics (Tuan, 1974, p 64). Environmental psychology research suggests this visual emphasis is particularly true of architects who focus on perceptual qualities [e.g. form] when interpreting the built environment (Devlin, 1990, p 236; Rapoport, 1982, p 19). Yet this perspective can constrain our understanding of the local condition. As Rapoport (1995) contends, an evaluation founded primarily upon the visual may lead to reductive, misleading interpretations and fail to reveal a true understanding.

The challenge faced is even more problematic where the visitor's experience with other cultures is limited. While a fresh perspective can be of benefit, (Tuan, 1974, p 65), the visitor's *a priori* knowledge and ways of working [i.e. the aspects noticed, the questions asked and the interpretations defined] may impede engaging with new beliefs and values.

The culture of Japan provided a challenging context in which to explore these considerations. Though long a source of fascination to the West, discourse across various disciplines has noted that the West has struggled with developing a coherent understanding of Japan (Bognar, 1985, p 17; Reischauer 1998, p 7; Whiting, 1989)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, discussion of Japanese architecture [as well as other aspects of Japanese design] by Westerners often identify it as being minimalist; yet as discussion later in this text will reveal, this label says more about the visual pre-occupations and preconceptions of the Western [external] observer than it does about Japanese design sensibilities.

For the students in this project, the setting of *Achihayao Jinjya*, with a history dating back over 1000 years, and an awareness that *Jinjya* are 'the spiritual home of the Japanese' (*Jinja-Honcho*, n.d.) only added to the acuteness of the task. The challenge faced by students was further exacerbated as it was not possible to journey to Japan.

In these circumstances it was all-too-probable that students would fall back upon their preconceptions, informed by images of the exotic or the Japanese architects' work they knew from books, journals and the internet. Their understanding needed however to be built upon more than just perceptions accumulated from such sources. Yet leading students through an examination of Japanese architectural history or even visiting

Japan would have been problematic, as the students later acknowledged, noting that they would have relied upon their existing methods of working, focused upon aesthetic-based observations. The concern was that in relying upon a visual analysis, they would not develop sufficient understanding of how Japanese people relate to, i.e. interpret and value, the built environment.

How then to prompt a group of students to move beyond their *a priori* thinking and visual preoccupations, and to ‘...understand better the richness of internal, local discourses in their full range and complexity’ as Eggener (2002, p 235) suggests? How might they gain a deeper understanding of Japan, particularly concepts of aesthetics, philosophy and space alien to their own Western experience and way of thinking, and so inform their design propositions?

### The approach taken

The Japanese tea ceremony [translated as *chado*, meaning ‘the way of tea’ and adopted for use generally in this text, or *chanoyu*, meaning ‘the art of tea’ (Urasenke Foundation, n.d.) or literally ‘hot water for tea’ (Tanaka and Tanaka 1998, p 15)] is a relatively simple event in which seemingly nothing of much consequence takes place; the participants simply engage in drinking tea, eating and making conversation together with the host (Inoue, 1998, p 11). Yet *chado* has been suggested to be one of the most quintessential expressions of Japanese culture, (Parkes, 1995, p 90) and today remains a tradition from which Japanese people continue to draw a sense of national belonging (Plutschow, 1999).

Recognising this significance, it was thought that a study of *chado*<sup>2</sup> through first-hand experience might help reveal particular qualities of Japanese design, free of the constraints of the students’ own pre-conceived expectations and thinking. For this ceremony, a temporary teahouse was constructed in the school, complete with an entry garden, a basin of water for purifying oneself, benches for sitting on before entering the teahouse, and an entry veranda. [How these elements are brought into play in *chado* are discussed later in the text.] The tea ceremony itself was conducted by a Japanese designer with formal training in *chado*.

As part of preparing students for this experience, a couple of exercises were carried out prior to it, though without the students’ awareness of the Japanese tea ceremony to follow. Firstly, students were asked to identify one image that defined Japan for them, and write down a few key words or phrases that this image suggested to them; these were then presented in a group discussion [without any specific critique from the tutor on the images or word/phrases]. Secondly, students were asked to carry out a mapping of their making and drinking a cup of tea (or similar drink), documenting this activity through annotated sketches and/or photographs.



Figure 2: Students participating in the tea ceremony (chado)

### Parallels with Japanese ways of thinking, de Bono and social anthropology

*Mitate* is a construct originating in the practice of using in the Japanese tea ceremony objects not originally made for it. It means ‘to see an object, not in the form that was originally intended for it, but as another thing’ (Omotesenke Fushin’an Foundation, 2005). It suggests an act of having a thing stand in for another; what is significant is the new meaning this can reveal of both the substitute and the original.

In the Western tradition, a helpful parallel to *mitate* is de Bono’s commentary on lateral thinking. Lateral thinking offers a way of engaging with seemingly known information and phenomena with a fresh perspective, and is particularly useful ‘...as a way to restructure existing patterns of thinking and provoke new ways’ (de Bono 1970, p 11). This approach is particularly useful where one is not trying to replace an existing idea with another, but rather in raising awareness of alternatives. De Bono suggests lateral thinking is especially viable where new information has to be evaluated through existing information, and where the concerns are more subjective (de Bono 1970, pp 9– 0).

The investigation of *chado* as a means to explore architecture reflects the spirit of *mitate* and lateral thinking. As de Bono suggests, ‘with lateral thinking one tries to look at the least obvious approaches rather than the most likely ones.’ (1970, pp 9-10). Certainly *chado* and architecture are upon immediate consideration quite disparate. Yet upon closer examination the study of *chado* is also particularly relevant in that it is a ritual, and that the value of such a study is underpinned by an understanding of how both rituals and architecture are defined.

Often associated with religious ceremonies, rituals are commonly thought of as ‘...a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order’ (Pearsall 1998, p 1603). Rituals are also associated with informal, everyday actions, as ‘a series of actions or type of behaviour regularly and invariably followed by someone’ (Pearsall, 1998). In either case, what is significant is that over time what the ritual represents to the participant can become more meaningful than the act itself. A review of discourse on rituals reinforces this view. Parkes (1995, p 93) posits that rituals are practices that cultivate who we are, while Plutschow (1999) adds that rituals relate ‘...to reality in a multi-dimensional symbolic way’, making life meaningful by reaffirming one’s understanding of life. Of equal importance is that the meanings of those rituals lie in how they are interpreted by those who practice them (Kluckhohn, 1949).

Concurrently, architecture may be defined as a setting for the lives of its inhabitants. This construct recognises that the design of this setting, through its sense of place and tectonic qualities, can contribute to how people move through, dwell in and relate to each other in it, and that an understanding of this inhabitation can contribute to the design of the setting. Thus, an exploration of ritual serves as a means to understand how others experience and relate to the world, notably in the relationship between ritual [as an act of inhabitation] and setting.

The students’ participation in *chado* as a means of design inquiry also reflects social anthropology’s ‘participant observation’. Such investigation ‘...urges the integrity of experience’, and recognises that ‘...insight follows from personal experience’ (Kuper 1999, p 215). In participant observation, ‘...the observer finds out what he or she wants to know by participating in the lives of people under study...The idea is to experience what it is like to be a member of that world, for otherwise one could not begin to understand how it looks and feels.’ (Hendry, 1999, p 3).

## Learning from *chado*

Through an exploration based on first-hand experience of *chado*, the students gained insight into how Japanese people relate to the built environment. It enabled them to develop an understanding of Japanese sensibilities of design towards place, inhabitation and tectonics, notably in terms of: the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, an emphasis upon the body and feeling, a valuing of the uniqueness of each moment (*ichigo ichie*), the Japanese conception of space (*ma*), and the purposefulness (*ito-teki-ni*) of individual aspects of *chado*; each of these are explored in more detail below <sup>3</sup>.

### *Wabi-sabi*

*Wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic that evolved with the development of *chado* (Koren, 1994; Urasenke Foundation, n.d.), though its significance extends beyond the ritual itself. Indeed, this aesthetic has been ‘...described as the culminating distillation of an aesthetic consciousness of the Japanese people that had been cultivated from the late ancient period through medieval times.’ (Koshiro, 1995, p 251).

*Wabi-sabi* is based on an understanding that truth, and thus beauty, can be found in nature (Koren, 1994). This belief has its origins in part in the desire Japanese people traditionally have had to merge and live in harmony with nature, and is grounded in the values of Shinto, whose essence is respect for nature (Terazono, Matsunori, Shrine Master of *Achihayao Jinjya*, 2004, interview with author, 1 August). The beauty and diversity of the landscape itself, and the distinct qualities of seasonal changes in Japan, have also led to the Japanese people being sensitive to nature's features (Hiroto 1971, p 26). [Images of Japanese television news reporting on the forecasted arrival of the blossoming of cherry trees in the spring, and the subsequent rush to the parks to picnic under the blossoms once they emerge, are just one contemporary illustration of the Japanese people's affinity for nature.]



**Figure 3:** The aesthetic of wabi-sabi; footbridge at Nanzen-Ji Temple, Kyoto, Japan

*Wabi-sabi* draws upon observing nature, which teaches us that everything is impermanent, imperfect and incomplete. In particular, this aesthetic suggests that beauty can exist in the inconspicuous and overlooked, and be coaxed out of ugliness. Material qualities reflecting *wabi-sabi* include a suggestion of natural processes, the irregular, the intimate, the unpretentious, the earthy, the murky and the simple (Koren, 1994).

These qualities, and their underlying connection with nature, both inform and are evidenced in *chado*. This includes a marking of time through specific references in the

ceremony, reflecting the season in which the ceremony is taking place. The use of objects such as bowls and utensils whose shape, texture and patina are aged and imperfect both by design and through use, reinforce the sense of *wabi-sabi*. It is also evidenced in the use and valuing of simple utensils, reflecting an attitude defined as 'to know what is enough' (*taru-o-shiru*) (Tanaka and Tanaka 1998, p 93).

It is this latter construct that is worth particular examination here, and its intrinsic reference to the unpretentious and simple. Though Japanese architecture is often identified as minimalist, such a singular label oversimplifies the diversity and contradictions that exist; more particularly, it misinterprets and devalues design grounded in the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*. While much of Japanese architecture shares with minimalism an elegant simplicity, the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic is not about design being reduced to '...the essentials of geometric abstraction.' (Guggenheim Museum, n.d). What it does value is restrained and unpretentious expression, through which the inner beauty of a thing is revealed (Koshiro, 1995, pp 247 and 251). The simplicity evident in much of Japanese architecture also reflects a belief that '...the implicit can express more than the explicit. Therefore they suggest, rather than directly declare or assert...“Less” here is not the reduction or elimination of symbolic intentions and content...' (Bognar 1985, p 31). It is also a quality that is reflected in the Japanese conception of space, discussed further below.

### Emphasis upon the body and feeling

Particularly relevant to *chado* is engagement of the body, inciting participants to become aware of all their senses and not just react visually. This begins at the entry into the teahouse garden through a door of narrow width or low height, or requiring one to step up and over a threshold, making the person more aware of their body as they manoeuvre through the door. Subsequent movement through the garden is not direct but rather broken by a path marked by both irregularly shaped and placed stepping stones, and distinct places along the path where some element is revealed, such as a view. Arriving at the teahouse the engagement of the body continues through a ritualised series of motions of cleansing one's hands, removing one's shoes and entering into the teahouse through a slightly too low door. This engagement is reinforced in the ceremony through the making of the tea in a much formalised way that emphasises the body's motions. It is also in the sounds explicitly generated in the quiet of the ceremony as various utensils are used in the making of the tea (e.g. the tapping of the ladle against the mixing bowl to remove remaining bits of tea powder, swishing of the whisk as it stirs the tea). Touch is also brought into play as the bowl with the tea is passed to and handled by the guests. Smell and taste are also engaged in the contrast of the almost too-bitter tea and almost too-sweet sweets. This contrast of tastes evokes the 'irregularity' in *wabi-sabi*, and more particularly *suki*, suggested as "the very essence of *chanoyu*"...in which the parts are eccentric and do not match.' (Koshiro 1995, p 248, from Sotaku, n.d. p. 301).

While a number of these elements and actions serve to symbolise the participant's leaving behind the ordinary and profane world and entering into a place that is sacred and extraordinary (Plutschow, 1999), they also act to engage the body with all of its senses in experiencing the ritual of *chado*. This engagement is reflective of philosophical tradition in Japan in which the body and feeling are emphasised. In contrast with Western philosophical tradition which privileges the mind and the intellect (Parkes 1995, pp 81 – 82), the ritual of *chado* serves as a reminder that the human body is not understood as something that '...distorts the judgement of the intellect but as a fundamental and trustworthy part of what it means to be human.' (Tanaka and Tanaka 1998, p 187). Emphasis on the body in Japanese (and East-Asian) philosophy extends back to Confucius, who believed one could cultivate the whole self through the engagement of the body in ritual practices (Parkes, 1995, p 82). This emphasis is also reflective of the concept of 'sensitivity to things' (*mono no aware*), which suggests that an essential trait of Japanese culture is a direct engagement with the world, unmediated by language or other discourse (Hooker, 1996).

### ***Ichigo ichie***

The references to time in *chado* through the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic and the various elements which engage the body also serve another purpose; they are intended to focus the participant's attention on the present moment in time and make him/her more intensely aware of the experience. Indeed, the development of the tea ceremony gave rise to an expression defining this quality, known as 'one-time one-meeting' (*ichigo ichie*) (Parkes 1995, p 94). It is reflective of a Japanese attitude of giving value to life's experience, not only generally but in each moment that makes up life. 'In the Way of Tea...we see an art form which perhaps more than any other has the potential of bringing its participants to a realisation of the uniqueness of the moment and a corresponding appreciation of the succession of movements called life.' (Urasenke Foundation, n.d.).

### ***Ma***

In contrast to Western conceptions of space as objective, static, and three dimensional (Nitschke, 1993, p 52), the Japanese sense of space (*ma*) is more suggestive and dynamic, existing both temporally as well as spatially. Indeed, *ma* is understood as what happens in the mind of the viewer as they experience a series of related events in three dimensions and time (Isozaki, 1979, p 13).

Inherent in the subjective nature of *ma* is the construct of 'in-between' (*en*). This is the space, or equally significant the pause, that occurs between spatial and thus intrinsically temporal elements. Though sometimes interpreted as a void, as adopted by Japanese Buddhists to express notions of emptiness (Nitschke 1993, p 58), the construct of *en* is rather more sophisticated than mere nothingness. Inherently ambiguous, it is neither one thing nor another, but rather a '... dynamic balance

between object and space, action and inaction, sound and silence, movement and rest' (Nitschke, 1993, p 56). This sense of the in-between is highly valued throughout the Japanese arts, as evidenced in *No* theatre, in which the performance depends as much upon the pauses between sounds and movement as it does upon the things themselves (Nitschke, 1993). It is also reflected in the Japanese custom of flower arrangement (*ikebana*). While Western interpretations of *ikebana* typically focus on the flower as ornament, in the Japanese tradition it serves to give depth to the shadows created between the flower and the wall or within the alcove where it is sited. As Tanizaki (2001, p 46) relates, 'we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the pattern of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.'



**Figure 4:** Teahouse at Nikko Shrine, Japan

The concept of *en* plays a significant role in *chado*, such as in the aforementioned pauses in the participant's movement on the path through the teahouse garden. It is particularly represented at the veranda (*engawa*) of the teahouse. The *engawa* is '...a transitional zone where exterior and interior interpenetrate and overlap...approximating in architecture the concept of *ma*.' (Bognar, 1985, p 58). This sense of in-between is reinforced through the act of removing one's shoes and stepping-up (*agate kudasai*) onto the veranda. Instead of a direct movement into the teahouse, the experience and setting is layered into a series of related events: turning around and sitting on the edge of the veranda to remove one's shoes, looking back into the garden just walked through, then stepping up onto the veranda and entering into the teahouse itself. The

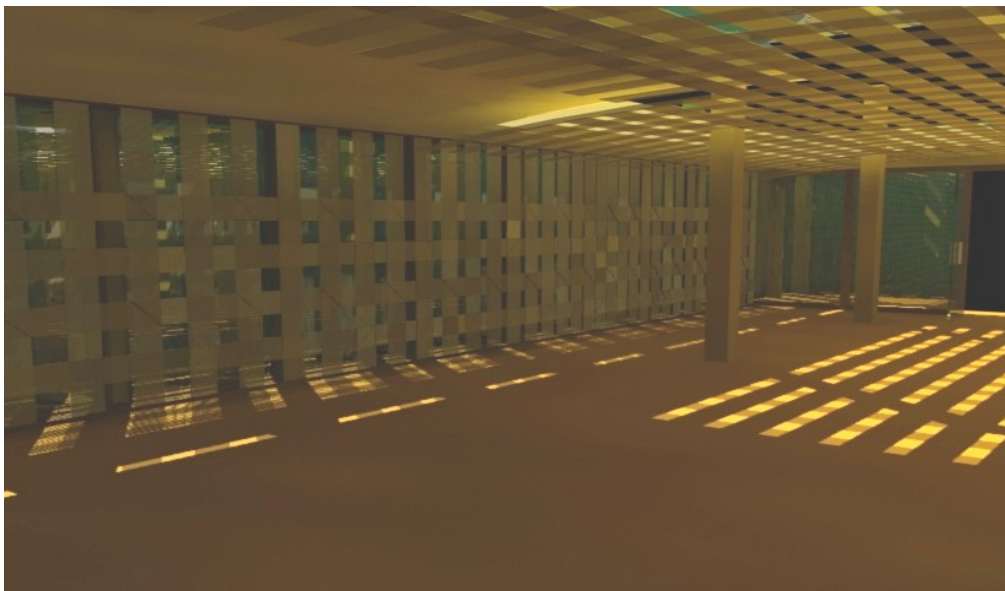
sensation of *en* occurs in more subtle ways as well, notably in the pauses experienced in the making and serving of the tea, marked by both silence and non-movement.

### *Ito-teki-ni*

A final point to note briefly is the purposefulness (*ito-teki-ni*) of elements in *chado*. Nothing in the tea ceremony is done arbitrarily but rather each aspect has a specific purpose (Urasenke Foundation, n.d.). The distinctiveness and meaning of each aspect of the ritual prompts the participant to reflect upon nature and time, awareness of their own body, the uniqueness of the moment, and both specific spatial-temporal events and the things in between.

### Building upon the experience of *chado*

As the students began to engage with the project, the insights gained from *chado* prompted further investigation of and reflection upon the sensibilities revealed. They began to consider not only the Japanese architecture they examined from a new perspective, but their experience also informed their subsequent design work. This is not to suggest that this experience was applied directly to their design proposals (a form of mimicry the project intended to avoid), but rather that it created an expanded awareness in which they formulated and developed their proposals. Projects by two of the students are discussed here to illustrate this.

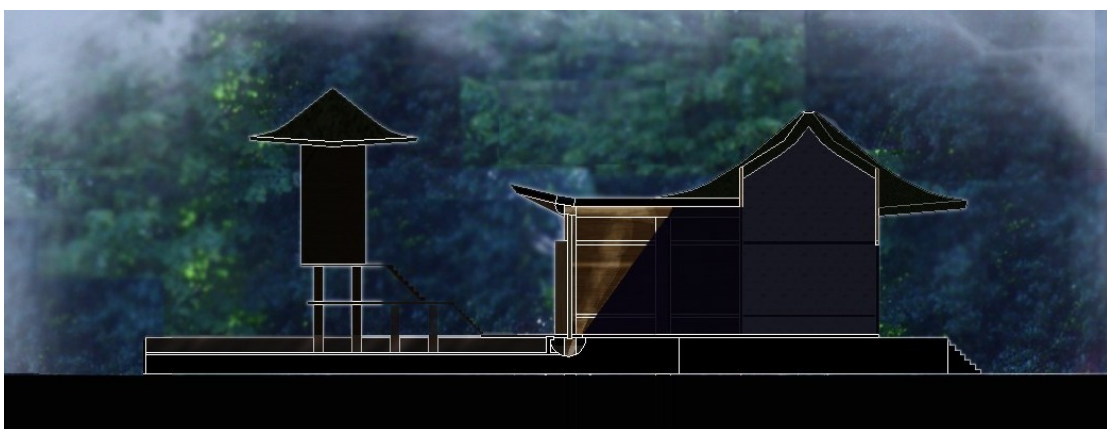


**Figure 5:** Layered screens in Jim Morris's proposal prompt an awareness of nature, space (*ma*) and the body

In Jim Morris's proposal, an envelope of layered timber and copper screens wraps the existing volume of the *haiden* [below its roof line] and its extension. In this proposition the visitor's engagement with the Shrine is marked not so much by visual emphasis upon the envelope as object, but rather in how the envelope engages the visitor

haptically; i.e. a holistic understanding of space involving not only visual perception but all the senses including a perceived sense of touch, positional awareness of the body and memory of prior experience (O'Neill, 2001, p 3). The haptic qualities of the envelope, notably in the texture and changing patina of the timber and copper screens, draw attention to nature and considerations of time. More significant is how variations in size and spacing of openings within the lattice-like screens act on the visitor, particularly as he/she moves in the hall and past the screens. This occurs through playing with an awareness of nature as views outward change. The sense of connection to nature is also incited in the form of natural light, modified by variations in the envelope along its length. This light continues to transform the space through the course of the day and the changing seasons as the position of the sun in relation to the screens changes. Combined together with the visible depth of the envelope, the variation of light filtering through raises the visitor's awareness of space, and their own body and movement, through encouraging the participant to 'slow down'.

In contrast, Matt Sicolo's proposal evokes *Achihayao Jinjya's* history through the introduction of a body of water in the *heiden*, the ceremonial space where offerings are made by the *kannushi*, which lies between the *haiden* and the *honden* [a structure where the god, or *kami*, of the Shrine resides]. While retaining a small platform to act as the ceremonial space, the water-filled *heiden* recalls the site's origins as a peninsula [prior to the build-up of modern day Osaka around it]. This intervention is more than just historicism however, as the water takes on a more dynamic role in the experience of the Shrine. As water spills into a trough behind the end wall of the expanded *haiden*, it generates both sound and reflections cast along the base and top of the wall. Even subtle changes in light conditions and variations in the movement of the water insure that each moment within the *haiden* is unique. The introduction of the water also reinforces the sense of *en* between the *haiden* and *honden*.



**Figure 6:** The use of water in Matt Sicolo's proposal acts to heighten the senses, the experience of the moment (*ichigo ichie*) and a sense of in-between (*en*), while simultaneously recalling the Shrine's past.

## **(Re)learning enabled through the project**

While this project formed part of a design studio, and as such was intended to contribute to the students' development of both their design skills and portfolio generally, what is more significant than the physical output is what students gained from this experience. An analysis of the outcomes of the project in relation to its aims suggests that the project was highly successful, a conclusion reinforced by the students' comments on the project.

The first aim of the project was to raise students' awareness of the notion of working across boundaries in particular to expose them to the challenges this poses and to begin to develop means to address these challenges. The setting of the project in Japan, especially in the context of a Shinto Shrine with its own very distinct values and traditions, provided a useful vehicle with which to explore the idea of working across boundaries. Confronted by beliefs and attitudes wholly disparate from their own experience, they soon discovered the shortcomings of falling back upon their preconceptions and visual preoccupations. At the project's completion, the students noted the challenges posed by the project meant they could not just rely upon an evaluation of visual characteristics; in order to develop a meaningful understanding, they needed to inform themselves more about Japanese people and their traditions. Their participation in the ritual of the *chado* proved to be particularly effective as a way of raising their awareness of Japanese sensibilities of design. Indeed, the students felt that through the experience of ritual and their subsequent explorations, they understood the place better than if they had just visited the site.

The second aim of the project was to challenge students' visual preoccupations, and raise their awareness of the potential for enriching their understanding of architecture, and their own design propositions, through a simultaneous inquiry of place, inhabitation and tectonics. In contrast to their customary design approach which tended to focus upon their own *a priori* aesthetic values, the students' work in this project explicitly arose out of an engagement with Japanese culture. Their work revealed that they found it easier, and were able to produce more sympathetic yet stimulating work, by responding not to form (and possibly falling into the trap of mimicry) but rather by exploring and responding to how the inhabitants experience inhabitation, place and tectonic qualities. Moreover, through the exploration of *chado* the students were able to experience directly, and not just visually examine, an architecture built upon a synergy of inhabitation, place and tectonics.

The third aim of the project was to prompt the students to reflect critically upon their own design practices. As suggested by the above, the students found that they could not just enter into the design process in their usual way (by their own admission, based on formal considerations informed by preconceptions and aesthetic-based evaluations of the site); to progress their work they needed to inform themselves more about Japanese sensibilities of design. Yet while they found engaging with another culture highly informative and rewarding, it was the re-encountering of their own pre-

conceptions and design praxis that was particularly revealing. Indeed, they found that the project had made them more aware of their own design process. Perhaps most significantly, the students recognised that the process that they had engaged in was one that, while prompted by working in a foreign context, they could continue to work with in other projects.

The transformation in students' thinking through this project is reflective of discourse on 'unlearning' (Brew, 1993) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Through their experience of *chado* and trying to make sense of its meaning, students were confronted by the constraints and limitations of their existing beliefs and ways of working. Their reflection upon this experience prompted them to reconsider their presuppositions, and simultaneously explore new thoughts and approaches.

These considerations were reflected in the assessment process, based on the students' final proposal but equally in an edited designing diary which recorded their own critical reflection upon their *a priori* thinking and development of their work. Such making sense of their own views, understanding and praxis served as a valuable resource for their development both as designers, and equally as learners.

A final point worth noting here is regarding the exercises the students were asked to carry out prior to their participation in the tea ceremony, in which they reflected upon their own existing knowledge of Japan, and upon a process (making tea) with which they were already familiar. This 'starting with where they are at' recognises students' existing knowledge and experience can act as a frame of reference, making the exploration of new ideas more accessible. Educational research posits that this promotes active participation by the learner and gives them a sense of freedom, thus facilitating deeper learning (Brookfield, 1987, p 82; Entwistle et al., 1992, p 7; Nicol 1997, pp 1 – 2).

### Limitations of rituals

The experience of this project certainly suggests that there is potential in examining ritual as a way of developing an understanding of architectural concepts and traditions in another cultural context. However, though the exploration of the tea ceremony played a significant role in this project, there are limitations to engaging with rituals.

Firstly, too much can be read into any singular ritual, especially in drawing too wide-ranging conclusions. Any ritual has limitations in terms of explaining the complexity of life. This is certainly true in the context of Japan, where for example, the understated symbolic gesture epitomised by *No* theatre sits happily side-by-side with the larger-than-life actions of *Kabuki* theatre (Keene, 1995, p 29).

Secondly, the place of traditions in contemporary life needs to be understood. We cannot assume that there is or should be strict adherence to the past, a view outsiders often project onto other cultures whose traditions they value; we need to recognise that

values and traditions evolve as cultures interact. Equally however, it does not suggest the eradication of ‘...a deeply engrained set of cultural values and principles, preventing (them) from being maintained, reinterpreted, reinvented and thus kept alive.’ (Bharne, 2000, p 12).

## Conclusions

In *The New Japanese House – Ritual and Anti-Ritual Patterns of Dwelling*, Chris Fawcett posits that, ‘...the house does not exist as something unto itself but engages in a daily exchange of social, economic and ritual gestures, and any attempt by the Western architect to try to come to terms with the Japanese house must start from this basic anthropological understanding.’ (1980, p 11). The experience of exploring the tea ceremony in this project echoes this view, and supports anthropologists’ contention that by looking at rituals we can learn a lot about how people see the world (Hendry, 1999, p 65). Moreover, it suggests that a study of ritual can contribute to our working processes when we venture across boundaries.

Whether educators [and professionals] are willing to consider giving a place to the exploration of ritual in the design studio is open to debate. The engagement with social anthropology is a path ventured down before in the 1960s as architects and architectural education collaborated with other professions; this was largely abandoned however, arguably in the UK, in favour of the architect-as-artist paradigm (Crimson and Lubbock, 1994). Intrinsic to this question is how much are we are willing to consider the lessons that can be drawn from rituals, even when they may raise questions about fundamental values underlying our discipline?

However we may respond, what is worth taking forward is the learning that occurred through this project. By participating in the tea ceremony, students gained not only an understanding of *chado* but more significantly of Japanese sensibilities of aesthetics, philosophy and space. This awareness in turn informed not only their projects, but more significantly prompted a critical reconsideration of their own *a priori* thinking and ways of working. Inspiration drawn from *mitate* provided encouragement to step outside of habitual ways of learning and provided new understanding. As Brew (1993, p 92) suggests, ‘...extending the range of what we consider relevant to any given situation opens us up to new insights.’

## Endnotes

1. While reflecting existing discourse, East and West are used here with hesitancy, as such terms are relative, and through contact with others ‘...all cultures are continually in a process of hybridity’ (Menon 2001, p 210).
2. Japanese traditions of bathing and dance were also examined as part of this project, with the support of the Japanese designer and a Japanese dancer/choreographer. While they also played a role in the students’

learning, discussion of these aspects is however beyond the scope of this paper.

3. The discussion of *chado* is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather focuses on particular attributes that reveal Japanese sensibilities of design. For further reading on *chado*, see Seno and Sendo Tanaka's *The Tea Ceremony*.

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