

“Wayō secchū” Meiji Architecture as an Interpretative Device for Tokyo’s Modern Space

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The rapid development of modernization, from the end of the Tokugawa period, and Tokyo’s ambiguous relationship with tradition gave birth to a new urban materiality and appearance that observers have often described as the shabby, chaotic, ugly condition of the modern capital city. The collision between East and West, tradition and modernity seems to have condemned the capital of Japan to a vague and uncertain identity. The research of an hidden order, the discovery of the historical traces of Edo, the Western aesthetic approach which views Tōkyō as the source of post-modernism, these are only few example of the interpretation that aim at finding a “meaning,” or a definition for Tōkyō.¹

Then the capital continues to dazzle the perceptive and cognitive capabilities of its inhabitants and visitors with a jungle landscape of high-engineered buildings, streets festooned with wires, every sort of billboard, poorly designed houses and forgotten spots of the traditional atmosphere of the ancient capital. Despite the economic, political and bureaucratic reasons that shaped this cozy urban “panorama” and its burden of social and living problems, I could not ignore the persistent toy-like appearance of the city.²

Walking in Shibuya, Shinjuku or Omote Sandō, it is not unusual to observe some amazing buildings that combine dramatic scale and refined use of material with surprising hyper modern design. But a stroll in Jiyūgaoka is a completely new experience. Here, among high-value residential buildings, the district is dotted with visions of a Versailles-style pink castle, a little scale Venetian “vista”; columns and stucco used in great abundance. Attracting customers to the restaurants and shops could be a reasonable explanation for such an original and imaginative architectural design. It would be interesting to understand, however, the way people feel attraction for this paradoxical interpretation of

1 Ashihara Yoshinobu, *Kakureta chitsujo, Nijuisseiki no toshi ni mukatte* (The hidden order, Urban perspectives in XXI century), Tōkyō, Chūō kōronsha, 1986. Jinnai Hidenobu, *Tōkyō no kikan jinruigaku* (Tōkyō, a spatial anthropology), Tōkyō, Chikuma Shobō, 1985; Roland Barthes, *L’empire des signes*, Genève, 1970, Kazuo Shinohara, *D’anarchie en bruit aléatoire*, in Augustin Berque (ed.), *La qualité de la ville. Urbanité française, urbanité nippone*, I, Tōkyō, 1987, pp. 103-111.

2 Ohkawa Kazushi, Henry Rosovsky, “Capital Formation in Japan,” in Yamamura Kozo (ed.), *The Economic Emergence of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 204-211; Tsuru Shigeto, *Japan’s Capitalism. Creative defeat and beyond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 158-176. Brian Woodal, *Japan Under Construction, Corruption, Politics, and Public Works*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press, 1997.

Western architecture. In other words, how could one research the code or the vocabulary that allows the communication between the patron of the project, the architect and the public involved in the construction of buildings that borrow from Western or European architectural models and freely adapt them to the context of Tōkyō? Is this phenomenon a sort of game that was created by the economic boom of the 90's? Or perhaps, does this behavior belong to a long and complex process of assimilation of the images and contents of the West?

From an urban perspective the transition from Edo to Tōkyō is the history of the transformation of the physical appearance and spatial organization of a feudal city into a Western looking modern capital.³ My research, therefore, begin with Meiji period Tokyo. The building I first focus my attention on is the Tsukiji Hoterukan.⁴ This building stands as a bridge that leads from the spatial and visual organization of the old capital to a transformation of the city which mirrors the political and cultural programs established by the Meiji leadership under the name of Civilization and Enlightenment in the 1870's.

At the beginning of the Meiji period Japan saw the image of its own future through the results of the modernization process brought by Western countries. Taking inspiration and borrowing from the political, economical and cultural systems of the West were part of the project for the creation of the new nation state that could compete with developed countries. The Fukoku kyōhei program (prosperous nation, strong army) was vital for its improvement without falling into a victim of the Western colonial policies. In such a context Tōkyō became the framework where the transformation could take place for the experiment of modernization. The elite who was ruling the country paid strong attention particularly to the physical appearance of the city. The movement aimed at making the city more beautiful, impressive and monumental was supported by the idea that the new image of Japan should first of all brought by the image of the new city.⁵

For transition from Edo to Tōkyō in terms of architecture a new style which was later called *giyōfū* was adopted. The first character of the word "giyōfū" in Japanese means "to imitate." When it was first introduced in 1930 by Hirokoshi Saburō, the con-

3 Henry D. Smith II, "Tokyo as an idea: An Exploration of Japanese Urban Thought Until 1945," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 4, 1, 1978; Fujimori Terunobu, *Meiji no tōkyō keikaku*, Tōkyō, Iwanami shoten, 1982; Jinnai Hidenobu, "The Modernization of Tokyo during the Meiji Period", in Attilio Petruccioli (ed.), *Rethinking X IXth Century City*, Cambridge, Mass., The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1988, pp. 29-31.

4 The Tsukiji Hoterukan, designed by R.B. Bridgens and realized by Shimizu Kisuke II, was the first western like hotel in the history of Edo-Tōkyō. For a description and some consideration on the "eclectic" nature of the building see for example Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 37; Kunio Kudo, Keith Vincent, "Tokyo", in Kenneth Frampton, Kunio Kudo (eds.), *Japanese Building Practise from Ancient Times to the Meiji Period*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997, pp. 81-84.

5 Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print. Impressions of a New Civilization*, New York-Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1986, pp. 3-61.

cept which supported this definition was that the mixture of the Japanese and Western features of the early Meiji period building design was an “inevitable” one.⁶ In fact the Japanese expression used was “yamu wo ezu konzai shite shimatta mono.”

It was assumed that the new giyōfū style was not the result of an elaborate research but the necessary reaction to the rapid process of confrontation with the West.⁷

This definition may help us to understand the process of the architectural innovation in modern Japan. At the same time, however, it seems also important to analyze the purposes of this attitude which led to “imitation”, and search the meaning of these new buildings beyond their appearances, which might not simply be the result of the adoption of Western or European models. In this way this research start to analyze the case of the Tsukiji Hoterukan, and first step aims to concentrate on the concept of empathy.⁸ In the process of modernization of a developing society empathy works as a psychic mechanism that enables a person to put himself into another person’s situation - to identify himself with a role, time or place which is different from his own. Among a range of psychic mechanism that supply imagination, empathy encourages upward mobility. In fact, it seems to be a great stimulus to imagine oneself in another person’s situation if it is better than one he/she is in now. The mechanism may or may not be granted by nature, but it can certainly be trained to operate more efficiently in people with desires to improve themselves. Desire is in fact a powerful tool that can activate the mechanism to improve one’s own situation, and in a wider sense the future of a developing nation.⁹

Empathy and desire, however, are strictly tied to the historical, cultural and social context to which they belong, in contrast to their stimuli towards transformation of individuals or nations. They have to operate within the framework of traditional behaviors, material culture conditions, economical and political assets, and thus they have to cope with them all. There is no big difference between conceiving them as a burden and as a

6 Hirokoshi Saburō, *Meiji tokei daiki*, Tōkyō, 1930.

7 Hatsuda Tōru, *Tōkyō toshi no meiji*, Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō, 1994, pp. 12-25

8 The aim of this research is to elaborate a toll of the analysis that allows to observe the urban and architectural changes of the city through the meaning of the collision between the new cultural western model and Japan. The choice to investigate the psychic mechanism of empathy, which needs a deeper elaboration, this research is to be considered in fact the first tentative step in this direction, should be useful to analyze the aesthetic approach, diffused also today, which lead to “pastiche” and “collage” of many different architectural styles in one single building. An effective analysis of the relationship between the meaning of architectural shapes and the mechanisms that bond the complexity of the constructed space and the social, cultural and artistic values of the building is presented in, Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1977; William H. Coaldrake, *Architecture and authority in Japan*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp.1-16, 208-250; Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings and power*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993. Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

9 David Harrison, *The sociology of modernization and development*, London, Routledge, 1991 (1988); Jerome Braun, *Psychological Aspects of Modernity*, Praeger Publishers, 1993.

precious legacy. What is vital for the success of the process is to be able to negotiate them. In such a context, the way of achieving complete modernization is based on the ability to transform the institutions (political, economical and social system) which have been transferred from the West, and to adopt the lifestyles, which cannot be easily adopted. In this way the individual should find a “path” for the participation in the process of modernization. In the field of the early Meiji architecture the mechanism of empathy could be explained using “compromise” and “eclecticism” as methodological devices of the research, resulted in the comprehension of these buildings, which stand as “modern illusions” of a rapidly approaching new world.

Compromise means to settle differences or conflicting claims etc. between parties by mutual concession or to come to an agreement by the partial surrender of positions or principles.

Eclecticism means to combine elements derived from diverse systems of opinions or practices in any science or art. It refers to a new system made up of selections that are not received indiscriminately but finding points of agreement with diverse parties or school. In art and in architecture eclecticism means to choose the best points out of a multitude of fine forms.

What I would like to emphasize here is that the meaning of compromise deals with a change from a conflicting situation to a mutual agreement. While eclecticism stands a free selection of different parts to create something that satisfies tastes or ideas of the person involved in the selection process. Compromise and eclecticism represent two different levels of perception of an object we have or we want to cope with.

In Japanese there is a word which seems to be a good combination of these two concepts. It is “*secchū*.” The Japanese definition of this word is あれこれと取捨して適当なところをとること.¹⁰

In this expression “*shusha*” means adoption and rejection, and “*tekitoona tokoro wo toru*” means to take suitable, proper or reasonable parts. The action of “*shusha suru*” seems to involve a process of finding a mutual agreement between opposite positions or claims. But “*tekitoona tokoro wo toru*” seems to concern a more creative process of conscious selection, closer to eclecticism rather than to compromise. Because the word “*secchū*” this double action, we can perceive that here the meanings of “compromise” and “eclecticism” are similar or closer than in English. The Japanese word commonly used to express “compromise” is “*dakyō*” (妥協) which means to shade a higher de-

10 The analysis of these terms started with the comprehension of their etymological sense and meaning through references tools as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Kōjien Japanese Dictionary*.

gree of conflictuality among opposing situations, ideas or claims. That is why it is possible to conceive the meaning of “secchū” also as the result of a process which does not simply lead to a conciliation or an agreement but to a new, different or eclectic condition. If we look at the English translation, “secchū” means compromise between opposing motives, cross blending, and the first and only meaning for “secchūshugi” is eclecticism. Finally, we could translate the word “secchū” as “compromising eclecticism.”

The interesting point is that the expression “wayō secchū” has been used, especially by prof. Hatsuda Tōru, to describe the particular kind of architecture at the beginning of the Meiji period.¹¹ All this considered, in which way compromise, eclecticism and secchū can explain the western-like architectural space of the first years of the Meiji period? And in which way the concept of “wayō secchū” architecture can become a tool for the interpretation of contemporary Tōkyō’s architecture?

I decided to analyze the Tsukiji Hoterukan because it is an early Meiji spatial experiment that can show the genuine reaction of the people of Edo-Tōkyō when the country was forced to deal directly with the West. The hotel was conceived as a place for foreign guests. The combination of Western and Japanese architectural features that characterized the design of the building is assumed to be the first example of the *giyōfū* style. I decided to focus on this example of early Meiji architecture because from different perspectives it can help to understand the way compromise and eclecticism shaped the process of adaptation of Western architectural tradition in Japan.

Tsukiji Hoterukan

The origin of the name “Hoterukan” was a coined word consisting of two terms: “hoteru” and “kan.” The former is the transliteration of hotel, and the latter is from the word *ryokan* meaning inn or hotel in Japanese. This word was especially used in prints depicting the building, which became very popular in the Meiji period. People started to know the new construction through this exotic name and its appeal reminding of a largely unknown western world. In the official document of the *bakufu* the hotel was called “gaikokujin ryokan”. While the name “Yedo Hotel” was used in the Yokohama based newspaper “The Far East.”¹² The expressions “gaikokujin ryokan” and “Yedo Hotel” in a certain way show how the official power, both of the Tokugawa bakufu and of the foreign press, identified and described the function of the building. For the bakufu it was

11 Hatsuda Tōru, *Tōkyō toshi no meiji*, Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō, 1994, Hatsuda Tōru, *Hankagai ni miru toshi no kindai Tōkyō*, Tōkyō, Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 2001, pp.17-76

12 See Hugh Cortazzi, *Victorians in Japan. In and around the treaty ports*, London, The Athlone Press, 1987, p. 114; *The Far East*, 16th August 1870.

a “ryokan” and for the foreign press it was a “hotel.” However “hoterukan” expresses a different point of view. It stresses the will to popularize among the people of Edo the image of the new building as a symbol of the new era. This name emphasizes the fact that the building was a different and unusual construction in Edo’s spatial and social landscape. It should be interpreted as a sort of eclectic compromise between two different languages, but also two different ways of conceiving the architectural space. In fact, the expression “hoterukan” can be considered as the linguistic attempt to explain what was happening with the spatial, physical appearance of the city. People needed a word that could translate the meaning of the transition from the traditional way of conceiving the place of the *ryokan* to the new foreign space of the hotel. The word “hoterukan” was a perfect Japanese synthesis for two worlds approaching each other.

There is another feature of the Hotel I would like to focus my attention in order to understand how the project and the design of the building developed in an eclectic and compromising new style. The “Edo gaikokujin kyoryu torikime” which was the official bakufu record issued in July 1867 stated that in the new foreign settlement of Tsukiji a building (gaikokujin ryokan) should be built according to the general plan proposed by a foreign architect. The American architect R. P. Bridgens was appointed. It also said that the supervision of the construction had to be executed by the most suitable Japanese *tōryō*.¹³ It should be noted that Kisuke II had already asked for his nomination for the construction of the new hotel prior to the decision made by the *bakufu*. Since the idea of constructing a hotel for foreigners was unprecedented at the time in Edo, it must have sounded very attractive to Kisuke II to take charge of the project which would also make a great profit. Once contracted, he had to pay for the construction works that were estimated in thirty thousand *ryo*. This was a considerable amount of money for those days. Economically speaking, the project was full of risk. But for Kisuke II was a new challenge.¹⁴

The binomial “Bridgens-Shimizu” influenced in a very particular and special way the design and appearance of the building. The American architect designed the E-shaped plan for the largest scale building of the history of Edo. The hotel had an area of 5 thousand square-meters. It contained 102 rooms each with a fireplace, which were arranged in a symmetrical pattern. Despite this huge western-like architectural composition, the hotel had an original flavor. This stand in between the imposing dimension of European

13 Hatsuda Tōru, *Tōkyō toshi no meiji*, Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō, 1994, p. 34

14 Hatsuda Tōru, *Shokunintachi no seiyōkenchiku*, Tōkyō, Kōdansha, 1997, pp.19-29

public building and an eclectic combination of decorative features and construction materials.

Bridgens was the supervisor of the project but in fact Shimizu Kisuke II gradually enjoyed a wider autonomy in the decision making process of building design and decoration. Then, observing the external composition and appearance of the hotel is possible to recreate the vocabulary made of the different elements, or units of the narrative discourse on architectural space, that express the complexity and originality of the style of the building. In other words, some characteristic of the design can be decoded into an intelligible language that allow the observer to understand the special nature and the social and cultural forces that shaped this new architectural style of the beginning of the Meiji period.

We should focus our attention on the tower and its peculiar design.¹⁵ The three-story tower-like cupola looked Western to Japanese observers. Despite its traditional origins it had to express the idea and convey the impression of prestige, authority and novelty which was recognized as a superior characteristic of Western architecture. The linear cornices under the roofs and the weather vane were features adopted from Western architecture. Also the bell in this new position must have been a kind of shock for the people who first visited the site. When we look closer at the design and decoration of the tower we can discover some other interesting details. The windows in *katō* style of Chinese origins, usually used for temples and shrines, and the *fūtaku*, which was a typical feature of traditional religious architecture, are among them. They had a special meaning for the people of Edo who got used to recognizing them as peculiar architectural characteristics of temples and shrines. They were a symbol of social status or social importance, because they belonged to religious architecture. However, their use in the design and decoration of a hotel was completely new and unusual. They didn't have any functional relation with the building. Then, did this composition have any meaning and if yes what was its message?

To find a possible answer we should look at the historical condition in which the hotel was completed. The Tokugawa bakufu, which commissioned the building, was collapsing. Japan and Edo in particular were in tumultuous conditions. There is no evidence of the presence of Bridgens in Tsukiji at that time. We can presume that Kisuke had the complete control not only of the construction works but also of the final drawings of the building. In fact we can find only his name in the writing to the new Meiji government

15 Prof. Hatsuda's analysis of the composition and aesthetic of the tower of the Tsukiji Hoterukan made my research proceed deeper inside the mechanism of overlapping and eclectic collision in architecture during the very first step of the Meiji period. Hatsuda Tōru, *Tōkyō toshi no meiji*, Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō, 1994, pp. 44-46.

asking, for example, for the permission to build with stone the entrance arch of the hotel. Because Kisuke was in charge of the construction costs of the building he had to cope with this new traumatic situation and find a way to get profit from the realization of the building. The project was a matter concerning money and reputation. First of all he had to find new clients. During the period of great changes and insecurity he invented a new style which looked like western architecture using a new eclectic vocabulary that was a combination of western images and new interpretation of Japanese traditional architecture features.

Kisuke found the way of communicating with the people of Edo using a language, or a code, which spoke about the coming modernization of Japan through word as “namako kabe”, or Edo period warehouse fireproofing walls which had an appearance reminiscent of stone, “katō mado,” and “fūtaku” that people could understand and accept. At the same time, this new architecture was attractive because it was a positive synthesis of the “new” and the “old” which created a new meaning in appearance. Kisuke’s idea was successful. After the completion of the Tsukiji hoterukan, one of the most important commissions he received was the construction of the Mistui Gumi Goyosho, or Mitsui Group Building, completed in 1872.¹⁶ At that time, the new style invented by Kisuke had become a sort of symbol for power and success. Because Kisuke II’s style was a balanced combination of innovation and tradition, it gave the possibility to experiment modernity avoiding the annoying impression of being overwhelmed by the West.

Conclusion

The experiments of Shimizu Kisuke II are important clues to understand the mechanism of empathy versus blind imitation and adoption of western style architecture. Because empathy encourages upward mobility, this mechanism frees desire and imagination, which are powerful tools of the self-improvement process. In fact, the Tsukiji Hoterukan was the result of an attempt to find the indigenous path for approaching modernization. This was the Japanese answer to the collision between East and West, tradition and modernity. It was not a refusal neither an imitation of the West, but a process of discovering and adapting the new foreign modern world step by step. Kisuke II, an experienced and creative master carpenter, invented an eclectic new style that later spread in the provinces, becoming a sort of new architectural model.¹⁷ At the same time the style of Kisuke II became a kind of “fashion” that the people of Edo-Tokyo started to follow when they

16 Dallas Finn, *Meiji Revisited, The Sites of Victorian Japan*, New York, Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1995, pp.17-22.

17 STEWARD, David, B., *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture, 1868 to the Present*, Tokyo and New York, Kodansha International, 1987, pp.30-33.

decided to build a new house, shop or other commercial space. For example, after the construction of the two buildings for the Mitsui Group the buildings of Ginza Brick Town were often decorated with “karahafu” style gambles which Kisuke used for the decoration of his projects. This single element, the Chinese styled gamble employed by Kisuke II in a western like scale architectural composition, stood for the symbol of the social position, or social status, of the owner who could not afford to make a contract with Kisuke but who would like to borrow from his style.

Because of the positiveness of the style elaborated by Shimizu, I would like to suggest that his building experiments cannot be described as *giyōfū* style architecture. Blind imitation and inevitable mixture of style were not the aim. As far as the Tsukiji Hotel is concerned, historical conditions, technical limitations and Kisuke’s imagination made the difference, which resulted in the original and attractive appearance of the building. The hotel was the result of Kisuke’s positive elaboration of the dramatic but stimulating contingent situation. Thus it might be considered more appropriate to describe his achievement as “translation” of western architectural vocabularies rather than imitation. The difference between the genuine western model and Kisuke combination of styles was expressed by the hazardous and unusual appearance of the hotel. The overall appearance of the building was a sort of metaphor of the transformation and changes that followed the sudden and critical collision between the civilizations of Japan and of the West. Compromise and eclecticism worked together in the highly creative approach of this master carpenter who selected and adapted different techniques, materials and styles in a new coherent architectural design. The style of the Tsukiji Hoterukan was not simply the result of a rapid and inevitable reaction to the exotic images of the West. Kisuke II set up a “path” aimed at coping with modernization interpreting his own tradition.

The expression *wayō secchū* architecture might suit the above case because the range of the meanings of the word “*secchū*” allows this definition to be applied to the process of elaborating a new suitable condition out of conflicting differences, claims or opinions. This was the context Kisuke II worked in. His new architectural design can be interpreted as the visual result produced by the mechanism of empathy which lead to the improvement of the technical and artistic characteristics of the building while pragmatically negotiating a compromise between architectural features belonging to different traditions. In fact, if we look closer to the process that supported the creative inspiration of Kisuke II we come to realize that it was firstly activated by the desire to improve his own condition: for Kisuke II the hotel meant “fame.” The impact with the West produced a new spatial materiality that stood for new social, economical and cultural possibilities.

This building was a modern illusion in a very special way. In the political context

of the transition from Edo to Tōkyō, when the strategies for the transformation of the city was a top-down decision making process, the Tsukiji Hoterukan was the expression of what it meant to be *modern* for Kiskey II and for the people who enjoyed the vision of the building. I use the word “illusion” because this building didn’t look like a real modern Western architectural image but it visually “represented” the meaning of collision between two different world, two civilization. I think that this no-genuine or counterfeit image of Western architecture was the projection of the idea and meaning of modernization as conceived by the people who had the possibility to cope with it at the beginning of the Meiji period. Moreover, the Tsukiji Hoterukan stood for *totem* or symbol of the process of modernization within the framework of a city whose spaces and rhythms were the ones of Edo. My opinion is that the expression “modern illusion” could be useful to describe the relationship between this space, the hotel was the very first experiment but many other followed, and the city as a whole. The Tsukiji Hoterukan was a building that the greater part of the population of the capital could observe through prints. It was an exotic and interesting place but in a particular sense that people couldn’t really experience its space. Furthermore, since this kind of constructions was rare in Tōkyō, it was easy to recognize them as different, that meant they were “modern.” Finally, this was the real power of the buildings like the Tsukiji Hoterukan. It was the projection, or illusion, of the coming future but it was not yet a real asset for the most part of the population. The Tsukiji Hoterukan, as well as the building, later designed by Kiskey II and by other Western architects in Tōkyō, became “place for modernity” where a person could free up the imagination and feel like it was possible to become a part of this new word, even for the time of a walk.

I believe that it would not be surprising if I conclude that wayō secchū could be a concept and an instrument that can help us in understanding the nature of Tōkyō’s modern architectural space. Perhaps it sounds like a paradox but I would like to propose that the experiment made by Kiskey II and the buildings of contemporary Jiyūgaoka share the same empathic approach to the “exotic” Western world. Perhaps for some people, borrowing from the West still means following a dream of progress, and cultural and economic improvement. But, if we consider the process of destruction and reconstruction propelled by the 1923 earthquake and bombing of the city during World War II, isn’t it possible that nowadays Tōkyō’s bizarre architecture is the winning result of an ironical game playing with modernity? Maybe, the experiments of Kiskey II and the buildings of Jiyūgaoka share the same power of attraction and fascination because they are the projections of an invented world made of interpretations of the new psychic and ever changing material conditions of modernity.