

# THE SHRINES OF NIKKO AND ORNAMENTAL ARCHITECTURE

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## ORNAMENTAL ARCHITECTURE

Naomi Okawa in his book on Edo Architecture writes that “it is truly an exhilarating experience to stand before the Yomei-mon gate of the Toshogu Shrine at Nikko, surrounded by a crowd of visitors and listen to the exclamations of wonder evoked by the majesty of the buildings”.<sup>1</sup> Although Professor Okawa doesn’t mention ornament as being implicated in this reaction, it is logical to conclude from what he says further on when comparing Nikko with the Katsura Imperial Villa, this latter as embodying “unscathed nature; where decorative painting and are virtually nonexistent”, while the former, Nikko, is an “architecture replete with teeming sculptures of dragons, flowers, and birds”, that ornament is conclusive when experiencing both architectures. Okawa is not alone in this inference; all historians whether Japanese or otherwise, when writing about the Shrines of Nikko, inevitably refer to their ornamental character.<sup>2</sup> This designation, while in principle not erroneous, nevertheless converts Nikko into a particular case within Japanese Classical architecture, and often the cause of censure among Western historians, starting from James Fergusson’s observation of “the great decadence which had taken place in the style”<sup>3</sup> to Taut’s (in)famous dismissal as inconsequential<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore this uniqueness is frequently correlated by historians, as manner of justification, to Western ornamental architecture, including Professor Okawa who describes the Toshogu as containing “varicolored, heavy, and exaggerated decoration, which some liken to the Western Baroque”<sup>5</sup>, or Noritake Tsuda’s analysis of the Yomei-mon gate, whose resplendent surface “represent what we call the Rococo style of Japanese architecture”<sup>6</sup>. Both propositions are accurate: its ornamental character and the association with the Baroque, or more specifically the Spanish Ultra-Baroque or Churrigueresque architecture. Although, evidently no possible historical or cultural reciprocity exists between Nikko and the Churrigueresque, their visual affinity is undeniable and, it should be added, not coincidental.

The similarity lies in what is mutually inherent: ornament. Not the actual ornament employed, whose formal language and motifs are distinct to each architecture or even less to Riegl-like evolutionary proposition<sup>7</sup>. Their parallelism is based on the role that ornament plays in both architectures. But to deduce what is common in the ornament of Nikko and, for instance, in a paradigmatic example of the Churrigueresque like the Monastery of San Martin

de Tepotzotlan, the more comprehensive question of the role of ornament in architecture has to be examined.

However, several considerations should be first taken into account: in the case of the Churrigueresque, with the exception of historians such as Manuel Toussaint and Ives Bottineau<sup>8</sup>, this classification has been condemnatory and in words of Graziano Gasparini<sup>9</sup>, Tepotzotlan is relegated to the state of non-architecture. With this in mind, it is important to remember that the Rococo has been challenged as genuine style of architecture, acceptable only in Paul Frankl's "post medieval" interpretation,<sup>10</sup> and that the Baroque itself was blamed for all the evils of architecture throughout the 18th century and only within the last decades, assisted by Heinrich Wofflin's "Renaissance and Baroque",<sup>11</sup> has it been redeemed. In addition, in both cases, that of Nikko and Tepotzotlan, the appreciation of its architecture distorts its significance, for this classification ensues from the belief that ornament is extra-architectonic. In other words, according to the traditional Vitruvian concept of architecture, valid for both Western and Japanese thinking, ornament is tangential to its content. It is additive and, consequently, unnecessary and dispensable.

This tenet translates into an ethical issue, as Gombrich explains in "The Sense of Order" when analysing Ruskin's eccentric view of ornament<sup>12</sup>. Not only is ornamental architecture non-architecture, but morally questionable, a fact of major relevance, at least from a non-Japanese historian's point of view, when Nikko is compared with the Japanese Classical ideal of architecture, the Imperial Villa of Katsura. In Katsura, nothing can be added or removed as both Naomi Okawa and Akira Naito point out<sup>13</sup>, a concept applicable as well to Wofflin's definition of Renaissance architecture with respect to Baroque, where he explains "there subsists a very palpable difference between the finished look of the classic architecture and the never-quite-assimilable picture of later art."<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, the Shrines of Nikko, like the Monastery of Tepotzotlan and other examples of ornamental architecture such as the Rococo and the Baroque, demand an obligatory redefinition of its architecture or vindication of the ornamental quality. Ornament is the salient factor of that architecture and understanding its contribution requires the understanding of the formal composition itself. On the other hand, if the characteristics of the composition of Nikko, as Professor Okawa elucidates, are the opposite to those of the Villa of Katsura<sup>15</sup>, they are equally contrary to that of other examples of classical Japanese architecture, like the Toshoda-ji, the Kofuku-ji and such prototypical buildings as the Nara temple complex of Horyu-ji. Therefore, the analysis of the architectural object that the Shrines of Nikko represent should be based, first on the collation of its morphological characteristics with those of the antithetical example of the Temple of Horyu-ji, and secondly, through their ratification with the analogous example of Tepotzotlan.

## ORDER AND ANALOGIES

The architectural objects that constitute the buildings of Nikko are apprehended through

its facades, or determinant planes, whether these be walls, structure, ceilings, roofs or eaves. Furthermore, these facades are composed of parts and its apprehension, in the Vitruvian sense, is realized through their attributes within the composition. Architecture, therefore, is the result of the characteristics and the conditions that determine the sum or the totality of all the parts involved in the composition. By totality is meant that situation which transcends the sum proper of the parts; in other words, the fundamental coherence of the composition of the architectural object: the order. Although the term lends itself to confusion, especially in relation to its limited Vitruvian meaning and to the inherited historical authority of the Classical orders, it nevertheless expresses that situation where the act of ordering of parts has achieved its equilibrium. Not as an aesthetic accomplishment, which is a contingent and concomitant possibility, but what Gombrich describes as a "structure of interacting forces"<sup>16</sup> in which the interaction could never be secured without some of basic sense of order. In the apprehension of the architectural object, all parts of the composition, regardless of their quality and classification as ornament or non-ornament, and the disparities in scale and immediacy of reading, whether in segments or in total must be included in the order. Nikko projects an architectural order, the product of meta-architectonic facts and events, of effects of time and place, sometimes even of similar nature such as Tokugawa Ieyasu's political ambitions in Japan and Spain's conquest of America, but beyond these influences in virtue of the sum of the parts of its determinant planes.

Although Mitsuo Inoue has shown, when analysing Nikko in his thorough study of space in Japanese Classical architecture, the singularity of its solution<sup>17</sup>, the shrines, in contrast to the Baroque style of Western architecture where modifications of ground plans prevail, do not innovate typology. The ground plans of the Nikko Toshogu and Taiyu-in buildings, besides their delicate and ingenuous adaptability to difficult site, employ layouts that have been tested over time. The same can be said with respect to the massing and roofing, where no innovative solutions are proposed. We are dealing with proven models, buildings with various uses, in several propositions within the needed structure and multiple roofs, both hipped and gabled, that do not search for originality as an end in itself and have been utilized often and regularly in other Japanese architectural temple complexes.

This holds true as well for the solution of Tepozotlan. The Jesuit monastery makes no contribution to the evolution of ground plans or of massing. Actually both the cloisters and the church consist of simplified and elementary propositions; in the latter, for example, a cruciform and mononave layout which is common to most of religious architecture of the time and the region. As in Nikko, it is a question of proven models. Although there are historical periods of Japanese architecture in which the formal search involves changes in prototypes, still, it is the solutions through variations of the determinant planes that give the architectural objects their identity. To experiment with plans and masses should not necessarily have laudable connotations, as has often been the case, for this is but an extension of the phase of the totality. What distinguishes all the formal possibilities above ground plan solutions and massing, the architectural reality or order.

Although all architecture has ornament and much of it has color, and both of these factors are far from exclusive to the Shrines of Nikko, fundamental dissimilarities exist with respect to other buildings of Japanese classical architecture. In the first place, the composition of the facades of Nikko comprise a multiplicity of parts in relation to all other examples of Japanese architecture. The components of the Yomei-mon gate of the Toshogu, for example, whether structural such as the pillars, the bracketing and the rafters, or non-structural such as walls and the gables, are all filled with ornament, of both abstract and realistic motifs, such as dragons, demons, flora and fauna, swirls, tortoise shell patterns, lacquer work, metal castings, murals and paintings. Often surfaces are totally carved and texturized with ornamental reliefs, such as the columns of both the Yomei-mon and the Karamon gate, and the interior panels of the Main Sanctuary, leaving no unoccupied space and making no distinction in their position within the composition.

In the second place, the buildings of Nikko contain more color and gold veneer than other examples of classical architecture. Gold leaf covers profusely entire walls, columns and lintels and bronze fittings of intricate design outline the bracketing, the rafters, the purlins and panels and doors. Equally, various colors, such as red, blue, and green, are applied on the different parts of the composition, structural and non-structural, often in contrasting tonalities, along edges, inlaid on reliefs and adjacent to each other.

Multiplicity of parts and abundance of color exemplify the architectural order oppositely that of the temple of Horyu-ji, a fact substantiated when Nikko's Yomei-mon is compared, for instance, to that of the Main Interior Gate of the Nara complex, where parts designated as ornamental are few and practically no surface covering is employed. Here, the simply stated bracketing, the beams and rafters, the limpid walls and the lack of ornamental components, conform a composition with a minimum of parts and without the agglomeration that is particular to the Nikko complexes.

This excessive quantity of ornament and luxuriant treatment of surfaces is analogous to the Mexican church of Tepetzotlan, where sculptural elements, abstract and realistic, putti, saints, plants and flowers, scrolls and mouldings of various types fill the main facade and the interior altars, and where the inverted pilasters, and both foreground and background, are covered completely with gold leaf and many of its components, just as in Nikko, are divided and outlined with rich and brilliant colors.

This multiplication of parts and application of veneer on its surfaces, imposes on the architectural object of Nikko three characteristics which are fundamental to its order: First, the equivalency of the parts, a fact not due to their precise scale, but to an acquired visual reduction of value within the architectural composition. For instance, the quantity of parts added to the pillars and to the bracketing and the excess of ornamental motifs in the intercolumnar panels, doors and gables and the underside of roofs and eaves of the Yomei-mon gate, requires for its apprehension a readaptation of the parts to maintain its coherence. Moreover, the surface veneer within the composition accents indistinctively all parts throughout, thus increasing the equalizing effect.

Second, the dehierarchization of the sum of the parts within the totality. In other words, the composition of a building like the mentioned Yomei-mon gate, embodies a summation of formal components, whose lack of hierarchy makes it impossible to comprehend as an established sequence of parts and is only apprehendable as totality.

And last, the uncircumscription of the sum of the parts. The composition of the Yomei-mon gate has no limits nor is it viably apprehended in sections since its homogeneity permits its extension in all directions. A certain verticality of the parts of the composition, a product of the initial structural proposition, is sustained but lost in a sum that rejects limits and inhibits all sequential readings from beginning to end.

These characteristics represent the extreme opposite of composition of the Main Gate of Horyu-ji, where the formal elements retain contrasting and individual values, both in scale and prominence and the sum of the parts exhibits a pyramidal proposition. Not only do components, ornamental or non-ornamental, stand out as individual entities in the composition, but there is an association of unequal and sequential parts duly hierarchized, with set borders, where extension is directed by the sum.

On the other hand, the equivalency of the parts and the dehierarchization and uncircumscription of the sum of the parts of the architectural object of Nikko, are verifiable in the analogous composition of the church of the Mexican monastery of Tepotzotlan, where the main facade as well as the interior altars that make up the walls have been broken up into innumerable equivalent gold-leaf covered parts, practically undifferentiated, none of which impose on the other's field of action, where recognizing a sequence within its order is, as in Nikko, impossible.

Furthermore, these morphological circumstances affect the basic and traditional relationship between structure and architecture. In the case of Nikko this influence is further complicated because the structure in Japanese architecture has a place and role beyond that of support. Although the same can be said of non-Japanese architecture, for columns and pillars have more than constructive functions in Western architecture, this is nevertheless far from the Japanese ideal where the structure, pillars and bracketing, is the initiation of the architectural proposition. But in Nikko, structure has lost its visual independence of sustentation, and therefore its original structural character. Structure merges into the sum of the elements of the composition. Its disappearance as an expression of support concludes the atectonization of the architectural object.

This change from the tectonic to the atectonic of Nikko is demonstrable when comparing it to the Nara temple of Horyu-ji, whose structure, pillars, beams and rafters, both outside and inside the buildings, transmit a firm image of support. The analysis of the Kondo walls, or that of the Interior Main gate of this temple complex, show a set pattern of relations of parts inflexibly confined and at all levels a formal solution bounded by the discipline of structure.

This effect of atectonization is identical in Tepotzotlan. The structure in the Mexican monastery, composed of pilasters and arches, becomes at the level of the lower body of the interior walls, a subordinated part of the assembly of the altars, losing all visual function of

both support and restrictions. Furthermore, the insistent use of inverted pilasters, both in the main facade and in the altars, with its unstructural image and fragile emphasis on verticality, equally excludes the tectonic character.

All these characteristics that constitute Nikko, — which result from an interpretation of Wollflin's principles of art for apprehending the different forms of representation —<sup>18</sup>, converge in one comprehensive concept, that the "tendency to disarticulate" of the determinant planes of the architectural object. The change from Horyu-ji to Nikko, from one order to another, is the rejection of the solidity, of the wholeness and stability proper to the composition of the first, to the formlessness, disaggregation and instability of the second. In other words, from Horyu-ji's whole and tactile facades to the imprecise and unrestrained and visually disarticulated facades of Nikko and Tepozotlan.

## ORNAMENT AND PROCESS

The orders of both Nikko and Hory-ji, like all manifestations of architecture, belong to a process. This process alternates from one order to the opposite order, although not in a set pattern nor with implications of culminations as has been often mistakenly maintained. In the history of architecture this process has varied, sometimes following a slow path, such as that of the Renaissance to the Baroque, which Wollflin analysed and which could be explained as a gradual change from one instance to the other;<sup>19</sup> and sometimes changing abruptly, causing a rupture, like the Rococo to the Neo-Classic, or from the Eclecticism to Modernism; or in contemporary cases, like that of Katsura or Horyu-ji to that of Nikko, where both orders coexist, but project contrary instances in the process. Although in all instances, these changes obey circumstantial and meta-architectonic events and are consequently unreplicative, the order themselves, being totalities or sums of parts, are of the essence of architecture and as such, analogical.

This process, which Wollflin described through what he called the relaxation of rules or "the yielding of tectonic strength"<sup>20</sup>, includes the polarity of the disarticulation or dematerialization and its opposite, the integration or materialization of the architectural object. And since architecture is apprehended in virtue of its position within the process, then architecture that is not part of either extreme instance, can be signaled out as phases in search of one or the other.

These two contradictory instances, can be equally explained from another synonymic viewpoint; that is to say, what Wollflin described as a closed and an open form where "every work of art must be a definite whole"<sup>21</sup> and at various levels of openness and closeness. In the structured and static composition of the closed order of Horyu-ji, the determinant planes project the materialization of the architectural object; in the unstructured and dynamic composition of the open order of Nikko, the disarticulated planes reveal the dematerialization of the architectural object. In the former, ornament maintains a separateness which makes viable its designation as such; in the latter, it becomes one with all the formal elements of the



composition, fading into the assembly of parts, undifferentiated, unprepossessing. And, what is more important, appropriating its protagonistic role. In this case ornament is not only indispensable, but it is indistinguishable from non-ornament. Ornament is never neutral. It is active, and evidently plays a relevant role in all instances of architecture, whether this be an open or a closed order. Only in a closed order, such as Horyu-ji or Katsura, could ornament be described as an addition to architecture, but even this is not truthful, for ascertaining what is necessary or unnecessary in any architectural composition is a failed effort.

The traditional Vitruvian<sup>22</sup> definition of ornament becomes rigid and equivocal and tergiversates its authentic purpose. Historians adopt a subjective vision when they differ between the ornamental and the non-ornamental, as if ornament were separable from architecture itself. This concept explains nothing of the architectural reality. What is confirmable is the fact the Nikko, without ornament, would be but an extended version of Horyu-ji. Ornament cannot be the factor either to name or categorize the architecture of Nikko; nor of that of Tepotzotlan. For as long as both of them are referred to exclusively by their ornamental character, then they will invariably be thought of as an architecture lacking or at least disparaging from content.

This classification, — particularly today when banality has taken over architecture, and it is pertinent to ask in what way ornament can correct or exaggerate this path to oblivion or, again, how to find a significant architectural language that will accept ornament, — the ornamental character should be redefined to point out the mode of ordering the architectural object; in other words, the attributions of the composition, in the exact way that one refers to the formal characteristics of the Renaissance in relation to the Baroque. In this respect, the insistent correlation of Nikko to the Baroque or the Rococo is not inconsistent.

Nikko is architecture, and as such it elicits, in its apprehension, specific emotions. Naomi Okawa's description of the sense of joy expressed by visitors to the mausolea of Nikko, is a veritable observation of a reaction not only to the majesty of the buildings, nor for that matter to ornament itself, but to a manifestation of architecture which includes ornament in vigorous role within the architectural process, different from that experienced when visiting the Temples of Horyu-ji, or Todai-ji, Toshodai-ji or to the Detached Palace of Katsura, but very similar to that when visiting the Jesuit church of Tepotzotlan, of which Professor Toussaint writes: "We think of submerged grottos covered with pearls and corals and palaces with ornament the work of fairies and magicians. At time the Christian ideal transforms itself into something pantheistic, universal, but anyone can enjoy the marvelous spectacle of its art, whoever has the artistic sensibility, be he pagan, protestant or atheist. . . It is the humility of man who knows how to create these magnificent prayers, materialized to praise with the most effusive hymns, since they lack words, the greatness of God"<sup>23</sup>. These words can very well be applied to the Shrines of Nikko.

## NOTES

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