Teaching Architectural History in Japan: Building a Context for Contemporary Practice

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The field of architectural history enjoys a diverse and broad audience in Japan. Group tours to major architectural monuments are a ubiquitous component of middle school and high school education. While these tours are often rushed and superficial, they do introduce students to their architectural heritage. A less regimented and, perhaps, more meaningful reflection of the interest in the subject is the widespread consumption of high-quality books on architecture for general readers. There are, of course, the easily digestible coffee-table volumes with sumptuous color photographs. However, more challenging publications are also extremely popular. Several series offer well-illustrated texts in accessible language that explain ancient tools and building methods, urban planning, the use of architecture in religious ritual, and other topics. Technical terms are defined and provided with furigana (syllables that spell out the correct pronunciation) for less-experienced readers.

Open-air architectural museums, such as the Nihon Minka-en (Japan Farmhouse Garden) in the western suburbs of Tokyo, or the Meiji-mura (Meiji Village) outside Nagoya, are extremely successful at attracting visitors. Television producers also seem to recognize a market for the subject. The airwaves are filled with documentaries that present significant information about the history of architecture. Some are little more than travelogues, but others, such as Suzuki Hiroyuki’s series on the history of modern architecture or the recent special on the architect and teacher Josiah Conder, demand more of their viewers.

Undoubtedly, a variety of motives fuels this consumption—fascination with the history of technology, a craving for tangible evidence of a coherent cultural identity, the desire for vicarious travel (or the need to prepare for the real thing), or anxiety about preparation for college entrance exams. Yet the widespread public exposure to architectural history is of tremendous significance for the field of architecture, for it helps to sustain an attentive audience for major new construction projects, and may also contribute to the growing support for the architectural preservation movement in Japan.

Professional training in the history of architecture is confined to a relatively narrow range of institutions. The subject is taught almost exclusively within departments of architecture. The related fields of architectural history, archaeology, art history, landscape design, and urban studies are usually organized into separate departments within a university. Even departments of art history, which in the United States often include faculty working extensively on architecture, usually do not regularly teach the subject in Japan (although, of course, some art historians share an interest and have acquired some expertise in the subject).

At the University of Tokyo, for example, architectural history is taught in the Department of Architecture within the School of Engineering, art history is taught within the humanities, and landscape design is studied in the School of Agriculture. Architectural historians often collaborate on research and restoration projects with archaeologists, conservators, historians, and other professionals, but their host institution is usually an architecture program and the majority of their students are future architects and building professionals. These teaching obligations have undoubtedly shaped the priorities of the field.

The close relationship between architectural history and architectural practice dates to the early days of the development of the architectural profession. The new government that was formed after the fall of the Tokugawa military government in 1868 recognized that rapid modernization was Japan’s only hope for staving off the threat of American and European expansion. The new leadership embraced Western architecture both as a system of advanced technology and as a compelling symbol of cultural modernity. As early as 1873, the government established the Imperial College of Engineering. By 1877, the college had secured the services of a young English architect, Josiah Conder (1852–1920), to organize a program in architecture (the heir to that program at the University of Tokyo is still one of the premiere training grounds for architects in Japan). Conder’s first students absorbed knowledge of Western architecture through studio projects in which they were expected to master the Gothic, Neoclassical, and other historical styles. Conder also placed those modes into historical context through survey courses in architectural history. For his instruction in architectural history, Conder
relied on texts such as James Fergusson’s *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (two of the four volumes of the second edition [1873–76] are still preserved in the Architecture Library at the University of Tokyo). Fergusson’s sweeping history of the architecture of the world was prescriptive—he hoped the lessons of history would lead to the improvement of contemporary practices. Conder himself exhorted his students to look to history as a guide to future design.

The purpose of school was to prepare Japanese to design buildings in Western architectural styles using modern building technology. In the early years, little attention was paid to Japan’s own architectural history. The second edition of Fergusson’s history barely mentioned Japan, but it included a short chapter on China and dedicated an entire volume to India. And although Conder had deep respect for premodern Japanese architecture and called upon his students to explore their architectural traditions, Japanese history was treated only briefly as a part of a survey of world architecture in the Engineering College’s classrooms. It was not until 1889 that a full course devoted to Japanese architectural practices was introduced into the curriculum of what was by then the Imperial University. That course was taught by a carpenter-contractor, Kigo Kiyoyoshi (1845–1907), who was trained not at the college but through apprenticeship. He concentrated on practical building techniques rather than on history per se. This new addition to the curriculum came at a time when younger Japanese were beginning to rethink the wholesale adoption of Western culture, and it had a significant impact on second-generation architects, such as Itō Chūta (1867–1954). Soon after graduating from the architecture program at the Imperial University, Itō published an article on the seventh-century Buddhist temple Hōryūji. This was one of the first examples of Japanese architectural history in the modern sense, and it launched Itō’s long and prolific career as an architectural historian. Itō collaborated with Kigo on the construction of a replica of a portion of the Heian-period (794–1189) Imperial palace for an exhibition in Kyoto in 1894. He soon took up a teaching post at his alma mater and introduced his architectural students to the riches of Japanese architecture both in the classroom and through field trips to major architectural monuments.

Before this reengagement with the Japanese architectural past, the practice of architecture and architectural history maintained a precarious existence as a purely foreign import largely autonomous of the Japanese context in which it was being propagated. Itō made use of Western historical methods to insert Japanese historical experience into a Japanese chapter in the history of world architecture.

Itō did not stop there. He advocated the use of premodern Japanese architectural forms in contemporary practice, and introduced these features in his own designs, such as the Great Kantō Earthquake Memorial Hall of 1927. In the late 1920s and 1930s, as nationalistic rhetoric intensified, Itō promoted a hybrid style including curved, tiled roofs and other Japanese historical ornament as an antidote to the perceived dominance of Western culture. A new wave of young modernists, many of them students of Itō, resisted the use of historical forms as a betrayal of modern materi-
als and methods, but they were only partly successful in their opposition. A number of the most prominent commissions of the period were executed in the Japanese historical style. Ito was instrumental in the acceptance of this style because he taught at the most prestigious school of architecture and often served as the senior juror on major architectural competitions.

Throughout the Pacific War, despite deteriorating conditions, Ito and other architects continued to produce substantial historical studies and to emphasize history in their teaching. The fact that so much energy was directed toward architectural history during the war can be explained, in part, by a lack of design work—many architects had little else to do. But there was more to it than that. The intense exploration of Japanese architecture was an effort to reconnect with a cultural identity placed in suspended animation during the scramble to modernize in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the context of the siege mentality that gripped many intellectuals during the war, the teaching and study of Japanese architectural history was crucial for situating modern architectural practice within a Japanese cultural framework.

Although the intellectual atmosphere changed dramatically after the war, architects and historians continued to examine Japan’s architectural past with some urgency. Tange Kenzo (b. 1913), a rising star in the international modernist firmament, took time out from his extraordinarily successful practice to publish several major works on Japanese architecture, including books on the Katsura Palace and Shintō shrines at Ise. Tange, who had studied architectural history as a student at Tokyo Imperial University in the 1930s (soon after graduating, he published an essay comparing Michelangelo and Le Corbusier), had produced designs in the nationalist style during the war. Now that wartime ultra-nationalism was largely discredited, Tange sought to distance himself from the formalism of that earlier work. Yet he felt compelled to find a way to mark his modernist work as distinctively “Japanese.” He did this by claiming that his monumental, reinforced-concrete designs emerged out of a legacy of Japanese aesthetics dating all the way to prehistory. This strategy of linking Japanese modernism not to historical forms but rather to abstract aesthetic values was compelling both to his Japanese contemporaries and to an international audience, which embraced his writings and architecture.

Tange’s students at the University of Tokyo, such as Isozaki Arata (b. 1931) and Kurokawa Kisho (b. 1934), were among the first to embrace the postmodernist play with historical styles in the 1970s and 1980s. For some, the study of architectural history continued to be a powerful therapy by which to allay anxiety over cultural identity. For others, the need to obsess over distinctions between Western and Japanese architecture had eased considerably. As Isozaki wrote when describing his design for the Tsukuba Center, which humorously appropriated features from the work of Giulio Romano, Michelangelo, and other canonical architects: “As I have often said, the Katsura Palace, the Parthenon, the Capitoline piazza, and so on all live in a time and place equidistant from us. Anything occurring in the history of architecture—even the history of the world—is open to quotation.”

Today more than one hundred institutions offer courses in architectural history, and the history of design and urban design. They range from large universities with programs in all fields, to universities that concentrate on the sciences and engineering, to technical high schools. Although there are variations, as one might expect, there does appear to be a fairly consistent list of core courses available to undergraduates. Among the standard courses are histories of Western architecture, Japanese architecture, modern architecture around the world including Japan, and urban architecture and design. Occasionally programs cover the architecture of China, India, Southeast Asia, or other parts of the world, but this is relatively uncommon at the undergraduate level.

The architecture of the West and of Japan before the modern period are usually taught separately. Classes on premodern Western architecture often start with the ancient Near East and leave off in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and those on Japanese architecture take on a similarly broad swath of history, finishing at the end of the Edo period, in the mid-nineteenth century.

Courses on modern architecture usually combine Western with Japanese material, but the exact parameters vary somewhat. In some cases, a course will begin discussion of Europe in the early modern period (sixteenth or seventeenth century), and in others, with the late eighteenth century. Either way, systematic coverage of modern Japan usually begins not with the Edo period (1615–1868), but at the time of increased contact with the West, in the final days of the Tokugawa regime in the mid-nineteenth century. Historians of economics and political historians all recognize this period as a profoundly important turning point for Japan, but they also expend great effort identifying threads of continuity between the Edo period (usually labeled “kōen” or “early modern”) and the modern era (“gendai”). For architectural historians, however, the transformation resulting from the importation of Western building technology, architectural styles, and teaching methods was so significant that the change completely outweighs any links
to the past. The practice of combining Japanese and Western architecture in classes on the modern period suggests that for many architectural historians one of the most salient features of the modern period in Japan has been the Japanese architectural profession's increasingly close relationship to the rest of the world.

Although the history of cities and urban planning are discussed in these courses, the larger programs also offer more focused classes on urban design, and these incorporate both Western and Japanese examples.

The choice of textbooks varies from instructor to instructor, but there are several favorites. For decades, a series of illustrated historical guides published by the Architectural Institute of Japan has remained a staple in the classroom. These texts correspond closely to the typical division of classes, with volumes on Japan, Western architecture, and modern architecture. The first edition of the Japanese volume first appeared in 1949 and the latest revision was published in 1980. The book consists of 106 pages of black-and-white photographs and plans (some pages containing ten or more images), followed by fifty-four pages of concise explanatory notes that emphasize the circumstances of construction and distinctive structural or stylistic features of the chosen designs. The coverage is eclectic, and begins with prehistoric archaeological sites and ends with details of bracketing from Buddhist temples. Along the way, one encounters late-twelfth-century drawings of peasant houses, monumental castles, and elaborately ornamented mausolea. The other books in the series follow a similar formula. Since they have been used so widely and for so long, they have come to function for students as a basic canon of images in architectural history.

These volumes are seldom the only texts for any given course. They serve as references or guides, but do not provide a coherent historical narrative. Indeed, Professor Nakatani Norihito at Osaka City University points out that one of the advantages of the series is that the text is minimal and open-ended, allowing instructors to use the material in a variety of ways. They are usually assigned in conjunction with another textbook or with a selection of readings from various sources. Among the books widely used as textbooks by students and professionals are Fujimori Terunobu’s Nihon no kindai kenchiku (Modern Japanese architecture); Kindai gendai kenchikushi (Early modern and modern architecture), which covers Japan and the West, edited by Suzuki Hiroyuki and Yamaguchi Hiroshi; and Ota Hirotaro’s Nihon no kenchiku (Japanese architecture), which focuses on the premodern period. Other widely used texts on Western architecture include Spiro Kostof’s A History of Architecture, Sigfried Gideon’s Space, Time, and Architecture, and Kenneth Frampton’s Modern Architecture, all of which are available in Japanese translation.

In general, these texts tend to be organized chronologically, by building type (temples and shrines, residential, and so on), or by a combination of the two. Those dealing with earlier material focus heavily on documenting the history of individual sites or structures based on archaeological findings and extensive use of primary written sources. Discussions of modern design often place greater emphasis on individual architects and their design methods. Treatment of specific historical designs often provides a context for the introduction to architectural criticism and critical theory. This training is especially important for students as they wrestle with the ideas of architects who self-consciously ground their designs in critical theory. Today in a Japanese classroom one might encounter Vitruvius, Roland Barthes, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Jacques Derrida, or Suzuki Daisetsu.

Vernacular architecture is a significant topic in many publications on Japanese architecture. The teahouses and brothels of the licensed prostitution quarters of the Edo period, provincial kabuki theater, and farmhouses are all well represented. Farmhouses are of special significance. Since the 1920s, architects and historians of all stripes have taken a special interest in the subject. The history of farmhouses provides authors with the opportunity to explore beautiful craftsmanship and to address the capacity of builders to adapt to different climates and changing uses. Farmhouses also have special resonance because agricultural life is widely believed to be the fountainhead of Japanese culture and to serve as Japan’s symbolic cultural home. Furthermore, they seem to offer the promise of a uniquely Japanese tradition for a profession that has long yearned for sources independent of China and the West.

The great majority of the students enrolled in the basic sequence of courses in architectural history specializes in architectural design and related fields in engineering. However, there is interest in attracting students from other disciplines, and in order to do this, instructors emphasize issues such as the architect’s design motives and the social and political implications of architecture and do not require sophisticated technical knowledge. In practice, therefore, these courses are often structured more like liberal arts classes than other offerings in the architecture curriculum. Until recently, the content of undergraduate classes has been relatively stable, but I sensed some restlessness among faculty with the standard treatment of architectural history in undergraduate education and a desire to customize readings and to expand the range of topics addressed.

Graduate training in architectural history is extremely
Figure 2 Two views and a plan of the Katsura Palace, a representative page from Kenchiku Gakkai, ed., *Nihon kenchiku shi zūshū* (Tokyo, 1980), 83
varied. Master's students might join advanced undergraduates in some of the regular surveys, but seminars and research meetings (kenkyūkai) form the core of graduate instruction. The content of seminars differs dramatically from institution to institution and from year to year, reflecting the research interests of individual faculty. In larger graduate programs, research meetings are held on a regular basis during the school year. In them, students present research projects and receive feedback from their advisors and fellow students. They pursue a wider range of topics than is possible within the context of a specific seminar—one might encounter a report of an excavation of a seventeenth-century merchant house in Kyoto in one meeting and an analysis of the early drawings of Eric Mendelsohn in the next.

The pool of students shrinks considerably as one moves from the undergraduate level to the master's level, and even more dramatically as one continues on for the Ph.D. At the University of Tokyo, there are four research groups (kenkyūbutsu) specializing in architectural history. Each of four professors accepts three new graduate students a year. Of these, only one third will go on to earn a Ph.D. in architectural history. The others will either continue in other fields in architectural studies or leave to practice architecture. Since master's students are required to take classes in structures, design, and so on, most of them apply from undergraduate programs in architecture, but some students who majored in other fields such as art history enter the program at the Ph.D. level, where this technical training is no longer required. Only a handful of programs (including the University of Tokyo, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Kyoto University, and Waseda University) regularly graduates Ph.D.'s in architectural history and approximately four to six people complete a Ph.D. in the field nationwide each year. Certainly, such a small annual output of Ph.D.'s cannot possibly meet the teaching needs of one hundred programs, and the great majority of faculty who teach architectural history are trained primarily in design and other fields.

In Japan, architectural history was introduced as one component of a systematic program in architectural education designed to address the needs of future architects. Teaching in the field has continued to be closely tied to the practice of architecture. Although architectural historians frequently collaborate with colleagues in related areas such as art history, teaching in these disciplines remains institutionally separated.

Perhaps because the teaching of architectural history is primarily geared to the needs of architecture students, architectural historians have placed a special emphasis on certain issues in their classes and textbooks. Themes such as the transformation of architectural styles, the development of building technology, and the use and social significance of architecture are especially prominent.

The teaching of the history of architecture is in the midst of significant change. The subjects covered in classes in architectural history continue to expand. I have no doubt, for example, that the architecture of other parts of Asia as well as of Africa and Latin America will gradually become a more common component of the curriculum. There are also signs that institutional barriers are becoming more permeable. Architectural historians are drawing increasingly on the social sciences and other disciplines, and this work is inevitably finding its way into university classrooms. Likewise, art historians, cultural critics, and others are making contributions to architectural history that should take the field in new directions.

Architectural history has long been a high priority in the education of architects, and the profession has benefited considerably from this outlook. For some students, architectural history remains little more than a source book with design ideas that can be selected or discarded at will. But for many, the encounter with history early in their education has had a more profound and lasting effect. In the 1880s, classes on Western architectural history were the tools with which students mastered their newly formed profession. In the 1920s and 1930s, history was at the center of a desperate debate over Japanese cultural identity. After the Pacific War, Tange Kenzō discovered, through a study of premodern architecture, a language with which to articulate his aesthetics. More recently, architects have positioned themselves on the global stage by laying claim to the entire historical legacy of world architecture. If Isozaki can claim that "the Katsura Palace, the Parthenon, the Capitoline piazza...live in a time and place equidistant from us," then perhaps the training in architectural history that has at times in the past distanced Japanese architects from others elsewhere now connects them with that world community more closely than ever before.

Appendix
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Notes
1. Examples of these introductory texts include the books in the series titled “Nihonjin wa dono yō ni kenzōbutsu o tsukute kita ka?” (What kinds of building structures have the Japanese made?). Volumes cover topics such as the seventeenth-century Katsura Palace and the construction of the eighth-century capital city at Nara. The “Tombo no hon” (Dragonfly books) series has its own volume on Nara, a volume on life (including building) at the prehistoric site at Yatsugatake, etc. These series are in many ways reminiscent of the books by David Macaulay in terms of their rich illustrations and emphasis on concrete detail, and like his books they are appealing both to younger readers and adults.


3. For example, in a lecture published by the Imperial College of Engineering in 1878, Conder promised his students: “The standard works upon Architecture—French, Italian, and English—I have had opportunities of pointing out to you; and when you have studied these carefully as well as illustrations and photographs of good buildings, you will be able to judge of the value of the worthless of new books on the subject.” Josiah Conder, “A Few Remarks upon Architecture,” (Tokyo, 1878), 14.

4. Ibid. Conder was an avid student of history and produced studies on Japanese architecture and garden design.

5. Horiguchi Sutemi (1895–1984) is another prime example of a practicing architect who wrote prolifically about Japanese architectural history during the war.


7. This calculation is based on the number of institutions listing faculty specializing in the history of architecture and design in the Architectural Institute of Japan’s Directory of Japanese Schools of Architecture and Building Engineering. The figure underestimates the number of institutions offering history, since some faculty who teach history also cover other subjects and have been listed in the directory under other fields (for example, Professor Fujioka Hiroyasu, who teaches a full program of architectural history at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, is listed solely as teaching the fundamentals of architectural design rather than history). Nihon Kenchiku Gakkai, ed., Daijigaku (kenchiku kankei gakka) meibo (The AJ directory of Japanese schools of architecture and building engineering) (Tokyo, 2001).


11. Prof. Fujimori Terunobu, e-mail correspondence with the author, 2 June 2002.


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