

## ARCHITECTURAL THEORETICAL EXAMINATIONS OF TYPICAL JAPANESE SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS IN INTERIOR SPACES OF KYO-MACHIYA TOWNHOUSES

Takahiko Otani

*Mukogawa Women's University, Japan*

**Keywords:** interior space of kyo-machiya, dimness, depth, spatial connection, asymmetry, ambiguity, situational spatiality, emotionalization, symbolization

### Introduction

**Background:** Kyo-machiya townhouses are traditional, wooden, urban dwellings in Kyoto, and have a quiet and emotional atmosphere in their interior space. Life in kyo-machiya townhouses is symbiotic with nature, and living with high-quality aesthetic sensitivity and spirituality integrated inside them. Their spatiality has a deep relationship with typical Japanese mentality. But, many contemporary or remodeled kyo-machiya lack such spatiality.

**Aims:** The original spatiality of kyo-machiya townhouses can be carried over to new kyo-machiya townhouses. I will examine their interior spatiality from an architectural theoretical perspective based on Japanese mentality and thought.

**Methods:** As an example, I take the interior space of a kyo-machiya townhouse built in the *omoteya-tsukur* style, which is the typical Kyo-machiya style for merchant families in the center area of Kyoto-city. It is composed of a front ridge for shop area and a back ridge for dwelling. There are an entrance area and a court garden between both ridges. A main garden and a warehouse are located in the deepest space. The entire space is composed by the earthen passageways and residence area (tatami-rooms), putting them together with line placement from a front towards the back. (Fig.1)

Kyo-machiya has left behind the customs and sensibilities of a historical lifestyle even now.

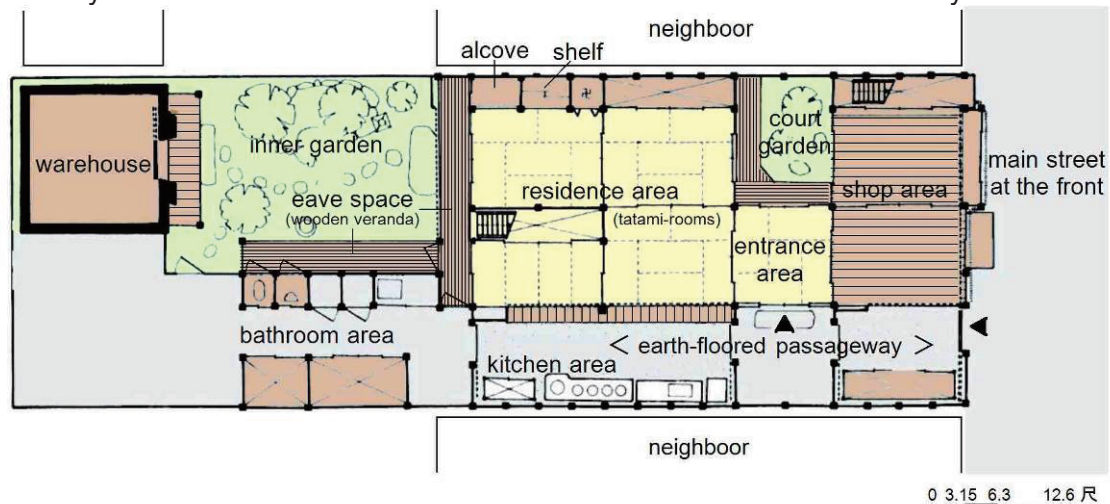


Fig. 1: Ground plan of kyo-machiya in omoteya-tsukur style [1]

When we experience spaces in kyo-machiya townhouses, we feel a strong sensation of spatial characteristics such as *dimness*, *depth*, *spatial connection*, and *asymmetry*. I will examine each from the viewpoints of architectural space and Japanese mentality.

## Discussion

### D-1. Examination from Viewpoint of Architectural Space

#### (1) *Dimness*

- The inside of kyo-machiya townhouses is dim because both sides are separated from the neighboring houses by a wall, The deep space inside captures the light from the main street at the front and the back inner garden. There is a uniform change from dark to light as one faces inwards.
- Built in a wooden framework structure, the sides of the rooms facing inwards in kyo-machiya townhouses are on the whole width open, although the eave canopy stretching out onto the garden softens the strong light from the outside. The trees in the garden shade direct light.
- The natural materials of kyo-machiya townhouses buildings do not reveal their presence as *objects*. They sink into the *dimness*. The earthen walls softly reflect light as if soaking it up.
- The latticework, paper screens, reed blinds, and other devices make the inside of the house dim (Fig. 2).
- *Dimness* pervades and uniformizes the interior spaces of kyo-machiya townhouses in this way, and these spaces are enveloped in *dimness* to create *spatiality* as *hazy regions* under the control of *dimness* (Figs. 3 and 4).

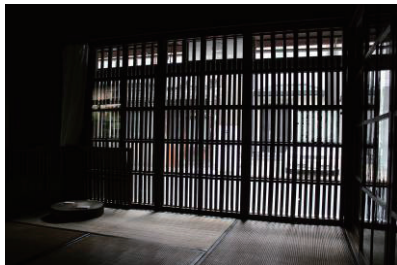


Fig. 2: Latticework inside

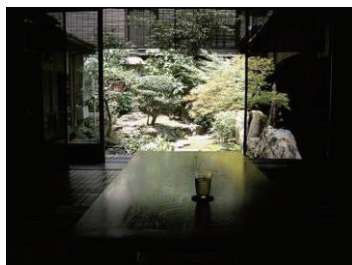


Fig. 3: Dimness = spatiality as hazy

(Phot. by Hironobu Yoshida)

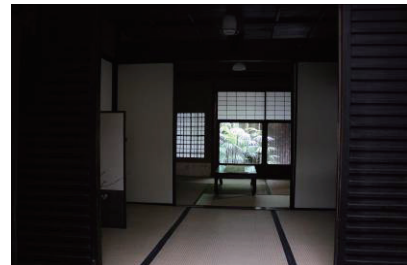


Fig. 4: Entrance room

with court garden in back

#### 2) *Depth*

- Within a densely urban configuration, kyo-machiya townhouses are narrowly isolated by the closed walls of the neighboring houses and are spaces with narrow frontage and large depth.
- The nature and brightness of the inner garden ahead of the dim space and the gradual change from dark to light from the inside outward strongly emphasize the directionality toward the inside depth (Figs. 5 and 6).
- Such sliding light fittings as shoji (translucent sliding screens) and fusuma (opaque papered screens) only provide a weak sense of shielding, allowing anticipation that they can be easily opened to create awareness of the back space. Although the four fusumas, which

are usually built into the full width of a room, obscure the field of view at both edges of the room when they are drawn to both sides, segmental continuity exists.

- In the earthen passageway, the temporal lapse and spatial change of the course reaching inside creates depth as a sequence that penetrates these segments. The row of side posts rising up from the ground every 90 cm outside the kitchen area and the splendid through-beam that stretches create an impression of depth (Fig. 7).



Figs 5, 6: Directionality towards inside depth of continuous rooms and garden in back

Fig. 7: Row of side posts and through-beam (Phot. By Hideaki Tenhata)

### (3) Spatial connection Paradoxical boundaries

#### 1) Connection between interior and exterior spaces: *mutual intermingling*

- At the *eave space* as an open space for connecting the inside and outside, the entire width of the tatami-floored rooms is fully open to the garden, diverting one's gaze from inside the rooms to the trees or rocks in the garden by the eaves that stretch out from the veranda space, emphasizing the connection to the garden. (Fig. 8)
- The garden stones that penetrate under the eaves are an intrusion from the outside inwards, and the eaves that continue out from the veranda are an expansion of the inside outwards. The eave space becomes an ambiguous interface where the inside and outside mutually intermingle. (Fig.8)
- The eave space is a transitional region between the inside and the outside and at all times a place of orientation with visual and spatial changes or unstableness.

- The *earthen passageway* is a continuous course passing through the building. This rustically built earthen space, as the entrance porch is an intermediate region with a semi-external, semi-internal expression.

- Usually the entrance has the ambiguity of being opened and closed. The earthen passageway, however, is not a simple ambiguous wall opening entrance. The effect of its segmental depth is exploited and it becomes a *mutual intermingling* space for the inside and outside in anticipation of the spatial and temporal allowance or the *margin of pause*. (Fig.9)

#### 2) Connection of interior spaces: *Segmental continuation*

- The *residence area space*, which has no walls that block the characteristic of the depth between(or through) the rooms stretching to the inside is separated and joined by such light sliding fittings as fusuma or shouji.
- The sliding fittings invoke a latent awareness that they can be easily opened and exhibit a *faint sense of closure* and *ambiguity* since they are semi-isolated and semi-open. Because of

the implicit effect at the parts hidden by those fittings, we imagine the connection to scenes visible at the opened parts (Fig. 10).

- A lattice at the front and translucent sliding screens also effectively create a casually sense of the path ahead because of semi-transparent effect.



Fig. 8: Space of eaves  
connection to inner garden



Fig. 9: Earthen passageway



Fig. 10: Sliding fittings.

Imagine the connection to scenes

#### (4) Asymmetry

• The basic space of a kyo-Machiya townhouse is configured in double spaces, earth-floored passageway and tatami-floored residence area and, furthermore, *asymmetry* is apparent in the configuration of both spaces. The space of the main tatami-mat rooms (zashiki) and the inner garden are emphasized asymmetrically by the building elements, the alcove and the shelves in the tatami-zashiki and the open veranda that extends from these rooms in the inner garden. Moreover, the positions of the building elements both spaces are reversed. The further effect of the movement *reversal* is cleverly interwoven into the dynamic sensation of *asymmetry* (Figs. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11: Alcove and shelf as asymmetry elements  
right-side of room



Fig. 12: Open veranda on left-side of  
inner garden on

#### D-2. Examination from Viewpoint of Mentality

• In Japanese thought (ideology), such concepts as *emptiness* and *absence* are far removed from reality [2]. The *dimness* of the kyo-machiya townhouses also forms an atmospheric

spatial region based on a sense of *airiness drifting* as a silent movement that is neither substantive nor has certain boundaries.

- *Yugen* or hidden beauty, which is a symbol of Japanese medieval culture suggests subtle *depth* something that cannot be measured and easily learned. *Depth* in the Japanese sense of the word is not an absolute depth as a definite place; it is a dynamic direction and perpetually moving towards endless depth [3].

- The *spatial connection* of kyo-machiya townhouses is a *boundary* having the ambiguity of mutual intermingling and connection across the semi-isolated and semi-open [4].

This ambiguity exists as if two meanings melt into one, a veritable duality of Japanese vagueness. Such boundaries cause and corroborate the atmospheric region *dimness* and dynamic direction's intentionality *depth* as the situational spatiality, and heighten their effect.

- The asymmetry of Japan is anti-formal, and shoulders the effect of activating spatial emotions or even movement and change that is compositely built into kyo-machiya townhouse spaces.

- What is important in the Japanese mentality is not *objects* but *situations*. Typical Japanese spaces do not necessarily require a distinct *center* and *boundary*, besides these visible clarities, like Western spaces.

- Life in kyo-machiya townhouses also has a relationship with nature, including a flower arrangement or hanging scrolls (*kakejiku*) within the transition from one season to another. There is a strong awareness of *situations* with less shape than objects.

"Movement, change, or ambiguity" looking at the interior space of kyo-machiya townhouses are situational characteristics concerned with Japanese mentalities. The life in kyo-machiya townhouses is also based on these Japanese mentalities.

## Conclusion

### Typical Japanese Characteristics of Spatiality of Kyo-machiya Townhouses

- In kyo-machiya townhouses, such spatial characteristics as *dimness* as an atmospheric spatial regionality, *depth* as a dynamic direction intentionality, *spatial connection* as an ambiguous boundary, and *asymmetry* as an anti-formal movement uniformize and integrate the space to configure its spatiality.

- The spatiality of kyo-machiya townhouses that unified their life is a *situational spatiality* composed of spatial characteristics based upon these typical Japanese mentalities. Such spatiality increase the orientation towards the emotionalization and symbolization of kyo-machiya townhouse spaces.

## References

[1] Shintani, A. *Kyo-machiya*, pp.4. Mitumura-suiko shoin , 1998

[2] Inoue, M. *The space of Japanese architecture, SD selected books*. Kashima shuppankai, 1969

[3] Maki, F. *The city that appears and disappears thought for depth, SD selected books*. Kashima shuppankai, 1996

[4] Masuda, T. *The scenery of house and garden*, Nakanishiya Publication, 1987