

## A Day in the Life of a Tradition

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I traveled to Japan in the late spring with the object of collecting video footage for a narrative project that had been in gestation for some time in my mind. Osaka was in the flush of cherry blossom season, a popular time to visit Japan, except that it creates the problem of making a lot of outdoor places too pretty to film. Even before arriving in the country, I had decided that Japanese architecture was going to constitute the primary material of my video footage. In particular, the work of Tadao Ando, an Osaka native and currently a global brand name in architecture in the mold of Frank Gehry, has exercised a deep and prolonged fascination for me. Ando is something of a *character*. He holds the honor of being the only self-taught architect on record. He was a professional boxer-in-training as a teenager. And, at 19, he packed up and traveled throughout Europe for a year, studying the work of the masters firsthand, *in situ*. An acolyte of Le Corbusier, he has chosen to work almost exclusively in concrete, and it is this stylistic temperament which, paradoxically, both has turned him into a darling of superstar architecture (a.k.a. “starchitecture”) and also makes him an artist for serious consideration.

In Osaka alone, there are twenty-six of Ando’s buildings. Architecture books tend to run quite short on actual addresses. An unfortunate by-product of this is that most buildings are fetishized by architecture photography as pieces of *beaux-arts*, and not as dwellings which architects very carefully and meticulously work to integrate into a larger built environment. I needed addresses, and decided that the best way to get them may be to ring up an architecture school in Osaka and ask nicely. And so it began, with a phone call to the Osaka Institute of Technology (OIT), and a line which I came often to repeat throughout my travels in Japan.

*Sumimasen, eiga o hanashimaska?*

Fortunately, the lady with the imposing voice on other end of the line did. I introduced myself, and explained the reason for my call. I could tell that she wanted to help, but I could also tell that a heavy sense of responsibility was getting in the way of that. We fumbled along on the phone for ten minutes before she put one of the faculty’s professors and a highly competent English speaker on the line. This was Professor Yoshimura and because of him my entire trip can be divided into *B.Y.* (before Yoshimura) and *A.Y.* (after Yoshimura). It was Professor Yoshimura, ultimately, who would open for me the doors to a more rigorous, more engaged, and ultimately more serious experience of Japanese architecture.

I repeated my request for addresses to Tadao Ando sites, but Professor Yoshimura instead asked me to come down to the Institute the next morning at 10am, explaining that he would have the proper materials on Ando ready for me by then. Naturally, I was very glad to have called the OIT, but also I began to intuitively sense that something deeper might be presenting itself.

Here was an opportunity for a real connection with the traditional acumen of Japanese architecture, beyond aesthetic fascination, beyond personal investment.

I had come to covet a list of addresses. That was the peak of my expectations. And so, I anticipated a perfunctory exchange of niceties between the official guardians of Japanese architecture (i.e. OIT faculty) and the foreigner who had crossed an ocean to experience it. This being smoothly concluded, transfer of the all-important coordinates would naturally follow. The foreigner shows his respect and the porters open the doors to the city. Something quite different happened. Something far more ceremonial, communal, and, more significantly, also more productive.

Upon arriving at the OIT, the ceremony began. The head of the administrative department received me. It was the same person who had spoken to me on the phone the day before. I was shown to Professor Yoshimura's office. Gift-giving is a currency of trust in Japan and I had read that those who come from abroad should bring with them the goods of that foreign land. As I had come from Canada, I bought a boxed bottle of Crown Royal Canadian Whisky. I presented it to Professor Yoshimura with a bow and he bowed back and laughingly said that he loved Canadian Whisky. Next, he walked me out of his office and led me to one of the department's meeting rooms. Professor Yoshimura is a humble man who radiates with warmth. But he also possesses the rare wisdom of understanding that when it comes to engaging with tradition the map is not the territory. In other words, he could have sent me packing with only the first book he gave me, which was a guided, fully addressed picture index of the best of Osaka architecture, a book which, in the one day interval, he had marked up with sticky notes where any of Ando's buildings made an appearance. And in fact, when I received this book I made to get up and go so as not to waste anymore of this man's time, especially not after he had given me exactly what I was hoping for. Instead, he told me to wait and left the room, re-entering it a few minutes later with a cardboard box and another professor. The box, which he immediately passed into my possession, contained three handsomely photographed architecture books on Japanese architecture, and two bilingual books detailing Ando's work and its evolution, one of which was personally signed by Ando. I was now starting to become physically uncomfortable with these unsolicited acts of generosity, and was waiting desperately for the slightest opening to make my escape. But they would not let me. The new professor was a relatively young man who had worked in the practice of renowned French architect Dominique Perrault before taking his position as professor of architecture at the OIT. He spoke a slightly stronger English than Professor Yoshimura, as well as French. As I came to discover later, he had also worked in Ando's studio in Osaka. This man was Professor Maeda.

It was only later, once the shock had worn off, that I was able to properly process what was happening. These people were being generous *to* their tradition. Their many gestures of generosity were in fact a deep expression of care. They were striving to ensure that the experience of their tradition was to be performed appropriately. So often, architecture, and art

in general, is experienced as something to be instantly consumed. You look, you admire, you walk away, with your sensibility allegedly refined from the interaction. This is primarily an affective experience, and in many ways it has come to define the culture of museums, art galleries, and coffee table books that has also come to dominate the way many of us engage with art. To view the arts, on the other hand, as traditions, which they are, each as a continuum of human experience manifested in traceable principles of craft and a deeply considered orientation towards the world, requires us to make our approach with more care and *delicatesse*, and not merely to strain our eyes and minds at a surface in expectation that it will yield up its depths. One of the many things my experience with the OIT faculty taught me is that when you genuinely care about an art form, no matter what it is, you approach it with a proportionate degree of care. Otherwise, you risk debasing the experience of that art form and putting yourself at further remove from what is essential in it. You draw away instead of drawing near. What Professor Yoshimura was doing was to make sure I oriented myself in the correct direction. He was guiding me, as any good priest would, towards the sources of a tradition he had devoted his career and life to.

I sat in conference with Professors Yoshimura and Maeda, discussing my expectations and intentions for the project I was pursuing. Suddenly Professor Maeda excused himself to make a phone call; in the meanwhile, Professor Yoshimura left the room and again returned, this time with the dean of the OIT in tow, Professor Teraji. Once more, I saw a warm man with an intelligent face and a bright plasticity about his movements. I have seen many deans in my life. None of them have possessed the youthful energy of Professor Teraji. Later, when I was conducting interviews with the faculty of the OIT for the journal's upcoming issue, Professor Teraji would be the first to volunteer his time and efforts.

As I was becoming growingly familiar with the various faculty of the OIT, a girl slinging a backpack on her shoulder and cradling a number of books in her arms walked into the conference room. This was Siga, a Senegalese exchange student who was completing her architecture degree at the institute. Siga was to be my liaison with the faculty on an ongoing basis, being that she was fluent in English, French, and Japanese; moreover, she was considered by the faculty to be something of an architectural wunderkind.

Once Professor Maeda was done with his call he started communicating something to Siga, and it seemed to concern me. When he was done, Siga turned to me and inquired what day I would be free to go visit the Nihonbashi House. When I asked what a Nihonbashi House was, I was informed that it was a three-storey building belonging to an alumnus of the OIT, which he had commissioned from Tadao Ando. Professor Maeda had called said alumni and arranged for a personal, guided tour of the building which would be conducted by the owner himself. Siga would again serve as the liaison between myself and Kanamori san, the OIT alumni and owner of the Nihonbashi House. I had come to the OIT dreaming of a list of addresses, and instead I was sent out with an arsenal of resources. But also, along with these resources, I was handed a

responsibility: the responsibility to bring a corresponding level of care to my engagement with the Japanese tradition of architecture.

Finally, everything was arranged and put to order, and each professor bowed his farewell and returned to his business. Stunned by the sheer generosity of these people who I just met that morning, I took my newly acquired materials and started to walk out of the OIT, in the company of Siga, who proceeded to explain to me all the things that needed explaining. She took me on a small tour of the OIT grounds, and introduced me to fellow students who were working in the Institute's graduate workshop. As we were leaving, she explained that I needed to take my leave of Professor Maeda in the proper way, as he had rushed out of our "meeting" to teach a class. She directed me to his classroom, where one final surprise was waiting to unfold.

Siga knocked gently and a student opened the door for us. Professor Maeda came to the door and I respectfully and gratefully offered my sincere goodbye. But he wasn't done with me yet. As we stood at the door, he started telling me that his students were currently preparing for a competition concerning a project for a proposed cultural centre in a small town in Saudi Arabia. I was not quite sure why he was framing the issue in this way, until he finally called me into the classroom, whereupon he handed me a folder containing the work that his students had done on the proposal, and requested that I give my opinion on it. Naturally, the students were now staring at the strange, unknown man holding the sum of their efforts in his hands and leafing through it like he was some sort of expert. Part of me wanted to shout through my teeth that this was too much to expect of me on such short notice. But another part, the part that had just witnessed the care with which these practitioners of their rich tradition had so lovingly and generously shared it with me, began to enter into deep focus. A patience came over me, and I laid the folder out on the table, slowly flipping through the pages, and attempting as best I can to read through the diagrams, plans, and other materials. Once I overcame the first cowardly instinct to retreat in the face of an unfamiliar experience, I began to see and understand. I started to put questions to Professor Maeda concerning some of the ideas the students were implementing for the site, and he carefully explained. Finally, I took my proper leave of Professor Maeda, but not before he reminded me that he would want to hear my feedback once the students had finalized their presentation, which would be ready in time for when I returned in a little over a month to conduct formal interviews with the OIT faculty. I was now beginning to see in their view of responsibility not a challenge, but rather a continuity, an attempt to constantly *build* a wider and deeper consensus, as a matter of pragmatism, rather than inclusivity. I was beginning to experience firsthand that broader sense of architecture which informs the Japanese sensibility, especially in the way it conducts social relationships and constructs collective understanding.

I had spent a few hours in proper communion with the custodians of a rich and deep tradition. I had come prepared with a map, and wanted it filled out with addresses. Instead, they had shown me the territory and invited me to explore it. They also taught me a lesson in love. I have always loved Japanese architecture, especially Tadao Ando's work. My entire expedition to Japan was

based on an effort to capture that love and transcribe it. But my love, though intense, was also deficient. It was detached from the tradition which fed it with care. It was, in other words, puppy love.

That day I learned that care is the medium by which those who are in the know and those who are not may come to occupy a shared ground of experience. Without it, traditions are landlocked into islands of dogma and orthodoxy. Worst yet, without it, the productions of these traditions become no more than mere facades, consigned to a life of superficial consumption, as far removed from their origins and ethos as we are from a serious engagement with the traditions that birthed them.

It is not enough to look, or to listen, or even to taste. We must love, with great care.