Duration and the Ontology of Japanese Architecture

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Introduction

1 In very general terms, we can understand tradition through two dichotomies. On the one hand, tradition is associated with a past that repeats itself in the present — in opposition to what is contemporary, novel, and emerging. And on the other hand, we can understand tradition as embodied in the present — it is lived, continuously re-emerges, re-evaluates, re-positions, and projects itself into the future. This dichotomy has also been presented as a division between “Western European” and “Eastern” cultural views; however, this divide is a gross generalization; geographical boundaries are perhaps the least-suited method of circumscribing philosophical thought and its debate. For example, many so-called “Western” philosophers such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Ravaisson, Whitehead, or Bergson have established dialogues and theorized ideas that can be found in different forms in the East.

2 Using this misconceived divide as a point of departure, we could say that in some Eastern cultures, tradition is predominantly understood as an inherent part of life, manifesting a particular understanding of the present and the effects of the past in its production. In Japanese culture, in particular, tradition is deeply rooted in the awareness and celebration of life, understood as unfolding in and through time, evidencing an affinity with Bergson’s philosophy. This paper proposes to reflect on how this philosophy manifests in Japanese aesthetics, focusing mainly on the aesthetics of architecture and the built environment. I propose to analyse how architectural traditions in Japan interconnect with Bergson’s philosophy and contribute to an alternative ontology — an ontology of duration, where the structures and spaces we build are no longer entirely material but transient transformations that are part of an ongoing process.
This essay will first explore some of the aesthetic traditions of Japan and how these are sympathetic to many of Bergson’s ideas, exploring how Japanese awareness and sensibility are akin to a form of intuition. Secondly, I will present the case of the Ise Jingu shrine. Looking at this case from a rationalist view of metaphysics, I will identify its problems with standard ontology (if such a standard can be defined at all). Following will be an interpretation of the shrine in relationship to Bergson’s philosophy, namely the aspects of duration, possibility, perception, and memory. Concluding, I will reflect on the implications this alternative ontology can have for interpreting and understanding architectural works cross-culturally.

A Synopsis of Japanese Aesthetic Culture

The idea of reality as change and transience is central to Shinto and Buddhist philosophies, for whom impermanence is an essential feature of the world. Japanese traditions evidence a particular awareness of this worldview, which is central to its aesthetic culture and traditions. This awareness can be understood as a form of perception that focuses not only on the object but also on the processes involved in its creation and life. This sensibility is evident in Japanese craftsmanship; it can be seen in the tectonic nature of things like wood joinery, the folded layers of forged metal, or the celebration of imperfections that arise in the making of artefacts. The aesthetic appreciation of wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection), or the practice of Kintsugi (repair of pottery with gold seams), are examples of the awareness and celebration of the imperfect, incomplete, and ephemeral nature of things (Koren 2008).

The awareness of the transience of things reflects a profound expression of the cycles of nature and life itself. For example, the old lunar calendar reflected the agrarian society of Japan but also the imperfect and transient nature of the seasons. It marked the cycles of agricultural activities and the life cycles of plants and animals. Therefore, each year the calendar was adjusted to reflect these natural cycles. The New Year coincided with the beginning of Spring and the blooming of plum blossoms, the second month with the cherry blossoms, the third with the peach flower, and so on. Each year’s calendar was announced so that agricultural activities could be organized accordingly. The Gregorian calendar, adopted by Japan in 1873 during the Meiji Restoration, was a rational and mathematical abstraction of planetary movements. While the lunar calendar reflected time according to the rhythms of life, the modern Gregorian calendar measures time objectively. Japan’s adoption of the modern calendar means that now the New Year starts in the winter, or that June, named Minazuki, which means “the month with no water,” is in the middle of the rainy season (Noguchi 2004, 12-13).

The contrast between the two calendars can be related to Bergson’s critique of the spatialization of time, characteristic of the physical sciences and mathematics. Bergson distinguishes between the homogeneity of space into which time is thrown in order to be measured and divided; with the heterogeneity of lived experience. It is a distinction between the quantitative nature of a mathematical variable and the qualitative flow of the rhythms of life. The modern Gregorian calendar imposes a rigid order of successions onto nature, becoming desynchronised with the natural movements of life. The traditional lunar calendar, in contrast, adjusted itself to the movements and rhythms of the natural world, drawing meaningfulness to time, not as a measurement
but as the movements and experience of life itself. For Bergson, scientific knowledge relies on artificial abstractions that do not fully represent the heterogeneous movements of life and nature. The modern calendar relies on measurement and convention created by human intellect for practical reasons. Bergson tells us: 

There is no doubt but that for us time is at first identical with the continuity of our inner life. What is this continuity? That of a flow or passage, but a self-sufficient flow or passage, the flow not implying a thing that flows, and the passing not presupposing states through which we pass; the thing and the state are only artificially taken snapshots of the transition; and this transition, all that is naturally experienced, is duration itself (Bergson 1922, 44).

The relationship of the body with the cycles of life is fundamental to Japanese culture, rituals, and aesthetics. “At the heart of a culture lies a certain view of the body, and this view decides which perceptual experiences the culture chooses to value” (Noguchi 2004, 8). Life, its creation, maturing, weathering, decay, renewal, and death, and the awareness of these processes in all things underline traditional Japanese sensibilities. This sensibility contrasts with a more mechanistic or functional view of the body found in, for example, some European philosophical traditions, where the body is a ‘tool’ or ‘machine’ to be used, serving a functional purpose. This mechanical view of the body reflects a meaning for life and death in, the so-called, modern capitalist culture. Life, as with time, becomes a commodity that can be gained, used, lost, and even sold. It has value, but it is a quantitative, mercantile value where the qualitative heterogeneity of life is merely apparent. This view of life also circumscribes the past, present, and future to strict, rigid boundaries, allowed to touch at points but never cut into each other. For Bergson, the past interpenetrates the present, and the present continuously gestures towards the future. Bergson’s analogy of a melody illustrates this idea. When a note extends into the next, we perceive them as being inside each other, interpenetrating, not as distinct notes. If a note is played out of tone or unnecessarily extended, we perceive this as an error because it fails to fulfil our anticipation of what is to come.

The contrast between these views can be extended to how tradition is understood. In Japan, tradition is alive; it re-emerges, re-invents, and evolves in a creative way. It survives by being lived and performed. Tradition is a part of life, interpenetrating it like with the melody.2 A contrary, or “European” view, understands tradition as something from, or contained, in the past; it survives only through preservation.3 Analogous to embalming or taxidermy, where bodies are given a lifelike effect. This illustrates a distinct view of the body.

[Death becomes merely the production of waste material. Hospitals have already turned into processing facilities for industrial waste, with organ transplants serving as part of the recycling business. Anybody who senses something strange about this mechanical image [...] will realise immediately that science in itself can never become ‘culture’(Noguchi 2004, 12).]4

In Japanese traditions, bodies, and therefore matter, have tangible and intangible attributes, eliciting that life is present even in the most ordinary objects, in their becoming, maturing, decay, renewal, and perishing.5 This particular awareness is best expressed by the phrase mono no aware. It is one of those untranslatable expressions particular to a specific culture which often portray and express a profound sentiment and character of that culture.6 The meaning of mono no aware is complex, (mono) refers to “things,” the particle (no) indicates possession, and (aware) means “pathos.” The literal translation is “the pathos of things” (Parkes 2018, Chap.2), but can also be understood as a “deep feeling of things” or “the impermanence of things.” The
expression suggests a worldview in which objects and bodies are not static but transient and unfolding — in duration. This understanding is intrinsically related to the beauty of things in the sense that it elicits a particular aesthetic feeling. The Buddhist priest Kenkō, in the fourteenth century, expressed this sentiment in the book Essays in Idleness.

If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty (Kenkō in Keen 1967, 120).

The intangible has a profound effect on the understanding of matter. In Japanese traditions, the intangible is as much a part of things as the physical particles that constitute them. The practice of mosha reflects this form of dualism. Mosha is the tradition of reproducing an artefact, usually a painting or calligraphy work. However, the products of mosha are not understood as a copy; they “preserv[e] both tangible and intangible qualities of the original” (Ellis, Oka and Hashimoto 2016, 286). All aspects of the artefact, its material form, technical “know-how,” and its “pathos” (expression of feeling or meaning) are transferred and not merely copied into the new object. The practice emerged during the Meiji Restoration to save Buddhist artefacts that were being destroyed due to anti-Buddhist sentiment. The products of mosha practices are not copies or forgeries; they are understood as extensions of the original object. In “European” culture, a similar equivalent to this aesthetic conception is found in works of literature, music, and other performance arts. A work of literature is not contingent on a single copy of a book or manuscript, or a piece of music is not contingent on its original performance; listening to any performance of a musical work is to experience that musical work and not a copy. Japanese aesthetic practices like mosha, extend this quality to all art, suggesting an entirely radical ontology.

The concept of MA is another important aspect of Japanese aesthetics. MA is the awareness of “an indivisible state of time and space” (Iimura 2002). The 1989 short film “MA: Space/Time in the Garden of Ryoan-Ji,” directed by the artist Takahiko Iimura in collaboration with the architect Arata Isozaki (texts) and music by Takehisa Kosugi, exemplifies the awareness and experience of MA in a work of art. The film begins with a description of the 16th-century stone garden in the Ryoan-Ji temple, Kyoto, followed by the text:

MA, a Japanese word, is a perception of space and time. It embodies the idea of space and time as one. Ma is reflected in many Japanese art forms and is fully realized in the garden of Ryoan-Ji.

In Takahiko Iimura’s notes on the film, he says:

In these films I am interested in realizing Henri Bergson’s concept of temporal duration, called “durée,” […]. I see Bergson’s “durée” as closer to the concept of time in the East, which regards time as duration rather than as divisible. If one regards the concept of Japanese “MA” as an indivisible state of time and space, there is common ground with Bergson’s “durée” […].

I thought of not merely expressing the concept of “MA”, but also of experiencing “MA.” […] The slow tracking shots across immovable objects create a continuous space while making the viewer conscious of his or her own time-process (Iimura 2002).

Gunter Nitschke suggests an association of MA with “place,” where “place is the product of lived space and lived time, a reflection of our states of mind and heart” (Nitschke 1988). Nitschke’s conception of place includes both the tangible and intangible, the objective and subjective. MA does not negate space; it infuses it with the
subjective awareness of heterogeneous life. The Ryoan-Ji stone garden also appears in the 1949 film “Late Spring” by Yasujiro Ozu. The scene depicts two fathers contemplating the stone garden and contemplating life. The juxtaposition of the scene, the garden, and the characters’ dialogue are symbolic. The experience of the garden is not immediate; its stones, although immovable, appear to us gradually. As with life, it too is never immediate; it slowly progresses through all things. The phenomena of MA, in many ways, can be related to the phenomena of duration. The Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki has referred to MA in several interviews as “the time between a clap.”

This brief outline of Japanese traditions and aesthetic culture reveals an inherent affinity with Bergson’s philosophy. There are apparent sympathies with Bergson’s durée — the tangible and intangible, the discrete and qualitative, the homogeneous and heterogeneous, the multiple and the whole. The sense of awareness, central to Japanese sensibility, can be related to Bergson’s philosophical method of intuition, which equates to a kind of understanding or knowledge of the world and reality from within. Bergson distinguishes two types of knowledge. “Relative knowledge” based on mathematical, analytical abstractions that understand things from the point of view of an observer. And in contrast, “absolute knowledge” grasps things from the “inside,” which is attained by the method of intuition. However, it is important to note that Bergson does not oppose science; on the contrary, he understands the value of scientific progress. His criticism is that science deals in abstraction, in isolated observations of things and phenomena, a viewpoint but not the whole picture. At the very least, the traditional Japanese sensibility and aesthetic awareness are akin to Bergson’s intuition, of knowing and understanding of things from the “inside.”

Under the pretext of positivism hides the absurdity of the scientist who turns on the lights in order to investigate the nature of darkness (Noguchi 2004, 15).

**Shikinen Sengu**

*ise Jingu* is one of Japan's most highly regarded Shinto shrines. The shrine is dedicated to *Amaterasu Omikami*, the sun goddess, the highest deity in the Shinto religion and the ancestor of the royal family. Popularly considered the “Soul of Japan” and a symbol of Japanese identity, it is a national treasure representing the emperor's grandeur and a symbol of Japanese nationalism. The shrine complex is comprised of many structures. The most distinguished are two plots of land that sit side by side. On one side, the *goshoden* enshrines the sun goddess herself in the form of a mirror. On the other side an empty plot of the same size and shape — the *kodenchi* (Lopes 2007, 79). Many rituals take place at the shrine, and although there are inherent political connotations, their calendar is generally defined by the cycles of rice cultivation. It is also one of the oldest Shinto shrines in Japan. According to some records, the *ise Jingu* could be 2,000 years old, although one particular ritual, the *Shikinen Sengu*, makes dating the structure a complex issue.

The *Shikinen Sengu* is the ritual of the cyclical rebuilding of the *goshoden* every twenty years in the empty site next to it, the *kodenchi*. In effect, every twenty years, the *goshoden* and *kodenchi* swap places. The works involved take about eight years and are a significant undertaking — 15,000 trees, 900 meters of silk, 3.75 kilograms of gold, and 260 kilograms of lacquer are some of the materials required for the task. In 2013 the reported cost was 55 billion yen. Ancient building techniques are used, and specific
rituals, a total of thirty-five, mark each rebuilding stage. Some rituals are modest, while others involve thousands of participants (Lopes 2007, 79).

There is no single explanation for the performance of this ritual. A theological view may present that it represents the Shinto doctrines of purity and renewal or that the deity, or kami, must always be placed in a new and beautiful shrine. A cultural approach may defend that it expresses an awareness of the transience of life and nature, fundamental to Japanese aesthetics. From a technical or architectural perspective, the ritual preserves the construction techniques, traditional tools, and know-how, passing this knowledge down to future generations. Or it is simply a way of preserving the building fabric because of the perishable qualities of the materials. Whichever the reason for this ritual of rebuilding, we can accept that it is well within the aesthetic traditions of Japanese culture.

Curious philosophers [and architects] who look into the pairing of goshoden to kodenchī will find themselves rethinking the ontology of architecture (Lopes 2007, 77).

Fig. 1 – The Ise Jingu shrine during the rebuilding process

The Ise Jingu shrine during the rebuilding process. Creative Commons License URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ise_Shrine_Naiku_1953-8-26.jpg

The Shikinen Sengu presents a significant problem — how can something be 2,000 years old if it is entirely rebuilt every twenty years? Buildings are material objects individuated as tables, chairs, or other ordinary things. They are made of parts and come into existence when these parts are assembled. Ultimately, if this ontological view is taken to the extreme (atomism), buildings and other objects are bundles of particles organised in a specific manner, location, and time. The well-known puzzle of the Ship of Theseus illustrates the complexity of the persistence of objects and part substitution and raises significant hesitations regarding the reduction of object identity to their material constitution. It is generally accepted that an object can survive the gradual replacement of some of its parts. It is controversial if it survives the gradual replacement of all of its parts. It is more controversial and likely not accepted that an
object could survive the simultaneous replacement of all parts. Furthermore, it is not compatible that an object can stand beside itself, and there is a moment in which the “old shrine” and the “new shrine” stand side by side. Therefore, according to more rationalist or even Platonic views on ontology, the *Ise Jingu* cannot be more than twenty years old.

However, the issue with this view is the same criticism Bergson makes about spatialising time. Time becomes subordinate to space, and things happen in a succession of intervals. Accordingly, each iteration of the *Ise Jingu* would have to be a distinct material object that exists only in discrete moments. However, it is commonly accepted, and our intuition tells us that the shrine is 2,000 years old, suggesting an alternative ontology of duration. In this alternative, the past and present co-exist; they interpenetrate, which is distinct from the cadence of successive moments into which things come and go from existence. Duration is not bound by mathematical division; instead, it is a continuous multiplicity. It can reveal other durations and encompass them *ad infinitum* (Pearson 2018, 18). The many are revealed as one, as Bergson notes:

> We can thus conceive of succession without distinction, and think of it as a mutual penetration, an interconnection and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought (Bergson 1910, 101).

And:

> When we are seated on the bank of a river, the flowing of the water, the gliding of a boat or the flight of a bird, the ceaseless murmur in our life’s deeps are for us three separate things or only one, as we choose (Bergson in Pearson and Maoilearca 2002, 257).

As with a melody, we can extract each note, but these alone do not constitute the melody in its fluid unfolding and duration. Bergson tells us that “when we try to cut it, it is as if we suddenly passed a blade through a flame. [...] [We divide] the unfolded, not the unfolding” (Bergson in Pearson and Maoilearca 2002, 255). To understand the *Ise Jingu*, in this way, is to understand it as unfolding in time, in duration. We can only divide its duration in terms of the re-buildings that have already happened, and this is not the complete picture; it is an abstraction possible through our intellect.

A counterargument is that the *Ise Jingu* is the case of a multi-instantiating object; similar to a work of literature or a piece of music, the same exact object is performed and repeated as a given aesthetic experience. However, although the current existing form of the *Ise Jingu* may resemble earlier ones, the Shikinen Sengu ritual of rebuilding has allowed for changes in material and spatial specifications (Lopes 2007, 82). Nevertheless, we do not consider the current form of the shrine as an error or impostor; it has simply evolved, continuously recreating itself anew.

The architect Bruno Taut in his praise of *Ise Jingu*, compared it to the Parthenon:

> The shrines of Ise Jingu are Japan’s greatest and most completely original creation in terms of world architecture. [...] The Parthenon on the Acropolis is to the present day a visible sign of the beautiful gifts that men of Athens bestowed on their collective symbol of wisdom and intelligence, Athena. It is aesthetically the greatest and most sublime building in stone, as are the Ise shrines in wood. But still there is a great difference. Even if the Parthenon had not been blown to ruins it would today still be only a monument of ancient times, as life is missing from it. How very different are the shrines of Ise! Not only are the religious rites and the everlasting stream of worshippers a living presence, the shrines have yet another vital quality,
which is entirely original in its effect, intention, and perception. This is the fact that the shrines are always new (Taut in Isozaki 2011, 124).

There are further relations between the *Ise Jingu* and Bergson’s philosophy, particularly if we look at the dichotomy between the goshoden and the kodenchi — the empty and the built sites. For Bergson, “consciousness is both memory (the conservation and accumulation of the past in the present) and anticipation of the future” (Pearson 2018, 75). The contrast between the two halves of the *Ise Jingu* reveals this idea through aesthetic means. Each half cannot exist in isolation; the unbuilt side is as much a part of the whole as the built side. The goshoden, through the continuous process of rebuilding, elicits the past into the present as a form of lived tradition. The kodenchi, the unbuilt site, awaits the future iteration of the shrine to materialise; mediating between perception and memory, it is a site of the virtual. Both plots are sites of endless possibility. According to Bergson, possibility follows reality and does not precede it; it is put into the past retroactively, after the fact.

As reality is created as something unforeseeable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is this precise moment that it begins to have been always possible, and that is why I said that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared. The possible is therefore the mirage of the present in the past; and as we know the future will finally constitute a present and the mirage effect is continually being produced, we are convinced that the image of tomorrow is already contained in our actual present, which will be the past of tomorrow, although we did not manage to grasp it. [...] If we put the possible back into its proper place, evolution becomes something quite different from the realization of a program: the gates of the future open wide; freedom is offered an unlimited field (Bergson in Pearson and Maoilearca 2002, 279, 281).

The complexities of the *Ise Jingu* speak to the nature of time and reality we find in Bergson’s philosophy. It is the continuous exchange between the built and unbuilt, each site simultaneously eliciting the past, present, and future in a continuous and creative movement. The kodenchi is a site of the past and simultaneously of the future. When we perceive it, we simultaneously recollect what is no longer present while evoking the possible future because of the juxtaposition with the built shrine by its side. It is simultaneously the site of what is no longer present and of what has not yet arrived. The dichotomy between the goshoden and the kodenchi presents both the virtual and the actual; however, either is entirely virtual or entirely actual, they are in constant flux, in a movement of subtraction and compression, revealing and concealing. “[P]erception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other and are always exchanging something of their substance as if by a process of endosmosis” (Pearson 2018, 70). Perhaps this analogy best describes the nature of *Ise Jingu*; paradoxically, resorting to science, the endosmosis and exosmosis are carefully regulated for cells to be able to remain alive. The co-existence and permeability of the past and present allow us to understand *Ise Jingu* in its entirety and not as a succession of distinct moments but as the intensity of life, continuously renewing, inventing and projecting itself forwards.

Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting, for the present moment, always going forwards, fleeting limit
between the immediate past which is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory (Bergson in Pearson 2018, 83).

And so, it is with the Ise shrine.

**Conclusion — Some Ramifications in “Western” Architecture**

Ise Jingu is not unique; more than thirty shrines in Japan are regularly rebuilt. The Kasuga Taisha shrine in Nara is rebuilt every thirty years, the Kamo Miyoa Jinga in Kyoto every fifty years, or the Nukisaki Jinga in Gunma Prefecture every thirteen years. Many other shrines and buildings are rebuilt in irregular intervals, e.g., the Izumo Taisha shrine in the Shimane Prefecture has been rebuilt twenty-five times. This process, or ritual, of rebuilding is also not unique to Shinto structures; Buddhist monasteries and temples have also been rebuilt. Some are gradual replacements as materials decay; others are entirely renewed, like the central Golden Hall of the Kofukuji temple in Nara (Lopes 2007, 80).

These rebuilding practices reveal a profound understanding of architecture's ephemeral and transient nature. It reveals a sensibility and awareness that things are not solely defined by their tangible material qualities but also exist virtually in duration. These practices accept changes to the material and spatial specifications, meaning they are not just replicas of what was there before but have evolved creatively. Tradition is kept alive and relevant in these rituals, which, in turn, have permeated architectural practices in Japan. We can find traditional forms in modern works of architects, such as the Yoyogi National Gymnasium, or in the concept of "metabolist" architecture playing with parts and elements that could be replaced and changed according to cycles of growth and renewal (Lopes 2007, 80). The rebuilding and replacement of structures have a long tradition in Japanese practices, a tradition that is continuously alive.

Lopes (2007) suggests that in order to overcome the paradox presented by the Ise Jingu, it should be considered a token event. To which the corresponding type, I assume, would be the type “Japanese architecture.” This view is appealing; however, understanding things as events may still reduce time to space if such are considered as divisible or made-up of successive intervals. Furthermore, this view ties us to a strong commitment between ontology and culture. Culture and distinct forms of aesthetic appreciation undoubtedly inform ontology, but is ontology contingent on culture? If these rebuilding practices and traditions were only circumscribed to a particular culture, in this case, Japanese culture, it would be suggested that ontology is, in fact, contingent on it. However, they are not; we find equivalent practices in many other cultures worldwide, namely European architecture. Although the awareness and sensibility of these practices may not be as ingrained into European cultural habits, they are still present.

For example, we can find this rebuilding in the pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich. The pavilion existed for a short period between 1929 and 1930 and was known as the German Pavilion. It was subsequently demolished after the International Exposition in Barcelona and rebuilt in 1986, now named the Barcelona Pavilion.
Between 1930 and 1986, it existed only in photographs, drawings, and memory. Despite the different names, it is considered the same pavilion.

We can find other manifestations of these rebuilding practices in the reconstruction works of many buildings and monuments after the destruction caused during WWII, e.g., the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. These examples seem to suggest that the ontology of architecture is not circumscribed to specific regional and cultural types. Furthermore, Japanese art and architecture were likely among the most influential expressions to permeate European aesthetic sensibilities. We find Japanese architecture’s material and spatial sensibilities in the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. We can find the perception of MA, the awareness of an indivisible state of time and space, at the Barcelona Pavilion in as much as it is found at the Ryoan-Ji stone garden.

The question remains whether we are dealing with distinct ontologies, or a shared understanding of architecture. Bergson’s contribution is that metaphysics is no longer confined as a closed system subordinate to scientific and mathematical logic alone; it becomes open and permeable to our sensibilities, expression, and experience of life.

As a provocation, I would like to conclude with a quote from the architect Arata Isozaki, which elicits a profound connection to Bergson’s *élan vital*:

We may also discover a Darwinist influence at work here, and Bruno Taut’s reference to the Parthenon stood clearly within such a paradigm. In the tradition persisting since classicism, positing the Parthenon as a convenient standard for measuring architectural progress had become commonplace. For instance, the lithic column with its entasis is said to preserve the trace of its having been made from a bundle of plants. This form then crystallized as a mass of stone, as an immutable emblem of progress as well as a means of achieving timelessness. (Isozaki 2011, 144).

At Ise, transubstantiation is omitted. Instead, the rebuilding-and-relocation scheme of twenty-year cycles embraces a biological model of regeneration. In order to preserve life, forms are generated and regenerated isomorphically. [...] In their shared will to embody permanence, Ise and the Parthenon are alike, but the paths to attainment are opposed. Stone structures weather over time. Wooden structures are less characteristically able to withstand alterity (changes in social systems and the style and taste of each age) yet better able to respond flexibly to the spirit of the age by way of naturally restorative and self-regulating impulse (Isozaki 2011, 144).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. For further references on Japanese aesthetic and cultural traditions, see, Cox (2003) and, Sanford, Lafleur, & Nagatomi (1992).

2. See Isozaki (2011, Part 1) and Tanizaki (2001). Related discourse can be found in Yasuo (2008), particularly in Chapter One: “The Image-Thinking of Ancient People, East and West.”

3. Ibid.

4. Questions about the relationship between science and culture may be too extensive to present in this paper. The intention here is to shed light on distinct worldviews, in particular in their understanding of the body. On one hand, a more rationalist view based on empirical objective observations, common to scientific discourse; and on the other hand, a more intuitive view of the body, one anchored in phenomenal experience.

5. An example of this is the belief of the ‘kami’ in Shinto religious practices.
6. A similar example is the word *saudade* in Portuguese. A profound melancholic longing or yearning that expresses an utter sense of loneliness or incompleteness but can also express a sense of happiness in the memory of things. *Saudade* can refer to people, objects, places, or a time past. The equivalent in Japanese is the word *natsukashii*.


8. For simplicity, “ise jingu” refers to the *gosho den* at the *naiku* (inner shrine).

9. The origin of the shrine is an issue of some debate. For a more indepth exposition on this matter see Isozaki (2011 chapter 8).

10. Endosmosis is the movement of water inside the cell while exosmosis is the elimination of water out of the cell. Both are types of osmosis.

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**ABSTRACTS**

Henri Bergson’s philosophy and Japanese cultural, aesthetic, and architectural traditions share an affinity regarding their view of reality as continuous change and the awareness of the vital impulses of life in all things. For example, these ideas are central to Buddhist and Shinto philosophies, for whom impermanence is an essential feature of the world. There are strong sympathies with Bergson’s duration, which has facilitated his reception in Japan. An understanding of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy of art can help illustrate and comprehend Bergson’s philosophy, and, in return, Bergson’s philosophy can reveal deeper understandings of the world and the environment we live in. This paper proposes to reflect on how duration manifests in Japanese aesthetics, particularly focusing on the philosophy of architecture and the built environment. I propose to analyze how architectural traditions in Japan interconnect with Bergson’s philosophy and how they might contribute to an architectural ontology of duration.

La philosophie d’Henri Bergson et les traditions culturelles, esthétiques et architecturales japonaises partagent une affinité en ce qui concerne leur vision de la réalité en tant que changement continu et leur conscience des impulsions vitales de la vie dans toutes les choses. Ces idées sont par exemple au cœur des philosophies bouddhiste et shintoïste, pour lesquelles l’impermanence est une caractéristique essentielle du monde. Il existe de fortes affinités avec la durée de Bergson, ce qui a facilité sa réception au Japon. Une compréhension de l’esthétique et de la philosophie de l’art japonaises peut aider à illustrer et à comprendre la philosophie de Bergson et, en contrepartie, la philosophie de Bergson peut révéler des compréhensions plus profondes du monde et de l’environnement dans lequel nous vivons. Cet article propose de réfléchir à la manière dont la durée se manifeste dans l’esthétique japonaise, en se concentrant particulièrement sur la philosophie de l’architecture et de l’environnement architectural. Je propose d’analyser comment les traditions architecturales japonaises s’articulent avec la philosophie de Bergson et comment elles peuvent contribuer à une ontologie architecturale de la durée.

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Mark Rego graduated from the Boston Architectural College in 2011. He undertook postgraduate studies in architecture at the University of Porto in 2013, was awarded a Master in Philosophy (MSc) from the University of Glasgow in 2021, a Post-Graduate Professional Diploma in Architecture from the University College Dublin in 2022, and is currently undergoing PhD research at the Glasgow School of Art — Mackintosh School of Architecture. He has worked in architectural and engineering practices in the USA, Portugal, and Scotland. He teaches at the BAC and at the GSA, where he lectured in the class Articulating the City: Methods from Philosophy and Literature. His main interests lay in the intersections and relationships between philosophy and architectural theory and practice. The title of his PhD research is Architecture of Time / Time in Architecture: Bergson and the Philosophy of Architecture.