12 Houses by Kazunori Fujimoto

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In the uneven overview of Japanese contemporary architecture given by magazines and the media in general, its various expressions and tools of design definition seem to result from different, sometimes contrasting, rationales and poetics ranging from a marginal impact of contextual values to a careful translation of local identity; from an indifference to heritage to an enduring loyalty to tradition; from a focus on building quality expressed by technological experimentation to an adherence to conventional techniques and materials; from a passion for materials to the pursuit of an architecture that is freed from matter and exclusively defined by flows of images and information; from a (almost religious) minimalist inclination to the pursuit of eclectic exoticism.

While these issues currently animate the international debate, the solutions and schemes they give place to in the context of Japanese architecture show an energy and sharpness that can be ascribed less to *cultural* or *linguistic* (in the sense of pertaining to design discipline itself) questions than to complex and contradictory contexts including both fragmented and messy (as well as in constant and dynamic transformation) metropolitan landscapes and quiet and serene landscapes sometimes dominated by nature.

However, I believe that what still contributes to define the identity of architecture in Japan (and still forms the deepest difference between East and West) is once more the spirit of simplicity and essentiality underlying the minimalist aesthetics, the pursuit of reduction (often related to a

philosophy of the *void*)[1], the «supreme pursuit of cleanliness»[2], as expressed by F.L. Wright in the early twentieth century and, as Isozaki has written more recently, «stripping away the excess, the unnecessary features, in order to extract just the essence, the *right* forms»[3].

Within this both aesthetic and moral ideal, the pursuit of simplicity is combined with the principle of adequacy and the beauty deriving from it. Rather than the adequacy that establishes the architectural forms' representative value and architecture's power to celebrate and describe human beings and their culture, this is a concept that expresses the poetics of small and measured gestures, the greatness of small things, the definition of the way things are and how they appear precisely as they should[4].

All this can be particularly found in the Japanese house that, even in the modern experience, still appears as a space founded on the pursuit of stark simplicity and the poetry of small things.

[1] Cfr. G. Pasqualotto, *Estetica del vuoto. Arte e meditazione nelle culture d'Oriente*, Marsilio, Venice 2006.

[2] «I saw nothing meaningless in the Japanese home and could find very little added in the way of ornament because all ornament as we call it, they get out of the way; the necessary things are done by bringing out and polishing the beauty of the simple materials they used in making the building. Again, you see, a kind of cleanliness. At last I had found one country on earth where simplicity, as natural, is Supreme». F.L. Wright, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York City, 1943.

[3] A. Isozaki, *L'ambiguità dello spazio*, in "Casabella" n. 702, Jul-Aug 2002, p. 4.

[4] These two meanings of *adequacy* may be further clarified by the words of a philosopher who conceived architecture as «construction of a real, adequate space, that visually evokes adequacy» (G. Lukàcs, *Estetica*, Ital. trans. Einaudi, Turin 1960, p. 1210) and by a recent novel explaining that it is precisely *adequacy* «that, in any moment, makes it possible for us to capture any quality of existence and, in the rare occasions when everything is harmony, to enjoy it with the necessary intensity … Whoever, like me, is inspired by the greatness of small things, pursues it right into the heart of what is inessential, where … it is issued from a certain order of common things and from the certainty that it *is as it should be*, from the conviction that it *is just as it is*» (M. Barbery, *L'eleganza del riccio*, Ital. ed. Edizioni e/o, Rome 2010, pp. 158-159).

If a selection of designs is enough to delineate a way of being of architecture, a selection of residential buildings is an opportunity to focus on the idea of house and derive a sense of the modern experience in Japan. These twelve designs may help us understand and interpret the materials and tools used by Kazunori Fujimoto in his work.

They can be ordered in two groups based on their environment.

The first group includes the designs sited in the difficult and turbulent condition of the city and founded on the intention to shut out and deny the surrounding disorder. This is essentially ensured by a self-exclusion that relies on geometrical clarity as opposed to the city's inability or impossibility to provide its own rules. In fact, if geometry, that expresses freedom as well as abstraction, makes it possible to translate the complexity and imperfection of the real world into a higher and pure order governed by the laws of harmony and beauty, at the same time it expresses the detachment between public space and the private and secluded space of the house or, in more general terms, between the world and the interior sphere, between unknown and known. The certainty of geometry also becomes a psychological device that assures safety and contrasts uncertainty and instability.

The designs rely on *discontinuity* with the Houses in Kasaoka, Innoshima, Ushita-Naka, Mihara in particular defining self-referential and introverted spaces that subsist as shelters from the shapeless and with their quiet simplicity appease the whirlwind chaos of life[5]. But, while the context is shut out, it is not denied. A visual connection is created by the skillful cuts in the outer walls, particularly when views of the landscape are still available, or when it is desirable to keep in touch with the flow of outer life. After all,

[5] Sometimes in Japan the client explicitly requires that the house be completely sheltered from external viewing.

the presence of boats (in coastal sites) or cars in the pictures of Fujimoto's houses are almost a reminder of the continuous link with outer life.
Furthermore, geometric clarity is used as an expression of stability so that the houses appear to be firmly anchored to the ground as a sign of their will to be in that space as well as to oppose the ephemeral and unstable system of what already exists.
The second group includes the designs sited in quiet urban contexts, in green surroundings or in particularly fascinating natural scenery; in such cases, one of the design's goals is the *revelation* of the landscape – the houses open themselves to the sea, embrace the woods, look onto borderless landscapes.
The house seeks the landscape, is amazed by the world's enduring beauty and becomes a place of happiness and a space of silence where the voice of the surf or of the wind in the trees can be heard. The house is concerned with the earth and the sky, it looks after and cares for them. Its calm stability antagonizes the fast changeability of light, while the cleanliness of lines, surfaces and volumes highlights the changes of level, the mountains' skyline, the coastal horizons.
While the designs conceived for turbulent contexts rely on geometry as an antidote to disorder, the Houses on Mt. Yataka, in Chikata, Ibara, Sunami, Tajiri use geometry as a filter between natural and artificial spaces.
In these buildings the denaturalizing force of geometry expresses the ability to create a critical distance between the design and the reality of the places in order to establish a new continuous connection between place and design. In these houses geometry is both a sign of detachment and a communication device: the space of the house is the silent frame of the natural scene since the houses capture and mirror the landscape. They are enfolded in the landscape and, at the same time, generously embrace it.
Although the houses express their belonging to a place, they appear to float

rather than being grounded. They look like they have just landed or are ready to take off. They seem to rely on an idea of lightness resulting from an acquired ability not to weigh on the ground. The evocation of suspension can be read as a reference to the tradition of the Japanese house the floor of which is elevated from the ground so that it generates a geometric plane leaning towards the outer context (like in the House in Hachikenya) and defines a continuous passage, just like the *engawa* modulates the relation between interiors and outdoor space.

In Fujimoto's houses this floating place defines a kind of lightness that seems to communicate a religious respect for the earth and, at the same time, a reference to Le Corbusier: «l'herbe est une belle chose, la forêt aussi… La maison se posera au milieu de l'herbe comme un objet, sans rien déranger»[6]. Such tension is fully revealed in the simplicity of the House in Ibara: an *objet trouvé* in the space of nature.

In the House in Hachikenya, as well as in other cases, the living space is covered by a floating roof: this is a reminder of the tradition of markedly overhanging roofs conceived to shelter walls and *engawas* from the rain and to filter natural light. The roof also takes the meaning of a modern expression of living as *being under* rather than *being within*: it is Mies van der Rohe's principle according to which space is defined by the suspended roof's plane that dissolves the idea of the container and of gravity in favour of transparency and floating. The rectangular planes *hanging* in the air, between sky and earth, represent the tectonic idea according to which the houses at the same time float in space and are attracted to the ground, trying to adhere to it. In the House in Sunami the two slim roof planes are folded wing-like as though preparing the house to take off!

[6] Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète de 1929-1934*, Les Éditions d'Architectures, Zurich 1964, p. 24.

The overhanging planes also support the need to modulate light so that the interiors are light-filled but sheltered and the outer volume can count on the delicate nuances expressed by the endless gradations of shade.

Suspended in space, some of these houses also appear to be suspended in time: the Henaji House in particular can be read as a reflection of, or a homage to, the ancient Japanese house, and especially its large hipped roof, overhanging and heavily marked by the ridges. As usual elevated from the ground level, it *floats* over it thus erasing all connection with the context: having become *an idea of house*, it has no connection with space or time.

A precise (history-related) time emerges instead in the other houses indicating their relation with the tradition of Japanese living, either ancient or recent, with the use of reinforced concrete to create a continuous exposed structure highlighting the perfection of the stripped-down and unadorned material, or the use of *tatami* or *shojis* ensuring poetical as well as technical results. The use of few materials and the monochrome composition purify the space and express the ideal *wabi* that translates Japanese culture's ethical and aesthetical aspiration to sobriety and frugality into a pursuit of authenticity[7].

From a procedural and dialectic point of view, Fujimoto's designs rely on the use of elementary planes and volumes that break down in order to distinguish and define the functional elements and, at the same time, form different relations. An often recurring geometric construction relies on staggered planes that define spaces, create passages, generate cuts of light and planes of shade.

By simply shifting, the main element (either in plan or elevation) moves

[7] Again this implicates the concept of adequacy with a reference to Saint Thomas who defined truth as «adaequatio rei et intellectus». Truth, adequacy and simplicity are in turn connected in the above mentioned novel *L'eleganza del riccio* [*The elegance of the hedgehog*]: «truth especially likes the simplicity of truth». M. Barbery, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

without changing its orientation, thus pursuing a proportional balance and rationally organizing the plan or settling the floors on the ground's incline. Sometimes the roof plane is indifferent to the varying heights of the interiors; in other cases the floor level remains horizontal while the roof planes shift and create the openings for light and landscape viewing. The measured, rigid movements of mechanics are balanced by uncontrolled outbursts of emotion. Even the buildings' drawings express a poetics of space. The clarity of the layout and the pursuit of simplicity are revealed in the almost abstract precision of plans and elevations that are often associated with axonometric views exposing the interiors from the roof; rather than following a neo-plastic aspiration, such representations almost allow for a view of domestic life that evokes the ancient Japanese drawings in the *fukinuki-yatai* style, or «roof-less house» style.

«I do not think anything in the world can be named, except virtue, which can deserve more care and application, than to fix a good and convenient habitation for yourself and family»[8].
In this sense, I believe that, with his house designs, Kazunori Fujimoto has rendered an excellent service to the Family, as well as to Architecture and Beauty.

[8] *The Architecture of Leon Battista Alberti in Ten Books*, Book 1, printed in London, 1755.