



Iori Machiya  
Restored, Kyoto



Moriyama House  
Kazuya Sejima, Tokyo



White U House  
Toyo Ito, Tokyo



Plastic House  
Kengo Kuma, Tokyo

## Japanese Conceptions of Space

Several years back, I had the occasion to call on an elderly woman at her modest *machiya* (merchant's wooden townhouse) in Akashi-chō in the Tsukiji district of *shitamachi* Tokyo. Stepping into the house through a latticed door slightly over a meter in width, I found not in front of me but to one side a raised doorsill leading to a small, 4.5-mat (7sm or 75sf) room behind *shōji* panels. In the center of the room was a *kotatsu*, a quilt-covered table built over a sunken pit. Light entered from the street, which ran parallel to the vestibule through which I entered. This section of the house was used for receiving guests. Behind this room was a second 4.5-mat room combining the functions of kitchen and bedroom. I was amazed at the complexity of orientation and density of space manifest in a total floor area of only 26sm (or 280sf). The presence of a household Shinto shrine, a family Buddhist altar, and a *tokonoma* alcove added to the complexity and reinforced the feeling of inwardness and depth.

Fumihiko Maki, Inner Space of Dwellings in *City with a Hidden Past*

A centripetal *okusei*, or inwardness, has always been fundamental to the formation of space in Japan. The word *oku*, expressing a distinctive Japanese sense of space, has long been part of the vocabulary of daily life. *Oku* is premised on the idea of *okuyuki*, or depth, signifying relative distance or sense of distance within a given space. The Japanese, long accustomed to high-density living given its archipelago geography, a 'floating world', conceive space as something finite and finely attuned to relative distance.

This seminar will examine Japanese concepts of space. Underlying principles and paradigms of Japanese domesticity, spatial patterns, perceptual phenomena, surface and constructional materiality will be unpacked. Different compositional strategies and their relationship to cultural values and systems of meaning will be studied. The city of Tokyo serves as a backdrop. Though geographically sprawling, Tokyo is a massive agglomeration of tiny pieces, slivers and wedges. Remarkably, each tiny part seeks to play a role in making the city. Along the way, we will explore a range of Japanese enigmas, from the conspicuous absence of large open public spaces to the magical network of small circuitous streets, alley ways and bifurcated blocks and lots to the remarkably refined yet ambiguous relationship between architecture and nature. Contemporary ideas and projects will be examined, including works by Hisao Kohyama, Hiroshi Hara, Kazuo Shinohara, Hiromi Fujii, Toyo Ito, Go Hasegawa, Sou Fujimoto, Ryuji Nakamura, Atelier Bow-Wow, Akihisa Hirata, Kengo Kuma, Ryue Nishizawa, and Kazuyo Sejima. Their ideas and projects will be used to illustrate new relationships forged between architecture and society.

The course will include lectures, guest speakers from near and far, and class discussions based on readings, videos, films, photography, and other visual materials. Each student will present a case study and complimentary term paper on a contemporary Japanese house, using hybrid digital/analog forms of representation.

## References

*An Anatomy of Influence*, Thomas Daniell, AA Publications, 2018 / *After the Crash: Architecture in Post-Bubble Japan*, Thomas Daniell, Princeton Architectural Press, 2008 / *Contemporary Japanese Architects: Profiles in Design*, Taro Igarashi, 2018 / *City with a Hidden Past*, Fumihiko Maki, Kajima Institute, 2018 / *Small Tokyo: Measuring the Non-Measurable*, Keio Institute, 2012 / *How to Make a Japanese House*, NAI OIO Press, 2015