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Architecture and National Identity in Meiji Japan: What's the Matter with the White City?

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Abstract

The following article focuses on Japan's pavilion at the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, exploring the interplay between political dynamics and architecture's material culture. This building is a crossroad of multiple histories and embodies one of the most significant points of convergence between the architectural cultures of Japan, Europe and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The fulcrum of this historical convergence is the mobilization of architecture as a tool to establish national identity – a fundamental instrument in the process of nation-building. The transformations of Japan in the aftermath of the 1868 Meiji Restoration shine a light on the complexities and contradictions that accompany such politicization of architecture, negotiating both exogenous and endogenous forces. In this study, particular attention is devoted to the role that building materials played in this realignment, pointing to the tension between Japan's millenary tradition of timber construction, the European myth of stone as a demonstration of power, and the ephemerality of the world's fairs of the turn of the century, as evidenced by Chicago's plaster exposition, also known as the White City.

Keywords: architecture, nation-building, material culture, world's fair, 1893 Columbian Exposition, Japan, Meiji Restoration, Ho-o-den pavilion.

Nation-Building

On October 13th, 1946 the headline of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* read: “Fire destroys 1893 Fair building: Two boys set fire in Jap Pagoda in Jackson Park”.¹ What the *Tribune* called “Jap Pagoda” was the Ho-o-den (Phoenix Hall), the pavilion presented by the Japanese government at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Built twenty-five years after the Meiji Restoration and Japan’s decision to open its doors to foreign (Western) models, this pavilion reflected the struggle to define the identity of a young nation and its architectural materialization. It was an exhibitionary architecture, designed to deliver a political message to an international, non-Japanese public. As noted by Chelsea Foxwell,

Japanese modernity took shape in relation to an outside audience that was envisioned as being present to see and evaluate. In an age when world’s fairs and museums were central to how the world knew Japan, exhibiting and being seen played a defining role in its modern development.²

The world’s fairs of the second half of the nineteenth century were the ideal stages for Japan to establish itself in the eyes of the world as a modern nation. The Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 came at a very particular conjuncture in Japanese history – a moment in which the assimilation of European culture was starting to be questioned. While in the European world’s fairs (London 1862, Paris 1867, Vienna 1873) Japan was overlooked and considered a backward, exotic country, in Chicago it finally found an audience that could relate to its condition. Like Japan, the United States were a young

1. 1946. “Fire Destroys 1893 Fair Building.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* October 13.

2. Foxwell 2009: 39.

nation eager to establish its cultural distinctiveness. As noted by Henry Adams, “the Chicago Fair was the first expression of American thought as unity”.³ Furthermore, both Japan and the United States were struggling to distance themselves from the European sphere of influence (in particular from British cultural hegemony). On one hand, Europe was a constant point of reference: Thomas Hines argues that “it was European and especially English approval of the exposition that counted most with Daniel Burnham, the director of the Exposition’s works”.⁴ On the other hand, Europe was the obstacle that Japan and the United States had to overcome in order to affirm their national identity.

The use of architecture in this nation-building project brought about a reconsideration of the entire discipline: the methods of construction, the organization of labour, the transmission of knowledge and many other aspects of Japanese architecture underwent a process of transformation during the Meiji period. At the center of this discussion was the definition of the building materials that would give form to the architecture of the new nation-state. As architecture became a political instrument, materials were given a symbolic overtone and were asked to convey the impression of strength that modern Japan wanted to transmit.

The relationship between materials and time was a central issue in this regard. According to the European discourse, a modern and civilized state was defined by the use of per-

3. Adams 2009: 123.

4. Hines 2009: 107. Thomas Hines comments on a series of letters that Burnham sent to Edison and Dredge in 1891. In these letters, Burnham expressed his appreciation for the visit of the British delegation.

manent materials – materials meant to last *ad infinitum*. As John Ruskin pointed out, architecture must be “built for permanence, so that no single member, no stone of it, could be spared and yet all stones are firm and uninjured as when they were first set together”.⁵ In Japan – as well as in the United States – architecture was based on a different material culture: the technology transfer implemented by the Europeans came into collision with an architectural practice that had nothing to do with Ruskin’s stones and had been using wood as the primary construction material for centuries.⁶ The overlap of these diverse practices at the Chicago Exposition showed that the notion of material permanence was a cultural and political construct – an unstable notion that changed according to the geographical context and the ideological framework. The durability of architecture was not determined by the material itself, but rather by the ideological connotation given to the material. The Ho-o-den did not collapse because its wooden structure was not durable enough, but rather because the political message that this little timber pavilion represented – the celebration of Japanese national identity – came into conflict with post-World War II America, pushing two boys to reduce the Phoenix Hall to ashes.

Meiji Restoration

The Meiji Restoration ended a policy of isolation lasted for more than two centuries and activated a process of moderni-

5. Ruskin 2000: 23.

6. In the book *Earthquake Nation* (2006. Berkeley: University of California Press), Gregory Clancey addresses the concept of “technology transfer” and discusses how objects and practices come to be constructed across different geographies.

zation and westernization of Japan.⁷ It was a full-fledged nation-building project aimed at reforming every single aspect of Japanese culture, politics, society, economy and law. The strategy was to look at the most advanced European nations in order to imitate their models: the constitution was based on the Prussian model, the education system was taken from France, the navy was remodelled on British lines, and so forth. This principle was clearly stated in the 1868 Charter Oath, the founding document of Meiji Japan: “Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule”.⁸

Since architecture was an important part of this reform, a group of British architects (led by Josiah Conder) was brought to Japan to train the first generation of designers. Given that the foreign experts were invited by the Emperor, the European presence in Japan did not have a colonial connotation. It was a rather unique case of a reform started from within the state (without the interference of a colonial power), using reform patterns taken from the outside. In the space of a few years, Japan overturned a system that had remained unchanged for more than two centuries.

7. The Meiji Restoration ended the Tokugawa Shogunate, a feudal military government that ruled Japan from 1603 to 1868.

8. McLaren 1979: 8. The Oath Charter consisted of five clauses: “1) Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by open discussion. 2) All classes, high and low, shall be united in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state. 3) The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall all be allowed to pursue their own calling so that there may be no discontent. 4) Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of Nature. 5) Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule”.

When the British architects arrived in Japan in the early 1870s, they found an architectural idiom based on timber technologies – an idiom derived from centuries of practice with wooden materials. Japanese architecture had always been a wooden architecture. This material had defined the entire organization of the discipline: the techniques of construction, the organization of labour, the professional profile of the builders, the tools of production, the transmission of knowledge, and so forth. The distinction between architecture, carpentry and engineering did not exist: the design and execution of buildings was assigned to the *daiku*, a professional figure specialized in timber construction. The building techniques (*kiwarihō*), the construction tools (*dōgu*) and the technical literature (*kiku-jutsu*) all focused on wood as the fundamental architectural material.⁹ This tradition rapidly came into conflict with the ideas brought by the British architects. For Josiah Conder and his collaborators, wood was equated with vulnerability, lightness and femininity.¹⁰ George Cawley, one of the engineers of the British delegation, argued that

the structural material of which the native temples were formed detracted in some degree from their beauty, because of its comparative want of durability; for the sentiment arising in the mind from the contemplation was tinged with sadness by notions of decay.¹¹

Likewise, architect Ralph Adams Cram wrote that “Japanese architecture was fanciful and frail, a thing unworthy of study”.¹² In the eyes of the British visitors, wooden construction was ephemeral and unfit for a modern nation-state. As

9. Wendelken 1996: 28-37.

10. Clancey 2006: 17.

11. Cawley 1877: 314.

12. Cram 1905: 35.

a result, Conder and his colleagues set themselves the task of rebuilding wooden-country Japan in masonry and iron. They regarded the use of strong and durable materials – such as brick and stone – as a sign of civilization and a symbol of the solidity of the state.

As pointed out by Gregory Clancey, the architects of nineteenth-century Europe traced the origins of their profession to the builders of Greek temples, Roman villas and medieval cathedrals, that is, stonemasons.¹³ For modern architects, the use of stone was a symbolic link to the most celebrated civilizations of the past – a link to Greece, Rome and the Gothic era. These beliefs were deeply rooted in Viollet-le-Duc's theories regarding the alliance between stone and reason: "Architecture does not receive its inspiration from natural objects, but follows laws established to meet certain necessities. These Laws are the result of reasoning".¹⁴ Viollet-le-Duc went as far as to argue that ancient Greek architecture did not derive from wooden building techniques, but was rather a purely *lapideus* architecture – an architecture based on the logic of stone. The transition from wood to masonry was regarded as an epistemic break – a shift that defined the proper development of a civilization. The rebuilding of wooden London in stone following the great fire of 1666 was based on these ideas.

In order to instil these principles in the Japanese culture, Conder undertook a drastic reform of architectural education. With the foundation of the Tokyo College of Technology in the mid-1870s, Conder tackled the *daiku* tradition at its root. Following the example of their British teachers,

13. Clancey 2006: 15.

14. Viollet-le-Duc 1875: 34.

young Japanese architects started to move away from wooden architecture and closer to European technologies and styles. Wrote student Sone Tatsuzō: “We are deeply regretful for the perishable nature of wooden buildings and their liability to catch fire”.¹⁵ Another student, Itō Chūta, graduated in 1892 with a project for a Gothic cathedral and a thesis on stone construction techniques.¹⁶

For the British educators, the permanent quality of stone construction was instrumental in maintaining the connection between the present and the past of a civilization: stone monuments and ruins allowed for the preservation of the memory of a nation’s historical achievements, fuelling its pride and identity. The lack of masonry ruins in Japan was equated with an absence of memory.¹⁷ From the European point of view, ancient architectures – ruins in particular – were essential components in a nation-building program, since they provided a tangible testimony to a nation’s historical trajectory. Stone ruins were not regarded as signs of death and decay, but rather symbolized longevity and permanence. This ideological connotation of architectural materials was completely alien to Japanese culture. In the Shinto animistic tradition, in fact, the difference between a stone and a tree was not so marked: they were both regarded as living things.¹⁸ The rift between these two architectural idioms – the first based upon the dynamics of wooden members and the second based upon the statics of masonry masses – did not take long to break out.¹⁹

15. Tatsuzō 1889.

16. Reynolds 2001: 17.

17. Clancey 2006: 17.

18. Clancey 2006: 16.

19. Scully 1953: 142.

Counter-Restoration

The assimilation of European ideas – not only in architecture but also in many other fields – rapidly led to a reaction. In the early 1890s, a newly formed government started to question the earlier uncritical adoption of foreign models, calling for an ideological return to the roots of Japanese culture.²⁰ The westernizing attitude that had characterized that first phase of the Meiji nation-building project was replaced by the rediscovery of the values of *Japaneseness*. The Japanese élite started to realize that the identity of a strong nation (with imperial ambitions) could not be based on the imitation of foreign systems: Japan needed to mobilize its history and its tradition in order to shape a distinctive identity, culturally independent from Europe.

This change of course was motivated by a combination of factors. The rapid economic growth brought about by the Meiji Restoration allowed the government to activate a project of imperial expansion. According to the principle of *fukoku kyōhei* (line of advantage), Japan would have been vulnerable to aggressive Western imperialism unless it extended a line of advantage beyond its borders. The emphasis on Japan's "preeminent interests" in Korea and Manchuria quickly led to major conflicts with China and Russia.²¹ The European powers that had been invited to participate in the early Meiji nation-building project, became threats and obstacles to the late Meiji imperial project. Moreover, the outbreak of war in China and Russia pushed Japan to reinforce its nationalistic attitude, starting to create an imperial narrative. Again, foreign policy played a crucial role in the definition of Japanese identity.

20. Wendelken 1996: 29.

21. Sims 2001: 114.

The rebuttal of the westernizing sentiment and the rediscovery of *Japaneseness* had a strong impact on architecture. This change of approach was amplified by a natural event that deeply affected Japan, the 1891 Nōbi earthquake.²² Most of the modern masonry buildings did not survive the earthquake, proving to be less durable than wooden buildings. The excellent seismic performance of many ancient timber structures led most Japanese architects to question the construction methods brought by the Europeans. This unpredictable natural event overturned the notion of material permanence that Conder and his collaborators had been trying to impose for twenty years: suddenly, brick and stone became the most fragile materials of all.

As a result, Japan started to move away from the European sphere of influence, developing a self-consciously Japanese architecture. This idiom, known as temple style (*shajiyō*), was based on the revival of forms, techniques and materials of traditional wooden architecture.²³ The refusal of masonry and the return to timber were symbolic acts – a declaration of independence from the Western world. Tokyo's Nihon Kangyō bank designed by Tsumaki Yorinaka in 1899 was a clear example of the temple style and illustrated the emergence of a formal and material language modelled after ancient Japanese architecture.²⁴ The typology, the program and the functional layout of the building, however, were undoubtedly inspired by European models: Tsumaki, in fact, was an alumni of the Tokyo College of Technology. The teaching of Conder had infiltrated Japanese culture too deeply to be completely erased. The result was a compromise (*wayō setchū*) between European programs and Japanese forms, materials and techniques.

22. Clancey 2006: 113-150.

23. Stewart 1987: 33-62.

24. Wendelken 1996: 28-29.

Moreover, the rediscovery of traditional Japanese architecture brought about a new attention toward the study and preservation of ancient buildings. The emergence of this archaeological interest resulted in the passing of the Temple Preservation Act in 1897.²⁵ The significance of this Act was twofold: on one hand, it embodied Japan's desire to establish an autonomous identity based on the architectural language of its historical heritage (as opposed to the European heritage); on the other hand, the desire for antiquity and the interest in preservation and archaeology were European *topoi*. Conder's emphasis on memory – the fundamental tool to shape national identity – had a decisive influence on the temple style of the late Meiji period, encouraging Japanese designers to search for the roots of their national architecture.

Japan's nationalistic shift of the early 1890s coincided with a change in the way the European *intelligentsia* looked at Japanese culture. As the first objects of Japanese art and craft arrived in Europe (mainly through fairs and exhibitions), an interest in all things Japanese started to emerge.²⁶ The focus, however, was not on the modern art produced during the Meiji period, but rather on the art of the ancient Japanese tradition, which became an inspiration for many Western artists. For example, designer Charles Tiffany purchased a multitude of ancient Japanese paintings, arguing that "Japan's ancient arts are far superior to its modern ones".²⁷

The uncritical imitation of foreign models started to be criticized even by the Westerners. During his Japanese *sojourn* at the turn

25. Reynolds 2001: 20.

26. Foxwell 2009: 45.

27. Ryūichi 1883: 5.

of the century, Frank Lloyd Wright visited the Kyoto School of Design and criticized its art collection: “The collection of this school consists of the worst of French, German and Italian Renaissance, rows of foreign horrors”.²⁸ On the contrary, Wright praised the “small but true Japanese collection” of the Takamatsu Technical School, which did not exhibit poor replicas of European paintings, but rather objects of “pure Japanese art”.²⁹ The fascination with Japan led many European artists to study and reproduce ancient Japanese artefacts. In 1883, French art historian Louis Gonse published *L’Art Japonais*, a study aimed at comparing ancient Japanese paintings to the works of Masaccio, Fra Angelico and Rembrandt.³⁰ What attracted the attention of the Europeans was the stylized, schematic quality of Japanese art – a quality that had nothing to do with the notions of solidity and permanence that Conder had been trying to promote. Designer Christopher Dresser argued that “the best Japanese art consists of perfect sketches and not of works which we call finished”.³¹ Overall, the Western interest in traditional Japanese art and culture converged with the Meiji nationalistic shift, leading to the rediscovery of Japan’s antiquity. As Karatani Kōjin put it, “it was from within a Western framework that Japan began to search for marks of local distinction”.³²

28. Wright 1905.

29. Wright 1905.

30. Gonse 1883. This book had a significant influence on the Impressionist movement.

31. Dresser 1882: 319. In late nineteenth century Europe, the sketch (*esquisse* in French) was a central issue in the artistic debate: the degree of finish associated with art was going through a process of reconsideration.

32. Kojin 2001: 43.

Ho-o-den

In 1892 – in the middle of the controversy over the assimilation of European architecture – Japan was invited to build a pavilion at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As Japanese ambassador Gozo Tateno explained, the Fair was Japan’s formal introduction to the West – a unique opportunity to “prove that Japan was a country worthy of full fellowship in the family of nations”.³³ Only one year had passed from the Nōbi earthquake and the Japanese architectural community was still divided: was the pavilion supposed to represent Japanese architecture (temple style) or was it supposed to imitate the style of the Western “modern” nations?

The government entrusted architect Kuru Masamichi, a pupil of Josiah Conder and a connoisseur of European architecture, with the task of designing the pavilion. Even though he was part of a highly westernized élite, Kuru Masamichi decided to go in the opposite direction and designed a building based on Japanese forms, materials and techniques. Not only he created a timber pavilion, but he also modelled it after one of the most ancient wooden structures in Japan, the Ho-o-do temple of Uji.³⁴ This temple, designed in the eleventh century by Yorimichi Fujiwara, was considered the prototype of traditional timber construction in Japan. The message could not be clearer: Japan wanted to exhibit its own architectural style, playing the “revival game” with its own past, not with the past of the Europeans.

Moreover, Kuru Masamichi wanted to challenge the Western bias toward wooden construction, displaying a replica

33. Tateno 1893: 42.

34. Kakudzo 1894: 181.

of a timber building that had existed for almost a thousand years: the link between timber and ephemerality was radically criticized. In an article entitled “Fletcher and the Unseen Ho-o-den,” Paul Walker discusses the omission of the Japanese pavilion from Banister Fletcher’s analysis of the World’s Fair: being a non-European building with a millenary historical background, the Ho-o-den, if acknowledged, would have undermined Fletcher’s distinction between Western historical styles and non-historical idioms from the rest of the world.³⁵ The historical lineage of Japanese architecture subverted the Western scheme and allowed Japan to build its national identity on thousand-year-old foundations.

The Ho-o-den pavilion – named after the temple of Uji – was built on Wooded Island, detached from the rest of the Exposition. The building consisted of a central hall with two identical structures situated on each side: the arrangement of the pavilion was intended to represent the head, body and wings of a phoenix (*ho-o*).³⁶ The phoenix, a mythological creature capable of rising from its own ashes, was a symbol of the rebirth of Japanese architecture after the westernizing policies of the early Meiji period. Furthermore, the decision to name the pavilion Phoenix Hall reveals an understanding of architecture as a temporal entity – an object associated with a life cycle.

Defined by an exposed skeleton of wooden beams and columns, the pavilion was characterized by a fluid relationship between the open, interior space and its natural surround-

35. Walker 1999: 145-151.

36. Karr 2013: 18.

ings. The interiors constituted a sort of pattern-book of authentically reconstructed period details selected from various eras of Japanese history. In the first room, the Fujiwara epoch (ninth to twelfth centuries) was represented with features inspired by the temple of Uji and the Imperial Palace of Kyoto. In the second space, the Ashikaga style (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) was depicted in a room modelled after the Silver Pavilion of Kyoto. In the central hall, the Tokugawa age (seventeenth century to the Meiji Restoration) was illustrated by a suite of rooms copied from the Edo Castle.³⁷ Described by David Stewart as an “academic exercise in revivalism”, this composition was aimed at exhibiting to the world the long historical trajectory of the Japanese nation.³⁸ The interior decorations and the exposition objects (carefully selected by the Imperial Museum and the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts) reinforced this political message, presenting Japanese art as a pure, millenary art liberated from the “deteriorating European influence”.³⁹

The Ho-o-den was inaugurated in May 1893 with a solemn dedication ceremony. Two photographs of the event – taken by Professor Halsey Ives, Chief of the Department of Fine Arts at the Columbian Exposition – have survived to the present day, providing a number of noteworthy details. The foreground of

37. Stewart 1987: 71.

38. Stewart 1987: 69.

39. Walton 1893: 88. Most of the objects exhibited in the Ho-o-den were modern replicas of ancient artefacts. Many of these replicas – such as a sculpture of a Buddhist guardian figure and a painting on silk representing a courtesan – had been slightly modified in order to match the idea of *Japaneseness* that the Western audience had in mind.

both pictures is defined by a group of men with traditional Japanese clothes: the white cross on their coats certifies their status as master carpenters.⁴⁰ In the centre of the first image, we can see a man in Western raiment, with spectacles and a top hat: he is the architect, Kuru Masamichi, the only member of the Japanese delegation dressed like a Westerner. Several hundred invited guests were in attendance, including government officials, prominent politicians, officers of the Exposition and businessmen.⁴¹ In the first photograph, we can also see Colonel Edmund Rice, Commandant of the Columbian Guards, standing in the corner of the veranda in the company of Thomas O’Niell, the Mayor’s Secretary.⁴²

The difference in the styles of clothing is very telling. Kuru Masamichi’s outfit reveals that architecture was regarded as a Western profession: in fact, before the Meiji Restoration and the arrival of British teachers, the professional figure of the architect did not exist in Japan. The garments of the workmen, on the other hand, illustrate the rooting of carpentry within traditional Japanese building practice: the professional figure of the *daiku* (master carpenter) had always been at the core of the discipline, developing over the centuries an apparatus of symbols and a distinctive uniform. The contrast of the two styles of clothing was emblematic of the compromise that Japan was struggling to find between the assimilation of Western models and the development of a Japanese identity.

These photographs also call for a series of reflections on the construction methods chosen for the Japanese pavilion.

40. Ives 1893: 199.

41. 1893. “In Japan’s Temple: Building of the Nation Is Dedicated to Fair Uses.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* April 1.

42. Ives 1893: 199.

Contrary to most foreign pavilions at the World's Fair, the Ho-o-den was not built *in situ*: the structure was designed and prepared in Tokyo, shipped to San Francisco and then transported by rail to Chicago.⁴³ When the pavilion arrived in the winter of 1892, the master carpenters seen in the picture assembled it with traditional hand tools under the supervision of Kuru Masamichi. The components of the building had been prefabricated by a company called Nippon Doboku Kaisha, the first incorporated construction company in Japan.⁴⁴ As a government sponsored company, Nippon Doboku Kaisha quickly developed a monopoly on government contracts and thrived for several years until bidding became open to public participation. Interestingly, this company constructed also Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel (1916-1923) – a building explicitly inspired by the Ho-o-den. The company was located in Fukagawa, a city at the mouth of Tokyo Bay known as the “place of wood”: in this location, the timber coming from the mountains was milled and turned into construction lumber.⁴⁵ The Fukugawa “lumberyards” had been depicted by Hiroshige in the 1850s as an enchanted landscape with snow-covered tree trunks floating down a crystalline river. The involvement of Nippon Doboku Kaisha in the project for the Chicago pavilion speaks to the tension inherent in the transformations of the late Meiji period: on one hand, the desire to return to a traditional wooden architecture, reviving Hiroshige's iconography; on the other hand, the drive toward indus-

43. Karr 2013: 10.

44. Frampton and Kudo 1997.

45. Karr, R. “The Phoenix Pavilion: Prefabrication Begins in Fukagawa.” *The Garden of the Phoenix*. www.gardenofthephoenix.org (accessed June 5, 2014).

trialization and the emergence of corporations capable of mass-producing lumber components as fast as their Western counterparts. The exhibition of traditional construction techniques, hand tools and clothing performed by the carpenters in Helsey Ives's photographs was essentially a *mise-en-scène*, since the components they assembled had been pre-fabricated in the industrial facilities of a major corporation, modelled after Western companies.

Plaster Exhibition

In 1892, Daniel Burnham – the director of the Columbian Exposition's works – sent a letter to Frederick Olmsted, praising the design of the Japanese pavilion: “They propose to do the most exquisitely beautiful things and desire to leave the building as a gift to the city of Chicago”.⁴⁶ In fact, the Ho-o-den was the only building meant to exist beyond the Fair's closing – the only permanent pavilion at the Columbian Exposition. The other buildings were temporary structures made of the most ephemeral and cheap materials. Described by John Cawelti as “counterfeit marble,” the predominant material of the so-called White City was a mixture of plaster, jute fibres and horsehair.⁴⁷ As Burnham pointed out, the buildings of the Fair were “made of materials substantial enough for one season, but as inexpensive as possible”.⁴⁸ In the guidelines sent to the foreign governments and the individual American states, Burnham specified that

46. Burnham, D. *Letter to Frederick Olmsted*. February 5, 1892. Burnham Papers, Chicago Art Institute Library.

47. Cawelti 1968: 343.

48. Burnham 1989: 36.

The architecture of the pavilions should be dignified in style, formal rather than picturesque. Oriental designs should be avoided as such motives will naturally be employed by the Oriental nations in the erection of their buildings. [...] The natural resources of each state can be drawn upon to furnish the material for its own pavilion.⁴⁹

The formal and stylistic characterization of the pavilions was Burnham's main concern, while the material quality was a secondary issue, determined only by economic considerations. In this context, the Japanese pavilion was an anomaly: the ideological value given to the material (wood), the integration of form and structure, and the search for permanence were completely alien to the culture of the World's Fair.

By the end of 1896, the other buildings had all disappeared: only the Ho-o-den survived the "creative destruction" that took place in the aftermath of the Exposition, remaining active for more than sixty years.⁵⁰ After the Exposition's closing ceremony, an estimated 10,000 "relic hunting vandals" went on a rampage through the fairgrounds removing all kinds of objects and numerous pieces of buildings.⁵¹ The structures that were not disassembled and taken away as souvenirs were claimed by numerous fires that plagued the site, both by arson and by accident.⁵² The memory of the World's Fair was a matter of souvenirs and relics: it had nothing to do with material permanence.

While the Nōbi earthquake was still fresh in the memory of the Japanese delegates, the Chicago Exposition showed that

49. Burnham 1892: 25.

50. Graff 2012: 705. Rebecca Graff argues that the dismantlement of the World's Fair was driven by a Schumpeterian logic of "creative destruction."

51. 1984. "Vandals at the Fair." *Chicago Daily Tribune* January 8.

52. The Ho-o-den survived these fire thanks to its protected position on Wooded Island.

fire did not represent a threat to the durability of architecture, but rather the *condicio sine qua non* for a new beginning. It was the opposite of what the Japanese delegation was expecting: the narrative promoted by Conder and his collaborators about the permanence and the solidity of European masonry architecture came into collision with the reality of a Victorian city made of plaster and designed to last only for a few months. As noted by Claude Bragdon, “the Fair was a simulacrum: the buildings, the statues and the bridges were not of enduring stone, but of lath and plaster”.⁵³ The architectural style that Japan had regarded as a model of strength and permanence for thirty years, was reduce to a *trompe l’oeil* – a monumental scenography made of fragile plaster shells.

The “Potemkin effect” of the Exposition later became the inspiration for many architectural and urban planning experiments based on simulation and theming: it was appropriate and prophetic that one of the common labourers who worked to build the World’s Fair was a man named Elias Disney, the father of Walt Disney.⁵⁴ As critic Montgomery Schuyler put it, “no one mistook the architecture of the Exposition for real architecture, pertinent to the needs of modern America”.⁵⁵ The buildings were not made of brick and stone, but rather of the material with which

53. Claude Bragdon is quoted without attribution by Lewis 1983: 44.

54. Hines 2009: 74. The phrase “Potemkin effect” is used to describe a fake object, built only to impress. According to the story, Grigory Potemkin – governor of Russia’s southern provinces in the late eighteenth century – erected fake settlements along the banks of the Dnieper River in order to fool Empress Catherine II during her visit to Crimea.

55. Schuyler 1894: 291.

fashion designers created corsets, doctors made orthopedic casts and stage designers built the first cinematographic sets: a material meant to be temporary. For Burnham, the pavilions only had to “suggest permanent buildings”. Japan’s desire to showcase the permanence of its wooden architecture collided with the spirit of the World’s Fair – a dream of ephemerality.⁵⁶

The only permanent component of the Exposition was buried underground, in the massive system of metal pipes and conduits that supported the White City. Recent archaeological excavations promoted by the University of Chicago have brought to light the permanent infrastructural city buried beneath the temporary city.⁵⁷ This underground city was made of sturdy materials and featured the most cutting-edge technologies available in the late nineteenth century. Time and money were not invested in the architecture of the Exposition, but rather in the infrastructural system that supported it. As Japan was striving to exhibit the durability of its architecture, the World’s Fair shifted the problem of permanence from architecture to its infrastructural underpinnings.

The divergence between the Japanese pavilion and the architecture of the World’s Fair is clearly illustrated in Halsey Ives’s photographs of the dedication ceremony. In order to emphasize this gap, Ives manipulated the two pictures and drew the silhouette of the Illinois building in the background. In reality, the Illinois building was not in that position and, at the time the photo was taken, the dome had

56. Burnham, D. *Letter to Elmer Lawrence Corthell*. October 4, 1890. Burnham Papers, Chicago Art Institute Library.

57. Graff 2011.

not been completed. The World's Fair reduced architecture to pure image, dematerializing the architectural object and creating a language based on illusion and deception. Once materiality was taken out of the equation, the Illinois building could be easily turned into a two-dimensional image, whose value did not reside in its adherence to reality but rather in its symbolic message.

The reason behind this photoshopping *ante litteram* was politically charged. The pictures, in fact, were part of Ives's *Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition*, the official publication of the Department of Fine Arts aimed at illustrating to the world the "marvels" of the Fair.⁵⁸ By airbrushing the dome of the Illinois building, Ives wanted to exhibit the *grandeur* of American modern architecture, suggesting the superiority of his national style over Oriental architecture. The hierarchical relationship suggested by the juxtaposition of the Illinois building and the Ho-o-den was reiterated in the second picture by the rigid separation between the Japanese workmen and the American delegation. The guests, in fact, were represented standing on the veranda and turning their backs on the Japanese master carpenters, who stood on a lower level with a deferential posture.

These photographs show how architecture (or, to be more accurate, the representation of architecture) was employed as a political tool – an instrument aimed at establishing a nation's voice and at rendering delirious the voice of the "Other".⁵⁹ Architecture and nation-building became in-

58. Ives 1893: 6.

59. Derrida 1982: 84.

terlocked at the Columbian Exposition, turning the fair-ground into a stage in which both Japan and the United States could construct and exhibit their identity before the eyes of the world.

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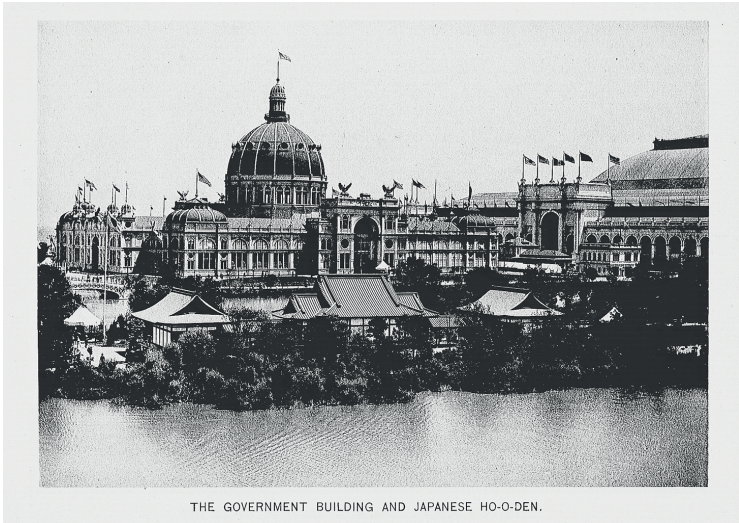


Image 1: Postcard of the Columbian Exposition, with the Ho-o-den in the foreground (1893)
Image 2: Photographic view of the Ho-o-den (1893)
Source: Japan's National Diet Library

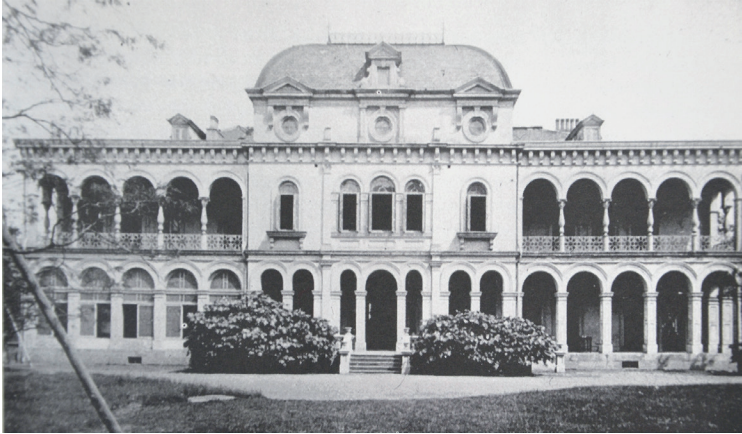


Image 3: Photographic view of Josiah Conder's Rokumeikan building, Tokyo (1883)
Image 4: Photographic view of Tsumaki Yorinaka's Nihon Kangy bank, Tokyo (1899)
Source: Japan's National Diet Library

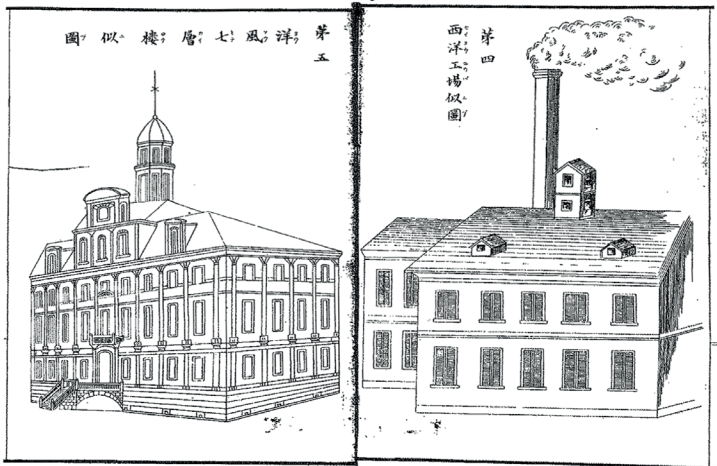
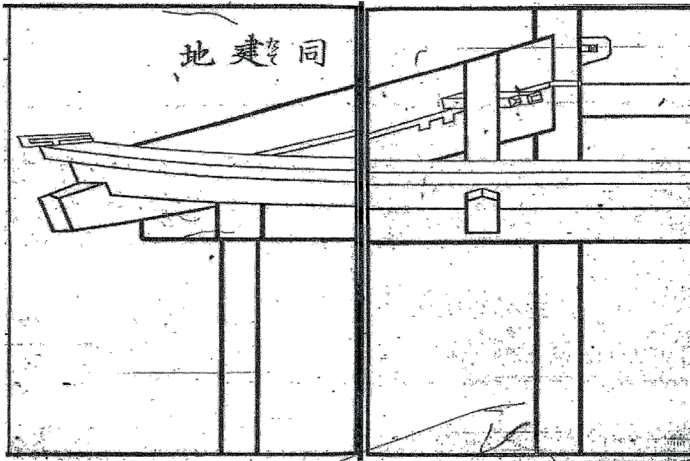


Image 5: Image from a Meiji book: Traditional wooden roof.

Source: Saruta Chōji, *Daiku Shoshin Zukai* (1883)

Image 6: Image from a Meiji book: Western-style building typologies.

Source: Tanaka Kunishiro, *Wayō Kenchiku Daisho Haya Wari Hi Den* (1902)

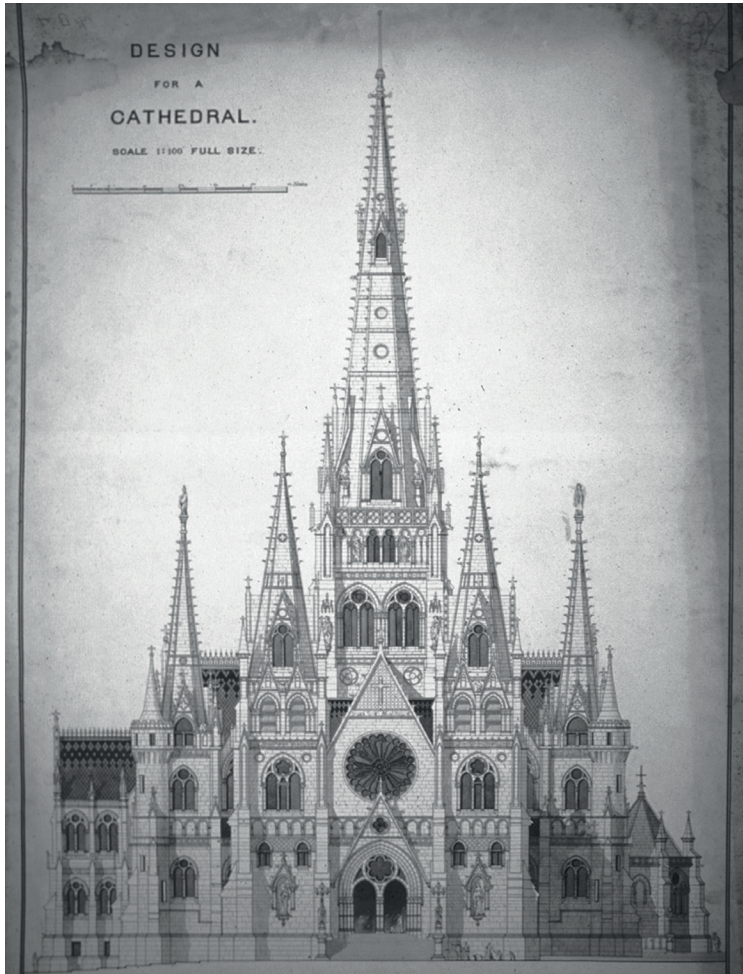


Image 7: Itō Chuta, Graduation Project at the Tokyo College of Technology (1892)
Source: Archives of Tokyo University



Images 8 - 9: Photographs of the effects of the Nōbi earthquake
Source: John Milne and Ogawa Kazumasa, *The Great Earthquake of Japan* (1892)

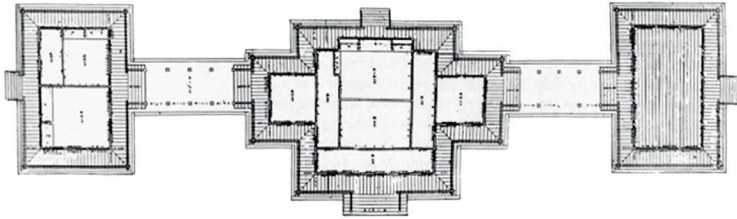


Image 10: Plan of the Ho-o-den

Image 11: Photograph of the interior of the Tokugawa room in the Ho-o-den's central hall

Source: *The Inland Architect and News Record* (1893)



Images 12 - 13: Halsey Ives's photographs of the dedication ceremony of the Ho-o-den
Source: Halsey Ives, *The Dream City: A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Exposition* (1893)



Image 14: Hiroshige, *The Fukagawa Lumberyards* (1856)



Images 15 - 16: Photographs of the White City one year after the Fair's closing (1894)
Source: Chicago Driehaus Musuem, Digital Archives