

# From the Tea House Reinterpretation to the Notion of Inhabiting

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## Introduction

Some Japanese architects started to reinterpret the tea house; minimal building typical Japanese where the tea ceremony takes place. The book entitled *The contemporary tea house* (2007) is the first publication about this topic, and presents the realizations created by Arata Isozaki 磯崎新 (1931-), Terunobu Fujimori 藤森照信 (1946-), Tadao Andô 安藤忠雄 (1941-), Kengo Kuma 隈研吾 (1954-) and Hiroshi Hara 原広司 (1936-)<sup>①</sup>. In this book, the Koboran (1974) designed by Arata Isozaki is identified as the first “contemporary tea house” i.e. a tea house reinterpreted by contemporary architects. These reinterpretations are based on a standpoint vis-à-vis “traditional tea house” and bring forward some interesting reflections, including some thoughts about the notion of “inhabiting” i.e. to live a space, an environment or a world, conducive to life and its development.

In this article, the potential link between these reinterpretations of the tea house and the notion of “inhabiting” are examined through a literature review and series of interviews conducted in 2019 in Japan<sup>②</sup>. The interviewees were people who are actively engaged in Japanese culture, being among them the renowned architect-historian Terunobu Fujimori.

## The renewed interest on the tea house

The tea ceremony is an essential part of the Japanese culture. All the interviewees showed a strong interest in this ceremony, even though they do not practice it themselves. Some even believe that it is too “complicated” and “too formal.” Judging by the thoughts and ideas gathered during the interviews, the reception of contemporary reinterpretations of the tea house within the Japanese society could seem contradictory. While some participants stated that a tea house cannot be contemporary for others, these reinterpretations could make the tea ceremony accessible to a wider public. Furthermore, one of the sources believed that a contemporary tea house would bring this ceremony closer to the daily life while continuing to create an “extra-ordinary world.” This point was an important

① Arata Isozaki, Tadao Andô, Terunobu Fujimori, *The contemporary Tea House*, Kodansha International, Tokyo. New York. London, 2007

② The interviews were conducted in Japanese, English and even French



**Fig. 1** (left-above) Kenshu-an. Room of 12 mats, inspired by Bosen tea house of Koho-an. Taken by the author.

**Fig. 2** (left-below) Kenshu-an. Room of 4.5 mats and one *daijime* (shorter tatami for the tea master), inspired by Mittan tea house of Ryuko-in. Taken by the author.

**Fig. 3** (right) Kenshu-an. View of the outside. Taken by the author.

characteristic to define a tea house for the majority of the interviewees.

The number of reinterpretations of tea houses has increased over time, although the total amount remains low. Only twenty-two are presented in the book *The contemporary tea house* over three decades. Half of them were built for private individuals, including the architects themselves. Others were made for museums, gardens, exhibitions, and restaurants, which make it possible for people to see them. Also, tea houses built for museums can either be used during special events or exposed as pure artistic objects.

For instance, the Ceramic Park MINO (2002) designed by Arata Isozaki, has a tea house called Kenshu-an designed by the same architect (fig.1-3). Here, its integration in the program comes from the willingness of the center to create a space which allows to contextualize ceramics within the tradition of the tea ceremony. At the same time, the center wanted to promote the tea ceremony by offering a space where anyone could practice it, since nowadays a few Japanese own a tea house. By using it, the museum's staff came to the conclusion that the tea ceremony is still attractive for many people although less and less people know how to practice it<sup>③</sup>.

③ Interview of the 21<sup>st</sup> February 2019

Nevertheless, not all tea houses are made to promote the tea ceremony. For example, in the Akino Fuku museum (1997) in Shizuoka, a tea house was built in 2018 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the museum opening. Both buildings were designed by the same architect, Terunobu Fujimori. In this case, the tea house called Bōkurō, is a commemoration object that was not built to be used, even when its characteristics allow it. According to the museum staff, the main interest of this small construction comes from the fact that it was designed by



**Fig. 4** (left) : Inside, Bôkurô tea house has a hearth to be used and two big windows to create views. Taken by the author.



**Fig. 5** (right) : The Bôkurô tea house from the outside. Taken by the author.

4 Interview of the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2019

Fujimori<sup>4</sup>. Although, most of the tea houses created by this architect were made for private individuals who use it for tea ceremony, he also designed several ones for museums. Questioned about those, Fujimori indicated that they are in fact, more related to an art piece than to a tea house<sup>5</sup>. Despite the difference in the final end of these creations, these art-pieces, as well as the private owned ones, maintain the traditional tea house as their reference.

5 Interview of the 11<sup>th</sup> Août 2019

## Tea House redefinitions

Each of the architects who have designed contemporary tea houses had different motivations and approaches in their constructions. For example, Arata Isozaki designed this type of building with a traditional interiors by using some contemporary materials and original elements. Indeed, the architect wanted to harmonize traditional and contemporary elements and materials, especially in the Uji-an tea house (1992) located in Tôkyô. For Tadao Andô, the tea house redefinition is a way to confront abstraction and representation, principle which he followed in his own three tea houses in Ôyodo, Ôsaka<sup>6</sup>. Or for Kengo Kuma, it is first of all a means to call into question the contemporary world and its main material: the concrete, which he deems too strong for the human body. Through the tea house redefinition, Kuma wanted to create a building as fragile as the human body<sup>7</sup>. Despite these different approaches, all architects invariably refer to Sen No Rikyû 千利休 (1522-1591), the tea master who took the tea ceremony and its architecture to its most refined expression.

6 Isozaki, Andô, Fujimori, 2007, p.58

7 *Ibidem*, p.108

This reference is expressed by an attempt to return to Rikyû's spirit and philosophy through a contemporary approach. Indeed, with the first great tea masters until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the architecture of the tea house experimented rapid changes and original spatial systems appeared. It was a stage of spatial experimentation of a minimal space that ended after Rikyû's death, when, through the establishment of tea schools, the tea ceremony and its architecture became

more rigidly codified under Rikyū's style. After this, few tea masters made changes to the form of tea house, being later evolutions more about finishing taste than spatial innovations. A need to overcome this codification of the tea ceremony and its architecture lay behind some of the contemporary reinterpretations of the tea house. For example, Arata Isozaki wrote about a sketch of one of his reinterpretations presented in 1983 in New York:

Such a seemingly strange “arrangement” is not merely representative of the present age, but an expression of the original spirit of the tea ceremony, transmitted from the sixteenth century. I regret that nowadays the tea ceremony has lost the creative flexibility on which it was founded, and remains only an empty formality. There are, nonetheless, still many lovers of tea ceremony, and if some of them understand its initial spirit, the meaning of my folly will be perceived<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Arata Isozaki, in. Anthony Vidler (dir), Catalog *FOLLIES Architecture for the Late-Twentieth-Century Landscape*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1983

By positioning himself within the tradition that follows of the original spirit of tea ceremony of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Isozaki brings back the freedom to experiment with the space destined to this ceremony but by keeping in touch with tradition.

The architect Sutemi Horiguchi 堀口捨己 (1895-1984) already expressed a distinction between the tea ceremony and its architecture in 1936. Even if he defined the tea house as “an architectural equipment for the tea ceremony”<sup>9</sup>, the architect explained that its architecture can be studied on its own, detached of the tea ceremony, with the condition of having a good understanding of it. Rejecting the ways to understand the tea ceremony of his time, Horiguchi proposed to

<sup>9</sup> In his text *chashitsu no shisōteki haikei to sono kōsei* 茶室の思想的背景とその構成 (the ideological context of tea house and its composition) published in 1936. Horiguchi Sutemi 堀口捨己, Sōtei. Kenchiku to chanoyu no kenkyū 草庭・建築と茶の湯の研究 (Tea garden. Architecture and tea ceremony study), Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo, 1968 (1948), p.35, translated by the author.



Fig. 6 Uji-an. View of the outside. Taken by the author.

⑩ *Ibidem*, p.54, translated by the author

understand it as artwork, not any kind of art, but “an art of life’s composition” (*seikatsu kôsei no geijutsu* 生活構成の芸術)<sup>⑩</sup>.

This understanding of the tea ceremony provides the tea house with a potential link to the Japanese lifestyle and the notion of “inhabiting,” which is what some contemporary reinterpretations intend to examine. That is the case for example of the tea houses designed by Fujimori, who studied Sutemi Horiguchi’s theory to build his own tea houses.

## The tea house and the notion of inhabiting

Interviews realized during the year 2019 reveal an ambiguity in the relation between the tea house and the notion of “inhabiting.” All the people interviewed underline a possible link between this notion and the tea house. Nevertheless, they believe as well that this building cannot be considered as a “space of inhabiting,” defined during the interview as a space which calls into question the same notion of “inhabiting,” confronts individuals to it and makes them reflect upon this notion.

The link between the notion of “inhabiting” and the tea house was established by people familiarized with the tea ceremony and architecture only through the fact that the tea ceremony is based on the Japanese way of life, on a specific daily act, the one to drink tea. According to one of the participants who owns a tea house designed by Terunobu Fujimori, this minimal building is related to the Japanese way of living and the tea is a link between the daily life and this other world which is the tea house<sup>⑪</sup>. For another participant who is a trained architect and who had practiced the tea ceremony for five years, the tea house could be considered as the essence of the Japanese way of life because it defines a lot of its aspects<sup>⑫</sup>. This link between the tea house and the notion of “inhabiting” does not appear in the building itself but through the tea ceremony according to Sutemi Horiguchi’s understanding: “an art of the life’s composition”. Nevertheless, participants dispelled the idea to define tea house as a “space of inhabiting,” because this space creates another world, extraordinary, detached of the one of the daily-life, and detached of the housing. According to Fujimori, the link between tea house and the notion of “inhabiting” is, first and foremost, symbolic.

⑪ Interview of the 19<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

⑫ Interview of the 21<sup>st</sup> February

Interviewed about the link between the tea house and the notion of “inhabiting,” Fujimori answered that it could be based on three things: the water for the tea, the fire of the hearth, and the threshold of the house, which is represented in this building by the *nijiriguchi* 躡口 (crawling door). This definition is closely linked with the tea house theory of the architect. Of course, water is a major element of the tea ceremony even present in its name: *chanoyu* 茶の湯 (literally the boiling water of the tea), and even if the guest cannot not see it, he will hear its boiling sound. The two others



**Fig. 7** (left) : the *nijiriguchi* of Ku-an tea house, the first tea house designed by Terunobu Fujimori. Taken by the author.

**Fig. 8** (center) : the Hearth of Takasugi-an tea house, the most famous tea house of Terunobu Fujimori. Taken by the author.

**Fig. 9** (right) : the table and the earth in Soratobu dorobune tea house of Terunobu Fujimori. Taken by the author.

elements mentioned by Fujimori, the fire and the threshold, are also present in the five points through which the architect defines the essential characteristics to conceive a tea house presented in his book entitled *The tea house's instruction of Terunobu Fujimori* (2012)<sup>15</sup>. These five points inherited of Rikyû, are respectively: the creation of a narrow minimal space, the presence of a hearth, the *nijiriguchi* —which in Fujimori's architecture is located on the floor —, some freedom in the design, and a construction build with natural materials. Moreover, the three first points were already present as the main characteristics of a tea house made by the architect in 2007, particularly the hearth and the *nijiriguchi*, elements that allow to make the link with the notion of “inhabiting<sup>14</sup>.” It is necessary to mention that Fujimori later adds other characteristics to conceive a tea house, as a view to the outside, a table if it is needed, the abandonment of *tokonoma* 床の間 (alcove for art piece), and the abandonment of other traditional Japanese elements as *shôji* 障子 (translucent sliding door made of Japanese paper), *tatami* or bamboo. Fujimori explained that he decided to abandon these traditional elements, including the *tokonoma*, because they are too strongly associated with the Japanese culture and makes people stop thinking about the quality of the space<sup>15</sup>.

The French geographer Augustin Berque (1942-) examined this link between tea house and the notion of “inhabiting” in his book *History of the ideal habitat*<sup>16</sup> translated in Japanese as *risô no sumai* 理想の住まい<sup>17</sup>. As Fujimori, Berque qualified this link as symbolic because this type of building is not a habitat, although it can be a model for it. When reflecting upon the tea house and its origin on the hermitage practice, Berque came to define an “essence of the inhabiting<sup>18</sup>” through these words: “Faraway of the worldly agitation, this hermitage quietness would be the essence of the inhabiting”<sup>18</sup>. The tea house

<sup>15</sup> Terunobu Fujimori, *Fujimori Terunobu no chashitsugaku* 藤森照信の茶室学 (The tea house's instruction of Terunobu Fujimori), Rikuyosha, Tokyo, 2012, p.237

<sup>14</sup> Arata Isozaki, Terunobu Fujimori, Tadao Ando, 2007, p.80

<sup>15</sup> Terunobu Fujimori, 2012

<sup>16</sup> Augustin Berque *Histoire de l'habitat idéal* (History of the ideal habitat), Félin, Paris, 2010

<sup>17</sup> Augustin Berque, *Risô no sumai* 理想の住まい (The ideal habitat), Kyoto University Press, Kyoto, 2017

<sup>18</sup> In French: *l'essence de l'habiter*, in Japanese *sumau koto no honshitsu* 住まうことの本質

<sup>19</sup> Augustin Berque, 2010, p.177

creates a different world, as a hermitage in the heart of the city, which represents the society and culture, according to Berque's theory. The tea garden makes the transition from the daily world to this other one and the *nijiriguchi* is the culmination of this transition.

However, the tea house does not take place only in the tradition of the hermit hut. It is also a result of the space to drink tea and to speak about politics called *kakoi* 囲 (enclosure) of the Japanese style called *shoin* 書院 (formal style of residential architecture), a representation of the highest culture. The tea house promoted and generalized some spatial systems inherited of this architectural style, as the *tokonoma* and other tatami-mats, which are the elements abandoned by Terunobu Fujimori.

Questioned about the "essence of inhabiting," in this occasion without reference to the tea house, Fujimori would define it through three points in a precise order: firstly, the water, secondly the fire, and finally the shelter. The shelter could be understood as lodging, but also as a hermit cabin, or even a tea house in this other world where the tea ceremony represents a metaphor of life. Considering that the hermitage practice could be seen as a way to leave the individual's own world and its worldly aspects, the tea house as a metaphor of this practice could allow the individual to achieve the same goal through the garden and the *nijiriguchi*. This small entrance leads guests to bow in order to enter the space of the tea ceremony, which is a metaphor of the abandonment of the strong hierarchy of the daily world for the new etiquette of the tea ceremony where everybody is equal. Fujimori's rejection of the elements judged as too strongly related to the Japanese culture could be seen as a way to abandon permanently all references of the Japanese society. In that case, the tea house could express its potential to examine the notion of "inhabiting."

## Conclusion

In order to redefine the tea house, architects made a philosophical reference to the origin of this building and mainly to Sen No Rikyū's theories in a contemporary way. These reinterpretations are related to their own architectural sense and show a real reflection about the way to redefine tea houses. Some of the redefinitions provide interesting questions, as the one of Terunobu Fujimori, which established a concrete link to the notion of "inhabiting" focusing on some traditional architecture elements and the abandonment of others. It is also possible to find this link in other architects' tea houses, as the experimentations of Kengo Kuma between the human body and the fragile materiality of his realizations, or even as the characteristics of Tadao Andō houses which can be related to the ones of the small building for the tea ceremony. Through these approaches, the tea house can achieve a new potential to reflect upon the notion of "inhabiting."