Perry Holen

Prof Kurita

Man’s Role in Space and Time

Tanizaki discusses the Japanese culture’s fondness for shadows and darkness in his piece, *In Praise of Shadows.* He details that the Japanese revere the darkness for its mystery and softness in their architecture and ideals of beauty. The most sacred rooms in a Japanese temple are those that are tucked the farthest in, away from sources of light. Buildings are built with sweeping low roofs that cast a deep shadow over the foundation. This comes as a shock to most Westerners, who often praise naturally sunlit rooms, filled with a bright white light. The west favors white porcelain dishes while Japanese favor dark lacquered wood. The contrasts are numerous, but hint at a difference in cultural perceptions of time and space. The west sees itself as the master of space and time, molding them to create their ideal setting, while the Japanese choose to exist in a place and find its natural beauty in their mind’s eye.

Tanizaki begins by anecdotally describing his views on lighting in the home he was designing for himself. He shows that the traditional Japanese view of the home contrasts the western opinions on lighting and convenience in a home. Tanizaki rejects most modern appliances and innovations because they refuse to meld with his idea of style. He finds stoves and heaters too noisy for his taste, and thinks they do not match with his gorgeous dark wood and peaceful rooms. He places value on appearance and tradition rather than the Western convenience and ease of living that accompanies appliances and tiling. He would rather stay hot and uncomfortable than have a fan in his room, saying “The snarl and bulk of an electric fan remains a bit out of place in a Japanese room” (Tanizaki 1). Putting his physical comfort after the aesthetics of his home, he fights to keep Japanese traditions alive by installing special lighting and appliances that would not clash with his aesthetic, paying a premium to maintain his sense of traditional wood and paper architecture. Tanizaki admits, “There are those who hold that to quibble over matters of taste in the basic necessities of life is an extravagance, that as long as a house keeps out the cold and as long as food keeps off the starvation, it matters little what they look like” (7). Tanizaki and his traditional fellows are more likely to maintain their taste while in the west it seems that people are much quicker to jump past taste and into utility. Style is still on the mind of a Westerner, but a house without a full range of working appliances would be considered inadequate. Westerners delegate house tasks to appliances like kings do to peasants. They fancy themselves king of their domain, the home, and assume an ownership of the space they live in, whilst Tanizaki exists in his home and wants its natural beauty to shine for itself.

Tanizaki says that the Japanese have even managed to make the toilet a beautiful experience, “Our forebears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance, replete with fond associations of nature” (4). Westerners refuse even to speak of their bathrooms in this fashion, considering the toilet a thing of utility alone. The Japanese find some token of beauty in every part of the home, turning everything around them into poetry. Westerners mold the bathroom how they wish, making it as sanitary and simple to clean as possible. Westerners take control of the space they call home, shaping it to their needs rather than their artistic imaginings.

Even within their ideas of beauty in the home we see differences in the two groups. In his description of Western architecture Tanizaki says, “I understand that in the Gothic Cathedral of the West, the roof is thrust up and up so as to place its pinnacle as high in the heavens as possible—and that herein is thought to lie its special beauty” (17). He follows this with, “In the temples of Japan, on the other hand, a roof of heavy tiles is first laid out, and in the deep, spacious shadows created by the eaves the rest of the structure is built” (17). When the Westerners do choose to focus on the aesthetic, as in their churches, they aim to pierce the heavens and thrust their rooftops as close to the sun as possible. The builders wanted to conquer the sky and show all those around the power and glory of the church. Comparing this to the humility of a Japanese temple built in the shade, there are definite contrasting cultural values at play. The Japanese temple almost hides from the sun, protecting and gathering itself in the shadows to maintain a peaceful but dignified existence. The Westerners display a bold assertion of their mastery of space while the Japanese humbly exist in a space occupied by the nature and sunlight of the world.

This continues with Tanizaki’s descriptions of the placement of Japanese art inside dark alcoves. Dimly lit alcoves lie in the periphery of the room, enshrining pieces of art like scrolls or paintings. The dimly lit spaces often make it difficult to see the art, but Tanizaki explains:

“So dark are these alcoves, even in bright daylight, that we can hardly discern the outlines of the work; all we can do is listen to the explanation of the guide, follow as best we can the all-but-invisible brush strokes, and tell ourselves how magnificent a painting it must be” (18).

Often the art cannot even be made out in its shadowy home in the alcove, but Tanizaki creates in his mind what he imagines an amazing painting should look like. Each viewer molds a different mental picture when shown the mysterious alcove, making their own conclusions of the space. In the alcove, man is not the ruler, but “…we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway” (20). Darkness and the surroundings are the masters, opposite of the Western opinion that man is the master of all locales in his home. Contrarily, Western art is often hung proudly on a wall, with a distinctive framing and lighting arranged to completely illuminate the piece. Western museums showcase art on blank walls with bright overhead lighting as if to display the prominence and ability of their progenitors. Again, the Westerners focus on proudly displaying their artwork, displaying their perceived mastery of art for all. The Japanese however maintain a more subtle relationship with beauty, creating their own beauty within any space. Keeping things unlit removes specificity and allows each viewer to weave beauty into the space. They have a less concrete view of beauty, art, and its showcasing, allowing them to find beauty in any place, whereas Westerners try to create beauty in their homes and buildings with their own two hands.

The classic Latin adage “Carpe Diem” describes the cultural mentality of Westerners that can be gleaned from Tanizaki’s piece. The Westerners take pride in what they do and venture out to carve out their piece of history. This leads to the invention of countless items with great utility, such as the aforementioned home appliances and now ubiquitous electric lighting. Anything that makes parts of their lives easier leaves more time for conquering and mastering the spaces around them. Electric lighting made it possible not only to seize the day, but seize the night as well. As Tanizaki states, “the ever progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot” (30). Regardless of climate and the nature around, the Western home tends to have a grassy lawn with deciduous trees and bushes, consuming water and soil to mold the perfect scenery, whereas “we Orientals tend to seek our satisfactions in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves, to content ourselves with the way things are…” (31). Tanizaki and his traditionalists flow from space to space admiring the surroundings, nobly finding the small beauties in the existence of things, while the Westerner arrives with a fanfare and begins to change and shape things to his liking. Westerners have a specific view of beauty that they try to create in their homes and cities, but Tanizaki says “the quality we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life…” (18). Tanizaki waits and observes, allowing beauty to flow by, watching and examining it as it drifts by, rather than clutching beauty, encasing it and illuminating it on his walls for all to gander. To him, man is just another existence as part of a greater whole, while the western Judeo-Christian *Genesis* implores man to rule over the Earth as his domain.

This comparison can even extend to perceptions of time. The Japanese language lacks a formal future tense in the way that a Western can announce their plans and aspirations for the coming day. The Japanese are part of their fluid version of time, events coming and going occurring as they may, possibly with some human involvement. The Westerner sees a linear model of time and places himself at the helm of time, master of the direction and future just as he is the self-centered master of his space.