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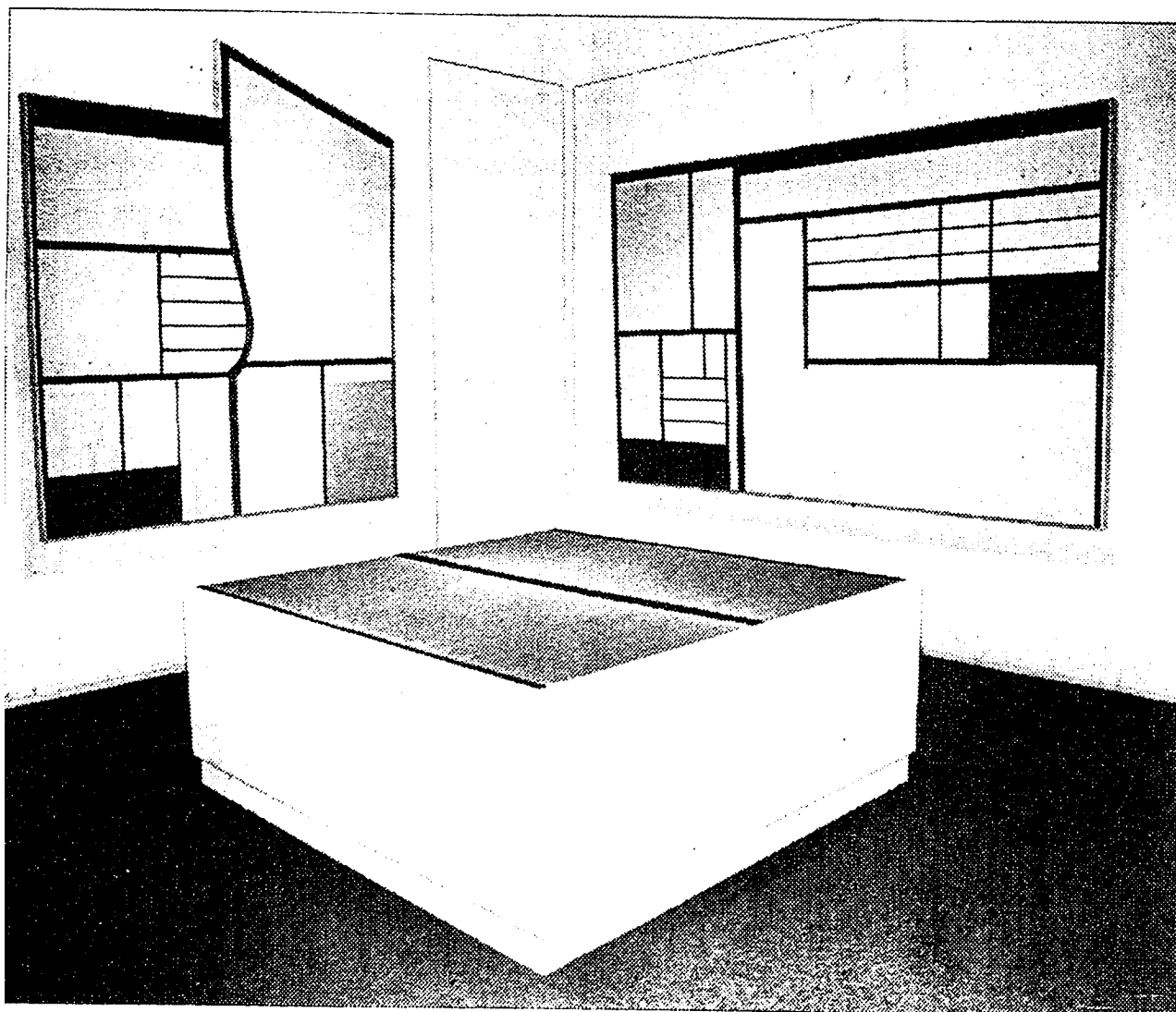
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

On the Japanese Esthetic



An abstraction of a Japanese house by Arata Isozaki

The most fascinating show in New York right now, from this museum goer's point of view, is an exhibition with the rather obscure name of "MA, Space/Time in Japan" at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design at 2 East 91st Street.

Conceived and directed by Arata Isozaki, one of Japan's leading architects, the show contains commissioned contributions from a number of Japan's outstanding artists and designers. A version of the exhibition was shown in Paris last fall, and it has been installed at the Cooper-Hewitt as the opening gun of a national festival of Japanese art and culture called "Japan Today," being held under joint Japanese and American sponsorship in cities across the country this spring.

At the moment, the Cooper-Hewitt's installation is not quite complete, although the main part of the show opened to the public last week on the museum's second floor. An additional, important section will open on the ground floor on April 3. If you go now, be sure to return. The show is so subtle and complex that two visits would be quite in order.

On April 10 another display will be added, of Japanese artifacts from the museum's own design collections, which are apparently bottomless and never fail to surprise and delight. These can be seen through May 20, with the MA show continuing through May 27. A third visit could coincide with the greening of the garden and Central Park.

"MA, Space/Time in Japan" is an ambitious undertaking dealing with a major theme. It is no less than an attempt to explain and illustrate a basic tenet of Japanese culture that is also a primary aspect of the Japanese sensibility — the concept of space and time as a unified idea and experience.

The exhibition takes on the formidable challenge of presenting an abstraction in visual terms. It offers no instant impact of drop-dead treasures. It is a difficult show, which takes a bit of work to understand, and then it rewards the viewer with the unfolding of unfamiliar and infinitely intriguing ideas. If possible, it would be good to get the handsome and informative catalogue in advance, or at least, to read it before that second, or third, visit. Because this is the kind of thoughtful display that opens the mind to new ideas and experiences in a very special and stimulating way.

The concept of *ma*, or space-time, is a commonplace in Japanese culture, but its role as the informing element of all architecture and design, with an influence on all phases of life, is quite alien to the Western mind. For the Japanese, space is measured by intervals, or distances, by the dimensions around its edges rather than by the void inside. Space starts as the distance between two points before it becomes, for example, a room, or a house, or anything else. This is a concept that began in history and mythology when four stakes were joined together with rope, demarcating the space to be occupied by the coming and going of the *kami*, or gods.

Space is also understood in terms of a progression of

connecting points between places; it is a continuous, rather than a static experience. The Japanese idea of space always involves movement for the special perception of its nature as in the crossing of a garden by carefully arranged stepping stones, or a prescribed way of walking through a tea-house to create the greatest awareness of its elements. Both movement and time, therefore, are intrinsic to the Japanese definition of space; thus *ma*, or space-time.

Space that reaches from one point to another is essentially two-dimensional. Walls and floors are visualized as flat planes that ultimately enclose space; the space is not conceived three-dimensionally, or volumetrically, to begin with, as in the West. This means that buildings (or the stage, in theater) are not seen three-dimensionally, or in perspective, but as thin, overlapping planes or discrete parts of a whole, requiring movement from one part to another to experience the total structure or design. (There is a lovely word for this when the parts parallel and overlap each other, *ganko*, or the pattern of flight of wild geese.) If anything, the spatial result is even more subtle and complex for this way of arriving at it.

In addition, space-time includes the idea of bridges, links and connections, as well as edges, transformation and change. These concepts are carried into the broadest kind of philosophy, covering everything from the perception of physical surroundings to the evanescence of life. Space-time is therefore understood both in the most universal and lasting sense and in the most fleeting aspects of experience. And it totally dominates the Japanese esthetic.

Mr. Isozaki has illustrated the theme with examples of architecture, landscape, sculpture and photography, and through many aspects of Japanese life. He includes both a full and half-scale traditional tea-house, and a large photographic essay on the Japanese house. (*Ma* is the place where life is lived; *ma* is also the word for house.)

But he has not restricted himself to high art. He also takes a certain wry delight in showing us how the classic conventions have been corrupted into clichés, and how, with popularization and modern life, they have been turned into incredible kitsch. One group of photographs, on the village and the city, catches an extraordinary mix of new and old that work almost like a series of cultural sight gags — a tiny shrine on the roof of a skyscraper next to the machinery tower that serves as a giant Coca-Cola sign; the *tokonoma*, or niche, for the display of beautiful things traditional to the Japanese house, filled with objects of shattering vulgarity in a rock star's home. We learn that *ma*, which began as a sacred ideal, can accept the most awful paraphernalia of a pragmatic and commercial world.

The heart of the show is the presentation of nine special themes contained within the word *ma*. Among these are *hashi*, which means both an edge and a bridge, connoting division and connection, separation and continuity, expressed here by a glass sculpture created by Shiro Kuramo-

Continued on Page 34

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Japanese Art

to. The knife-sharp, transparent connecting forms are an amazing translation of the conceptual into the visual.

Equally successful is a particularly beautiful sculpture by Aiko Miyawaki, which represents *utsuroi*, or the perception of change, as in the fading flower, the changing season, the shifting of light, the moment when one thing becomes another. These suave, gleaming, faceted and polished brass planes offer constantly new combinations of surface, form and glistening light as the viewpoint alters. Sculpture com-

missioned from Jiro Takamatsu evokes *sabu*, the idea that everything is ephemeral and transient.

Another theme, *michiyuki*, means, literally, a going-along-the-way, and describes the process of movement from one place to another. This is illustrated by stepping stones to the tea-house and a series of new and old maps

tracing the historic trip from Tokyo to Kyoto known as the 53 stages. The Cooper-Hewitt just happened to own a complete set of Hiroshige prints of the "Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido" to key to the maps, showing the landscapes and stopovers along the way.

Still to come on April 3 are "yami,"

the dramatic contrast between the world of light and dark, and life and death, which will consist of part of a Noh stage and a row of Buddhist monks by the sculptor Simon Yotsuya, which are costumed by the fashion designer Issey Miyake. This was the hit of the show in Paris. And there will be a "sacred space," or *himorogi*, staked out with fences, stones and string in the Carnegie conservatory.

By then, the old wisteria should be on its way to this spring's blooming in the garden outside (*utsuroi*), while two cultures blend as part of the Carnegie Mansion's continuing new life (*utsushi-mi*). ■