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Superflat Architecture: Culture and Dimensionality

ABSTRACT

Takashi Murakami's notion of 'superflat' art has specific roots in the western-influenced woodblock prints of nineteenth-century Edo and contemporary applications in the popular culture media of *manga* and *anime*. As applied to architecture, 'superflatness' is suggestive of a sensibility that derives its aesthetic qualities from a mixture of Japanese traditions and western architectural lineages. More intriguingly, the idea of superflat architecture implies a way of perceiving space and dimensionality that is distinctive to contemporary Japanese architects.

Superflat Architecture: Culture and Dimensionality

The world of the future might be like Japan is today — super flat.¹

In his article 'Superflat Architecture and Japanese Subculture', architectural critic Taro Igarashi describes the work of architects such as Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, Hitoshi Abe, Atelier Bow-Wow, Jun Aoki and Kengo Kuma as 'superflat', alluding to a two-dimensionality in their buildings that is based on a particular history of cultural interaction within Japan.² This paper will explore this contention in reference to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art by SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa) and the Tama Art University Library by Toyo Ito. The physical and spatial qualities of these buildings will be related to the notion of 'superflatness'. As will be discussed, in contemporary Japanese art 'superflat' can arguably refer to both a perceived condition of contemporary Japanese culture, and a culturally specific way of seeing and representing space. As both a cultural and a spatial medium, architecture provides a way of exploring this dual definition, and conversely, the consideration of architecture as superflat suggests a way of understanding what might be distinctive about Japanese contemporary architecture beyond the use of readily identifiable motifs and forms.

Igarashi borrows the term 'superflat' from the artist Takashi Murakami, who makes the assertion that 'Super flatness is an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernised'.³ This intriguing statement by Murakami references the history of Western influence on Japan; from the formal borrowings of eighteenth-century artists, through the rapid modernisations of the Meiji Restoration and the traumas of the Second World War, to the globalised present. Murakami writes: 'Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history.'⁴ In such cultural and formal two-dimensionality, Murakami defines an aesthetic that is not just two-dimensional, but which emphasises its intrinsic flatness instead of alluding to depth. As Michael Darling puts it, 'Artistically, Murakami is interested in the formal

1. Murakami, 2000, p. 5.

2. Igarashi, 2000, p. 98.

3. Murakami, 2000, p. 5.

4. Murakami, 2000, p. 5.

connections between the new and the old — stylisation, pictorial flatness, all-over composition.⁵ One of Murakami's points of reference are the Edo-era woodcuts known popularly as *ukiyo-e*. Translated as 'a composite term: *uki* (floating), *yo* (world), and *e* (pictures)', of which *ukiyo* refers to the Buddhist concept of the illusory nature of the experiential world,⁶ *ukiyo-e* art was the product of an eighteenth-century Japan that was beginning to take notice of the West. It was an art that was developed in order to be mass-produced, most popularly as woodblock prints; not for the Tokugawa Shogunate or the Imperial court, but for a growing merchant class, whose wealth was increasing but remained unsubstantiated by status or land tenure.

Traditionally, Japanese artists worked in a Chinese-derived tradition, where isometry had been developed to simulate depth. They drew on particular representational conventions, in which landscape elements of similar size were taken closer to the viewer if they were lower in the composition. This was effective in elongated, vertical scroll paintings, where distant mountains at the top of the image were equal in size to closer ones below. It was also effective in landscapes portrayed on *byōbu*, Japanese folding screens.⁷ An isometric view meant that the viewer could perceive whatever was illustrated; pavilions, natural features, courtyards, castles, equally, without having to stand in a particular position. In fact, the image was best experienced by moving in front of the screen, with the image (literally) unfolding as one did so. *Emaki*, narrative handscrolls, developed this use of pictorial narrative more extensively, allowing for the viewer's gaze to move across a progression of connected images and text.⁸ Murakami argues that this kind of art 'controls the speed of its observer's gaze'.⁹ He connects this perceptual device with that used by contemporary Japanese media, such as *manga*, *anime* and his own 'superflat' art.

In portraying landscapes within the truncated proportions of the woodblock print (34 x 22 cm), this method was less effective and *ukiyo-e* artists began to use new methods, combining traditional methods with new techniques from the West. In terms of landscape depiction, the foremost amongst these was the use of single-point perspective, the first examples of which appear in the mid- to late-1700s in the work of Okumara Masanobu and Utagawa Toyoharu.¹⁰ By the eighteenth century, Karushika Hokusai and Hiroshige Ando and other *ukiyo-e* artists were commonly using single-point perspective in their landscape views. With the viewer's eye unable to drift upwards or sideways for any distance, western perspective was much more effective in representing background depth. However in the foreground, isometric methods of projecting buildings and interiors maintained a level of immediacy and familiarity. Hokusai's *A Treasury of Loyalty* series illustrates this combination of isometric and perspectival projection in several examples. In *Act 6*, an outdoor background is depicted in western perspective while, in the foreground, the interior is done in isometric projection. In *Act 10*, Hokusai combines two perspectival forms: an outdoor scene in western perspective, and an indoor scene, which is shown with its walls and roof removed — a traditional way of viewing detail from

5. Darling, 2001, p. 79.

6. Woodson, 1998, p. 32.

7. Murase, 1971.

8. Murase, 1983.

9. Murakami, 2000, p. 9.

10. Woodson, 1998, p. 38.

above. This latter method, *fukinuki yatai*, also allows for simultaneous viewing of interior and exterior detail. Correspondingly, this technique allows for two narratives to appear within the one picture, suggesting both the tension and the connection between interiority and exteriority.¹¹ As Masako Watanabe has noted in her discussion of the twelfth century *Tales of Ise* and *Tale of Genji emaki* scrolls, *fukinuki yatai* is an ancient pictorial technique in Japan. The depiction of interior space is used to represent the psychological states of depicted characters, while at the same time the isometry of the architectural representation serves to frame, flatten and abstract pictorial space, and so emphasises the continuity between the different compartments of a painting.¹² *Fukinuki yatai* is not the only method used for this effect. Hiroshige's *Asakusa Rice Field During the Cock Festival at Otori Shrine* (one of his *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*) depicts a rice field in the background in Western perspective, which is viewed through an isometrically projected timber screen. So *ukiyo-e* art was not all about perceptual flatness, and sometimes this is noted to question Murakami's assertions.¹³ However, *ukiyo-e* artists' methods of portraying depth in different ways, or their combining perception of depth with depthless flat surfaces within the same composition, suggest the potential for more complex architectural explorations.

While Taro Igarashi also relates how, from the 1960s until the present day, Japanese architects have been influenced by growing up with *manga* and *anime*,¹⁴ his more intriguing suggestion is that Japanese architecture shares dimensional qualities with these media, and — in common with them — a way of seeing space and surface that can be traced back through to *ukiyo-e* artists. Igarashi describes 'the exploration of what might be called the "2.5 dimensional"', in these architects' work.¹⁵ This statement seems absurd at first glance, given architecture's unavoidable three-dimensionality, but Igarashi implies that Japanese architects, like *manga* artists, have particular ways of seeing architectural space that are culturally derived and oriented towards a form of two-dimensionality. The connection between physical and cultural flatness can refer to both the shift between the two- and the three-dimensional in architectural space, and a culturally specific relationship between surface and skin.

In his recent book of collected writings on Japanese architecture in the 2000s, Thomas Daniell posits the two strands of contemporary Japanese architecture to be: 'the visceral and the ephemeral'.¹⁶ He describes 'ephemeral' architects as having 'no interest in the physical, corporeal properties of building', instead, attempting to 'abstract architecture to purely visual, perceptual effects'.¹⁷ He places several of the most celebrated Japanese architects of recent times in this category, including Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA), Hitoshi Abe and Kengo Kuma. This apparently minimalist approach is different from contemporary western minimalists as it is not trying to distil

11. Watanabe, 1998, p. 116.

12. Watanabe, 1998, p. 142.

13. Steinberg, 2004, p. 462.

14. Igarashi, 2000, p. 96.

15. Igarashi, 2000, p. 99.

16. Daniell, 2008, p. 37.

17. Daniell, 2008, p. 38.

architectural form into some kind of structural or material essence; instead, it eschews materiality altogether.

A key example of this architectural approach is illustrated by SANAA's 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa. The building's plan is a perfect circle into which cubic, rectangular and circular gallery spaces on a single plane (there is also a basement gallery) are placed. Each of these internal volumes is separated completely from the others, without any obvious hierarchy or sequential arrangement. The building's exterior perimeter is an almost unbroken plane of curving glass. There is minimal obvious structure to support this perimeter, so the gallery spaces inside can be clearly viewed while walking around the building. These galleries are constructed of no obvious material, their walls being entirely smooth and white. Thus there is also no sense of mass, or articulation. Instead, the apparently randomly arranged planar forms create a sense of space that is uncannily virtual — space as an assemblage of planes. In this way, structure is subsumed in the surface, neutralised, as Juan Antonio Cortés puts it, so that in terms of perception, it seems not to exist.¹⁸

In the wake of western postmodernism, there has been an increased interest in the qualities of architectural skins. However, there remains a prejudicial attitude towards the notion of the surface in the West. This is embodied in the word 'superficial', which describes the literal and ontological emptiness of something whose surface hides a lack within, and indicative of the view that the surface, be it wrapping, skin or container, is merely the covering of the essential thing inside it. The surface, in this estimation, however truthful, obscurant or deceitful about its contents, cannot be productive. However, in both traditional and contemporary Japanese terms, the surface is of considerably more intrinsic value. From the ritual roping of rocks in sacred Shinto places, to the elaborate wrapping of even ordinary retail items, and the artful plating of *kaiseki* meals to the presence of uniformed greeters in department stores, there is a belief that the content of a thing can be determined by its image, impression or surface. As such, the two-dimensional assumes great importance in this way of thinking, as it literally coats whatever it contains in meaning. Dimensionality and content are thus inextricably combined.

This importance can be seen in the quintessential Japanese garment, the kimono. Kimono are renowned for their exquisite designs, which are displayed to best effect when flat. Unlike the Western tailored garment, which requires the three-dimensional shape of a body within it to reveal its form, the flat nature of kimono serves to 'shift the issue of fashion away from shape to the areas of colour, pattern, and decorative detail'.¹⁹ A kimono is constructed of straight lengths of fabric, upon which designs are often non-sequential. On the body, they often seem like fragments of a larger design, the centre of which is beyond its boundaries. Kimono are usually displayed flat, which provides for a fuller appreciation of their design. Unlike a tailored garment, which requires the form of the body underneath it to reveal its design, a kimono modifies the body to suit the cylindrical shape determined by the garment's two-dimensionality. Because of this, when

18. Cortés, 2007b, p. 51.

19. Dalby, 2001, p. 18.

a kimono is worn, it is the body that needs to be modified, in form and in action. Waists are padded, breasts are compressed and legs restricted, so that the fabric can be wrapped round the body to form a perfect cylinder. The kimono could be described as a 2.5-dimensional garment, as it is essentially a flat surface wrapped around the body.

Toyo Ito's Library at Tama Art University has a similar relationship between surface and space, and similarly its structure is minimised. Unlike the Kanazawa Museum, the building's materiality is quite overt (mostly off-form concrete), but expressed in ways that reinforce a sense of flatness. The space of the main library area is dominated by what appear to be arches, curved rows of which criss-cross its space. These are, in actuality, the structure of the building, but they are not true arches. The structure of the building is a simpler system of steel columns and beams. Over this structure, a series of arch-shapes in concrete have been applied, the surfaces of which show a rectangular pattern of seams and circular indentations. This is a common concrete surface effect, as such a pattern is naturally produced by panelled concrete formwork. Here, however, the pattern makes the apparent arches seem more like bites taken out of a continuous surface. When creating a virtual model of a building, texture patterns can be applied to simulate concrete. In a model, these are intended to enhance the realism of the created image. However in a real building, when the patterns left by formwork look like such a texture pattern, they reinforce a sense that the space of the library is not bounded by a solid concrete, but instead made up of layers of insubstantial planes. This effect is reinforced at the building's edges, which are also made up of curving rows of arches. Here, the spaces beneath the arches are filled with glazing panels, which are in turn mounted so as to be flush with the outer edges of the concrete walls. From the outside, glazing and concrete combine to create a flat curving surface. Again, the overall effect is more like a computer rendering brought to life than a physical construction.

It is in the world of computer graphics where the concept of the 2.5-dimensional has most currency. Here, 2.5D is used to describe a number of non-perspectival methods for portraying three-dimensionality on a flat screen. Most of these use some form of isometry in which measurable lines and surfaces are represented at angles to indicate depth. Traditionally, the serial nature of computer games involves a protagonist moving sideways in an essentially linear environment. Where single-point perspective requires far more computing power as it constantly has to be readjusted for the viewer's changing position, isometry allows for a constantly shifting viewpoint without any adjustments except for the unrolling of scenery in linear sequence. A way of seeing is required that involves a steady moving gaze across a scene. Thus, while the overall effect might be curiously flat from a single perspectival viewpoint, its hierarchy of elements based on actual size and perceived importance becomes apparent as the viewer moves across it. Thomas Lamarre describes a similar way of seeing in the anime *Steamboy*, where the background is framed as series of still planes, in front of which animated characters move in their own plane. Lamarre refers to *Steamboy*'s 'diorama style' in which the sensation of depth is achieved through the sensation of movement across a multiplanar surface.²⁰ Without such movement, all the planes collapse into one another, creating not just a flat

20. Lamarre, 2006, p. 121.

image, but one ‘with layers that introduce the possibility of depth and then crush it’.²¹ This is, in a purely visual sense, a superflat image, one that can be loaded with twenty-first century cultural meaning. More specifically, Hiroki Azuma has connected the way images are viewed on a computer with the way that Japanese *otaku* (young people obsessed with computers, *anime/manga* or video games) perceive the world: as series of ‘hyperflat’ simulacra linked by an invisible database, with no overarching narrative.²² The difference between Azuma’s ‘hyperflat’ and Murakami’s ‘superflat’ is that ‘hyperflat’ is purely about structural perception, whereas ‘superflat’ entails broader cultural implications. However, given the architectural interest in the virtual world, further connections could be explored. As Ryue Nishizawa says, ‘computers have brought changes to our feelings and the sense of perception for all of us. That is why you can speak of a relationship between computers and our architecture’.²³

These architects are not unique in their interests. Kengo Kuma is attempting ‘to “defeat” architecture by designing “soft” architecture and, if possible by “erasing” architecture’.²⁴ Jun Aoki has been noted as saying that he sees architectural space ‘only in correlation to physical movement’.²⁵ Further to this, he states:

architecture is merely a surface. You might say that architecture is a building that is enclosed in surfaces. In that sense, the surfaces are a fiction. One of the most important themes in architecture is whether you can make something out of surfaces alone.²⁶

Correspondingly, in the Kanazawa Museum, space is perceived as something experienced in motion, rather than from any fixed point. Speaking of the perimeter of the Kanazawa Museum, Sejima stresses that ‘The important thing is for the outline to be just one line’.²⁷ While the perimeter glazing of the building clearly delineates its interior from its exterior, its complete transparency blurs this distinction. As the building is circumambulated, the combination of uninterrupted bodily movement and the constant ability to see into the interior is akin to the movement of the eye across a narrative *emaki* handscroll painting. Individual galleries are white objects within this transparent space, rectilinear in relation to each other, but not aligned to any obvious grid or proportional relationship. There is also a continuity of perceived space between the inside and outside: an effect assisted by the evenness of lighting and passage widths, plus a determination on the part of the architects to have no ‘end spaces’.²⁸ The isometry of the layout, as perceived from the exterior, gives way to an experiential ‘superflatness’ as the visitor moves through the building’s interior. The lack of materiality adds to the sense of virtuality of the experience. Surfaces wrap the exhibits of the museum within perfect cylinders and cubes, between which several paths can be taken with equal ease. Spatial elements are

21. Lamarre, 2006, p. 136.

22. Azuma, 2009, p. 102.

23. Nishizawa, interviewed by Cortés, 2007a, p. 7.

24. Fujimori, 2007, p. 23.

25. Luna, 2007, p. 14.

26. Aoki, Sawaragi & Maeda, 2006, p. 103.

27. Sejima, interviewed by Cortés, 2007a, p. 13.

28. Sejima, interviewed by Cortés, 2007a, p. 19.

sometimes in sequence, but there is no obvious hierarchy, so spatiality is experienced by the body moving past and between these planes (theoretically at least), with no beginning or end.

The Tama Art University Library's dematerialised structure also makes judgement of scale and depth difficult within its spaces. Sometimes views are set up, but these are distorted, partially by the curving nature of its rows of apparent arches, but also by the way they are articulated so they appear to criss-cross each other like cut-out paper.

The Kanazawa Museum and the Tama Art University Library can both ostensibly be positioned within a globalised neo-modernist idiom of architecture. Both SANAA and Ito have designed buildings outside Japan and, like Murakami, they understand how their work relates to traditions of western origins. In this sense, their architecture is culturally flattened, without obvious formal or material references to Japanese traditional buildings. As such, whether or not their dematerialised, almost ethereal architecture constitutes a culturally particular way of seeing remains open to debate. Nevertheless, the idea that space can be perceptually collapsed into planes and lines can almost be experienced within these buildings, and perhaps 2.5-dimensionality is the best way to describe it. In both buildings, perspectival views sometimes appear, but the apparent randomness of their placement create perceptions of depthlessness that echo the hybrid spatial qualities of both *anime* scenography and *ukiyo-e* landscapes.

Dave Beynon's research broadly involves investigating the social, cultural and compositional dimensions of architecture and urban environments, in particular the adaptation of architectural content and meaning through motifs, rituals and form, and investigation of notions of place, multiculturalism and identity in Australia and south-east Asia. Publications on this theme include the following: 'Architecture, Multiculturalism and Cultural Sustainability in Australian Cities', in The Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability, (2009); 'Refusal of Home: Architecture ex-patriota', in Interstices (2008); and 'Melbourne's Third-World-looking Architecture', in Suburban Fantasies: Melbourne Unmasked (2005). Dave is currently affiliated with the School of Architecture and Building, Deakin University, and is also a practising architect with alsoCAN Architects in Melbourne.

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