

Time by Windows Is Time  
Well Spent

*Practicing Full Emptiness  
in Architecture*

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While writing the first words of this essay I notice how the sunlight moves across my paper. Sitting near the window, looking out over my backyard, I feel the sun warming my skin. A soft breeze moves the branches of the apple tree, allowing a shadow play to emerge. Before it illuminates my paper, the light is diffracted through a glass of intense lemon-ginger-honey tea. For a moment, I find myself on the veranda of an Indian homestay drinking tea while breathing in thin mountain air. I feel the Himalaya massif pressing on my chest. Martin Hartley reminds us that:

...windows have always been gateways for our imagination. We look outwards, then turn inwards to dream. ... be that from the inside of a remote cabin, within the confines of a high-rise, or the interior of a railway carriage. Time by windows is time well spent.<sup>1</sup>

1 Hartley, 'Foreword,' 9.

As you read this essay, I encourage you to move close to your favorite window. If you are already outside, I invite you to visualize a window in front of you as a temporary frame that simultaneously separates you from and connects you to the world. Take a moment to become aware of the change and movement in your environment. Maybe you notice a slight difference in temperature, how the light enters your personal space and makes it somewhat bigger, or how the sun and the wind regulate your hormone levels, shift your mood, and tune your body to the seasonal and cosmic cycles. It is from this reservoir of subtle realities and the awareness of the reciprocity between inside and outside, between mind, body, and environment, that I start writing this essay.

### Practicing *ma*

... between interior and exterior, between artificial and natural, between object and empty space, between truth and falsehood—if we cut open these intermediate zones, give them spatial form and make them into something we can experience, our world will undoubtedly be richer for it.<sup>2</sup>

2 Fujimoto, quoted in Kuma, *Kyokai*, inner cover.

3 The term *Japan-ness* is introduced by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki to refer to the spatial and performative characteristics of Japanese architecture in contrast to the material and constructive characteristics dominant in the Western architectural tradition Isozaki, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, xiv.

4 In the context of Shinto religion the concept of *ma* refers to the *moment* and the *location* the spirits appear from the underworld. During the Edo Period (1603–1868) the concept of *ma* gained broader meaning in architectural practice. It was used to suggest measurement, like the span between beams or the volume of a room, but also to indicate qualitative aspects of the spatial experience. In the 1970s, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki interpreted the concept of *ma* as spacetime by an, in traditional Japanese uncommon, abstraction of the Japanese language in which he centralizes the translation of time as (Greek) *chronos* + *ma* (時間 = 時 + 間) and space as void + *ma* (空間 = 空 + 間).

5 Jameson, 'Perfected by the Tea Masters,' 2.

6 The exhibition *Ma. Espace-Temps du Japon* opened its doors in Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) during the Festival d'Automne in Paris in 1978, after which it traveled throughout Europe and the USA. In 2000 a revised version was shown at the Tokyo University Gallery in Japan.

Over the past years I have been studying *Japan-ness* in architecture by means of artistic and designerly methods in the context of my doctorate research.<sup>3</sup> With this essay I take time to reflect upon my findings and set intentions for my spatial practice yet-to-come. In Japanese architectural practice the space between objects, the void, is not thought to be empty but is experienced as a spatio-temporal interval filled with change and movement. This sense of *full emptiness* is articulated with the Japanese concept of *ma*.<sup>4</sup> American cultural theorist Fredric Jameson explains that *ma* is one of those ancient Japanese phonemes which has no Western equivalent:

The description is as arresting as the space itself, for it includes an account of the corporeal training (the tea ceremony) necessary to perceive the space in the first place, as well as to construct it.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, my research was shaped by active engagement with the Japanese practice. Iterations on (parts of the) exhibition *Ma: Space-Time in Japan*, as conceptualized and designed by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki in 1978 to introduce the concept *ma* to the Euromerican context, formed the starting point of this inquiry.<sup>6</sup> For example, the exhibition included a performance by Japanese Body Weather<sup>7</sup> practitioner Min Tanaka.<sup>8</sup> To study the potentials of this movement practice for architectural fieldwork, I joined multiple courses of Body Weather training. By means of listening, gazing, moving and breathing with change and movement in the environment, I learned how to attune to *ma* and develop my sense of *empathy* beyond the human subject. The exhibition also showed replicas and iterations on the *Teigyoku-ken* Teahouse in Kyoto.<sup>9</sup> In the Japanese tea ceremony, the spatio-temporal experience of *ma* emerges from the carefully crafted reciprocity between the architectural and performative procedures. Every little architectural detail correlates with specific movements in the choreography of the tea ceremony. For example, the location of tea utensils as well as the step sequence in the tearoom—when to cross which edge with which foot—is indicated by, respectively, the number of woven lines from the edge, and the position, of the *tatami* mat.<sup>10</sup>

I decided to visit the teahouse in person, but also to reconstruct it during a residency at Cloud/Danslab in The Hague to carefully study the influence of the architectural surrounding on my body in movement. By bringing the body slightly off balance in such a way that one has to reorient oneself by reaching out to the environment I learned how to vitalize *ma*. I learned how to *animate* architecture, not by assigning a sprinkling of agency to the building or its materials, but by connecting it to the generative fluxes of the world.<sup>11</sup> For example the zigzagging pattern of the unbalancing stepping stones leading towards the entrance door of the teahouse activates my sense for gravitational forces. The small crawl-through door that gives access to the teahouse takes away my regular point of coordination and challenges me to set horizons anew. The carefully designed bamboo pattern that fills the rectangular window in front of the fire diffracts the sun rays in such a way that a colorful light play emerges within the tearoom that allows me to attune to the rotation of the sphere. In other words, while practicing *ma* I learn that the animating force of empathy—or the empathic force of animism—are two sides of the same process in which, rather than unidirectional incorporation, *mutual incorporation* of body and environment becomes key to the architectural experience as well as the design process.<sup>12</sup>

Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling reminds us that the affirmative reconceptualization of nothingness into an affirmative fullness not only means to accept everything just as it is and to live from moment to moment, but also that to exist in *betweenness* means nothing other than to exist as a human being by virtue of one's body.<sup>13</sup> French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced us to the ambiguity of the body as both interior and exterior. In a similar way as the window next to you is—and can be thought of as—both inside and outside, our body holds both an empathic insideness as well as the abstract outsideness from which we can look back upon ourselves. I understand the practice of *ma* as a moving, a constant back and forth, between inside and outside. In a regular architectural practice this happens unconsciously. However, practicing *ma*, that is affirming the fullness of the change and movement within what was considered to

7 *Shintai Kisho* (Body Weather) explores the intersections of bodies and their environments. Bodies are not conceived as fixed and separate entities but are, just like the weather, constantly changing in relation to processes occurring in- and outside of the body. Frank van der Ven, bodyweather. [blogspot.com/search/label/Frank%20van%20de%20Ven](http://blogspot.com/search/label/Frank%20van%20de%20Ven) (accessed March 2020).

8 Min Tanaka, *The Drive Series* (1978).

9 Kanamori Sōwa, Teigyoku-ken Teahouse, c. 1600–1700, Daitoku-ji, Kyoto, Japan.

10 Fehrer, *The Japanese Teahouse*, 73–75.

11 For a more elaborate interpretation of animism beyond traditional anthropological perspectives see: Ingold, 'Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought.'

12 In social interaction theory mutual incorporation explains that empathy does not start as the relation between minds, but rather in a process of reciprocal and coordinated actions between two embodied agents. When mutual incorporation emerges, the self and the other enter into a relatively unpredictable phase guided by the relation itself. It is exactly this new phase, the autonomous (hetero)productive function of the intermediate that has a life of its own and guides the course of action, that Japanese psychiatrist Bin Kimura refers to as *ma*. Upon

learning how to interact with the environment using a new instrument, the body incorporates this instrument into the body schema and brings about a change in sensitivity and perception. This phenomenon is called unidirectional incorporation. However, based on my practice of *ma* in Japanese architecture, *ma* emerges not only as mutual incorporation between social bodies, but also between moving social, technological, and cosmological bodies. It is the diffraction of sunlight through the window frame that allows mutual incorporation between social and cosmological bodies. Tanaka, 'Intercorporeality and Aida,' 337–53.

13 Oosterling, 'Sensus Communis,' 73–75.

14 The term *biotopology* is introduced by Arakawa and Gins as the foundation of science cum art/chitecture, because—following the implication of the embodied mind—the 'science of life' is meant to be a topology.

be an empty window frame, is a way to fully engage with this underexplored reservoir of subtle realities. Practicing with and in the full emptiness of *ma* is a direct engagement with the tiny perceptions that guide our spatio-temporal experience as well as our design process. Therefore, unlike the Post-Christian spirituality in which the Zen-Buddhist traditions are taught as a way to retreat from the hustle of daily life, I understand practicing full emptiness as a plunging into life, that is a plunging into the sensorially charged field that emerges by virtue of my body in movement.

### Biotopological Craftsmanship

Practicing full emptiness, to me, has resulted in the reinterpretation of architecture as a *biotopological craft*. Contemporary findings in the cognitive sciences confirm the enactive, embodied, embedded, extended, and affective nature of the architectural experience. Inspired by the work of Japanese artist Shusaku Arakawa and American poet Madeleine Gins I therefore use the term *biotopology* to remind myself that the sensorially charged field, the tiny perceptions that guide our way, are not 'reserved' for the Japanese.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, biotopological craftsmanship, understood as a working with and in the reservoir of subtle realities, is a practice that belongs to us all. But how to further this soft practice in the context of contemporary architecture? Instead of looking into the future, I propose a *re-gnosis* in which we look from the future back to today. This allows us, rather than drifting off in the unknown, to form a loop of knowledge in which we include ourselves and our internal adaptations to a changed world. So, I invite you to, once more, climb through your window and step into a future of biotopological craftsmanship. How do we look back to the present?

As I climb through my window, I find myself walking in a garden near my—future—atelier. I see my colleagues working on the land, building 1:1 mock-ups. Some of them have invited their clients as collaborators into the experimentation process, while others are immersed in an

intensive play with the wind or the soil to study spatial, perceptual, and environmental phenomena. Collectively we run an architectural practice in which we combine the most recent scientific findings in environmental studies and cognitive sciences with our first-person experiences. We jokingly refer to this practice as ‘Dirty Architecture.’<sup>15</sup> Instead of working in a clean, sealed-off design studio, distancing us from the real work in the real life, we literally *incorporate* scientific knowledge into our bodies and work outside ‘where the living happens.’ I enter the atelier. It’s a place where we work but also invite visitors to pass by for a holiday. Different rhythms and perspectives keep us at-tuned. In an inner garden we study the behavior of various materials, textures, and colors in different habitats. In a spacious studio we have established a movement practice that challenges our cognitive and sensitive capacities. In the other studios we carefully rehearse the movement complexities of our newly-proposed projects by tracing and tweaking spatial arrangements with our bodies. Today we gather in the living room to look back at the past twenty years.

15 From my perspective, ‘Dirty Architecture,’ much like H el ene Frichot’s *Dirty Theory*, muddies pure reason and doesn’t shy away from the inevitable sensible, dark, and messy contingencies of life. Frichot, *Dirty Theory*.

One of the first themes that pops up in the conversation, if it has not already become clear from the diversity and the liveliness of the group we have gathered today, is that we have come to a full encounter with what we used to phrase as *otherness*. This means we have not only come close to the social, bio- and ecological other, but also with the unconscious, mystical, and unknown other. We have fully understood that the (built) environment is our collective unconscious. This means that we feel proximity to our surroundings, not like twenty years ago just for that romantic moment at sea or while hiking the great outdoors, but as part of our daily practices. We spend time in the global cities to train our punctuality and coordination, we learn from the rainforest how to *see* with our feet, and we learn from Algonquian-languages how to perceive over fifty shades of green. The oldest member of the atelier reminds us that coming close to otherness has come at a cost. Engaging with the unconscious, facing the lived difficulties of everyday life, means to come close to darkness too. But, as we have learned from the Japanese, when you live in times of catastrophe

and the planet itself just might not be around for that long anymore, the only course to pursue is to sense the beauty of the catastrophe. In other words, you can go through hell and high water, but you should not lose your ability to sense, affirm, and participate in life. In this process *otherness* has not just become close, it has become ours. Therefore we have established a creative practice that moves beyond generally accepted—clean and comfortable—conventions in favor of spatial rituals that embrace the unknown. It took some time to accept that we can listen to stones and that the floor guides our behavior, but eventually we have learned to break with situated normativity. The more we came to realize that just as we design the environment so do our environments reconfigure who we are and what we will become, architecture for us transformed from a practice of master builders to a craft that foregrounds a leading-out. Constantly challenging our habitual languages and environments by introducing a newly formed word or a slight unbalance in a spatial arrangement, we've grown comfortable with deviating from the norm and opening up for the unexpected of the more-than-human, more-than-conscious and open-present of the lived, moment-to-moment experience.

As I begin to slowly climb back through the window to reflect upon this re-gnosis, suddenly a kid appears from under the table in the atelier and cheers 'Dance! Dance! Dance!' She pulls me back through the window and invites me to join her play. Her frisky vibes remind me that biotopological craftsmanship, collective building, is an open invitation to experiment. As architects, specialists of the spatial, it is our role to guide the unfolding process of collective exploration until we forget our profession. Coming close to *otherness*, that is forming empathy from the inside out, and alternating situated normativity, that is animating architecture from the outside in, are two sides of the same process in which we, as naïve as the crafted and as wise as the playful, carefully construct life.

## Soft Shifts, Crucial Changes

to intend yourself,  
not wanting to intend,  
is intentional. That's what it's all about,  
my dear, not intentional  
intention not to intend.<sup>16</sup>

16 Henneman, *Ideas and History of the Theories of the Japanese Art of Tea*, 65.

While writing this essay, countless subtle shifts and nuances have transpired. The light falling through the window has not only warmed my skin but also moved my writing. I am longing for the moment that my window becomes a spacious double door that makes room for *everybody* to freely wander around in the open-present, moving back and forth between what-is and the yet-to-come. In my personal practice coming close with *otherness* results in and from sensuous fieldwork, deviating from the situated norm happens by means of minor interventions, and every project is considered a sited experiment in which I welcome the lifelines of first-person experience and action.

Opening doors in the collective unconscious is hard work.

In 2018 I undertook a residency at the Bioscleave House, Lifespan Extending Villa in East Hampton, New York, a place envisioned and built by Sushaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins and the Architectural Body Research Foundation in 2008. For ten continuous days I was immersed in an architectural environment that breaks with the tradition of comfort architecture and instead challenges the body with unbalancing floors, shifted walls, and rotated ceilings that not only re-order but also extend the sensorium. During this residency I started to realize how our spatio-temporal experience is formed by basic premises. We orient ourselves using gravity, the horizon, and the rotation of the sphere as unquestioned anchor points. It is exactly these basic operations that Arakawa and Gins throw off balance. I could feel space-time stuttering, thickening, and becoming architecture. After the residency I returned to my temporary office located in a large office tower near Bryant Park in New York City. While sitting behind the desk in my cubicle for the first time in ten days my body felt at ease. In the course of opening doors I had come to appreciate the norm.



Therefore I argue: stop fighting, stop willing, stop intending. Like a small adjustment in a yoga pose that suddenly opens the body to untapped sources of life, soft shifts make crucial changes. Looking out over my backyard and following the plays of light that track my freshly written words, I realize that furthering *biotopological craftsmanship* is not about grand gestures. It is just a minor invitation to become aware of the tiny perceptions that, in a world in which social-environmental degradation is our main concern, bring us to the ground and guide our way. Cutting the void, working with and in *betweenness*, with and in *ma*, means to biotopologically craft openings within what was thought to be empty. It is in this reservoir of subtle realities between inside and outside, between mind, body, and environment, that a practice unfolds. Time by windows is time well spent, because only close to a window a small step is enough to affirm *full emptiness* as life.

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