

# The international nature of modernity

This fine contribution to the history of Japanese architecture provides a detailed analysis of the work of three influential architects of the interwar period. The book, however, achieves more than this: it presents the reader with a broad framework for understanding the nature of the cultural and intellectual links that flowed between Japan and the West at the apex of the imperial era. Arguably, this was the high point of what is generally defined as ‘modernity’, and the theoretical premises upon which author, Ken Tadashi Oshima, bases his discussion certainly has relevance beyond the arena of Japanese architecture. Indeed, Oshima places the question of the international nature of modernity at the very centre of this book in a way that enhances his forensic detailing of uniquely Japanese response to the intellectual currents in these decades.

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**Reviewed publication:**  
**Oshima, K.T. 2010.**  
*International Architecture in Interwar Japan: Constructing kokusai kenchiku*  
 Seattle: Washington University Press, ISBN: 9780295989440

WHAT OSHIMA EMPHASISES HERE is that the ‘internationalism’ of Japan’s architecture is not a matter of these architects’ (or indeed, of Japan’s) dependence on, or appropriation of, Western modernity. Rather, the issue here is the resultant development of a specific Japanese genre of ‘internationalism’, the *kokusai kenchiku* (international architecture), in the field of architecture, which formed as the response to the encounter with both the West and the region. This discussion, then, points to new perspectives on an understanding of the nature of ‘international’ that has relevance beyond the field of architecture and the era, to have wider relevance to current debates about globalisation/glocalisation.

## Internationalism

Oshima’s account of International Architecture in Interwar Japan is based on an analysis of the work of Yamada Mamoru (1894-1966), Horiguchi Sutemi (1895-1984) and Antonin Raymond (1888-1976). The selection of these three architects is strategic – as well as sensible – as an appendix lists a further 50 architects, not all Japanese, who were prominent in Japan in this period. Focusing on the biographies of these architects allows the writer to demonstrate more clearly what he sees as the significance of “the lived experience of international architectural design”. Although Oshima struggles somewhat to articulate it, internationalism was constituted through the lives of these three architects who were both individuals with specific biographies who “exist[ed] in a fabric of relations” and formed “parts of larger constellations – generational, national, international, and transnational”; who were distinct selves existing and “exist[ed] as an interconnected nexus of ideas, buildings practices and forms” (p. 9).

In confronting the question, what is and what makes Japanese architecture, Oshima specifically challenges “a simple dichotomy between Japan and the West and a romantic notion of a ‘pure’ Japan (or West) based on ethnic and racial characteristics”. The inclusion of Raymond already makes clear that a study of international architecture in Japan need not be confined to the work of Japanese architects, nor situated in Japan. The fundamental inspiration for the ‘international architecture’ the title refers to was the experience of modernity made possible by them travelling to Europe and America. The journey of the Japanese architects, Yamada and Horiguchi, to Europe and America and the integration into this discussion of Raymond, a Czech, who spent much of his life in Japan, underpins the perspective that the book’s title points to. The architecture that evolved drew on a shared cultural inspiration in an era when architects “were all grounded in the same artistic milieu ... were part of the same historical movement [and] ... inspired by the same painters” and which was made possible by the technologies of modernity. At the same time, this experience found its expression in a particular intellectual context, “a space between nationalities and between nations east and west”. Executed in the certain political context in Japan during the interwar period, its particular forms and meaning, Oshima insists, requires it to be referred to by its Japanese reference, *kokusai kenchiku*, the term also used as the title of the influential journal that promoted the concept of international modernism.

## Modernist agenda

This account then, while focusing on the lives, ideas and the work of three architects, is certainly not a set of discrete biographies. From their lives, ideas and work Oshima ‘constructs’ (a term he sees as a metaphor for his approach to research and writing) a broad discussion on the dynamics of a historical period in Japanese architecture. The book is divided into four chapters, which gradually lead the reader into the heart of *kokusai kenchiku*. The first chapter establishes a concise historical account of the origins and early development of modern architecture in Japan, specifically linking this to the nation building project of the Meiji Restoration. Initially tied to service the requirements of “the Westernising Meiji government”, architects in Japan were only gradually able to “offer their independent, social, economic and design positions” through private practice.

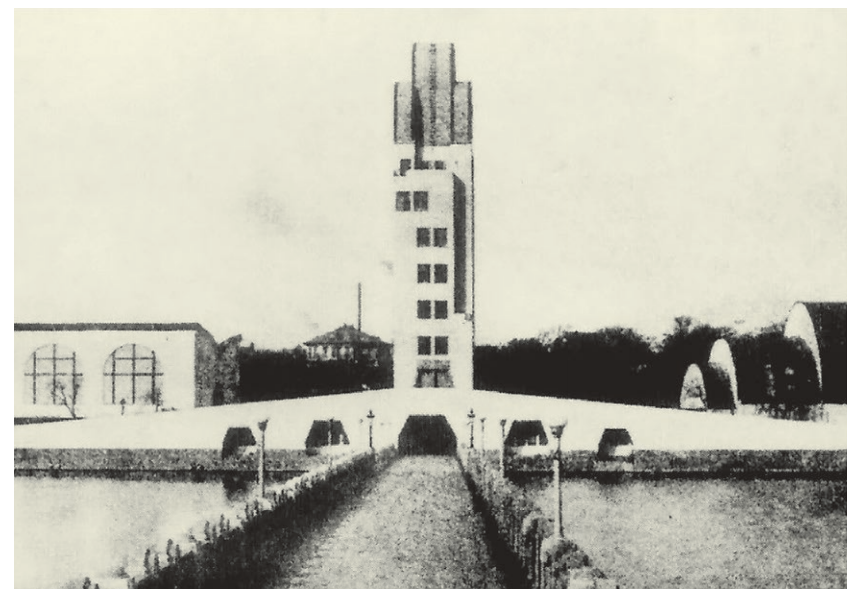
Widespread dissemination through journals of developments in Europe inspired the discourse on a Japanese ‘future architectural style’ that emerged at the end of World War One. By the 1920s Japanese architects began to employ the term ‘international’ [*kokusai*] as “a pervasive signifier of an ideology that reflected the war’s national sentiments”. In a crucial and perhaps contentious pivotal point in this chapter that is not further developed, Oshima argues that “[e]ven Japanese imperialism in Asia, while clearly nationalistic, could be construed as internationalism of another sort” in the sense of “establishing a pan-Asian unity”.

Against this background, the second chapter, ‘Construction for practice’, introduces architects Oshima has selected for examination. As already indicated, biography plays an important role in Oshima’s argument – all three architects were formed by their location as younger children of rural families. Although each gave early evidence of an artistic talent “[p]aramount to this generation’s formation as architects and individuals was their experience of the urban capital city as a displacement from the environmental harmony of their provincial origins”. Crucial in providing the context for Japanese architects to develop their ideas of a ‘new architecture’ independent of government, was the modernist agenda of the *Bunriha* (Japanese secessionist group) of which Yamada and Horiguchi became leading members. The debates within this movement encouraged Japanese architects to travel abroad to seek inspiration while, in reverse, foreign architects, inspired by the same aesthetic principals, travelled East.

In this chapter Oshima briefly elucidates the key elements of ‘East’ and ‘West’ which inspired the respective travellers. Raymond, for instance, after moving to the United States, travelled on to Japan to work on Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel project, while Yamada and Horiguchi travelled to Europe, to see for themselves the work inspired by the Vienna Secessionists and the Dutch ‘De Stijl’ school. The latter in particular “resonated with Horiguchi’s artistic sensibilities and those of Japanese in general”. Yamada found inspiration in the work of Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) founded in 1928, and later by his visit to the United States.

## Domestic and public

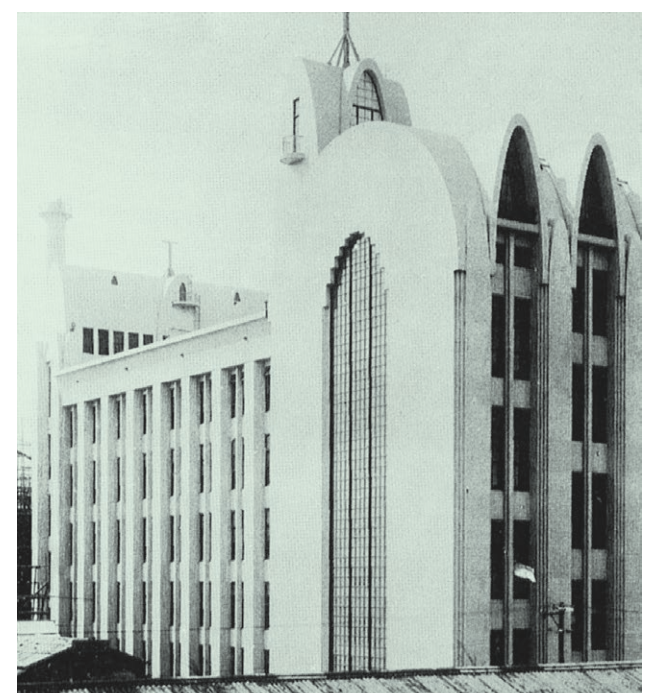
After these two background chapters, the book then examines how these ideas were reflected in architectural practice in the domains of domestic and public architecture in Japan, chapters which he entitles respectively, ‘Structures of Modern Living’ and ‘Building a modern infrastructure’. Documented by copious black and white photographs and a small folio of colour plates, these chapters are as fine an example of architectural history as one would wish. The detail is specifically valuable since, most of the buildings designed by these three architects have disappeared. Oshima has rescued them and their associated history from oblivion

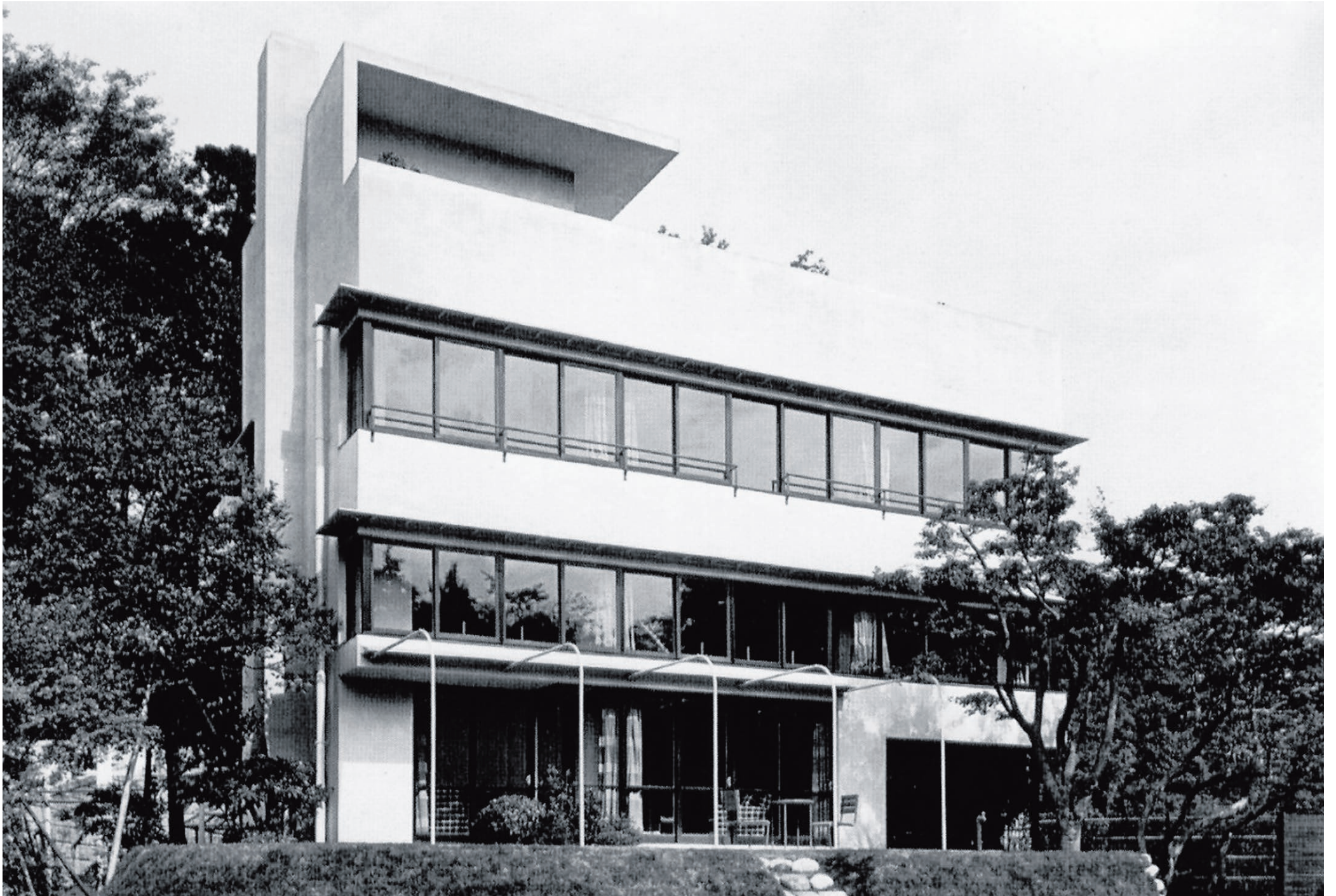


Top:  
 Antonin Raymond:  
 Reinanzaka House,  
 Tokyo, 1924.

Middle:  
 Horiguchi Sutemi:  
 memorial Tower,  
 Peace Exhibition,  
 Tokyo, 1922.

Right:  
 Yamada Mamoru:  
 Central Telegraph  
 Office, Tokyo, 1925.





by careful analysis “principally [from] black and white photographs ... architectural journals and other media” – sources that are listed in almost 30 pages of bibliography.

The form of and debates concerning the Japanese houses of the kokusai kenchiku era evolved from “the creative tensions between international and regional culture”. This introduced physical and practical issues concerning the incorporation of new materials, such as reinforced concrete, new forms of construction, such as Western wood-frame technology and even furnishings. These issues in turn raised fundamental questions about the accommodation of the duality of Western and Japanese traditions and whether “Japanese tradition could be reconceived to form a new synthesis that transcended dichotomies to form a new modern Japanese house”.

Having raised these questions, the chapter then examines how each of the three architects attempted to resolve them. In material terms, the chapter reveals the importance of the introduction of concrete to bridge the East-West dichotomy:

**Above:**  
Antonin Raymond:  
Akaboshi Kisuke  
house, 1932.

**Below:**  
Yamada Mamoru:  
Tefonic Offices,  
1933 Tokyo.

“Reinforced concrete had the ability to replicate the order of timber frame construction yet transform the scale of interior spaces to suit the needs of both Western and Japanese lifestyles”, while traditional values of countryside and the use of natural materials were fused in modern designs that reconnected “modern life both to the region and to the international sphere”. Rather than being anti-modern or anti-international, the architects’ renewed interest in the country house in this period was justified on the grounds that “the house in the country is universal”. As might be expected from this publisher, the argument of this chapter is lavishly illustrated with photos and designs exemplifying the domestic architecture of these three architects.

The long chapter on domestic architecture is balanced by a chapter of similar length on public architecture. The subject of this chapter perhaps more immediately addresses the question of modernity and internationalisation in focusing on the city. But it also throws into even greater relief the dichotomies of the ‘international cityscapes’ associated with

the ‘West and Japanese tradition’ and, following the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, the question of materials. Oshima selects six projects for detailed discussion of both discourse and construction which, despite their diversity – the post 1923 buildings include a sports pavilion, a weather station and a healthcare centre – and despite “appear[ing] to represent functionalist, international-style architecture unified by a common language of modern materials”, “still articulated the personal inflections of the respective designers”, while also “express[ing] the architecture of a new age as part of an on-going tradition”.

**A different regional context**

A brief conclusion underlines the initial assertion of the book that the kokusai kenchiku of the between wars era was a time when “Japanese architectural practice [was] an open-ended process of construction and composition” in which “architects interpreted both Western and Japanese forms and ideas”. This was not, however, a one-way dialogue with the West: in the course of the nineteen thirties, Japanese architects also began to direct their attention to Japan’s imperial project beyond its national borders. Here “they did not intend simply to export Japanese modernism but rather, once again to translate principles for a different regional context”. Although indicating that Yamada and Horiguchi were involved in this later development, Oshima unfortunately does not award it with what could have been one further chapter; the development, he notes, although only in the conclusion, can be seen as a significant extension of both the era’s architectural history and his own argument.

This last critical comment aside, this is a work of great elegance and substance. As well as being an important contribution to the understanding of Japanese architecture and national history, it takes its place alongside a growing literature that is reinterpreting the important cultural dynamics and global developments of the first half of the twentieth century. It lifts the blanket of war and imperial histories that for so long have dominated the exploration of the between-wars period to investigate the alternative efforts for international understanding.

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