



Stone steps and stepping stones viewed from the main entrance of the Old Shoin, Katsura Villa, Kyoto.
Photograph by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.

Floors and internal spaces in Japanese vernacular architecture

Phenomenology of floors

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Concealment

Fearing death, the ancient Japanese closed themselves up in their dwellings when night came, and waited intently for dawn. Their fear was connected with the ancient belief that the human spirit (*tama*), while dwelling in the body, is capable of both entering and leaving it. Its complete departure spells death; and since the spirit could leave the body more easily at night than during the day, the Japanese of the distant past attempted to prevent this by making holelike dwellings in which they could shut themselves up after dark.

Although later these dwellings assumed ceremonial significance, their earliest function was that of a hiding place. The dwelling was not merely an artificial shelter from wind, rain, cold, and heat, as a purely rational explanation would have it. Originally, the desire to conceal oneself from things fearsome and mysterious may well have played an equally important role in the evolution of the dwelling.

Whatever the origins of the dwelling, once the ancient Japanese concealed themselves in their pits at night and waited for the rising of the sun, they had little chance to observe the stars — something that, despite

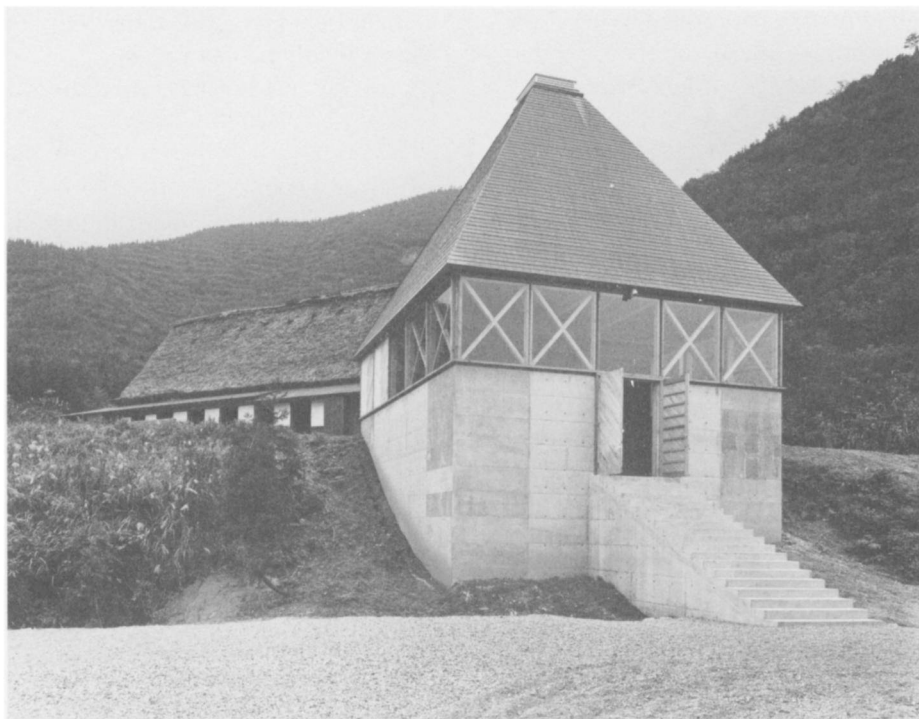
Chinese and Korean proximity, may have contributed to their lack of an astrological tradition. In addition, it is people who live in largely undifferentiated environments, such as deserts or prairies, or those who live by traveling on the open sea, who tend to rely on the stars for directional guidance. Japan, however, is a land of intensively subdivided geography and numerous small islands where it is easy to orient oneself. Thus the Japanese had little interest in the stars; instead they developed a strong awareness of the east-west axis based on the movement of the sun that largely determined the rhythm of their lives.¹

To prevent their own spirits from wandering around at night, the ancient Japanese concealed themselves:

1. Awareness of the north-south axis was introduced into Japan with Chinese Daoism. The Chinese knew that the North Star is almost directly above the Earth's axis of rotation. The Dao system includes a philosophy according to which the Son of Heaven faces south, with his back to the North Star. This conception found application in the planning of Chinese capital cities and later in the planning of such Japanese capitals as Fujiwara-kyō and Heijō-kyō (modern Nara), which were based on Chinese models. (The word *Tenno*/Heavenly Emperor, used to designate the ruler of Japan, was borrowed from Chinese Dao teachings.)



High-floored granary in Okino-Erabu Islands. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.



Entrance, SCOT Toga Sanbo Theater. Photograph by Taisuke Ogawa. Courtesy of *The Japan Architect*.



Entrance hall, SCOT Toga Sanbo Theater. Photograph by Taisuke Ogawa. Courtesy of *The Japan Architect*.

they stayed out of sight. Possibly they rolled themselves up in something like the fetal position, further to hinder the spirit's escape. In this posture, with bated breath, resting where no one could pry, they would imbue their spirits with new vitality in an action that was a form of ritual sublimation. In other words, through the false death of night they found resuscitation at dawn. The act of concealment became a transitional ceremonial required for resurrection.

The state of concealment relates to the act of incubation. At a given instant, the creature in the egg breaks the shell and is transformed. Essentially, the shell is seamless and exitless, as is the membrane surrounding the embryonic human afloat in its amniotic fluid. Concealment therefore may be associated with the fetal position. Both prototypical shelter and clothing may be compared with the membrane or shell covering the concealed being. The holiest of ancient Japanese garments was a complete piece of uncut, seamless cloth called *utsuhata*. According to the poet and folklorist Shinobu Origuchi (1887–1953), among some primitive people a piece of cloth with a hole cut in the center for the head served all clothing functions. But the *utsuhata* was unflawed and uncut; it had no hole in the center for the head. And it may be presumed, therefore, that the

human being wrapped himself up, or concealed himself, in this whole piece of cloth.

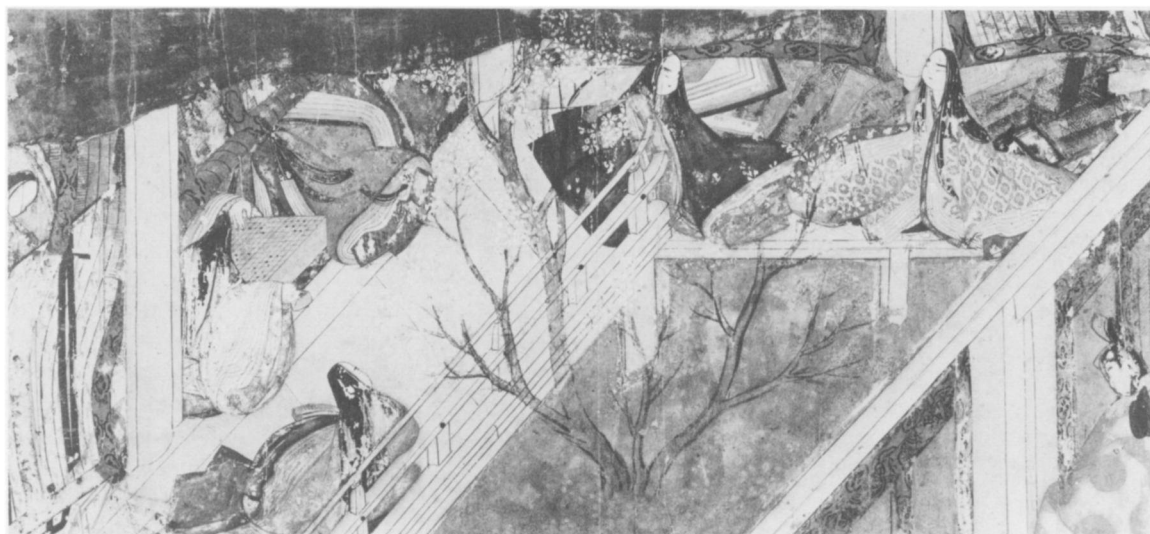
The ancient Japanese used the word *utsu* to mean both a condition in which a substance filled something that was hollow and the place in which the spirit abides. Just as residence and garments were conceived of as *utsu*, so the pit dwelling of the distant past may be regarded as baglike in shape with a large hollow (*utsu*) interior.

For a pit dwelling, an area was dug to a certain depth below ground level, and four (sometimes only two) posts were set in holes in the center of this sunken zone. Horizontal sections were added to form a frame, and rafters were placed on the frame around the periphery. Thatched all the way to the ground, the pit dwelling gives the impression from the outside that the roof — like that of the more recent Japanese farmhouse — has been set directly on the ground. (The roof of later farmhouses employs the same structure as that of the ancient pit dwelling.) Part of the roof was cut away and fitted with a plank door that could be propped open when necessary, providing both lighting and ingress.²

2. Basically, this primitive door is similar to the hinged *shitomido* fillings used in openings of mansions of a later period.



SCOT Toga Sanbo Theater. Photograph by Taisuke Ogawa. Courtesy of *The Japan Architect*.



“Tale of Genji” picture scroll.

Aside from occasional small holes for smoke exhaust, the pit dwelling is windowless. And the plank-door entrance is so small that a person must crawl to get through it.

It is easy to associate places of concealment with the cavelike *muro* mentioned in the *Kojiki* (records of ancient matters), places where people retreated in order to fast. Frequently used as dwellings where young men were shut away from society before ceremonies of initiation into adulthood, these *muro* were plastered over to shut off all contact with the outside air. Entering them, abiding there awhile, and then emerging was a kind of death and resurrection. The *muro*, the interior space of the pit dwelling, and the seamless, holeless garment called the *utsuhata* all provided sacred places of concealment, usually with no openings for communication. There was no need of a door to provide free entrance and exit since sudden transformation and emergence were expected. For the same reason, the egg shape was ideal.

Rising

In the period when pit dwellings prevailed in Japanese architecture, one symbolically elevated kind of building — the *kura* — emerged. It was located in the center of clusterings of these houses and was used to store the fruits of the harvest. Although written with different Chinese characters, several words pronounced

kura are related: *kura* for saddle or *kura* meaning a platform for human beings or animals. Originally a valleylike depression in the land was called a *kura*; *kura* also means dark. The depression in an arrangement of boulders where gods were thought to descend and abide was called an *iwa-kura*. From this place, where the gods were thought to sit, the idea of an elevated *kura* storehouse emerged.

The elevated storehouse that rose as a symbol among earth-hugging pit dwellings was a wooden structure of a sophisticated style (probably introduced by peoples who long ago entered the Japanese islands from the south) requiring considerable technical skill. At first it crossed no one’s mind to live in such buildings, since, except for the humidity, the pit dwelling was comfortable in cold weather and much easier to build.

The association between a depression and a storehouse (*kura*) is less strained than one might think. What was stored in these *kura* was grain — something that might be thought to be appropriately done in a hole in the ground, were it not for the depredations of rats. Grain was the sacred lifeline of the entire society; and the elevated storehouse — raised high on posts with boards fitted at the top to prevent rats from mounting to the storage chamber itself — was a suitable receptacle to protect it.³ Although it is impossible to say whether the elevated *kura* was considered a suitable place for the

3. Such a transformation of storehouses into temples is not unusual in world history. One important function of the Greek temple, for instance, was that of storehouse for the wealth of the city state.

gods first, or whether the seat of the gods, after having been elevated, became a suitable place for storing grain, it is certain that so-called elevated-floor (*takayuka-shiki*) architecture provided the prototype for later Shinto shrine buildings.

The famous storehouse called the Shōsōin at the Buddhist temple Tdaiji in Nara is an example of the elevated-floor style. At about the time of its flourishing, a Shinto shrine style, exemplified by the Grand Ise Shrine — which at first glance looks like a storehouse — came into being. Both buildings are raised high off the ground, and neither was intended for human habitation. One is a warehouse, the other a place to which a god is supposed to descend (conceptually, a hollow for actual sacred objects).

If loftiness indicates sanctity, the holiest of shrines would be the Great Izumo Shrine, which in its present form is elevated thirty meters off the ground. This height necessitates, of course, immense support posts and a long staircase to bridge the level difference. In a reconstruction by Toshio Fukuyama, the Izumo Shrine staircase is estimated to have been one hundred meters long, a length that powerfully expresses the vast difference between the realms of gods and human beings.

Elevated floors in shrine architecture often have more of a conceptual and symbolic than a purely practical significance. In a land like ancient Japan, where religious-ceremonial and governmental functions were virtually synonymous, the difference in level between the ground and the raised floor stood for social differences that evolved in the presence of vesting and unifying the state. The ground is the vulgar, and the elevated floor the sacred. The staircase is the mediator between the two. At some point in history, the imperial family and court aristocrats abandoned pit dwellings and moved into houses with raised floors, thus visually representing the distinction between themselves and the common people.

Just as the Shinto priest had to ascend a staircase to the shrine during ceremonies, so it became necessary to ascend a staircase to reach the floor level of the homes of the aristocracy. As a representative of the gods occupying the throne of divinity, the emperor naturally lived in a raised-floor house. And, in imitation, the aristocrats too prepared for themselves raised-floor mansions that developed into what is called the *shinden* residential style.

People of low social rank who for one reason or another might be invited to mansions of the great were

usually not allowed to mount the staircase; they must have experienced a sense of inferiority and oppression. The relation between the two classes is expressed in the sobriquets applied to them: aristocrats were called “people above in the palace,” whereas commoners were referred to as “people below on the ground.” The lowly position of the commoner was represented by his dwelling: a pit covered with a hipped, thatched roof. And because of residences with raised floors, ascending symbolized being aristocratic.

Originally, the pit dwelling had no true floor. Its inhabitants slept on the ground, probably on straw. They grew rice in wet fields, which were usually as close to the cluster of houses as possible for work convenience. But the proximity of wet paddy fields meant unwanted damp in the pit dwellings. The solution to the problem was to make the level of the dwelling floor higher than the water level in the paddy fields. Raising it as high as ground level, however, robbed the dwelling of the advantages of a pit. This problem was solved by digging a ditch around the periphery of the house, mounding the excavated soil on the inner bank of the ditch, and thus creating an artificial level that permitted the digging of a pit with a bottom that was still higher than the water level of the surrounding paddy fields. In addition, the peripheral ditch reduced the dampness. This advanced version of the pit dwelling, which apparently became more popular during the Yayoi period (200 B.C. to 250 of the Christian Era), nonetheless still had a plain earthen floor.

At a later time, branches or rushes were spread on the earthen floor. Excavations of sites dating from the Period



Rice-planting scene in Kyoto. Photograph by Masaru Miyouchi.



Yoko Ashikawa and others performing an underground dance. Photograph by Toshimi Furusawa.



Students on a school excursion walking on the garden of Sanzen-in Temple, Kyoto, with their footwear enclosed in bags. Photograph by Masaru Miyauchi.

of the Tumuli (250–552) have shown dwellings in which the floor was a combination of planks and earth. This combination persists in surviving old-fashioned farmhouses, which always have an earthen-floored area in conjunction with a board-floored zone.

In the distant past, no doubt, most daily activities were performed in the earthen-floored zone, and the floored area was an elevated region probably outfitted with some kind of bedding. Vestiges of this system can be seen in two devices employed in *shinden*-style mansions: inner sleeping (sometimes storage) spaces, called *nurigome*, created by means of windowless walls within otherwise open rooms, and, surrounded by draperies on movable frames, the wooden platforms topped with *tatami* mats that served as beds set on board floors.

Two clearly different courses of architectural development are represented by the elevated-floor style and by the pit-dwelling style in its later stages. The entire post-and-beam structure of the elevated-floor building is posited on the need to raise the floor off the ground. Even in the more advanced stages of the pit house, on the other hand, the plank flooring, although raised on posts, is totally distinct in structure from the pit dwelling as such. The transition from a pit sunk below the surrounding ground level to one dug in artificially raised land and then to a dwelling combining earth and plank flooring was a natural evolution.

There is no clear proof showing that the *shinden*-style mansion evolved from either one or the other of these two developmental courses. But the Dempōdō, at the temple Hōryū-ji, in Nara — the oldest piece of wooden-

structure residential architecture in Japan — has flooring supported on short posts that are independent of the main structural body, indicating that the floor was a later addition. The structure and techniques used in the residential building that was the forerunner of the Dempōdō were no doubt imported from China. It is worthy of note, however, that Chinese architecture, implanted in Japan over several generations, did not employ wooden floors at this time. This suggests that the Great Hall of State and other official buildings in the ancient Japanese capital city of Heijō-kyō followed Chinese patterns and had earthen (or stone or tile) floors on which were placed Chinese-style chairs and desks. Buddhist temples too were no doubt in the same style.

Living on the higher level

In a technologically eclectic way, the Japanese made their first creative contribution to architecture by incorporating the floor into the wooden structures they had learned from the Chinese. Around the great grave mounds that gave their name to the Period of the Tumuli, it was customary to stand, on floors, clay *haniwa* figures in various forms, including house shapes. Elevated floors are reserved for storehouses, but other houses have low floors, close to the level of what would correspond to the earthen-floored zone.

From the presence of floors in the *haniwa* representations, it can be conjectured that the *shinden* raised-floor building evolved by combining the indigenous wooden floor with imported Chinese architectural structures. In time, in buildings of this kind,

just as in elevated storehouses, the floor came to be incorporated into the main structural body. Perhaps the symbolization of level differentiation in elevated-storehouse (that is, Shinto shrine) architecture, combined with the practical wish to avoid the dampness — as illustrated by later versions of the pit dwelling — merged in the *shinden*-style mansion. No matter how its evolution is reconstructed, the latter appeared on the scene as the first distinctively Japanese kind of residential architecture. Its most characteristic feature is the establishment of the level for daily life at a height to which one must climb. Living at a level higher than that of the ground has led the Japanese people to spend much of their time seated on the floor.

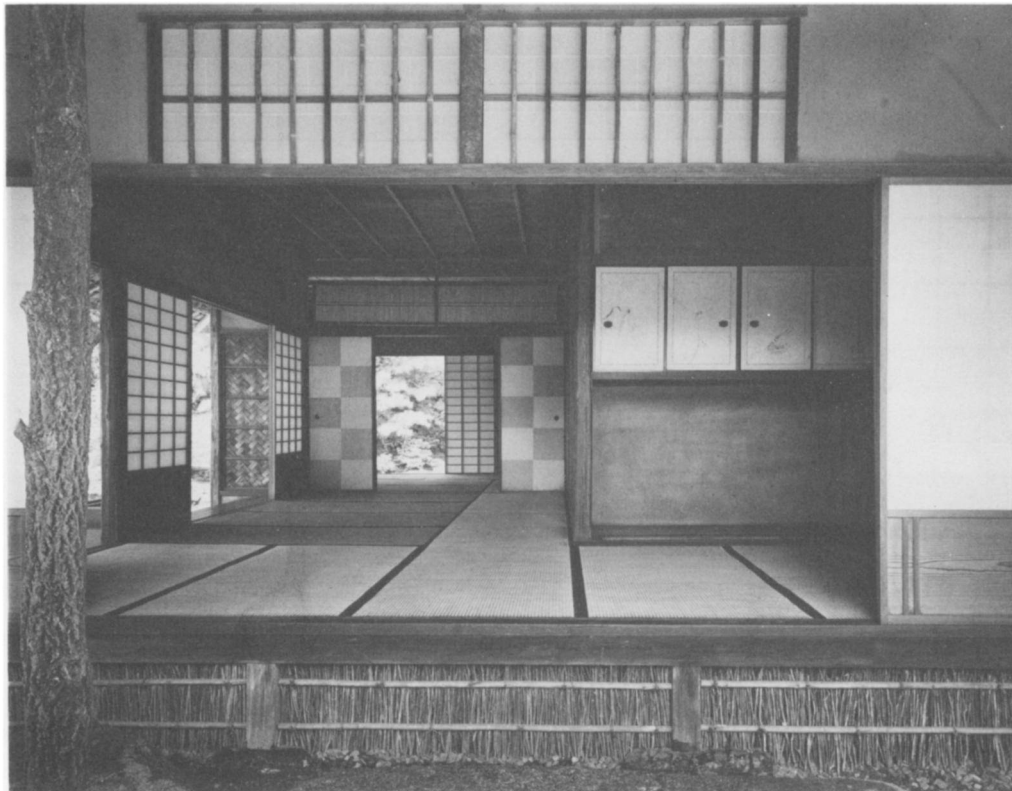
As I have said, straw and rushes were spread on the earth in ancient pit dwellings. Excavations have uncovered a board inside the entrance where people probably cleaned the mud and dirt from their feet before entering the rush-strewn inner space. Of course, the only footwear that peasants of the time wore consisted of short lengths of board strapped to their feet to prevent sinking in the paddy fields. Otherwise, they went

barefoot. And although there was a door at the entrance, the interior was coated with the same earth as the exterior.

In China and in the West today, it is not uncommon to find houses whose floors, although covered with some substance, are on the same level as the ground outside, of which they seem to be a continuation. It would be only natural that people living in such houses should wear shoes indoors and take them off only upon going to bed. The Japanese, however, seem to have made a distinction between interior and exterior levels at an early age. And the custom of sitting on the floor was extremely important in the development of the distinctive Japanese culture.

Nonetheless — although the presence of boards for the wiping off of mud at the entrance indicates a certain penchant for cleanliness — in terms of the relation between inside and outside, ancient Japanese pit dwellings were not far removed from houses in the West and in China. The distinguishing change occurred when whole interiors were outfitted with wooden flooring.

In the imperial palace compound of Heijō-kyō



Main room of the Shōkin-tei Pavilion, Katsura Villa, Kyoto. Photograph by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.

(capital from 710 to 784), there were two kinds of architecture. Official buildings like the Great Hall of State followed Chinese models faithfully, as did the life-style lived in them. The posts of their wooden structures rested on foundation stones, and roofs were of tiles. They had no wooden flooring but were covered with something like pounded clay on a raised platform. In these official buildings, as in Buddhist temples, people sat at desks on folding stools.

In contrast to these Chinese-derivative buildings, the residences of the emperor and the court were in a simpler, distinctively Japanese style. Like the ancient elevated storehouses, their posts were sunk in pits in the ground. (Although this system results in quicker rotting, it requires less technical skill than cutting posts to fit natural foundation stones.) The roofs were of thin boards. Like other forerunners of the Dempōdō and the Fujiwara Tomonari residence — as reconstructed on the basis of documentary evidence found in the Shōsōin — they had raised wooden floors. This purely Japanese residential tradition, which persisted in spite of the Nara-

period enthusiasm for copying the Chinese, came to full completion in the later *shinden*-style mansion. And even those elements that have Chinese origins underwent a complete transformation to suit Japanese tastes and needs.

Whereas the houses of aristocrats and warriors underwent a total transformation, those of the peasant and lower classes always retained many traces of their past and grew only by accumulation. Farmhouses (*minka*, literally folk dwellings) that survive to the present reveal three different kinds of flooring: an earthen area, a boarded-floor area, and an area covered with *tatami*. The earthen-floored region is an extension of the exterior, a place where some farm work can be done, with the stable often immediately adjacent. Here, outdoor footwear can be worn. The demarcation point, the place where footwear must be removed, is the step-up (*agarigamachi*) to the boarded-floor zone.

In the earthen-floored area are the wood-fired stoves, where rice and other foods can simmer safely and slowly because the fire is kept away from the flammable

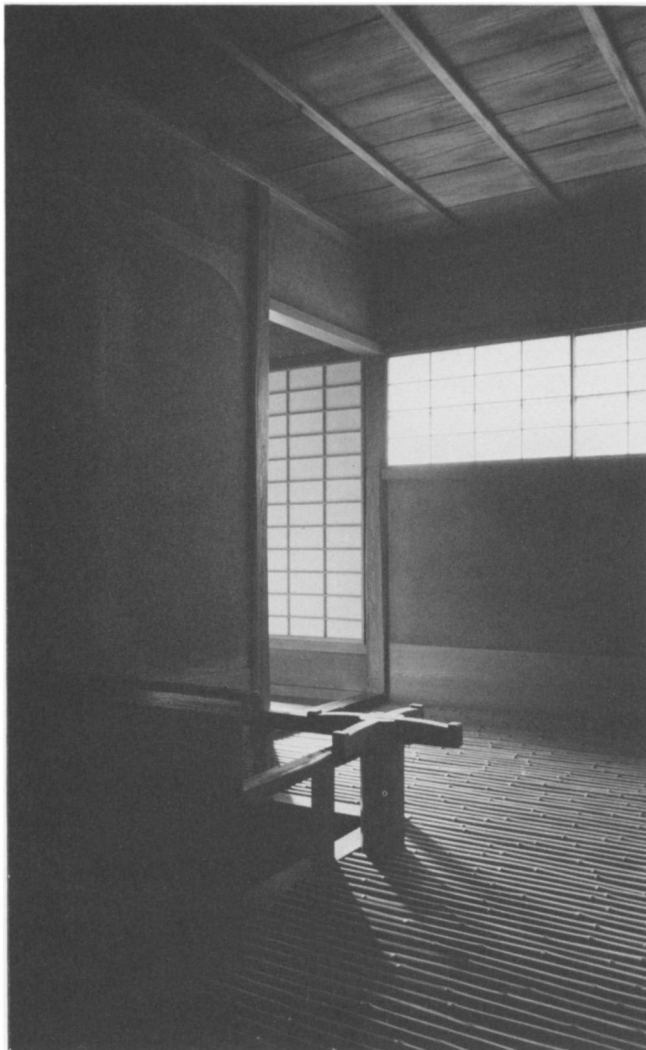


Garden gate near the main entrance of the Old Shōin, Katsura Villa, Kyoto. Photograph by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.

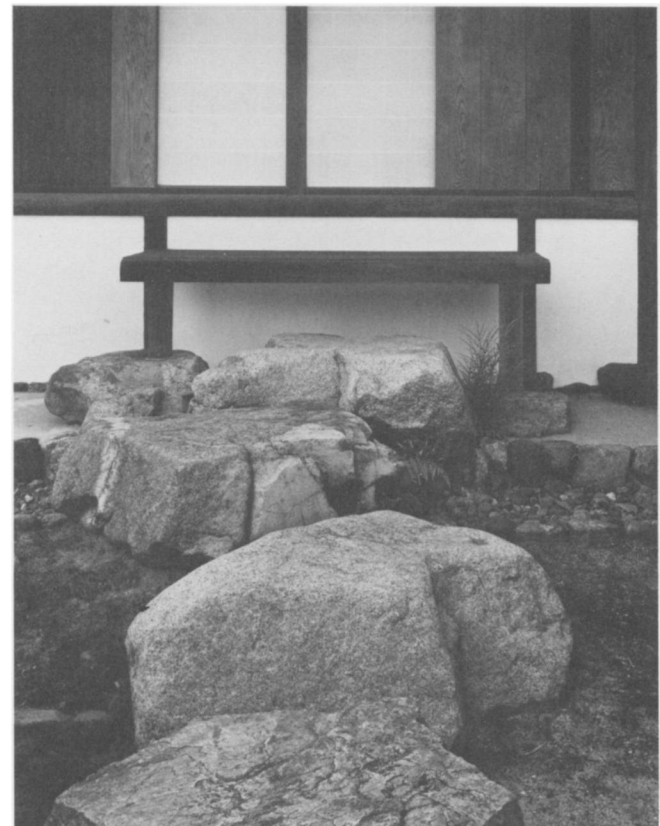
wooden-floored zone. As the location of the stoves, the earthen-floored zone is both vital and sacred. In addition, wells are sometimes dug in this zone, which thus becomes the region where both fire and water are used. The wood-floored area contains a large, sunken hearth, open on four sides and filled with ash. In the center there is clearly visible a fire of brush or twigs that serves both as a source of warmth and for cooking. Thus the space in which the hearth is located serves as both living and dining rooms. The floors of the inner regions of the house may be covered with *tatami* on which people sleep. And the innermost room, which is graced



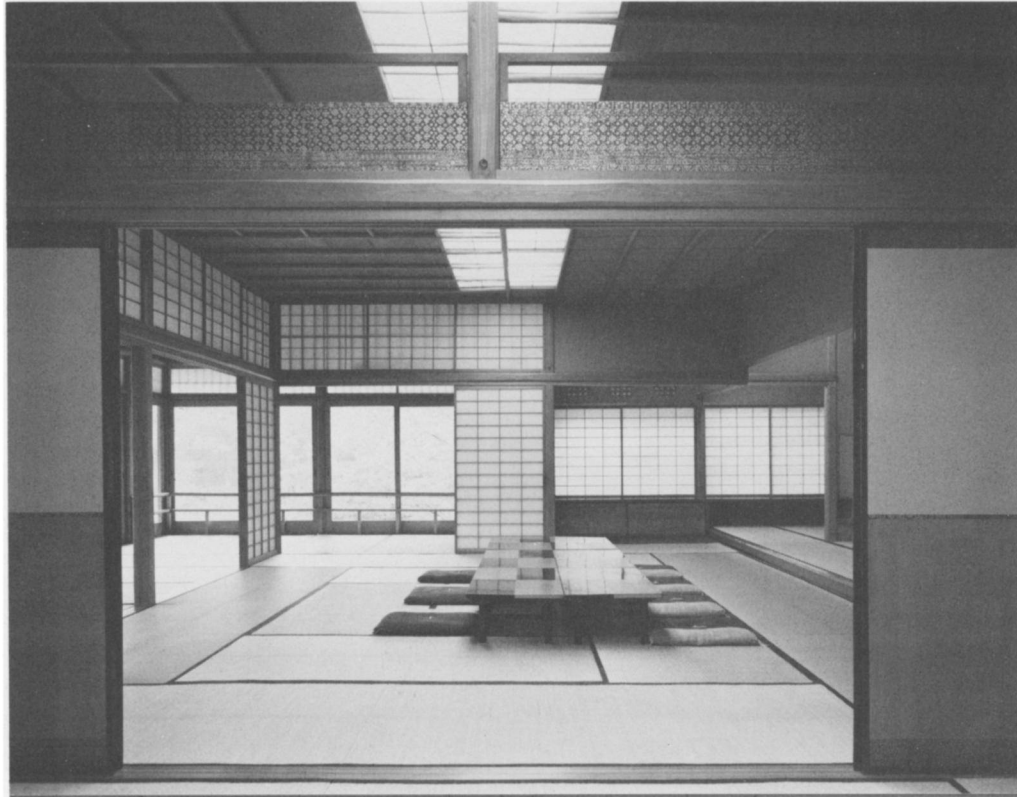
Broad veranda and the moon-viewing balcony of the Old Shoin, Katsura Villa, Kyoto. Photograph by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.



Vessel stand and the sinkhole in the hand-washing room of the New Goten, Katsura Villa, Kyoto. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.



Stepping stones and the footwear stone in front of the broad veranda of the Old Shoin, Katsura Villa. Photograph by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.



Hatsho-kan, room used by the emperor. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

with a *tokonoma* alcove, is considered the most dignified. It is reserved for the master of the house or for guests.

These three kinds of floor — earth, board, and *tatami* — correspond to the stages in development from pit dwelling through *shinden*, to *shoin*-style residences. In the aristocratic home, first boards and later *tatami* came gradually to pervade the entire building. However — probably because farm work maintains close connections with the outdoors — it was only in certain parts of the farmhouse that each of these newly developed kinds of floor became incorporated.

The roof structure of the farmhouse is a still more vivid example of preservation of architectural traces from the time of the pit dwelling. The basic frame of the pit dwelling consists of posts set in holes with radially placed rafters to support the roof, which could have been a simple hipped form or could have a hole for smoke exhaust. In the traditional farmhouse, carpenters prepared the basic frame up to the beams. Then a communal group assembled to produce a roof structure of logs tied together with ropes. No joinery and no nails

were used. On this structure was laid a thatch of straw or miscanthus reeds. Whereas the thatched roof of the pit dwelling descended to the level of the ground, that of the farmhouse is elevated on top of the basic structure of the lower part of the house. The styles of the roof structures, however, are fundamentally the same.

A complete board floor throughout all its interior spaces characterizes the *shinden*-style house. These floors are neither the expedient spreading of planks seen in pit dwellings nor the symbolically lofty platform requiring one to mount a staircase such as that seen in elevated-floor storehouses. Their level is only slightly lower than eye level, but this is high enough to create a different kind of domestic space and to alter the life-style of its occupants.

I have said that peasants of ancient times went barefoot most of the time and sat or knelt on the ground. *Haniwa* representing them are shown crouching on their haunches. The shoelike gear seen on the feet of some *haniwa* indicate that the personages portrayed by the figures were aristocrats or warriors, who conceivably galloped to the hunt on horseback and, indoors, sat

either on folding stools or cross-legged on raised platforms. Some scholars claim that the folding stool itself was introduced into Japan by nomadic people from the north who spent a great deal of their time in the saddle. The ancient Chinese peasant too always knelt or sat on the ground; but in the late Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 of the Christian Era), Mongol tribes introduced lightweight folding chairs (perhaps because these habitual horse-riders found kneeling difficult).

In Japan, the shoe-wearing, chair-using, mounted warrior conquered the peasant agricultural population; and, as has been said, it was for the sake of these aristocrats that houses with raised floors were created. Indoors, when they mounted to the higher interior level, these warriors and aristocrats removed their footwear for a number of reasons. First, the wooden surface was more susceptible to damage from shoes than was the earth or stone. Second, the floor was in a sense an amplification and extension of the older sleeping zone. Awareness of this may have established the boundary beyond which footwear was forbidden. (In some drawings of *shinden*-style houses, people are shown having removed their outdoor shoes and having put on some kind of indoor footwear suited to walking on wooden floors.)

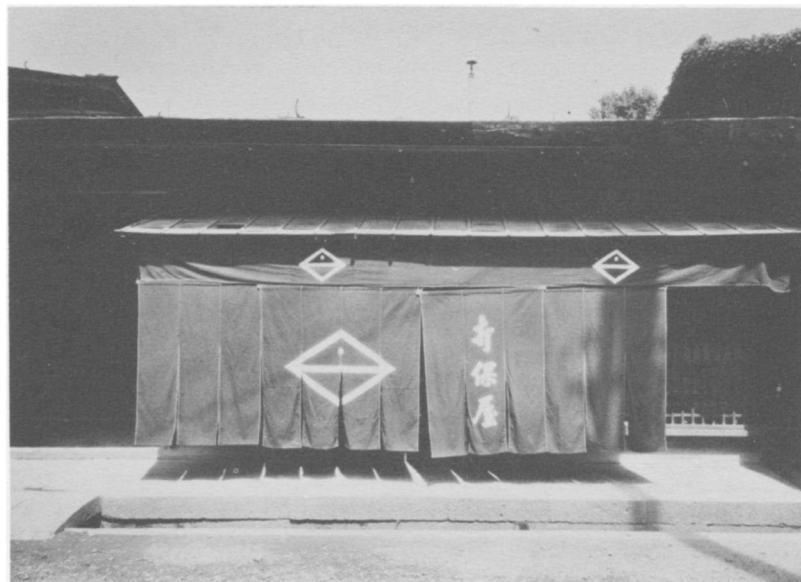
The raised wooden floor is a clean, artificially created surface isolated from the earth, a surface on which people can sit without concern. Unlike the raised

Japanese wooden floor, the upper stories that have been part of Western homes from early times are not a surface in a completely different phase. Although these upper-story rooms are far removed from the surface of the earth, shoes are worn in them; and chairs, tables, shelves, beds, and so on are essential because the floor is "unclean."

On the board floors of a *shinden*-style interior, however, *tatami* mats (thicker versions of their grass-mat predecessors) could be placed wherever necessary. Silk curtains on movable frames placed around the *tatami* provided privacy. People slept directly on the *tatami*, without the kind of bedding used in Japan today, and for warmth covered themselves with long silken robes.

As has been said, the folding stool was used by warriors to indicate their position of superiority to peasants who knelt or sat on the ground. Buddhist temples of the period when the *shinden* style of architecture was emerging eagerly copied Chinese models. They generally had earth or stone floors, and employed chairs. But in adopting the raised wooden floor and the style of living it required, the aristocrats abandoned the chair and all the things associated with it. It is as if the whole board-floored *shinden* interior had become an architectural extension of the chair and the dignity it symbolized.

Up to this point, I have been speaking of floors in the sense conveyed by the Japanese word *yuka*. The



Noren curtain on the facade of a soroban (abacus) shop. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

Chinese character with which this word is written may also be read *toko*. It is frequently used in the combination *tokonoma*, the ornamental alcove that was part of the *shoin* style of architecture perfected after the *shinden* style. In his book *Shoin-zukuri (shoin style)*, Hirotaro Ota has said that in the Heian period (794–1185) platforms with legs were called *toko* and were set where needed on the board floors of *shinden* rooms. The *tokonoma* of the *shoin*-style room developed from a board or a *tatami* mat (without legs) placed on top of the flooring in what was considered the most dignified part of the room. As the folding stool was once both a sign of dignity because of its elevation and an extension of the ground in that it was a place to sit, so the *tokonoma* represented dignity because it was the thickness of a *tatami* mat higher than its surroundings and an extension of the rest of the floor. Such ambiguity in meaning is part of the unique quality of Japanese architectural space.

Making the whole floor a place on which it is possible both to walk and to sit brought architecture and furniture together. It is often said that furniture is little used in traditional Japanese architecture. It is probably more accurate to say that, with the development of the *shinden* style, earth-floored areas that were extensions of the outside ground were abandoned, and the whole building was converted into an outsized kind of furniture. Naturally this development influenced life-styles. On movable *tatami* mats, aristocrats sat with crossed legs the way peasants sat on the ground. The only time they sat as one would in a chair was when they were at the edge of *tatami* platforms or verandas.

Gliding

The characteristic *shinden* space is a large, wood-floored zone in which individual grass mats (*okidatami*) were placed as needed, just as chairs are in rooms with earth or stone floors. In the imperial palace, court rank determined the size of the mat on which a person sat. Those of the first rank were entitled to a mat 6 by 4 *shaku* (a *shaku* is 30.3 centimeters), those of the second rank to mats 5 by 4 *shaku*, and those of the third rank to mats 4.6 by 4 *shaku*. The mats were arranged around the periphery of the room much as *zabuton* cushions are placed for large parties today.

The shift from the *shinden* to the *shoin* style of residential architecture entailed a subdivision of large spaces. In the early phase of the development of *shoin*

architecture, a room 3 by 3 *ken* (a *ken* is 1.818 meters) was considered the norm. *Tatami* mats, which had gradually evolved into a standard, and modular, size of 3 by 6 *shaku*, would be placed around the periphery of such a room. The floors of all rooms smaller than this standard, however, would be completely covered with *tatami* mats.

With the passing of time, Japanese floor surfaces became softer and softer. Originally, platforms with legs were placed on the board floors of *shinden* rooms to provide a place to sleep. Later the platforms were made more comfortable by the addition of a grass mat. Still later the entire floor was covered with these grass mats to become what might be viewed as a giant bed or cushion, on top of which were spread still softer bedding (*futon*) and cushions for sitting (*zabuton*). The older sleeping platforms had legs, but lost them; these soft mattresses and cushions never had legs.

Covering the floor with soft mats created a puzzling situation since people not only sat, but also walked, on a floor that had come into being as bedding. Board floors are softer than stone pavement, but *tatami* are softer still. Indeed, so sensitive is the footing they offer that a heavy tread on *tatami* can reverberate over considerable distance. The need to minimize such disturbance generated a special way of walking related to the stylized *suriashi* walk still used today in the *Nō* drama, *Nihon-buyō* dancing, the *Kabuki* drama, and even in some advance/attack motions of *sumo* wrestling matches.

In his book *Dento to Danzetsu (tradition and rupture)*, Tetsuji Takechi has analyzed this way of walking as follows.

Though in ordinary walking, the weight is shifted to the forward foot, in the *Nō* style, it remains on the rear foot, none is on the forward foot at all. The toes of the forward foot are raised, but no pressure is applied to its heel. Raising the toes of the forward foot is like describing part of a parabola indicating freedom from weight and oriented toward limitless space. At the instant when the heel of the forward foot is about to leave the ground, the weight, which has been on the rear of the arch of the rear foot, partly owing to the power of the hip region, catches up with the forward foot. The weight moves from the outer side of one arch to the outer side of the other as the feet exchange positions, almost brushing against each other in the process. The balance of the whole body weight does not move from right to left or from left to right.

The foot that has been freed of weight now describes the curve with the toes that indicates infinite space. While

supporting the body weight, the other foot stores up energy for the next advance.

The important point is that this method of walking minimizes energy dispersal to the surroundings. Instead of employing the recoil caused by pressing the heel firmly against the floor for the sake of forward motion, this system concentrates energy motion within the body posture. Minimizing transmission of energy to the floor creates the impression that the person is moving soundlessly forward in an upright position. In *Nihon no Mimi* (the ear of Japan), Akira Ogura says that this gliding, ceremonious way of walking was suitable to the life-styles of aristocrats and warriors who lived in mansions with wood or *tatami* floors.

Peasants too evolved a way of walking that minimized its effect on the ground. The classical example of the peasant walk is to be found in the exaggerated gait of the comic character *Hyottoko*, who appears in many summertime festivals, usually wearing a mask with oddly pursed lips. The *Hyottoko* gait originated from the way farmers walked through their fields.

In *Dento to Danzetsu*, Takechi calls this peasant gait *namba*.

Namba represents the farmer's work posture. Unlike normal walking, this gait calls for advancing the right arm and right

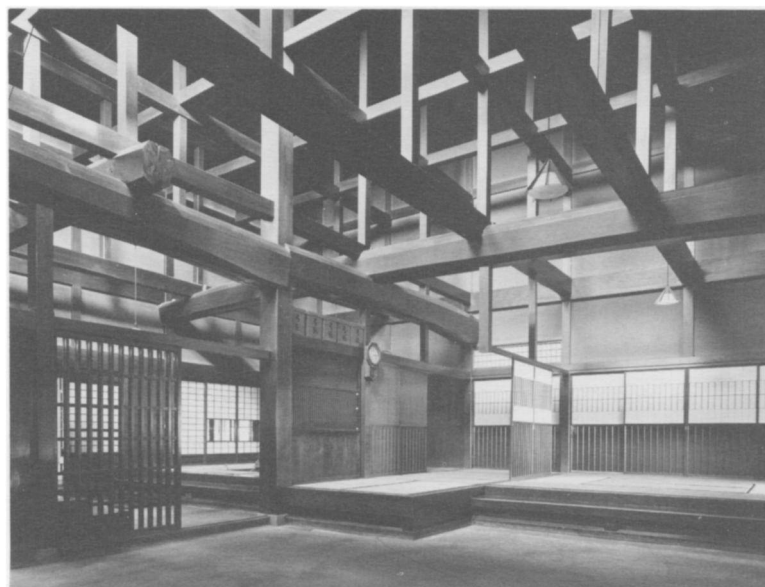
leg at the same time and the left arm and left leg at the same time. It is valuable agriculturally since it stretches the muscles and ensures that all energy expended becomes work force directed to the earth.⁴

Peasants confined the energy of their walking within their body as much as possible to avoid needlessly packing down the soil of their fields. Aristocrats and warriors, while using another way of walking, did something similar to minimize transmission of energy to soft floor surfaces. Confining energy and preventing its outward dispersal are connected to Japanese building materials and furnishings, which, employing mostly paper and wood, are fragile. This structure and the earthen-floored space, both remnants of domestic architecture of the distant past, remained unaltered until fairly recent times, when much farm labor was mechanized.

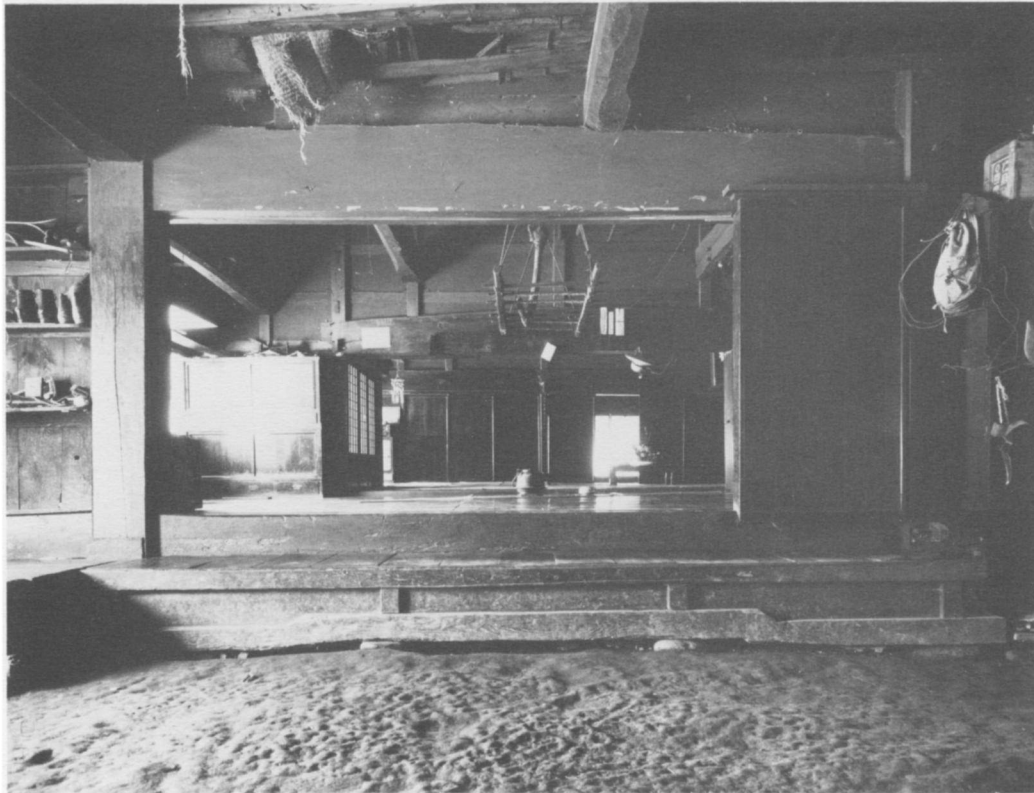
Squatting

Until the introduction of gas and electricity robbed the earthen-floored zone of its reason for existence, the majority of farmhouse cooking was done by women squatting in front of wood-stoked cookstoves. In the

4. Takechi further states that people of Japan of the distant past did not swing their arms while walking. As can be seen in performances of



Earth floor and beams, Yoshijima house, Takayama. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.



Kitchen of a traditional farmhouse, Seki House. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

squatting position, the knees are bent until the kneecaps reach the chest. The backs of the thighs are pressed against the backs of the calves, and both feet are flat on the ground. In this posture the upper surfaces of the thighs naturally come into contact with the belly.⁵ The posture is related to one referred to in Japanese Buddhist terms as *songo* and used as a sign of respect toward persons in high places.

Squatting this way in the earthen-floor cooking area meant that only the footwear or the soles of the feet were soiled by the dirt of the floor. (Some people assumed this position but raised their heels from the ground in something like the position *sumo* wrestlers assume when they toe the mark at the beginning of a match.) Forward motion in this squatting position is clearly related to the *namba* way of walking: when one leg is advanced, the hip on the same side alters its angle

and moves forward, leading the arm forward on the same side. The *namba* style of walking was employed by farmers in their work and entails keeping the hips held low. The squatting position is no more than a further lowering of the hips. Movement in it can be related both to the gliding foot movement of *Nō* actors and to certain motions performed by *sumo* wrestlers.

As stated earlier, this squatting position indicates respect. The board floor was a status symbol of social importance. It could therefore be considered fitting for people in the earth-floored zone (a leftover from humble beginnings) to crouch in respect for those on the higher level of the board floor. The inclusion in farmhouses first of board and then of *tatami* floors reflects the efforts made by the peasant class over the years to overcome their position of social subjection. Still, the earth-floored area persisted not only in farmhouses, where agricultural labor was performed, but in city dwellings too, where stoves and wells were found in such spaces until fairly recently. Mechanization and electrification of the kitchen changed this and greatly reduced the need to use the squatting position. Concurrent with this trend

Nō and *Kyogen* plays, the body moves on the feet alone, and the arms hang straight down.

5. This description is based on a passage in *Nihonjin no suwarikata ni tsuite* (the ways the Japanese sit) by Tatsukichi Irizawa.

was the move away from sitting on the floor and toward the use of chairs, with a consequent loss of flexibility in Japanese knees.

Crouching

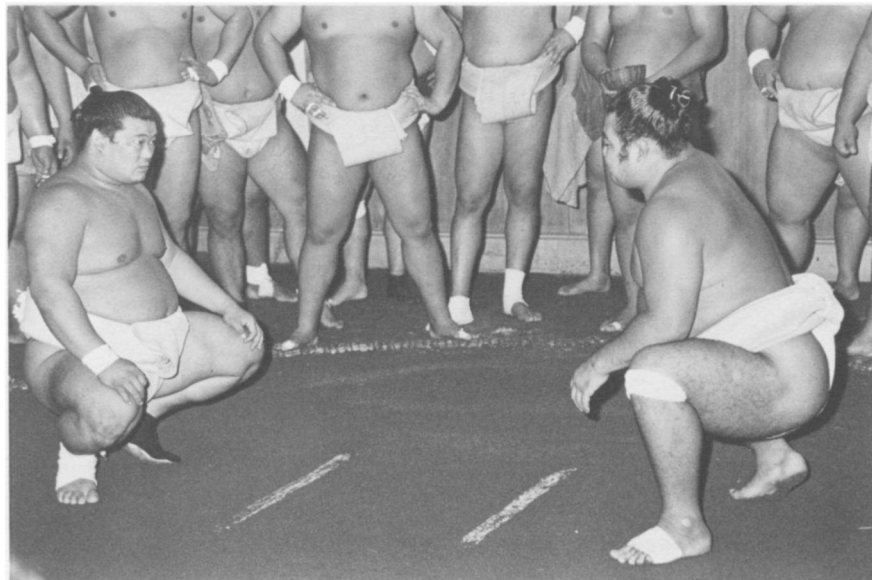
I have already mentioned the gradual lowering of the height of the horizontal member (*kamoi*) over doors and other openings in traditional Japanese architecture. At its lowest, this beam was about one meter and seventy centimeters above floor level, or high enough for most people to pass through with, at most, a slight inclination of the head. But in the architecture of the so-called rural-hermitage tea-ceremony pavilion (*sōan fū chashitsu*), all connection with the proportions of the human body was cast to the winds. Essentially, buildings of this kind were thought of as isolated from ordinary life. Their extremely small spaces were microcosms for the ceremony-without-a-god of preparing green tea and serving it to guests. To enable them to fulfill this purpose, functions other than those of tea and conversation have been eliminated, and space has been minimized. In their early period, these pavilions employed rooms that were four and a half *tatami* mats in area. Later, in the time of the most famous of all tea masters, Sen no Rikyu (1521–1591), it could sometimes be no more than one *tatami* mat for two guests and another mat, two thirds the size of a normal one, on which the host sat and prepared the beverage.

The entrance for the host, distinct from that for guests, was so low that a person had to stoop considerably to enter. But the entrance for guests, the *nijiriguchi*, was no more than sixty centimeters from the floor level. In other words, entering such a door demands crouching on all fours.

In the space for the tea ceremony, all ordinary hierarchies collapsed. Although this kind of building was evolved during a time when the warrior class held great power in Japan, the tea master insisted on certain concessions even from the mightiest. For instance, the samurai considered his swords his most prized possessions, a symbol of the entire Japanese cult of the martial. But no samurai was allowed to wear his swords in a tea-ceremony room. Instead he was required to place them on a rack at the entrance provided specifically for this purpose. Removing them was partly ceremony, but there was a purely physical reason too: with swords jutting from his sash, a person would be unable to enter the *nijiriguchi*. Inside the tea-ceremony room, people knelt in what came to be the formal position and faced each other, all having been divested of their weapons.⁶

At the moment of crouching to enter the room, a person tends to feel helpless. The reduction of the normal standing posture to a crouch on all fours creates

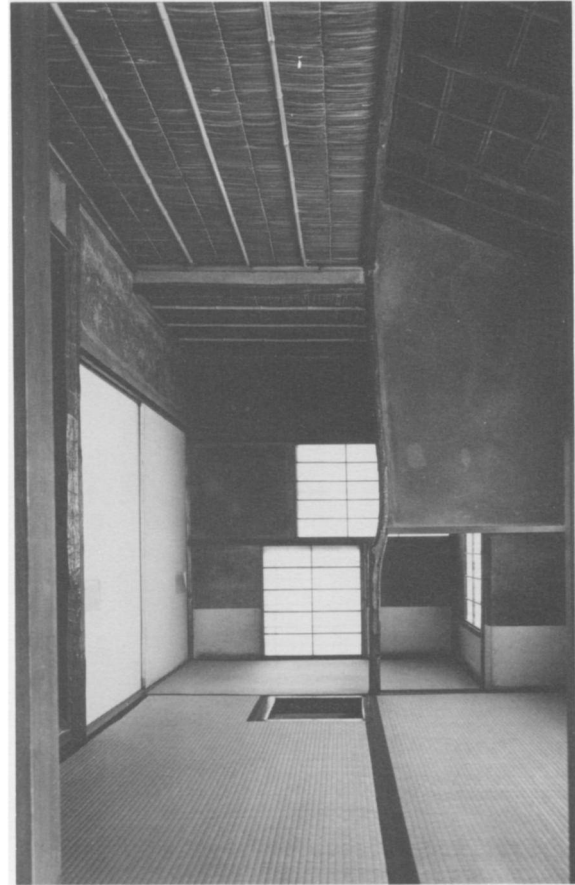
6. Tetsuo Yamabushi claims that this formal position evolved as a position for tea-ceremony conversation at a time when men usually sat with buttocks flat on the floor and legs folded in front of them.



Sumo wrestlers assuming a crouching posture. Photograph by Tuyoshi Nishihama.



Small entrance (*nijiri-guchi*) of tea-house Shinju-an in the Daitoku-ji Temple, Kyoto. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.



Tea ceremony room, Shinju-an of the Daitoku-ji Temple, in Kyoto. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

psychological tension. Indeed, enforcing psychological flexibility is a major characteristic of the *nijiriguchi*. At the instant of passing through it, one sees the outside world crumble to nothing and finds oneself suddenly in a completely different world.

Everything in the world has contracted, so that ordinary movement and behavior are restricted. But once the kneeling position has been assumed and the eye has had a chance to take a composed look, space reveals itself as a perfect balance, its compositional elements pruned to a minimum. Furthermore, everything is designed to be seen by the eyes of a person in the formal kneeling position.

The floor edge marks the boundary between the stepping stones of the outdoor path and the *tatami* of the interior. The *nijiriguchi* is a device used to demonstrate a spatial transition. It is interesting to try to trace the origins of this kind of manipulative entranceway.

On the back of an ancient mirror called the *Kaoku-kyō* there are relief decorations. These depict four houses and provide some of the oldest images we have of archaic architecture in Japan. Two of the houses have elevated floors, thus probably representing an aristocratic residence and a communal grain storehouse. The other two are pit dwellings; they are generally interpreted to be an ordinary farmhouse and a village meeting place. The one that seems fairly large may represent the locale of some ceremony, perhaps a coming of age. I have already mentioned the ancient custom of closing oneself away in cavelike spaces at such a time — something that this building could be showing architecturally. If being closed off from the world is the aim, the fewer the openings in the building the less the disturbance from without. As has been said, doors to pit dwellings were small (it was necessary to stoop to enter); and since the only other opening was a



Entrance hall of tea-house Shinju-an in the Daitoku-ji Temple. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

smoke-exhaust hole, their interiors were dark. Alternatively, this building might be the forerunner of those special lodgings where single young men of a village gather to work, talk, and spend the night together.

In the Okinawa region at present, group meetings and ceremonies are held in ceremonial huts (called *kami-ashiage*) not unlike these pit dwellings. The structure consists of posts set in holes arranged, roughly, in a triangle; in some instances the roof descends to about a meter above the level of the ground. Like the pit dwelling, when it is seen from a distance, the roof of the *kami-ashiage* seems to rest directly on the earth. This arrangement — needed to protect the interior from outside disturbances — makes it necessary to crouch low to enter the building. In other words, the *kami-ashiage* seems to be a present-day survivor of the large, ancient pit dwelling, converted into a ceremonial hall.

Both have entrances so low that a human being is compelled to stoop, crouch, or crawl to enter.

We have no definite information on when the tea ceremony *nijiriguchi* came into being. It is said that the first one was held in a special pavilion built by Sen no Rikyu in a port called Yamazaki, and that the *nijiriguchi* was based on the small, low entrance to a ship's cabin. It seems more reasonable to me, however, to trace links between the *nijiriguchi* and the low entrances of large pit dwellings and ceremonial buildings like the *kami-ashiage*. People gather (usually in small numbers) in the tea ceremony just as they do in ceremonial huts. Crouching and stooping of the kind essential to entry by means of the *nijiriguchi* were part of the daily lives of users of pit dwellings and primitive ceremonial buildings. It is common for people to crouch upon approaching a place considered holy, or in some other sense very special. Therefore, since the tea pavilion is



Entrance of a traditional farmhouse, Tanaka House. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

intended to be a place for the performance of a semisacred ceremonial, crouching to enter it through the *nijiriguchi* is only appropriate.

Looking out over

In the West, the classical window is a hole deliberately created in a stone or brick wall: an eye turned to the outside. In Japan, on the other hand, the post-and-beam structural system entails post-to-post openings that are sometimes obstructed by wall materials. More often they are filled with sliding panels that function as partitions in the inner areas of the building and become windows at the periphery.

The difference in the nature of the windows generates a difference in the kind of view available. A Western-style window provides a frame around a picturelike view of the outside world (the term *picture window* in this sense is apt). In traditional Japanese architecture, however, the view of the outside is delineated at the top

by the line of the eaves, at the bottom by the floor, and on either side by the shadowlike existence of posts.

Owing to prevailing structural types, the proportions of openings and the views they provide vary. In the West, in older buildings at any rate, windows are generally tall and narrow, whereas in many Japanese buildings they are broader than they are high. In other words, the structural system (bearing-wall or post-and-beam) influences the proportions of the picture view commanded by openings. The picture scroll and wide *fusuma* paintings suit the general horizontal orientation of Japanese architecture.⁷

The horizontal compositional orientation found in Japanese residential architecture may be seen in the stage sets for the *Kabuki* drama. Unlike the Western opera stage, which is high and deep, the stage for the *Kabuki* is lower and much wider. In more recent times, familiarity with Western stages has resulted in modern *Kabuki* stages that are much higher than those in the Edo period (1615–1867). Nonetheless, the tendency toward sidewise expansion, always present even in older *Kabuki* stages, stems from the directionality established by floor and eave lines in residential buildings.

Views of Japanese gardens, for example, represent a kind of horizontally oriented composition that would be unthinkable without the severance produced by floor and eave lines. But this horizontality results in a loss of depth. The view one has from a Japanese opening is not the depth-penetrating look provided by a small window cut into a solid wall. Instead, it is more like looking out over things in a wide and expansive way. Depth can be suggested, however, by a multiplication of these more or less flat, horizontal views. On the *Kabuki* stage, for instance, perspective and the vanishing point are not employed: scenery generally consists of flat surfaces set one behind the other, to represent near, middle, and far ground. In an arrangement of this kind, the vanishing point is both unnecessary and unsuitable; to employ it would invite a predicament like that of the Teatro Olimpico, where there are several axes and a number of different vanishing points.

The Japanese word for looking out over horizontally oriented vistas, *miharasu*, is related to a series of words that seem to be connected with a fondness for

7. It is true that many scroll paintings for display in the *tokonoma* alcove are long and narrow, but these proportions derived mainly from Chinese painting. In Japan, as time went by, perhaps because they gave an impression of greater stability, wider scrolls became popular for use in the tea ceremony.

horizontality. For instance, *hareru*, which means for the weather to be fair, summons up images of wide, refreshing, cloudless skies. *Hara* (field) means a wide, smooth expanse of ground. *Hareru* (to swell) indicates the expanse of something like surface tension pressed outward from within. *Haru* (spring) is the time of year when the buds expand. *Hara* (belly) is an expanse of the human body, and *hari* (beam) is the architectural elements stretching horizontally from post to post. *Harebare* (bright and cheerful) suggests the feeling one has looking out over a wide, unobstructed view, as if from a prominence. The Japanese preference for the wide, horizontal view is set forth in many poems in which people climb a hill or mountain to enjoy vistas extending as far as possible from side to side. From an elevated position, also, the eye is on a level higher than what it beholds. The vista extends far into the distance, just as, in a similar way, the oriental mode of representation suggests depth, without making use of perspective, by putting objects in the far ground at the top of the composition, those in midground in the middle, and those in the foreground at the bottom. Looking out over things from an elevation puts the viewer in a commanding position. At the same time, behind this way of looking at things can be sensed the desire for the bracing, refreshing air expressed in Japanese words like *miharasu*.

Just as this same kind of wide, expansive view recurs indoors through the Japanese architectural-space composition of horizontality that the lines of floor and eaves emphasize, so can the horizontal view of the garden also be enjoyed simply by sliding back the panels that fill the opening between two structural posts.

In time, the *kiwari* system of measurements governing the proportions and details of traditional architecture changed, with consequent alterations in the distance between floor and eave lines in this horizontal composition. Even within the *shoin* architectural tradition, for instance, the height of the horizontal beam over openings (the *kamoi*) gradually decreased. And in *sukiya*-style buildings, freed from the restraints of the *kiwari* system, the eave ends could be positioned freely, with the result that the height of openings decreased still further. In some instances the horizontal beam was lower than the height of a standing human being. This lowering was commensurate with an increasing tendency to look out over gardens, not from a standing position but kneeling or seated on the *tatami* floor. In other words, the new vantage point no longer permitted the viewer to hold a commanding position.

Stepping over

In Japanese shops of the past, the accounting and reckoning was done in a room where the floor was covered with either *tatami* or boards. In one part of the room a small screenlike object called a *kekka* usually stood. Customers were expected to remain on the outer side of the *kekka* — the zone beyond was for employees only. Of course, since this was a simple affair no more than sixty centimeters high — or less than half the height of a kneeling adult — anyone could easily step over a *kekka*. Nonetheless, since in modern terms it delineated the public from the private spaces, no customer would go beyond it without permission. The shop's books were kept inside the *kekka* in the area where the accounting was done. Although it served a similar function, this small partition could not compare as a physical barrier with the counters that separate the outer from the inner spaces within modern banks and even stores. In banks, for instance, the cash is further protected by being kept and handled in roomlike booths, and transactions are carried out through small windows — large enough only for the passage of hands — that are the sole means of communication between customer and teller.

The term *kekka* is a Buddhist one used to mean the demarcation of areas within a temple, or the boundary between the sacred and the secular. In esoteric Buddhist terminology, it sometimes refers to a magic circle. The word *kekkaichi* means a zone set apart for religious purposes, off limits to laypeople or other groups. For instance, the esoteric-Buddhist monastery on the mountain Koya-san was out of bounds to women and was called a *kekkaichi*. In the shop as in the temple, the *kekka* establishes zones without actually creating a serious physical spatial barrier. An extension of the same idea is the stone set on paths in the tea-ceremony garden to indicate that guests must proceed no further in that direction. Stepping over the stone would be easy enough, but no knowledgeable tea-ceremony guest would ever do so.

The use of symbolic markers instead of physical walls or ramparts to delineate space reflects a characteristically Japanese understanding of space. The same kind of understanding is seen in the construction of an abbreviated Shinto sanctuary by erecting no more than four poles around the spot considered a seat of divinity and then connecting those poles with no more than a sacred rope. Similar arrangements are to be found in *Nō* stages, in *sumo*-wrestling rings, and in *kami*-



Waiting room, Kitamura House. Photograph by Yukio Futagawa.

ashiage. In all these cases, posts and a rope create a sacred zone that is separated from the surroundings by invisible, intangible, but symbolically restraining walls. (Today, for the sake of visibility, the posts have been eliminated from many *sumo*-wrestling rings.) Although there is no door or other concrete barrier in these places, the awareness of passing through the intangible walls — which might be called the *kekai* membrane — and thereby advancing into a different kind of space creates psychological tension. An invisible line between the two spaces must be stepped over.

In traditional Japanese houses there are sills — sometimes grooved for sliding panels or doors — between the posts that are at the boundaries of rooms and corridors. These sills too demarcate one space from another. In crossing to make the spatial transition, it is considered bad manners to step directly on sills. Possibly this is because of their symbolic meaning or because they were at one time considerably higher above floor level than they later became.

Between *tatami*-floored rooms, these sills are now set on the same level as the tops of the *tatami* mats. But when they separate a *tatami* room from a board-floored one, the sills are slightly higher than the board floor. Even though the height differential between the two is small, a person walking along the board surface in the *Nō*-style gliding gait must stop and change posture in order to step over the sill. This makes that person conscious of passing into another space (room).

In farmhouses, the sill between the outdoors and the earthen-floored zone is high enough to make stepping over it a much larger motion than the relatively smooth transition between board and *tatami* floor. The sill, in this instance, is a barrier between the indoors and the outdoors, instilling a strong awareness of resistance in the person stepping over it. Although from a technical standpoint it would be easy to change this and thus facilitate entrance, it is deliberately preserved as an obstacle. Thus it compels people to be aware of spatial articulation, in the same way that the *nijiriguchi* does in the tea-ceremony pavilion.

In the short, narrow *rōji* garden leading to the tea-ceremony pavilion, various obstacles are placed that increase the psychological transition from the front gate to the building. For example, in the garden wall an opening (called a *kuguri*) will be cut. It is so low that one must stoop — if not crouch and crawl, as in the case of the *nijiriguchi* — to pass through. Passage is further restricted by making the sill much higher than the stepping stones on either side and thus necessitating considerable raising of the legs in a decisive act of stepping over. To maneuver safely, the guest must carefully watch what he is doing. Still further concentration is demanded by the stepping stones that form the path he must follow. These stones frequently have uneven or rounded upper surfaces that the guest must navigate gingerly — a task that is aggravated by old-fashioned Japanese footwear.

By compelling the person crossing it to assume certain postures and to walk with the greatest care, the short tea-ceremony garden — leading from the *kuguri* gate, along a stepping-stone path, and finally to the *nijiriguchi* — stimulates awareness of transition into another world.

Passing over

The boarded strip projecting from the traditional Japanese house into the garden space is called an *engawa* — a word imperfectly translated by the Indian-

English word *veranda*. This space too is like a *kekai* in that it delineates two zones without physically separating them. Seen from outside, the *engawa* seems a part of the building, whereas seen from indoors it appears to be part of the garden. It is, in other words, an ambiguous space belonging to both zones but not exclusively to either.

The edge of the veranda (called *hashi*) is the line that simultaneously divides and connects garden and interior. Interestingly enough, another Japanese word, *hashi* (ladder), stands for the means of connecting the upper level of the board floor with the lower one of the garden (in *shinden*-style houses, the difference in the two levels was often great enough to require a ladder of several steps). And still another word, *hashi* (bridge), means the device used to connect one shore of a body of water, or side of a ravine, with the opposite one (attaining the opposite shore, in Buddhist terminology, signifies to find enlightenment and move to the far bank where Nirvana is reached). All three of these devices called *hashi* — although written with different characters — connect two different worlds.

In the *Nō* drama, supernatural beings or phantoms assume human form and, leaving the other world, appear in the ordinary world of humanity. The other world is represented in the theater by the dressing room, or mirror room, to the left side of the stage. The main stage itself stands for the world of ordinary human reality. Connecting the two is an open wood-floored corridor called the *hashigakari*, over which supernatural and ghostly beings pass to be with human beings.

Before making his entrance, the actor prepares himself ceremoniously in front of the mirror in the mirror room to receive the spirit of the character he is portraying. The transformation completed, he passes under the curtain of colored striped silk raised for him, and slowly, in the gliding gait that has already been described, passes over the *hashigakari*, thus symbolizing transition from the other world to this one.

His movement juxtaposes the world of imagination and the world of actuality. The spirits dwell in the world of imagination but visit human beings dwelling in the actual world. This bifurcation into a real and an imaginary world is consonant with the indigenous Japanese view of the universe.

On stage, the actors walk with their bodies' center of gravity held low. As I have said, moving with the gliding gait probably imitates the way of walking of aristocrats living in houses with floors raised off the ground. It is thus eminently suited to representing the movement of gods or spirits who have come to the human world from afar.

Two Japanese words may be translated in English as to dance: *odoru* and *mau*. *Odoru* may include irregular movements and is not always smooth and horizontal in orientation; it is, in other words, related to the peasants' *namba* way of walking. In the *Nō* drama, people do not *odoru*, they *mau*. The kind of dance represented by this word requires smooth, horizontal, gliding motions and revolutions and a minimum indication of the reactions caused in the floor surface by the actor's feet. It is in movements of this kind that the *Nō* actor, with a mask



A scene from the movie *Kobayagawa Family's Autumn* by director Yasujiro Ozu.



A scene from the movie *Kutsukake Tokijoro: Life of a Lonely Chivalrous Man*.

concealing his face, passes over the *hashigakari* from the other world into this one, from the mirror room to the stage.

Low angle of vision

In the preceding sections, I have discussed the influence that floor levels, divisions, articulations, and surface materials have exerted on the postures and ways of sitting and walking of the Japanese people. As long as the floor was an extension of the ground, artificial platforms were essential for sitting and sleeping. Later, however, the artificial platform was expanded to cover the entire interior area. When this happened, people not only sat and slept but also walked on it. The resultant double meaning of the floor as a place to walk and a place to sit has made the Japanese one of the few peoples of the world for whom sitting on the floor is a generally accepted practice at all levels of society and has caused them to employ postures and ways of walking that are characteristic of them alone.

These same factors also have exerted important influences on architecture. First, they have stimulated the creation of deep eaves and openings extending from structural post to structural post and a horizontally oriented compositional plan defined by the floor at the bottom and by horizontal architectural members at the top. For some reason, the height of this horizontally oriented space tended to decrease with the years. Consequently, with a few exceptions, such as skylights, there are practically no soaring interior spaces in traditional Japanese architecture. Even when the space is unceilinged and open as far as the roof underside, it is crossed by several layers of beams and ties that are part of the roof support structure.

The proportions of a Japanese interior are determined on the basis of the sight lines of people seated on the floor. For this reason, they look entirely different to people who are standing. The desklike window ledge, the *tokonoma* alcove, and the associated set of shelves beside it in a *shoin*-style room appear most beautifully balanced when seen from a seated position on the floor; and ornaments and other articles are placed to be appreciated from that posture. From a standing position, one must look down on them. Even gardens, especially the courtyard gardens called *tsuboniwa*, are intended to be viewed by people sitting or kneeling on the floor, from which position they are rarely able to see the sky above the garden space. In other words, Japanese

architectural compositions tend to make people turn their gaze downward.

Turning the eyes downward was considered proper for women who dwelled in the dim inner regions of Japanese houses. It is the final outcome of the historical development of architecture in which horizontality and the demands of an ambiguous, soft, clean floor, on which it is perfectly proper to sleep as well as walk, have played a determining role in the gradual lowering of ceiling heights. In the *shinden*-style mansion, spaces were lofty. In buildings of the *shoin* style, ceilings were installed to terminate upward spatial rise. In the *suliyā* style, the ceiling heights were reduced; and finally, in the so-called rural-hermitage tea-ceremony pavilion, vertical measurements in general, and the height of the *nijiriguchi* entrance specifically, were reduced out of proportion with normal human physical dimensions.

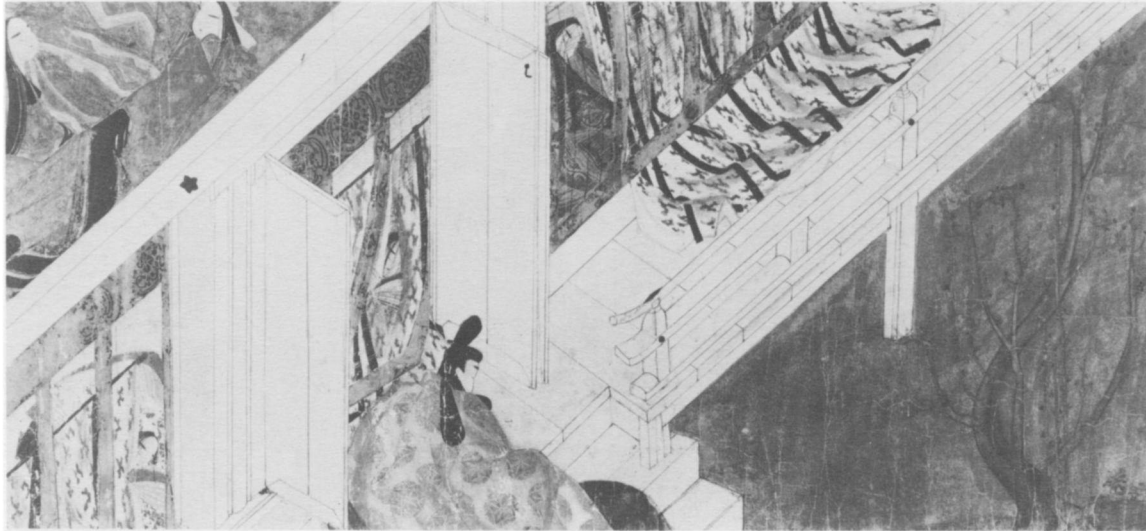
The low-angle camera position used in filming Japanese interiors in the late works of the great motion-picture director Yasujiro Ozu is in perfect keeping with this lowering of the line of sight necessitated by this height decrease. In order to maintain a stable composition of the domestic settings of his films, Ozu set his camera close to the floor and never altered its position. This camera angle, a characteristic of Ozu's films, was inevitable for a person aware of the nature of the Japanese house, whose essential composition it reflects.

Another motion-picture director, Yasushi Kato, lowers the camera still further, almost to the level of the top of the *tatami*. In one film this is perfectly logical, since the scene involves the playing of a card game called *hanafuda*, in which the cards are spread on the floor. In other words, the floor itself becomes a leading player.

It is possible to represent the interior of a traditional Japanese house with a method, resembling modern axonometrics, in which the roof is removed, revealing the spaces and the people in them at once to the elevated eyes of a distant third party. This kind of representation is seen in a set of paintings illustrating *The Tale of Genji* and is suited to ceilingless rooms of the kind found in the *shinden*-style mansion. The low-camera-angle approach of Yasujiro Ozu is diametrically opposed to this method. In it, the godlike, isolated beings looking down from above are gone. The camera is set in actual spaces and represents the eyes of actual people. Of course, to represent these eyes with complete accuracy, the camera would have to be turned downward and not straight out on a horizontal line. No

doubt Ozu chose this horizontal focus to endow his people with monumentality and make them fill the screen. In addition, however, it can be said that the line of sight of Japanese architecture itself has traditionally been one corresponding to this low-angle camera and that this visual orientation came into being with the introduction of floors completely covered with *tatami* mats.

Today that line of development has been broken. Carpets are used on floors now. The low table of the past has been replaced by Western-style dining sets, and living-room sofas and lounge chairs are set down on *tatami*. This means that a shift in sight line has inevitably occurred. As the old way of sitting on the floor blends with the new way of sitting on chairs, the floor itself is once again becoming ambiguous.



“Tale of Genji” picture scroll.