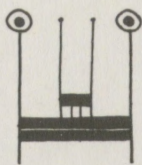
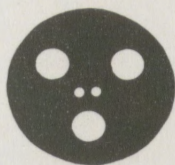
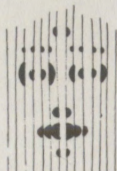
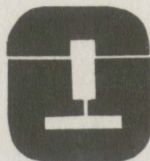
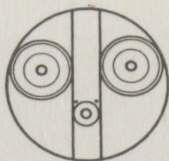
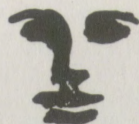


Design as Art

Bruno Munari



How One Lives in a Traditional Japanese House

We have never grown tired of each other, the mountains and I.
(*Li-Po*)

Ever since I was a boy I have dreamt of living in a Japanese house made of wood and paper. During a recent trip to Tokyo and Kyoto I stayed for three days in a traditional house and was able to poke around and notice every detail, the thicknesses, the materials, the colours. I was able to sniff around it inside and out, and try to make out how it was built the way it was, and why.

In modern Japan there are thousands of buildings and great office blocks made of cement, but the house that people actually choose to live in is nearly always the traditional house of wood, straw and paper.

The entrance of this very ancient type of house is most discreet. One does not step straight from the street into the living-room, as we so often do. There is a space, nearly always a small space, between the street and the door. It may be six foot square, this space, but it is enough to create a sense of detachment that is, I should say, more psychological than physical. The surface of these four square yards differs from that of the street. If the street is asphalt, this tiny forecourt will be paved with stones, and not just slabs of paving but stones of different kinds. Then there is one wall made of bamboo, one of natural wood, and one

stuccoed. The street side of the forecourt sometimes has a low wooden gate. In some cases there is also a small trickle of water running in a groove or a square stone with a round hollow full of water in it. Our equivalent would be the gutter that you see sticking out of the side of certain peasant houses, that periodically gushes out soapy water from the wash tub.

A small tree rather higher than the bamboo wall throws a decorative pattern of leaves on the plastered wall. The actual door is hidden behind a screen of dry branches. One opens the door and there one is. The entrance hall is paved with rough grey stone, and there one takes off one's shoes. On a wooden step one finds a pair of slippers. The room one enters next is raised above the level of the hall. If you go to Japan don't bother to take a pair of slippers: anywhere you go you will find some ready for you.

Our custom, on the other hand, is to keep our shoes on and trample the dirt from the street right through to the bedroom.

The character of the inside of the house is determined by the *tatami* on the horizontal plane, and by other vertical modular components. The module, prefabrication, mass-production and all the other things we are now recommending as necessary innovations have been used for hundreds of years in the traditional Japanese house.

The *tatami* is a mat of fine and tightly woven straw, and its colour is that of almost dry grass. It is edged with dark (often black) material and its size is about three foot by six, the size of a man lying down. The floors are covered with these *tatami* from wall to wall. They are pleasantly soft underfoot. The proportions of the room are expressed in *tatami*, so that a two-*tatami* room is about six foot by six, an eight-*tatami* room is twelve by twelve, and so on.

Another Japanese discovery that we are now in the process of discovering is the moving wall and the continuous window. All the inside walls of the Japanese house are movable except those devoted to built-in cupboards. Similarly, with the exception of the household services, all the rooms have outside walls that slide. One puts the walls and windows where one wants them. According to the position of the sun or the direction of the wind, one can arrange one's house in various ways.

I should tell you at once, in case you do not know, that there are no pieces of furniture stuck about the room. Everything one needs is kept in the wall-cupboards, that also act as soundproofing when necessary. Even the bed (that is, mattress and blankets) is kept in one of these cupboards. When you want to go to bed you close one wall, take your mattress out of another, lay it on the *tatami* (which is by no means 'on the ground', as some people think), tuck the blankets round it and go to sleep. And how do you sleep? Very well indeed. The floor is not hard or cold, thanks to the *tatami*, and the mattress gives one the firm comfort of a good solid bed without a sagging hole in the middle.

The rooms are about eight feet high, so that when one lies in bed there is not a great yawning void above one. It is like being in a large four-poster.

The sliding doors of the house itself and of the cupboards are made of paper mounted on a light wooden frame, and they run in grooves scarcely wider than a scratch between one *tatami* and another. They are so light they can be moved with a fingertip, and they have no locks or handles.

But we of course have heavy doors with locks and handles, bolts and chains, and when we shut our doors the bang can be heard all over the house. But when you shut a paper door. . . .

One pads softly over the *tatami* in one's socks, the light is discreet but sufficient, the proportions are harmonious. Air is circulated in a natural way. Instead of blasting in 'conditioned' air that is nearly always either too hot or too cold, the Japanese have regulable openings in the coolest part of the house and others at high points in the sunniest part. In comes the cool air and out goes the hot air. In winter they simply make their rooms small, so that a brazier or small stove gives ample heat.

The 'windows' are sliding frames fitted with paper or glass, and they can be opened all round the house. They are protected by a roof that projects so far as to form a covered way along the outside. This serves as a kind of veranda, or an external passage between one part of the house and another. Windows and doors, you will already have realized, are one and the same thing. Each panel could equally well be thought of as either.

The building materials are used in their natural state and according to logical and natural rules. For example, what should one use to roof a wooden house, as we would use tiles? A layer of cypress bark of course, for bark is the part of the tree accustomed to alternations of sun and frost, damp and drought, so it will not rot or perish. In using wood for the rest of the house it is always borne in mind that every tree-trunk has a back and a front: the front is the part facing the sun, the back is the shady side. They do not put wood that has always been in the shade in a sunny part of the house, or vice versa.

All woods and other materials are thus used in their natural state, and only for certain exceptional uses are they painted. A natural material ages well. Painted material loses its paint, cannot breathe, rots. It has become bogus.

All these houses, whether rich or poor, have the same modules, the same *tatami*, the same woods and the same proportions, but they differ in the degree of inventiveness with which the materials are used. Their colour is neutral, ranging from grey-green to walnut, from the colours of the woods to those of dry grasses, and finally that of a special stucco coloured with the clay soil of Kyoto.

In such natural surroundings a person stands out and dominates. Sitting on the *tatami* or on cushions at a small low table — the only piece of furniture and the only lacquered object of any kind — one drinks tea and plies one's wooden chopsticks. The food is simple and abundant, a kind of oriental equivalent of Tuscan cooking. The wine is *saké*. At the end of the meal the chopsticks are thrown away, the few plates are washed and put away, and the dining-room becomes the sitting-room again. Later on it will be a bedroom. There is no moving of furniture, no complication, no clattering of knives, forks and spoons. Everything is of the simplest.

In the part of the house which is most used there is a kind of square niche with a raised floor. This is the *Tokonoma*, a corner of the house made out of materials from the preceding house, a link with the past. It is sufficient that in our new house we have an old wooden post, well seasoned but still sound. In the *Tokonoma* is the only picture hanging in the house (there are others rolled up in the cupboards), and a vase of flowers arranged with real art. Unlike us, the Japanese do not buy a couple of pounds of carnations and stuff them into the first jam-jar that comes to hand.

Even the 'services' are arranged with simplicity and imagination. From the lavatory window one can see a branch of a tree, a patch of sky, a low wall and a hedge of bamboo.

The bathtub is made of wood, the most pleasant material to the touch.

Of course, living in a house made of paper and wood one has to behave well. One must learn not to lean against the walls, or throw cigarette butts on to the floor. One cannot bang doors and spill things. But if by chance one does dirty a door, with a few pence one buys a new piece of paper and all is spick-and-span again.

How lucky we are, in comparison. Especially in Italy where our floors are made of marble, which doesn't burn, so we can drop our cigarettes on to them without even having to stamp them out, where we can slam the doors to our hearts' content (otherwise they don't shut properly), where our hands can swarm here there and everywhere and we can make crazy patterns on the wainscot with the soles of our shoes. And as if that weren't enough we try to use materials that won't show the dirt. We do not get rid of dirt, or try to behave in a more civilized way. Just as long as we don't see it, why worry?

Anyone wishing to study this subject more closely is recommended to read the fine volume on Japanese architecture by Teiji Itoh, published in Italian by Silvana.