

**(IN)VISIBILITIES FROM THE *INTERVAL*'S DISSYMMETRY
REFLECTIONS THROUGH TÁVORA'S JAPAN AND SARTRE:
THE TENNIS PAVILION
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Cepeda, J. (2020). Traces of Japan'ness in Modern Portuguese Architecture. 16th International Docomomo Conference.

Cepeda, J. (2013). Nadir Afonso, Arquitecto. Caleidoscópio.

Abstract: *The Japanese way of building and inhabiting has decisively influenced many Western authors. Regarding Western context, “Japan'ness” was appropriated through different manners. However, surprisingly, a subliminal (yet essential) Japanese cultural feature seems to have been overlooked – at least, as far as the research on its possible reverberations on Western design is concerned. Disrupting Western's more typical symmetrical logic, this Nipponese principle that only exists in Japan, is untranslatable. Here named (and interpreted) as ‘interval’, this notion embodies a concept that, although hidden or intuited, seems to be transversal to all Japanese realms. Based on these indications, this paper focuses on this (little-known to the West) original conception, to finally rehearse an interpretation of the potentiating effects it may have had in the case of one of the 20th century most prominent Portuguese architects – Fernando Távora –, by driving attention to his (Occidental) example, and taking on a critical and different review of his theoretical perspectives, his archives, his journeys, and an in-depth (and, we believe, unprecedented from this viewpoint) examination of his personal library – filled with Japanese and existentialist “Sartrian” traces –, to finally focus on one specific example of his architectural practice: the Tennis Pavilion.*

Keywords: Interval; Dissymmetry; Távora; Japan; Sartre.

**INTRODUCTION – TRACES OF AN (IN)VISIBLE DEPTH:
BEYOND WESTERN SYMMETRICAL ABSTRACTION**

Japanese exotic scenarios summons Westerns to an intuitive recognition of a certain pre-existing reality – like a culture that seems to exist before time itself. After all, as Taut warned, in Japanese traditional architecture, “(...) *our eyes think.*” (Taut, 1958, p.114). Aristotle's ontological “architecture” suggested only two symmetrical (contrary) hypotheses – to be or not to be. These, anchored in the 'non-contradiction' foundation, disregarded the third alternative that, *in-between*, lies in the *middle*, 'neither being, nor not being' – which the philosopher considered, but denied, calling it ‘the third excluded’ (Aristotle *et al.*, 2012). Thus, this logic entails the impossibility of a theorem neither being true, nor false – no proposition could be in this *intermediate* space. Hence, what could be 'one or

the other', or 'neither one, nor the other', would be outside of the conventional Western rational system. The Japanese ideogram '間' represents an untranslatable conception whose meaning only exists in Japan. Like others, this "veiled" concept subliminally inhabits the particular Japanese common-sense: although everyone knows it, they're not capable to express it. Transversal to all Japanese culture, this notion contains this *intermediary* universe that – with the exception of a few Western authors who (also) suggested a third additional element – seems to have been neglected by the vast majority of the West's traditional (and merely) symmetric oppositional abstraction.

ESSAY OF AN *INTERVAL* THEORY – A THIRD WAY: SYMMETRY DISRUPTED

Although some Westerners briefly assessed this principle (Nitschke, 1966; Pilgrim, 1995), in reality, there are no evident Western in-depth studies approaching this concept, that apparently breaks Western's more common symmetric philosophy, disrupting its "2-sides-only" of antagonistically and dyadically structuring the thought. Therefore, in 1976, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki prepared an exhibition in Paris to enlighten this enigma to the West. However, records from the time unanimously reported the "(...) *fasco of venturing into the impenetrable.*" (Berque, 1982, p.71). From then on, several translations were suggested: 'gap', 'distance', 'space', among others. From this vast "ensemble", this investigation elected the word *interval* to represent it. Exploring this *interval* invites us to scrutinize that remaining third possibility, exterior to the traditionally dual-mirrored symmetric universe of 'being' or 'not being' – an *in-between* option, of the simultaneous and contradictory, occupied by what can simultaneously be 'one and the other', or 'neither one, nor the other'. The potentiality and ambivalence of the *interval* seems to foster an aesthetic that emphasizes, for example, the white spaces not drawn on paper (Figure 1), the silences in musical compositions – but also the spaces that are located in the *interstice*, in the *intermediation* of the full and the empty, the internal and the external, or the natural and the built atmospheres that, as Taut suggested, the eyes look for, but cannot see.



Figure 1 The latent *interval* in the painting
"Pine Trees" (c. 1595), by Tohaku Hasegawa¹

According to cornerstone Japanese compendiums, the *interval* may be apprehended through a keen awareness of space and place. This perception shouldn't result from their physical dimension, but through a simultaneously empirical, temporal, and sensory understanding of form ('what exists'), and non-form (which shouldn't be understood as 'what doesn't exist', but as 'what exists beyond form'). It isn't something resulting from addition – its focus falls on a *negative* space. It is the space that 'isn't there' that, perceived as an *interval*, gives shape to 'what is' – the *negative* intuitive *void* that 'isn't there', ends up emerging as the principal actor. As such, the *interval*'s spirit doesn't suggest a celebration of any element, but of the space *between* them – it fundamentally represents an '*absence*', contrary to Western's more typical (and tangible) view.

FROM THE MISLEADING EYE – TRACING TÁVORA'S "*ORGANIZATION OF SPACE*"

This paper's objective is not to search for more authors who were directly "influenced" by Nipponese architecture – its focus lies on the *interval*'s specific scrutiny: initially, building a *theory* around its (in)definition; and afterwards, inspecting the potentiating effects it might have brought to the *practice* of one renowned Western architectural author.

Consequently, the concentration on the example of the well-known Portuguese architect Fernando Távora arose as an (almost) obvious choice. A primordial criterion was outlined: the hypothesis that some of his achievements somehow raise or translate the *interval* – ultimately, and for the purpose of this paper only, we'll solely focus on one case: his built Tennis Pavilion. Secondly, subsequent premises consolidated Távora's adequacy: his 1960's Japan trip; his admiration for the country; his records from those journeys; and the fact that he wrote about his own work – an essential condition, due to the manifest relationship between *theory* and *practice* in this paper's exploration.

Finally, his frequent theoretical assertions that "(...) *what one leaves empty is as important as what is filled*" (Távora, 1962, p.XV), or that "(...) *space is not only the forms that exist and occupy it, as our eyes mislead us to suppose*" (Távora, 1962, p.12), because "(...) *the space separating forms, is also form, although we cannot see it*" (Távora, 1962, p.14), consubstantiate supplementary meaningful indications.

Alerting that "(...) *space is what our eyes cannot apprehend through natural processes*" (Távora, 1962, p.12), Távora states, thus, the potentiality of that (remaining) space (*in-between*), which he claims "(...) *not being merely (...) the negative of forms and volumes, (...) it is matter and substance itself.*" (Távora, 1962, p.XXIII)

BETWEEN TÁVORA'S JAPAN AND SARTRE – AT THE HEART OF HIS JOURNEYS AND PERSONAL LIBRARY

Távora's visit to Japan occurred from an invitation received as a "*CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne)*" member, to attend the 1960's "World-Design-Conference" in Tokyo. Venturing through Tokyo, Nikko, Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara (Figure 2), his diary reports extraordinary drawings and descriptions of several gardens, temples, shrines, and palaces, clearly suggesting his identification to those places: "(...) *Japan, a majesty. I'll have to come back.*" (Távora, 2012, p.79)



Figure 2 Some of Fernando Távora's original photographs from his trip to Japan in 1960, with permission from FIMS – Fundação Marques da Silva (Fernando Távora's Archive).

In fact, Távora reflects that the Japanese essence "(...) *adds remarkable lessons, pointing a new path that has to be travelled to try to solve the chaos of contemporary space*" (Távora, 1962, p.17), underlining the importance of the distinctive Nipponese "(...) *sense of integration of the space phenomena, which we're not used to in our world of categorizations, distinctions, and opposites.*" (Távora, 1962, p.17)

Moreover, scrutinizing Távora's former office's library and private personal collection, several relevant Japanese architectural culture compendiums can be found. Including more than 50 editions, some essential references presenting Nipponese architectural foundations emerge, for instance, Hideto Kishida's "*Japanese Architecture*" (1948), Tetsuro Yoshida's "*Japanische Architektur*" (1952) and "*The Japanese House and Garden*" (1955), and Jiro Harada's "*The Lesson of Japanese Architecture*" (1954), among many others. Furthermore, apart from these major works, Távora also collected other noteworthy Japanese publications, ranging from cultural-societal books, to artistic or aesthetics compilations – from which the Okakura's seminal "treatise" "*The Book of Tea*" (1906) stands out (Figure 3). Additionally, it's particularly interesting to note Távora also had various "oeuvres" of the renowned French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre – from which we underline the examples of "*Being and Nothingness*" (1943) and "*L'existencialisme est un humanisme*" (1946) (Figure 4). This fact builds its interest not just for Sartre's known relation with Japan, but because

of the apparent harmonious closeness between Sartre's existentialism and, in many ways, the *interval*-philosophy.

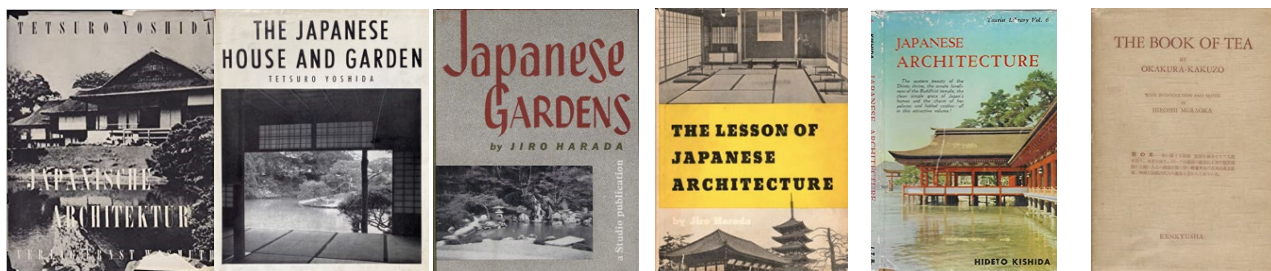


Figure 3 Some of Fernando Távora's original editions of several relevant Japanese books, with permission from FIMS – Fundação Marques da Silva (Fernando Távora's Archive).

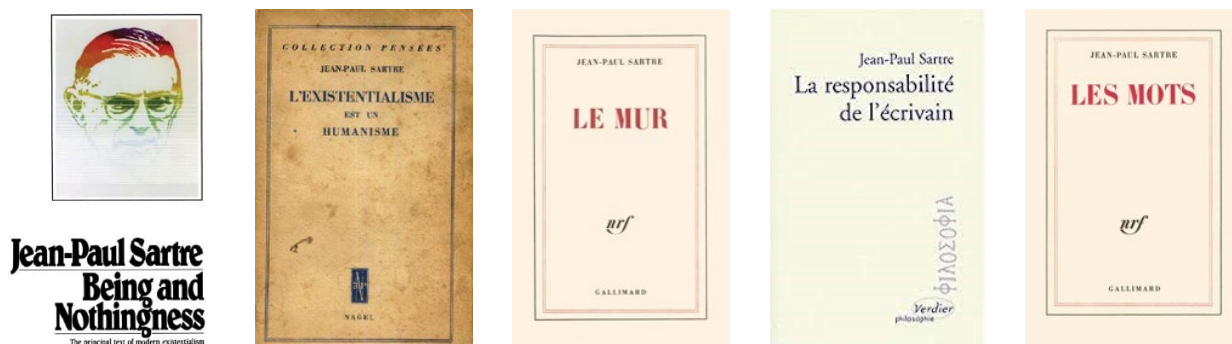


Figure 4 Some of Fernando Távora's original editions of Jean-Paul Sartre's books, with permission from FIMS – Fundação Marques da Silva (Fernando Távora's Archive).

If, in “*The Book of Tea*”, Okakura declared that “(...) *beauty can only be discovered by one who mentally completes the emptiness*” (Okakura, 1906, p.70), later, in that same century, the European philosopher seems to have sensed a similar direction. Among his reasonings, Sartre often suggested that, if *between* 'being' and 'non-being' there was nothingness, then, this didn't represent total emptiness, or absolute 'non-existence' – but rather a promising space: “(...) *That nothingness carries being in its heart.*” (Sartre, 1943, p.83). Therefore, as a possibility, the *interval* may associate with this *emptiness* – diverging, however, from the Western notion, whose connotation is plain nothingness. Conceptually, this emptiness may be seen as an *absence* of something that doesn't reveal itself, but whose “presence” is manifested by its potentiality. An *empty* space (physical, but intuitive) which, in this way, can contain everything, and boost the possibility for the new – giving rise, thus, to a third (*in-between*) alternative existential space².

“BEYOND FORM” – ‘TO BE AND NOT TO BE’: THE TENNIS PAVILION DISSYMMETRIC *INTERVAL*

Located at Quinta da Conceição's Municipal Park in Matosinhos (Portugal), Távora's Tennis Pavilion appears as a small building that, however, emanates a very intense yet subtle aura. Holding an

apparent delicate austerity, its atmosphere's simplicity is enhanced through the pavilion's tribune intimate domestic scale, fully integrated in nature (Figure 5). Responding to the specific use of viewing the tennis matches below, it's the tribune's complete *emptiness* that stands out – a physical space which, although being formally defined, apparently seems to not be (demandingly) utilitarian (Figure 6).



Figure 5 The Tennis Pavilion (1956-60) at Matosinhos, Portugal, in 1967, with permission from FIMS – Fundação Marques da Silva (Fernando Távora's Archive).



Figure 6 The Tennis Pavilion (1956-60) at Matosinhos, Portugal, in 2004 (Unknown photographer); The Tennis Pavilion project (1956-60) original drawings – plans, sections and elevations (Fernando Távora), with permission from FIMS – Fundação Marques da Silva (Fernando Távora's Archive).

(Re)reading Távora's descriptive texts of the project, one is struck with an apparent unsettling dimension, full of meanings, or perhaps enigmatic: the Pavilion, after all, "(...) *is useless.*" (Távora, 1993, p.74) Additionally, and possibly even more disturbing than this surprising declaration, Távora continues proclaiming that this is "(...) *the maximum compliment one can give to it (...).*" (Távora, 1993, p.74) Based on the (sincere) assumption that the planned views for the tennis courts were, finally, unfortunately short and insufficient, Fernando Távora suggests that – with the exception of the bathhouses designed on the lower floor – the function for the building does not work, or that, at least, the 'purpose' planned for the small covered podium did not work. The message is as clear as it is unexpected: the building doesn't work, and that's its greatest strength. On the one hand, we are dealing with a space that is formally defined, constituting, for that very reason, a habitable space, in which one can remain. On the other hand, this is a category of space that presents itself to us as

“non-functional” – at least, in the usual terms. Perhaps “non-utilitarian” suits as the most accurate expression, in the sense that it does not, or eventually did not end up containing a specific utility. One is summoned to (re)visit the Park, (re)apprehending its ambience, and its infinitely vague and inscrutable atmospheres. And all of a sudden, (maybe) by means of abstracting reason from one’s discernment, one’s judgments seem to refer to a certain level of holistic, more intuitive and comprehensive understanding. In fact, answering to the precise use of following the tennis games underneath, the pavilion’s purpose seems way broader – one of structuring views, and ultimately, ordering the entire park. And promptly, one reaches the awareness of a kind of ‘essential function’ – the ability to organize a larger space. After all, this is a space that “(...) *is useless*” (Távora, 1993, p.74), but that works. That doesn't have a specific use but has a function. The impression seems to hold us in an atmosphere of silence, of a (remotely) Japanese serenity.

Its ambience transports us through space and time, to the ancient “*sukiya*”-style Japanese teahouses (“*chashitsu*”). These (equally) small constructions – which mimicked in miniaturization the large Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines – seem to reveal similar principles to those of Távora’s pavilion. Also responding to the specific use of the traditional tea ceremony, its purpose was another, more comprehensive – their major function was the Japanese gardens organization. The tea pavilions were established as small ornamental elements of the Japanese garden, having, therefore, as a true function, its marking and punctuation. Its use exists and is well defined – but its reason is broader: a structuring function, of ordering the garden, the territory, and the landscape. Additionally, these were also constructions whose qualities translated into a *void* – like “blank spaces” for experimentation, whose particularity lies in the fact that they do not need to respond to the demands of everyday life. Alike Távora’s pavilion, the “*chashitsu*” constituted habitable spaces that, however, didn’t serve as spaces to inhabit, but to be enjoyed at times, through the will and sensitivity of each person, who decided how they’d “fill” that *void*. Furthermore, albeit covered, the pavilion’s tribune constitutes a space that becomes external, due to its limit’s dilution. As Távora often avowed, there’s a “(...) *tension that comes from the dialectic between (...) internal and external (...) space*” (Távora, 1962, p.IX), and if “(...) *space is continuous, [then] (...) it cannot be partially organized, (...) in interior (...) or exterior (...).*” (Távora, 1962, p.IX). In reality, this pavilion’s ambiguous “interior-exterior” area – as a *transitional* space open to different usages, resumed in a neither interior, nor exterior fashion, but both simultaneously – ends up falling, then, precisely, in that possible third category of *interval* existence of ‘being and not being’, breaking Western’s conventional symmetry. In the end, the attentive (but unrestrained) experimentation of this kind of ‘space of suspension’, suggests us how, from a very small gesture, and initially designing a (very) precise function, Távora’s Pavilion (still) accommodates many other *intervals* and possibilities – it is a special case

of architecture. According to Távora himself, he started out the project resting upon this one simple demand: “(...) *to create an object endowed with presence (...)*.” (Távora, 1993, p.74)

Presence became revelation.

Of the space, and the territory.

A perception beyond form – beyond the Pavilion, the park, or the place.

Perhaps beyond ourselves.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese building influenced many Western authors. Surprisingly, an essential Japanese cultural feature seems to have been overlooked, as far as its possible impacts on Western design is concerned. Disrupting Western's symmetrical logic, this exclusively Nipponese untranslatable principle is here named '*interval*'. Focusing on this (little-known to the West) conception, this paper essays its possible effects in one renowned Western architect, Fernando Távora, by critically reviewing his example, journeys, and personal library. Summarizing, this paper explores the (in)visible reverberations *between* the *interval*'s apparent dissymmetry and (part of) Távora's architectural thinking-practice, concentrating in one of his most celebrated achievements, the Tennis Pavilion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank FIMS - Fundação Instituto Arquitecto José Marques da Silva for the opportunity to share special photographic material within this scientific paper.

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² Two other Western authors are mentionable, as they also were exceptions to the more typical Western thought, proposing tripartite systems: the American philosopher-scientist Charles Sanders Peirce, who designed a triadic model of thought; and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who, learning from Peirce, translated his model to his psyche studies, suggesting the unconscious (or “the real”) as a concept of absence. However, both their focuses were fundamentally directed to the study of sign processes and symbols – the semiotics field –, and to psychoanalysis, respectively. Furthermore, their triptych structures also do not seem to resemble the *interval* concept, mainly due to the fact that their concepts appear to lack the design of a third element's *in-betweenness*.

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