Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

• Paper / Proposal Title:
This Here Now: Traditional Japanese Building and the Singular Nature of Being

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• Abstract (300 words):
The form and location of the Japan’s earliest sacred buildings were based on how, where and when immaterial spirits known as kami were thought to be embodied in the physical world. This paper argues that the approaches to building represented in these early Shinto structures have important lessons for contemporary building designers in affirming the unique conditions of every material being, including our own, and in encouraging more empathetic relationships with our fellow beings and with the natural environment.

This Here Now analyzes traditional Japanese architecture as a series of built responses to perceptible events, in materially, space, and time. To be perceived at all, phenomena need to have a certain minimal extension in space or time, and to be experienced as distinct, they also need to have clearly defined limits. Gestalt psychology suggests that humans have evolved to pay special attention to such “events” as potentially meaningful variations from the status quo, and this is powerfully illustrated in early Japanese responses to kami in the guise of natural phenomena. In the term for moment, shunkan (瞬間), for example, the Japanese sense of “now” had a temporal duration. In the word for human being, ningen (人間) “here,” as measured by the body, likewise had an implied extension in space. And although it has fallen out of use today, there was also a traditional Japanese word for “here” that included spatial extension, deriving from the Chinese term cijian 此間, which translates literally as “this interval” or “at this place.”
responsiveness offers an important source of practical design strategies for affirming the uniqueness of individual human beings, and at the same time for effectively overcoming the limits of the individual body and sharing the normally subjective experiences of this, here and now with others. It suggests that built enclosures can serve as a “third skin” that effectively extends the human body, making it both sharable with others and offering us the opportunity to implement a new, more mutually beneficial relationship with the natural environment.

The paper presents three arguments:

1. as extensions of the human body, buildings can help to affirm the uniqueness of our individual being by actively revealing this, here and now

2. in their co-habitability, these built “artificial bodies” can also help us to effectively share our normally inherently individual perceptions of this, here and now, as well as other experiences of being

3. in offering us the opportunity to re-design the interface between ourselves and the world at large, building “skins” can express how we want to live with the natural environment

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Kevin Nute is an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Hawaii. He trained at the University of Nottingham, earned his PhD at the Martin Centre for Architectural and Urban Studies at the University of Cambridge, and previously taught at Cambridge, Muroran Institute of Technology in Japan, and the University of Oregon. His research focuses primarily on transcultural design principles in traditional Japanese architecture and their application to contemporary environmental design beyond Japan.


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2 The location of places, things and occasions is conventionally judged subjectively in relation to the individual human body: the original measure of “now,” “here” and “this,” Just as phenomenologists believe that the body acts as a mediator between the inner world of the mind and the physical world “out there,” buildings similarly mediate between our bodies and the world at large, and that in so doing they can effectively expand “now,” “here” and “this” to make them both perceptible and sharable experiences.