

# A STROLL THROUGH A BOOK

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The taxi pulls up in front of the bamboo fence of the Katsura villa just before nine. We drove through Kyoto's hectic morning rush hour to the frayed edges of the city, an area of rice fields and industrial premises. This is the spot where, in around 1650, prince Toshitada realized an idyll; a delightful retreat consisting of a garden, teahouses and a villa, a creation of unprecedented beauty, simplicity and precision. The Katsura villa embodies the perfect harmony between nature and culture. It is also a construction for the observation, study and understanding of natural phenomena. Katsura had a magical reputation among the Western modernists. The architect Bruno Taut visited the villa in 1933. He is credited with its discovery. Today, one has to make an appointment far in advance for a viewing. You then receive a guided tour in a group of ten for one hour. That is far too short.

The gate opens and we enter the secret garden. Despite the early hour, the August heat is already oppressive in the humid atmosphere. Streams of sweat run down the body, quickly turning the light-coloured clothing dark. The walk follows a winding path through tall bamboo bushes past green ponds, bordered by moss and bonsai trees. The architects have channelled water from the river outside to the country estate and modelled the banks with pebbles and boulders on a small scale after the existing jagged coastline of the Japanese archipelago. Water and land are an accurate imitation of the organically formed landscape. Rocks apparently placed 'at random', but actually positioned with great care, form natural steps to the wooden veranda of a slightly elevated teahouse. Consistent with much traditional Japanese architecture, this is a half open structure with a strong element of interaction between inside and outside. As with a beautifully detailed sculpture, the materials speak for themselves.

The wooden frame of arched trunks and straight beams is filled in with walls of clay mixed with the husks of rice stalks. These light yellow-brown surfaces of natural materials harmonize with the blond reeds of the tatami mats and the dark cedar wood floor of the veranda. At regular intervals the white rice paper-covered screen doors graphically

interrupt the view like the pauses in a poem. The sliding walls, with which the spaces can be divided or combined, are distinctive in colour and design: a chequered pattern of bold clear white and blue squares. Together with the shoebox-like setting, it evokes associations with an interior by Vermeer. In a second teahouse the walls function as a frame around a large rectangular window, which displays the progression of the daylight and the cycle of the seasons as a living painting. In the seventeenth century the Japanese, just as their Dutch contemporaries, were fascinated by the visible world, the book of nature.

Our walk finally takes us past the villa. The facade of the complex, which consists of connected residential elements with their wide verandas and large overhanging roofs, is ornamented with an elegant Mondriaanesque pattern of horizontal and vertical lines, between which the white rice paper panels stand in dazzling contrast to the surrounding green of pine trees and lawns. One large terrace, a simple rectangle woven from bamboo stems, was used for moon gazing. It overlooks a lake of especially large dimensions in order to make a long reflection of the moonlight possible. The tour ends at the entrance to the villa. We stand outside, bewildered and overwhelmed. What did we see?

A few years later I am sitting at home at my table and find myself again in Katsura. In front of me lies the beautiful 400-page book *Katsura Imperial Villa* from 2004, published by Electa Architectura. In addition to the diary notes made by Bruno Taut in 1933, the text also contains essays by other architects such as Walter Gropius, Kenzo Tange and Arata Isozaki. The majority of the book consists of an accurate photographic record of a tour made by Yoshihara Matsumura. This begins at the main building and continues anticlockwise to the teahouses. I enter through the inner courtyard. Concise notes, maps and floor plans accompany the splendid photographs of the successive rooms and verandas of the 'shoin' complex, the buildings of which are staggered to resemble geese in flight. My eye wanders through the rooms, which are structured by a grid of horizontal and vertical lines formed by pillars, the blue edges of the tatamis and the black lacquered

wall frames, decorated with ochre and white floral patterns. From the villa I walk into the garden. The path leads past a waterfall, over a bridge to a shore with pebbles. Occasionally the camera zooms in on a detail, such as a stone lantern in a tree. The seasons come and go. Sometimes the branches are bare, then the azaleas are in bloom or it is drizzling over the motionless lakes. Strolling through the universe of prince Toshitada, another analogy with seventeenth century Holland comes to mind, and with a similar project, that of the country estate laid-out as a work of art.

At virtually the same time, around 1640, in Holland the poet and diplomat Constantijn Huygens, assisted by the classicist architect Jacob van Campen, created the country estate 'de Hofwijck' in Voorburg. In this he attempted to articulate 'the World'. Not by copying its natural manifestation, but by presenting it in an idealized form, in a cosmic order. For a rectangular piece of land on the banks of the River Vliet, he made a design that, according to Vitruvius, was based on the proportions of the human body. In the mathematical model, rows of trees and borders along straight axes represent the limbs and torso of a human figure. The country house, the top floor of which offered a panoramic view in all directions, formed the head.

In order to clarify his architectural concept, Huygens wrote a 'didactic poem' in which he contends that studying the cosmos is the key to happiness. In the poem, which has him commenting on his creation while wandering through the estate, he enters into dialogue with himself. He asks himself whether it is sometimes permitted to digress from the mathematical order. The answer is no, as the result would be as disordered as a 'Japanese skirt'. Huygens speaks in the classicist language of his day, but his intentions to unite art and nature into a cosmic whole are timeless and universal. Seeing plays a central role in this. One gains insight through observation. This notion connects him with his Japanese cultural philosophy contemporaries and with the modernists of the twentieth century. Strolling through the book, I walked with them for a while, cutting right across time and space.