

Beauty to the modernist eyes: Katsura Imperial Villa and the Japanization of European-American modernism

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Everyone will have observed how much easier it is to get the measure of a picture, especially sculpture, not to mention architecture, in a photograph than in reality.

—Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 1931.

(Benjamin, 1999, p. 523)

This book does not tell everything there is to tell about the Katsura Palace. It is neither a definitive introduction nor a historical study. Quite possibly the photographs in it do not give an accurate over-all view of the palace, or even of the individual buildings in it.

—Kenzo Tange, *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, 1960.

(Tange, 1960a, p.v)

Does the photographic representation reveal specific characters of the architecture more than a product of the camera? Kenzo Tange’s opening remarks in his foreword to the 1960 book on the Japanese imperial villa Katsura suggested a transformation of the architectural subject through photographic reproduction and a construction of a new vision independent of historical narratives. An imperial retreat of Japanese garden and architectural complex built in the seventeenth-century, Katsura remained obscure to scholars until the twentieth century, when the German architect Bruno Taut “discovered” the place in 1933.¹ The book, entitled *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, was a major publication on the villa in the 1960s. It was collaborated by the former Bauhaus masters Walter Gropius and Herbert Bayer, the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and Japanese-American photographer Yasuhiro Ishimoto (Gropius, Tange, Ishimoto, & Bayer, 1960). Through a series of monochrome photos, the book presented how the villa could be transformed from a subject of Japanese tradition to a product of modernist ideals. At the same time, the photographic reproductions also suggested the capacity of Katsura to accommodate such a modernist vision. By examining the development of modernist interests in Katsura, emerged since Taut’s visit and fully flourished in the 1960 book, this article sets out to illustrate the role of Katsura as an architectural medium to participate in the process of the Japanization

of European-American modernism, facilitated through cultural interchange and defined by characteristics of Japanese architecture.

Bruno Taut: “Beauty for the eye,” 1933

Katsura Imperial Villa, or Katsura Detached Villa, is located in the Western suburbs of Kyoto in Japan. It was commissioned by Prince Toshihito (1579–1629) and completed by his son, Prince Toshitada (1619–1662). The project, initiated already in 1615, was constructed, renovated and expanded into the present form across three stages in the mid-seventeenth century (Isozaki, 2007, p. 9). Katsura comprises a building complex of four sections, surrounded by a large-scale garden landscape of Zen aesthetics and bounded by the Katsura River.

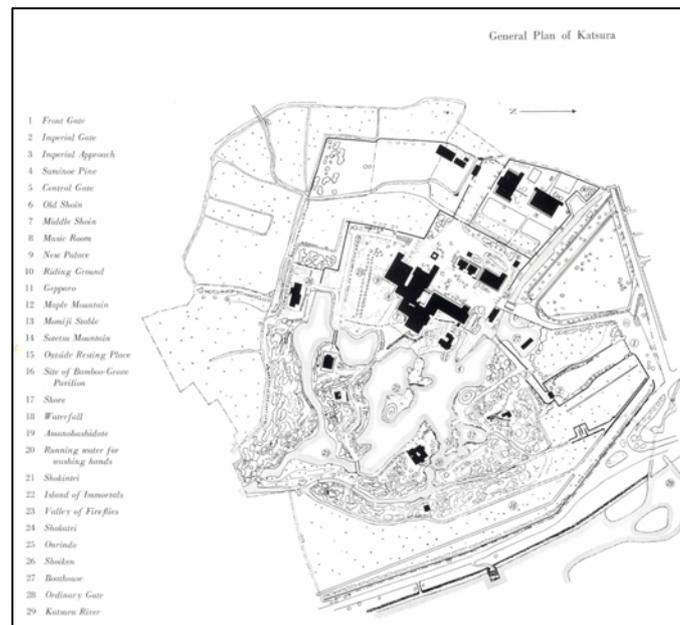


Fig.1. General Plan in *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture* (Gropius et al., 1960, p. 12).

The architectural plan of Katsura – which I refer to the drawing in Gropius, Tange and Ishimoto’s 1960 book – suggested a specific order to visit the site which highlighted its

garden landscape (Fig.1). Upon entering the Front Gate and the Imperial Gate, visitors would walk a promenade of the Imperial Approach before reaching the main buildings behind the Central Gate, embedded in Katsura's nature-emphasised landscape. The building complex consists of the Old Shoin, the Middle Shoin, the Music Room and the New Palace. All of the constructions within the Shoin complex are interconnected with each other through aisles and corridors. The garden, largely inspired by Chinese and Japanese classics on nature, has structures of different scales scattered around the central pond, including four teahouses named after four seasons – Shokintei (Winter), Shoiken (Summer), Shokatei (Spring) and Gepparo (Autumn) – and Onrindo, a small Buddhist temple where the memorial tablets of the Katsura family were previously kept. These elements are accompanied by sceneries featuring a waterfall, mountains and pine trees (Ishizawa, Kondo, Okada, & Tazawa, 1957, p. 140). Overall, Katsura presents an intimate relationship between the architecture and the surrounding landscape, highlighting elements of nature, tea rituals and the harmony of the spiritual and physical world, as if the site is detached from the actual everyday life.

When the German modernist architect Bruno Taut – who designed the Glass Pavilion for the 1914 Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne – visited Katsura two days after his arrival in Japan, he identified its cultural specificity and architectural importance based on his experience with modern architecture in Europe: “Here the European visitor is confronted with a wholly new beauty, one that can be compared with no other and is purely Japanese. [...] Nothing like this can be viewed anywhere else, not even in Japan [...]” (Taut, 1934). Arata Isozaki notes that Taut's visit to Katsura was facilitated by Isaburo Uneo and Shotaro Shimomura – both of were members of Japan International Architectural Association, the leading group in Japan in 1930s to promote Western modernist ideals. As a result, Taut's visit to and notes on Katsura, as Isozaki points out, can also be interpreted as an intentional performance “staged after a scenario written by the Japanese modernists” (Isozaki, 2007, p. 11).

Taut documented his visit through writings and sketchbooks, which became the first major publication on Katsura (Buntrock, 2012, p. 2). Taut was drawn to the integrated relations between nature and architecture in Katsura, the experience of which was extended through the richness of formal aesthetics along the promenade, from the garden and the courtyard

to the tea houses and the Shoin interior. Taut then connected this relation between architecture and nature to the spiritual functions of Katsura, in contrast to the rational analysis of form and function in European modern architecture. As Taut passionately journaled after his first visit:

Courtyard: [...] movement on the pathway to the gate [...] Anterooms, waiting room, [...] Moon-Viewing Platform! So beautiful it moves you to tears: movement of garden, landing stage set crosswise, [...] Infinite and so rich in relationships that you are overwhelmed. [...] Continue into the palace [...]. Along the path great richness, [...] Subtle differentiation on artistic enjoyment: the “all” only in movement, when motionless restraint. Beauty for the eye: eye = transformer into spirituality. Thus Japan: visual beauty. (Taut, 1933)

Manfred Speidel has noted that Taut’s appreciation of the artistic and spiritual embodiment of Katsura was in essence a reassertion of his utopian visions for modern architecture developed since *Alpine Architektur* in 1918, where Taut expressed similar proclaims for architectural elements representing a sense of freedom – Taut even specified Katsura to be the representation of “a new Alpine Architecture” in his diary in 1934 (Speidel, 2007, pp. 325–7). This enthusiasm for the architectural attributes was therefore a performance of modernist interest (of both Taut and Ueno), but only in a context of Japanese tradition. Taut’s modernist enthusiasm for Katsura, focusing on a sense of spirituality of the architecture, soon appealed to Gropius, evinced from Gropius’s visit to Japan in 1954 and the subsequent publication on Katsura.

Walter Gropius and Kenzo Tange: modernist interventions in Japanese architecture

In 1937, Gropius moved to America following his appointment at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and formed The Architects Collaborative (TAC) in 1945 to develop cooperative design practice. Gropius travelled to Japan in August 1954 for a four-month-visit under the Rockefeller Foundation’s programme, for the purpose of promoting cultural exchanges between the East and the West. Philip Goad notes that Gropius’s enthusiasm for Japan could have been largely inspired by Taut’s 1934 visit, because whilst Gropius was in

London, he would have already attended Taut's lecture in October 1935 which set the keynote for Taut's *Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (1936) (Goad, 2009, p. 112). The connection is evinced from a small feature Gropius wrote during his stay in Japan in 1954 – which was later translated into Japanese as the preface for Osama Mori's illustrated book, *Katsura Villa* (1955) (Buntrock, 2012, pp. 7–8). In his short text, Gropius eloquently suggested that the flexible structural and spatial compositions of Katsura and its garden, as a paradigm of Japanese architecture, evoked a spiritual representation of architecture and, therefore, “the timeless modernity” (Gropius, 1954, p. iii).

The focus of Gropius' trip to Japanese cultural sites included visits to Ise Shrine – the Japanese imperial house of Shinto religion and known for its reconstruction of the entire timber structure every twenty years in order to maintain the perfection of the building – and, more importantly, Katsura Villa. Having a similar modernist interest as Taut, Gropius also wrote down his appreciation of Katsura's architecture and garden, and had even sent postcards to Le Corbusier (Dal Co, 2007).² In 1960, Gropius wrote an article entitled “Lesson in Intensification” for the book *Buddhism and Culture* (Yamaguchi, 1960), and the article later featured in *Katsura* (1960) (Goad, 2009, p. 111). It was also Gropius who initiated the idea to develop the 1960 book (Goad, 2009, p. 111). As Goad argues, Gropius's interest in Japanese architecture was driven by an underlying endeavour to sustain his modernist principles, in order to resist the rapidly changing course of postwar American modernism towards ornamentation and architectural symbolism (Goad, 2009, p. 112).

Gropius was impressed by the architecture in Japan, from which he first identified the characteristics of Zen culture that distinguished Japanese architecture from Chinese architecture (Gropius, 1960, pp. 2–3). He passionately elaborated on the kinships between the Western modern approach and Japanese architectural traditions “which differ greatly from a superficial and imitative transfer of style characteristics from the one to the other” (Gropius, 1960, p. 5). The employment of industrial techniques in modern architecture, as Gropius explained, achieved new designs of openness and freedom which echoed the open structures and free spirit of Japanese buildings – in contrast to the “defensive character of Western houses” before modern architecture (Gropius, 1960, p. 5). Focusing on the architecture and garden of Katsura, Gropius praised the villa for its formal

simplicity, the strict sense of design austerity and for the workmanship of collaboration, although Gropius nevertheless criticised the ‘excess’ of decorations and details in the palace and the garden (Gropius, 1960, pp. 6–8). Gropius suggested that from Katsura’s architectural vocabulary, he observed a spiritual expression “representing the human ideals and virtues of Japanese society and its recognised style of living” – an implication that there was a sort of connection between his modernist beliefs and the Japanese tradition – “Katsura Villa appeals to our emotions because here, [...], design has been linked closely to the human being, to his style of life and to the realities of his existence” (Gropius, 1960, pp. 8, 10). This emphasis on the spiritual function of the architecture was already visible in Gropius’s view towards museum designs in 1946, that a monumental expression of the museum should be a synthesis of the technical, emotional and artistic considerations (Gropius, 1968, pp. 141).

Apart from Gropius’s text emphasising the modern potentials to learn from Katsura, Tange provided an essay to elaborate on his perception of Katsura’s architectural reinvention of Jomon and Yayoi aesthetics by integrating the aristocratic Heian traditions and the everyday, elemental cultures in its scale, layout, order and structure, and has therefore represented a formal and also spiritual sense of architectural vitality (Tange, 1960b). Ishimoto produced photos for Katsura in collaboration with Tange, and Bayer designed the book layouts. The *Katsura* publication was also timed to coincide the development of Tange’s architecture towards a more pronounced expression of modernist vocabulary, typified in his design of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (1949–56) (Isozaki, 2007, p. 15). It was also a period of Tange’s collaboration and friendship with Gropius. Taking inspirations from Gropius’s TAC, Tange formed a partnership-based practice, Kenzo Tange and His Team, whilst he was a professor at Tokyo University (Boyd, 1962, 11). In 1961, Gropius recommended the Australian architect Robin Boyd to write a monograph on Tange for the series *Makers of Contemporary Architecture*, in which Boyd elaborated on Tange’s architectural approaches in a way that well corresponded to Gropius’s modernist principles (Goad, 2009, p. 110–3). Ishimoto had contributed some photographs of Tange’s architecture to the book, in a style immediately reminiscent of his work for Katsura.

Although Tange suggested that the photographs in *Katsura* “do not give an accurate over-all view of the palace, or even of the individual buildings in it,” he nevertheless justified the

authenticity of their modernist approach, as the audience “will later discover that they [the everyday experience of general visitors] have formed much the same image of Katsura as is revealed here” (Tange, 1960a, p. v). According to Tange, the book, rather than disrupting the traditional views towards Katsura, offered “a guide to a better understanding of the palace” as a paradigm of “tradition and creation in Japanese architecture” (Tange, 1960a, p. vi).

Yasuhiro Ishimoto: tradition and creation in Katsura

Born in America and raised in Japan, Ishimoto returned to the US in 1939. He went to study photography in the Institute of Design in 1948, which was founded as the New Bauhaus by László Moholy-Nagy and reshaped into Institute of Technology in 1949. By the time when Ishimoto enrolled in the Institute of Design, Mies van der Rohe – Head of Architectural Department and responsible for the construction of the new campus – had just completed the first stage of main campus buildings featuring the use of glass, steel and brick, and the external finish of flat surfaces typical of his modernist vocabulary.³ The American education Ishimoto received which celebrated modernist aesthetics – grounded in the trajectories of the Bauhaus legacy in America – reasonably led to his modernist interpretation of Katsura. Ishimoto commenced this photographic project in 1953 after he returned to Japan. This was initially commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and later developed into this photobook in 1960.

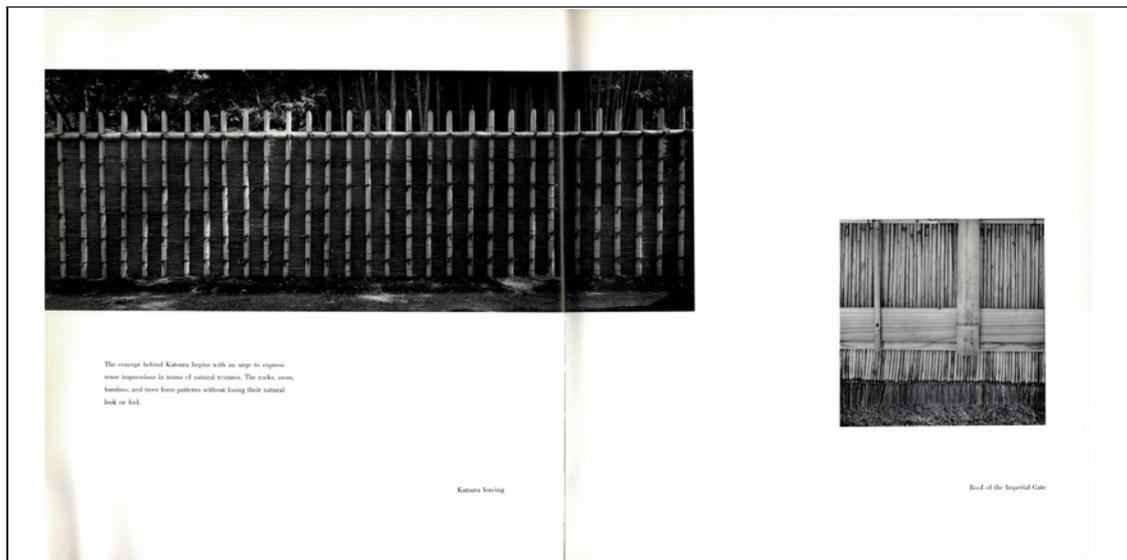


Fig.2. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, *The bamboo fence of Katsura*, 1960 (Gropius et al., 1960, pp. 37–38). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

Ishimoto's collection of over 130 photographs in *Katsura* suggested a thorough celebration of modernism assimilating the Bauhaus aesthetics. By focusing on certain elements and architectural details, Ishimoto invented a very specific modernist experience of the site through his control of exposure and direction of viewpoint. The photographs also circumvented forms and structures not compatible with modernist characteristics, mostly evinced by Ishimoto's omission of the Shoin roofs which were clearly in conflict with the flat roofs of the International Style (Isozaki, 2007, p. 15). This modernist tour began from the entrance to Katsura, defined by Ishimoto through a view of the long bamboo fence as a row of columns. The visual effect against the dark background almost indicated a defensive function of the gate which contradicted its aesthetic attribute as part of the natural landscape (Fig.2). Another close-up view of the fencing structure at the front gate presented a wall of bamboo, framed by timber and stonework, with an effect as if the gate had been detached from the physical setting in the garden (Fig.3). This emphasis on details, rather than an overview of the landscape, was further presented through close-up views of the pathway to the central buildings, in which the natural elements of rocks, moss and plants seemed to have been removed from their original settings, and have instead formed individual compositions comparable to Mondrianesque paintings.

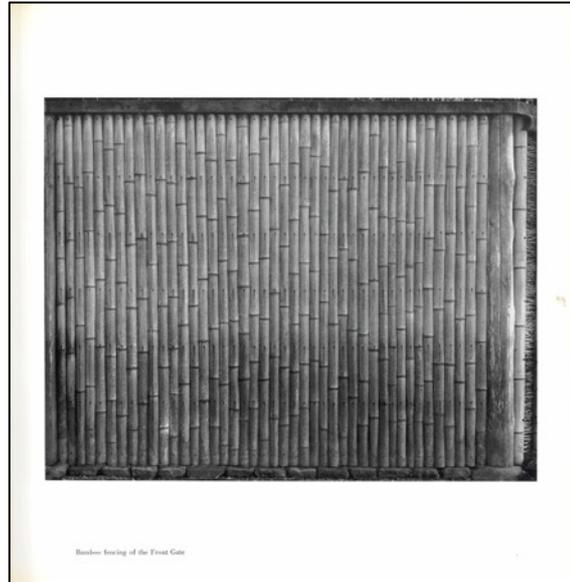


Fig.3. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, Bamboo fencing of the front gate, 1960 (Gropius et al., 1960, p. 40).
Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.



Fig.4. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, View of the Music Room and the New Palace, 1960 (Gropius et al., 1960, p. 76). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

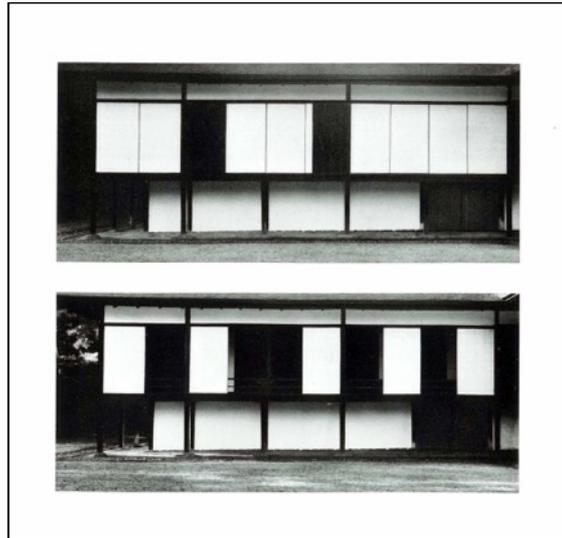


Fig.5. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, The New Palace and Lawn, 1960 (Gropius et al., 1960, p. 85). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

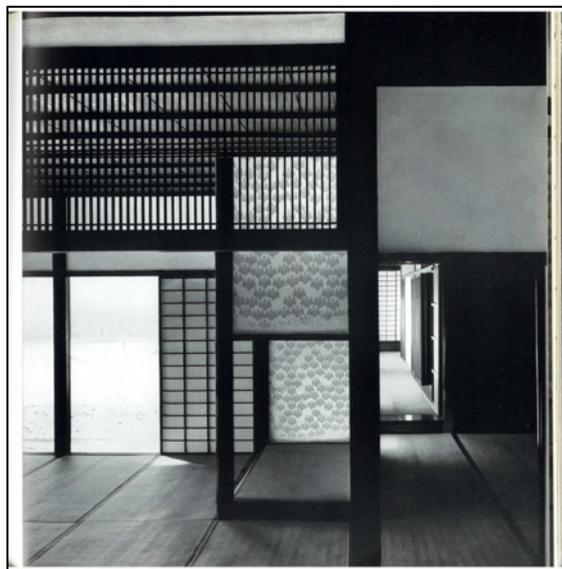


Fig.6. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, View of the Middle Shoin from the First Room of the Old Shoin, 1960 (Gropius et al., 1960, p. 92). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

Ishimoto continued the modernist view through the representation of the central building complex. Focusing on the lineal composition and individual segments from posts to beams and lintels, Ishimoto created patterns and views of geometric emphasis through overexposure and underexposure, from the interior to the exterior of buildings, altering the space of depths to flat surfaces (Fig.4). Apart from the removal of decoration and colour, Ishimoto had even projected a sense of whiteness through underexposure both on the façade and the interior walls the Shoin buildings, framing elements and views as modernist pieces (Fig.5). This modernist view was reminiscent of the white surface of the Weissenhof housing estate in Stuttgart built in 1927, in which modern architects from Gropius and Mies celebrated the whiteness of building facades as a typical feature of the International Style of modern architecture. With regard to the view of the garden, an intentional distance between the building and the landscape could also be captured, as Ishimoto either decided on specific viewpoints to frame – and therefore limit – the view of nature in his strictly symmetrical and lineal compositions, or elaborately employed overexposure to eliminate the view of nature. An example of this was a picture of the Middle Shoin taken inside the First Room of the Old Shoin, where the view of the natural landscape outside the building was erased to the largest extent in order to highlight the spatial relationship between the Old Shoin and the Middle Shoin (Fig.6).

Reflecting on Bruno Taut's interpretation of Katsura in 1933, that the architecture invited a visual appreciation of the changing views of the garden and the palace rather than any rational analysis of its structure, Ishimoto's interventions performed a consistent modernist tour which precisely emphasised on the elements of structure, symmetry and order, the possibility to separate segments and details from their architectural settings and, most importantly, a distance between architecture and nature. Commenting on this work in 1983, Ishimoto explained that his modernist perspective at the time enabled him to reinvent the minimal aesthetics of Mies van der Rohe – evinced in specific structural and monochrome compositions of Katsura (Ishimoto, 1983, p. 280). Through the lens of Katsura, Ishimoto demonstrated his interests in exploring existing principles of modernism as well coincided with Tange and Gropius's search for the modernist vocabulary from Japanese traditions.



Fig.7. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, Rendering of the bamboo fence of Katsura, 1983 (Ishimoto et al., 1983, p. 26). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.



Fig.8. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, View of the Bamboo Fence, 1983 (Ishimoto et al., 1983, p. 27). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.



Fig.9. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, View of the Middle Shoin from the New Palace, 1983 (Ishimoto et al., 1983, p. 113). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

Almost thirty years later, in 1983, Ishimoto was invited to reinterpret the architecture of Katsura through a new photographic series in colour (Ishimoto, Isozaki, Kumakura, & Satō, 1983). This 1983 representation of Katsura can be termed as “modern” in contrast to the “modernist” collection in 1960. The difference can be seen immediately from the rendering of the bamboo fence at the entrance, as Ishimoto this time presented a close-up view of the bamboo fence which highlighted the colour and texture of the bamboos, unlike the 1960 one of defensive profile (Fig.7). In 1960 monochrome production, Ishimoto set to frame the views – an example was the representation of the bamboo wall – and therefore transform the architectural landscape into pieces of portable modernist pictures. In the 1983 production, however, more attention has been paid to textures and patterns of the subject, the view of which can hardly be framed or limited by the camera lens (Fig.8). Ishimoto also intentionally avoided some symmetrical or lineal compositions, seen from his adjusted viewpoint, which presented a more balanced relationship between architecture and nature (Fig.9). With constant visual portrayal of the built context and physical condition of the subject, Ishimoto’s 1983 production presented an impression that nature is an essential

element in Katsura. In terms of the representation of architecture, unlike the 1960 collection, in which Ishimoto tended to frame patterns, structures and compositions, the 1983 production heightened an interrelatedness of the architectural components in terms of both the inside and the outside of the building complex. It also presented a more integrated view towards the garden setting, creating a sense of consistency from the inside to the outside of the Shoin. Finally, the myth of the whiteness of the 1960 collection has been replaced by a more realistic rendering of the structure and materials of the architecture (Fig. 10).

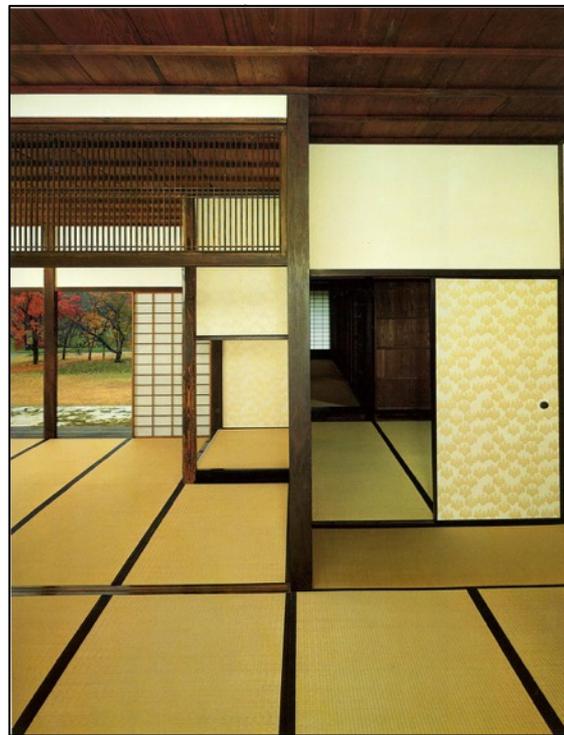


Fig.10. Yasuhiro Ishimoto, View of the Music Room and Hearth Room in the Old Shoin, 1983 (Ishimoto et al., 1983, p. 81). Image Credit: (c) Kochi Prefecture, Ishimoto Yasuhiro Photo Center.

Conclusion

The accommodating view towards nature and the garden setting of Ishimoto's 1983 collection further raised questions on the specific role of the 1960 work in answering to the Japanization of modernism. While Ishimoto presented the prospects to transform Katsura

into a medium to experiment with principles of modern architecture in his 1960 work, he nevertheless highlighted the conflict between Gropius's modernist ideals and the architecture of Katsura, for that an iconic modernist identity could only exist in a monochrome frame which to a large extent filtered out considerations of scale, volume, colour, texture, form and, more importantly, the relationships between architecture and nature as an essential character of Katsura. To justify the incompatibility of this modernist lens, however, Kenzo argued in 1960 that "The fault lies not with the photographs, but with the palace itself", because "the palace does not achieve plastic unity" in terms of texture, pattern and space of the architecture and garden (Tange, 1960a, p.v). Looking backwards, the compositions have been fixed in the monochrome frames, frozen as still images to document the history of Katsura as a site of modernist interest in the mid-twentieth century.

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¹ Taut travelled to Japan via Siberia as an émigré architect in March 1933 and stayed until October 1938.

² In 1955, Le Corbusier also visited Katsura and showed appreciation towards the princes who built the place.

³ Minerals and Metal Building (1943), Alumni Hall (1946), Wishnick Hall (1946) and Perlstein Hall (1946); all in the Illinois Institute of Technology.