

Understanding the Japanese culture of space from a cross-disciplinary approach. —JAPARCHI: From a network to a collaborative tool for innovative research—

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Abstract

The French-Japanese research network Japarchi has produced in 2014 a “Vocabulary of Japanese spatial concepts” published as a book in French. Its purpose consists of approaching the question of space in the Japanese culture through its notions, as material or conceptual devices, bringing together in a specific form diversified knowledge, using written and visual materials. Japarchi’s next project for 2018-2020 aims at developing its network research system into a digital collaborative tool for its community as well as a dynamic online database open to the public, while keeping the same frame and format principles. In particular, the chosen format is a dictionary entry through a term, rather than a category for instance, inasmuch as it offers the possibility to build a cross-disciplinary approach. Among several advantages, a digital collaborative platform would provide the possibility to review, update, interconnect and geo-localize the written and visual materials, enhancing and facilitating the research production as well as the multiplicity of its information layers. In other words, it should respond to the idea of an information research network, at the same time enriching the research process and giving access to its results in different ways.

Keywords: Japanese spatial culture; encyclopaedia; collaborative research tool; digital knowledge platform; interdisciplinary

Introduction

Considering space as a cultural tool to understand a society and its environment—past, present and future—, we consider that identifying and sharing fundamental knowledge is becoming more and more crucial in the context of a rapidly changing world. Research has indeed an important role to play in this context, such as revealing the sometimes hidden, lost or forgotten spatial structure of a specific culture, clarifying its meaning and complexity, looking at its formation or regeneration through various influences, borrowings, adaptations, etc. In other words, it helps to better understand changes in progress and cultural differences, aiming at bringing closer different cultures in order to temper the conventional on-going discourse on cultural homogenization due to our globalized world. Spatial notions and their built-up devices constitute a visible and material expression of such dynamics. The dispersed range of knowledge it requires formed the first motivation to establish the Japarchi research network.

What is the Japarchi research network?

Japarchi is a French-Japanese research network founded in 2006 by a group of French architects and scholars teaching and doing research in the French National Graduate schools of Architecture. It is fund-

ed by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication—among nine Thematic Academic Networks— as a part of its policy to develop research in the field of architecture, urban and landscape theory, history and design, and to encourage cross-disciplinary and international approaches.

It gathers now nearly one hundred French and French-speaking Japanese members involved in research and education, from an undergraduate to a doctoral level, in the disciplines of space focusing on Japan’s spatial culture studies. The members belong to various disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, landscape design, geography, history, philosophy, anthropology, aesthetics, etc.

The original tasks of the network are:

- to link scientific productions, pedagogical practices and professional stakes, in the thematic area, between France and Japan but also at an international level;
- to capitalize and disseminate the results of scientific research in the thematic area;
- to make knowledge and information available to

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architecture students who are engaged in this thematic area from the Master level (in order to build, in the thematic area under consideration, an innovative doctoral logic);

- to foster scientific activities such as research seminars, symposiums and collective publications, by the members of the network.

More than a network, Japarchi is a knowledge and information platform to facilitate and promote cross-cultural studies between France and Japan in the fields of architecture, urban and landscape history, theory and design. It is not a research laboratory specialized in one specific discipline but a platform where specialists of the Japanese culture of space coming from different institutions and disciplines can meet, exchange, and collaborate.

Its organization is a guaranty of its scientific level, most of its members being confirmed researchers involved in official research laboratories. Its structure comprises:

- a double head Direction (one in France, one in Japan);
- a French-Japanese Scientific Committee (8 members): it gives scientific orientations, evaluates the proposals;
- a Reading Committee: its composition changes according to the research project.

This platform offers tools and a methodology allowing to link the diversity of the members and knowledge:

- a Website (see reference): as a communication tool, open to the public. It is a showcase of the members' activities and production, as well as an information database about universities, research centres, cultural institutions and exchange programs involved in French-Japanese academic relationships in those fields;
- a Steering group: it links the members, the members and the public, feeds the website and diffuses information, organizes events;
- a Shared research frame & format: to approach the question of space through its notions, as material or conceptual devices, bringing together in a specific form diversified knowledge, using written and visual materials.

Japarchi editorial production in 2014

The "Frame" is a common research project based on the definition of the spatial concepts of the Japanese culture through its own words or vocabulary, and its translation into spatial devices.

It has been implemented regarding four specific dimensions of "space" as a research object—our purpose being to use them into a dynamic research process rather than compartments or separated categories:

- 1- the question of scale (from micro to macro) as a specificity of our fields: to establish links rather than differences;

- 2- the question of time (historical and present): to identify dynamic relationships between times revealing permanence and mutations;

- 3- the diversity of fields and disciplines: to create interaction rather than partition;

- 4- the dual source of knowledge: to reinforce the dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

The "Format" is a dictionary entry based on quantitative and qualitative specifications or guidelines that reflect those complementary dimensions. Each entry is a term that can be a notion, a toponym, an architectural or urban type, a spatial phenomenon, etc. considered as significant of the Japanese spatial culture. The advantage of using terms, rather than categories for instance, offers the possibility to build an interdisciplinary approach.

Each entry starts with a focus on the genealogy of the term and its meaning(s), from its origin to its present usage. It then develops a dynamic definition through explanations of the former spatial device(s) to the current situation, bringing light to its transformation process as well as its permanence. It contains references to other entries of the dictionary when appropriate. Visual materials such as drawings and photographs illustrate a historical stage or a specific representation the device has introduced.

The most important research production of Japarchi is the publication in French of a collective book in 2014 that takes the form of a "Vocabulary of Japanese spatial concepts" (see reference, Fig.1&2). It encompasses topics stretching from gardens, the wider landscape, urban spaces down to intimate spaces such as the Japanese house. The book's aim is to let the reader freely discover Japan's spatial culture, through a series of entries encompassing the fundamentals of the Japanese culture of gardens, tea pavilions, architecture, nature and the city. It is accompanied by a rich iconography (photos, drawings, paintings, maps), and is accessible to an interested public as well as a guide for the students. 64 members contributed to the book, which comprises 190 entries. It has been re-printed five times so far due to success in the bookstores, and received the prize of the French Academy of Architecture in 2014.

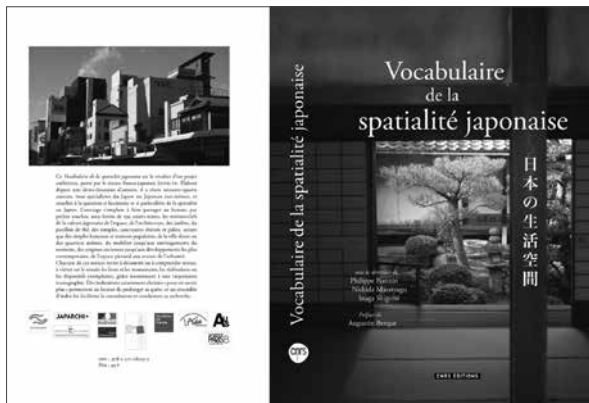


Fig.1. Japarchi collective publication in 2014 (back and front cover).

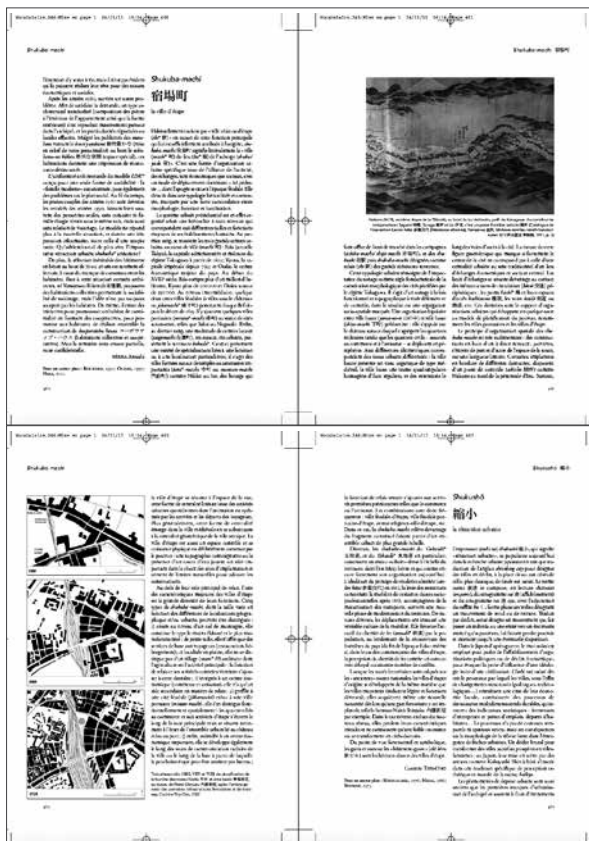


Fig.2. Example of one entry using an urban type to describe a large scale spatial organisation, from its original meaning to its current definition ("shukuba-machi/宿場町/la ville d'étape", op. cit., p.460-463)

From a book to a collaborative tool?

Japarchi's next project for 2018-2020 is to develop the network or platform system into a collaborative tool in order to create a dynamic online database (the traditional publication system remaining static and limited, it is a result rather than a process) while keeping the same frame and format principles. About 100 entries that have been selected by the Scientific Committee, are not integrated in the book nor completed so far.

Its impact on the production of knowledge would be:

- to increase the complementary dynamic between fields, disciplines, times, scales, etc. as a potential to upgrade the production of knowledge in terms of quality and innovation;
- to stimulate the reactivity of the research community (making comments on, or reviews of the new online published entries, for instance);
- to update the production, and make it available in other languages (mainly Japanese and English);
- to make more visual materials available;
- to geo-localize the examples the authors are mentioning or describing;
- to interconnect the written and visual materials in order to create multiple layers of information;
- to create hyperlinks with other Japanese studies' institutions and research centres and their on-line productions (open edition scientific magazines, for instance) as knowledge extensions.

One example we are now studying as a reference is the Archipédie collaborative digital platform opened to the public in 2017 in its first stage completion (see reference). Archipédie is a collaborative digital encyclopaedia on modern and contemporary architecture conceived by the Cité de l'Architecture et du patrimoine (French National Centre for Architecture and Preservation, Ministry of Culture and Communication) based in Paris-France. In a few words: Archipédie is an editorial project with educational and experimental dimensions, a place for sharing and diffusing knowledge on modern and contemporary architecture. Its focus is the history of men and women who make architecture—therefore each entry of the Archipédie encyclopaedia is the name of an architect and its content a monograph.

In many aspects, the purpose, the architecture and the functionality of the Archipédie collaborative digital platform seem suitable regarding the new Japarchi project. In both cases, some obstacles like the visual materials' copyrights for instance can be surpassed thanks to the links the digital tools now bring to the researchers community and the public. In other words, it could respond to the idea of an information research network, allowing a research process as well as an access to its results.

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JAPARCHI

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Index alphabétique en français du « Vocabulaire de la spatialité japonaise »

Outil complémentaire de consultation de l'ouvrage « Vocabulaire de la spatialité japonaise »

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Fig.3. One intermediate tool: the book's online index according to the French alphabetical order (<http://japarchi.fr/outils/index-alphabetique-francais-du-vocabulaire-de-la-spatialite-japonaise/>)

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