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ARCHITECTURE AS A PLAY WITH HISTORY: KENZO TANGE'S SEIJO VILLA IN THE CONTEXT OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS AND MODERNISM

ARCHITEKTURA JAKO GRA Z HISTORIAŁ: SEIJO VILLA KENZO TANGE WOBEC ESTETYKI JAPONŐSKIEJ I MODERNIZMU

Abstract

The article examines Seijo Villa (1953) by Kenzo Tange as an example of architecture playing with history. The aim is to show how modernist form was combined with traditional Japanese patterns. The study applies comparative analysis and theoretical interpretation based on the reflections of B. Taut, J. Tanizaki, and A. Isozaki. The results indicate that Seijo Villa represents a manifesto of creative reinterpretation of history and a foundation for modern Japanese architectural identity.

Keywords: Japanese architecture, perception of architecture, Kenzo Tange, theory of architecture

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje Seijo Villa (1953) Kenzo Tange jako przykład gry z historią w architekturze. Celem badań jest ukazanie, jak modernistyczna forma została powiązana z tradycyjnymi wzorcami japońskimi. Zastosowano metodę analizy porównawczej i interpretacji teoretycznej w odniesieniu do refleksji B. Tauta, J. Tanizakiego i A. Isozaki. Wyniki pokazują, że Seijo Villa stanowi manifest twórczej reinterpretacji historii i fundament nowej tożsamości architektury japońskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura japońska, postrzeganie architektury, Kenzo Tange, teoria architektury

1. INTRODUCTION

In postmodern culture, the question of the meaning of tradition, its reinterpretation and creative transformation returns – architecture, which is both a record of cultural transformations and a medium of constructing identity, constantly negotiates its place between heritage and the avant-garde. This phenomenon is visible, among others, in Japanese post-war architecture, which became a field of intense dialogue between international modernism and domestic aesthetic patterns.

One example of the discussion between history and modernity is Seijo Villa – Kenzo Tange's own home from 1953. This project, located in Tokyo's Setagaya district, was created

during the formation of a new identity for Japanese architecture after the destruction of World War II. Unlike Tange's monumental productions of later years, Seijo Villa had an intimate character, which allows it to be read as a personal manifesto. In this small project, the architect attempted to combine the language of modernism – expressed in the column structure and geometric simplicity of the body – with the Japanese tradition, present in modularity based on a grid of *tatami mats*, the use of sliding partitions, or the relationship between the interior space and the garden.

Seijo Villa's interpretation takes on a deeper meaning when juxtaposed with the reflections of theorists who tried to capture the essence of Japanese aesthetics. Bruno Taut, in *Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (1936), pointed to the purity and clarity of composition as values close to modernism, seeing in the Katsura Palace a model of modern simplicity. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, in his essay *Praise of Shadows* (1933), emphasized the role of the subtlety of light and twilight as elements constituting the experience of space. Many years later, Arata Isozaki, in his work *Japan-ness in Architecture* (2011), continues to draw attention to the problem of the identity of Japanese architecture in the era of globalization, posing the question of how much it is possible to define it through references to tradition.

In these considerations, Seijo Villa is treated as a case study, allowing us to show architecture as a game with history. An analysis of this house makes it possible to see that a reference to tradition does not have to lead to its direct copying, but can become a tool of creative reinterpretation. Juxtaposing Tange's project with the reflections of Taut, Tanizaki, and Isozaki allows us to see that the problem of "Japaneseness" does not concern only theory, but finds its clear embodiment in architectural practice.

The aim of the article is also to show Seijo Villa as a bridge between modernism and tradition, history and modernity, locality and universal values. An analysis of this realization leads to the conclusion that Japanese post-war architecture was not only an adaptation of Western modernism, but a process of constructing its own identity, in which native history and aesthetics became an important source of the avant-garde.

This research raises the question of how Seijo Villa can be interpreted as a conscious play with history – both in formal and ideological dimensions. The analysis focuses on four issues: (1) embedding the project in the cultural context of post-war Japan, (2) the relationship between the modernist form and traditional spatial patterns, (3) reading Seijo Villa in the light of theoretical reflections on the "Japaneseness" of architecture, and (4) showing the avant-garde dimension of this realization in the broader discourse of modernism and postmodernity, with particular emphasis on the achievements of Le Corbusier. Such an arrangement allows us to treat Tange's house not only as a single example, but as a key point in the formation of the modern identity of Japanese architecture.

2. IDEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The architecture of post-war Japan developed in a special political, social and cultural situation. On the one hand, the enormous destruction of cities forced rapid modernization and urban planning activities, and on the other hand, there was a need to redefine cultural identity. International modernism (including the ideas of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus) entered Japan with impetus, but not without critical reflection. The architects had to find a way to reconcile modern design methods and technologies with native spatial and aesthetic traditions. In this

context, the reflections of thinkers who tried to determine what the specificity of Japanese architecture is and how it can inspire modernity gain particular importance. The most important voices include the reflections of Bruno Taut, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, and Arata Isozaki, whose writings show different ways of understanding the relationship between history and modernity, tradition and the avant-garde.

Bruno Taut, an architect and theoretician associated with the modernist movement, spent the years 1933–1936 in Japan. His stay was of great importance both for Taut himself and for the perception of Japanese architecture in Western circles. He wrote that Japanese architecture is transparent, devoid of ornament, revealing pure order¹. In his eyes, Japanese architecture – especially the Katsura Villa complex in Kyoto – was the embodiment of modernist ideals of simplicity, transparency, and rationality. Taut also draws our attention to the strong connection between Japanese architecture and everyday life and its embedding in the culture of the inhabitants². This perspective indicates that for Taut, architecture was not just an aesthetic form, but a reflection of social and cultural relations. The reception of Taut in Japan was ambivalent – on the one hand, his enthusiastic discovery of the simplicity and clarity of the native tradition was appreciated, and on the other hand, simplification and idealization were criticized. Nevertheless, his writings influenced the way postwar architects – including Kenzo Tange – understood their own heritage and its potential for modernization.

Parallel to Taut's observations, Japan developed its own reflection on the specificity of architectural aesthetics. One of the most important voices was Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, a writer and essayist, the author of the classic essay *In Praise of Shadows* (1933). Tanizaki opposed the modernist fascination with light, glass and transparency, pointing out that in Japanese culture beauty lies in penumbra, subtlety and understatement. He pointed out that in this way a separate world of shadow was determined³, emphasizing that Japanese architecture is based on the play of light and shadow, which gives the space an atmosphere of mystery and intimacy. For Tanizaki, space is not a neutral background, but a sensory experience in which materials, smells, and textures also play a role. His considerations can be treated as a kind of counter to European modernism. Tanizaki reminded us that what is hidden and not fully visible can be a source of a deeper aesthetic experience. This reflection proved to be extremely inspiring for many post-war architects, including Tange and later Tadao Ando⁴.

A few decades later, Arata Isozaki – a student of Tange, and at the same time one of the most important architects and theoreticians of the second half of the twentieth century, returned to the problem of the identity of Japanese architecture. In his work *Japan-ness in Architecture*, Isozaki poses the question of whether it is possible to speak of the “essence” of Japanese architecture at all in the age of globalization. He rejects the understanding of “Japan-ness” as the essence or unchanging cultural core, pointing rather to its processual and changeable character⁵ – he emphasizes, suggesting that the identity of architecture is not given once and for all, but is shaped through constant negotiations with history, tradition and external influences. Isozaki critically analyses earlier interpretations (including Taut Katsura's fascination with Katsura and Tanizaki's literary reflection), pointing out that they were

¹ B. Taut, *Fundamentals of Japanese architecture*, Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, Tokyo 1937, pp. 15–16.

² B. Taut, *Houses and people of Japan*, Sanseido, Tokyo 1937, p. 42.

³ J. Tanizaki, *Pochwała cienia*, Karakter, Kraków 2016, p. 60.

⁴ M. Skaza, *Kolory światła – architektoniczna gra ze światłem w wybranych projektach domów Tadao Ando*, “Przegląd Budowlany” 2024, no. 7, p. 99.

⁵ A. Isozaki, *Japan-ness in architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 9.

somewhat simplified. At the same time, however, he confirms that it is precisely in the tension between tradition and modernity that the creative potential of Japanese architecture lies.

The reflections of Taut, Tanizaki, and Isozaki form an interpretive triangle within which the meaning of Seijo Villa by Kenzo Tange can be read. Taut points to simplicity and clarity as values close to modernism, Tanizaki emphasizes the role of shadow and sensuality in the experience of space, and Isozaki problematizes the very possibility of talking about “Japan-ness” as a stable category. An analysis of Tange’s house in the light of these three perspectives allows us to see that Seijo Villa is neither a simple adaptation of modernism nor a nostalgic return to tradition. Rather, it is an experiment in which history becomes a field of play and reinterpretation, and architecture – a medium for negotiating cultural identity in the postmodern world.

3. KENZO TANGE AND SEIJO VILLA (1953)

Kenzo Tange (1913–2005) was one of the key architects of the twentieth century, who gained international recognition both for his realizations and theoretical activities. Initially, he was fascinated by the work of Le Corbusier, whose ideas of functionalism and monumentalism had a significant influence on Tange’s early projects. At the same time, however, from the very beginning, he tried to find a way to reconcile modernism with the Japanese tradition. Z. Kósa pointed out that Japanese architects were influenced by their masters (it should be noted that K. Tange never studied in the studios of foreign architects). He adds, however, that in art the new never depreciates the old, and thanks to this, the works of young Japanese architects not only have a modern form, but also bear features characteristic of the art of their country⁶. Seijo Villa, made in 1953, was a turning point in Tange’s career – it was an experiment at the intersection of the intimate scale of everyday life and the universal language of modernism.

Seijo Villa was the first and only house designed by Tange for himself and his family. Located in Tokyo’s Setagaya district, it had the character of a personal manifesto – an individual statement regarding the understanding of architecture. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to several different drawing analyses that were the way to the final form of the object.⁷ For Tange, this project was not only a space for private life, but also a laboratory of ideas. Kenneth Frampton later referred to similar projects as “testing the place for theory”, which well reflects the character of Seijo Villa. It was on this small scale that Tange tested strategies that he later developed in larger projects – from St. Mary’s Cathedral in Tokyo (1964) to the Olympic team in Yoyogi (1964).

From the formal point of view, Seijo Villa was an attempt to combine the language of modernism with references to tradition. The building was erected in a pillar structure, and the afterimages of Villa Savoye seem to be a natural point of reference here. The clear geometry of the body and the simplicity of the solutions referred to the modernist ideals of clarity and rationality, with particular emphasis on Le Corbusier’s five principles. At

⁶ Z. Kósa, *Kenzo Tange*, Arkady, Warszawa 1977, p. 9.

⁷ S. Toyokawa, *Research on the design process of Kenzo Tange’s own residence*, “Japan Architectural Review” 2023, no. 1, art. no. e12339, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2475-8876.12339> (access: 12.09.2025).

the same time, however, the form of the building was far from the anonymous apartment blocks that dominated Tokyo's post-war reconstruction. Tange consciously gave his home an individual character, in which the simplicity of the material was combined with subtle spatial solutions. This duality – modernist construction and traditional references – made Seijo Villa unique against the background of Japanese architecture of the time.

Even more clearly than in the external form, traditional references were present in the organization of the space of the house. The layout of the rooms is based on a grid of tatami mats, which has been the basis of modularity in Japanese architecture for centuries. Toyokawa points out that the tatami mat module has not been abandoned, but reinterpreted within a modern framework⁸. Thanks to this, Tange preserved the rhythm and proportions of the spaces close to tradition, and at the same time gave them a modern character through the use of new materials and constructions. Another element was a system of sliding partitions, allowing for flexible shaping of the interior space. This solution, known from traditional Japanese houses (e.g., *shōji* and *fusuma*), was introduced by Tange in a new interpretation, adapted to the conditions of modern life. This made the space of the house fluid and changeable, which allowed it to be adapted to the needs of the users. The relationship between the interior and the garden also played an important role. In traditional Japanese architecture, this boundary was never rigid – spaces intertwined through verandas, terraces, and sliding walls. Seijo Villa continued this principle by incorporating the garden into the structure of the house and making it an integral part of the experience of the space.

Seijo Villa played a special role in Tange's biography. On the one hand, it was his private house, used by the family for many years, and on the other hand, it was a reference point for further design research. Toyokawa (2023) notes that an analysis of the surviving drawings and photographs from the design process reveals the enormous care with which Tange treated this realization, despite its small scale. This house can be read as a prototype for the architect's later activities, including the development of the idea of metabolism and urban exploration. Although metabolism is primarily associated with visions of megastructures, its sources lie in smaller experiments – such as Seijo Villa.

Seijo Villa is an example of architecture that consciously and subtly combines tradition with modernity. From the formal and structural point of view, it is a modernist realization, based on a column structure and clear geometry. At the same time, however, in the spatial structure we find traces of the Japanese tradition – tatami as a module⁹, flexible partitions, the interior-garden relationship. With this project, Tange proved that modernism does not have to mean a break with history, but can be a way of reinterpreting it. Seijo Villa is therefore the architect's manifesto, in which he included his vision of a creative dialogue with tradition, and at the same time an announcement of later, more monumental realizations.

4. SEIJO VILLA AS A GAME WITH A STORY

Japan's post-war architecture developed in a strong dialogue with international modernism. Kenzo Tange, as an admirer of Le Corbusier, was often inspired by the architecture of the French master. Drawing on the language of Le Corbusier's architecture, he maintained

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁹ H. Engel, *Measure and construction of the Japanese house*, Tuttle, Tokyo 2020, pp. 44–57.

a Japanese sensibility. He did not copy Western solutions, but adapted them to local conditions and traditions. Looking at the views of Villa Savoye and Seijo Villa¹⁰, it is difficult to get rid of the impression that both projects have something in common. In this sense, Kenzo Tange's Tokyo house fits into a broader process of modernist globalization, which has taken on different faces in different countries, depending on the cultural context. It can be assumed that Seijo Villa is one of the foundations on which metabolism was soon to develop – as a Japanese reinterpretation of modernism¹¹.

However, Seijo Villa was not a simple implementation of modernism. Its particular value lies in the reinterpretation of traditional Japanese patterns within the framework of modern architectural language. Arata Isozaki emphasizes that in Japanese architecture, tradition is never frozen, but is always reinterpreted¹². Tange in Seijo Villa embodied this principle: the traditional tatami module was retained, but used in a reinforced concrete structure. The sliding partitions were not copies of old *shōji*, but their modern adaptation. The interior-garden relationship was part of the modernist opening to the exterior, and at the same time continued the Japanese tradition of the interpenetration of space. In Seijo Villa, the simplicity of form did not result from modernist minimalism as an abstract idea, but from the deep-rooted spatial culture of Japan. On the other hand, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, writing about people of the yellow race, reminded us that “we try to remain immersed in the shadows”¹³. In Tange's house, the play of light and shadow, resulting from the relationship between the interior and the garden and the use of translucent partitions, was a subtle commentary on this aesthetic. Architecture was not just a set of geometric forms, but a field of sensory experience, in which light and shadow played a key role.

Interpreting Seijo Villa in a broader cultural context, one can see a number of inspirations and parallel themes. Taut, Tanizaki, and Isozaki pointed to various aspects of the “Japaneseness” of architecture – simplicity, shadow, processualism – that are reflected in Tange's house. Modern Japanese architecture is created in conditions of the coexistence of various influences¹⁴. Seijo Villa, although small, is an expression of the same logic of pluralism – it connects modernism and tradition, West and Japan, past and future. The role of light in this building should also be indicated. This is proof that the experience of space through light and shadow is a permanent element of Japanese tradition, reinterpreted by successive generations of architects.

Although Seijo Villa was a small single-family house, it had an avant-garde dimension. Contrary to appearances, it was not a conservative compromise between tradition and modernism, but a radical experiment in a conscious juxtaposition of two orders. On a small scale of the house, the architect tested the ideas, which he later transferred to projects of international scope. It was an avant-garde gesture, because it pointed to a new direction – modernism rooted in tradition. The memoirs of the participants in the metabolist movement confirm that they did not want to copy the past, but to create a new avant-garde, as Kisho Kurokawa emphasized many times in an interview¹⁵. Seijo Villa was one of the steps toward this “new beginning”.

¹⁰ N. Pollock, *The Japanese house since 1945*, Thames & Hudson, London 2023, pp. 58–61.

¹¹ Cf. R. Koolhaas, H.U. Obrist, *Project Japan: Metabolism talks*, Taschen, Köln 2021.

¹² A. Isozaki, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹³ J. Tanizaki, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁴ M. Skaza, *Tokyo. One city. Ten cases of architecture*, “Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura” 2015, no. 2-A(2), pp. 179–180.

¹⁵ R. Koolhaas, H.U. Obrist, *op. cit.*, pp. 377–405.

Seijo Villa can be read as a game with history – architecture that does not negate tradition but treats it as a field of creative reinterpretation. In this project, Tange not only combined modernist form with traditional Japanese elements but also gave them a new, avant-garde quality. Analysis in the light of the reflections of Taut, Tanizaki, and Isozaki shows that Tange’s house was not an accidental compromise but a conscious theoretical gesture. The simplicity of form, the aesthetics of the shadow, and the processual understanding of “Japan-ness” find their concrete embodiment here. Seijo Villa proves that history does not have to be a burden or an object of nostalgia. It can be a partner in a game that leads to the creation of a new architecture – at the same time rooted and avant-garde, local and universal.

5. SUMMARY

The analysis of Seijo Villa by Kenzo Tange shows that architecture – understood as a game with history – is a process in which tradition is not questioned or thoughtlessly reproduced but reinterpreted in the light of new cultural and technological conditions¹⁶. Tange, designing his own house in 1953, created a space where modernist ambitions and spatial patterns rooted in Japanese culture meet.

The reinforced concrete structure and the geometric clarity of the body inscribe Seijo Villa in the trend of international modernism. At the same time, the presence of the tatami mesh, the flexibility of the partitions, and the fluid relationship between the interior and the garden refer to the tradition that Tange consciously transforms and gives a new meaning. The identity of architecture is not given once and for all, but is formed in a constant dialogue with the past and the present.

Taut’s and Tanizaki’s theoretical reflections allow us to better understand the importance of Tange’s design decisions. Taut saw Japanese architecture as the embodiment of the modernist values of simplicity and clarity, which we find echoed in the restrained form of Seijo Villa. Tanizaki reminded us that space shaped by shadow and twilight is an important element of Japanese aesthetics – in Tange’s house, the relationship between light and shadow creates an atmosphere that transcends the modernist neutrality of space. In this sense, Tange’s project provides a practical answer to the questions posed by theorists: how can modernity draw from history without falling into nostalgia or pastiche.

Seijo Villa is also a manifesto of the avant-garde. Its radicalism consisted not in a spectacular form but in a subtle juxtaposition of two different orders – modernism and tradition – into a coherent whole. In this project, we find the seeds of ideas that Kenzo Tange developed in his later projects of global importance. In this sense, the house in Seijo is not just a biographical episode, but a starting point for further research and experimentation.

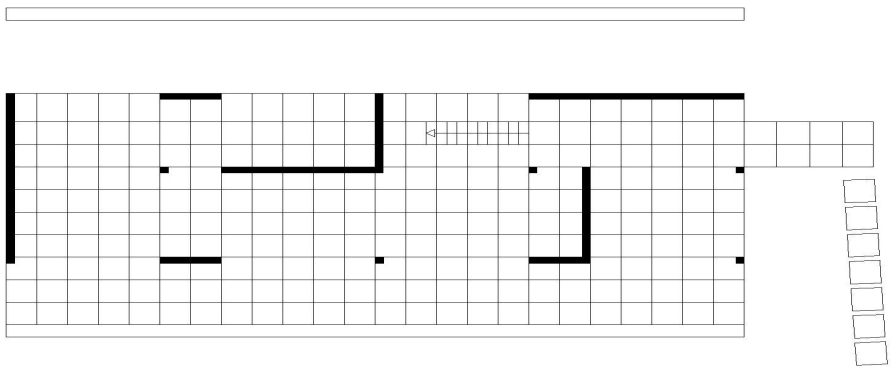
From the perspective of the conference’s theses, devoted to the relationship between architecture and history, Seijo Villa illustrates several important themes. Firstly, it confirms that history does not have to be identified with tradition in the sense of unchanging patterns – it can become a space for dialogue and inspiration. Secondly, it shows that contemporary architecture can develop in conditions of pluralism, combining avant-garde elements with

¹⁶ M. Skaza, *Architecture as a consequence of perception*, “IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering” 2019, no. 2, art. no. 022033, pp. 5–6, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1757-899X/471/2/022033> (access: 12.09.2025).

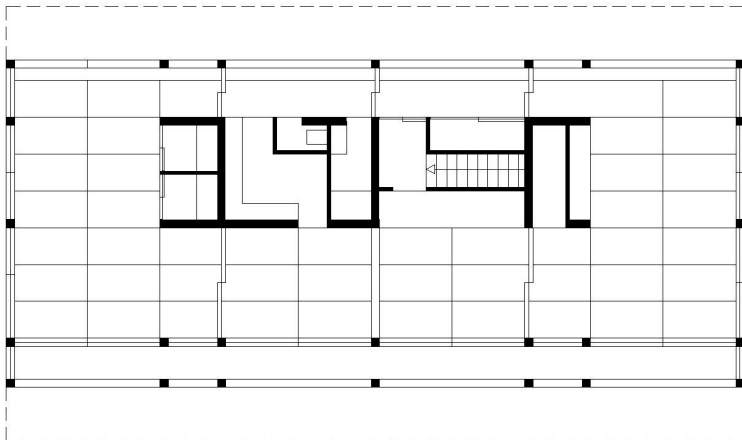
rootedness in local culture. Thirdly, it points out that “novelty” in architecture does not consist only in a formal rupture but should result from the creative processing of heritage.

In a broader perspective, Seijo Villa is part of the process of shaping the post-war identity of Japanese architecture. It was an identity built not by direct imitation of Western modernism, but by its adaptation and reinterpretation in dialogue with local tradition. As a result, Japanese architecture became one of the most important voices in the global discourse of the twentieth century, offering a model of the avant-garde based not on the negation of the past, but on its creative transformation.

In the era of postmodernity, in which the world of art and architecture is full of the coexistence of ideas and forms, the question of the relationship between history and novelty remains crucial. Tange’s project shows that playing with history can lead to works that are both rooted in tradition and open to new perspectives for the future.



Ill. 1. Ground floor plan (drawing by author)



Ill. 2. First floor plan (drawing by author)



Ill. 3. View from the entrance, source: ArchEyes Team, *Seijo Villa: Kenzo Tange's residential masterpiece* [in:] ArchEyes, 21.02.2023, <https://archeyes.com/kenzo-tanges-house-villa-seijo/> (access: 12.09.2025)



Ill. 4. View of ground floor, source: ArchEyes Team, *Seijo Villa: Kenzo Tange's residential masterpiece* [in:] ArchEyes, 21.02.2023, <https://archeyes.com/kenzo-tanges-house-villa-seijo/> (access: 12.09.2025)



III. 5. Interior view, source: ArchEyes Team, *Seijo Villa: Kenzo Tange's residential masterpiece* [in:] ArchEyes, 21.02.2023, <https://archeyes.com/kenzo-tanges-house-villa-seijo/> (access: 12.09.2025)

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