An Afternoon Tea at the Eames House
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In 2012, a tea ceremony was held at the Charles and Ray Eames House, attended by a shy number of guests. The event was intended to recall another that had taken place in the same space sixty years ago, when the Eameses had received distinguished guests such as Charlie Chaplin and Isamu Noguchi. On both occasions, the Eameses’ ‘select and arrange’ aesthetics, together with the artistic interventions of their guests, created a bare scenography, rather Westernised, that served as the basis for the celebration. These events, as well as the elements and guests who gathered there, represent but a small sample of Eames’ link with Japanese design and architecture, and particularly the embodiment of some common ideals manifested in their own iconic Californian home, becoming essential chapters in the unique story of this building.

On the 10th of March 2012, the Eames House in California once again displayed tatami mats in the living room. The mats, eight, in particular, were laid out on the floor in an almost rectangular shape near the corner most open to the garden. Nine LTR (Low Table Rod) tables, designed by the couple in 1950, with their black and white surfaces, are arranged in an L-shape, away from the wall, forcing the connection to the outside. Several of the iconic LOW (Lounge Chair Wood) chairs, designed in 1946 in three-dimensional moulded plywood, shown here in natural colour and lacquered in black, red or white, stand behind the nine tables waiting to welcome the guests. Between the chairs and the rear wall, there is an interior garden made of stones and some flowerpots.

On that date, two of Charles and Ray Eames’ grandchildren, Lucia Atwood and Eames Demetrios, who are part of the Eames Foundation’s management team, organised a symbolic tea ceremony at the house to raise funds for the Foundation, which is responsible for the restoration and conservation of the house. Only twelve privileged people were able to attend the event, which recalled a first ceremony that took place in 1951, and which would be significantly officiated by Sosei Shizuye Matsumoto: sixty years earlier, she had been in the same place with her husband Eddie Matsumoto and the 15th generation Grandmaster of the Urasenke Tea School, Genshitsu Sen. Sosei had met the Eameses through earlier, she had been in the same place with her husband Eddie Matsumoto and the 15th generation Grandmaster of the Urasenke Tea School, Genshitsu Sen. Sosei had met the Eameses through acquaintances into their home. On this occasion, in keeping with Westernised, that served as the basis for the celebration. These events, as well as the elements and guests who gathered there, represent but a small sample of Eames’ link with Japanese design and architecture, and particularly the embodiment of some common ideals manifested in their own iconic Californian home, becoming essential chapters in the unique story of this building.

Terunobu Fujimori

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their admiration for Japanese aesthetics, they held a truly unique traditional tea ceremony on 24 July 1951. Charlie Chaplin and Isamu Noguchi were present as guests of honour, among other attendees such as Christian and Henrietta Lederborn, Iris Tree and the actors Betty Harford and Ford Rainey21. Sosei Shizuye Matsumoto would lead the ceremony and her pupil, actress Yoshiko Yamaguchi, would prepare a sukiyaki meal for the attendees, at Chaplin’s request (fig. 04). Later, he himself, who admired Japan and appreciated the tea ceremony22, and had even studied Kabuki, Kyōgen and Nō theatre to shape and perfect his own art, delighted the audience with a Nō dance23. Chaplin struck up a lasting friendship with Yoshiko Yamaguchi, who would marry Isamu Noguchi shortly after the tea ceremony on 15 December 195124.

The young actress appears in two other unique photographs of the house, dressed in a different kimono from the one she wore at the famous celebration, so we can assume that it was from another date close to the ceremony, or in the moments prior to its preparation. In one of them, Yoshiko is by herself in the middle of the room, sitting on a cushion and meditating at the end of a rectangular composition of eight tatamis. A horizontally suspended panel clearly marks the space in height, and on the wood-panelled wall there is an intriguing composition, “quite Eames”, derived from the pictures, by Isamu Noguchi. Almost in the centre of the space, in the opposite corner to Yamaguchi and in the foreground, on a lacquered wooden board, rests the chagama, the pot for boiling water at the ceremony, and a floral arrangement (fig. 05).

In the other photograph, the artist is wearing the same kimono (fig. 06), and stands next to Noguchi, who is dressed in more casual clothes than he would have worn at the ceremony. Both are standing in front of the door leading to the event, next to the side courtyard. As it can be observed in this photograph (also in fig. 03), a transverse panel has been placed in the doorway, intentionally lowering the lintel, to form a nijiriguchi, the small entrance to the tearoom, making visitors bend down in a symbol of the definitive abandonment of the everyday world.

Once inside, the interior layout corresponds to the first part of the event, i.e., the tea ceremony itself, with the eight tatamis placed together and two clearly differentiated areas on these: the one with the coloured cushions for the guests, further away from the glass enclosures and facing them, and the one in the opposite corner, which will be occupied by the tea master, Sosei Matsumoto, assisted by Yamaguchi (fig. 08 above). This is a formal and restrained arrangement which emphasises the solemnity of the ceremony as well as its theatricality, with the tea master performing a series of prescribed movements and the guests in front of her observing her contained gestures and losing themselves in contemplation of the scene. In the words of Kakuco Okakura, “the tearoom was an oasis where weary travellers could gather to drink from the common source of the love for art. The ceremony was an improvised drama revolving around tea, flowers and paintings”24.

Following Okakura’s words again, we see how this ceremony strikes a curious contrast with the traditional idea of the house and the tea ceremony, since, according to him, the house “implies a structure created to satisfy an individual artistic demand” and, therefore, “the tearoom is made for the master, not the master for the room”25. In this space, however, this artistic individuality has been lost, producing a set of individualities, with related or like-minded sensibilities, in many cases close to or interested in Japanese aesthetics, but with their own characteristic culture and creativity.

Thus, on the wooden wall that acts as a conceptual tokonoma, in addition to the Eames decoration, and the Akari, a light Eames centipede is placed in the corner, resembling both his animal kites, ephemeral and natural elements which hung from the ceiling of the great hall, and the centipede-shaped sculpture, made by Noguchi himself in ceramic during his productive stay in Japan the following year26. The decoration of the scene is completed by yet another singular object which, from then on, ‘wanders’ around the space of the great room: a miniature garden, a mobile rectangular metal planter, roughly the size of a tatami, covered in small white stones and on which are placed vases and pots with plants, ferns and, above all, monsters or ‘Adam’s ribs’, which will always have a place in the Eames living room, and which will reach considerable size and acquire prominence in their saturated world full of objects.

No other images have survived of the more formal part of the ceremony, apart from the one showing Yoshiko’s self-absorbed presence and others displaying the elements arranged in an uninhabited space. On the contrary, there are numerous photographs of the kaiseki, the more informal part of the celebration in which food is shared, which allow us to appreciate the arrangement of the elements in space, as well as that of the participants, although some of them will change position throughout the images (fig. 07).

At this point, the tatami that had previously been grouped together are moved, leaving three close to the glass, on which there are three LTR tables occupied by Ray and probably Betty Harford and Charles, one on each side, although the latter will never be seen sitting on the tatami mats, as he and Noguchi will be the main photographers. On the opposite side of the room, two more tatami mats, almost next to the wooden wall and separated from the previous ones by the distance of another tatami mat, are occupied by whom we can consider the most prominent guests: Charlie Chaplin in the middle, Iris Tree on his left and a space alternately occupied by Yoshiko and Isamu Noguchi on his right. Between these two groups, and following the first three, a tatami occupied by Henrietta and Christian Lederborn, on which the only Akari that will remain in this part of the ceremony rests, as the main source of illumination for the space, and then the mobile planter closing the corner. Opposite this tatami, but not quite in line with the others, will be the last of seven tatamis, which will be occupied by Ford Rainey and, at some point, from what can be deduced in the pictures, by Isamu Noguchi. Almost in the centre of the space, under the panel which limits the scale of the room, either in a more comfortable position or in the more formal posture of seiza, resting on their knees, is the tea master’s space, to be occupied by Sosei Matsumoto and Yoshiko Yamaguchi (fig. OB below). Here, the original floor of the house has been left bare and, on it, we see a large circular tray and the mistress, with a small brazier and a pot in which she will prepare the food. The arrangement of the diners and of each element that makes up the scene, the small pieces of furniture and the multitude of containers for the food, do not seem excessively rigid, but undoubtedly correspond to an unmistakable Japanese taste, in which the elements are arranged “for a painter’s view”27, but with a high degree of naturalness and asymmetry, as Roland Barthes points out, and perfectly illustrates the position of the tea master in the central space. At the same time, it is in keeping with the Eames aesthetic and the configuration of space, with the ‘select and arrange’ that constitutes the sign of the occupancy of space.

The contrasting reduction and scenographic restraint has been attributed to Isamu Noguchi.28 Yoke-Sum Wong explains that Charles Eames had confessed that after the tea ceremony, the house remained empty, and they had enjoyed the open space, but then over time everything returned, ‘little by little’, until the images of the house that we were used to were brought back again, full of various found objects, selected and arranged. Thus, the scenography of the tea ceremony probably resembles more the initial drawings of the naked container that were printed in Arts & Architecture in September 194929.
Charles and Ray had not visited Japan before building their home, but there certainly are myriad of aspects of the house which are reminiscent of Japanese design. Among the many visitors to their home, and before and after the tea ceremony previously described, were several Japanese celebrities who had more than likely nurtured their admiration for oriental art and customs. Through Isamu Noguchi, for example, the Eameses met the designer Isamu Kenmochi in 1950 and the painter Genichiro Inokuma, who paid a visit in 1955. In 1961, the year of the ceremony, the 18th generation tea grandmaster of the Urasenke Tea School, Genshitsu Sen, visited the house. In 1952, Torao “Tiger” Saito, editor of Japan Today magazine, visited the house and introduced the Eames’ work to Japan through his articles at a time when, after the Second World War, Japan was paying particular attention to American design. In 1953, the renowned ceramicist Shōji Hamada and Bernard Leach also visited the house, as did the thinker Soetsu Yanagi, a key figure in the founding of the Mingei movement, whose exaltation of everyday beauty and functional objects would probably have been much appreciated by Charles and Ray. The Eameses would later travel to Japan, both for work and leisure, and the house began to reflect more clearly the architects’ admiration for Japanese architecture and culture, to the extent that, as Alison Smithson, who would soon recognise the Japanese influence on the house, said, much of Japan’s influence came to the West through the Eameses.

This influence had been evident in Los Angeles architecture since the beginning of the 20th century, especially in the way interior and exterior spaces were linked. Pat Kirkham underlines the reminiscence of traditional Japanese architecture in the Eames House by its emphasis on lightness, elegance, simplicity, and geometry. The structural grid is key in this respect, Pyon's wood-framed screens, which slide along the façade, were placed at the top of the house and at the bottom of the studio with the initial aim of providing sun protection and privacy. Their appearance and function are therefore similar to the characteristic translucent shōji panels of the Japanese house, and in the same way they allow one to particularly enjoy the shadows of the eucalyptus trees dancing around them as the light changes.

The constant connection between the inside and the outside, framed by this almost invisible structure of steel and glass, is also a common feature between the Eames House and the Japanese house. The two courtyards of the Santa Monica house, one between the house and the studio and the other to the south of the house, along a path delimited by tall eucalyptus trees. In 1961, the access of reduced nijiriguchi and the necessary mental separation from the stones placed at the entrance to the teahouses, would mark the end of the rōji and the necessary mental separation from the outside world before entering the teahouse. At this point we find the nijiriguchi transposed to the Eames House, the access of reduced dimensions developed by Sen no Rikyū, which equalises the status of the participants, as they must bend down and practically crawl to enter the room.

The constant scenographic change that the interior of the house undergoes to accommodate different moments, situations and domestic celebrations can also be linked to what happens in the tea pavilion, an “Abode of the Void”, as Kakuzo Okakura would say, which takes delight in the ephemeral: “The term ‘Abode of the Void’, besides conveying the Taoist theory of the inclusiveness of the whole, conveys the idea of a continuous need to change decorative motifs. The tearoom is absolutely empty, except for the changing elements, arranged to satisfy a temporary, almost momentary aesthetic taste”. However, as he later points out, “the way we decorate our tea rooms is in contrast to the Western system, in which the interior of an ideal house often resembles a museum. Thus, we can speak of a “Westernised Japaneseness” in the Eameses, a similar attitude but one that employs juxtaposition rather than “centrality” as a compositional method, where “all other elements are selected and presented to enhance the main one”. It is no coincidence that the Smithsons similarly alluded to the fundamental difference between Japanese and Western homes: “storage goes unnoticed in the spaces and at the same time defines them, unlike the Western house, which has always tended to show everything” (fig. 10).

In any case, the flexibility sought in the interior of the home, the search for a lower point of view to enhance the enjoyment of the space, with its usual scenographic changes, are also features shared with Japanese design. The Eameses emphasised this with the double height in both the studio and the living room, the use of carpets (if not tatamis) and low furniture: Indian seats in carved and painted wood, or directly on cushions in a variety of colours and patterns, and the versatile LTR side table which, with its 25 centimetres of height, would become the undeniable protagonist of the tea ceremony.

Beyond the formal evidence and parallels we can discern, it is probably Charles’ own words that shed more light on the connection between the Eames House and traditional Japanese architecture, particularly that of the teahouse. In an article published in Architectural Forum in 1953, Charles points out how traditional Japanese constructions, whether objects or buildings, seem to make use of the humblest materials to provide solutions that imply a heightened understanding of human needs, as well as the relationship between these creations and the scale of the body itself.

Even more enlightening is the letter he wrote to Genshitsu Sen on the occasion of the tea ceremony in 1961. “Any feeling I may have about the relationship of this beautiful and ancient ceremony with the architecture it harbors can only be based on an intuitive feeling, since I have no extensive knowledge of either, Charles writes with some humility, but allows himself to draw what he sees as the greatest parallel between the two: “The most important thing (the house) has in common with the Japanese teahouse is the fact that it uses extremely humble materials in a natural and uncontrived way. The bare, unadorned I-beams and the open, latticed steel beams largely serve as the bare wooden structural elements of the teahouse”, nuancing how, in this simple, bare space, “the intrusion (...) of tables and chairs in a westernised version seems to me quite shocking”, reflecting on the need for the space to retain its essence, and probably also on the furniture and objects he and Ray designed for the famous ceremony; a reflection that could be extended to the even more westernised 2012 ceremony.

In these statements we can see that there is a common essence, something that goes beyond mere appearance
and approaches a form of understanding, a shared attitude. This is summed up by Charles in the following sentence, which is enlightening: “Conceptually, the environment must be modest, sensitive and discreet.”

According to Okakura, “(the tearoom) is an Abode of Fancy inasmuch as it is an ephemeral structure built to harbor a poetic impulse. It is an Abode of Vacancy inasmuch as it is devoid of ornamentation except for what may be placed in it to satisfy some aesthetic need of the moment.” These beautiful descriptions could well have been written for the Eames House. The ‘magic factory’, which hosted both ceremonies is configured as a container in which the aesthetic impulses of its owners are collected and displayed through the objects arranged there and their ever-changing character.

It was also a shared space in which these poetic impulses could be given free rein, with some found objects and others created by the authors or by those who visited the house and temporarily made it their own, and which, arranged in heterogeneous groups in this empty space, revealed all their aesthetic potential. Above all, however, the house is a simple container, built as a shelter with humble materials and on a human scale, a sensitive space that is a faithful reflection of a way of life and a showcase for the elements that make up its unique way of inhabitation. These moments of life, when the house becomes a real tea pavilion, reinforce the successful enjoyment of its spatiality.

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Images
01. On the left, utensils for the tea ceremony on the tatami, with the folding screen, the calligraphy and the flower arrangement in the background. On the right, image of the tea ceremony held at the Eames House in March 2012, with the guests seated on the LOW chairs and the LTR tables in front of them.

02. Charles and Ray Eames in the living room of their California home, filled with furniture, rugs, lamps, plants and other unique objects selected by them. Photograph: Hap Johnson para la Eames Office. © 2012 Eames Office, LLC. Published in: https://eamesfoundation.org/events/japanese-tea-ceremony/

03. The Eames House living room prepared for the tea ceremony, that took place on 24 July 1951. We can see on the right two Akari lamps by Isamu Noguchi and on the left, the tatami and cushions for the guests, and near the corner of the room, the chagama and flower arrangement. Photograph: Charles Eames. Published in: © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/37419


07. Kaiseki from the tea ceremony held on 24 July 1951 at the Eames House, where we can see some of the attendees seated on the tatami and surrounding the central space occupied by the tea master, in this case, Yoshiko Yamaguchi. Photograph: Charles Eames. Published in: © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/37429
