

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David N. Buck. *Responding to Chaos: Tradition, Technology, Society and Order in Japanese Design.* London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 212 pp. \$65.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-419-25110-1.

Reviewed by Sandra Katzman (National Defense Academy, Yokosuka, Japan)

Published on H-US-Japan (March, 2002)

In his inspired and inspiring first book, *Responding to Chaos* David N. Buck takes the title as an all-around question posed to each of seventeen architects he interviews. Presenting their answers in words and well-chosen well-reproduced photographs—not by the author—in color and in black and white, Buck explores the phrase he defines as the embracing concern of Japanese architects modern and historical.

Individual voices and thoughts and structures animate this book. The photos draw you into the interviews, each prefaced with a short essay by the author. An architect, a historian, a Japaneseophile, or anyone who enjoys structures will find it interesting, I think. The writing is both substantial and humorous, weaving references to history, movies, and comparative cultures skillfully throughout the essays and the interviews. The interviewees rightfully are in the foreground expressing a wide variety of opinions which predominate over the author's introductory essays. Full bibliographical data follow each chapter.

The title refers to the author's primary standard question, posed for instance as this: "‘Dealing with chaos’ seems to be the catchphrase to some degree of all Japanese architects. Is this how you see your work?" (p. 140)

The interviewees' voices come through as highly articulate, although I found myself wondering about the flawless quality of English, perhaps having missed an explanation about any translation.

The British author lets the Japanese interviewees speak, reflecting their culture, their land, and climate. "...What I tried to achieve in this architecture was to

weave the water element and children's lives into the space, protecting the children from strong seasonal wind and yet letting them still breathe the richness of the wind into their bodies," says Shin Takamatsu describing an elementary school (p. 142).

Other very famous designers like Tadao Ando find their places and are quoted by the other sixteen in the book. Self referential, these comments provide context within the interviews. Takefumi Aida says in his interview, "Most people thought architects and builders were the same, until about twenty years ago when Tadao Ando, 'architect,' could be found in the newspaper for example" (p. 176).

The book has four sections, and the author has placed the 17 interview subjects in them although different choices for categories he admits is possible. "Tradition" includes Shigeru Uchida, Kan Izue, Yoshiji Takehara, and Toru Murakami. "Technology" includes Toru Mitani, Shoei Yoh, Motoko Ishii, and Waro Kishi. "Society" includes Kazuyo Sejima, Tohiyuki Kita, Shigeru Ban, and Shin Takamatsu. "Order" includes Tadao Ando, Kazuhiro Ishii, Takefumi Aida, Yoji Sasaki, and Hiromi Fujii.

Author Buck has accomplished his purpose in filling a gap that he had perceived. "As the work of the preceding designers shows, there is a wonderful range of thought, theory, and completed works in Japan that has not always been given fair attention in the design press" (p. 206). A designer himself, Buck writes that he always knew he would visit and work in Japan.

Themes emerge throughout the book. Repeated phrases and questions provide a path through the narrative. For example, you recognize the theme of Japan and

technology. The essay before the chapter on Tohiyuki Kita states that “Japan’s love affair with technology isn’t a revolution in the way that it is often portrayed” (p. 112).

Another theme is a statement for the future, expressed by Kazuhiro Ishii’s phrase “Non-city in a city.” Happily, no matter how good or even how occasionally forced the writing of the author or the speaking of the designers, the photos of the works speak most eloquently, as in the Seiwa Bunraku Puppet Theater’s spiral roof of Kazuhiro Ishii.

Contrast to other countries by way of approval and disapproval runs throughout—both from the author’s voice and from his subjects’ For example, Buck writes “... by the 1960s, Italian lifestyles had moved ahead. Italy now had ‘lifestyle infrastructures’ of parks and good housing, whereas in Japan, it was tiny cramped apartments, overcrowded trains and an urban fabric of amorphous architecture threaded together by overhead electric power lines” (p. 113).

Buck unabashedly makes broad statements: “Its [Japan’s corporate stance] either been a policy of looking into the past-retro-products-or looking too far into the future-undersea cities” (p. 113). He thus leads into interviews, as in that one for Shigeru Ban, who has set up his own non-governmental organization. Ban answers the question about the future: “So my legacy will not be

architecture per se as architecture develops so slowly” (p. 132).

Buck offers social context, such as mentioning when Shin Takamatsu’s “Ark” was used in the movie “Batman.” Poetic description by Buck may be accurate for the photo: “Like a fragment of a giant ark or an aeronautical wing, the upper museum areas seem to be held in levitational balance against the sky” (p. 137).

Shin Takamatsu ranks high among the gathered interviewees, and Buck explains: “His buildings seem to know much more than they are actually willing to say, and therein lies his genius” (p. 137).

This month, March 2002, the American Planning Association wrote: “Until the mid-’30s, almost everyone claiming to be a city planner was an architect, landscape architect, or engineer. In the ’60s, planning lost its rapport with the engineering and design professions, and allied itself with the social sciences. Now civil engineering firms are trying to get their foot in the door again.”

Buck’s book might be said to address such changes in Japan, including one of the architects who stepped in and started to rebuild Kobe after the 1995 earthquake. Highly informative, interestingly opinionated, balanced between essay, interview and illustration, *Responding to Chaos* is a good book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Sandra Katzman. Review of Buck, David N., *Responding to Chaos: Tradition, Technology, Society and Order in Japanese Design*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6041>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.