

***Ise Jingu*: A manifestation of the coeval past, present and future**

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The purpose of this article is not to describe, but mainly to interpret the meaning of *Ise Jingu*, Japan, as a unique manifestation of Shinto architecture. For this purpose, reference is made to ideas expressed by Japanese architects concerning the architecture of the buildings of the two shrines at Ise as prototypes of Japanese architecture. These views on the meaning of the shrines are supported by Western theoretical insights, mainly those formulated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

***Ise Jingu*: 'n manifestasie van die gelyktydigheid van die verlede, hede en toekoms**

Die doel met hierdie artikel is nie om *Ise Jingu*, Japan, te beskryf nie, maar hoofsaaklik om die betekenis daarvan as 'n unieke manifestasie van Shinto-argitektuur te interpreteer. Met hierdie doel voor oë word verwys na die menings van Japanese argitekte oor die geboue van die Ise-heiligdomme as prototipes van Japanese argitektuur. Hierdie beskouings oor die betekenis van die heiligdomme word ondersteun deur Westerse teoretiese insigte, hoofsaaklik dié wat deur die Duitse filosoof, Martin Heidegger, geformuleer is.

The most sacred collection of Shinto sites at Ise, collectively called *Ise Jingu*, which centre on the *Naiku* or Inner Shrine (figures 1-3) and the *Geku* or Outer Shrine (figures 4-5), is not well known in the West. In Western books on architectural history in which a chapter is devoted to Japanese temples, shrines and castles, Ise usually merits an illustration of only the *Naiku* main building, accompanied by a description. Reference is usually made to the fact that the shrine buildings are continuously rebuilt every twenty years on adjacent sites. At most, a description of the architectural style of the main and subsidiary shrine buildings is limited to their steeply pitched thatched roofs with spreading eaves, platform construction for the main rooms, and light timber partitioning for the walls, with an explanation that the prototype was the indigenous tent-shaped thatched Japanese hut on stilts. Since the layout of the shrine buildings and their

precinct enclosures are basically symmetrical, Japanese thought and planning are said to be characterized by extreme formality which contrasts with the natural forms of the environment. While descriptions and historical facts are relevant, the purpose of this article is not to describe, but mainly to interpret the meaning of *Ise Jingu* as a unique manifestation of religious architecture. For this purpose, reference is made to the ideas expressed by the Japanese architects Kenzo Tange and Noboru Kawazoe in their book on Ise. Their observations on Ise as a prototype of Japanese architecture and its cultural context are supported by Western theoretical insights formulated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who postulated the concept of a cosmological fourfold - the unity of heaven, earth, humans and the divinity - which can be said to manifest in all authentic architecture.

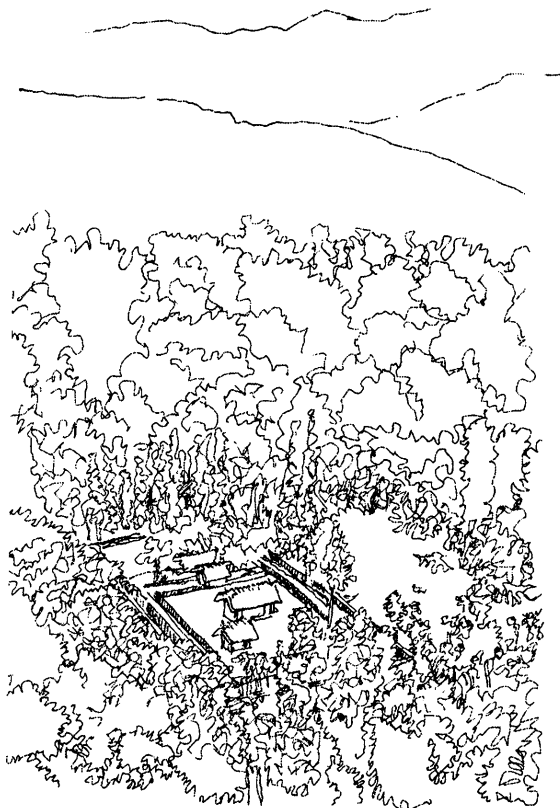


Figure 1
Aerial view of *Ise Naiku*

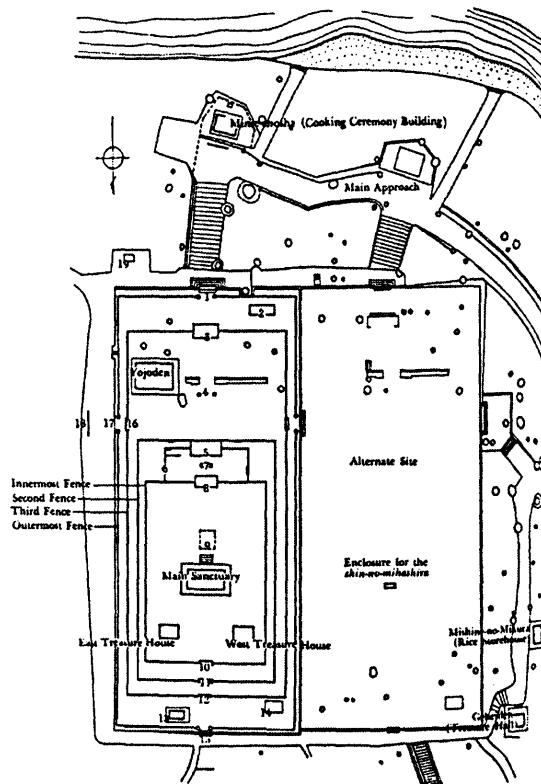


Figure 3
Plan and alternative site of *Ise Naiku*

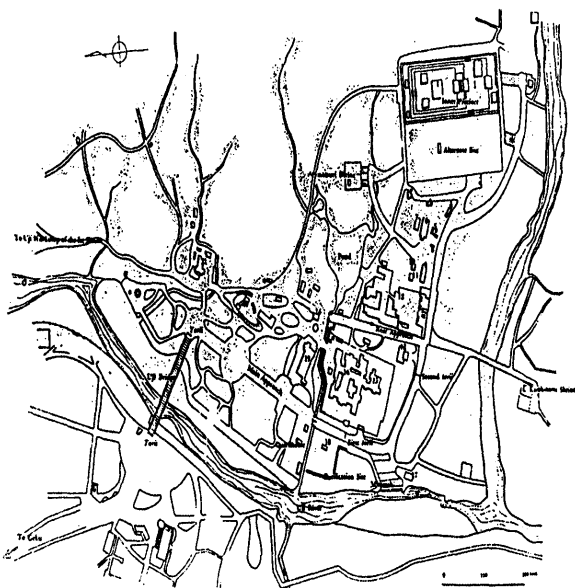


Figure 2
Layout of the *Ise Naiku* precinct

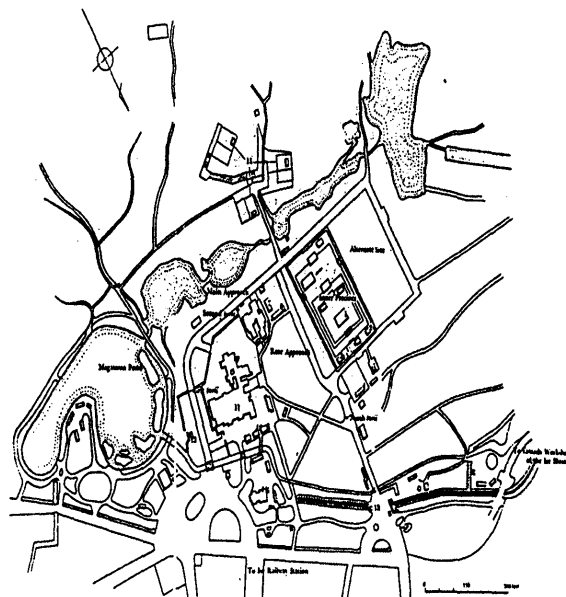


Figure 4
Layout of the *Ise Geku* precinct

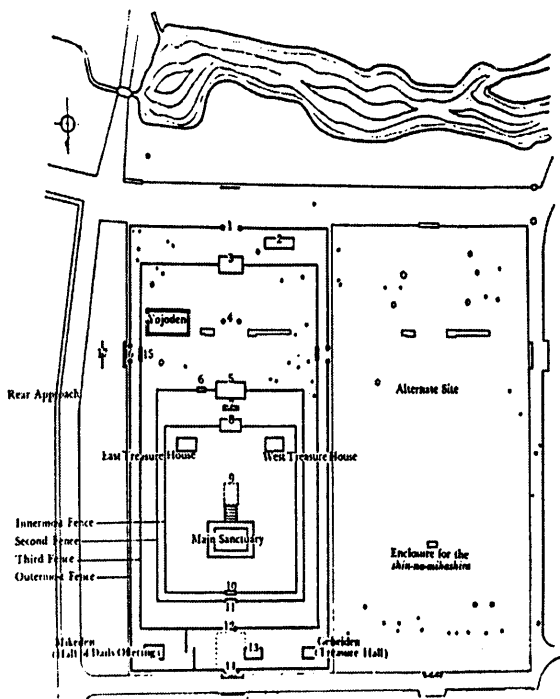


Figure 5
Plan and alternative site of *Ise Geku*

According to legend, *Ise Naiku* was founded in the reign of Emperor Suinin (249-280 C.E.). Suinin's daughter, the Princess Yamato-hime, went from place to place in search of a good location for the worship of the Great Deity. When she came to the Ise area she received the following oracular message: "Since this land of Ise is a land where no turbulent tempests blow, and is a peaceful land where the twang of the bow and the hiss of the arrow are never heard, I desire to rest in this land" (Tange 1965: 37). The princess then erected a shrine for the Great Deity, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omi-Kami, who was worshipped as the founder of the Japanese imperial line and guardian of the nation. This goddess has her dwelling at the main building of the *Naiku* figures 6-7), in a sacred mirror, which is one of the three sacred treasures of Japan. It rests in a boat-shaped container, approximately two metres long, set above the central pillar of the main building in order to recall its arrival in Japan.

The structural materials applied at the Ise shrines are mainly cypress, cedar and thatch

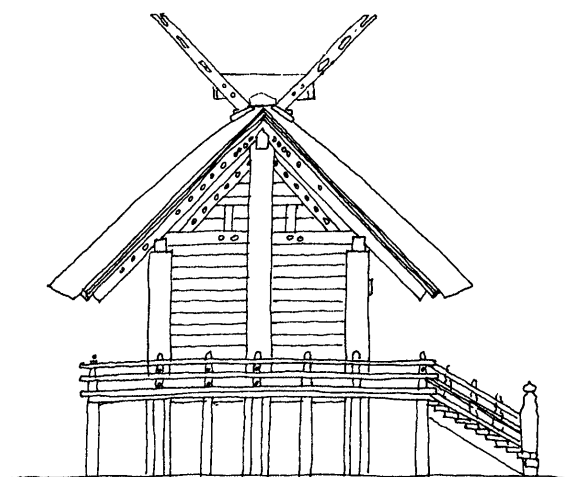


Figure 6
Side elevation of the *shoden* (main sanctuary building) at *Ise Naiku*

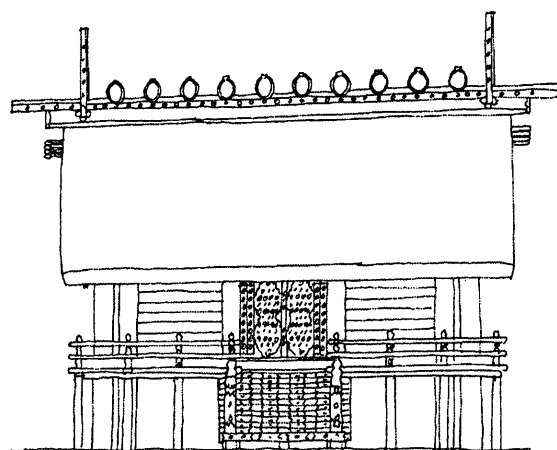


Figure 7
Front elevation of the *Shoden* at *Ise Naiku*

with some metal ornamentation. There are no sculptures and no intricate spaces to fathom, but the refinement of detail grips the attention. However, more profound meanings should be given priority in the discussion of *Ise Naiku* and *Ise Geku*, situated some four kilometres apart. These shrines embody an architectural endeavour that makes the presence of human beings as creators of order visible to the deities who are invited to dwell in these earthly places. In the layouts of the *Naiku* and the *Geku* a sensitive awareness of the presence of mountains, forest and sky is retained so that the origins of the Shinto religion can still be sensed there. The trees, a

waterfall, and the various natural phenomena that surround the *Ise Jingu* clearings complement the architectural forms, in which there exist a natural relationship between elements of the earth such as stone, wood and water, and air and wind which belongs to the sky.

The *Naiku* is approached by means of a wooden bridge, which spans the Isuzu River; at the end of the bridge a *torii*, or gate, announces the entrance to a Shinto sacred place (figure 8). The pathway to the enclosed shrine is paved with small pebbles, which cause footsteps to sound *zaku-zaku*, an audible reminder to visitors that the profane space on which they tread is demarcated as separate from the sacred space of the divinities. Throughout the *Ise Jingu* precincts there are stones and rocks, which are venerated as abodes of deities. These are the forerunners of traditional Japanese stone gardens of great artistic beauty, replete with symbolic meaning, because “in these stones and rocks the ancient Japanese saw something of the mystery dwelling within nature and natural phenomena” (Tange 1965: 25). The stones at *Ise Jingu* are cordoned off by ropes and white fluttering paper along either side of the path. This treatment enhances the visibility of the stones and bears witness to the care and respect Shinto worshippers lavish on natural elements (figure 9).



Figure 8
Torii and Uji Bridge across the Isuzu River,
leading to *Ise Naiku*

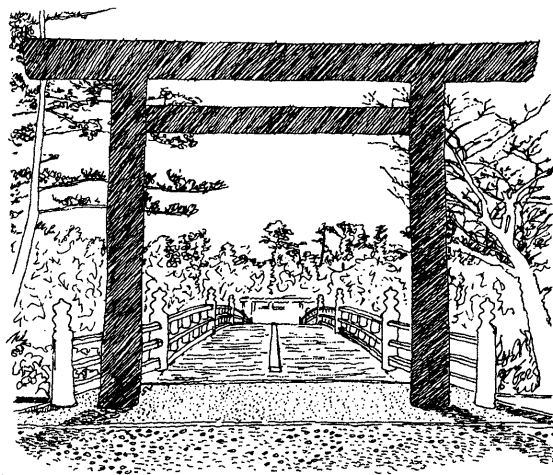


Figure 9
Stone demarcated as the abode of a Shinto deity

The arrangement of the shrine buildings on the sites within clearly defined boundaries were the symbols of the way in which the deities ranked within the hierarchy of the supernatural world (Tange 1965: 34). During the Nara period (645-794 C.E.), the *Naiku* had seventy subsidiary buildings, in addition to the main sanctuary and the east and west treasure house. The *Geku*, founded in 478 C.E. and dedicated to the grain goddess Toyouke-no-Okami, was more modest with fifty. The extensive development of the Ise sites testifies to the splendour of the religious festivals of the time and the rich and varied existence imagined for the deities dwelling there. At present the shrines comprise only four rectangular buildings: the *Shoden* or main shrine building, two treasure houses behind the innermost fence, and a meeting hall for priests between the second and third fences. The fence surrounding the level clearing of approximately 18 x 39 metres and the three innermost fences clearly demarcate the hierarchy of sanctity, so that in most respects the shrines still resemble the description in the *Documents on the rituals of the Great Shrine at Ise*, which dates from 804 C.E.

Since the interior of the main *Naiku* shrine building was not intended to accommodate people, but is primarily a place of repose for the divine spirit, it is

constructed on a small scale. The *Naiku* complex is surrounded by four enclosures (figure 10). Only the first is marked by a gateway, which is open to the public. Selected people of high rank are admitted to the second enclosure, but the third and fourth enclosures are reserved only for the Emperor who is the high priest. The privileged pilgrim may be led by a priest to a position facing the inner shrine where he or she bows deeply and claps hands three times for the *kami*, which signifies that “reverent respect has been paid to the Emperor and the August ancestors of the Japanese nation” (Rubenstein 1989: 84).

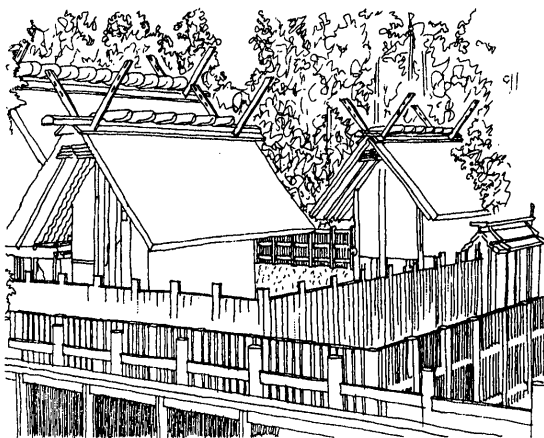


Figure 10
Detail of subsidiary *Ise Naiku* buildings surrounded by four enclosures

Beyond the four wooden fences, the visitor may glimpse the V-shaped external roof elements of the shrine buildings, which glitter with metal ornamentation (figure 11). These elements, called *katsuogi*, were originally weights on the roof, which served as protection against the wind, becoming, in due course, stylized symbols of the Emperor’s palace. Summing up, Kenzo Tange (1965: 52) avers:

A special feature of these storehouses was the construction of the walls, which consisted of boards with the ends crossed at the corners, log-cabin fashion, and which directly carried the weight of the roof. ... The construction of the main sanctuaries of both the *Naiku* and the *Geku* at Ise, as we see them today, is the so-called *yuiitsu shinmei-zukuri*, consists of posts

and beams, with boards fitted in between the posts to make up the walls, and verandas with railings.

Out of ... nature’s darkness, the vigorous conceptual ability of the ancient Japanese gradually fashioned various symbols of the spirit culminating in the creation of the form of Ise. Here eternal darkness and eternal light, the vital and the aesthetic, are in balance, and a world of harmony with nature unfolds.

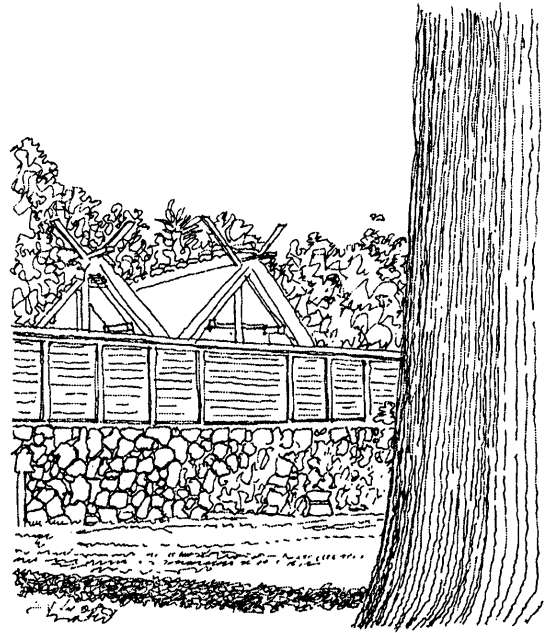


Figure 11
V-shaped roof details at *Ise Naiku*

The shrine buildings at *Ise Jingu* are the first great architectural achievement of the Japanese people, even though their model was the modest raised-floor storehouse, described by Tange (1965: 45):

It is most remarkable that for more than 1300 years, from the time of Emperor Temmu, who reigned from 672 to 686 C.E., both the *Naiku* and the *Geku* have been rebuilt in twenty year cycles, most recently in 1993, for the sixty-first time, with the longest breaks in the respective rebuilding cycles occurring between 1462-1585 and 1434-1563. Jonathan Reynolds (2001: 339, note 21) observes: “Although there are some differences between the appearance of Ise Shrine at the beginning of the 17th century and the present, the differences are not ... extreme... .” The present shrine buildings are, according to John Burchard (Tange

1965: 9), “very old and very new”. Thus, historical memory is evoked continuously by the effect of the reconstruction:

In place of the new timbers sported by a recently reconstructed shrine, the viewer is enjoined to imagine the sanctuary as it once was. In other words, while the buildings themselves may have changed, Shinto shrines are built to retain the intent and basic design of the original architecture; it is this ancient structure as it once existed that the viewer is required to imagine (Watanabe 1974: 26).

In the persistence of an architectural pattern, one may identify a supreme example of how mythologizing thought can imbue an established concept with timeless validity. Since the Ise complex became the prototype for all Shinto sanctuaries elsewhere in Japan, one may say that the repetition of the same basic design and layout pattern reveals an acceptance by the Japanese Shinto believers that the unity of human beings and the divinity is authentically manifested in the shrine architecture. It therefore comes as no surprise that Tange (1965: 51) expresses his awareness of the meaning of the established shrine layouts and their periodic restructuring in mythical terms, referring back to the intentions of the original builders:

When the Japanese people try to glimpse the divine, this form becomes the symbol. Or perhaps one should say that the Japanese see in this form the divine. The energy that sustained the creation of this form was also the energy that welded the Japanese into one people; it reflects their primordial essence.

In the absence of any visual representation of the divinities at *Ise Jingu* Kenzo Tange (1965: 16) describes the shrines themselves as “the symbolic form of the religious myths”. In essence, *Ise Jingu* manifests the world of Shinto religion. “Shinto” is the Chinese reading of the two characters, which comprise this word and is usually translated as “the Way”, or “Teaching of the Gods”. However, the Way of Shinto religion embraces the totality of heaven and earth. The key to the understanding of Shinto

shrines such as Ise *Jingu*, which is set in a forest at the foot of Mounts Kamiji and Shimaji where the perennial presence of the unity of the supernatural and the natural are felt, is the concept *kami-no-michi* (often rendered only as *kami*), which refers to “god” or “spirit”.

S Shunzu (1975: 25) explains:

The term [*kami*] is applied in the first place to the various deities of Heaven and earth ... but birds, beasts, plants and trees, seas and all other things which deserve to be dreaded and revered for the extraordinary powers and per-eminent powers they possess are called *kami*... . The more important *kami* were in greater or lesser degree affiliated with birth, growth, change and death... . From the divine hosts inhabiting the plain of High Heaven, there eventually emerged two deities, *Izangani* and *Izanami*, who begot the Sun Goddess and the Moon God.

Also Tange (1965: 39) explains that the deities worshipped at Ise

have some relation to nature and cultivation. There are deities connected with water, wells, rivers, pools, and waterfalls, with the sea..., with agriculture ... and nature phenomena, like the sun and moon. These deities quietly dwell here in the deep forests, by the banks of the Isuzu River and the shores of Ise Bay, as if to remind us of the distant past. The legendary world of the *tenchi kaibyaku* [creation of the Japanese archipelago] myths is, as it were, displayed before us in an expanse of space.

Even though heaven and earth are different they belong together and in their unity they reflect the cycles of nature. Likewise, the Ise shrine structures, which do not change visibly over a long period because they are periodically rebuilt, belong to the cycles of nature, which Noboru Kawazoe (Tange 1965: 167) says reveal a “simultaneous opposition and accord”. This echoes Heidegger’s insight regarding a cosmological fourfold of “simultaneous opposition and accord” of which human beings are part. We as mortals are, first and foremost, bound to the earth (Heidegger 1949: 274). By creating works of architecture we have the ability to affirm that we relate to

heaven, because being on earth means being under heaven (Heidegger 1954). Being related to heaven implies a relationship with the transcendental, because, like humans, divinities also relate to heaven and earth and dwell as we do.

In Shinto religion deities are not represented by means of images. "Instead of thinking in terms of images of the deities, [the Japanese] thought in terms of an image of space in which deities moved, and proceeded in various ways to symbolize this space" (Tange 1965: 30-31). Rice straw ropes were used from a very early period to delimit areas, which were not to be approached by visitors. These areas still signify that the space is occupied by the deities and, at the same time, symbolize the deities themselves.

One may explain this by recalling Mircea Eliade's (1964: 167) insight into naturalistic cults: "The veneration of cosmic objects is not 'fetishism'. It is not the tree, the spring, or the stone that is venerated, but the sacred which is manifested through these objects."

Evaluation

The fourfold in perfect balance.

At *Ise Naiku* and *Ise Geku* the natural and the supernatural worlds are brought close together, but in such a way that each retains its separate identity. This manifests in their clearly bounded space, because the demarcation of a boundary is a prerequisite for building and dwelling. Rubenstein (1989: 81) makes the point that "although human hands have tended each stone, and care has been lavished on each pebble [at *Ise Jingu*], nature rules here - not humans". However, nature excludes neither humans nor divinities, but is inclusive of all that is mortal and transcendental. The domains of heaven and earth, of divinities and mortals are bound together into the unity of a "fourfold", as described by Heidegger in his essay "Building dwelling thinking" (1977). According to this philosopher the world is revealed by the advent, or the coming-to-

presence, of heaven, earth, divinities and mortals in relationship to each other. By heaven and earth he means the totality of physical nature, the whole of all inanimate things as well as animate beings. However, as a unitary structure, the fourfold is dynamic. It reflects the differences between the components as well as their unified identity. In Heidegger's (1971: 158) terminology the fourfold is "guarded" in all authentic things, which include works of art and architecture. Both the unity and the differences between heaven and earth are reflected in authentic architecture, which forms the context in which mortals find their fulfilment in dwelling. In order to dwell authentically mortals need to build and building requires a clearing, or clearly bounded space, like a room. Relating these ideas to Ise one may refer to similar ideas expressed by Kenzo Tange and Noboru Kawazoe (1965: 167). They point out that the division between the Inner and Outer shrines formally acknowledges a balance between the celestial and the terrestrial. Thus, the *Geku*, which presides over the fundamental necessities of human life, complements the *Naiku*, dedicated to a sky element. This insight may be taken as the basis of an approach to an aspect of the meaning of the shrines, in both a religious and an architectural sense.

The natural and ecological qualities of the shrine

The message that *Ise Jingu* sends to the world transcends Shinto beliefs. It embodies the cycles of nature to which all sentient beings are subject. Everything comes into being, decays and ceases to exist in a continuous process of life and death, birth and death, decay and rejuvenation. The shrines at *Ise Jingu* embody an archetype of the polarities of the process of life in which renewal and destruction are unified. Shinto beliefs respect the unity of all life and the ecological balance of all systems of life. While the production of natural materials for

architecture implies destruction, the workshop which prepares the structural parts from cedar wood, supplies newly prepared elements such as columns, beams, wall panels and fencing to *Ise Jingu*, which are recycled at other Shinto shrines during the twenty year cycles of rebuilding. This echoes Avital's (1998) idea that all organisms are finite and unique in the history of time, but at the same time they are recursive through birth and offspring.

The aesthetics and uniqueness of the architectural design

Although each organism or shrine is closed-ended, it is at the same time open-ended through birth and renewal. Since Shinto is a nature religion, periodicity is one of its basic ideas. Hence, the renewal of the shrines may be interpreted as symbolic of renewal like the seasons in nature. Also, shrines for divinities should somehow reflect their eternal aspect. Paradoxically, however, nothing that exists in space and time is eternal and the only way to overcome this is by periodically renewing the abodes of the divinities.

A comparison between Japanese and European architectural expression

Tange (1965: 33) is aware of the differences between Japanese and European architectural expression:

Making space tangible meant in the West wresting it from nature, piling it up in vaults and domes, until ultimately in Gothic cathedrals these elements were integrated like the movements of a symphony. Space thus created was a separate microcosm, a transcendental world, apart from nature.

On the contrary,

space in Japanese architecture is still nature itself, space is bestowed by nature. Even though space is delimited, it is not built up into an independent world severed from nature: it is considered in closest relationship to its environment and always reveals a striving towards oneness with nature. A suggestion of

animistic feeling hangs about Japanese space.

Summing up

During the various epochs of the long history of culture architecture has been a means of expressing knowledge and art, which dignifies human existence. The subtle point is made by John Burchard (Tange 1965: 8), that it is not difficult to reach *Ise Jingu* physically, but: "The spiritual journey is longer." *Ise Jingu* dignifies not only human existence in the realm of time but demands a transcendent understanding of the unity of time past, time present and time future, which is in mythical terms an eternal present.

Notes

All the illustrations were redrawn from various sources by the architect Arthur Rapanos.

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