Coincidentia oppositorum and *hankan gõitso*: aesthetic philosophies in the West and Japan — their similarities as expressed in architecture

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The concepts *coincidentia oppositorum* and *hankan gõitso* were respectively formulated in the West and the Far East (Japan). The essence of both is that harmony is created when opposites coincide in a structural unity. The creation of a unified harmony of nature, human beings and divinities in works of architecture can be recognised at Delphi, a classical Greek site, and at the Shinto shrines at Ise, Japan. Even though the layout of these sites are vastly different, Delphi and Ise merit comparison in terms of the architectural integration of pairs of opposite forces, which are respectively resolved in terms of the principles of *coincidentia oppositorum* and *hankan gõitso,* both relating to the integration of the divine in the physical universe, and both allowing for a symbiosis between human beings and nature.
Key words: *coincidentia oppositorum, hankan gõitso,* Delphi, Ise

***Coincidentia oppositorum* en *hankan gõitso*: estetiese filosofieë in die Weste en Japan — hulle ekspressiewe ooreenkomste in argitektuur**
Die konsepte *coincidentia oppositorum* en *hankan gõitso* is onderskeidelik in die Weste en die Verre Ooste (Japan) geformuleer. Die essensie van beide is dat harmonie geskep word wanneer teenoorgesteldes 'n strukturele eenheid vorm. Die skepping van 'n harmoniese eenheid van die natuur, mense en goddelike wesens in argitektoniese werke kan herken word by Delphi, 'n klassieke Griekse terrein, en die Shinto-heiligdeomme by Ise, Japan. Hoewel die uitleg van hierdie terreine heeltemaal verskillend is, kan hulle nietemin vergelyk word in terme van die integrasie van gepaarde teenoorgestelde kragte, wat onderskeidelik vereenselwig word in terme van die beginsels *coincidentia oppositorum* en *hankan gõitso*, beginsels wat voorsiening maak vir 'n simbiose tussen mense en die natuur.
Sleutelwoorde: *coincidentia oppositorum, hankan gõitso,* Delphi, Ise

While it is not possible to formulate a single universal principle for aesthetic analysis, the question nevertheless arises whether artefacts of various cultures – in spite of their differences – may be assessed with a similar or related criterion. I contend that at least one comparable ideal for the visual arts was formulated in the West and the Far East (more specifically Japan). The criterion I am proposing is especially relevant in the analysis of the structural unity of separate parts or elements of a work of architecture and, more importantly, its symbolic meaning. It is therefore my purpose to explain the theoretical similarities of the concepts *coincidentia oppositorum* and *hankan gõitso* and their expression in the different cultures in which they were formulated. My choice of examples is the Temple Complex of Apollo at Delphi, Greece, and the Great Shinto Shrine at Ise, Japan.

At the outset various traditional differences between Western and Far Eastern architecture can be enumerated. Starting with an explanation of the cultural and religious differences between these two regions which influenced their respective ways of expression in architecture Clay Lancaster (1956: 301-2) discusses eight divergent principles between the two cultural traditions:

> (1) that the first has the appearance of solidarity and the second that of lightness, (2) that the one considers the building from the point of view of form and the other from that of volume, (3) that the first is composed of individual parts and the second of integrated units, (4) that the former shows the tendency to embellish and the latter an inclination to simplify, (5) that Western building designs stress verticality and the Eastern horizontality, (6) that Occidental architects stand on a formal footing with their work and the Oriental architects display a close association with it, (7) that the first is more concerned with effects and the second a forthright exhibit of materials, and (8) that in the West a building is withdrawn from the natural environment whereas in the Far East it is identified with its setting.

Clearly Lancaster's generalised principles are mainly formalistic. For every one of his principles exceptions in both Western and Far Eastern architecture may be found. Furthermore, noteworthy buildings which are expressive of culture and belief cannot be so narrowly categorised because in many notable Western and Japanese buildings, both historical and modern, combinations of the above principles are simultaneously present.

Since the purpose of this article is to argue the point that the West and Japan have a principle in common, alternatively designated as *coincidentia oppositorum* and *hankan gõitso* it is imperative to point out that no work of architecture can be reduced to its materials and structural forms. Architecture is a unity of constitutive parts and social functions, but also of environmental and symbolic references.

In the West the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* was formulated by Nicholas of Cusa, called Cusanus (1401-64), in his *De docta ignorantia* [*On Learned Ignorance*], a work on Christian religion published in 1440. However, this concept is not restricted to religion because in all of existence opposites coincide. In order to create harmony opposites should not remain separate entities or dyadic pairs (as postulated in structuralist discourse), but be unified in a totality to eliminate the strife or disharmony of duality. According to György Doczi (1981: 1) this order can be seen in the "dynamic way all things grow or are made — by union of complementary opposites". Harmony thus arises when the different parts of a whole are united so that each preserves its own identity, and yet blends into the greater pattern of a whole. When applied to a work of architecture as a method of analysis opposite elements - whether structural or symbolic – should thus be found to coincide to form a totality.

This principle can, in retrospect, be recognised in the Temple Complex at Delphi which exemplifies the fact that classical Greek architecture was not exclusively an architecture of three classical orders, but an architecture on two interlinked hierarchical levels, namely the architecture of the divine level, as symbolised by the perfect, eternal Doric temple which is aligned with features of the earth, the horizon and the sky as a dramatic natural backdrop, as seemingly opposed to the architecture of the secondary human level as embodied by the auxiliary buildings along the sacred way which are smaller and characterised by complexity and ambiguity in the sense of being imperfect, restless, of varied design and not oriented to a geometrical axis, forming a contrast with the architecture of the superior Doric order embodied in the Temple of Apollo, isolated from the bustle of the smaller approach structures, on an elevated platform below the foothills of Mount Parnassus. Thus, classical Greek architecture embodies a geometrically symmetric order and a random order that are two complementary orders, or a dialectic between order and disorder.

The layout of the central part of the sacred precinct at Delphi comprises the isolated Temple of Apollo and the winding ceremonial way and its environs, lined with various treasuries, small buildings, clustered structural elements and sculpture, dating back to the fourth century BCE (figure 1). The ambiguity and complexity expressed in the relationship between the approach buildings and the temple, as well as the totality of the architectural schemes at Delphi may be explained by the fact that approach structures are characterized by the use of the various architectural orders which vary in scale, and exhibit deviations from the classical ideal of symmetry. By contrast, the Temple of Apollo is a single, normative building on a monumental scale, meticulously completed and refined. The ambiguities in the approach may be equated with purposeful disorderliness, the secondary buildings acting as a foil to the symmetry and order of the main temple which is geometricised to the point of abstraction. However, the totality of the group design forms a unified multiplicity, resulting in a complete and integrated experience of the two distinct parts, achieved through a synthesis of chaos and cosmos (Maré and Rapanos: 1984).

In a different era and culture – in Japan – an architectural design was established that also manifests a unified multiplicity, but in a manner that does not resemble Delphi physically.

During the Edu period in Japan Miura Baien (1723-89) formulated the ideal of *hankan gõitso* (oppositional unity) or non-duality in art that is a symbiotic aesthetic of non-dualistic mutuality. This thinking, not new at the time, was probably derived from Chinese logic of binary analogies (Rošker 2010: 79). Its main thesis is that both part and whole of a creative work are subsumed into a relationship of identity in difference. This structural epistemology was continued by the Zen thinker Daisetz Suzuki who held that both part and whole are subsumed into this relationship of identity in difference (Kurokawa: 1978).

Figure 1
General view of the approach area and Temple of Apollo, Delphi
(drawing: Arthur Rapanos; copyright E.A. Maré).

It is proposed that this principle can be recognised in traditional architecture such as the most sacred collection of Shinto sites at Ise, collectively called *Ise Jingu,* which centre on the *Naiku* or Inner Shrine and the *Geku* or Outer Shrine, situated some four kilometres apart (figure 2). A millennium ago these shrines, in the prefecture of Mie, Japan, had been in existence for almost two centuries (thus being more or less contemporary with classical Greek architecture). The origins of the Inner and Outer shrines are mythical. The main and additional buildings of both shrines, as well as all their enclosures are completely rebuilt on adjacent sites in cycles of twenty years. The new buildings faithfully replicate the original design. In 2013 they will be rebuilt for the 62nd time.

The structural materials used at the Ise shrines are mainly cypress, cedar and thatch with some metal ornamentation. There are no sculptures and no intricate spaces to fathom, but the refinement of detailing grips the attention. However, more profound meanings should be given priority in the discussion of *Ise Naiku* and *Ise Geku*. 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 exists a natural relationship exists between elements of the earth such as stone, wood and water, and air and wind which belong to the sky.

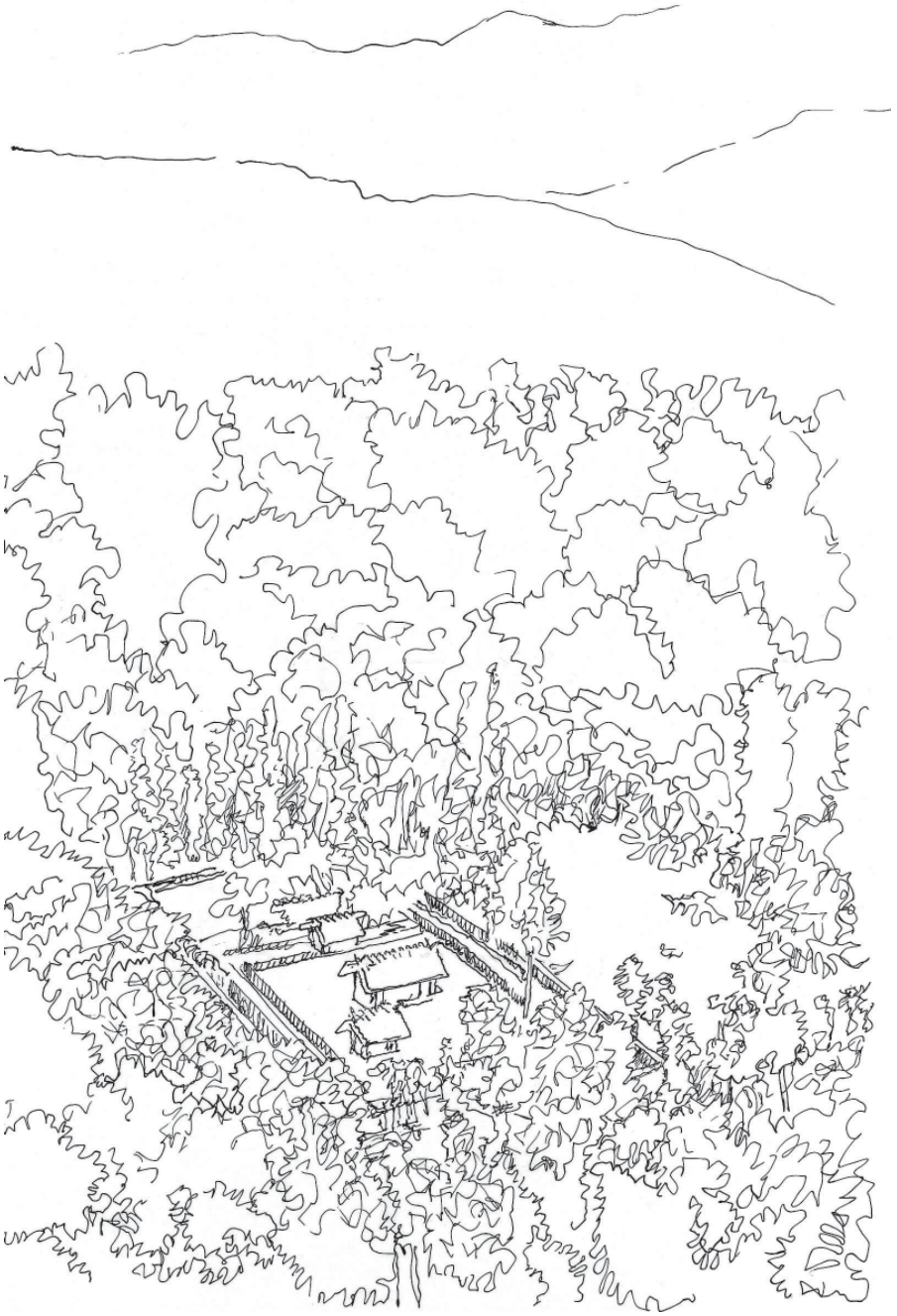

Figure 2
General view of the *Naiku* or Inner Shrine, Ise, Japan
(drawing: Arthur Rapanos; copyright E.A. Maré).

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. 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.

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. Since the layout of the shrine buildings and their precinct enclosures are basically symmetrical, Japanese thought and planning are said to be characterised by extreme formality which contrasts with the natural forms of the environment. Consequently, a symbolic ensemble of spiritual and physical forces, opposed in tension, but representing a unique reconciliation of permanence and flux, manifest at Ise. Time is periodised as past, present and future in which the architecture at Ise will exist unchanged because all structures are demolished and rebuilt cyclically so that decay and regeneration are securely balanced (Maré: 2002).

The temple complexes at Delphi and Ise merit a conceptual comparison in terms of the architectural integration of pairs of opposite forces, comprising divinities and humans, the sky and the earth, which are respectively resolved in terms of the principles of *coincidentia oppositorum* and *hankan gõitso,* both relating to the integration of the divine in the physical universe, and both allowing for a symbiosis between human beings and nature.

The principles discussed in relation to the architectural complexes at Delphi and Ise, has been reformulated insightfully by Martin Heidegger in his essay "BauenWohnenDenken" (1954), in which he states that "the world" is revealed by the advent of the fourfold that comprises heaven, earth, divinities and mortals in subjective relationship to one another. As a unitary structure, the fourfold is dynamic, reflecting the identity as well as the differences between the components. Separately, heaven and earth are a dyad: they are profoundly different and the tension between them cannot therefore be ignored. Yet these regions are aspects of the event — interpreted as their manifestation in a material creation such as architecture — which implies both their coming-to-presence and complementary concealment. Together heaven and earth represent the totality of physical nature, both inanimate and animate. However, inanimate things (including works of architecture) are not mere objects, they are "beings" and their advent reveals "Being", since every authentic thing not only brings heaven and earth closer together but, while affirming their distinctness, unites them as compatibles.

However, the idea that modern architecture is the product of technological development has gained global momentum since the industrial revolution. Treating nature as an object of exploitation has allowed human beings to change the environment for the sake of material gain, a process that causes us to suffer alienation by perverting our subjective relationship to nature. This process turns buildings into consumer products that lack universal values. Architects now have to use available technological knowledge to correct erroneously designed buildings that created inhuman environments.The remedy would be to earnestly learn a lesson from history: that architecture should be a meaningful integration of life forces — as exemplified at Delphi and Ise.[1]

Note

1. This article is a revised and extended version of the paper read at the XVIII International Congress of Aesthetics, University of Pekin, Beijing, 9-13 August 2010.

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