

VISIONS OF RENEWAL

Role of the Ephemeral in Recovery and Renewal

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Installed during the Tohoku earthquake relief fundraising event, CONCERT FOR JAPAN, at Japan Society in New York City on April 2011, the Luminous Washi Lanterns was a meditation and celebration of renewal through light and impermanent materials. The paper examines the role of the ephemeral from the ancient to contemporary Japanese culture, collective experience during an ephemeral performance, and translation of traditional Japanese renewal rituals into a piece that engages a diverse range of people outside of Japan. How can designers instigate a process of renewal following a disaster in manners that engage people of all ages and backgrounds in a collective healing experience?

INTRODUCTION

How can designers instigate a process of recovery and renewal following a disaster in manners that engage people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds? Following the March 11, 2011 Great Tohoku Earthquake, my students and I faced the challenge of designing an interactive, temporary installation that would become a part of earthquake relief fundraising concert at Japan Society in New York City. Constructed and installed during the Tohoku earthquake relief fundraising event, CONCERT FOR JAPAN, at the Japan Society on April 9, 2011, The *Luminous Washi Lanterns* was a celebration of renewal and recovery through light and impermanent materials. The work explores and celebrates the ephemeral, fleeting nature of materials traditionally used in Japanese rituals and events. The lanterns were designed as a part of an intensive design studio class at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) over the four months preceding the event. Over the twelve hours of the concert, the students ran a workshop to teach hundreds of visitors with varying skills and age levels to fold the lanterns and collectively hang them. The participants were also given an opportunity to write wishes or make drawings for the survivors on *tanzaku*, a piece of paper traditionally used for writing poetry, and tie them on bamboo frames along with their lanterns.

The project raised these additional questions:

1. How can traditional renewal rituals of Japan be translated into a work of art that engages people outside of Japan?
2. How do impermanent materials such as paper provide a sense of renewal in Japanese culture?
3. What form of participation will allow the makers as well as the viewers to be renewed and empowered?

The paper will examine aspects of Japanese culture that were translated in a contemporary American context, the design process of the *Luminous Washi Lanterns*, and the outcome and impact of the installation.

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1. Luminous Washi Lanterns installed in Japan Society's atrium

EPHEMERALITY IN JAPANESE RENEWAL RITUALS AND EVENTS

In Japanese language, the word for the ephemeral is 泡沫 (pronounced *houmatsu*), meaning ‘a bubble on surface of liquid’, indicative of the intimate connection between the ephemeral and nature. Renewal rituals and built environments have been intrinsically tied in Japanese culture since the ancient times. Every twenty years since 785, the *Naiku* and *Geku* shrines at the Grand Ise Shrine have been dismantled and rebuilt to the exact specification on an adjacent site next to the old structures. This is consistent with Shintoist understanding that nature lives and dies, that it is continually renewed and reborn. The belief in the impermanence of all things, the process of constant renewal, has been at the core of Japanese environments.

In his book *Japan-ness in Architecture*, architect Arata Isozaki argues that while the Greek temples’ stone columns with entasis (slight convex curve of its shaft) is said to be preserving its root to having been made from a bundle of plants and attempts to attain permanence by being built in stone, Ise omits this transubstantiation. Isozaki says Ise sustains identity through repetition:

At Ise...the rebuilding-and-relocation scheme of twenty-year cycles embraces a biological model of regeneration. In order to preserve life, forms are generated and regenerated isomorphically. In this manner, Ise ensures a replica of itself, daring to retain those impermanent elements such as *hottate-bashira* (massive bearing columns without stone bases) and thatch of miscanthus. In the process, architectural and ritual impetus strive to preserve identify through maintenance of an archetypal form (Isozaki 2006:145).

Ise’s renewal ritual and the duplex mechanism of renewal in which the new shrine is constructed adjacent to the old, is explained and analyzed in great deal in Gunter Nitschke’s essay “Daijosai and Shikinen Sengu - First Fruits Twice Tasted.” In this essay can be traced reasons why impermanence is

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valued in Japanese culture. Nitschke claims that that the sanctuaries in earliest phase of Shinto had no permanent shrine buildings, but “the layout and rites were structured by the dynamic, non-stationary quality of the agricultural deity, which was venerated as a mountain deity in winter and a field deity from spring to autumn.” There are rituals for calling down the deity from the mountain, and a separate set of rituals for sending the deity back up the mountain (Nitschke 1993:23-24). These deities did not live permanently in one place but came and went with seasons. This might help to explain why the Japanese are highly aware of changes in natural surroundings and why holidays and rituals are intimately connected to the seasons. It may also elucidate why passing on of rituals from one generation to another may be more valued than the permanence of materials or buildings. *Luminous Wasbi Lanterns* installation is as much about the rituals and collective experiences through passing of rituals as it is about the physical work of art.

In everyday life, no other ritual exemplifies Japanese ephemerality as a cherry blossom viewing. Anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, in her paper “Cherry Blossoms and Their Viewing: A Window onto Japanese Culture,” traces the background of cherry blossoms to its roots in the agrarian cosmology in which the deity of the Mountains comes down from the hills to become the Deity of Rice Paddies. As cherry trees grew in the mountains, cherry blossoms symbolized the sacred mountains (Ohnuki-Tierny 1998:214). Over Japan’s history, the elite established their own identity through their rituals of cherry blossom viewing, accompanied by elaborate rituals of drinking, feasting, and composition and reading of poetry. *Manyōshū* (759 A.D.), the oldest collection of poems in Japan, contains references to cherry blossoms, and other poems about rural areas by unknown poets also embraced them (Ohnuki-Tierny 1998:219). In wartimes, cherry blossoms took on a Nationalist symbol. The military government used the beautiful, short life of cherry blossom to urge soldiers to die for their country.

Today, cherry blossom season is associated with spring, the season of renewal and rebirth; it is the start of the school year, the fiscal year, and the time of new hiring at companies. For people of all classes, farmers and urbanites alike, cherry blossom viewing holds an enormous importance to companies and families. There is a frenzy of excitement every March as viewing and festival take place starting in the southernmost islands of Okinawa moving north to Hokkaido (Ohnuki-Tierny 1998:224). The occasion is a collective ritual used to strengthen the group bond, whether they are families or coworkers (Ohnuki-Tierny 1998:231).

Japan is one in a small number of countries to officially designate the title of National Living Treasure to a living person practicing a craft. While the US and other countries bestow such status to historic monuments or parks, which are then placed on the National Historic Register, Japan designates people who embody intangible cultural values as National Living Treasures. There is greater value placed on the process or craftsmanship associated with making of the artifacts than the artifacts themselves (Hakomori 2002:86). These people will eventually age and die, so these treasures are impermanent. However, what is preserved and protected are the processes and skills that are passed on from one generation to another.

Yo-ichiro Hakomori, in his chapter “The Sacred and the Profane in *Matsuri* Structures” writes how the *matsuri*, seasonal festival specific to local harvest and cultural traditions, embody Japanese Shintoist and Buddhist beliefs in the ephemerality of all things and beings.

The ancient Japanese made no clear spiritual distinction between gods, inanimate objects, natural objects, and human beings. Many natural objects such as large

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stones, mountains, the sun and large trees were thought to possess spirituality. Natural phenomena such as the wind or thunder were thought to possess spirituality. Great man-made products, such as swords or brilliant mirrors, jewels, and sometimes the shrine structures themselves, were also believed to possess spirituality (Hakomori 2002:79).

If spirituality can be possessed by wind, stones and shrines alike, this provides insights into questions why permanence is not as highly valued, why there is a high level of craftsmanship in humble materials such as paper or rope, and why permanence and impermanence are both highly valued.

There are various types of *matsuri* structures, which are all displayed or carried by festival participants only during the few days of the festival. These temporary structures are believed to mediate between the sacred, the deity that descends from the mountains during the festival, and the profane, the townspeople (Hakomori 2002:78). The deity is taking temporary shelter in a portable shrine that is festively carried around town, so it becomes understandable why preparing and construction of the structures are done with great attention and care.

There are many examples of small, temporary structures in Japanese culture that grow as public participants add to them. At shrines, visitors buy paper *omikuji* (fortune telling paper strips) which they tie to trees on the temple yard or a wooden scaffolding that is built hold the paper strips. On July 7, for the *Tanabata* star festival, children decorate bamboo trees with paper garlands much like a Christmas tree, though with a shorter lifespan of a few days. Following the tradition of writing short poems, children today write wishes on strips of paper, or *tanizaku*, and hang them on the bamboo branches.

Washi is the Japanese term for handmade paper (*wa*=Japan, *shi*=paper), most commonly made with *kozo* (mulberry tree) fibers, which are some of the longest of all papermaking fibers. While they are ‘delicate, wafer thin, translucent, soft and absorbent,’ they possess strength as a result of the long fibers, and have many uses beyond writing and printing. They are also used to make fans, dolls, clothing, umbrellas, and *shoji* and *fusuma* room divider screens. Handmade *washi* is said to possess “a certain *kansei*, which roughly translated means the paper is imbued with the maker’s character, his perceptions, his attitudes, his feelings, his outlook and his generations of inherited skills” (Turner 1991:36-37).

OBSERVATIONS & REFLECTION PRECEDING THE INSTALLATION

My own experience of growing up in Japan provided insight into the role of paper in the aforementioned rituals, and observations of people and temporary constructs further confirmed my instinct about using *washi* in this installation. *Washi*, or which are often used to build spaces and objects, is not intended to be permanent. The *washi* that provides translucent sheathing for the *shoji*, the wooden lattice partitions in Japanese architecture, is ritualistically torn off and reapplied every December in preparation for the New Year. The house is renewed through replacement of this impermanent material; it is a form of cleansing that signals a new start. In this spirit, the *Luminous Washi Lanterns* was designed so that the participants fold the *washi* lanterns and leave a written wish to be collectively hung and illuminated for a short period of time. They are then taken down so that a new life can begin.

From a young age, I have had a fascination with festivals or seasonal events that take place around

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temporary structures. Growing up in Tokyo, I looked forward to seeing wooden scaffolding, strings of lanterns and food stalls go up in the public parks and parking lots in preparation for summer *Obon* festivals, when families came out at night to eat, dance, and play. In the springtime, people gather with bento box lunches and sake under the cherry trees. The delicate blossoms on the branches overhead are admired while the falling pink petals create natural confetti. At night, the parks and temples illuminate the trees for another kind of experience. As an architect, it is fascinating to observe what makes people occupy and enjoy these seemingly undesigned spaces so naturally. While not permanent structures, faint pink blossoms create an overhead enclosure, and the beauty of it is in its impermanence, the knowledge that this is a fleeting moment that will pass with the short life span of the flowers.

Similarly, a scaffolding holding hundreds of paper lanterns creates walls or overhead canopies that define spaces for activities such as dancing and eating. After a few days of the festival, the lanterns come down, turning the parks and temple yards back to their everyday states. The materials may be gone, but the memory of the experience and the illumination, along with the anticipation of the event recurring a year later, makes a permanent mark in people's imagination. Besides the knowledge of cultural rituals, is there something about the luminosity of the lanterns and the petals that captivates people to come out and stay almost spontaneously? What about the temporary nature of these spaces make these experiences so memorable?

Design ideas for the *Luminous Washi Lanterns* also surfaced in 2009 and 2010 when I taught a class called 'Light in Japanese Architecture' at Japan Society. During the 45 minute class, 3' by 7' screens made by children using tracing paper and basswood were assembled to form an enclosure on top of a table, and illuminated from within to reveal shadows of the wooden lattice. Paper cut out in shapes of human and animal figures were placed inside to cast shadows on the screens, and the lamp was moved close up and farther away to show how the shadow's size and crispness change. When the room is darkened and the attention is focused on the illuminated space on the table, the mood of the children is both delightful and contemplative. There is a sense of delight because the play of shadows, like shadow puppets, are interactive and fun to watch, and the children take pleasure and pride in knowing that they contributed to the project that is captivating a roomful of their peers and adults. It is also contemplative because the darkness and the focused light visually and mentally shut out the chatter that is outside of the small, luminous world on the table.

The results from the class suggested an idea for a larger scale installation that assembled parts made by individuals into a larger whole which would then be illuminated. The participatory nature of the project created a sense of community that seemed appropriate at a time following a disaster. It also revealed that the illumination of the paper screens created a place of gathering and contemplation.

METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Three means of engagement were employed in the *Luminous Washi Lanterns* installation to engage people who may not be familiar with Japanese culture: use of rituals, gathering around source of illumination, and writing as a means for coping and renewal.

It may be said that production and proliferation of cultural heritage outside of the native country is often effectively done through rituals. Sylvie Guichard-Anguis writes about the production of artifacts that connects to notions of "Japanese culture" outside Japan: "People are not only asked to

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watch cultural producers but to be part of the process as producers themselves in this culture.” By learning how to arrange flowers in *ikebana* or by participating in martial arts or festival performances, the participants become cultural producers (Guichard-Anguis 2001:212). These rituals, she points out, often focus on creation of the ephemeral as a cultural production and use impermanent materials such as paper, powdered tea, flowers, and parades in festivals. Ritualistic aspects of these arts are passed on from one generation to another, both inside and outside of Japan (Guichard-Anguis 2001:214). One might say that ritualistic aspects of Japanese heritage make it possible to imagine there are experiences representative of Japan which are ever-evolving and adaptable to being performed outside of Japan.

The second method of engagement was through the use of illumination as a place of gathering. Philosophers and architects have called the space around fire as a place where the first gathering of people occurred. I quote from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* by philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard:

To be deprived of a reverie before a burning fire is to lose the first use and the truly human use of fire. To be sure, a fire warms us and gives us comfort. But one only becomes fully aware of this comforting sensation after quite a long period of contemplation of the flames; one only receives comfort from the fire when one leans his elbows on his knees and holds his head in his hands (Bachelard 1964:14).

Around the fire, humans built a hearth, which became both the physical and the symbolic center of a building. In 1851, architect and theorist Gottfried Semper said in *The Four Elements of Architecture*:

The first sign of human settlement and rest after the hunt, the battle, and wandering in the desert is today, as when the first men lost paradise, the setting up of the fireplace and the lighting of the reviving, warming, and food-preparing flame. Around the hearth the first groups assembled; around it the first alliances formed; around it the first rude religious concepts were put into the customs of a cult (Semper 1989:102).

Visitors during CONCERT FOR JAPAN at the Japan Society gathered around the lanterns in the atrium as the sun went down and quietly contemplated as if they were sitting around a fire. They were comforted by the illumination emanating from the field of lanterns, the long fibers of mulberry trees softening the glow of electric light.

Lastly, the act of writing was used as a means of collective engagement and healing. In the past few decades, studies by psychologists have demonstrated the healing effects of writing about emotional experience. Studies of people who disclose deeply personal thoughts through writing have overwhelmingly shown that the writing is a valuable tool in healing from trauma. Professor James W. Pennebaker, the Chair of Psychology Department at University of Texas, Austin, has written extensively about the healing effect of writing. Writing has found to have benefit on immune functions, significant reduction in distress, and increased performance at schools and workspace (Pennebaker 1997:162). In his paper “A Social Stage Model of Collective Coping: The Loma Prieta Earthquake and The Persian Gulf War,” Pennebaker explains how the cognitive act of putting the experience into words affords insight or perspective: The social act of communication with other people opens channels for affinitive benefits (Pennebaker 1993:131).

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Though the experience of writing during CONCERT FOR JAPAN occurred over one day and was shorter than in James Pennebaker's study which was conducted over days or weeks (Pennebaker 1997:164), reactions of people at the event suggest that writing wishes to the victims of the Great Tohoku Tsunami had the similar healing effects on the writers. Writing on tanzaku paper during the Luminous Washi Lantern installation provided a place for people to, however brief, put their thoughts to paper. Some did so privately while others discussed amongst their friends and family for what they might wish. While some people identified their *tanzaku* with their name, others left them anonymous.



2. Paper folding and wish writing workshop during CONCERT FOR JAPAN

Pennebaker's studies of coping following the 1989 Loma Prieta 6.9 magnitude earthquake showed that the frequency of quake-related thoughts and talking by the survivors dropped sharply after two weeks of the quake, which he calls the *emergency phase*. Beginning the second or third week to about the 6th week following the quake, they wished to talk about the disaster again but did not want to be an audience to others' quake-related thoughts and feelings. He calls this the *inhibition phase*, and this is the time that social conflicts, disturbing dreams and health problems surface. After about the 6th week, in the *adaptation phase*, thoughts and talk both drop significantly (Pennebaker 1993:133-134). CONCERT FOR JAPAN occurred four weeks after the quake in Japan. The participants in the installation were past the stage of constantly thinking about the quake but still desired to communicate and connect with others while they tried to make sense of the disaster. The space in which the lanterns were folded and wishes were written became a quiet place of collective healing and renewal, one that allowed people to share their thoughts as much or as little as they wanted. It may have provided an appropriate level of privacy and connection during their inhibition phase.

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PERFORMANCE THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE EPHEMERAL

Because *Luminous Washi Lanterns* was installed during the fundraising event over a period of about eight hours, the participants witnessed the growth of the work. In installations that do not involve audience participation in its making, the work of art is put in place by the gallery staff and presented to the viewers as a static, finished piece. This interactive, dynamic aspect of our work shares a kinship with a performance than a static sculpture. Performance theorist Richard Schechner, in his book *Anthropology of Performance*, writes about the collective experience that is shared during a performance:

Spectators are very aware of the moment when a performance takes off. A 'Presence' is manifest, something has 'happened'. The performers have touched or moved the audience, and some kind of collaboration, collective special theatrical life, is born.

He goes on to say that this connection occurs in performances that build to a climax the way a Pentecostal church service does or *Macbeth* might. Building up of slow “patterns of accumulating intensities,” as in Phillip Glass’s work can bring the spectator into ecstatic trance (Schechner 1985:11).

In a similar way, audience members who participated in the folding of lanterns or writing of wishes stayed or came back hours later to the atrium to view how the installation had grown. They walked along the balcony, pointing to their friends the pieces that they had folded or the wishes that they had hung on the bamboo frame. The audience was the participant, and as a result, many were emotionally moved while they made the lanterns, then again when they came back to see their work as a part of a larger, collective installation. There was no moment of climax or the most important piece of paper in the total installation – the work built up gradually and quietly, but throughout its evolution and at the end of the evening, the participants felt a connection to the work and to others who took part.

EPHEMERAL WORK IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Besides the traditional rituals, there are examples of contemporary art installations to which ephemerality is fundamental. An example is works by German artist Wolfgang Laib. Laib’s installations consist of meticulously collected and placed regenerative substances such as pollen, milk, beeswax, and rice. Rituals play a key role. In his *Milkstone* piece, a rectangular block of polished white marble has slight depressions in which a thin layer of milk is ritualistically filled by the museum staff daily to maintain an illusion of a solid form (Sean Kelly Gallery). In his *Pollen* series, he harvests pollen from one plant at a time near his home, and painstakingly spreads the fine yellow pollen with a sieve into a rectangular shape on the floor. At the end of an exhibit, the pollen is carefully collected and stored in jar. Here, as Swiss art historian Philippe Büttner notes, ‘we face the fact of extreme fragility and fleetingness’ (Büttner 2005:78). However, as Ulf Küster, curator at the Foundation Beyeler, notes, while pollen may look fragile on first glance, it is extremely durable. At its microscopic scale, pollen grains can be seen as balls covered with barbs that can attach to surfaces. Pollen can be found preserved over many millennia in moors, telling the history of the earth (Küster 2005:106). A viewer would only

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appreciate a small fraction of the depth of Laib's work if they experienced the aesthetic beauty – the materials have rich physical properties, meanings and cultural associations, resulting in work that has both ephemeral and eternal qualities.

Another example of ephemeral art involving audience participation is the *Wish Tree* by Japanese artist Yoko Ono. Exhibited throughout the world since 1981 following John Lennon's death, over 700,000 wishes have been collected and sent to the Imagine Peace Tower in Reykjavik, Iceland (Koch 2010). Ono exhibited 10 Wish Trees around Washington DC during the 2007 National Cherry Blossom Festival, one of which was acquired permanently by the Hirshhorn Museum and is located in their sculpture garden. During the summer months when the leaves are full, the museum provides paper tags with strings for the visitors to write wishes and hang them on the tree. The museum staff harvests the wishes everyday and ships to Ono's Imagine Peace Tower in Iceland where they become part of a larger collection of wishes (Imagine Peace). The project reflects the spirit of cherry trees that were given to DC by the city of Tokyo in 1912 to foster friendship between the two countries. Ono says about her Wish Trees: "As a child in Japan, I used to go to a temple and write out a wish on a piece of paper and tie it in a knot around the branch of a tree. Trees in temple courtyards were always filled with people's wish knots, which looked like white flowers blossoming from afar" (Ono 2000:261).

While both the cherry blossom trees and the Wish Tree may become a permanent part of the landscape as long as they stay live, they both draw people seasonally and become catalysts for collective experience – the cherry trees to encourage people to come see the beautiful blossoms, and Ono's Wish Tree to encourage people to stop, write and/or read wishes. The wishes varied from mundane ("I wish to come back here soon" or what they wanted for dinner that night) to optimistic ("I wish everybody lived happily ever after"). In his essay "Seduction of the Gaze and Life Experience of the Work of Yoko Ono," Pablo Rico says Ono asks the audience to "participate... by desiring and wanting to desire, identifying our desires and daring to write them down..." (Rico 2000:267).

DESIGN PROCESS

The RISD students who designed the installation were enrolled in a class named Architectonics, an intensive introductory class geared primarily towards freshmen looking to major in Architecture. The class took place over 6 weeks during RISD's Wintersession in January and February 2011. The project evolved over the last five years in which I had taught the course, and in 2011, I began looking for a venue in which to execute an installation in real life.

Following conversations with the Japan Society staff several months prior to the semester, a plan to teach a course culminating in a lantern installation was already underway for the annual J-CATTON festival at the Japan Society. On March 11, 2011, the Tohoku region of Japan was hit by the devastating earthquake and tsunami. Japan Society changed the event to a benefit concert and agreed that the installation was appropriate to remain as a part of the program.

In the class, the students were first asked to create a series of three mulberry paper screens that filtered light in three gradations. They were to design simple systems by using a variable technique, such as folding, slicing, or layering, and study them through drawings and photographs of their models.

In the second phase, specific conditions of the Japan Society atrium site were introduced. The students were asked to study how their system of paper light filters could be scaled up or multiplied to become lanterns that engaged the site, which was roughly 30 feet by 55 feet and over 20 feet tall. To

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ensure audience participation, an important factor for the students to consider was the lantern's constructability by visitors of all ages and skills on the day of the event. This meant that the process of making the lanterns had to be simple while not losing the richness of its effects, and it had to be systematized so that the pieces made by many participants could be assembled together easily on site.

The third and final phase of the six-week semester was to propose how the full-scale lantern units would be repeated to engage the entire atrium site. This was done through architectural drawings and scaled paper models of the atrium. Following the final presentations of the semester, three students' schemes were selected to be developed further for the installation in April. The criteria for selection included the effectiveness in how the paper transmitted and filtered light, the ease of construction by participants of all skill range, and how well the construction was systematized with the right balance of predictability in planning and unpredictability in effects.

The grades had been given and the semester was over, but design meetings and planning continued into the spring. Mockups of the developed design were tested first on campus, then tested again twice at the Japan Society atrium. Each time, problems and new possibilities to enhance the experience of the event were identified and the design developed. The day before the event, a van packed with students and materials left campus at dawn and arrived in Manhattan by lunch time. There was still pre-assembly of the bamboo frames to be done before the next morning, and about one-third of the lanterns were to be folded to ensure that the entire installation could be completed by the end of the concert.

On the morning of the event, the students began to arrive at 7am to continue folding the paper and attaching the bamboo grid to the balustrades surrounding the atrium. A stamp with a heart was carved out of a baking potato to seal each of the wishes that the guests would write on the tanzaku. The students ran a workshop from 11am to 6pm to teach the visitors how to fold the mulberry paper lanterns and add their pieces to the installation. In a room set up with tables and chairs in front of the gallery, the students offered the visitors a choice of folding lanterns and/or writing wishes on tanzaku. Visitors of a wide range of age and skills participated in the making of three types of lanterns.

Once each participant finished their lanterns and/or the tanzaku, the students accompanied them in hanging the pieces on the bamboo frames attached to the balcony balustrades. The lanterns were lit naturally from the skylight above the atrium during the day, then by lamps concealed by the paper lanterns through sunset, dusk, and into the evening until the concert ended at 11pm. The bamboo frames that lined the balustrades surrounding the atrium space could be likened to impermanent matsuri structures that become the place of gathering in Japanese festivals. In "The Sacred and the Profane in Matsuri Structures," Yoichiro Hakamori explains, "In many cases, such as the *mikoshi*, the structures become the point of interaction that makes manifest the threshold between the spiritual and mortal worlds. Often they become the catalyst for the interaction that forms the basis for the matsuri." In the context of CONCERT FOR JAPAN, rather than a threshold between the spiritual and mortal worlds, it could be said that the bamboo frame carrying the washi lanterns was a threshold between the well-wishers in New York and the receivers of the wishes in Japan who are struggling with the aftermath of tsunami.

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3. Young visitor reading messages left by other participants

Standing along the two-storey atrium with the color of the sky tinting the white washi as the sky changed in color and light through the day, touching the washi lanterns and the wishes written on tanzaku connected the people in New York to the survivors on the other side of the world. Visitors could be seen at night and during the day either quietly contemplating while walking the balcony, or in groups gregariously reading the tanzaku that other visitors had left on the bamboo frame.

The event was attended by over 2,400 guests in one day. While initially intended for a 12-hour lifespan, the Japan Society requested to have it stay up for one additional week, which was then extended to stay for over a month until mid-May.

REFLECTION

As Ariana Moir, Education Associate at the Japan Society, noted, the fact that the installation was not only viewed but was made collectively by hundreds of participants was significant: “We noticed that visitors became deeply invested in making their part of the installation, taking the time to carefully craft pieces to add to the larger installation.” (Moir 2012). While some visitors spent well over 30 minutes carefully folding the folders, for others, writing on tanzaku became their form of participation in the installation.

Many wishes by adults were written in second person, and reading them felt as though we had glimpses of intimate letters that were written to the survivors. Such messages included, “We are proud of your strength during this time” and “You are in our hearts.” Others were written in forms of prayers, such as “We pray for safety and strength for all Japanese,” and “Wishing for a peaceful world full of compassion.” Ones by children often included drawings. One message from a child was written in colored markers, “I’m heart broken. I hope all of you are fine” next to a drawing of a broken heart. Also spotted were ones written by adults and youths who are studying Japanese as a foreign language, as evidenced by their use of Roman letters to phonetically spell out Japanese words: “*Nibon ga daisuki*

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desu (I love Japan). *Inotte imasu* (I am praying for you).” Many of the tanzaku were written in Japanese by native Japanese speakers living and working in or around New York City, sending compassionate thoughts and prayers and fighting spirit to their native country.

When asked whether the participants were required to have previous knowledge of Japanese culture and rituals to be impacted the installation, Fumiko Miyamoto, Program Officer at Japan Society responded,

I believe most people who came to Japan Society on that day came with the notion that the events that were going to unfold inside of the building would be mainly related to the 3.11 disaster. I think the interactive component of the installation gave an opportunity for the audience to deepen their association with the event and about their particular choice they had made to be in that space on that day (Miyamoto 2012).

Collectively leaving words of encouragement created a place of communal gathering. While some tanzaku wishes were written by Japanese natives who were familiar with the rituals, the process was simple enough to be followed by someone who was not. By seeing the wishes hung together, written in both Japanese and English, with drawings or in words, a wide spectrum of visitors felt that they took part in a collective effort.

Miyamoto further made an observation about a reason why background explanations of Japanese culture and rituals may not have been necessary in the context of this event – its architecture. In 1971, Junzo Yoshimura designed the Japan Society building, as the first Japanese architect to design a building in New York City. It is executed with material sensibilities, proportions, and intimate connection to the garden and natural light in ways which are often found in Japanese architecture. Miyamoto says, “Walking into the building already gives you a sense that you are in a Japanese context. The installation itself was such a perfect fit to the surrounding, existing environment that I am not sure if the audience had to even make sense of it.”

Miyamoto also noted that the soft light emanating through the washi paper created a sense of peace and healing, and that she and other staff members at the Society continued to be moved by it over the five weeks that it remained in their building: “Leaving messages on a piece of paper and hanging it (and) being able to read them as a third person was probably a moving experience for many when the memory of the disaster and the scope of damage were still very raw in many people’s minds” (Miyamoto 2012).

Eri Yamagata, a Japanese architecture student studying in New York City, assisted the guests in folding the washi paper and writing wishes on tanzaku during the workshop. When asked how people seemed to make sense of the installation, she told a story of a guest who approached the workshop tables in excitement, then became very quiet and focused once he started folding. She said it was the act of folding, their dedication of time, focus, and interaction with paper that helped them find meaning in the installation. She also noted that visitors who came to the event, most likely either consciously or subconsciously, associated the act of paper folding with something Japanese, such as origami and the story of one thousand cranes (Yamagata 2012).

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EXTERNAL GAZE

“From its inception of the problematic of “Japan-ness” has belonged to an external gaze, that gaze directed toward Japan from beyond this insular nation,” writes Isozaki. He says,

It has not emerged *causa sui*. Were an insular nation merely a closed, self-sufficient community, it would have no need to solicit its proper characteristics or the essence of its culture. Any such query would be halted in a circle of self-referentiality. Only when a gaze from without supervenes has a response to be formulated in an effort of introspection bound to shape aesthetic tastes. Throughout history, the problematic of Japan-ness surfaces whenever an encounter has occurred on the archipelago's perimeter, that is, at the edge of its lapping ocean (Isozaki 2006:3).

He then goes on to write about moments in history that resulted in the Japanese to introspectively examine its own nationhood in its architectural culture: western passion for collecting *japonaiserie* exoticia; how Frank Lloyd Wright, who was in love with Japan and its aesthetics, misinterprets Japanese space when he designed the Imperial Hotel, which is really a “conventional Beaux-Arts scheme unrelated to Japanese way of sensing space.” (Isozaki 2006:8); and how German expatriate architect Bruno Taut's awe and affirmation of Katsura Imperial Villa as a ‘masterpiece’ in 1933 resulted in re-examination of Japan's own ancient architecture (Isozaki 2006:12-14).

Artist Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles as an illegitimate son between a Japanese writer father and an American artist mother. He lived between two countries in his youth, and went back to Japan as an adult and learned traditional Japanese lantern making in rural Gifu. His Akari light sculptures made of washi became an icon of 1950's Modernist design. They are a re-interpretation of Japanese traditions through an external gaze of a Japanese-American whom Japan considered very foreign in his time.

When faced with a challenge of designing for an event that is about recovery and renewal in Japan, but in an event context outside of Japan, I as a Japanese-American architect was led to introspectively examine rituals of Japanese culture through an external gaze. Architects build primarily out of permanent materials, with anticipation that it would outlive them if it is designed well. On the contrary, a temporary installation that looked to renew rituals in Japanese culture and made of the most impermanent of materials, light and paper, may have been just as, if not more, consequential and memorable than permanent memorials or buildings.

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