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TATAMI



Inside the Shōkin-tei, located in the garden of the Katsura Imperial Villa.

A joint of three tatami.



Tatami

Carola Hein

Use of the tatami mat reportedly goes back to the 8th century (the Nara period in Japan) when single mats began to be used as beds, or brought out for a high-ranking person to sit on. Over centuries it became a platform that has hosted all facets of life for generations of Japanese. From palaces to houses, from temples to spaces for martial art, the tatami has served as support element for life. Used as an integrated floor element, it is a multifunctional platform for many daily practices: from sleeping to eating, from leisure to work. A tatami mat is a space to sleep. Rolling out a futon mat turns a room into a bedroom. Bringing out a smaller zabuton cushion to sit on and a folding table makes the same space a dining room.

The presence of tatami in diverse types of buildings and in spaces catering to all classes, made it for a long time a social and cultural unifier. To understand the original function of the tatami in the Edo period (1603-1868), its transformation and slow disappearance from buildings since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and its current use, this text provides a chronological analysis of tatami practices, from lifestyle to building block.

As a standardized horizontal unit of approximately 1.8 metres by 90 centimetres, the tatami can be assembled into different floor patterns. Its proportions have also shaped the vertical dimension of the building, providing a norm for wall elements, sliding doors (fusuma and shoji). The height and design of the ceiling were adapted to the eyes of a person seated on the floor rather than one sitting on a chair; ceilings are relatively low and often decorated.

The tatami is an integral part of the physical ecology of traditional Japanese buildings, which are raised on posts. The wooden frame permitted air to circulate through the wooden floor structure and the tatami flooring. Composed of natural materials, layers of rice straw and covered with igusa rush, tatamis are adapted to the Japanese climate: cool in summer, warm in winter. Furthermore, in the hot and humid Japanese summers, the rush is said to absorb humidity in the summer and release it in the drier season. The floor system is integrated with openings above the wall elements and sliding doors. Beautifully decorated transom panels (ranma) allowed for air circulation above the sliding doors.

The best example of Japanese tatami culture is Katsura Rikyu, a detached Imperial Villa located in what are today the suburbs of Kyoto. The floor plan of the shoin, the main study building, shows a traditional Japanese layout, with corridors connecting the rooms on the outside. The continuous interior can be separated into single rooms by fusuma sliding doors, creating individual rooms that are indicated by the tatami patterns.

The lifestyle of the Edo period is encapsulated in the four tea houses (originally there were five) that remain on the property of Katsura Rikyu. The most famous among them is the Shokin-tei. Walking through the garden the visitor approaches a small thatched hut. Guests would have come to enjoy a tea ceremony and to admire the gardens while sitting on the tatami floor. The blue and white chequered sliding doors, that could be used to separate the interior into smaller rooms, fascinated European Modernist architects and artists, who used them as inspiration for and confirmation of their functionalist argument. Depending on the season, visitors could move to another of the tea houses, watching the moon, for example, from the hilltop tea house, the Shoka-tei.

The same physical elements noted in Katsura Rikyu are combined in the Imperial Palace, the Gosho (where the tatami are uniquely lined in red), in the Shogunal Palace, the Nijo castle, where the corridors are fitted with springs that would announce an approaching ninja, in Kamakura, where traditional zen temples such as Enkaguji allow for prayer as well as for archery practice, or Miyajima, a Shinto shrine, where the same building elements combine, but where the typical orange colour and the Shinto gate provide identity. The same building elements can also be found in merchant's houses, such as the Yamamoto Residence in Obi, an old castle town on the Southern island of Kyushu.



Katsura Rikyu, the detached Imperial Villa.

Pavilion in the garden of the Katsura Imperial Villa.



The end of the Edo period and the over 200-year long period of Japanese isolation, brought new lifestyles and building materials to Japan. The tatami as the platform for Japanese life survived the extensive political, economic, social and cultural change that came with the arrival of the so-called Black Ships on the shores of Japan in 1854. With modernization in the Meiji period traditional buildings saw new additions, such as pieces of furniture or frosted glass in the shoji sliding doors.

At the start of the Meiji period in 1868, Japanese leaders aimed to “catch up and overcome the West.” New infrastructures and building types emerged in Japan. Buildings for industry, government and corporations, for ministries, offices, department stores, or museums served functions that had not existed in this particular form beforehand. Their style reflected European and American practices. As chairs, tables and cupboards entered the Japanese lifestyle, wooden and stone floors replaced tatamis. To give just one example: traditionally shopkeepers, seated on their tatami floors, would bring out the goods that they thought would match the needs and budget of their clients, a tradition very different from that of a department store, where all the goods are put on display for the client to choose from.

The new lifestyle also influenced domestic housing practices, albeit not as quickly. There, the traditional Japanese lifestyle lasted much longer than in public buildings. During the Meiji period people would build houses that incorporated Western and Japanese life-styles, including spaces for chairs and tables adjoining others fitted with tatami, occasionally having a single table span over two types of sitting facilities.

While Japan was steadily adjusting to the foreign way of life and the structures associated with it, foreigners came to admire the rapidly disappearing traditional structures of Japan, praising them in Orientalist fashion. Europeans discovered Japanese architecture and integrated it as an argument for the modern movement. Katsura’s proportions inspired Mondriaan and Bauhaus photographers, and Horiguchi Sutemi’s Okada house speaks to both Mies van der Rohe’s Pavilion and traditional Japanese architecture.

The disappearing traditional lifestyle also caught the attention of Japanese architects. Nishiyama Uzou, for example, captured the old structures in beautiful drawings, as well as in photography. His representations of traditional houses show floors in the kitchen, and storage areas and tatamis in the living spaces, where users would take off their shoes. While this traditional building inspires a lot of nostalgia, photos by Nishiyama give a sense that tatami living was not always elegant and clean.

In the mid-20th century, after the 1923 earthquake and again following the disaster of World War II, Japanese architects designed new lifestyles. Tatamis no longer provided the foundation for various functions. The need to house a growing population required the construction of high-rise buildings. Small apartments came to host large parts of the urban population. A small dining kitchen (known in Japan as DK) and a limited number of tatami rooms became the standard for many urban dwellers. 2DK, for example, describes an apartment with a dining kitchen and two tatami rooms. Tatami rooms traditionally hosted different functions and contained limited furniture. With modernization came an invasion of objects, such as phones or televisions, that would no longer be stored away and brought out when needed. These objects started to clutter the traditionally empty spaces.

Over a century and a half have passed since Japan introduced Western concepts. Tatamis no longer provide the foundation for everyday life, but they have not disappeared altogether. Many modern flats will at least contain one tatami room. Realtors are still renting out tatami apartments, at least they are featured next to those with a Western style setup. But tatamis need to be looked after. They require users to take off their shoes; they age and they are dented easily when heavy furniture is put on them or moved around.

As a result of lifestyle changes, tatami have become isolated elements for a single room, they are connected to select practices, or they are transformed into movable floor mats rather than integral to the building. Even its composing elements are disassembled and commodified often for touristic purposes: Igusa grass appears as a cover for chairs, on traditional slippers, but also as a table set or a floor cover. There are also plastic versions of the tatami mat that, while practical, lack the smell or tactile quality of traditional tatami. These are used, for example, in martial art studios, where the tatami traditionally belonged, but where natural tatami decay quickly, or in places where traditional materials would not have survived, such as in a hot spring.

The tatami as part of a social, cultural, architectural and environmental system has been lost in the transformation of lifestyles and in the introduction of traditionally non-Japanese practices. This becomes obvious in foreign practices and in connection with spaces of tourism. Tatami-beds of European or American design are wooden structures that hold two mats on which futons can be placed. This creates a permanent piece of furniture on top of the floor, thus defeating the original purpose of the tatami as a multifunctional floor covering, becoming objects in a room that cannot be moved with the changing rhythms of the day.

Apartments rented out on AirBnB are another example. They highlight the discrepancy between foreign perceptions of Japan and the Japanese view of foreigners' needs and desires. Walls decorated with kimonos as wall decorations, tatamis on which Western-style beds are placed, making a multifunctional use impossible, futons rolled out next to a butsudon where the ashes of the deceased family members are kept. Or futons laid out on the wooden floor of a traditional kura, a storage building that hosted grains and family valuables. Such practices are contradictory to the traditionally integrated use and function of tatami.

The loss of traditional practices and lifestyles is also documented in much boutique architecture. A few contemporary architects have continued to include tatami spaces. Tatamis are still present in religious buildings such as Ando Tadao's 1991 Water Temple on Awaji Island. Shigeru Ban's Naked House from 2000 features tatamis as part of the rolling cubicles, detached from the actual floor. The client had asked Ban to design a house that was completely open, where the whole family could communicate while also maintaining some sense of personal ownership. As a result, Ban created tatami-fitted boxes open on two sides that run on wheels. Other designs by contemporary Japanese architects surprisingly don't feature tatami spaces. The NA house by Sou Fujimoto, with its multiple levels and sitting places, uses wood floors instead of tatami.

One might wonder why Japanese still bother to live on tatamis. For one, the high density of Japanese cities may call for a preference for multifunctional spaces. A chair and a table are objects that stand around, but these are not necessary in a tatami setting, whereas sabutons can be folded away. Integrated storage spaces prevent the need to buy a cupboard. Advertisements in Tokyo and throughout Japan also seem to suggest yet another space where tatamis have endured (and are perhaps even coming back). Publicity for leisure spaces, traditional hot spring spas for example, show tatami spaces for sleeping and eating, making traditional lifestyles the counterpart to busy modern Tokyo. The persistence or return of such traditional elements is also reflected in the use of traditional Japanese clothing (yugata) worn by women and men in traditional resort towns, but also on a summer day in one of the big metropolises.

Japanese life is changing, tatamis are no longer the all-round part of daily life, they have retreated into niches, including Western style tatami beds and resorts. But a careful look at their unique multifunctional capacity as a platform for life may allow this unique tradition of multifunctional tatami living to continue. For the time being, there are still a number of tatami makers who know their trade and who can help continue this century-old tradition.