

The Cross-Culture Concept in the Topics of Architectural Design Classes in Japanese Universities

安田研究室 18M58147 肖 雪 (Emma Xue XIAO)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Aim

The international exchange has been a significant move in Japanese architecture education. Since the 1990s, increasing numbers of foreign visiting professors and international joint workshops have promoted architecture knowledge exchange and revealed the diversity of culture in the world. It has brought refreshing ideas and viewpoints, along with introducing the studio system to the underpinning laboratory format of Japanese university¹⁾. Though the study benefit of these classes was frequent mentioned, it remains a rather generic image of "being international". Few studies have focused on the actual content of class topics and thoroughly discussed the cross-culture concept. It is reasonable to argue that these topics, which by default under cross-culture context, obtain a specific concept in architecture discipline. These topics, which are often planned collectively by the overseas and the Japanese educators in host universities, contain an important academic value. They reveal the attention on architecture study of overseas educators' to Japan, vice versa Japan to the world. The current global mobility allows instant exchange of informa-

tion and education resources, while traditional and distinct culture confronts homogenization. Cross-culture topics bring forth the unknown of another culture, and alternative views to challenge the familiar norm of one's own.

This research closely analysis the topics of design classes taught by overseas professors and international joint workshop. Through proposing the fundamental questions of "What and How": What is specific in cross-culture context and How does it operate in a design class topic. Progressively investigate the emerging concept, factor, types, and characters of cross-culture in architectural design education.

1.2 Research Objects and Methodology

360 topics from 17 universities in Kanto Region are collected through publication, online resources, and interviews with 7 professors teaching at Japanese universities²⁾. Chapter 2 studies the basic information and culture spheres of the counterpart, which will be taken as tools for the analysis in a later stage. Chapter 3 studies the elements and three associated aspects through close reading and analysis of 126 selected topics³⁾. Chapter 4 illustrates cultural factors on each

aspect. Through their combination, the cross-culture concept could be recognized. Accordingly, three topic types with their sub-types could be found (fig.1).

2. Class Types and Culture Spheres

2.1 Class Types Based on Participant and Location

Two **Class Types** were classified base on the participant, location, repetition(fig.2). **Studio**(92) refers to the class taught by visiting professors for one time(37), or a long-term foreign professor in a Japanese University(55). **Joint Workshop**(268) refers to the classes participated by Japanese and overseas universities. Within this type, sites overseas (173) surpass sites in Japan (97), meanwhile mostly are series workshops (191) that repeat annually. The series workshop sometimes under a principle topic (e.g. "Housing" WO01, and "Historical city redevelopment" TT37).

2.2. Culture spheres of the Cross-Culture Counterpart

The Cross-culture topic is not a physical accumulation of two, it is a certain perception of one group of people to the other⁴⁾. The perception from the different regions to Japan would be utterly distinct. Some academics previously discussed the important role of Japan within the Asia education framework, when Europe and US education is weak to tackle the surging developing issue in China, Japan could play a better role for reference⁵⁾. Thus, when the distinct culture and education of Japan meet the following three culture spheres⁶⁾, the distribution of Class Types (fig.1) and the tendency of topic could be recognized: **East Asia/Kanji Circle**[K] (96/360) including China, Korea, etc. They were classified into one group due to significant proximity in language, history and men-

tality with Japan. The major class type in Kanji Circle is Joint Workshop (95/98), which almost ¾ amount them locate overseas. This tendency is possibly due to physical proximity and mutual understanding.

Asia Sphere (excluding Kanji Circle)[A](36/360) refers to Southeast Asia countries such as Thailand and Singapore, they are geometrically close to Japan and share issues such as waterfront and rapid urbanization, while different in climate and ethnic culture. Similar to the Kanji Circle, the major class type is joining workshop(34/37), which ¾ located overseas.

Western Sphere [W](223/360) includes universities of the USA, Europe, and other regions of western civilization groups in contrast with Asia civilization. It appears the majority of Studio(92) was taught by educators from Western Sphere(86/92).

3. Elements and Three Aspects

126 topics with detailed descriptions were selected and taken for in-depth analysis in this chapter. Elements were extracted and placed under three aspects, which collectively compose one valid topic(fig.4).

3.1 The Three Aspects

Physical Context [P] includes two sub-groups: Physical Site Context[P1]and Building Types[P2]. [P1] categorized various sites, including Tokyo Metropolis (12), Commercial Centre (9), Old Neighbourhood (10), Residential suburbs (18). In contrast with urban environments, Village/Rural/Regional(29) received much attention.

Social Context[S] includes Social Background(Macro)[S1] and Specific Local Issue(Micro)[S2]. The former regards global and national issues, such as disaster (16), aging issue (7), urbanization (17),

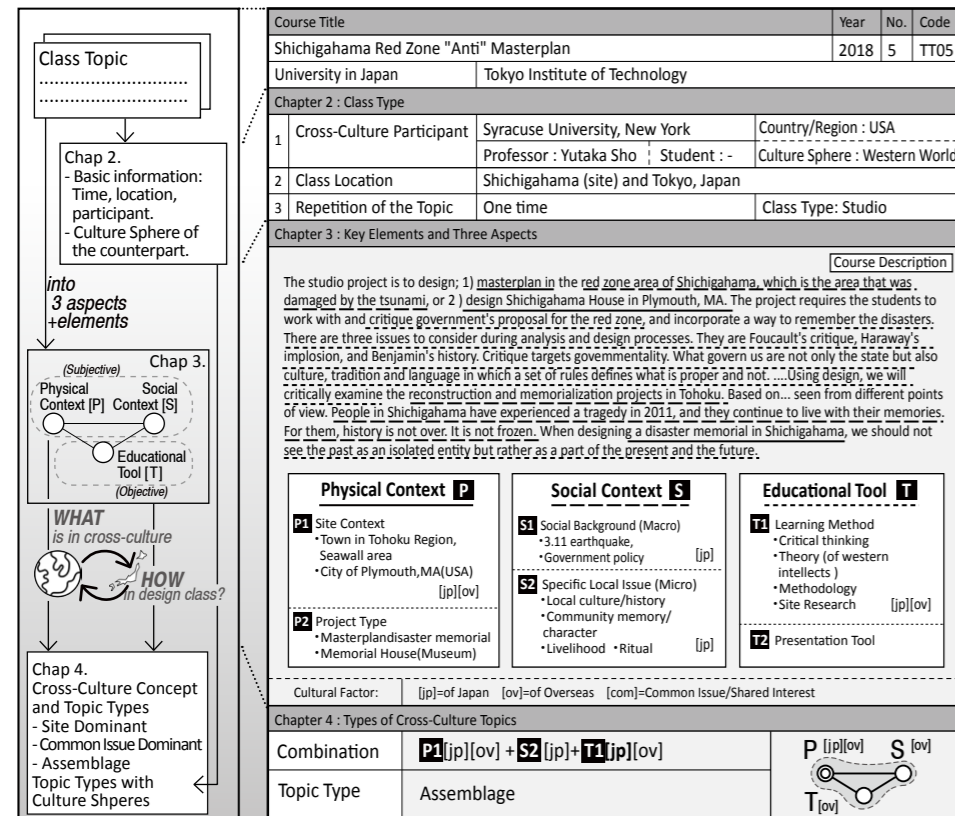


fig.1 Research Methodology and Example of Analysis

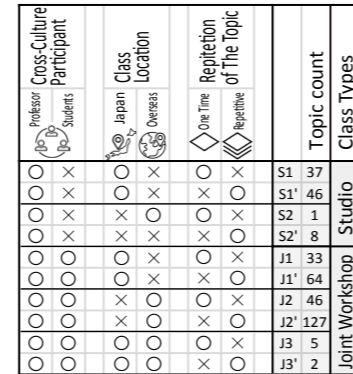


fig.2 Class Type

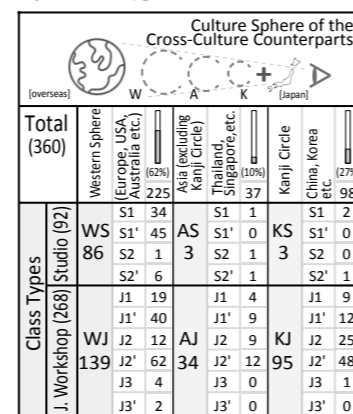


fig.3 Class Type with Culture Sphere of Cross-Culture Counterparts

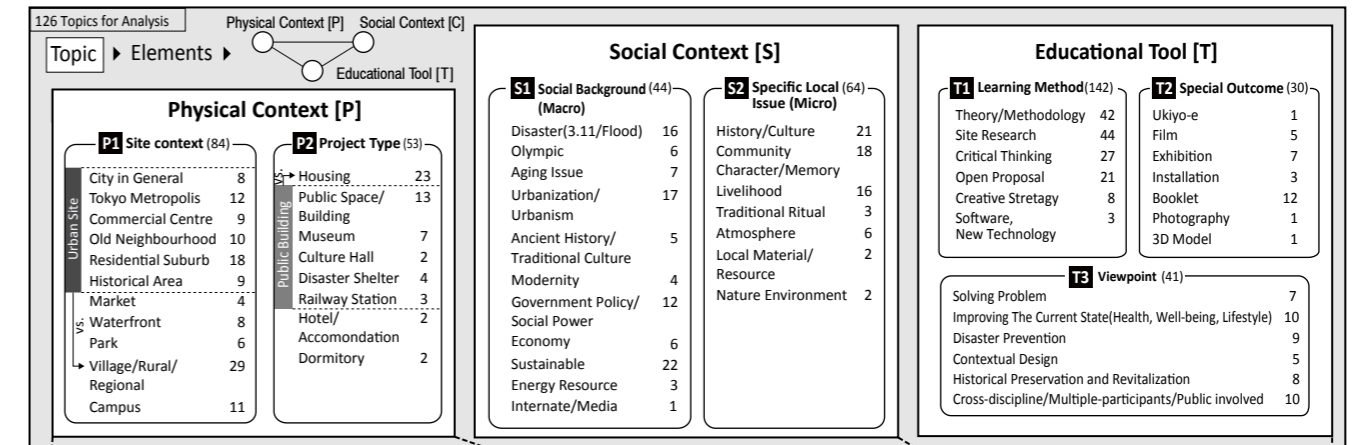


fig.4 Elements and Three Aspects of the Topics

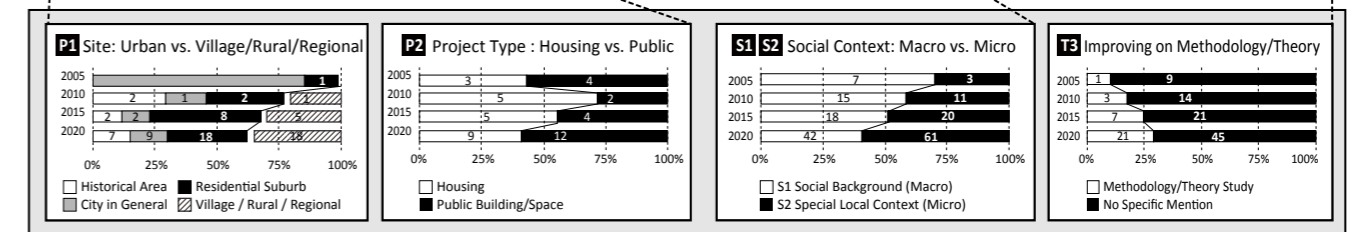


fig.5 Chronological Study of Paired Elements and Issues, from 2005 to 2020

the latter regards micro-scale, highly contextual issues such as History/Culture (21), Community Character/ Memory (16), Atmosphere(6). **Educational Tool [T]** refers to the architecture teaching approach, which could be seen as subjective decisions by the educator. Learning Method [T1] indicates that apart from the universal site research (46), several classes commence with Theory/methodology (44), Critical thinking (27), as well as an open proposal (23). These showed a focus on design thinking education, compared to conventional brief following projects. As many topics encourage challenging the norm, propose new questions based on discovered issues and context, then apply to the practice. Special Outcome [T2] (30/126) occurs in 1/4 of the total topic. These creative outcomes include making the film (5), building real installation, shows an alternative and cross-disciplinary study format of architecture. Viewpoint [T3] could evidently illustrate the diverse mentality in cross-culture, includes Problem Solving (7), Improving the Current State (health, well-being, and lifestyle) (11)

3.2 Chronological Study on Paired Elements From 2005 to 2020

The rapid social renewal has also affected the focus in architecture design. The majority of topics in this analysis were within 2005-2020. By placing elements in the time-line, some tendencies could be discovered. The attention on Village/Rural/Regional has steadily increased compared with urban areas in the site [P1](fig.5) Within the urban range, Residential Suburb (16/30 in 2015-2020) gradually became a major site, showing an interest in vernacular space. Public projects exceeded Housing projects [P2]. In Social Context, Specific Local Context [S2] gradually received more attention than Social Background. As for Learning Method [T1], there is a clear growing tendency that topics employ Methodology/Theory Study.

4. Cross-Culture Concept and Topic Types

4.1 Cultural Factor and Cross-Culture Concept

It is worth to note that all topics in this research carry the cross-culture concept by default, due to their de facto international participants. The attempt is trying to find a measure, with this non-measurable subject, out of the general slogan of “international class”. With elements that were identified in the previous step, this Chapter discusses the crucial question of how cross-culture implement and evolve in design class.

As previously mentioned, the three aspects compose one valid topic, each aspect was considered to fit one “cultural factor” to identify if it related to culture of Japan [jp], or to overseas [ov], or both in some cases. For **Physical Context**, the cultural factor evidently follows the location, for example, if the site is Tsukiji market, means the [P] has a “culture factor of Japan”, written in the form of P[jp]. Equally, an overseas site is P[ov]. For **Social Context**, cultural factor mainly follows the location, for example, aging

issue [S1] in Tokyo is [jp], Ancient history of a heritage city in Laos [S2] is [ov]. However, some topics mentioned both Japan and Thailand that shares the Disaster of water[S1] or Urbanization[S1] problem in both Tokyo and Taiwan. In this case, the cultural factor was presented as [jp+ov]. When both cultures occur in one aspect, it was presented as [jp]+[ov]. Regarding Educational Tool, when there is clear mention of Theory/Methodology brought by the overseas professors, the cultural factors appeared to be T[ov]. These results in 8 combinations of aspects with cultural factors, indicated an objective direction that focused on the site, and the design process is rather linear, similar to all standard design classes. The other approach took focus more on the subjective intent, usually has a special lens to understand the fact.

4.2 Three Topic Types

From the above study, three Topic Types were recognized (fig.6)

Site Dominant (71) take the majority in all topics (71/126). The topic are clearly based on specific site condition. The 38 cases in Japan shows the interest of the overseas participant to Japanese architectural study, noticeable site and project include Shinjuku (4), Railway Station (3), Tokyo Suburb (5) and Housing (5). In the overseas site (33), Village/Rural Area (10) associated with Tradition/Community Character/Livelihood [S1] (8) frequently appears, showing an interest in non-urban sites, Specific Local Context [S2], and ancient historical areas overseas.

Common Issue Dominant (28) refers to topics that involve a Common Site Character (10) or Common Social Issue (12) that is shared by Japan and the overseas counterpart. Site Characters include waterfront/river (6) in the city. Common Social Issue includes traditional village sustainable regeneration (6)

Assemblage (28) mainly takes overseas methodology or the professor’s expertise, and applies to the research on a Japan site[P1], with a focus on specific social issues [S2]. Contexts and Educational Tool organically assembled, rather than a conventional linear working process. There is no “dominant aspect” nor “dominant culture” that can be firmly identified. It’s initiated by the subjective intent of the educator. A non-hierarchy, non-essential, assemblage concept⁸⁾.

A chronological study of Topic Types shows a steady increase of all three types since 2015, with a surge in the last 5 years (fig.7). This study, in association with the earlier chronological study on elements (fig.6), could be recognized as the epitome of this unprecedented global mobility era. The sweeping power of internet media and mobile devices, though allows overseas education resources to be more accessible everywhere, causes distinction and mentality confront homogenization⁹⁾. When modernity assimilates the image of cities around the world, cross-culture topics pay attention towards the micro context in vernacular sites such as suburbs and villages, where local characters remained.

4.3 Topic Types with Culture Sphere

The results also deliver preference of Topics Types and elements by different counterpart culture-sphere. Assemblage Type appears to be the most noticeable for studios with western educators (25). Village/Rural Area [P1] (16), housing (6), local community character (11) frequently appear in the Joint workshop with Kanji Circle. It could relate to the mutual background mentality of Kanji Circle allows subtle issues to be learned in a vernacular site. The historical city visit also resonates for both parties. The common issue of waterfront (4/6) is especially noted by [A] and [K] culture spheres, which bears geographic similarity with Japan.

5. Conclusion

This research studied the topics of design classes with overseas participants, investigated cross-culture concepts, which within mere three decades has evolved and diversified. Three Topic Types and patterns based on culture spheres were clarified. The result hopefully could provide a reference for future academic

exchange. In this era of global mobility and information exchange, architecture education is inevitably involved, yet ought to bear awareness and a critical view, undertake contextual thinking in the built environment and culture landscape.

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- Note:
 1) Kitayama,K., Tsukamoto,Y., JABS建築雑誌201306_特集- 拡張する大学院, 2013. .
 2) Material sources include: 1. Department yearbook and university websites 2. Booklets and other publications 3. Material from direct contact and interviews with 7 professors involved cross-culture teaching in Japanese universities.
 3) From the total 360 topics, 126 topics with detailed written record of background, objective, outcome, comment from teaching professor etc., were selected for further analysis in chapter 3.
 4) Riccardi,P. “Cross Cultural Communication”, TEDxBergen, 2014
 5) 100年の教室 古谷・田辺・有賀3教授に聞く「世界と早稲田建教育」, 早稲田建築学報 2011,2011.
 6) Hall, E. 1959,1976, Theory of “High-context and low-context cultures”
 7) The “Culture spheres” in this research were to categorize countries and regions of participants, base on their architecture education system and general culture group, with reference to Frobenius, E., 1898, Graebner,F., 1911, concept of “Kulturkreis” (“culture circle”).
 8) DeLanda, M., 2016, Assemblage Theory
 9) Baudrillard, J., 1998, The Consumer Society, Theory of media.

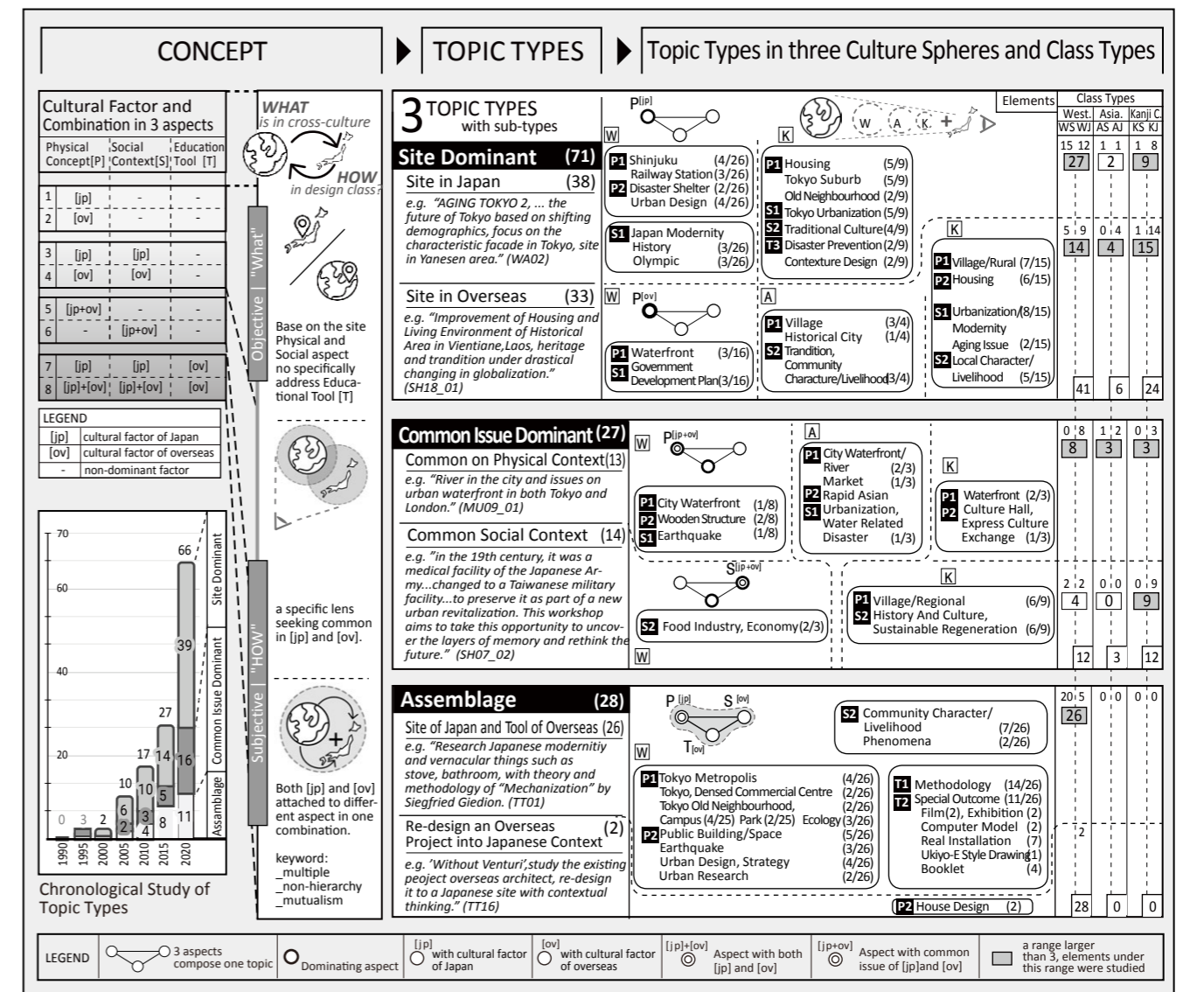


fig6. Cross-Culture Topic Types, Example of each type, Key Elements, Characters