

The Japanese Room

A pedagogical treasure in a time capsule

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Situated on the north-west corner on the fourth floor of the Glyn Davis Building on the Parkville campus is a very special space in the university. Built in the 1960s and rebuilt in the 21st century, the space is known as the Japanese Room.¹ To the Australian eye, the design reads as an exemplar of Japanese design: harmonious proportions, and features such as *shoji* (papered sliding window screens), *ranma* (timber grille transoms) and *chigaidana* (built-in shelves). The textures of the room are rich in detail. Visitors are delighted when the glow of the setting sun

filters through the screens, highlighting the gold threads in the wallpaper and the layered details of the gold-flecked papers in the *fusuma* (sliding doors). But all is not as it seems. The architect, Shigeru Yura, describes the room as 'mixed-up style'.² Professor Yura states that the room is unique, as it is a blend of Australian and Japanese styles.

Each year since the new Architecture, Building and Planning Building (now called the Glyn Davis Building) formally opened in March 2015, a class for the breadth subject Knowledge, Learning and Culture has been held



Previous page: The Japanese Room in September 2019. The new LED lighting above the tables is in harmony with the lines of the ceiling and the *shoji* screens. Photograph by James Rafferty.

Below: *Chigaidana* (built-in shelves), September 2019. Photograph by James Rafferty.



in this room during semester one. This subject explores the significance of culture and context in the development and transmission of knowledge. The story of the room is revealed by looking and questioning with the eyes, then through a drawing exercise. The only direction given to

Opposite, left: *Shoji* (screens), September 2019. Photograph by James Rafferty.

Opposite, right: Stone bench in the balcony garden adjoining the Japanese Room, September 2019. Photograph by James Rafferty.

the students is to ‘draw what they see’, and it’s always fascinating to observe that each student sees the room differently. During the next part of the class, students are shown materials from archival collections, and hear stories that tell the history and significance of the room. Finally, students walk around the space and the adjacent garden, examining features and considering the archival record and the often-conflicting anecdotes about the room. It is clear that different people’s memories of the recent past diverge.

The students are asked to study the space to interrogate the authenticity of the design. The room was conceived as a contemporary interpretation of a traditional Japanese room, based on the domestic *shoin-zukuri* style of the 17th century. Some students focus on the geometries and rhythms of the cedar panelling, which is fitted together using traditional Japanese construction methods, without nails. Other students draw the traditional Japanese details such as *ranma*, *shoji* or *fusuma* designed by Japanese artist Ken Jiro. A few students copy the flowing motifs of the woven silk and gold-thread wallpaper that was custom-made by the Tatsamura Textile Company in Osaka. Invariably, students conclude that it isn’t a true Japanese room. They see that moss-green carpet has been installed in place of *tatami* mats. Others might notice the LED lighting, or the technology that has been subtly installed. When the students hear that the room was originally located on the first floor of the north side of the old School of Architecture building, they are stunned to realise that the room has survived demolition and been reconstructed in a new building. This is a space of wonder that carries history and collects stories. It is evident that the students understand the significance of the room and realise that they, too, are now part of the story.

University of Melbourne Archives holds two collections that document Shigeru Yura’s time in Australia and the development of the design of the room.³ The first



collection was transferred from the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, and comprises drawings that show iterations of the room design, along with designs for a garden and a tiled feature wall designed by ceramicist Fumiko Yura, wife of Shigeru Yura. The second collection was donated by Professor Yura himself in 2014 and includes letters about his appointment to the university, a few records about his classes, a sketchbook of the garden design, and news cuttings about Mrs Yura and her tiled wall design. The present article records some of the stories behind the archival records and the room as it is today.

Brian B. Lewis (1906–1991), who was the university’s foundation professor of architecture from 1947 to 1971,⁴ organised a faculty study tour to Japan in 1961, for 40 students and a number of architects—they had to charter a plane. During the visit Lewis met Shigeru Yura. Soon after, Yura travelled to Australia to work on the Japanese ambassador’s residence in Canberra (although this seems to have been also attributed to I. Shimada),⁵ and in 1963 he designed the Japanese War Cemetery in Cowra.⁶ At some point Professor Lewis invited Yura to teach at the School of Architecture in 1963–64 and contribute to the design of a new building for the faculty.

Lewis’s vision for the new School of Architecture included a number of rooms and installations that would enable students to study traditional forms from various countries without the cost of international travel: there was a Chinese Room, an Indian Room and even plans for an American Room. The Japanese Room was the most fully realised, but because it was on the first floor of the building it was disconnected from the garden that Professor Yura designed as its complement.

Although the design of the room embodies traditional Japanese forms and building techniques, it was influenced by local contemporary forms, most notably the mid-20th-century Australian living room. When Shigeru Yura

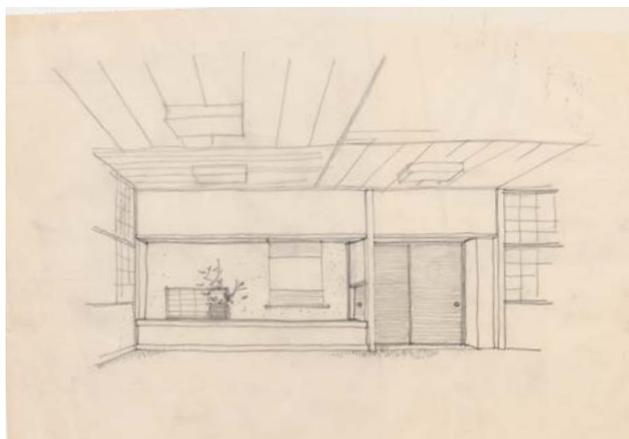
visited the home of faculty colleague George Tibbits, he noticed how the front room of the house faced the street, how walls related to each other and to the street, how pictures were hung, and where furniture was located. He saw something that helped him link the two cultures.⁷

The faculty already had students and staff from south-east Asia, but the cultural differences between Japan and Australia in the early 1960s were great. The story of the Japanese Room is one of two cultures coming together to create an exceptional space at a time when the two nations had relatively recently been at war. Designing, planning and funding the room were exercises in international relations. Professor Yura facilitated significant philanthropic gifts from Japanese companies, making it possible to furnish the room with materials of the highest quality. Funding for construction and decoration came mainly from donations by members of the Japan–Australia Business Co-operation Committee in Japan. True to the intention of the room, these materials were sourced in Japan.⁸ As this was to be a working room on a university campus, there were numerous complexities to be considered. While the wallpaper, shoji and other details are traditional in materials and craftsmanship, the furniture is modern. It was designed by Katsuo Matsumura of Tokyo (1923–1991), whom Yura had met at a conference in Sydney,⁹ and constructed by Japanese firm Tendo Mokko Seisakusho. It has been described by Yura as ‘very good quality, proud furniture’,¹⁰ and is still in use.

The Japanese Room embodies notions of continuity and change, and stands as a symbol of what can be achieved by cross-cultural understanding. Several stories that we tell students each year illustrate a clash of cultures during the time of the initial construction. The room was intended to be built without nails—the pieces fitting together like an intricate jigsaw puzzle—but the Aussie builders of the era struggled with this technique. The story goes that one day

Below, left: Shigeru Yura, Sketch of interior, Japanese Room, for University of Melbourne, New School of Architecture, c. 1963, pencil on tracing paper, 27.5 × 41.0 cm. 1976.0012.00010, University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below, right: The original Japanese Room. 2003.0003.01753, University of Melbourne, Media and Publication Services Office, University of Melbourne Archives.



a frustrated builder hammered a nail into one of the walls and hung his hat on it, exclaiming ‘there’s at least one nail in this room’. We also tell students that, in Japan, the same room would have been constructed by builders wearing gloves to protect the soft timbers. This was something Australian workers couldn’t get their heads around. A compromise was reached, and it was agreed that builders wear one white glove, on their left hand—predating the pop-look of the 1980s.

The Japanese Room quickly won a place in the hearts of the staff and students who attended meetings, gave their confirmation addresses and enjoyed events in the space. When the 1960s building was to be demolished, the faculty sought input from alumni and members of the Japanese community about preserving the room, and philanthropic support for the project. Using a report prepared by Roger Beeston Architects, the room was carefully decommissioned, materials were cleaned, conserved and stored, and eventually the room was rebuilt in its new location on the fourth floor of a new building designed by John Wardle Architects and NADAAA.

When the room was opened for its second lease on life, vice-chancellor Glyn Davis AO, chair of the campaign committee that raised funds for the project Mr Allan Myers AO QC, and dean of architecture Professor Tom Kvan were joined by the architect of the Japanese Room, 86-year-old Professor Emeritus Shigeru Yura, who had travelled from Japan (pictured opposite). He was delighted to see the sympathetic restoration of the space, and that the room is now adjacent to a garden. The celebrations included a Japanese tea ceremony supported by the Chado Urasenke Tankokai of Melbourne, and a *No* drama sung by Yura. Events like this highlight the significance of the room for the university, and its enduring appeal. Even formal events illustrate the difficulties of managing an active space that is made of special materials complemented by artefacts given to the university. It is a fine balancing act to make the room available for many uses while ensuring that it is not damaged in the process.

In a faculty that educates people who will be creating the built environment of the future, a room of historical significance is a pedagogical treasure, because it sows the seeds for conversations about how we as a community



treat our historically significant buildings and spaces. It is a wonderful primary resource for students. We are fortunate to have the Japanese Room at the University of Melbourne, and to have the archival collections that record its history. We are honoured to be the custodians of some of the oral histories of the room and to be able to share these with students. Seeing the astonishment and wonder each year when we reveal the history of the room to the students, we come to realise what a privileged position we are in.

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- 1 See Melbourne School of Design, *Japanese Room*, University of Melbourne, <https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/explore/level-4/japanese-room> (viewed 15 May 2019).
- 2 Interview between Professors Qinghua Guo and Shigeru Yura, 18 March 2015, audio interview, 2019.0103, University of Melbourne Archives (hereafter UMA).
- 3 University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, 1976.0012, UMA; Records of Shigeru Yura and Designs at the Faculty of Architecture, 2014.0035, UMA.
- 4 Neil Clerehan, 'Lewis, Brian Bannatyne (1906–1991)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2016, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lewis-brian-bannatyne-21872/text31932>.
- 5 *Canberra Times*, 'Japanese replica home in Sydney', 31 October 1960, p. 5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article103108366>; *Australian Women's Weekly*, 'Canberra: See how it grows', 20 June 1962, p. 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article58587922>.
- 6 Michael Foster, 'Timestyle: Japanese garden, Cowra: A landscape of peace created', *Canberra Times*, 13 May 1979, p. 9, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article110945922>.
- 7 Interview between Professors Qinghua Guo and Shigeru Yura.
- 8 Archival collection 2014.0035 holds a series of letters between Professor Yura and the craftspeople, discussing the furnishings.
- 9 Interview between Professors Qinghua Guo and Shigeru Yura.
- 10 Interview between Professors Qinghua Guo and Shigeru Yura.