

Transnational Architecture and New Femininity

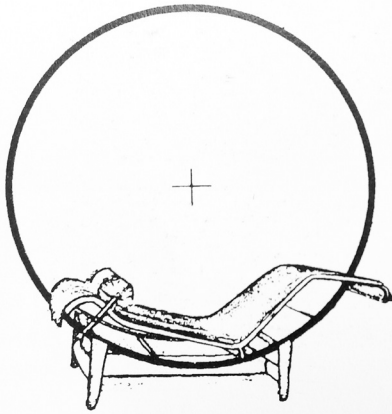
Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999) and Kazuyo Sejima (b. 1956) stand as paradigms of a Western-Japanese architectural dialogue. Their transformative encounters between their familiar territory and one far away, between Japan and the West, began before leaving their own homes. In turn, they both took advantage of contexts of female dynamism, in France in the 1920s and in Japan in the 1980s. Perriand's and Sejima's approach was highly personal, designing objects for themselves, using body as a unit of measurement, and promoting their image.

This paper evaluates the role of the New Woman in architecture as a proactive status associated to moments of economic splendor and technological revolutions as well as the flourishing of urban nomadism across national borders, which demanded novelty and experimentation in architecture.

Transnationalism creates a blurring, a reordering of cultural, social and epistemological binary distinctions in our modern period. Transnationalism accepts 'style' without hierarchy; it offers cultural equivalence and global adaptation, enabled by communication technologies. Transnationalism is associated with nomadism, pronounced in times of strong economic growth and social revolution. Transnational architects/designers are frequently disciples of great masters, who undergo a transforming encounter by 'avant la lettre' contact with other culture(s). They are transformed because what actually travel are objects, projects, models or ideas, and they produce architecture of fusion between different cultural entities. Transnational designers have had more capacity of transformation than their mentors, who have traditionally been advocates of their own ideas.

It is relevant to analyze the transnational in relation to Japanese architecture and the interpretation that the West made of its architectural tradition. The Modern Movement used Japanese architecture to support its new theories, and it particularly exalted the Katsura Imperial Villa as a paradigm of traditional Japanese domestic architecture. Subsequently, the West promoted Modernity in Japan, and Japan assumed it as 'Westernization'. In 1960, Japan sought to create its own avant-garde movement, taking advantage of the crisis of the CIAM.¹ After the

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Figure 1: Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Charlotte Perriand. Chaise Longue, 1928.

failure of the Metabolist Movement in 1970, Japan incorporated the post-modern, but this time with the confidence of being 'Number One'.² In the 80s, Japan began exporting to the West its experimental domestic architecture, making this decade the most transnational period of 'Japanese' architecture.

Consequently, the transnational in relation to Japanese architecture is assumed as an overcoming of the West as 'conqueror', traditionally identifying modernization equals Westernization. While the International Style brings together the most purist architecture of the Modern Movement, the transnational refers to the fusion of the Japan-West architecture, as the result of a circular cultural exchange.

In this regard, the analysis of transnational ties between France and Japan appears as a paradigmatic case, since in the artistic exchange between the two places, the concepts of 'origin' and 'destination' have been diluted by History. France was the place where the first examples of Japanese architecture were displayed in the West, on the occasion of the International Exposition of 1867. Later, Paris would also hold Japan's first modern building built outside of Japan in 1937. France was the home of Le Corbusier, the most influential modern architect in the history of Japan. It also was the place where Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999) started her career, who arguably remains the most influential Western woman architect in Japanese history.

A crucial figure in the Modern construction of the concept of 'Japanese architecture' in the West was Bruno Taut and his interpretation of the Katsura Imperial Villa in the early 1930s. Supported by Taut's description of the Japanese palace, the masters of the Modern Movement—including Adolf Loos, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier—viewed in the Katsura Villa the sublimation of Japanese architecture. They made a deliberate reading which promoted their idea of Modern Architecture in relation to Japanese architecture, considered as the exaltation of formal restraint and an exquisite relationship with nature.

However, before Taut's publication, some Japanese architects had already moved to Europe in order to work as apprentices. This was the case of Kunio Maekawa, who arrived in 1928 at Corbusier's Atelier in Paris, where he remained until 1930. During Maekawa's two years at the Atelier, two other Japanese architects, Tsuchihashi Nagayoshi and Makino Masami worked also at Corbu's studio for short periods.³ Afterwards, Junzo Sakakura began his particular journey at the Atelier Rue de Sèvres in 1931, where he worked until 1936.

Although Maekawa and Sakakura adopted the role of 'emissaries' of Corbusier in Japan, the successor of Bruno Taut in Japan was Charlotte Perriand, who was hired as an official advisor on industrial design to the Ministry for Trade and Industry. She became the true ambassador of Corbusier's ideas in Japan, and restored the France-Japan bond in a more complex way, combining Decorative Arts, Architecture and Equipment. She blurred the relationship between conqueror and conquered culturally thanks to her previous connection with Japanese culture in France. Perriand's life and work signified a real link between France and Japan in terms of architecture, interior design and industrial products.

In fact, according with Kenzo Tange, Perriand achieved a fusion of European industrial style and Japanese traditional styles.⁴ Thus, she became an outstanding paradigm of the Japan-West transnational architectural exchange. Which was possible because she traveled to Japan after being 'transformed' in Paris during her collaboration of nearly a decade at the international environment of Le Corbusier's Atelier.

Her first exhibition in Japan, *Contribution to the interior equipment of the apartment, Japan 2601. Selection, Tradition, Creation*—organized together with Junzo Sakakura in 1941—, made palpable her transnational condition. Particularly, her design of the *Chaise Longue* in bamboo (prototype 1941),⁵ as a modern icon made out of a traditional Japanese material, evidenced her commitment to cultural ‘dialogue’.

Nonetheless, Perriand’s aesthetic had already undergone a fundamental evolution before her first trip to Japan. In the 1930s, modern architecture became fashionable across much of the industrial world, regardless of location, people or circumstances—the ‘International Style.’ It displaced diversity with a single, exclusively functionalist model. Perriand rebelled and aspired towards a different kind of transnational architecture. She pulled away from the dictates of the Modern Movement—which was reduced to a single formula—and attempted to re-imagine a new type of residential modernity. Part of her change was made possible by the encounter (*de-ai*) of cultures and times, where Japanese tradition took on a dimension that certainly attracted Perriand.

The incorporation of transnational features in Perriand’s work was not only in her furniture, but also, in a more eloquent way, in her architecture. Using Japanese formal references was not as subtle but rather deliberately evident in her holiday house projects since the mid 1930s.⁶ For example in the *Demountable Weekend House* (1934-1935), Perriand used movable panels that transformed the space offering an unusual functional flexibility, with rooms susceptible to accommodate any function. In turn, there was total harmony with the nature that surrounded the small project. Later, in the *Vieux Matelot* (1938), near Saint-Nicolas-de-Véroce, she incorporated shelves with ‘asymmetric breaks’ as a reinterpretation of a *tokonoma*. She also designed a facade alternating opaque and transparent rectangles, echoing a panel composition from the cabinets at the *Katsura Villa*.⁷

Subsequently, before her going to Japan in 1940, Sakakura had asked her to gather as much information as possible about what was going on in Paris.⁸ Among the material she brought to share with her colleagues were plans for demountable buildings she had developed in the late 1930s in France in collaboration with Pierre Jeanneret and Jean Prouvé.⁹ With Japan at war, that kind of demountable architecture was of particular interest. In fact, those plans would serve as a catalyst for Sakakura and Maekawa’s research on prefabricated architecture in the first half of the 1940s.

Charlotte Perriand was able to give an answer to what the Japanese were questioning most of the time: the integration of the Western/Modern world and the Japanese culture as preservation of a tradition. The ‘dialogue’ or exchange between Perriand with Japan was not only on an individual level and within a very limited scope, but it extended from Interior Design to Architecture over time, before, during and after the war. She collaborated with Japanese architects for over half a century, not only with Maekawa and Sakakura, but also with Sori Yanagi, her assistant during her first visit to Japan; Ren Suzuki, who worked with her after the war; and Kenzo Tange in the late 1950s, who was directly influenced by her. She also participated in the Japanese national reaffirmation in the 60’s.

Perriand was the only Western architect invited to take part in organizational meetings for the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo, which was the beginning of a big shift in the history of Japanese architecture. Throughout the pre-1960 period, the Western was assimilated as Modern. The manifesto ‘Metabolism 1960’ marked the turning point as the start of the first purely

Japanese avant-garde movement, while representing a critique of progress associated with the Western and the Modern and therefore to the International. Thus Metabolism was born as a certain national reaffirmation but with the ambition to transcend internationally. It was actually a transnational movement,¹⁰ and the decade of 1960 signified a stage of Japan-West 'pre-transnationalism'.

While the 1970s were a period of 'indecision' for Japanese architecture, during the 1980s, as construction boomed in Japan, the international attention also increased. More architects visited Japan, and the publication of Japanese buildings soared. Indeed there is general agreement, in both the press and in academic circles, that the 1980s was the most transnational decade for Japanese residential architecture in the XX century.

The interest of Japanese society towards the domestic space—as a result of the rise of consumerism of 'art of life'—in combination with the new female power, motivated the rediscovery of the figure of Charlotte Perriand among architects and designers in Japan in the early 1980s. Japanese architects sought new references to address domestic design according to new lifestyles. Perriand's contribution had been crucial in the history of interior design in Japan since before the War. Her role as transnational French architect/designer, collaborator of Le Corbusier, link between the West and Japan, and her 'life of art' resurfaced in the 80s in Japan as a niche of inspiration for the creation of furniture, new lifestyles and architecture.

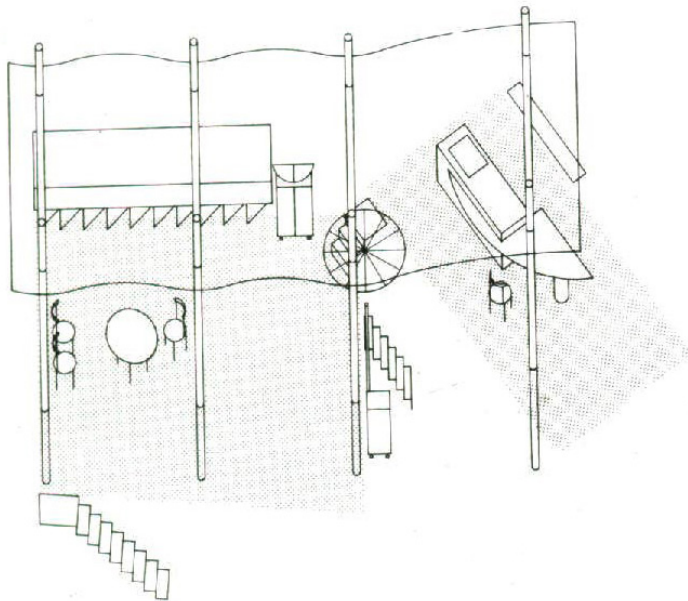
At the beginning of 1980s Toyo Ito established a research group on furniture and new lifestyles. Itsuko Hasegawa, Kijo Rokkaku, Osamu Ishiyama and Riken Yamamoto were involved in those meetings—named 'Aderu no kai'—, which took place at Ito's office. They studied the designs of a woman collaborator of Le Corbusier in the 20s and 30s in Paris, 'someone like Perriand',¹¹ according to Ito. That investigation would lead Ito to develop his concept of the Pao I for the Nomad Japanese Woman in 1985. His collaborator Kazuyo Sejima (b.1956) was on charge of the design of Pao I in Tokyo's transnational context.

Thanks to her mentor Ito, Sejima became interested in Perriand's 'life of art'.¹² Previously, during her college years, Sejima had written about Eileen Gray, who was another important reference for Japanese domestic architecture in the 80s. Like Perriand, Gray was early influenced by japonisme, beginning to study the art of oriental lacquers in 1907 with Seizo Sougawara. In fact, in pre-war France, Charlotte Perriand and the Irish designer Eileen Gray were the only women working in architecture.¹³

Sejima studied housing at the Women's University of Japan between 1975 and 1981. That time was a period of active criticism to the nationalism theories of the Metabolist Group. Therefore her training was focused on Western architecture. Indeed, Sejima chose the work of Le Corbusier as the subject study for her final thesis project, motivated by her professor Yuzuro Tominaga. She also attended the 'History of Western Furniture' class taught by Koji Taki at Zokei University in 1980.

Sejima's first projects, after leaving Ito's office, evidenced the avant la letre transnational character of her architecture. Particularly apparent in her early weekend houses, Platform Houses, designed in the late 1980s, which she presented as 'futuristic' alternatives to convention. That 'futuristic' label indicated a non-Japanese condition—as opposed to Japanese traditions—but rather transnational features in those furniture-houses or 'petite architecture.'¹⁴

Platform I (1987-1988) was actually a fusion of the concept of the traditional



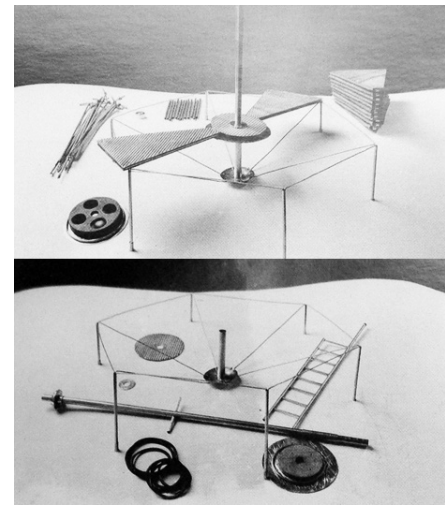
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Japanese house with Western furniture. It was a baroque home to enjoy leisure time, which contrasts with the idea of simplicity and minimalism associated with the Japanese from the West. Platform I was full of Western influences: designed to be standing up or sitting on Western chairs, with angles and no straight lines confectioned its shape—resembling a cubist explosion of furniture—that impeded the complete closure of the space.

After Platform I, Sejima designed Platform II (1988-1990), a house-studio located in Yatsugatake Mountains. There are recognizable important, formal and conceptual similarities between Sejima's house and the studio that Eileen Gray designed for Jean Badovici, Apartment Ru Chateaubriand (1929-1931) in Paris. In fact, the focus towards the kinetic, tactile and sensual potential of Gray's architecture and furniture becomes palpable in the house designed by Sejima. Platform II and the Apartment Ru Chateaubriand also shared the same sensibility in the use of forms, materials and textures. In particular, Gray's mobile striated curve—created as an evolution from the circle—seemed to solidify in Platform II, and was the key element in both cases. Despite its small size, both studios were planned to accommodate a variety of user-needs with wit and sophistication. The careful treatment of the details as well as the sensuality that permeated the whole, made them mark a distance with minimalism.

These projects illustrate the fact that Sejima introduced Western features since the beginning of her professional trajectory, which makes her an 'avant la lettre' transnational architect. Other projects, such as the House in a Plum Grove (2003)—another prototype of 'petite architecture'—, demonstrate that Sejima has incorporated transnational references throughout her career.

In the House in a Plum Grove, a sequence of rooms, typical of the Japanese house, are combined with a terrace on the roof. The spaces are stacked and the house is broken in the roof through a Western and modern gesture: an open room or elevated garden, in the same way of Villa Savoye. In turn, there is no concept of intermediate space or corridor, moving from one room to another is through the 'cut-outs' in the steel plate walls. In this sense, the succession of the rooms is typical of traditional Japanese domestic architecture, but it is not the fact that this occurs also vertically. On the other hand, now nature is introduced



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Figure 2: Kazuyo Sejima. Platform I, 1987.

Figure 3: Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret. Barrel shelter, 1938 (unbuilt project).

into the house through square façade holes. All partitions are structural and the structure also becomes façade. The flat roof with no overhang cancels any possibility of engawa and in turn it breaks to feature an elevated garden.

Sejima's ability to move easily in the West, using transnational codes, led her to become a great ambassador of Japan of her generation in the West. Disciple of Toyo Ito and mentor of Ryue Nishizawa, she received the Pritzker Prize—together with Nishizawa—in 2010, two years ahead of her mentor, breaking Japanese hierarchical barriers. Sejima—who began her career during the decade of most economic growth, industrial development and social revolution in the history of Japan—is considered the most influential Japanese woman architect in the West.

Both Sejima and Perriand have moved in a transnational space since the beginning of their careers. Both had a transformative encounter with the Japanese and the West respectively without leaving their homes: Perriand in Paris during the 1920s and Sejima in Tokyo in the 1980s. Which led them to become transnational architects 'before traveling'. In turn, both architects/designers embodied a new kind of femininity. They took advantage of their status proactively from the very beginning of their professional trajectory.

In the 1980s in Japan, as it had happened in the 1920s in France, the accelerated economic growth along with the postindustrial changes led to a social revolution in favor of a more egalitarian society, where women gained freedom as a result of new job opportunities. The emergence of the concept of the New Woman, in relation to the movement of reform of the domestic space, had a similar role in France and Japan in the second half of both decades. The economic growth favored, for the first time the incorporation of women as direct consumers thanks to their new economic autonomy. Hence, the feminine played a crucial role in an environment of booming leisure and consumption, where new lifestyles demanded experimentation in domestic architecture.

Women's freedom was celebrated in popular media, which dramatized the influence of women as consumers of clothes, of pleasure, and residential architecture. The concept of New Femininity refers to those women designers/architects who, during a time of female liberation and prominence in the media, motivated by the rise in consumerism typical of economic booms, seize their feminine condition in a proactive sense when they start their career.

The post-industrial Japanese context of the eighties favored the independence of women, in a society where, due to its historical and cultural particularities, feminism had evolved differently than in Western society. It was in the 1980s when the Japanese university-educated women began to work, focus on their career, and live more independently. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO) of 1986 encouraged Japanese women's career opportunities in the second half of the 80s, especially in the tertiary sector.

With a historical, geographical and cultural leap, there was a coincidence in the change of the traditional roles for women in relation to architecture. The New Woman took advantage of the waves of their media preeminence, which led her to become a 'total designer'. In both Japanese and French cases, there was also a flourishing of a new; weekend nomadism, because of new paid holidays for French laborers;¹⁵ and urban nomadism in the Japanese case because of real independence of the concept of Oyome.¹⁶ Which favored an architectural revolution that supported its experimentation on the small scale.

In a professional world largely dominated by men, Charlotte Perriand and Kazuyo Sejima status as New Women favored their professional success in the mainstream media, even before being hired by Le Corbusier and Toyo Ito respectively. Both Perriand and Sejima were precursors to designing objects for themselves and tailor them to their own bodies as well as promoting them by using their own image. They became total designers: from a tea set to a wooden chair, from a mirror to the most technological metallic interior, from a small house to a large building on an urban scale.

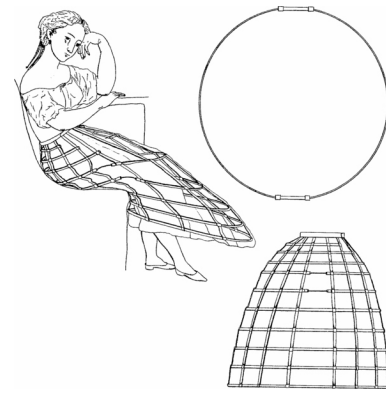
Similarly to Perriand or Gray standing out as women working in male dominated field of architecture in the 1920s in France, the 1980s favored the launch of the first internationally recognized Japanese women architects. Itsuko Hasegawa opened her office with the decade in 1979, or Kazuyo Sejima became independent from Toyo Ito's office in 1987. Those women architects usually initiated their career designing small household objects as interns at studios led by men. Hasegawa began with Kazuo Shinohara, Sejima and Nagisa Kidosaki at Toyo Ito's office.

Charlott Perriand and Kazuyo Sejima had similar education, studied furniture, attended at a women's college, and showed an especial interest on fashion. Maurice Dufrene—powerful woman designer in the mid-20s in France—stood out as an important mentor for Perriand. The ideas of Dufrene, for whom 'a cabinet maker is an architect',¹⁷ are reflected in Perriand's professional trajectory. Among the female referents for Sejima's aspirations were Miho Hamaguchi (1915-1988) as the first woman famous architect in Japan; Masako Hayashi (1925), the first female Japanese architect to get the prize of the Architectural Institute of Japan; or Yoko Kuwasawa (1910-1977), one of the architects and feminist figures ahead of her time, and founder of Tokyo Zokei University in 1966.

Shortly after finishing her studies, Perriand appeared in the press as the 'woman wearing a metal necklace with short hair'. She began to personify the image of the Modern Woman described by Le Corbusier: a short-haired woman who dresses in five minutes and is beautiful, seducing through her grace, courage and inventive spirit, which led to a revolution in clothing design, a miracle of modern times.¹⁸

Toyo Ito in the early 80s, like Le Corbusier in the late 20s, was well aware of the new female autonomy as consumers of the 'art of life'. In 1980, Ito projected his Dom-ino prototypes, trying to discover the new desires of the post-modern Japanese woman, while reinterpreting the theories of Le Corbusier. The project was promoted in the women's magazine *Croissant*, with the help of his then intern Kazuyo Sejima, for whom 'it is the same to design a house than to design a piece of furniture'.¹⁹

Perriand and Sejima represented the Modern Woman described by Le Corbusier and the Japanese Nomad Woman for whom Toyo Ito designed his new domestic architecture in the mid-80s. Together with their mentors they designed two objects that became icons of the Machine Age and the Electronic Age respectively: the Chaise Longue (1928) and Pao I (1985). In 1986, Sejima was the Nomad Woman living Pao I, showing how that 'intelligent-furniture' was tailored for her body. Perriand had posed resting on the Chaise Longue more than half a century before, transforming a 'leisure machine' into an object of desire. Le Corbusier logic of elimination of the decorative arts, satisfied by equipment, contrasted with the overt sensuality of the Chaise Longue, which, like Pao I, was associated primarily with the satisfaction of the senses, following Perriand's and Sejima's ability to serve bodily needs.



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Figure 4: Drawing of woman sitting in crinoline, Paris, 1858.

Figure 5: Kazuyo Sejima in Pao I, Tokyo, 1986.

ENDNOTES

1. "Japan first captured the attention of the architectural world in 1960 with the simultaneous unveiling of Kenzo Tange's Plan for Tokyo and the publication of *Metabolism 1960* by five young designers". For further information see Michael F. Ross: *Beyond Metabolism: The New Japanese Architecture* (1978).
2. In 1979 Ezra F. Vogel published the book *Japan as Number One LESSONS FOR AMERICA*, which became book of cult in Japan shortly after its publication.
3. Jonathan M. Reynolds: *Maekawa Kunio and the emergence of modernism in Japanese architecture*, p. 57.
4. Kenzo Tange, 1955, quoted by Saikake Toyokawa: "Kenzo Tange and Charlotte Perriand – Establishment and Demonic Integration of Art in Japan", en *Charlotte Perriand et le Japon*, pp. 273-275.
5. Which was a reinterpretation of the *Chaise Longue* by Le Corbusier, Perriand and Jeanneret in 1928.
6. Marta Rodríguez: "Charlotte Perriand. Un mestizaje Europa-Japón", in Pilar Garcés & Lourdes Terrón: *Itinerarios, Viajes y Contactos Japón-Europa*, pp. 775-785.
7. Exactly one year before Bruno Taut had published his famous book, *Houses and People of Japan* (1937), where he showed the *Katsura Villa* as Japanese architecture paradigm.
8. Yasuto Ota: "Junzo Sakakura: Exchanges with Jean Prouvé" in Jean Prouvé. *The Poetics of the Technical Object*. *Vitra Design Museum*, 2006, p. 354-55.
9. Japan also offered Perriand the opportunity to further expand her material sensibility as she studied bamboo, fabrics for kimono sashes (*obi*), and she became interested in the *Mingei* (folk crafts) movement.
10. Marta Rodríguez: "Arquitectura Metabolista petite: Las raíces francesas de las cápsulas móviles de Ekuán", in *Pasajes Arquitectura y Crítica*, no. 124, pp. 74-77.
11. Toyo Ito. Interview by Marta Rodríguez. Personal interview. Tokyo, December 20, 2012.
12. Kazuyo Sejima. Interview by Marta Rodríguez. Personal interview. Tokyo, December 25, 2012.
13. Jaques Barsac: "The Life and Work of Charlotte Perriand", in *Charlotte Perriand et le Japon*, 264-265.
14. "petite architecture is defined as habitable technological furniture" by Marta Rodríguez: *Arquitectura petite: Charlotte Perriand & Kazuyo Sejima. Una historia transnacional*, p. 208.
15. In 1936 the Popular Front got the power in France. That year legislated the concept of paid holidays for French laborers, sought to expand the concept of leisure from an elite privilege to a mass political concern.
16. Japanese tradition by which the young wife lived under the command of her husband's mother while the young couple cohabited with his parents.
17. Maurice Dufrene, quoted by Frank Scarlett and Marjorie Townley: *Arts Décoratifs: A Personal Recollection of the Paris Exhibition*, p. 78.
18. Le Corbusier. Article published in the women's magazine *Maison pour Tous*, quoted by Silvana Rubino: "Bodies, chairs, necklaces: Charlotte Perriand and Lina Bo Bardi", in *Cuadernos Pagu*, Campinas, nº 34, pp. 331-362.
19. Kazuyo Sejima. Interview by Marta Rodríguez. Personal interview. Tokyo, December 25, 2012.

The anthropomorphic character of some of their small-scale projects—as the *Le refuge Tonneau* designed by Charlotte Perriand & Pierre Jeanneret in 1938 or the *Small House* designed Kazuyo Sejima in 1999—denote an inspiration from furniture design as well as from the fashion world. Their designs have borrowed techniques of tailoring and fashion design to make architecture 'adapted to the human body'. Cuts, shapes and material patterns embody their designs and turn them into objects of desire with 'ergonomics'. The sensuality of their creations is amplified by the introducing their own image as a publicity stunt. Aware of their prominence in the media, both were pioneer in posing as models for their projects. They also incorporated the idea of mobility into their projects to enjoy modern urban nomad.

The main contribution of both designers to the architectural discourse has been their material and tactile focus, as well as the sensual potential of their work, which is largely derived from their interest in integrating furniture, textiles and sophisticated technology with architecture. On the other hand, the incorporation of foreign models has given Perriand's and Sejima's *petite architecture* a complex duality, where concepts such as Japanese temporality converge with some aspirations for luxury associated with the French decorative arts, which in lieu reveals the transnational nature of their architecture.

In essence, this complex convergence of Japanese with French features reveals a true transnational nature. Which appears not only in Sejima's and Ito's residential architecture, but also in other influential post-modern Japanese architects' *petite prototypes*, like Shigeru Ban's designs. Which led us to conclude that what we currently call 'innovative Japanese residential architecture' is actually transnational, a new 'style' of architectural fusion of Japan and the West; consequence of a circular exchange along Modern history.