Designing Japanese Identity and Culture in Canadian Architecture

Study of the Architectural Design of Asian Cultural Centres in Canada

Dr. Henry H. Tsang[1]

[1] Assistant Professor, RAIC Centre for Architecture, Athabasca University, Canada

Abstract

Japanese immigration to Canada can be traced back to 1877 in British Columbia. Today, there are approximately 121,485 people of Japanese ancestry living in Canada, and Japanese communities can be found in every major city & town across the country. During the war years, Canadians of Japanese ancestry were uprooted from their homes and sent to internment camps. Bustling Japanese communities disappeared, but many rebuilt themselves after the war when their rights were restored. Where the ethnic congregation became large enough, Asian neighbourhoods, such as Chinatowns and Japantowns, emerged. Next, cultural and community centres are established as hubs for Japanese communities to congregate, preserve language, heritage and share their culture. As a building typology, cultural centres are of interest, as by its purpose, it naturally searches to express the culture and identity of the community it represents, in this case, the Japanese culture and identity. The first constructed Japanese cultural centre in Canada is the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall building built in 1928. It was designed for this purpose by Vancouver architects Sharp & Thompson Architects. In the 1950s, several Japanese Canadian architects emerged, and with their Japanese roots, were commissioned to design cultural centres to reflect their identities, such as the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto. This paper studies the architectural design of Japanese cultural centres in Canada and ways these buildings express Japanese identity and culture. The significance of this study lies in whether a building with high cultural significance can be properly executed by an architect with little knowledge of that said culture. Many studies of Chinatowns, for example, have identified poor understanding of Asian cultures and building designs that were skewed towards orientalism and stereotypes. On the other hand, it would also be incorrect to assume that importing a style from another country and replicating it would make the building any more authentic. The core of architectural design needs to be the community it represents and the geographical context of its location. It is suggested that this can be achieved with a systematic and strategic research process before design; however, this is not always in the architect's scope of work. This research attempts to outline a design process that may better capture identity and culture, and translate these into the built form of buildings, based on case studies of Japanese cultural centres.

***Keywords**: Japanese immigration, Japanese diaspora, Nikkei culture, Canadian architecture, cultural centres, design, culture, identity*

1. BACKGROUND

The way a community and its culture are portrayed in buildings depends largely on the architects' vision and interpretation of it. The role of an architect is to design buildings. But what if the architect's culture, background, and values do not see eye to eye with the client's or the people the building is to serve? The better an architect understands the community's identity and culture, the better a building can be designed to represent it. Failing to do so, an architect may rely on personal assumptions or stereotypes. In Canada, this phenomenon is particularly apparent, given the diversity of the country's population due to immigration. Sadly, the profession of architecture is underrepresented by ethnic minorities, and remains predominantly white and male. Another reality is that Canada itself does not possess a unique and recognizable architectural identity that it can relate to. Historically, architectural styles and aesthetics have been imported or influenced by western cultures, particularly European countries given our colonial past. Canada also continues to struggle to reconcile with its indigenous roots and identity. As a country of immigrants, the built environment of our cities and towns is becoming more and more populated by immigrants, and the design of buildings need to address the issues of culture, identity, and local context much more sensitively. This paper attempts to analyse elements of the built environment to identity opportunities to express culture and identity in buildings. The focus of this paper looks at East Asian immigration, with a focus on Japanese communities in Canada, and how buildings have been designed to represent identity and culture. Case studies of the architectural design of culture and community centres have been selected from across Canada for the purpose of this paper.

2. EAST ASIAN IMMIGRATION & MAJOR ARCHITECTURAL TRENDS IN CANADA

East Asian immigration to Canada dates to the late 18th century when Chinese immigrants first landed in Canada.

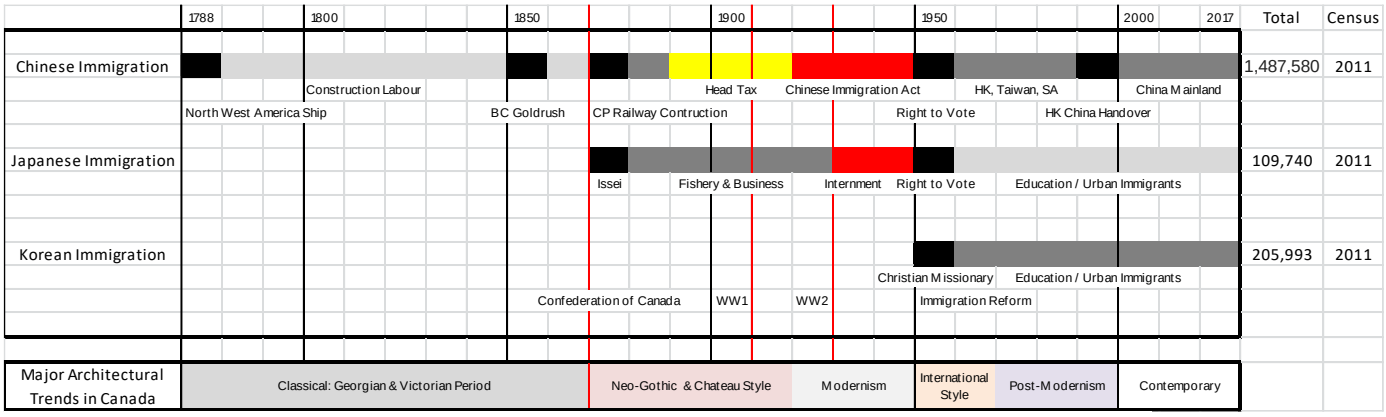

Figure 1. Timeline of Asian Immigration and Major Architectural Trends in Canada. Prepared by author.

Canadians of Asian ancestry comprise the largest visible minority group in Canada, at 15% of the Canadian population, and is also the fastest growing.

Figure 1 identifies the major timeline of East Asian immigration and major events that has affected immigration. During the war years, Japanese immigration was halted. Also, the table also shows the major architectural trends in Canada between 1788 till today, which has mostly been influenced by western countries, in particular the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Canada's architectural identity is very much cast in colonial architecture, and the more there are immigrants in Canada, the less it is representative of our mosaic of cultures.

3. PRECEDENT STUDY: CHINATOWNS & CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

Chinese immigration to Canada was triggered centuries ago by large construction projects, such as the construction of the Northwest America Ship (1788), the British Colombia Gold Rushes (1850-1941) and the Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1881-1885). Later immigration came from Hong Kong migrants who made their way to Canada prior to the China handover in 1997. Since 2000, immigration from Mainland China has continue to grow. With a long history of Chinese immigration to Canada, Chinatowns emerged in major cities where Chinese communities congregate and live.

Historian John Kuo Wei Tchen states Chinatowns were built on orientalism, which is how western people portrayed Chinese culture rather than a search for authenticity. It is nothing like China, so it is a product of America. Most buildings are existing and adapted for use by the Chinese community, and many buildings that were commissioned later were designed by white architects based on their imagery of the orient.

McGill University architecture professor Dr. Annmarie Adams says this about the Montreal Chinatown: "As a community matures, however, it often commissions its own structures for specific purposes: churches, community centres, schools, etc. The fondness for the homeland expressed in the new architecture reveals a lot about the group."

In Calgary, the Chinese community commissioned for a new Calgary Chinese Community Centre in 1992. The project was designed with a roof, replica of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. The project was designed by the IBI Group, a Canadian firm based in Toronto, yet particular attention was put on the roof, as proportions and dimensions were perfect, and building materials, as well as skilled workers were imported from China. See Figure 2. The Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver goes even further in reconstructing a whole imperial hall. This project was built in 1978 was designed by Hong Kong-born architect James K.M. Cheng and depicts the urge to refer to Chinese architecture, as symbolism and identity. See Figure 3.

Figure 2. Calgary Chinese Community Centre, Calgary, AB. Photo by Marilyn Peddle.

Figure 3. Chinese Cultural Centre, Vancouver. Photo by Johnny Chan.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL CENTRES AND THEIR ARCHITECTURE

The building typology of culture and community centres is particularly relevant for a study on architecture and culture. Cultural centres inadvertently search for ways to express the culture and identity of the community it represents. As seen above, cultural centres are the headquarters and gateways to an ethnic community, naturally architects want to dress them to look like their community.

5. JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTRES: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Japanese immigration to Canada can be traced back to the 1877 in British Columbia. According to the 2016 Census Canada, there are 121,485 people of Japanese ancestry living in Canada. Communities were mostly settled in British Columbia as it was closer to fishing villages. Japanese immigration gave rise to Japantowns. However, during the war, people of Japanese marginalized and were relocated to internment camps and much of their original settlements do not remain. There is currently only one Japantown in Canada remaining, in Vancouver surrounding Powell Street.

Japanese communities have rebuilt around cultural and community centres across Canada. Although many are housed within re-adapted existing buildings, there is a set of architectural gems that have emerged in the last few decades.

5.1 Case 1: The Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall in Vancouver, British Columbia

The Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall was established in 1906, but the current building was built in 1928 and is the oldest Japanese school and cultural centre in Canada. It was designed by Vancouver architects Sharp & Thompson Architects in an Art Deco style, with a Spanish colonial influence. A 5-storey addition was also constructed in 2000, designed by another pair of local architects Birmingham & Wood. The design of the addition takes into account the original building, which is designated as a heritage building, and follows a similar style and aesthetic.

According to Saimoto (2020), "While the designs of these buildings primarily aligned with the dominant design trends of the time, if you look closely, Japanese Canadian names are spelled in English on these buildings." Subtle Japanese symbols, such as the Buddhist Sanskrit symbol, momiji leaf and sakura flower, can also be found embedded on the exterior of the building. This is believed to be impacted by the racial tensions during those times, and the Japanese communities equal desire to assimilate, yet display their own cultural identity.

Figure 4. Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall, Vancouver, BC. Photo by Leslie Hossack.

5.2 Case 2: The Old Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, Ontario

In 1963, the Japanese community in Toronto opened the doors to its newly designed and built cultural centre, the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC). This was a significant moment in history as it was the first that was designed by one of their own, a Japanese-Canadian (Nikkei) architect, Raymond Moriyama. According to the architects' website:

> While the building materials are quite modern, the proportions of the building, the landscaping, and details are very traditionally Japanese. The building also has elements designed to draw parallels to the experiences of those Canadians incarcerated during World War II — the 2-storey windows in the main hall have lattice reminiscent of bars, and rainwater is directed off the roof using chains attached to stones on the ground.

It is clear that the expression of this project wanted to recognize its roots in a less visual way, but rather in its details. Whereas the façade chooses to relate more to the particular history and identity of Japanese-Canadians, and a memorial to the dark years of the war.

Figure 5. The Old Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, Toronto, ON. Photo by Moriyama & Teshima Architects.

5.3 Case 3: The New Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in North York, Ontario

The JCCC eventually grew out of its small building as the Japanese community in Toronto grew. They moved to a new site in North York, Ontario, and commissioned another Toronto-based Japanese-Canadian architect Bruce Kuwabara, a founding partner of the firm KPMB, to design their new building. The new JCCC was completed in 2008. According to KPMB's website, the project is described as follows:

> A combination of new construction and strategic renovation transformed the existing office building into a cultural facility that is welcoming, accessible and inclusive… Three major elements – a sign, a screen and a lantern tower – create a distinctive presence for the JCCC on its new site… A translucent acrylic and steel tower, its form inspired by the Akari lamps designed by Isamu Noguchi, dramatically mark the main entrance.

Figure 6. New Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, Toronto, ON. Photo by Bob Krawczyk.

In fact, this is a partial adaptation of an old office building, with an addition of new spaces, which include a dojos and tatami rooms. Unlike the former JCCC which reflected heavily on the narrative and history of Japanese-Canadians, this project's aesthetics draws inspiration from Japanese artefacts, such as the Akari lamps. Perhaps deliberately, they also chose to refer to another Nikkei, Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi, rather than to make a direct link to Japan.

5.4 Case 4: The Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia

Meanwhile in Vancouver, the Japanese community in Vancouver also constructed an additional cultural hub called the Nikkei Place, built in 2000. Here is housed the Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre, as well as seniors housing. The firm selected for the project was Moriyama & Teshima Architects, a firm that was formed between Raymond Moriyama, who designed the Old JCCC in Toronto, and another Nikkei, Ted Teshima. However it was actually led by Jason Moriyama, the son of Raymond Moriyama, who also happened to become an architect and has been directing the firm since Raymond's retirement.

Figure 7. The Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia. Photo by

This project design takes on a much more modern approach, reminiscent of modernist Japanese Tadao Ando's work with sculptural concrete. The centre even drops the word 'Japanese' from its name. The identity and culture of Nikkei becomes central to this museum and housing complex.

5. PILOT PROJECT: THE CALGARY JAPANESE CULTURAL & COMMUNITY CENTRE IN CALGARY, ALBERTA

As a pilot project for this thesis on designing Japanese identity and culture, a design proposal for the Calgary Japanese Community Centre was drafted and presented to the board of directors in 2020. The team consisted of Calgary-based architecture firm Modern Office of Architecture & Design (MoDA) and Henry Tsang Architect.

We developed the project through a series of systematic workshops and interviews designed to better understand the culture, identity and sets of values of the Japanese and Nikkei community in Calgary. The resulting design thrived to encompass the principles of Japanese aesthetics and architecture, in its form and spatial relationships. But rather than to replicate a preserve Japanese roots, without replicating a Japanese building. The building also needed to fit within it Calgarian context, in the residential neighbourhood of Killarney. The concept was that the project needed to be a fusion of Japanese and Canadian cultures. As an example, the exterior façade is clad with Canadian red cedar, a local material that is easily sourced. The finish, however, utilizes a shou-sugi-ban technique, a Japanese way of charring wood for environmental protection. The project was awarded a 2020 Canadian Architect Award of Excellence and rewarded for the sensitive approach to designing identity and culture.

Figure 8. Calgary Japanese Cultural & Community Centre Proposal, Calgary, AB.. Design and image by MoDA and Henry Tsang Architect.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, A., Sijpkes, P., (1991). Chinatown's Architecture Comes of Age, *The Gazette*, August 10, 1991.
2. Canadian Architect (2020, December). Calgary Japanese Community Centre, *Canadian Architect, 65(9), 22-24.*
3. Chan, K. (2020), Renovation proposed for Vancouver's historic Japanese Hall, Daily Hive Vancouver. Retrieved February 4, 2021 from https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/vancouver-japanese-hall-language-school-renovation?auto=true
4. KPMB. (n.d.). Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. Retrieved February 4, 2021 from https://www.kpmb.com/project/japanese-canadian-cultural-cent
5. Moriyama & Teshima Architects. (n.d.). Noor Cultural Centre (formerly Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre). Retrieved February 4, 2021 from https://mtarch.com/projects/noor-cultural-centre-formerly-japanese-canadian-cultural-centre/
6. Saimoto, L. (2020, September). The Brain Ball Strategy of Japanese Canadian Architecture, Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall. Retrieved February 4, 2021 from https://vjls-jh.com/blog/2020/09/29/the-brain-ball-and-architecture/?fbclid=IwAR1XKFN9Kfq_X3npaqYbRvKL9Nhy-57NQbmabn6oJagR_-4q_cNMhlnZO4E
7. Sunahara, A. (2011). Japanese Canadians, The Canadian Encyclopedia. Retrieved February 4, 2021 from http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-canadians
8. Tchen, J. (2001). New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882, John Hopkins University Press.
9. Thomas, C. (2006). Canadian Architecture 1867-1941, The Canadian Encyclopedia. Retrieved February 4, 2021 from http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-architecture-1867-1914/