Received: June 30, 2025; **Received in revised form:** July 4, 2025; **Accepted:** November 11, 2025

Citation: Ingarden, K., Kinoshita Watanabe, Y., (2025). The Japanese Traditional House: Spatial Representation of Dualistic Social Codes, *Środowisko Mieszkaniowe/ Housing Environment*, *54*, pp. 25–37, https://doi.org/10.2478/he-2025-0035

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The Japanese Traditional House: Spatial Representation of Dualistic Social Codes

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje tradycyjny japoński dom jako przestrzeń semiotyczną odzwierciedlającą kody społeczne. Badanie koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób elementy architektoniczne, takie jak przedsionek genkan, engawa, zashiki, przesuwne panele shoji oraz fusuma, mediują relacje pomiędzy strefami prywatnymi a publicznymi. Wprowadza kluczowe pojęcia japońskie (*honne/tatemae, uchi/soto, omote/ura, hare/ke* oraz *kafuchō-sei*), wyjaśniając, jak powyższe dychotomie - prawdziwe intencje/społeczne oczekiwania, wewnętrzne/zewnętrzne, front/tył, świąteczne/codzienne oraz role płci - kształtują przestrzenie domu. Zmienność i elastyczność aranżacji elementów przestrzeni architektonicznej pozwala mieszkańcom negocjować granice, utrzymywać harmonię społeczną oraz dostosowywać przestrzeń do okazji świątecznych lub codziennych. Artykuł potwierdza tezę, iż dom japoński ucieleśnia nie tylko funkcjonalny racjonalizm i dostosowanie do warunków klimatu, lecz poprzez swoją organizację przestrzenną odzwierciedla i utrwala skodyfikowane wartości kulturowe i społeczne.

Abstract

This article analyses the traditional Japanese house as a semiotic space that reflects social codes. It examines how architectural features such as the genkan vestibule, the engawa, zashiki, shoji and fusuma sliding panels – mediate relationships between private and public zones. The study introduces key Japanese concepts (***honne/tatemae, uchi/soto, omote/ura, hare/ke***, and ***kafuchō-sei***) to explain how dichotomies of inner/outer, public/private, and gender roles shape domestic spaces. Transitional, flexible elements allow inhabitants to negotiate boundaries, maintain social harmony, and adapt space to ritual or everyday occasions. Ultimately, the Japanese house is argued to embody not merely climate adaptation or practical rationalism but to perpetuate codified cultural values and social codes through its spatial organization.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycyjny dom japoński, dualistyczne kody społeczne, przestrzeń architektoniczna
Keywords: traditional Japanese house, dualistic social codes, architectural space

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines the traditional Japanese house as a system of spatial signs that reflects the fundamental cultural dichotomies of Japanese society. Central to this inquiry are the oppositions *honne/tatemae* (authentic intention/social façade), *uchi/soto* (inside/outside), *omote/ura* (front/back), *hare/ke* (ritual/everyday), and the influence of *kafuchō-sei* (patriarchal order) on domestic space. These categories, identified in sociological and ethnological studies, are applied here to the spatial composition of traditional functional and formal elements of a house. This research aims to determine how social codes are interpreted by architectural forms and how space arrangement regulates boundaries between individual and public zones. The hypothesis assumes that the traditional Japanese house operates as an instrument of spatial mediation, balancing visibility and concealment, formality and privacy. By linking the spatial language of the Japanese house to patterns of social behaviour, it aims to demonstrate that the organization of the Japanese house reflects social hierarchies, behavioural discipline, codes, and also social harmony (*wa*).

STATE OF RESEARCH

Research on Japanese traditional houses has long underlined the space modularity and flexibility of the house plan, basically through descriptive architectural typology (Engel 1985; Ueda 1974), ethnography (Hamaguchi 1950). The house was analysed as governed by flexible space, where partitions (*fusuma, shōji*) and transitional elements like the *engawa* mediate between interior privacy and public face (Engel 1985). Anthropologists such as Hendry (2013), Sugiyama Lebra (1976) have described how social distinctions: inner/outer visible/concealed, official/private spheres correspond with architectural form. Takeo Doi's[1] psychoanalytic work on Japanese society added vital insight by framing these spatial-social dichotomies as reflections of deeper psychological dualities such as *uchi* versus *soto*, emphasizing their interdependence. Takeo Doi's contribution is pivotal to understanding how the social dichotomies manifest not only materially but psychologically. His concept of *amae*, a specific need for dependence, frames the oscillation between dependence and autonomy, core to the *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) duality. Doi's psychoanalytic perspective highlights that these spatial-social dichotomies are dynamic, socially regulated tensions rather than rigid divisions, helping explain the ongoing negotiation of intimacy and distance in Japanese social life.

The new type of architectural-semiotical analysis was introduced

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by the method called space syntax – it enabled evaluation of household layouts as networks of circulation and visibility (Hillier, et al., 1987). Following this method, Kim's (Kim, 2025) study reinterprets Edo-period samurai residences via the reception-oriented principle (*Sekkyaku-honi*), revealing that more than 45% of these houses present outward-facing configurations where nearly half the spatial connections link interior rooms with external spaces. This, surprisingly, presents traditional houses as more extraverted than introverted. It highlights an architectural and social extroversion with the dominance of the *omote* aspect (public) over the *ura* (private) sphere in the analysed type of buildings.

Coaldrake (1996) analyses architecture from a symbolic perspective, in which soto and *uchi* play an important aspect – in which *omote* (front) elements like the *mon* (entrance gate) forms a strong architectural and social threshold that expresses authority, marking the intersection of *soto and uchi* and privileging the *omote*, which symbolizes power and social status.

Contemporary researchers like Tamura (2024) focus on boundary gradation rather than strict dualities, and emphasize multilayered thresholds such as *engawa* and semi-open porches that modulate social interaction and visibility. Japanese theorists Hayami (2010) and Usugi reveal how architectural terminology and morphological principles encode social hierarchies and order through spatial organization. Japanese authors, Hayami (2010) and Usugi (1997) further enrich this discourse by revealing how architectural terminology and morphological principles encode social hierarchies and order through spatial organization. Hayami's analysis of spatial naming in early Edo shows how *ura* zones were developed as marginal yet essential service areas supporting the public-facing *omote* sectors. Usugi's "Space-ology" methodically articulates the morphological and typological logic of *ura/omote* and *uchi/soto*, demonstrating these spatial dualities as operative principles shaping human behaviour. Fabian Jander and Teruyuki Monnai's (2013) article on *machiya* brings a semantic dimension to traditional Japanese domestic architecture studies. Their semantic analysis of *machiya* inhabitation examines how residents perceive formality, privacy, brightness, and naturalness across spatial zones.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative methodology. It integrates architectural analysis with cultural semiotics to conceptualize spatial form as a medium of social communication. Sociological and ethnological models of Japanese behaviour (Doi, 1973, 1986; Nakane, 1973; Sugiyama Lebra, 1976; Hendry, 2013) are employed as analytical frameworks, providing the conceptual foundation for interpreting architecture as a system of spatial dichotomies. Architectural studies (Engel, 1985; Ueda, 1974; Hamaguchi, 1950) further substantiate this theoretical framework with typological and design data. Two traditional domestic typologies – *machiya* (urban merchant house) and *minka* (rural dwelling) – serve as comparative case studies. Plans and photographic documentation of these house types serve as the primary material for analysis and illustration. The compositional principles that govern traditional architectural elements (*genkan*, *engawa*, *zashiki*, etc.) are analyzed as carriers and signifiers of social behavior. The study aims to reveal and explain the relationship between spatial composition and hierarchy, and the dualistic social and cultural patterns that shape behavioral norms in Japanese society.

3. THE TRADITIONAL JAPANESE HOUSE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The traditional Japanese house is not only an efficiently functioning arrangement of rooms adapted to family needs, but also a carefully crafted instrument of spatial negotiation between interior rooms and interior to exterior. Consequently, it mediates between privacy and public image with the aim of maintaining harmonious social relations. Two principal house-types, *machiya* (urban merchant houses) and *minka* (rural houses), developed spatial layouts that accommodated both family life and service activities such as craftwork, trade, and food preparation. Their organization typically involves a clear division between private zones and areas intended for external interactions.

Machiya, typical of cities such as Kyoto, are characterized by a narrow frontage and a deep plan. The front space, often combining shop and workshop functions, acts as a display toward the street and exemplifies the external image (*tatemae*), while rear rooms are reserved for private life. The rear is featured by the work/kitchen with a double height ceiling, a space to let out the heat and smoke from cooking. In the case of fire, it served to contain the fire to prevent it from spreading to the neighbors. The double height kitchen often had a skylight, because apertures could not be opened on either side of the *Machiya* side walls.

By contrast, rural *minka* emphasize separation between work/kitchen (*doma*) areas and everyday living zones, which are distinct from rooms intended for receiving guests. These layouts highlight the importance of "in-between" spaces and the relationship with garden and landscape; the *engawa* (veranda) plays a central role as a transitional zone between exterior and interior. In both *machiya* and *minka* several key architectural features we can consider as basic for the current investigation[2]:

- *Genkan*: entrance vestibule and threshold where shoes are removed.
- *Engawa*: veranda or semi-public strip that mediates between the house and the garden.
- *Zashiki*: reception room covered with *tatami* mats.
- *Tokonoma*: alcove in the reception room for displaying a calligraphy scroll, painting, or *ikebana* arrangement.
- *Fusuma* and *shōji*: opaque and translucent sliding panels that enable flexible use of rooms.
- *Tatami* modularity: the mat module imposes rhythm and scale, influencing seating, posture, and ritual placement of honoured seats relative to guests.

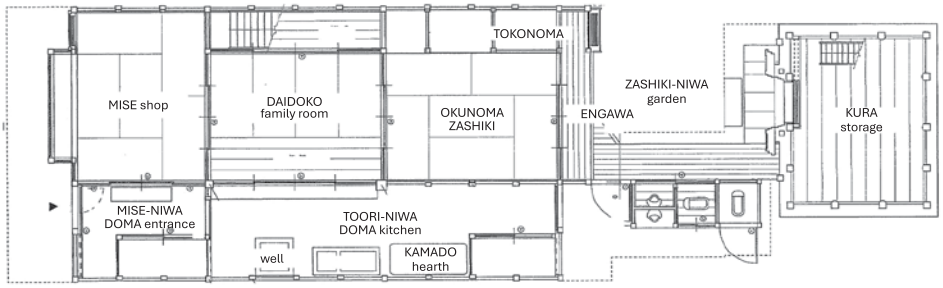
Interiors are typically finished in natural materials: wood, *tatami* mats, and paper for *shoji*, which moderate light and create a subdued atmosphere. Light generally enters indirectly (through sliding doors and the *engawa*). Floor plans commonly distinguish working and living areas (inaccessible to guests) from formal reception spaces.

4. THE CONCEPTS OF HONNE AND TATEMAE: SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

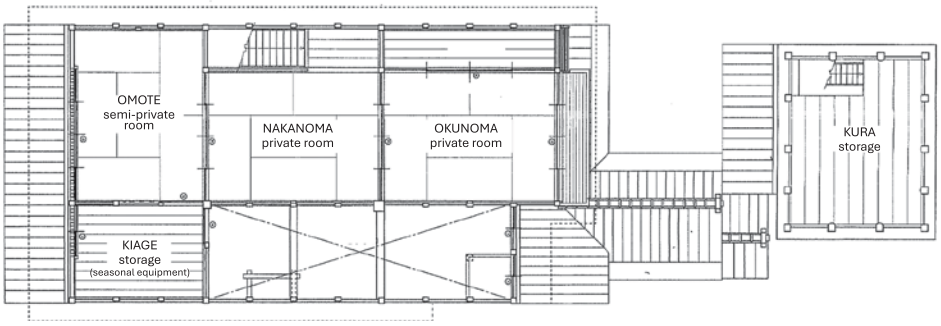
To understand the Japanese traditional house as a subtle spatial instrument of communication, it is essential to situate it within a broader sociocultural perspective. This requires reference to selected research addressing the distinctive characteristics and behavioural patterns of Japanese society, examined from both sociological and ethnological perspectives. Central to this inquiry are dichotomies such as: inner–external, back–front, private–public, hidden–visible, individual–group, whose juxtapositions structure spatial organization of the house as well as modes of interaction between people. Among these, one of the

III. 1. *Machiya* façade – photo by Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

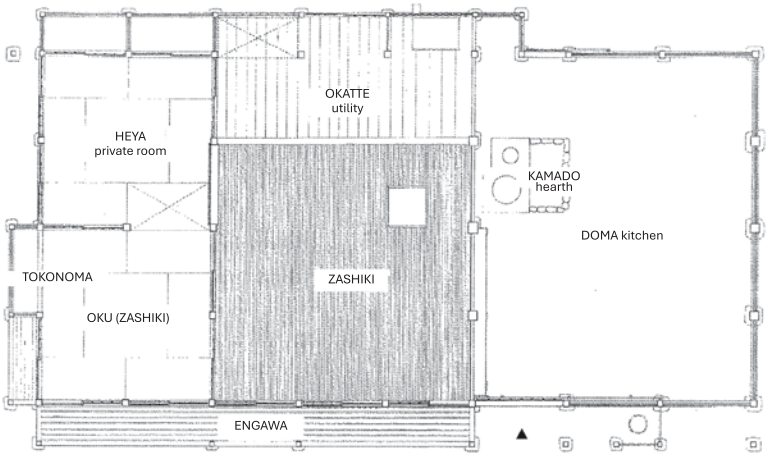
III. 2. *Minka* façade of the restored Kitamura House (Important Cultural Property), source: Minka-en Zukai Series No.6. (1969, 2024) Jyuyou Bunka-zai Kyu-Kitamura-ke Jyutaku no Shiori, Kawasaki: Kawasaki Shiritsu Nihon Minka-en



III. 3. *Machiya* Prototype – first floor plan



III. 4. *Machiya* Prot*otype* – second floor plan, source of Ill. 1 and 2: Kyoumachiya Sakujigumi (2002) Kyoumachiya Saisei no Waza to Chie – Kyoumachiya no Shikumi to Kaishuu no Tebiki, Kyoto, Gakugei Shuppansha.



III. 5. *Minka* – Floor plan of the restored Kitamura House (Important Cultural Property), source: Nihon Minka-en Shuzo-hin Mokuroku 12 (2009), Kyu-Kitamura-ke Jutaku, Kawasaki: Kawasaki Shiritsu Nihon Minka-en

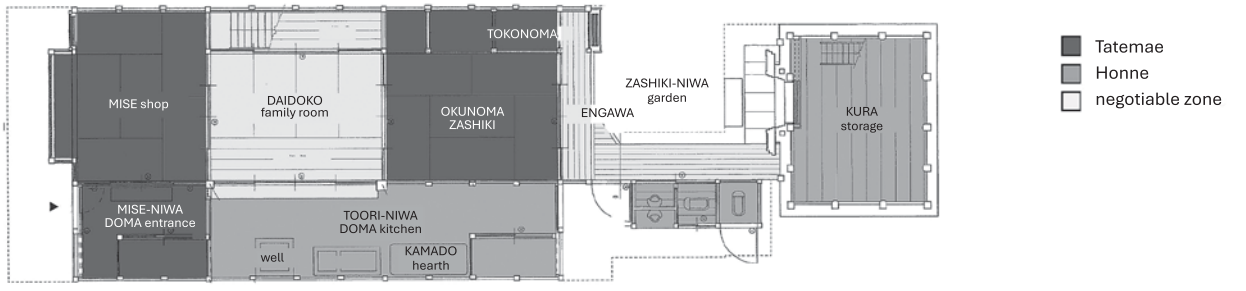
most interesting to the present study is the distinction of spaces which can be considered private from these which can be presented publicly.

This dichotomy refers to the notion of ***honne/tatemae.*** *Honne* (a person's genuine intentions) and *tatemae* (socially expected façade) are concepts describing the way an individual interacts with others and regulates self-expression when dealing with different social circles. It is particularly interesting to explore how these concepts relate to the space of the Japanese house. Interpersonal relationships in Japanese society have traditionally been codified and formalized. The clarity of behaviour in social interactions and the established rule of order, clearly separating one matter from another – is considered an important principle for maintaining proper relationships. For instance, during meetings and conversations, situational and thematic combining is avoided: certain topics must be concluded before others can be addressed. A defined order, focus, and clear closure of a subject are essential. This principle is coded in the term ***kejime*** (which can be interpreted as: maintaining order, drawing clear boundaries, behaving appropriately). The American anthropologist Takie Sugiyama Lebra explains and positions this pattern of behaviour highly as follows:

> "One situation cannot be mixed with another. Situational mixture is avoided by giving priority to one situation over another […] To make *kejime* from situation to situation is a part of moral discipline, as well as a sign of maturity for Japanese; the person without *kejime* cannot be depended upon" (Sugiyama Lebra, 1976, p. 136).

Sugiyama Lebra argues that the care and attention devoted to observing the rules of *kejime* may contribute to the Japanese having an acute awareness of the distinction between one's inner self and outward-directed actions. These two attitudes, turning inward and creating an external image, are defined by the

III. 6. Ground floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Honne/tatemae* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



III. 7. Second floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Honne/tatemae* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

III. 8. Floor plan of *minka* – zones: *Honne/tatemae* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

terms honne and tatemae. *Honne* refers to one's natural, real, or inner wishes and proclivities, whereas *tatemae* refers to the standard, principle, or rule by which one is bound at least outwardly (Sugiyama Lebra, 1976, p. 136).
Thus, *honne* denotes a person's true feelings, thoughts, and intentions, while *tatemae* is the external layer of behaviours and utterances adapted to social expectations. In the literature, this distinction is not presented as a moral dichotomy, an either/or choice, but rather as a functional mechanism for maintaining social harmony.
According to psychoanalyst Takeo Doi, the distinction between *honne* and *tatemae* is fundamental for interpreting everyday social practices in Japan; he argues that the tension between these two concepts is one of the major elements in Japanese behavioural patterns. Doi relates the etymology of the sociological concept *tatemae* to the term *tatemae* used in Japanese architecture, which means "raising the ridgepole".

> "It can refer either to the physical act of raising the ridgepole, which marks the completion of the framework of the house, or to the celebrations that follow. The owner of the building under construction would treat the master builder and his helpers to a lavish banquet after it was completed" (Doi, 1986, p. 47).

Tatemae is also the term used in the tea ceremony:

> "It is used in tea ceremony for the formal movements of the host in presenting utensils and serving the tea" (Doi, 1986, p. 35).

In both cases, in architecture and tea ceremony, the *tatemae* is essential. However, it must also be noted that in architecture the roof-raising ceremony itself is called *Jōtōshiki*, while the literal meaning of *tatemae* refers to the face or front of the house/structure, emphasizing the completion of the visible front of the building, or the structure which is being made visible to the public. Nevertheless, both terms are in use. Doi concludes that the ***tatemae-honne*** relationship can be linked to the concepts of socialization and self-consciousness; they are two sides of the same coin. *Tatemae* is the product of socialization, and *honne* is the expression of self-consciousness (Doi, 1986, p. 46).
Chie Nakane points out that, from a sociological perspective, Japanese social practices are structured by an orientation toward group activity and the preservation of harmonious relations, embodied in the concept of *wa*. She states:

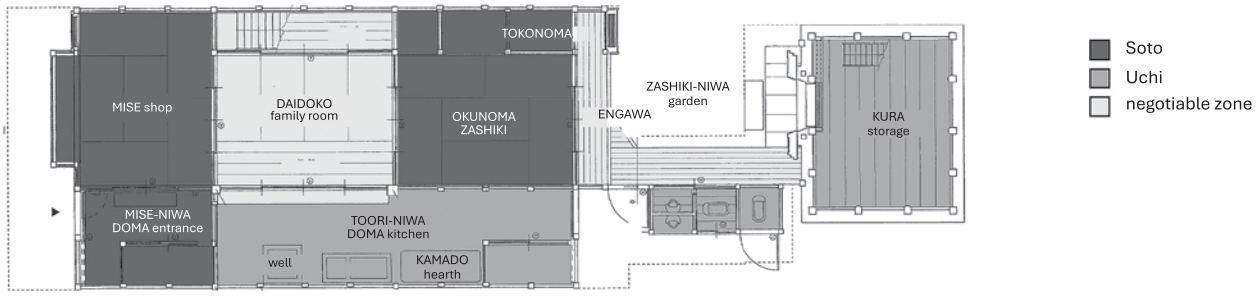
> "The Japanese ethic puts high value on the harmonious integration (*wa*) of group members" (Nakane, 1977, p. 52).

This emphasis on *wa* shapes individuals' awareness of which behaviours and emotions may be expressed publicly and which must remain private. Thus, it regulates the relationship between *honne* and *tatemae*.

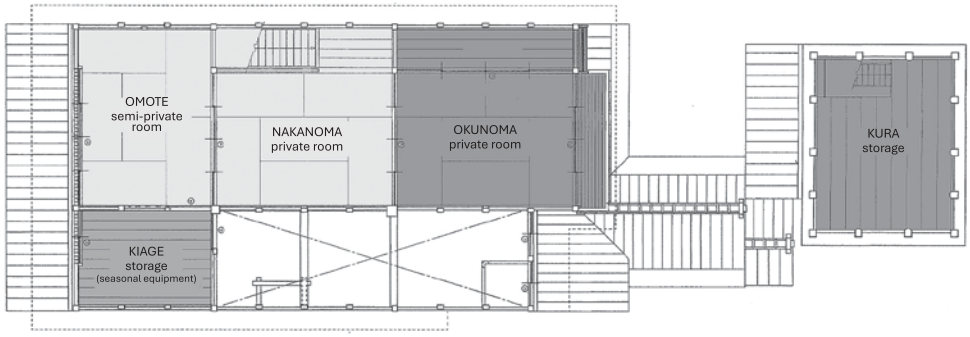
5. THE CONCEPTS OF UCHI/SOTO AND OMOTE/URA: SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

This controlled dichotomy has a strong influence on domestic architectural choices and spatial organization. It is reflected in shaping the layout of the Japanese house, while its relationship to other spatial dichotomies also becomes significant. These related dichotomies include *uchi/soto* (inside/outside) and *omote/ura* (front/back), both of which are crucial for understanding the function and composition of individual rooms and floor plans.

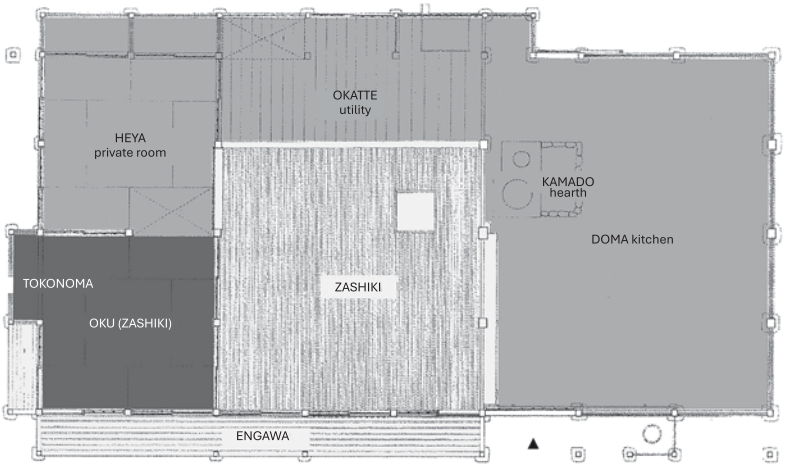
Uchi/soto defines the relationship of belonging to the inner, familial, domestic sphere, whereas *omote/ura* points to the aspect of appearance and what happens "behind the scenes" (Hendry, 2013, p. 75). Takeo Doi notes that *uchi* and *soto* constitute a dyadic pair that is roughly equivalent to "inside-outside" in English. It is clear in the contrast made in human relations between *soto no hito* (outsider) and *uchi no hito* (insider). However, he suggests that the sociological implications of this dichotomy differ from those suggested by English concepts (Doi, 1986, p. 33).
Uchi means not only inside or insider but also represents the household, including family members, family business, and property shared by the family; it also implies collective ownership (*uchi-no*). Every member of the family is identified with the "uchi," its business, and tradition.
The inside–outside relationship, is articulated in the traditional house space through architectural elements such as the *engawa, shoji, fusuma*, *genkan* and the translucent *washi* paper. These components are crucial in shaping the gradations of interiority and exteriority, and facilitate not a strict binary division but a series of grey zones – a dynamic continuum of spaces which at the same time are linked to modes of social interaction.
The ***engawa*** is a narrow wooden veranda that lines the exterior of the house, space acting as a semi-public buffer zone between the interior tatami rooms and the open garden or street. It "creates a graded threshold that blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, extending the living space into nature while providing shelter and control over interaction with the soto realm" (Ohazama,T, 1982, p.7). It is a shaded walkway controlling inner rooms from overheating and socially, as a place of casual encounter or contemplation: "Being located in this area of transition, it allows fresh air and sunlight in, while protecting the interiors from the intense weather of the rainy season. From inside, the veranda appears to be a spontaneous extension of the flooring; it was often used as a kind of informal garden area" (Garda, E. et al., 2017, p. 279)
Sliding partitions/doors, ***shoji*** and ***fusuma*** also serve to modulate inside-outside space. Shoji are lightweight sliding doors made of a wooden lattice covered with washi paper, which softly filters light. It creates an atmosphere of relative isolation and privacy while visually connecting rooms and allowing a subtle light permeability. *Shoji's* delicate diffusion of light creates an ambient interior quality, brightens the interior with diffused and indirect light. ***Fusuma***, by contrast to shoji, are solid-opaque sliding panels that provide greater privacy and insulation. The sliding timber rails enable the panels to be easily moved along or easily taken away and repositioned. Such range of possibilities make them a perfect tool for space remodelling and mediation – the house ca be adapted spatially according to actual needs, to the season or guest presence.
These architectural elements constitute spatial vocabulary of change, adaptability and negotiation. Interior and exterior spaces can be easily modified through gradations of floor size, wall's materiality and light control. The *engawa, shoji, fusuma*, and *washi* paper enable a spatial and social dialectic of *uchi-soto*. It rejects rigid division and instead proposes a scalable, context-responsive negotiation of boundaries.
Omote/ura are the next pair of complementary oppositions. *Omote o tateru* literally means to build a front elevation, and *omote dōri* refers to a front-facing, busy street. Doi notes that these concepts are closely linked to the *uchi/soto* pair. *Omote* is the part shown to the outside (*soto*), while *ura* is the part not presented to outsiders; it is kept concealed, accessible only to insiders (*uchi*). Doi also emphasizes that in classical Japanese



III. 9. Ground floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Uchi/soto* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



III. 10. Second floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Uchi/soto* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



III. 11. Floor plan of *minka* – zones: *Uchi/soto* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

omote means *kao* (face), and *ura* means *kokoro* (mind, heart, or soul) (Doi, 1986, p. 24).

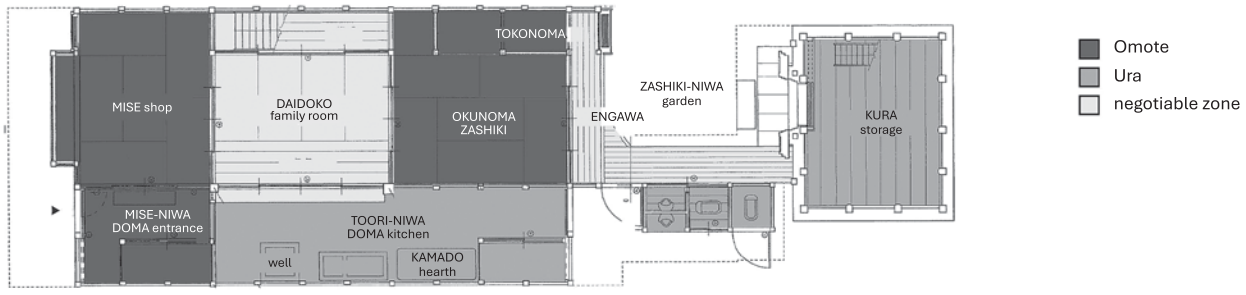
From this distinction, Doi concludes that *omote* can also function as a mask that covers all human emotions hidden behind. Observing the *omote* mask can reveal hints of the concealed *ura*. These concepts are relative and suggest a duality: *omote* is public-facing, while *ura* is private, intimate, or concealed (Doi, 1986, p. 29).

Doi further suggests that Japanese thought is more attuned to matters beyond language. To be considered an adult in Japanese tradition is to understand the distinction between *omote* and *ura* (Doi, 1986, p. 33). This attitude leaves room for negotiation and compromise to achieve social balance.

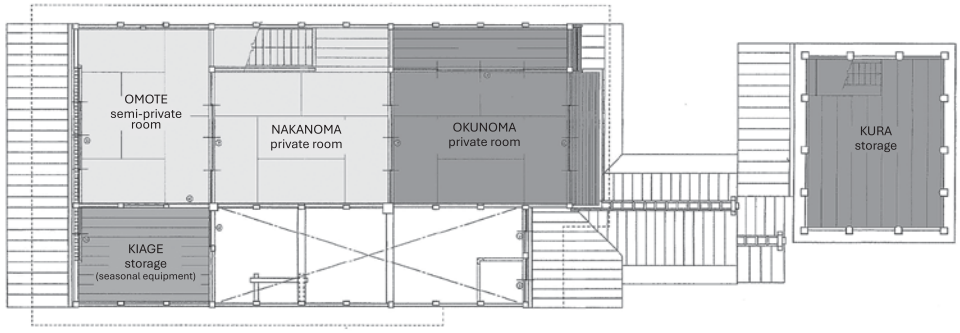
From the perspective of these dichotomies, the traditional house can be investigated and understood as the material and spatial counterpart of established patterns of social behaviour. Domestic space conceals or reveals what is appropriate for maintaining *wa* (social harmony): what is "inside" (*uchi*), "at the back" (*ura*), and "behind the scenes" is balanced by what is "at the front" (*omote*) and permissible to reveal in encounters with the "outside" (*soto*).

6. THE CONCEPTS OF HARE AND KE: ETHNOLOGICAL CONTEXT

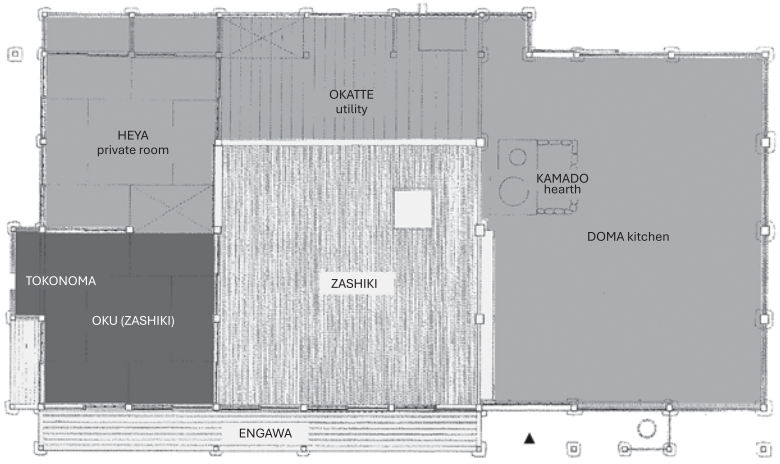
Hare and *ke* are another important concept in understanding Japanese domestic space. Traditionally, Japanese homes served as venues for weddings, funerals, and other out of the ordinary or exceptional events. The domestic space where these public and external functions, such as reception and ceremonies were performed, was considered *hare* space (*omote*), while the



Ill. 12. Ground floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Omote/ura* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



Ill. 13. Second floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Omote/ura* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



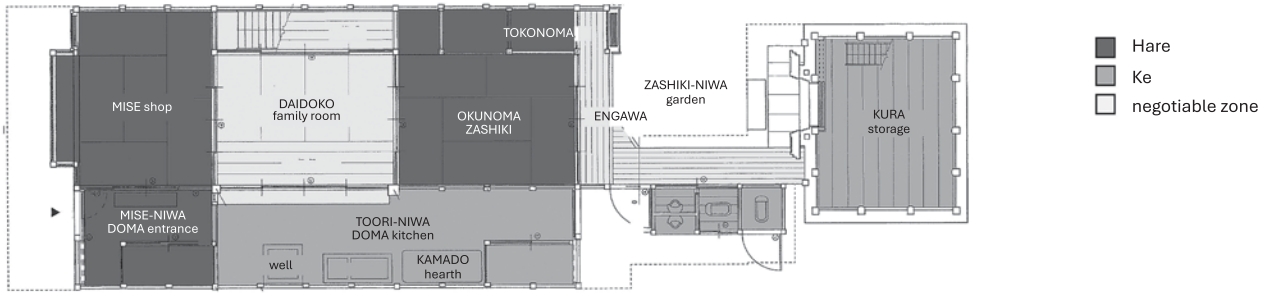
Ill. 14. Floor plan of *minka* – zones: *Omote/ura* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

space for private and everyday functions was known as *ke* space (*ura*). *Hare* and *ke* represent a dichotomy central to traditional Japanese living principles.

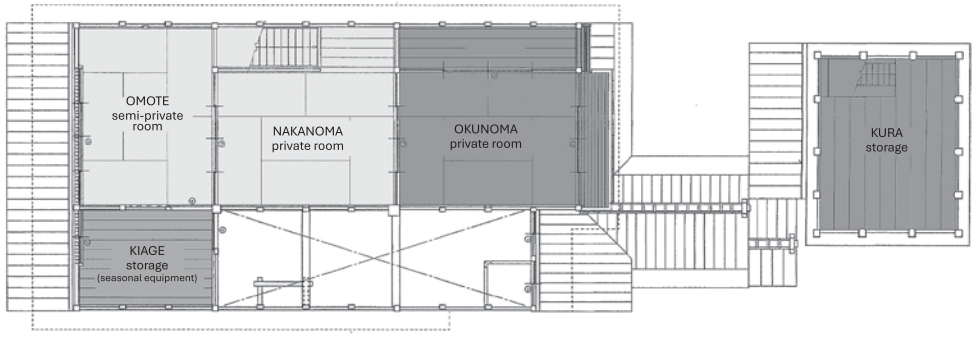
The concepts of *hare* and *ke* were brought to light in modern times by ethnographer and folklorist Kunio Yanagita. Traditionally, *hare* referred to a turning point or milestone (associated with the principle of *kejime*), and its etymology is said to come from the word *hare* (denoting a sunny or special day). It referred to important occasions that occur at distinctive moments in life, such as weddings and funerals, which involved entertaining guests. Seasonal *matsuri* festivals, as well as other exceptional days, were also regarded as *hare* events. The formal attire worn for ceremonies was called *haregi*, and so the term *hare*, as part of this word, came to describe exceptional occasions. In contrast, everyday clothing was called *kegi*, and therefore *ke* came to represent daily life.

For *hare* events accompanied by banquets, food such as rice cakes (*mochi*), red rice (cooked with red beans, as the colour red wards off evil spirits), white rice, whole fish, sake, and other special dishes were served. At the time, these foods were considered a delicacy for laypeople, whose daily diet consisted primarily of simple foods such as mixed grains, soup, and pickles. Special tableware was also displayed for memorable *hare* servings.

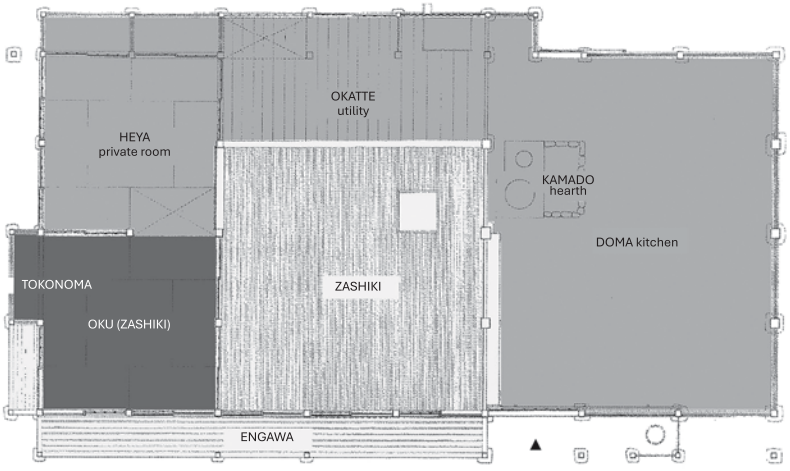
In order to perform *hare* day banquets at home, the domestic space had to accommodate these special needs. The customary lifestyles of *hare* and *ke* called for domestic space that clearly demarcated front (*omote*) and back (*ura*) to facilitate use and function. *Omote* was the public, extroverted space for ceremonies and receiving guests, functioning as a place for entertainment (*hare* space); meanwhile, *ura* was the private, everyday space with supportive functions (*ke* space).



III. 15. Ground floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Hare/Ke* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



III. 16. Second floor plan of *machiya* – zones: *Hare/Ke* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



III. 17. Floor plan of *minka* – zones: *Hare/Ke* + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

7. THE IMPLICATIONS OF *KAFUCHŌ-SEI:* CONTEXT OF GENDER ROLES

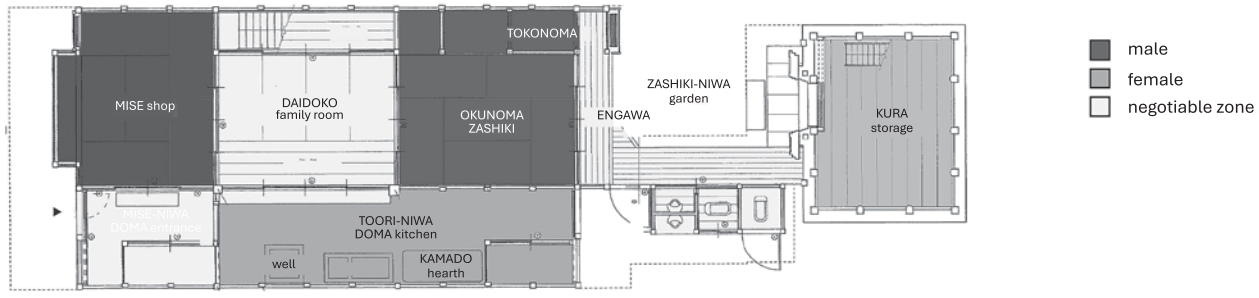
Kafuchō-sei (paternalism) can be described as a feudalistic system within the family that dominated pre-modern Japanese society and was entwined in the spatial character of the Japanese domestic space, particularly in relation to male/female duality. It was a system in which men primarily held a dominant and privileged position, while women's submission was implied. Individuals were governed by the *ie* (family) to which they belonged rather than by their own self.

Kafuchō-sei was formally abolished by the revision of the Civil Code in 1947 after World War II, but even after the abolition, the male/female spatial duality continued to exist in domestic spaces. Miho Hamaguchi, a pioneering female architect of post-war Japan, observed the presence of deeply rooted *kafuchō-sei* in living spaces, especially in rural areas. The following passage from Hamaguchi's essay *Nihon Jyutaku no Hōkensei (Feudalism in Japanese Homes*) adequately explains the situation:

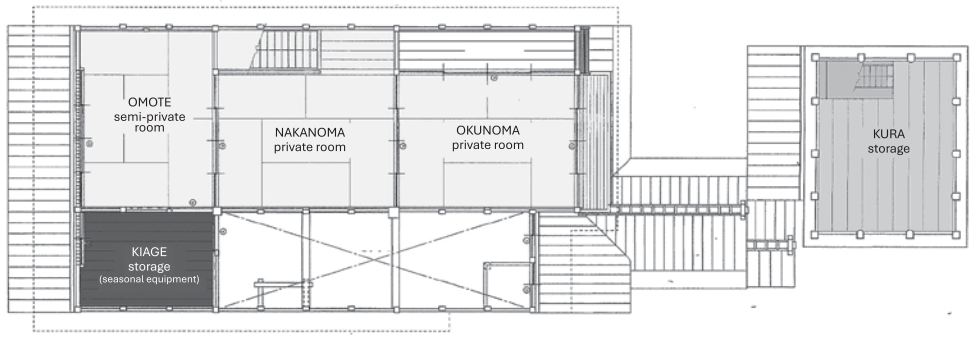
> "Individuals are immersed in the basis of the *ie* to which they belong, and do not make their presence felt. In other words, in rural society, it is the *ie* that has fundamental significance as a unit in society" (Hamaguchi, 1950, p. 59, translated by the author).

Hamaguchi concludes her essay with the following argument:

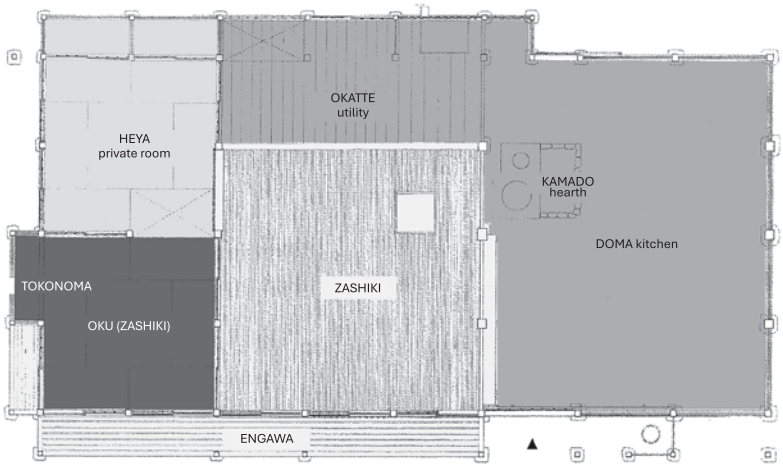
> "Life in patriarchal feudal society, as under *kafuchō-sei*, was centred around the concept of *ie* = family, under which people huddled and lived quietly. The physical expression of *ie* = family was exemplified in domestic space" (Hamaguchi, 1950, p.160, translated by the author).



Ill. 18. Ground floor plan of *machiya* – zones: male/female + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



Ill. 19. Second floor plan of *machiya* – zones: male/female + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe



Ill. 20. Floor plan of *minka* – zones: male/female + negotiable zone, author: Yoko Kinoshita Watanabe

The male/female dualism of *kafuchō-sei* was directly represented in the spatial organization of the traditional domestic space. The front (*omote*), symbolized by the *zashiki*, was assigned as a space for men, while the back (*ura*), characterized by the *doma* (earthen floor), was a space for women. The *doma* included spaces such as the kitchen with *kamado* hearth, toilet, and bath – areas considered impure that required frequent cleaning.

The level difference of floors was another characteristic of Japanese domestic space that represented hierarchy inherent in *kafuchō-sei*. The *zashiki*, considered hierarchically superior, was approximately 60 cm above the *doma*. One also removed shoes to enter the *zashiki* with clean feet, brushing off the dirt from the *doma*. Architect Atsushi Ueda reflects on the hierarchy within the Japanese house:

> "In addition to being functional, Japanese dirt floors seem to have been created with a deliberate intention to stigmatize the 'inferior dwellers' […] The floor heights of the different spaces all vary slightly. For example, the *doma* entrance and the corridor, the corridor and the *zashiki*, the *zashiki* and the *engawa*, the toilet, the bathroom, and so on. […] In past societies, when the class system was strict, these level differences directly determined the class relationships of the people who belonged there" (Ueda, 1974, pp. 86–88, translated by the author).

8. ANALYSIS OF THE SPATIAL REPRESENTATION OF DICHOTOMIES

This section examines the spatial representation of social dichotomies within traditional *machiya* and *minka* type houses.

The analysis synthesizes data from the preceding plan studies, summarized in Table 1, to illustrate how architectural space mediates between social, functional, and symbolic realms.

The spatial organization of both *machiya* and *minka* reveals a correlation between architectural zoning and the following dichotomies: *honne/tatemae*, *uchi/soto*, *omote/ura*, and *hare/ke*. The plan analyses indicate that zones associated with these dichotomies tend to overlap within each typology.

The zones of ***tatemae*, *soto*, *omote*, and *hare*** are associated with the same type of rooms in each of house type.

In the *machiya*, equivalent spatial representations are found in the *mise* (shop front), entrance hall, and *zashiki* reception room.

Table 1. Spatial representation of dichotomies in *machiya* and *minka* houses

	Machiya	**Honne/ tatemae dichotomy**			**uchi/soto dichotomy**			**omote/ura dichotomy**			**hare/ke dihotomy**			**male/female dichotomy**		
		tatemae	honne	negotiable	soto	uchi	negotiable	omote	ura	negotiable	hare	ke	negotiable	male	female	negotiable
	ground floor															
1.	mise - shop	1			1			1			1			1		
2.	mise-niwa-doma - entrance	1			1			1			1					1
3.	daidoko - family room			1			1			1			1			1
4.	oku (zashiki) with tokonoma	1			1			1			1			1		
5.	toori-niwa doma - kitchen		1			1			1			1			1	
6.	engawa - veranda			1			1			1			1			1
7.	toilet		1			1			1			1				1
8.	kura storage		1			1			1			1			1	
	second floor															
9.	omote semi private room			1			1			1			1			1
10.	nakanoma private room			1			1			1			1			1
11.	okunoma private room		1			1			1			1				1
12.	kiage storage		1			1			1			1		1		
13.	kura storage - second level		1			1			1			1			1	
		3	6	4	3	6	4	3	6	4	3	6	4	3	3	7
		23%	46%	31%	23%	46%	31%	23%	46%	31%	23%	46%	31%	23%	23%	54%

	Minka	**Honne/ tatemae dichotomy**			**uchi/soto dichotomy**			**omote/ura dichotomy**			**hare/ke dihotomy**			**male/female dichotomy**		
		tatemae	honne	negotiable	soto	uchi	negotiable	omote	ura	negotiable	hare	ke	negotiable	male	female	negotiable
	ground floor															
1.	engawa - veranda			1			1			1			1			1
2.	zashiki - reception room			1			1			1			1			1
3.	oku (zashiki) with tokonoma	1			1			1			1			1		
4.	doma - earth floor kitchen		1			1			1			1			1	
5.	okatte - service area		1			1			1			1			1	
6.	heya		1			1			1			1				1
		1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	3
		17%	50%	33%	17%	50%	33%	17%	50%	33%	17%	50%	33%	17%	33%	50%

In the *minka*, these attributes are embodied primarily in the *zashiki* room with *tokonoma*, a space reserved for guests and ceremonial occasions.
Collectively, these areas account for 23% in the *machiya, and 17*% of the total spatial program in the *minka*. It indicates the proportion of these functions within the total amount of domestic functions.
Conversely, the concepts of ***honne, uchi, ura,* and *ke***, which denote privacy, domesticity, and the everyday, are associated with spaces devoted to household activities and family life.
In the *machiya*, they correspond to the *toori-niwa doma* (kitchen passage), toilet, *okunoma* (inner private room), *kiage* (raised storage area), and *kura* (storehouse).
In the *minka*, these include the *doma* (earthen-floored area), *okatte* (kitchen), and *heya* (room).
These spaces constitute 46% of the *machiya* rooms, and 50% of the *minka* – indicating the predominance of inward oriented, pragmatic domains in both typologies.
Intermediary or negotiable zones, that is, spaces mediating between public and private, formal and informal represent 31% of the *machiya rooms* and 33% of the *minka*.
These transitional areas embody the fluid boundaries central to Japanese spatial thought, where thresholds such as corridors, verandas, and semi-open spaces enable gradations of access, visibility, and social interaction.
An exception to the above pattern of spatial correspondence among dichotomies emerges in relation to gendered spatial divisions. In this case **the male/female zoning** does not overlap with the spatial representation of the other discussed dichotomies.
In the *machiya*, **male-associated zones** include the *mise*, *zashiki*, and *kiage*, what makes together 23%.
In the *minka*, the *zashiki* room with *tokonoma* functions as the male domain, symbolizing authority and representational character, and accounting for 17% of the total functions of the house.
Female-associated spaces, are linked to domestic and service functions: the kitchen and *kura* in the *machiya* (23%) and the *doma* and *okatte* in the *minka* (33%).
Interestingly, the **negotiable spaces** within this gender-related dichotomy are proportionally the largest among all examined dualities – 54% in the *machiya* and 50% in the *minka*. This prevalence suggests a greater permeability between male and female spatial domains, reflecting the adaptive and interdependent nature of gendered roles within the traditional Japanese household.
Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Japanese house operates as a material expression of social dichotomies, not through rigid separations but through spatial flexibility and context-dependent spatial relationships.

9. DOMESTIC SPACE AS A METAPHOR FOR DUALISM

The space of the both types of houses clearly enacts a scenario in which the roles of family members and guests are clearly defined. It serves as a kind of stage set that not only allows social scenarios to be realized but also imposes certain forms of behavior. The duality between *hone/tatemae*, *hare/ke*, and the male/female hierarchy of *kafuchō-sei* are all interwoven into this scenario. In some zones, one type of behaviour predominates, while in others the opposite type prevails, however there is always a negotiating zone between.
Spaces of *tatemae* include the *genkan* entrance and the *zashiki* reception room with its *tokonoma* alcove. The *genkan (or mise-niwa-doma)* functions as a point of house access control: it is where the ritual of entering begins, shoes are removed, and the first aesthetic impressions of the interior are formed. The *zashiki*, as a room prepared for receiving guests, is designed to facilitate "correct" behaviour toward visitors. Here, formal gestures of hospitality are performed, and the *tokonoma*, with its hanging calligraphy scroll, serves as a focal point through which the host communicates aesthetic sensibility and social status. In these spaces, scenography and compositional precision support the establishment of contact with the guest, a representative of the *soto* world. The most presentable furnishings, carefully chosen decorative elements, and clean surfaces of tables and tatami mats all contribute to this effect.
Spaces of *honne* are those where family or household members (*uchi*) can remove their social masks: the kitchen, private bedrooms, and rear garden are functional and intimate areas. These are places where everyday objects are stored and where "behind closed doors" conversations occur — conversations not intended for outsiders' ears or eyes. Doi explicitly notes that *honne* becomes visible when an individual feels safe and shielded from social scrutiny (Doi, 1986).
The *zashiki* also serves as the centre stage for *hare* occasions. When there are rooms adjoining the *zashiki*, they can be opened and expanded by removing the sliding screens (*fusuma*) between rooms, transforming multiple rooms into a space that can accommodate large numbers of people. Such flexibility is an important feature of the traditional Japanese house. The *tokonoma* has long been considered a sacred space symbolizing the prosperity of the home. Art and seasonal items, such as hanging scrolls, flower arrangements, and ornaments, are displayed to welcome and entertain guests. The selection of displayed items provides the homeowner an opportunity to demonstrate taste and skill.
In domestic spaces under *kafuchō-sei*, the *zashiki* also took an important role to symbolize the dignity of the household head. The place closest to the *tokonoma* or the place farthest from the *zashiki* entrance was the seat of honour, reserved for the head of the household or, depending on the situation, offered to guests. In this way, traditional Japanese domestic spaces were governed and determined by invisible rules.
Spaces of *ke* are closely related to spaces of *honne*. While the *omote* consisted of the *zashiki*, the *ura* contained the kitchen, bedroom, storeroom, bathroom, and toilet. These spaces were used for everyday functions and became the service areas that supported *hare* events and ceremonies. Bedrooms were not isolated private rooms but rather flexible spaces that functioned for different purposes through the use of sliding screens (*fusuma*).
While *kafuchō-sei* defined the *zashiki* as the male domain, the *doma* (earthen floor) was considered that of the female. In terms of floor height, the *zashiki* was the highest, while the *doma*, close to the ground, was the lowest. In a culture where shoes are removed indoors, the *doma* allowed people to enter and exit the house without removing their shoes. The *kamado* hearth occupying the *doma* kitchen was practical for cooking with fire and handling smoke and dirt from crops. While cooking demanded use of fire and water, the *doma*, with little use of wood material for its interiors, was an effective space without the worry of rotting from moisture or burning from fire. Nevertheless, the study shows that the male/female zones were negotiable – approximately 50% of spaces in both type of houses belong to the zone of negotiation.
Intermediate spaces, such as the *engawa* veranda and sliding panel system, function as transitional zones, mediating between privacy and publicness. The *engawa*, a strip between the interior

and the garden, enabled interaction with neighbours without inviting them into the intimate core of the house. Typically set 45–60 cm above the garden, the *engawa* allowed neighbours to sit on it and converse with the owner, who was also seated on the interior side. Sliding panels (*fusuma* and *shōji*) allowed rapid adjustments in privacy: they could be opened to expand the reception area or closed to create intimate spaces. In this way, parts of the house operate as fluid transition zones between *honne* and *tatemae*, as well as *hare* and *ke* purposes.

Spatial alternations must also consider time and seasonality. Many decisions that alter the layout, such as opening or closing *shōji* or displaying decorations in the *tokonoma*, are linked to seasonal and ritual calendars regulating *hare* and *ke*, which in turn affect which elements of the house are revealed (*tatemae*) and which remain concealed (*honne*).

10. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional Japanese house emerges as far more than a functional shelter or an architectural response to climate, available materials, and construction techniques. It constitutes **a spatial embodiment of social order and cultural codes**, where architecture mediates between individual expression and collective expectations. The spatial arrangement of the domestic interior does not simply accommodate family life but serves as a stage upon which the dynamics of social relations are enacted and regulated. The analysis of concepts such as *honne/tatemae*, *uchi/soto*, *omote/ura*, *hare/ke*, and the gender hierarchies contained and codified in *kafuchō-sei* demonstrates that Japanese domestic space is structured through a series of **symbolic dichotomies**. These oppositions – inner/outer, public/private, front/back, formal/informal – do not function as rigid separations but as **negotiated boundaries.** The architecture of the house, with its sliding partitions, *engawa* verandas, tatami-based modularity, and floor level differences, provides the physical framework for these negotiations, allowing for a flexible, yet traditionally codified, regulation of family life and social interaction. From this perspective, the house space becomes a metaphor for Japanese dualism: it conceals and reveals, includes and excludes, separates and connects. The *zashiki* reception room, with its *tokonoma* alcove, exemplifies *tatemae* and *hare* – a space of formal social relations, art, aesthetics, and social display. In contrast, the kitchen, *doma* floor, and private quarters embody *honne* and *ke* as domains of intimacy, labor, and everyday life.

Transitional spaces such as the *engawa* and *fusuma* or *shōji* partitions create intermediate zones characterized by fluidity and adaptability, enabling shifts between behavioural modes depending on occasion, season, and social context.

At the same time, the persistence of hierarchical structures within domestic layouts – whether through gendered spatial divisions, symbolic elevation of floors, or the privileged positioning of the household head – illustrates that architecture also reinforced social order. Even after the formal abolition of *kafuchō-sei*, these spatial codes continued to shape domestic life, underscoring the durability of cultural patterns in architectural space.

In conclusion, the Japanese traditional house can be understood as a spatial instrument of communication and mediation. It translates cultural values such as social/group harmony (*wa*), proper distinction (*kejime*), dualism, and hierarchy into material form and codified layout. By embedding these values into the everyday domestic environment, architecture both reflects and sustains the behavioral patterns of society. The study of these houses therefore reveals not only an architectural tradition but also a cultural grammar of space, in which the negotiation of boundaries is central to the preservation of social harmony.

DICTIONARY OF JAPANESE TERMS

Daidoko – family room.
Doma – earthen-floored area of the house, used for kitchens or workspaces.
Engawa – veranda or transitional strip between interior and garden.
Fusuma – opaque sliding panels used to divide or join rooms.
Genkan – entrance vestibule where shoes are removed.
Hare – sphere of ritual, formality, and exceptional occasions.
Heya – room
Honne – genuine feelings, thoughts, and intentions.
Ie – household.
Kafuchō-sei – patriarchal household system, prevalent in premodern Japan.
Kejime – principle of clear boundaries and proper separation of situations.
Ke – sphere of everyday, ordinary life.
Kiage – storage with raised floor.
Kura – storage to safeguard valuables such as rice, documents, or other goods.
Machiya – urban merchant house with narrow frontage and deep plan.
Mise – shop.
Minka – rural house, often associated with farming or craft activities.
Nakanoma – private room.
Okatte – kitchen utility / service area.
Okunoma – private room.
Omote – front, formal, outward-facing aspect of space.
Shōji – translucent paper-covered sliding doors.
Tatami – straw mat flooring that determines spatial rhythm and scale of house.
Tatemae – socially acceptable façade or external behavior.
Tokonoma – alcove in the *zashiki* for displaying calligraphy, flowers, etc.
Uchi – inside, domestic sphere of family belonging.
Ura – back, hidden, or "behind the scenes" aspect of space.
Wa – principle of harmony and group cohesion.
Zashiki – tatami-matted reception room for guests, often with a *tokonoma*.

ENTNOTES

[1] Takeo Doi (1920–2009), psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, and professor at the University of Tokyo (Department of Neuropsychiatry), was the author of influential works on the characteristics of Japanese society – *Anatomy of Dependence* and *Anatomy of Self*. His writings are commonly associated with the broader discourse on Japanese cultural specificity known as *nihonjinron*, which focuses on interpreting Japanese cultural identity. Doi examined and sought to define concepts such as *amae* and cultural dichotomies including *uchi–soto* and *hone–tatemae*, treating them as deeply rooted features of Japanese social life. His work, despite its substantial contribution and influence, faced methodological criticism. Examples of such critiques include Peter Dale (1986), *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, and Ross Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto (1986), *Images of Japanese Society*.

[2] For more detailed characteristics of a Japanese traditional house elements and features please refer to Engel H. (1985) or to Ingarden K., Banasik-Petri K. (2024)

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