Among the unwritten chapters on the architecture produced during World War II, the case of Japanese monumental architecture is representative of the ideological agenda of a whole generation of Japanese architects. The construction of war monuments started after the Japanese colonization of East Asia and was a critical issue at the end of the thirties. The creation of a Committee for the Construction of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere by the Architectural Institute of Japan after the start of the Pacific War catapulted the issue of National Architectural style to the forefront.

The discourses produced on the occasion of architectural competitions for the Memorial Tower for the Fallen Soldiers (1939), the Memorial of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (1942) and the Japanese Cultural Center in Bangkok (1943), reveal how modern architects participated in the invention of a national monumentality. How were such discourses on Japanese monumentality constructed theoretically? Firstly, they were rooted in the geopolitical context of the conflicted relationship between both Japan and its Asian “Orient” and the European-American “Occident”. After assimilating western techniques, Japanese architects started to look back at Oriental architecture, thus engendering a perspective from which Japan could estimate its own degree of modernity. At this juncture, intellectuals were engaged in an ongoing debate regarding the “overcoming of modernity” and were looking for original forms of “Japanese” thought.

In the field of architecture, the critic of the Occident was funded in criticism of the so-called western forms of monumentality. Japanese (modern) architecture was mostly presented as an alternative to the westernization of Asian architecture. The Japanese occupation of East Asia was said to provide the opportunity to experiment with architectural and urban planning in Asia, and to develop a regional modern architecture.

The Japanese architects who took part in the birth of Japanese modern architecture in the thirties were particularly active during the war. These same figures later became major participants on the international architectural scene in the postwar era. This paper will focus on the fate of this generation of architects who, after carrying the ideals of modernization, contributed to the discourses on Japanese National architecture in the forties. We will also see how these discourses have been incorporated into forms of Japanese contemporary architecture.
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