

Strategic Communication, Strategic Narratives, and Museums: An Introductory Study of “Authentic Japan” through the Japan House Project

Raffaella MARINI*

Abstract: This paper presents an introductory study of “authentic Japan,” a strategic narrative constructed and conveyed through Japan House São Paulo, Japan House Los Angeles, and Japan House London, three overseas hubs equipped with exhibition spaces, libraries, seminar rooms, shops, restaurants, and cafés, established by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of its latest strategic communication projects. Following the conceptual framework drawn from strategic communication, media, and museum studies, this article reports and analyzes data collected from Japan House’s official websites about their spaces, exhibitions, and events. The content analysis reveals that “authentic Japan” is a heterogeneous, dynamic, and continuously negotiated social construct whose creation depends upon the agenda of the involved actors and whose projection is heavily influenced by Japan Houses’ spaces, exhibitions, and events.

Keywords: *strategic communication, strategic narrative, museum, Japan House, authentic Japan*

1. Introduction

As Aoi (2017) highlighted, Japan, being a nation bound by a pacifist constitution, has naturally engaged in different strategic communication activities to fulfill its short-term and long-term policy objectives. In particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), operating through its Public Diplomacy Department (2004–2011) and subsequently its Press Secretary/Director-General for Press and Public Diplomacy (from 2012), has launched a series of strategic communication initiatives serving the dual purpose of enhancing the comprehension of Japanese policy and improving Japan’s image abroad. Surprisingly, scholarly attention to MOFA’s strategic communication activities is still limited.

Therefore, this article aims to contribute to the existing literature by presenting an introductory study of MOFA’s latest strategic communication initiative, the “Japan House Project,” and its projected strategic narrative, namely “authentic Japan.” After this introduction, the paper’s first section establishes the conceptual framework by defining “strategic communication” and “strategic narrative” and then introducing the connection between strategic narratives and physical spaces including museums as the media through which strategic messages are conveyed. The following section discusses the Japan House project’s origins, objectives, and implementation through the formation and projection of “authentic Japan.” The data in the reported tables derive from the content analysis of Japan House São Paulo, Los Angeles, and London’s selected web pages.

* Doctoral Student, Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University

Email: gr0554pr@ed.ritsumeikan.ac.jp; raffaella.marini95@gmail.com

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The final section proposes an interpretation of “authentic Japan” based on the conceptual framework previously developed.

As this paper will show, “authentic Japan” is a heterogeneous, dynamic, and continuously negotiated strategic narrative whose creation depends upon the involved actors’ goals and whose projection takes place through space, particularly Japan Houses’ galleries, and events happening there.

2. Literature Review

(1) Strategic Communication, Strategic Narratives, and Museums in IR

Strategic communication is a developing field of study with little agreement on its definition. Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder broadly described it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass et al. 2018, 493). In International Relations (IR), strategic communication is primarily driven by government ministries and agencies. However, non-state actors, including private companies, social movements, religious groups, and terrorist organizations, have gained increasing prominence as strategic communication agents (Frost and Michelsen 2017, 10–11).

The primary objective of strategic communication is to convey “narratives” (Aoi 2017, 75). Freedman (2006) defined narratives as “compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman 2006, 22). Narratives are usually designed or nurtured to influence the responses of others concerning developing events (Freedman 2006). Therefore, they represent, at a strategic level, “a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors [...] attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 7).

According to Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013; 2017), in IR, it is helpful to distinguish between three types of strategic narratives, inextricably linked to each other: system, identity, and issue narratives. First, system narratives articulate how the international order is structured, who the political actors are, and how the system functions. Second, identity narratives outline political actors’ stories, values, and goals (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 10; 2017, 8). Finally, issue narratives are employed by political actors who attempt to influence the development of a policy by explaining why it is needed and how it will be successfully implemented (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 11; 2017, 8).

System, identity, and issue narratives can be analyzed in terms of formation, projection, and interpretation (Miskimmon et al. 2013; 2017). Usually formed by political actors aiming to achieve their short-term or long-term goals, strategic narratives are projected (or narrated) in a specific media ecology that might present challenges for the actors themselves, including the study of the effects of narratives on target audiences who actively engage in their reception and interpretation (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 14–18). This concept of “media ecology” denotes that the term “media” comprises actors, environments, and technologies co-existing together in a balanced but evolving system, which is characterized by a complex set of interrelationships (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 16). This broad definition allows scholars to analyze strategic narratives’ formation, projection, and reception through a wide range of media, including museums.

According to Silverstone, “[...] museums are in many respects like other contemporary media” (Silverstone 1994, 162). They serve the dual purpose of entertaining and informing while telling stories and constructing arguments to please and educate their visitors. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they establish an agenda. They also transform the unfamiliar and inaccessible into

the familiar and accessible while offering an ideologically influenced account of the world through their texts, displays, and technologies. Unlike broadcast media, museums occupy physical spaces, containing selected objects, encouraging interactivity, and enabling visitors to wander through their texts (Silverstone 1994, 162).

In IR literature, museums have been predominantly studied as foreign policy instruments functioning as cultural ambassadors able to facilitate the exchange of ideas, culture, and knowledge, or as cultural diplomacy institutions, serving as foreign policy resources for state and non-state actors pursuing their cultural diplomacy goals (Mariano and Vårheim 2022, 651–652). However, so far, no scholar seems to have interpreted museums as the media through which governments can convey their strategic narratives to target audiences. Therefore, this paper will expand the existing literature by analyzing the formation and projection of strategic narratives communicated through physical spaces, particularly museum galleries, while examining MOFA's latest strategic communication initiative, the "Japan House Project."

3. The Japan House Project

(1) The Origins and the Objectives of the Project

The origins of the Japan House Project lie in a report titled *Basic Policies for the Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2014: From Deflation to an Expanded Economic Virtuous Cycle* (MOFA 2014a). This document was drafted by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, established by Koizumi Jun'ichirō as part of his central government ministries reorganization on January 6, 2001. While defining the basic policies for economic and fiscal management in 2014, the Council emphasized the importance of increasing strategic communication efforts in the promotion of "what Japan is really like as well as many of [its] attractive aspects" (CAO 2014, 25) through the establishment of dedicated diplomatic facilities for public relations and cultural promotion abroad.

Therefore, in December 2014, MOFA started considering building six "All-Japan" hubs, called "Japan Houses" (JH), in major global cities. The objectives were mainly three: (1) showcasing Japan's attractions, such as the vitality of the private sector, the "Japan Brand," and the appeal of various Japanese regions; (2) introducing Japan's policies and contributions to the international community; (3) creating a deeper understanding of Japan through hands-on activities and exchanges. To do so, the project provided for establishing a management structure able to respond to the interest of local people in each location while enabling effective collaboration with Japanese government ministries, agencies, the private sector, regions, and local organizations on various events (MOFA 2014b).

After an initial investment of fifty billion yen for the FY2014 supplementary budget and the FY2015 initial budget (MOFA 2016a, 281), MOFA approved the construction of three centers in São Paulo, Los Angeles, and London equipped with seminar rooms, exhibition spaces, cafés, restaurants, multimedia areas, pop-up shops, and information salons. Since its early stages, the project has been managed by a Japan House steering committee in Tokyo, in charge of formulating the overall project policy, and local Japan House steering committees, responsible for defining the business policy later implemented by the local Japan House secretariats (MOFA, 2015a). The exchange of perspectives and ideas among committee members was initially favored by the Japan House Expert Advisory Council, whose meetings were held regularly from 2015 to 2019 (MOFA 2015b; 2019). Discussions are now occurring during the Japan House Forum, an annual meeting that has been held since 2016, chaired by Hara Kenya, Japan House Chief Creative Director (MOFA 2016b).

As previously noted times, the project aims to enlarge Japan’s international popularity by nurturing a deeper understanding and appreciation of “authentic Japan” (JH 2019a, 4–10). The idea of “authentic Japan” has been constructed and conveyed through the physical space of the facilities themselves and several activities designed by domestic and local experts to introduce all aspects of Japanese culture, namely, “Japanese tradition as future assets, the wave of popular culture, the power of advanced technology, and the diverse appeal of Japanese food,” while trying to detach themselves from past cultural initiatives defined by stereotypes and faux representations of Japan (JH 2019a, 3).

Among the activities held within Japan House, one of the most impactful is touring exhibitions. Touring exhibitions are selected annually in an open contest by a panel of museum directors and curators working in Japan. They visit each hub at given intervals, avoiding post-opening slowdowns and creating collaborative connections among the three centers. As shown in Table 1, exhibition themes can vary from objects generally introducing Japanese culture to curated exhibition projects that feature unique Japanese creations and creative elements. Any genre is acceptable if the project intends to answer the question: “What is Japan?” (JH n.d.; 2019a; 2020; 2023).

Table 1. List of the Selected JH Touring Exhibitions (2017–2024).

Term	Exhibition Title	Exhibition Organizer	Exhibition Theme
1	Sou Fujimoto: FUTURES OF THE FUTURE	TOTO Gallery • MA	Architecture
	TAKEO PAPER SHOW SUBTLE — Delicate or Infinitesimal	TAKEO Co., Ltd.	Crafts
	Prototyping in Tokyo	Prototyping & Design Lab. Institute of Industrial Science, the University of Tokyo	Technology
2	This is MANGA – the Art of NAOKI URASAWA	The Yomiuri Shimibun © Naoki URASAWA	Pop Culture
3	Windowlogy: New Architectural Views from Japan	Window Research Institute	Various
4	KUMIHIMO: The Art of Japanese Silk Braiding by DOMYO	Domyo Co., Ltd.	Art & Crafts
	WAVE: New Currents in Japanese Graphic Arts	Hiro Sugiyama Takahashi Kintarō	Art
	Symbiosis: Living Island	Hasegawa Lab & SANAA	Art & Nature
5	DESIGN MUSEUM JAPAN	NHK Promotion NHK Educational	Design
6	KIGUMI: Revealing the Carpentry Behind the Wood Joint	Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum	Crafts

Source: Japan House Official Website (“*Junkai Kikakuten*” Section).

Equally compelling are locally planned exhibitions, curated by local directors and complemented by a comprehensive program of events consisting of demonstrations, displays, film screenings, gallery tours, performances, talks, tastings, and workshops. In addition to the three hubs, other state and non-state actors, including Japanese private companies, local institutions affiliated with MOFA, and local private foundations involved in promoting Japan abroad, usually organize and present events (JH 2019a; 2020; 2023).

Japan Houses’ physical spaces, in-house curated exhibitions, and events will be analyzed in detail in the following paragraphs, starting from the first of the three facilities opened by MOFA: Japan House São Paulo (JHSP).

(2) Japan House São Paulo (JHSP)

JHSP's official inauguration took place on April 30, 2017, with the participation of several representatives from the Japanese and Brazilian governments (MOFA 2017). The hub opened its doors to the public on May 6, 2017, marking the occasion with a unique celebration featuring *Flower Messenger*, an innovative botanical artwork developed by the avant-garde artist Azuma Makoto. *Flower Messenger* comprises thirty functioning bikes overflowing with floral arrangements and driven by young individuals of Japanese descent. As the fleet traveled from landmark to landmark, the messengers warmly greeted passers-by, presenting them with flowers (Azzarello 2017). The opening ceremony was concluded by a celebratory concert that took place at the Ibirapuera Auditorium in São Paulo, where an audience of approximately 15,000 people enjoyed performances by Japanese musicians Sakamoto Ryuichi and Miyake Jun, alongside Brazilian musicians Jaques and Paula Morelenbaum (The Government of Japan 2017).

Located on Paulista Avenue, the building was designed by the world-renowned Japanese architect Kuma Kengo. The project consisted of the refurbishment of a 2,244m² former bank belonging to Banco Bradesco. The facade was made of wired *Kiso hinoki* (a type of Japanese Cypress), reinforced with carbon fibers, while the interiors were decorated with metallic meshes covered by handmade *washi*, Japanese paper (KKAA 2017). As Kuma underlined during an interview released for JH in 2019, the idea was “to design a concrete building whose interior was reminiscent of a Japanese forest. Passing through this cypress forest, a space made of *washi* will reveal itself [...] I wanted to use it [*washi*] to create a huge net or mesh, to perhaps change the very concept of *washi*” (JH 2019b).

On the ground floor, visitors are welcomed into the entrance hall, flanked by a large multi-purpose room that faces an outdoor courtyard called *soto doma*. The floor is completed with Shin, a shop selling fine Japanese handicrafts, a café, and a multimedia space containing around 2,100 books regarding Japanese architecture, culture, design, gastronomy, history, lifestyle, politics, and technology. The ground floor rooms are separated by *fusuma*, large sliding doors that delimit or create spaces by closing or opening them (JHSP 2023).

The first floor features a small corner selling *furoshiki* (Japanese wrapping clothes), and a seminar room, where lectures and workshops are constantly held. Visitors can access the second floor by climbing the internal staircase next to the *furoshiki* corner. This space is mainly occupied by Aizomê, a Japanese restaurant run by chef Shiraisi Telma, and a vast exhibition area where exhibitions alternate throughout the year (JHSP 2023).

Since its opening, nine touring exhibitions, thirty-eight in-house curated exhibitions (see Table 2), and about six hundred events (see Table 3) have been held at JHSP.

Table 2. List of JHSP In-House Curated Exhibitions (2017–2023).

Year	Exhibition Title	Exhibition Organizer	Exhibition Theme
2017	Bamboo — Stories of a Japan	JHSP	Nature
	Kengo Kuma — Eternal Ephemeral	n.d.	Architecture
	Satoyama — Yoshihiro Narisawa and Sergio Coimbra	n.d.	Food & Drinks
	Foam — Kohei Nawa	JHSP	Art
2018	Oscar Oiwa in Paradise — Drawing the ephemeral	n.d.	Art
	Aromas and Flavors	Felipe Ribenboim	Various
	Muji pop-up store	n.d.	Various
	DŌ: on the way to virtue	Daniel Hernandez	Sport

2018	Dimensions	THE FORCE	Art
	A Light Un Light	n.d.	Fashion
2019	Architecture for Dogs	Hara Kenya	Architecture
	JAPAN 47 ARTISANS	Nagaoka Kenmei	Crafts
	7 Masters of Graphic Design	n.d.	Art
	DŌ — The Path to Serenity	Thompson Erisson	Nature
	Tsuyoshi Tane Archeology of the Future — Memory and Vision	Tane Tsuyoshi	Architecture
	NUNO — Contemporary Textile Poetics	Adélia Borges Mayumi Ito	Crafts
2020	Internal Line (Internal Line) — Chiharu Shiota	Tereza Arruda	Art
	Construction — Tadashi Kawamata	n.d.	Art
	Japan in Dreams	n.d.	Art
	Japan — Naoki Ishikawa	n.d.	Various
2021	The Fabulous Universe of Tomo Koizumi	n.d.	Fashion
	Packaging: Contemporary Designs from Japan	JHSP	Design
	DŌ: The Way of Shoko Kanazawa	JHSP	Art
	Tokyo Sports Lounge 2020	n.d.	Sport
	Parade — a drop dripping, a bead, a short story	JHSP	Art
	Balance — Daisy Balloon	JHSP	Art
2022	Murmurs	JHSP	Crafts
	Robot Lab	n.d.	Technology
	[odd]even	JHSP	Crafts
	What is not seen — Rhizomatiks	JHSP	Art
	The Art of Ramen Donburi	Satoh Taku	Crafts
2023	Technology in Motion by Xiborg	Marcelo Duarte	Technology
	Innovation in Motion	n.d.	Technology
	ESSENCE: Inner Garden - Atsunobu Katagiri	JHSP	Nature
	Japan in miniatures — Tatsuya Tanaka	JHSP	Art
	Dōshin: the charms of Japanese toys	JHSP	Crafts
Living with robots	Zaven Paré	Technology	
NIHONCHA: introduction to Japanese tea	JHSP	Food & Drinks	

Source: JHSP Official Website (“Exposições” Section)

Table 3. Theme Analysis of the Events held at JHSP from 2017 to 2023.

Event Theme	Events (n.)	Events by Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)	Events by non-Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)
Activities for children	43	1	42
Architecture	29	1	28
Art	41	1	40
Business	2	0	2
Cinema	16	1	15
Crafts	42	2	40
Dance	2	0	2
Design	13	1	12
Fashion	6	0	6

Food & Drinks	63	17	46
Foreign Policy	5	4	1
Fragrances & Scents	4	0	4
History	2	1	1
Japan-Brazil	4	0	4
Language (Japanese)	1	0	1
Literature	54	2	52
Museum	2	0	2
Music	5	0	5
Nature	20	0	20
People	4	0	4
Philosophy & Religion	17	0	17
Photography	5	0	5
Pop Culture	61	6	55
Reconstruction & Recovery	1	0	1
Science	13	8	5
Sport	16	1	15
Studying in Japan	10	6	4
Technology	25	6	19
Theatre	5	3	2
Tourism & regional revitalization	28	10	18
Various	41	2	39

Source: JHSP Official Website (“Eventos” Section)

As shown in Table 2, around 32 percent of the in-house curated exhibitions featured works by contemporary Japanese artists, who managed to reinterpret Japanese traditions by skillfully mixing them with modern topics and contemporary techniques in unexpected and captivating ways. Approximately 16 percent of the exhibitions showcased modern Japanese craftsmanship, ranging from ceramics and glass crafts to textile and multi-material jewelry. Technology and contemporary architecture accounted for 11 percent and 8 percent of the exhibitions, respectively, while the remaining exhibitions focused on modern design, fashion, food, nature, and sport.

Exhibitions were complemented by an extensive program of events organized mainly by the JHSP local team or Japanese government-affiliated institutions and agencies including the Consulate General of Japan in São Paulo, the Japanese Embassy in Brazil, the Cultural Affairs Agency, the Japan Foundation, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). As shown by the content analysis results reported in Table 3, event themes varied according to the organizers. On the one hand, the JHSP local team focused on pop culture, literature, food, art, and craftsmanship; on the other, Japanese government-affiliated institutions and agencies concentrated on food, tourism, science, technology, pop culture, and studying in Japan programs.

(3) Japan House Los Angeles (JHLA)

Almost eight months after JHSP’s launch, MOFA partially opened its second Japan House in Los Angeles (California, US). The entire facility was officially inaugurated on August 24, 2018, and

made available to the public the following day (MOFA 2018b). Unlike what was planned for Brazil, the grand opening celebration began with a red-carpet entrance by Japanese executives, officials, celebrities, and Hollywood entertainers. It continued with a concert by Japanese singer Yoshiki and finished with a dance performance by the Japanese dance troupe Elevenplay (Villan 2018).

JHLA occupies two floors, level 2 and level 5, at Ovation Hollywood, an entertainment complex previously known as Hollywood & Highland (JHLA 2022, 2). Covering an area of 560 m², level 2 features a gallery, where exhibitions rotate every trimester; WAZA, a shop introducing Japanese products; and a small café (JHLA 2022, 4). Level 5 (740 m²), hosts a library instead, which houses a wide range of books; a salon, where workshops, receptions, lectures, seminars, film screenings, and performances are held; and INN ANN, a restaurant managed by chef Araki Taro serving a selection of Japanese delicacies (JHLA 2022, 10–12).

The facility space, which was designed by Tanigawa Junji, founder of consulting firm JTQ Inc., provides creative directions to clients aiming to convey their messages through the medium of space. In an interview released for Japan House in 2019, Tanigawa underlined that the concept shaping JHLA's environment was “*wa*” interpreted as a kind of “flow”: “the Japanese word ‘*wa*’ has a lot of possible interpretations [...] If we look at food, the word ‘*aemono*’ (dressed dishes) also uses the kanji character for ‘*wa*.’ In those dishes, the ingredients are left to sit, which allows the taste to develop by adding the element of time” (JH 2019c). “This type of ‘flow,’” Tanigawa said, “can be found in other aspects of Japanese culture too. In Los Angeles, a diverse range of people come together [...], so there’s a large variety of content and styles. I think it would be very interesting to redefine the Japanese context within that ‘flow,’ and I’m sure doing so would have some intriguing effects” (JH 2019c).

The interiors of level 2 and level 5 were designed by the artist Nawa Kohei and the designer Kosaka Ryu. Designed as a blank, neutral space cut out from the surrounding environment, level 2 features a layout without clear divisions, allowing the multi-purpose space, gallery area, and shop to blend into each other seamlessly. The design of the shop area was inspired by the image of a group of small boats, which encapsulates Japan’s history as an island nation, importing other cultures by sea, refining them in original ways, and fostering reciprocal exchange (JH 2019d).

Since its opening, JHLA has hosted eight touring exhibitions, fourteen in-house curated exhibitions (see Table 4), and around two hundred and fifty events (see Table 5).

Table 4. List of JHLA In-House Curated Exhibitions (2017-2023).

Year	Exhibition Title	Exhibition Organizer	Exhibition Theme
2018	Anrealage A Light Un Light	JHLA	Fashion
	Satoyama Yoshihiro Narisawa & Sergio Coimbra	JHLA	Food & Drinks
	Satoyama Evolving with the Forest	JHLA	Food & Drinks
	Beautiful Rice For a Sustainable Future	n.d.	Various
2019	KESHIKI The Landscape Within Contemporary Japanese Ceramics from the Brodfuehrer Collection	JHLA	Crafts
	BAKERU Transforming Spirits	JHLA	Various
	JAPAN 47 ARTISANS	JHLA	Crafts
2020	HIDA A Woodwork Tradition in the Making	JHLA	Crafts
2021	NATURE/SUPERNATURE Visions of This World and Beyond in Japanese Woodblock Prints	JHLA	Art
	RECONNECTING A Vision of Unity by Kengo Kito	JHLA	Art
2022	The Art of the Ramen Bowl	JHLA	Crafts

2022	LIFE CYCLES A Bamboo Exploration with Tanabe Chikuunsai IV	JHLA	Nature
2023	Designing with Disaster Stories from Seven Regenerative Cities Inspired by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami	JHLA	Design
	POKÉMON X KOGEI Playful Encounters of Pokémon and Japanese Craft	JHLA	Pop Culture

Source: JHLA Official Website (“Past Exhibitions” Section)

Table 5. Theme Analysis of the Events held at JHLA from 2018 to 2023.

Event Theme	Events (n.)	Events by Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)	Events by non-Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)
Architecture	8	1	7
Art	20	1	19
Business	5	0	5
Cinema	31	5	26
Crafts	17	3	14
Dance	4	0	4
Design	4	1	3
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	6	6	0
Fashion	2	0	2
Food & Drinks	56	13	43
Foreign Policy	15	8	7
Fragrances & Scents	3	0	3
History	2	2	0
Language (Japanese)	1	1	0
Music	5	2	3
Nature	10	2	8
Pop Culture	13	2	11
Science	10	5	5
Sport	3	2	1
Technology	8	5	3
Theatre	1	0	1
Transports	1	1	0
Various	11	1	10

Source: JHLA Official Website (“Past Events” Section)

As indicated in Table 4, approximately 29 percent of the in-house curated exhibitions showcased contemporary Japanese craftsmanship (ceramics and woodcrafts). Another 29 percent was equally distributed between exhibitions featuring Japanese art and food. The remaining 42 percent focused on fashion, nature, pop culture, and urban design. It is worth noticing that some of the exhibitions JHLA hosted also visited the Brazilian hub and vice versa. In particular, *Anrealage: A Light Un Light* and *The Art of the Ramen Bowl* traveled from Los Angeles to São Paulo, while *Satoyama: Yoshihiro Narisawa & Sergio Coimbra*, *JAPAN 47 ARTISANS*, and *LIFE CYCLES: A Bamboo Exploration with Tanabe Chikuunsai IV* toured from São Paulo to Los Angeles.

Similarly to what happened for JHSP, exhibitions were enhanced by hundreds of events organized mainly by either JHLA local team or institutions and agencies affiliated with the Japanese

government, including the Consulate General of Japan in Los Angeles, the Japan Information Culture Center (JICC), the Embassy of Japan in Washington DC, the Japan Foundation, JAXA, JETRO, the Japan Food Product Overseas Promotion Center (JFOODO), and JNTO. As Table 5 highlights, locally organized events focused on Japanese food, cinema, art, crafts, and pop culture, while externally designed ones revolved around Japanese food, foreign policies, cinema, science, and technology. In addition, a special event series supported by the Consulate General of Japan in Los Angeles and JETRO was dedicated to exploring initiatives and perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion in Southern California.

(4) Japan House London (JHL)

MOFA set up its last Japan House in London (UK). The facility was inaugurated on June 21, 2018 (MOFA 2018a). Similarly to JHSP, the opening ceremony was followed by a customized version of *Flower Messenger*. Inspired by flower sellers during the Edo period (1603–1867), thirty flower messengers visited several of Kensington’s cultural institutions on foot while stopping to greet passers-by and give them flowers (JHL 2018). An additional opening ceremony took place on September 13, 2018. It was attended by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, who officially presented the “Japan-UK Season of Culture 2019–20” (MOFA 2018c).¹

Situated on Kensington High Street in the former Derry & Toms department store (JHL 2022, 5), the center space was designed by Katayama Masamichi, interior designer and founder of Wonderwall Inc. The concept adopted by Katayama in designing JHL’s space was “*wa*,” in a different interpretation compared to the one offered by Tanigawa: “If we could design a space to reflect such an abstract concept, it could convey ‘*wa*,’ or Japanese-ness, without being too ‘in-your-face’ about it. The space itself would embody the Japanese philosophy” (JH 2019e).

Spread over three floors, the facility comprises a gallery, an events hall, and a library on the lower ground floor (B1F); a shop, a takeaway café, and a travel information area on the ground floor (GF); a restaurant and a bar on the first floor (1F). The spatial organization of B1F and GF embodies the concept of the “*tokonoma*,” a recessed space in Japanese-style reception rooms whose atmosphere can shift by replacing the items displayed at it: “Our goal was to create a space that echoes the unique Japanese quality in which the atmosphere of the room changes according to the various elements and events taking place inside” (Wonderwall 2018a).

The first floor is shaped, instead, according to the idea of “*doma*,” a semi-outdoor space often found close to the entrance area of Japanese-style houses: “[*doma*] was not only a place of communication [...] but it was also the center of food with a kitchen in its corner [...] Harnessing the unique qualities of the *doma*, we designed a space that amplifies and expands the joys of gathering, conversing, and dining together” (Wonderwall 2018b).

Since its opening, eight touring exhibitions, nine in-house curated exhibitions (see Table 6) and around five hundred events (see Table 7) have been held at JHL.

Table 6. List of JHL In-House Curated Exhibitions (2018–2023).

Year	Exhibition Title	Exhibition Organizer	Exhibition Theme
2018	Biology of Metal: Metal Craftsmanship in Tsubame-Sanjo	JHL	Crafts

¹ The “Japan-UK Season of Culture 2019-20” is a foreign diplomacy program that bridged the Rugby World Cup 2019 and the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Based on an agreement between the Prime Minister of Japan and the Prime Minister of the UK in August 2017, it illustrated Japan’s multi-faceted appeal, encompassing its culture, art, innovation, and technology across various fields, such as medicine, science, and industry (MOFA 2018b).

	Living Colours: Kasane — the Language of Japanese Colour Combinations	JHL	Crafts
2019	Anno's Journey: The World of Anno Mitsumasa	JHL	Art
	WOW: City Lights and Woodland Shade Digital Art Encounters with Japan	JHL	Art
2020	Architecture for Dogs	Hara Kenya	Architecture
2021	MAKING NUNO Japanese Textile Innovation from Sudō Reiko	JHL	Crafts
	Tokyo 1964: Designing Tomorrow	JHL	Sport
2022	The Carpenters' Line: Woodworking Heritage in Hida Takayama	JHL	Crafts
2023	Ainu Stories: Contemporary Lives by the Saru River	JHL	Various

Source: JHL Official Website ("Past Events" Section)

Table 7. Theme Analysis of the Events held at JHL from 2018 to 2023.

Event Theme	Events (n.)	Events by Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)	Events by non-Jap. Gov. Inst. (n.)
Activities for children	10	0	10
Architecture	23	0	23
Art	34	4	30
Cinema	49	2	47
Costumes & Clothing	7	0	7
Crafts	86	5	81
Dance	1	1	0
Design	8	0	8
Fashion	1	0	1
Food & Drinks	50	11	39
Foreign Policy	14	6	8
History	3	1	2
Japan-UK	1	1	0
Language (Japanese)	3	2	1
Literature	5	1	4
Museum	1	0	1
Music	14	0	14
Nature	20	1	19
People	22	10	12
Philosophy & Religion	7	1	6
Pop Culture	24	1	23
Reconstruction & Recovery	12	11	1
Science	4	4	0
Sport	7	0	7
Stationery	6	0	6
Technology	14	2	12
Textile	14	0	14
Theatre	11	3	8
Tourism & regional revitalization	8	1	7

Transports	2	1	1
Various	22	2	20

Source: JHL Official Website (“Past Events” Section)

As Table 6 reveals, approximately 44 percent of the exhibitions were dedicated to Japanese craftsmanship from selected Japanese artisans or areas such as metal craftsmanship from Tsubame-Sanjo (Niigata Prefecture), the work of the Somenotsukasa Yoshioka dye workshop (Kyoto), Sudō Reiko’s textile innovations, and wood craftsmanship from the Hida region (Gifu Prefecture). Contemporary art featured in 22 percent of the exhibitions, while the remaining showcased items connected to contemporary architecture, the Tokyo 1964 Summer Olympics, and modern Ainu culture. Similarly, in JHL’s case, some exhibitions were in-house curated but still touring between hubs. For example, *Architecture for Dogs* and *MAKING NUNO: Japanese Textile Innovation from Sudō Reiko* was previously hosted by JHSP, while *The Carpenters’ Line: Woodworking Heritage in Hida Takayama* was initially displayed in JHLA.

Unlike JHSP and JHLA, JHL complemented its exhibitions program with seven rotating library displays and dozens of GF booth displays. Exhibitions and displays have been accompanied by hundreds of events organized by the British team of local experts and Japanese government-affiliated institutions and agencies including the Embassy of Japan in the UK, the Japan Foundation, the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan’s National Tax Agency (NTA), Japan’s Reconstruction Agency, JAXA, JETRO, JFOODO, and JNTO. Similar to what has been noted in JHSP and JHLA’s cases, the themes of the events changed according to the organizer (see Table 7). Locally organized events focused on Japanese craftsmanship, cinema, food, art, and architecture, while the others were centered on Japanese food, reconstruction, foreign policy, minorities, and science.

4. Discussion: “Authentic Japan” as a Heterogeneous Strategic Narrative

If we apply the definition of “strategic communication” elaborated by Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder (2018) to the study of the “Japan House Project,” it becomes possible to interpret “authentic Japan” as a strategic narrative constructed upon MOFA’s initiative and conveyed through three different environments composing Japan Houses’ physical spaces, including their galleries.

As mentioned in Section 2, strategic narratives can be analyzed in terms of formation, projection, and interpretation (Miskimmon et al. 2013; 2017). The formation of “authentic Japan” involves and constantly requires interaction between four main groups of actors: (1) Japan Houses’ teams of local experts, (2) Japanese government-affiliated institutions and agencies, (3) Japanese private companies, (4) local institutions and organizations engaged in the promotion of Japan abroad. Each of these actors has its own goals and uses different types of communication to construct strategic narratives. Therefore, in the context of the Japan House Project, “authentic Japan” can be understood as a heterogeneous, dynamic, and continuously negotiated social construct originating from the interaction of MOFA with its internal and external key stakeholders. This is evident in the projection of “authentic Japan” through the choice of different themes for the exhibitions and events held within the three centers.

As the data reported in Section 3.1 showed, 40 percent of the touring exhibitions featured various Japanese art forms, ranging from Japanese silk braiding and Inujima “Art House Project” to

contemporary graphic art and manga. Approximately 20 percent showcased Japanese craftsmanship, including paper and wood crafts. The remaining presented contemporary architecture, design, and technology. By contrast, the focus of in-house curated exhibitions varied according to the hub. For example, JHSP predominantly organized monographic exhibitions on Japanese contemporary artists, while JHLA and JHL mainly curated exhibitions on Japanese craftsmanship seen from different perspectives.

The themes of the events organized by Japanese-government-affiliated institutions and agencies slightly changed according to the hosting facility. While Japanese food, science, and technology were themes common to all three hubs, events on tourism, pop culture, and studying in Japan programs were featured only at JHSP. Moreover, events focusing on Japanese cinema were presented at JHLA, while events on foreign policies were organized for both JHLA and JHL. Finally, events on reconstruction and ethnic minorities were explicitly designed for JHL. By contrast, the themes of the events organized by JH local teams were mainly centered around Japanese food, art, craftsmanship, pop culture (JHSP and JHLA only), cinema (JHLA and JHL only), literature (only JHSP), and architecture (only JHL).

In addition to exhibitions and events, “authentic Japan” was projected through the physical spaces of Japan House. In all three cases, existing buildings were chosen to establish the hubs. The projects were entrusted to renowned Japanese artists, architects, and interior designers who designed the spaces according to their original interpretation of “authentic Japan.” In particular, the Brazilian center was designed to resemble a Japanese cypress forest, while the American and British hubs embodied different interpretations of “*wa*.”

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presented a preliminary study of “authentic Japan” created within the “Japan House Project” scope and narrated through Japan Houses’ physical spaces, exhibitions, and events. The examination of the data collected by content analysis showed that “authentic Japan” is a heterogeneous, dynamic, and continuously negotiated strategic narrative whose creation depends upon the involved actors’ agenda and whose projection takes place through and is influenced by Japan Houses’ environments. While Japanese government-affiliated institutions and agencies recognized “Japanese authenticity” in Japanese food, science, technology, arts, and crafts, the teams of local experts offered a broader interpretation that took local preferences into account. This makes it challenging to establish a single, comprehensive definition of what constitutes “authentic Japan.”

Due to its introductory and exploratory nature, this research did not consider (1) the role of private companies and local institutions engaged in Japan’s promotion in terms of “authentic Japan’s” formation, (2) the impact that Japan Houses’ spatial characteristics further have in terms of “authentic Japan’s” projection, or (3) the effects that Japan Houses’ spaces, exhibitions, and events have on target audiences regarding “authentic Japan’s” reception. Therefore, this paper opens the door to all those scholars interested in expanding the existing literature in strategic communication studies by further exploring this or other strategic communication initiatives carried out through space as their medium.

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