Ma the space that is empty but not empty

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When I first started teaching ikebana, I quickly realized that explaining MA was one of the hardest things. Not because I didn't feel it. On the contrary. After living and studying in Japan for over a decade and studying Japanese gardens, I had absorbed it almost naturally. But finding the right words for MA, to explain MA to others, is another story. Even Sofu Teshigahara mentioned the same challenge. In an interview from the 70s, he said that foreign students kept asking, why is that? And can you explain? Japanese students didn't ask those questions. They didn't need to.

They had grown up in a culture where space is not just a physical gap, but something deeply felt, practiced and shared. MA is present not only in physical design, but in music, language, relationships and daily life. Designer Alan Fletcher put it simply: the Japanese had a word, MA, for this interval which gives shape to the whole. In the West, we have neither word nor theme. A serious omission.

This absence of language makes MA mysterious to many foreigners. That is why in 1978 architect Arata Isozaki made a groundbreaking exhibition called MA Space Time in Japan. It traveled internationally for over 40 years, helping Western audiences begin to grasp what MA is. Through this research, and by reading the works of architects and philosophers who tried to describe it, I began to find not just a feeling, but also some structure to help explain it.

Let us begin with the kanji itself, MA. It is composed of two parts: MON meaning gate, and HI meaning sun. The image suggests sunlight shining through the gap in the door. A fleeting beam of light made visible only because of the opening. That small opening, not the sun, not the door, becomes the focal point. The place of potential. That is MA. A space that is charged. Empty but not empty. A pulse that holds energy. A silence that speaks.

MA appears in countless Japanese words. Here are a hundred examples of words that include the character MA. Before we go on, it is helpful to understand something about how the Japanese language works. A single kanji character can have multiple pronunciations, and these change depending on which other character it is combined with. The character MA can be pronounced MA, KAN, KEN or AIDA.

Let us look at a few words that include MA: JI-KAN, KU-KAN, NIN-GEN, MA CHIGAI, HIRU-MA, I-MA, KYU-KAN, NAKA-MA. At first glance these words may seem unrelated. Nevertheless, they all share a common trait: the character MA. The combination shows how deeply the idea of MA is woven into everyday Japanese language and life. And this is the reason why the concept of MA feels so natural to Japanese people. It is not something they learned from art books or theory. It is part of everyday life from the beginning.

And maybe this is also why it is difficult to explain. When something has been fully absorbed, when your body feels it, your senses respond to it and you move with it intuitively, it becomes second nature. Japanese people do not need to think about MA. They live it. It is like learning to drive a car. Once you have internalized how to shift gears and steer, you no longer analyze each action. But if someone asks you to explain what you are doing, suddenly it is not so simple. That is the challenge with MA. You can understand it deeply, but putting it into words is another story.

German architect and scholar Gunter Nitschke spent much of his career trying to understand and explain MA. He describes it as more than just space or time. It is a sense of place that includes perception and experience. He applies five dimensions of MA. We will explore each one, one by one.

We begin with the simplest form: the line. In architecture, the Japanese character of MA can also be read as KEN, a term that originally refers to the interval between two wooden columns. One KEN is roughly one meter eighty two, the same standard length as a tatami mat. It becomes a modular unit for arranging architecture. But for the Japanese, KEN is not just a line. It is a cadence. It sets a beat that guides how space is walked, seen and felt. KEN is fixed. But MA, the space between those columns, is lived. It is not just a measurement. It is a feeling.

There is another way to read the character MA: AIDA, meaning in between. Rather than simply naming a distance, AIDA gestures toward relationship. Like the quiet understanding between two people or the space you feel on the train moving from Tokyo to Osaka. Even in this one dimensional form, MA carries a quiet paradox. It is both separation and connection. Both distance and relationship.

Now let us move on to surface, to floor plans, footprints and layout. Rooms were once measured in JO, tatami mats. A common phrase in Japanese is HACHI-JO NO MA, an eight tatami room. But this does not just describe size. A room surface is not defined by walls only. It holds memory, season and social intention. A two dimensional MA tells us how we might live in that space. How many people could share tea. How light might fall across the floor.

In Japanese, the word KUUKAN is often used to mean space, but its roots go deeper. Volume becomes meaningful when it is inhabited with intention. The MA is not in the walls. It is in the relationship between people, between people and objects, and in the way both engage with the space itself. It is the atmosphere that arises from presence and engagement.

Take the word TOKONOMA, the display alcove in a traditional Japanese guest room. It is not just a functional area. It is a space activated by human relationships. It is where a host places a flower or a scroll. It is where a guest pauses, observes and appreciates. This exchange of giving and receiving is the MA.

Time in Japanese is JI-KAN, literally time space. In Japanese thinking, time is not linear. It flows like a current through space. The character of time includes the symbol for the sun, evoking movement, change and presence. Expressions like SHUN-KAN, a blink, MA NIAU, to be in time, or MA MO NAKU, soon, show how MA lives inside language.

We see this beautifully in Japanese gardens. A path of stepping stones, TOBIISHI, can slow us down, guide our gaze and invite a pulse. Each step creates a rhythm, turning movement into mindful progression. Unlike a flat path, stepping stones force us to be present. We look down. We feel the shifting weight. We measure our pace. In this way time stretches. The garden does not just direct our path. It choreographs our experience of space and time. That pause between the stones is MA.

Another beautiful illustration of time and space working together is the Japanese scroll. Unlike framed pictures that present everything at once, a scroll reveals its story gradually as we unroll it, scene by scene. We control the pace. If you were to unroll the whole scroll at once, the story would collapse. The gaps, the transition, the gradual unfolding, all of these are MA.

Finally, we arrive at MA as a deeply human and social space. In calligraphy or theater, a good pose is called MA GA UMAI. The timing is beautiful. The opposite, MA GA WARUI, refers to a pose or pacing that feels off, awkward, mistimed or out of place. These expressions are not only about spatial gaps. They are used to judge the overall sense of harmony, rhythm and emotional tone in a work, whether in a piece of music, a dramatic scene or an ikebana arrangement. MA GA UMAI means the timing and placement feel right. MA GA WARUI means the whole feels out of sync.

In storytelling, the silences are as important as the words themselves. Even in architecture, the word MA DORI once meant more than just a layout. It meant grasping place. A home was designed to change with the seasons, the

people and the moment. Sliding screens and light structures made this fluidity possible.

So how does this all connect to our practice? In ikebana we sometimes say it is the art of subtraction. What you do not use is as important as what you do. The best arrangements reveal a unique interplay between the visible and invisible. Kiyoshi Matsumoto writes: in ikebana, space is an essential component, often even the focal point of the arrangement. It is seen as invisible energy that gives life to the form.

In the following videos, we will explore how these ideas of MA, its dimensions, its meaning and its energy appear in basic ikebana styles.

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