

In Praise of Shadows

Or will we soon have to bring our own shadow with us?

Recently, I found *In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki again in my library and decided to read it once more.

I read the last pages on a bench in Luxembourg City Park, right in the middle of public space.

The temperature shown on the weather app on my phone was 37 degrees and it felt even hotter. For Luxembourg, that is an exceptional temperature, and the heavy, warm air made even sitting in the shade almost unbearable.

The longer I think about Tanizaki, the harder it becomes for me to separate the author from his texts. His attitude towards modernity, his romanticised idea of a supposedly original Japanese aesthetic, his opposition between East and West, but also the way he describes and writes about cultural and physical differences or women, all of this makes me uncomfortable and, to me, is not acceptable today. And yet there is this damn ambiguity.

Because this man could, for his time, write remarkably precisely and sensually about light and shadow. Some of his thoughts have stayed with me even though I cannot share the attitude from which they emerged.

Maybe that is the dilemma. You cannot completely separate a work from its creator without leaving part of its history behind. But at the same time, you cannot reduce the work entirely to the person who created it.

So perhaps all that remains is to live with the tension. But that is another thought. I am drifting off...Back to the park where I am sitting.

While I was sitting there, all kinds of people were walking past me. Some with parasols, others with small handheld fans, others with spray bottles. Everyone seemed to be trying, in their own way, to protect themselves from the sun and the heat.

The longer I watched them, the more I thought about the ideas in Tanizaki's book, and suddenly they started to unfold in a different way.

This guy does not write about shadow simply as the absence of light.

For him, shadow is an essential element of atmosphere, perception and beauty. He describes an aesthetic that does not lie in completely illuminating a space, but rather in the transitions between light and darkness, between what is visible and what remains hidden.

In Praise of Shadows is actually about much more than light. Tanizaki writes about architecture, interiors, materials, food, clothing, theatre and everyday objects.

You can think what you want about many of his ideas, and as I said, a lot of them are difficult to accept. But again and again he returns to the same question:

What happens to an object when we do not see it completely?

And what happens to a space when light does not make everything visible at the same time?

Maybe beauty lies precisely where not everything is visible at once.

An object does not need to be completely explained. A room does not need to be illuminated into every last corner.

Quite the opposite.

It is often where light meets darkness that depth, atmosphere and a certain tension begin to appear.

Materials change with the light. Colours become softer. Edges begin to disappear. Spaces acquire another mood.

Architecture can work with this principle too.

A roof overhang, an arcade, a tree or a recessed facade can filter sunlight and turn something direct and harsh into something much softer.

Shadow is then not simply the absence of light. It becomes a spatial element.

It creates transitions. It protects. It slows things down. It gives the eye something to hold on to.

Maybe that is what makes this idea interesting again today.

For a long time, shadow was mainly considered a question of atmosphere and design. In today's city, it is increasingly becoming a question of comfort and even usability.

Sitting on this park bench, I started wondering how we actually think about shadow in our cities.

Not only as something that creates beautiful images, but as something that makes spaces inhabitable in the first place.

Especially on hot summer days, shadow is no longer simply a question of atmosphere.

It determines whether a place can actually be used.

Luxembourg City. Large parts of its squares, streets and pavements are made of hard and sealed surfaces.

On an ordinary summer day, these spaces can feel pleasant and completely normal. But when temperatures rise to 30 or 35 degrees and beyond, their perception changes.

Surfaces heat up. Certain paths are avoided. Places to sit move into the shade. People actively search for the few areas protected from the sun.

What was previously just a spatial quality suddenly becomes a question of comfort, health and social use.

Maybe this is where the idea of shadow becomes surprisingly relevant today.

Shadow is not simply the opposite of light. It creates space.

You can understand this particularly well through the way Tanizaki describes shoji.

The paper of the sliding screens allows light to pass through, but not as direct and harsh light. It transforms it into a diffuse glow.

Tanizaki does not describe this brightness as illumination in the conventional sense. It seems to hover somewhere between light and darkness. Precisely because the light is softened, an atmosphere emerges in which materials, surfaces and proportions are perceived differently. [3]

The tokonoma, the traditional alcove in a Japanese interior, works according to a similar principle.

It is not simply a decorative wall surface. Its effect comes from spatial depth, subdued light and the controlled relationship between object and background. An object is not simply displayed.

It is brought forward through shadow. That is an interesting difference from many spaces today.

We often try to make everything visible.

Facades are fully illuminated. Interiors are evenly lit. Shop windows remain brightly illuminated throughout the night. Public spaces are equipped with lights so that dark areas disappear.

Visibility is associated with safety, modernity and functionality. But what do we lose in the process?

Tanizaki also describes lacquer objects that can appear almost banal in direct light.

Only in subdued light does their surface begin to reflect.

Gold does not appear simply as shiny decoration, but as something slowly emerging from the darkness. The beauty lies not only in the material itself, but in the relationship between material and shadow. [4]

Even if gold lacquer and highly reflective surfaces no longer have the same status today, and even if the word "kitsch" did not have quite the same meaning or did not even exist in 1932.

But anyway.

Shadow becomes part of perception, not a lack of perception.

And this is where the connection to the city begins.

A square completely exposed to the sun and a square with trees, arcades, canopies and different degrees of light are not the same public space.

Shadow determines where we sit, walk, wait, play or meet.

And yet we often treat it as if it were a byproduct of architecture.

Which brings me to this slightly absurd question: Will we soon have to bring our own shadow with us?

In this utopia, people become mobile architects.

When leaving the house in the morning, we no longer take only our keys, phone and water bottle with us, but our own personal climate infrastructure.

The backpack becomes an urban survival kit. A parasol unfolds like an exoskeleton.

Small solar panels charge a power bank, phone or vape.

A small fan creates a personal airflow.

An integrated cooling system keeps the water bottle, iced coffee or iced matcha cold on the way home from the yoga studio or gym.

In extreme heat, the backpack transforms into a small mobile seating area with a sun canopy, cooling surface and misting nozzle. (Fig. 2)

Maybe one day we will wear cooling capes that circulate air around the body. Maybe small mobile shade modules will follow us through the city. Benches become cooling stations. Bus stops become climate shelters. Traffic lights become temporary sun canopies. (Fig. 3) Squares are equipped with mobile shade trees whose artificial crowns follow the movement of the sun.

If you do not own your own shadow, you can rent one. The hotter the city becomes, the more absurd the equipment becomes. And that is exactly where the criticism begins. The exaggeration makes visible what is actually absurd.

We start developing individual products and personal climate systems because public space can no longer provide one of its most basic forms of comfort: shade.

Maybe the personal parasol is therefore not the solution, but a symptom.

Because shadow is not a purely private matter. Shadow is infrastructure.

It determines where we walk, sit, wait, play, work and spend time.

A city without enough shade becomes a different city when temperatures rise.

Paths are avoided. Squares become empty. People stay for shorter periods.

Air conditioned interiors become more attractive.

Public space loses part of its function as a shared living environment.

This is where *In Praise of Shadows* takes on another meaning.

Because shadow does not simply appear when you put something over a space. Shadow is constructed. It emerges through roof overhangs, depth, distance, materials, vegetation and the precise relationship between opening and wall. Traditional Japanese architecture almost produces shadow as a spatial element. That is an important consideration for the city today.

Maybe we should stop thinking of shading as something added afterwards.

Not as a parasol placed on a finished square. Not as a tree planted somewhere between paved surfaces. Not as another technical product. But as a fundamental part of design.

Spaces have different qualities depending on how light enters them and how much of it is held back.

The question is therefore not sun or shadow. The question is: how can we design with both?

Perhaps a good public space should offer exactly those gradations that Tanizaki describes in the interior.

Sunny areas for those who want warmth. Deep shade for the hottest hours. Half shaded transitions.

Trees. Arcades. Textile canopies. Covered seating areas. Places where people can stay regardless of their individual tolerance to heat.

Public space could become a kind of climatic interior. Not completely enclosed, but spatially differentiated. Not bright everywhere, but not dark everywhere either.

Not artificially air conditioned, but regulated through architecture, vegetation and materiality.

Maybe that is one architectural consequence we can take from these thoughts.

Shadow does not have to be understood as the opposite of sun, but as part of a continuous spatial spectrum. Tanizaki's relationship with modernity should, of course, be treated with caution. His essay was written in 1933, at a time when electricity and modern technologies were rapidly changing everyday life in Japan.

His criticism is therefore not simply a rejection of technology. He is asking what happens when a new technological possibility replaces an existing culture of space. Electric light makes rooms brighter, but for Tanizaki, more light does not automatically mean more quality. [5] Exactly this question can be asked again today. Ninety three years later.

Our air conditioning systems, fans, cooling vests and portable devices are undoubtedly impressive technological solutions.

But what happens when we use them to compensate for a city that itself no longer responds adequately to heat?

What if we used the same technological creativity not to protect and equip each individual more efficiently against the city, but to make the city itself more resilient to heat?

The real architectural intervention might therefore begin at the other end. Not everyone gets their own shadow. The city produces shadow as public infrastructure.

What if Luxembourg City developed a connected network of shade? (Fig. A)

Roofs extend over streets. Squares become climatic landscapes. Facades become vertical sun sails.

Trees are supplemented by temporary structures until they are large enough to create their own canopies. Car parks become covered parks. Bus stops become small climate shelters.

Streets are connected through continuous corridors of shade. (Fig. A)

Shading does not necessarily have to mean a heavy permanent structure. It could be temporary, seasonal or movable. In the morning, structures open towards the sun.

At midday, they close and create large floating roofs. In the evening, they become transparent again.

Textile membranes provide shade while also generating energy. Rainwater is collected and used for irrigation or cooling. Green structures connect with existing trees. (Fig. A)

Architecture is no longer understood simply as a static object, but as climatic infrastructure that responds to its surroundings. Architecture is not interesting because it is dark.

It is interesting because it responds to natural conditions and transforms them into spatial quality.

Perhaps the future lies less in completely controlling nature and more in learning how to design with it again. Such a city would not simply be a city with more parasols or emergency solutions such as misting systems used to cool public terraces.

It would be a city that does not force its inhabitants to individually protect themselves against their own environmental conditions.

Because this is where an important question emerges: Who is actually responsible for heat in the city?

The individual who buys a fan? The resident who carries a parasol in their backpack?

The municipality that designs a square? The architect who designs a building?

Or the city as a whole, which decides what kind of spaces we share?

The answer can hardly lie with the individual alone. Of course, personal objects and mobile solutions can help. But if every person has to carry their own microclimate, something fundamental becomes visible. The city has stopped providing certain basic conditions for public life.

Personal shade then becomes a utopian object and, at the same time, a warning sign.

The more absurd our personal cooling devices become, the clearer it becomes that something is wrong with public space.

If we eventually have to carry sun protection, cooling and comfort in a backpack, perhaps we have not invented the perfect product.

Perhaps we have simply solved the wrong problem.

Maybe we need both.

Individual ingenuity and a radical transformation of our built environment.

The important architectural question is no longer simply: How can we adapt people to heat?

But: How can we change our cities so that we do not constantly have to adapt ourselves to them?

Perhaps the future lies not in perfect climate equipment for every individual, but in architecture that understands shade, cooling and comfort as shared resources again. And perhaps this brings us back to Tanizaki. Because *In Praise of Shadows* is not really about darkness being better than light.

His real interest lies in the space between them. He describes gradations, transitions and atmospheres.

He shows how a shoji filters light, how a deep roof overhang creates shadow, how a tokonoma gains depth through darkness, and how colours and surfaces only reveal their full character in subdued light.
[1]

Maybe that is precisely the idea that matters for the city of the future. A city does not need to be completely shaded. It needs to learn how to consciously produce, distribute and design shade.

Shadow could become as normal a part of urban infrastructure as water, electricity, transport or lighting. Maybe we need to go one step further.

If Tanizaki teaches us that beauty does not only lie in what is made visible, but also in what remains hidden, then a climate adapted city could learn not to use every surface to its maximum, illuminate everything to its maximum or expose everything to the sun.

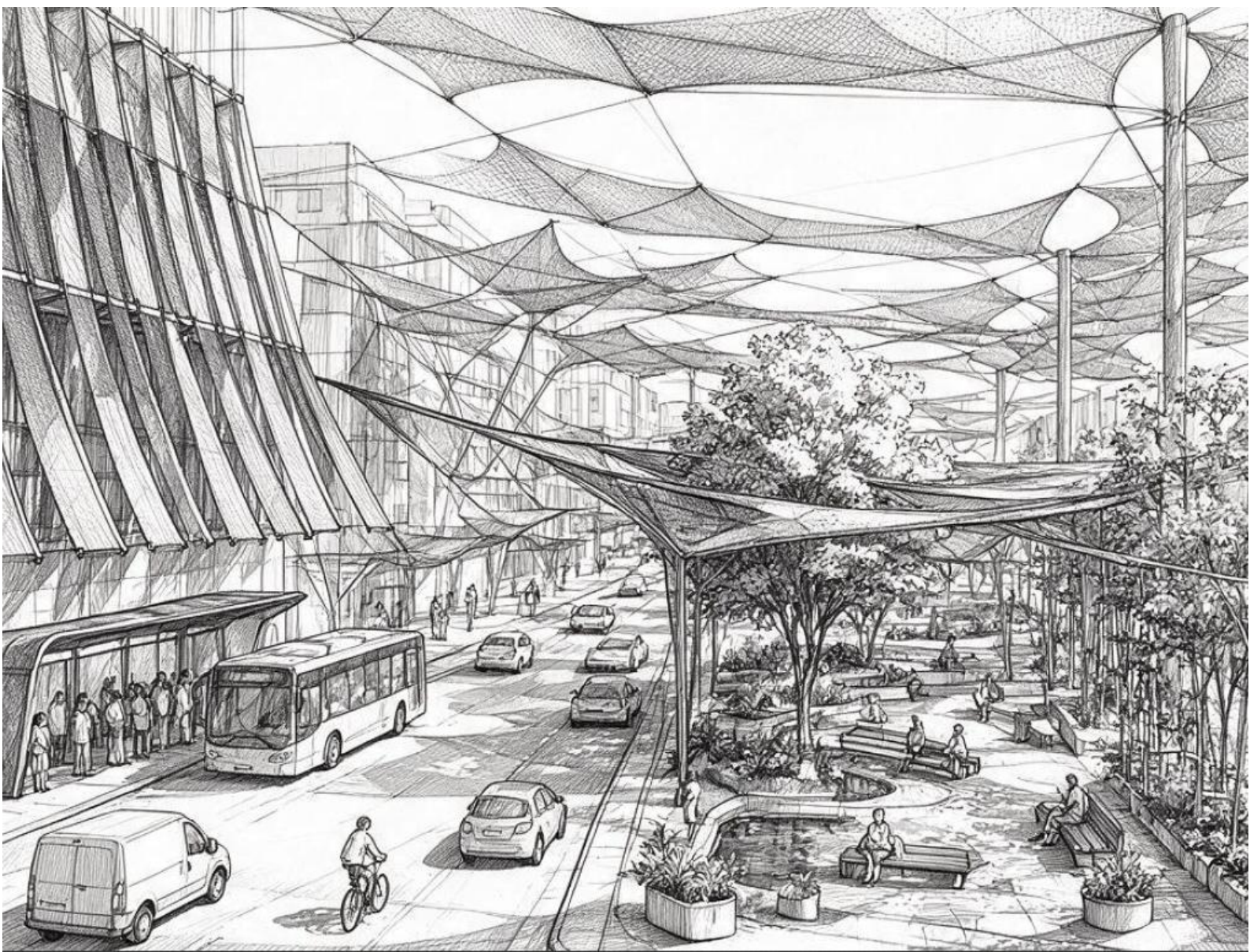
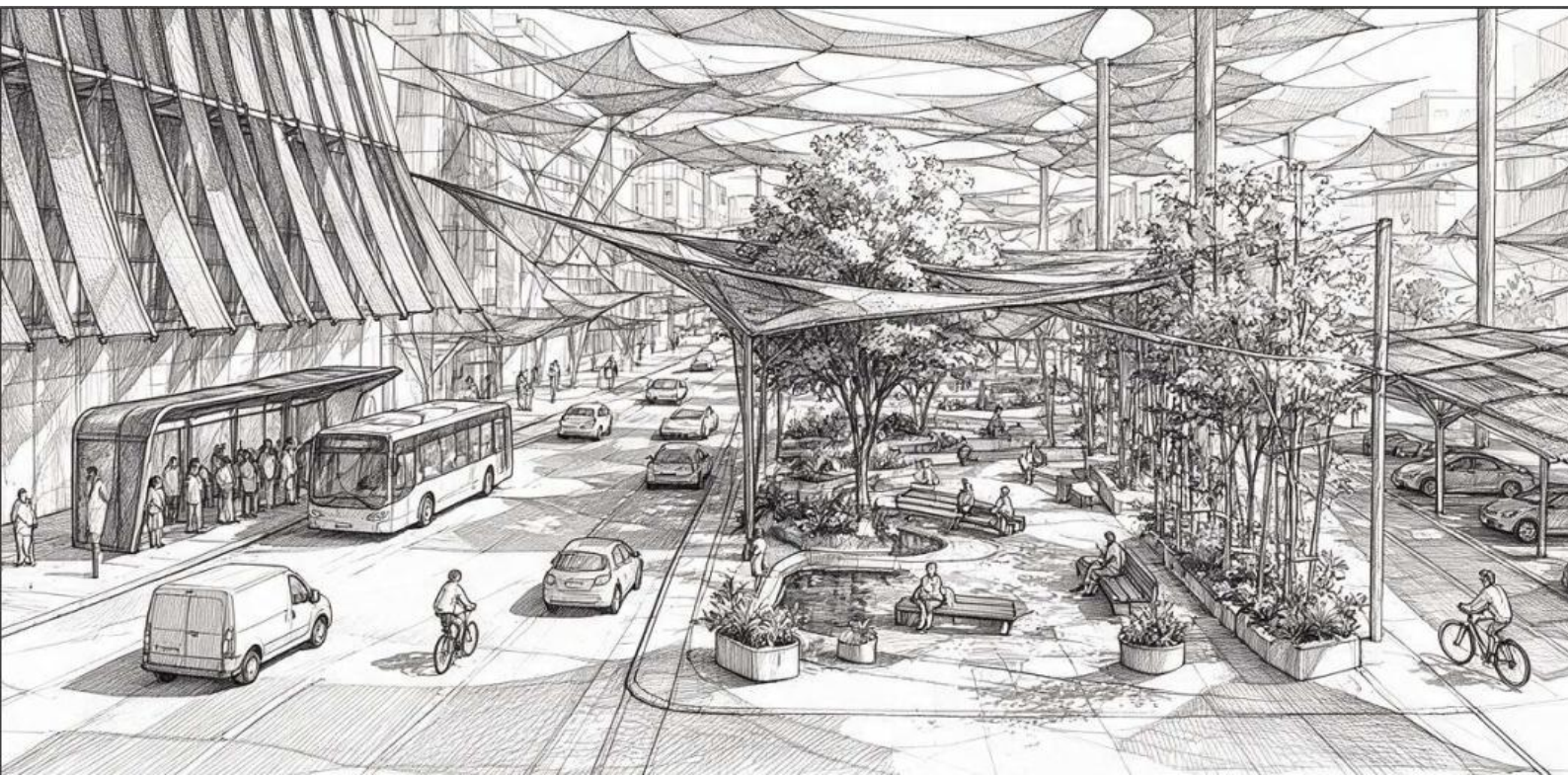
Maybe the city needs more in between spaces again. More depth. More transitions.

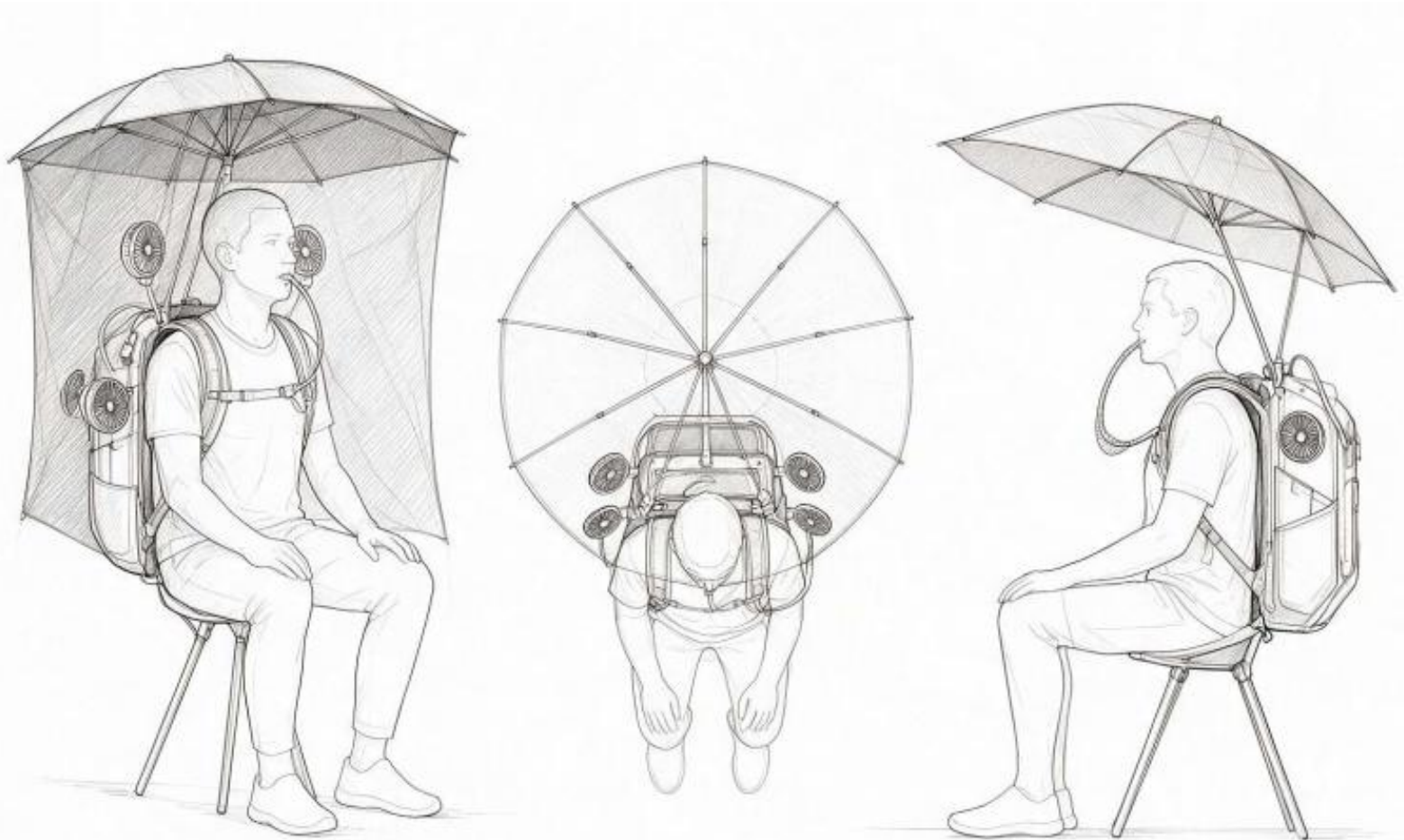
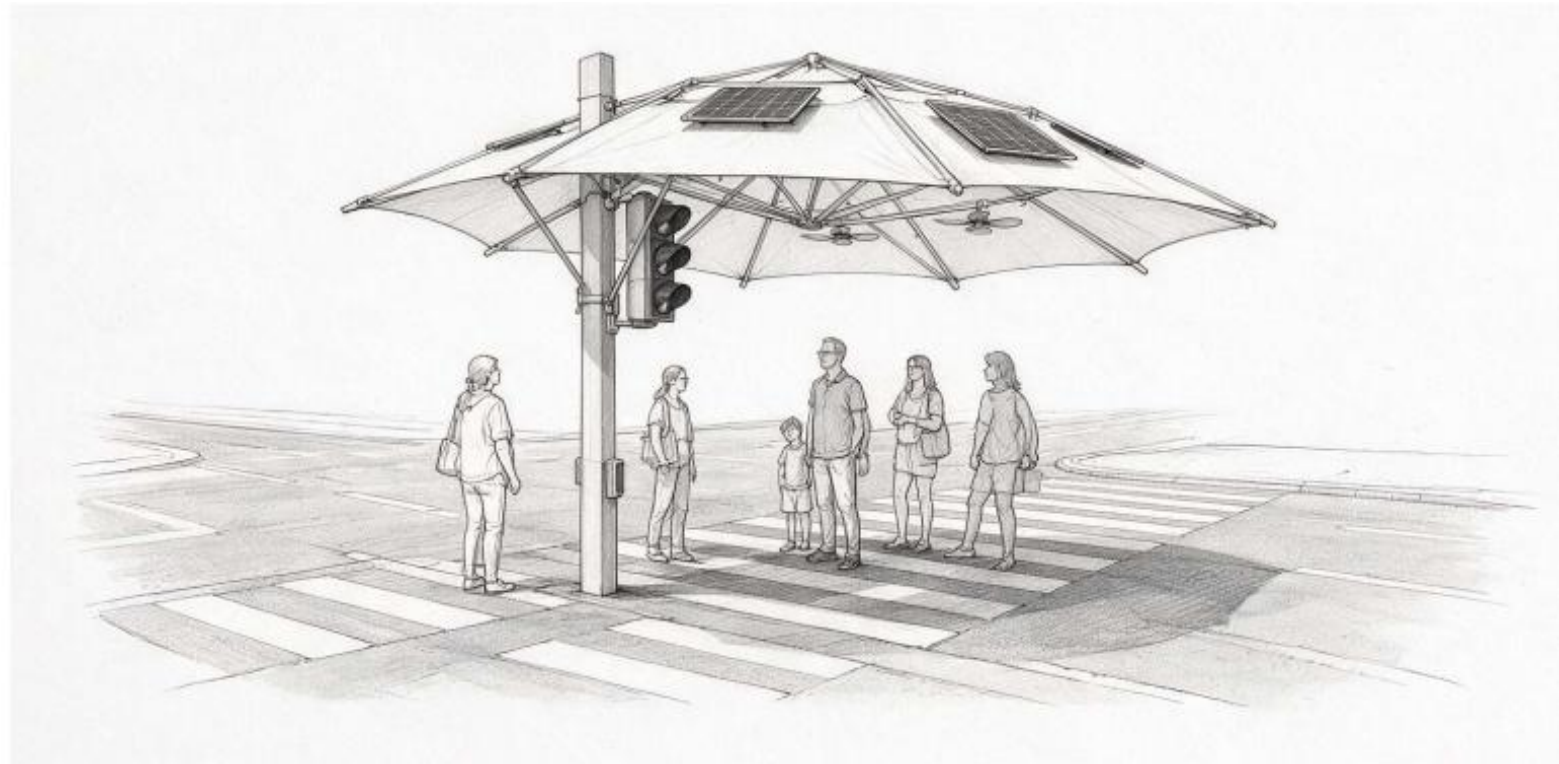
More places that are neither clearly inside nor outside. More places between sun and shadow.

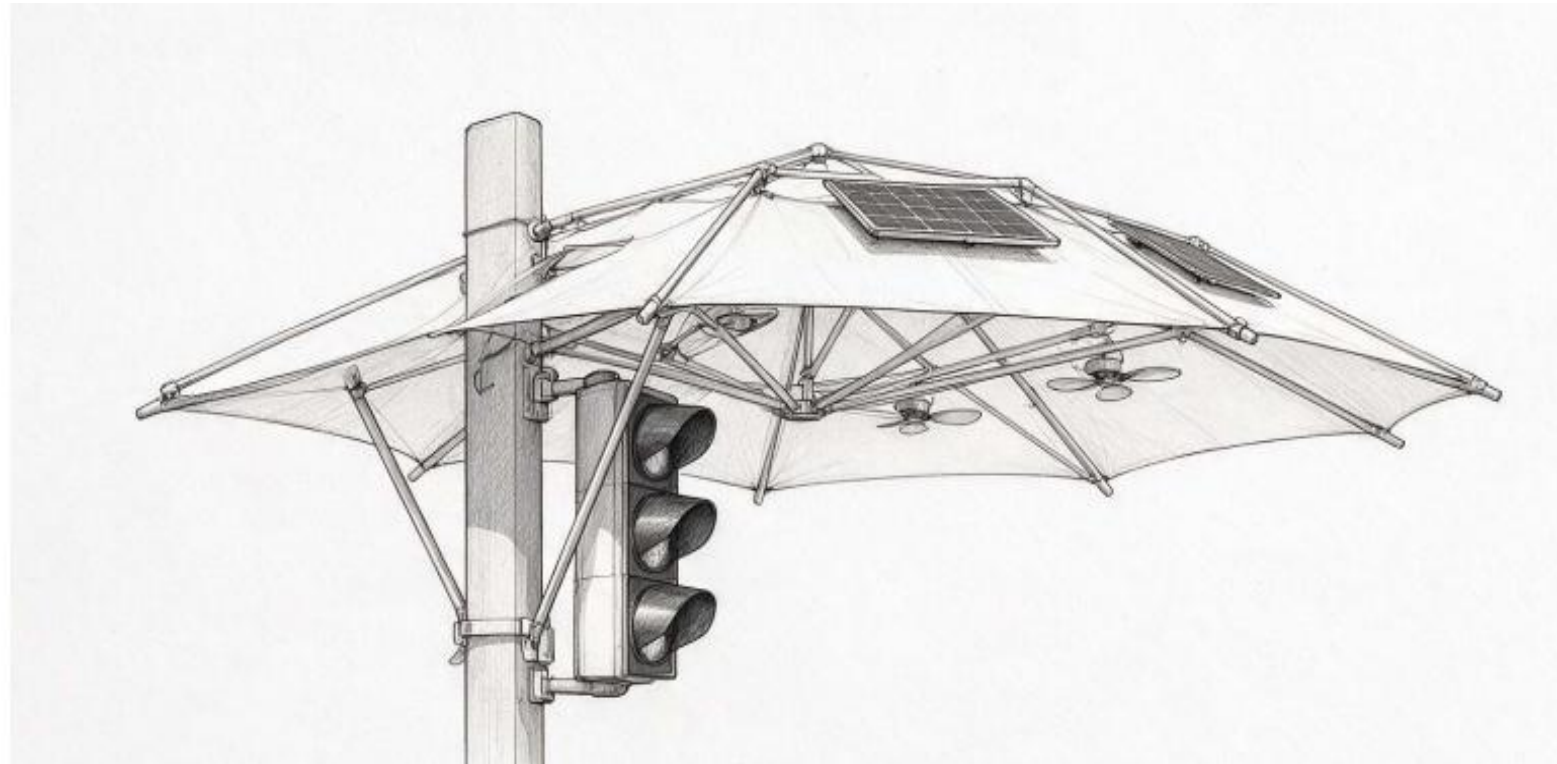
The utopia would be a city in which nobody has to think about how to escape the sun because the architecture already takes care of it.

And perhaps this future does not begin in Luxembourg with a spectacular large scale project.

Perhaps it begins quite simply with a patch of shade where there is none today.







Shoji (障子)

Traditional Japanese sliding screens made of a wooden frame covered with translucent paper. They allow daylight to enter while filtering it, creating a soft, diffuse light.

Tokonoma (床の間)

A traditional, slightly raised alcove in a Japanese interior. It is often used to display artworks, scrolls, or flowers. Its restrained lighting and the shadows it creates are part of its spatial effect.

In'ei (陰影)

Roughly meaning “light and shadow” or “shadows and light.” The term describes the subtle gradations between brightness and darkness and plays a central role in Tanizaki’s reflections on light, shadow, and atmosphere.

[1] : *Buch Lob des Schattens . Deutsche Fassung (In Praise of Shadows)*

[2]: <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/property/2014/06/03/praise-shadows-excerpt>

[3]: <https://readwise-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/media/wisereads/articles/in-praise-of-shadows/In-Praise-of-Shadows-Junichiro-Tanizaki.pdf>

[4]: <https://studylib.net/doc/27846126/in-praise-of-shadows-junichiro-tanizaki>

[5]: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/praise-shadows-junichiro-tanizaki>