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Heritage Conservation in Japan An Eyewitness View

A 1992 invitation to Japan, from then Tokyo-based Fulbright Fellow Cherylyn Widell, to meet Professor Masaru Maeno of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, would bring an entirely new dimension to my professional life. For years I had been showing visitors an America that tourists seldom see. On this, my first visit, I was filled with inspiration and fascination by a Japan far off the paths that most tourists take.

Two short months later I was back again, this time with six graduate students, to join Maeno and his students in a survey of two threatened historic towns, Tamashima and Takahashi. Our assignment to our students was for them to “read” the buildings, structures, settlement patterns, and other cultural features to postulate the story of the towns from this visual evidence, and then report

in Swanton, Vermont, and Newburgh, New York, with equally positive results. Soon, Japan would become my second home as I made frequent trips to lecture, learn more about its everyday landscape, and take up the challenge to speak its language. I applied for, and was awarded, a Fulbright Fellowship for a project entitled “Learning from Everyday Places: A Bridge for Japanese/American Understanding” for the 1994–95 academic year.

After establishing a base in Tokyo, I traveled throughout Japan, studying the landscape, lecturing at conferences and universities, and advising government and non-profit agencies. As a special project I also photographed the cultural landscape along the entire route of the old Tokaido road, made internationally famous by the prints of artists such as Hiroshige. Now extensively bypassed by railroads and superhighways, and fragmented, with many stretches virtually forgotten, the Tokaido had been Japan’s national main-street linking the old capital of Kyoto with the new capital Edo (now Tokyo). This article is based on my observations of the Japanese cultural landscape during my stay.

Dispelling Japanese Landscape Myths

It is a popular conception that Japan contains only the very old and the very new with little in between. In the course of my studies I found this was far from true, for Japan’s surviving cultural resources reflect a chronological continuum not unlike our own. Both countries have prehistoric and historic archeological sites, medieval survivors, such as Nara’s Todaiji Temple, or New Mexico’s Taos Pueblo. However, the majority of extant structures, in both nations, date from approximately the same span of time—the 17th century to the present (Edo through Heisei periods). Also, the best known and best protected historic structures have traditionally been the country’s many shrines and temples, castles, and homes of samurai and prosperous merchants. In recent years, however, a wider spectrum of the nation’s physical legacy is receiving attention.

The Japanese tend to characterize structures under two broad headings, traditional and Western. Be they palaces, temples, homes, stores, or theaters, the basic unit of scale of traditional buildings is most often the woven straw *tatami* mat, which in turn is scaled to a single human



Author (left) discussing the future of downtown Tamashima, Japan with local official Masataki Miyake (Center) and a television reporter (right), 1995. Note the streets lined with *machiya* in the background. Photo by Eric DeLony.

our joint findings along with what we would conserve, why, and how, to the residents of the town. Soon we discovered that the built environment was a medium that could speak volumes across even the most difficult of language barriers, and this enthusiasm carried over to the local population who, after seeing their town from a cross-cultural perspective, seemed to find renewed resolve to conserve their communities.

Encouraged by the positive reactions of both students and residents, we conducted a similar exchange in the United States in the fall of 1993,

being at rest. Even those hundreds of skinny, five- or six-story structures, which abound today in larger cities—called “pencil buildings” because of their tall, thin profile—assume this form due to the narrow *tatami* scale lot they sit on where a traditional house or shop once stood. Traditional interior features, especially in domestic buildings, are familiar to us in the West, the paper-glazed wooden frame *shoji* (sliding room separators), the *tatami* mat floors, the *tokonoma* or sacred alcove, which in houses today is just as likely to be the home of the family television as well as a scroll and flower arrangement. Structurally, traditional buildings are built of braced wood framing infilled with bamboo strips bound with rice twine, covered with wood siding or plaster. Roofs today are mostly of heavy, glazed Chinese-style tiles though an occasional thatch roof still survives. It is not uncommon to happen upon a 200-year-old former farm house, with its thatch roof now hidden under a cocoon of metal cladding, in the middle of a crowded Tokyo-area neighborhood—a poignant but not-as-yet valued touchstone to a long-vanished agrarian past.

One of the most common, yet rapidly-disappearing types of everyday traditional buildings, are the *machiya* or town houses. Districts of these large, two-story structures, creating a continuous wall on both sides of a narrow street, often with stores on the first floor and owner’s living quarters above, form the soul and spirit of the traditional Japanese town as the buildings of “Main Street” do for American communities.

While most traditional buildings were built before World War II, in cities like Tokyo, another generation of such structures arose in bombed-out areas, only to be replaced by more modern structures a few years later. Even today, traditional building is hardly extinct. Many smaller houses and commercial buildings are still framed-up in a

traditional manner only to be finished off with dry-wall, concrete, and tile appliques.

As for the other term used by the Japanese for categorizing buildings “Western,” at least on the surface, most structures so labeled reasonably resemble the pallet of foreign design imagery that influenced them. One can find everything from Italianate main street commercial buildings and Greek-temple banks to Victorian houses built by early foreign residents, in the late-19th century, in Yokohama and Kobe. It is possible to come across streamlined buildings from the 1930s in Tokyo and Osaka, farming villages in Hokaido, which at first glance look like pictures from *Vermont Life* magazine, while larger cities seemingly have every variant of modernism, post-modernism, deconstructionism, and even neo-traditionalism.

A word of caution is needed here, for the term “Western” can be as misleading as if one were to call all American buildings influenced in part by European buildings, “European.” Most Japanese Western buildings have a particularly Japanese twist. Take the house I rented near Tokyo, for example. The modern kitchen and wall-to-wall carpeting would be familiar to any American suburbanite. Yet, after entering the front door one removed one’s shoes before ascending a step into the livingroom quarters. The house still had a traditional *tatami* room, and Western visitors often hit their heads on hanging lights which most Japanese easily cleared. These and scores of subtle and not-so-subtle differences were reminders that the sobriquet “Western” is a perilous term at best.

Along with the types of structures already mentioned, Japan also has a rich industrial heritage with both steeply cambered wooden traditional bridges and Western bridges of every description, and an abundance of historic industrial and factory buildings, railroad stations, and other technological remains. Many varieties of farm houses, barns, rice terraces, and other rural features dot the countryside, while the highways are spawning a particularly Japanese version of roadside architecture. The Japanese heritage is also not as culturally homogeneous as most people in the West assume, with Chinese, Korean, Polynesian, and native Ainu influences producing many subtle variations and subtypes.

Accepting the Cultural Continuum

To what extent do the Japanese recognize the totality of this inheritance? Like America of a few decades ago, which was just awakening from its fixation on things colonial to embrace broader aspects of its heritage, Japan is just beginning to look beyond the temples and shrines to take a wider view of its total legacy. Today, citizen initiatives are underway to save individual landmarks,

Former dry dock, Yokohama, Japan, 1994. People now can stroll in a public plaza where once ships for the Japanese Navy were built. Photo by the author.



from Tokyo Station to Frank Lloyd Wright's *Myonichikan* (building of tomorrow), built for the Jiyugakuen or freedom school. At the same time, dozens of communities are being encouraged by agencies like the Architecture Division of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Japan's National Preservation Agency), and non-government organizations such as the Japan Association of Machinami Conservation and Restoration, and the Japan National Trust, to save the country's traditional main street commercial buildings.

These latter structures, while still in reasonable supply, are rapidly dwindling. Made of relatively frail materials which are strong only when tied together in a unit, these buildings can be literally scooped up, loaded in a truck, and carted off in a surprisingly short time. I saw this first hand in Imaicho, when a building which was standing in early morning had completely disappeared by early afternoon. Convenience stores, vest-pocket parking lots, or "pencil buildings" soon occupy their place.

In areas where *machiya* are preserved, like Kurashiki, buildings usually have been stripped of subsequent layers, and function as souvenir stores catering to tourists. There are notable exceptions such as the Yanaka district, an older residential

area of Tokyo which miraculously survived the firebombings of the War, where buildings have been less drastically renovated and while some buildings have been adaptively used for offices and art galleries, many

local shops still cater to residents as well as sight-seers.

Once a new concept also to Americans, the adaptation of old buildings to new uses can be increasingly found in Japan—from the art galleries of Yanaka to the conversion of a former dry dock in Yokohama, to a sunken pedestrian plaza as part of a high-rise office and shopping complex. Despite the growing numbers of examples, many Japanese, imbued with a taste for the new, still do not believe it is possible to reuse old buildings for contemporary purposes, and adaptive use in the United States was one of my most widely-demanded lecture topics. To further encourage reuse of historic buildings, the Japan National Trust has set up a high-level committee to recommend to the Japanese government that it adopt tax incentives

for reuse of historic structures. The prospects for adoption of this proposal are uncertain.

Preservation of industrial heritage is also being widely advocated, although the movement is still quite decentralized. In some places, like Osaka, where the Department of Public Works is meticulously maintaining that city's historic bridges, these efforts have been quite successful, while in other areas, such as Kagoshima in the south of Japan, the opposite is true. Here a series of beautifully-crafted stone Edo period bridges, in excellent condition in the center of the city, have been torn down by local authorities and the national construction ministry as part of a flood prevention project denounced not only by local residents, but by many of the nation's leading engineers as well. No doubt there will continue to be this pattern of bright successes and troubling losses as Japan comes to grips with conserving its industrial past.

Many Japanese feel quite strongly about natural area preservation, just as Americans do. Environmental organizations abound in Japan, linked by the Association of National Trusts in Japan. However, as in the United States, the idea of conserving a harmonious countryside as is done in areas of Great Britain, where people, culture, land, and nature function as a harmonious whole, is a relatively new idea.

Countryside conservation is peppered with the same extremes of successes and failures as initiatives to rescue the industrial heritage. In Gifu prefecture, for example, the government is leveling centuries-old rice terraces, scaled for tending by humans, to create much larger rice fields designed to be worked with machines. Developed a number of years ago when the nation was trying to boost its rice crop, ironically this initiative has now become obsolete with the decision to gradually import greater quantities of foreign rice. Nevertheless, the demolition continues. As one farmer sadly told me, "I can hardly recognize our valley anymore."

Such tragedies are offset by happy successes such as the mountain village of Shirakawa, where huge, traditional high-peaked, thatch-roof, 19th-century wooden farmhouses "*Gasshozukuri*," bams "*naya*," commercial "*machiya*" and the surrounding rice terraced landscape, have been conserved as part of a working farming village. Tourists are also accommodated as a means of generating supplemental income to help sustain farming in the area. Even here though, the government is threatening to build a large highway interchange on a plateau within sight and earshot of the village, prompting the Japan National Trust to hold a conference on saving the countryside so that officials from Shirakawa and other rural villages could dis-

Tamae bridge, 1849, under demolition, Kagoshima, Japan, 1994. Photo by Takashi Itoh.



Ghost stretch of the old Tokaido Road near Mishima, Japan, 1995. While the paving dates from the early-17th century, this stretch of road was actually laid out several centuries before. Photo by the author.



cuss this and other threats and successes, an embryonic example of horizontal networking in a society which is normally more vertically-organized and hierarchical.

Ten Dollar Cups of Coffee?

To what degree then are both citizens and visitors aware that Japan is more than modern buildings and ancient temples? The problem is not unlike that of the ever-recurring assertion in the American press that a cup of coffee in Tokyo costs \$10. While it is hard to find such an expensive cup of coffee (most cost \$2 or \$3), perhaps some reporter covering the visit of a foreign dignitary staying at the nation's most expensive hotel was charged this price, and included it in an article, since quoted by dozens of journalists, many of whom have probably never been to Japan. Likewise, most Japanese repeatedly advise visitors to see a handful of places in Japan such as Tokyo,

Nara, and Kyoto, and these visitors, in turn, tell others that these are the only places worth exploring. Of course, these places are indeed worth exploring, yet they receive a disproportionate percentage of foreign (and Japanese) tourists, while other fascinating destinations see only a trickle of visitors at best.

To boost tourism, some of the less-visited communities are tearing down historic structures to put up huge new museums and cultural centers, often outsized versions of what was demolished. Visitors step off their buses, walk through the facility's gates, look at the exhibits for a little while, and then speed out of town, barely seeing the real historic places in the area. Other towns have put up interpretative maps, such as the city of Shimoda, directing visitors only to old temples and shrines. Still other communities are seeing value in interpreting their continuous historic past, such as in pioneering Yanaka where a series of sidewalk

panels inform the visitor of the evolution of the area. Nevertheless Japan remains, in my observation, underinterpreted for visitors and little literature exists in foreign languages to guide the visitor to experience its total legacy.

Despite the language barrier and high prices, Japan's cultural landscape is worth seeing and studying, not just for its historic resources. Japan has solved, over centuries, some of the dilemmas that now face the United States. Land-rich Americans often scoff at Japan's crowded places, yet the ability to live safely and relatively harmoniously in efficient, lively, attractive, densely-packed neighborhoods, as many Japanese do, could hold a key to our own future as we are forced to seek alternatives to sprawl in the early-21st century.

It will be interesting to see to what extent Japan's emerging holistic preservation movement can become an effective force for expanding the dialog over what constitutes its physical heritage as well as influencing the form that future growth will take. My bet is that it will eventually do both; however, progress will be measured not in years but in decades.

Selected Readings

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