

Japan as seen from architecture (2)

“Neighborly Harmony”

Marks Japan’s Urban Landscape

By Yamaga Kyoko

Preface

Whenever I drive from Narita airport to downtown Tokyo after returning from an overseas trip, I am always disappointed at the disharmonious landscape along the highway. Compared with the old, serene townscape in Europe and the verdurous surroundings of American cities such as Minneapolis, the landscape in Japan, particularly in the suburbs of big cities, is regrettably far from eye-filling. On the other hand, similarly disharmonious but bustling downtowns in Japan, like Tokyo’s Shibuya and Akihabara entertainment districts (*Photo 1*), are full of energy built up in the capital and give us a lot of fun. The Japanese suburban and urban landscapes are very different from each other as far as their outer attractiveness is concerned. But they have one thing in common: the absence of harmony. The same is true of Japan as a whole.

Let us see Japanese culture from the viewpoint of urban structure, which has produced the urban landscape, and urban architecture, an element making up Japanese cities.

Features of Japanese urban structure

Historically, Japanese urban structure has several characteristics. Below, I cite three of them.

Firstly, Japanese cities have no castle walls such as those of their Chinese and European counterparts. Accordingly, Japanese cities have no physical boundaries. This is in stark contrast with the European urban structure: the inside of the castle walls is the city center, while the outside is the suburb.

In various countries, particularly in Europe, a lively debate is going on about the concept of a “compact city.” The concept is aimed at reducing the movement of people and goods, and lessening the environmental load and financial burden by making cities more compact against the background of a declining population. In Japan, some local governments and other quarters have begun to deal seriously with the issue but are yet to formulate a clear vision. This is because Japanese city planners find it difficult to grasp a definite urban image because Japanese cities, without boundaries, have sprawled disorderly in an amoeba-like fashion (as shown in *Photo 2*). In Europe, on the other hand, it is easy to envision a “compact city” thanks to its historical background.

Secondly, the life of Japanese structures is short. Japanese culture is referred to as a “culture of wood” because most residential houses and other structures in the country are made of wood. Wooden structures are short-lived, and furthermore Japanese cities were often hit by big fires during the Edo period



Photo 1: The main street of Akihabara: a cityscape disharmonious but energetic

(1603-1867). Most Japanese those days considered that transportable household belongings last longer than fire-risking houses.

With structures becoming increasingly fire-proof, Japanese people have come to regard their residences as assets in recent years. But the traditional Japanese view of houses was that the residence is something tentative in this transient life. Residential structures had long been an ephemeral existence in this country. Japan’s “wood culture” is different in its historical background from the Western “stone culture” that has continuously inherited structures from the past.

Thirdly, houses in Japan stand on small lots in densely populated areas. About half of Japanese cities are located on the seacoast with mountains in the background and habitable land is limited. Moreover, since wooden structures cannot be built high, most residential houses are one-story. Japanese people have preferred and still prefer to see their residences earthbound. In other words, the Japanese still choose to live in low-rise, independent houses instead of mid-rise collective housing even in urban areas. Such a Japanese propensity has resulted in the creation of highly dense residential areas crowded with cramped detached houses.

Sliver Buildings & Cramped Houses

The present state of Japanese cities is that while they have no clear boundaries, cramped houses are constantly rebuilt on small lots in densely inhabited areas. In recent years, large-scale redevelopment projects such as the Roppongi Hills complex have emerged in Tokyo one after another. But in most parts of the capital, sliver buildings, known as “pencil buildings,” and cramped detached houses still stand wall to wall on small lots.

Occupants in many of such slender buildings are different from floor to floor. For example, the basement is used by restaurants, the ground floor by retailers such as convenience stores, the lower floors by service business companies such as hair-dressers, the higher floors by offices and the top floor by its owner. That the top floor of a sliver building is mostly used as the owner’s residence is easily discerned since it is a little more exquisitely

designed than other floors. The intermingling of small multi-tenant buildings is an Asiatic phenomenon, but in a way typically Japanese in the sense that they stand in good order on small lots.

Cramped houses have been born out of the need to build homes in dense clusters on small lots when inhabitable land areas are limited. Overwhelmingly prevalent are cheap houses built as bargain homes mainly in suburban areas under what are called “mini-development” projects (*Photo 3*). Such small houses are built even in midtown areas of big cities when land plots inherited by the kin of landowners are sold to pay inheritance tax. In such cases, several houses are built on a single tract where only one house once stood. Cramped houses built wall to wall can neither get enough sunlight nor be well ventilated. Such houses hardly make a good living environment.

To address the problem, some young architects have taken the initiative to design comfortable residences for construction on small lots (*Photo 4*). Their designs have been introduced in foreign countries as those for “small houses” and are highly regarded. Aiming to deal with the reality of Japanese cities, they have presented various new ideas about small residential houses focusing on openness and privacy so that each member of a family can have a small individual room.

Conclusion

Cities represent the totality of human activities. What cultural characteristic can we see from Japanese cities and architecture?

It may be proper to say that Japanese culture has a weak logical structure. In other words, it is a kind of structure with weak hierarchy where – in terms of relationship between parts and totality – parts are bundled to constitute totality rather than totality controls parts. As I have already stated, Japanese cities have no physical boundaries. But lacking are not

boundaries alone. They have no strong center or structural framework. Put another way, it may be said that they are devoid of God’s viewpoints.

Weak logical structure has no strong order. What I referred to at the outset as a disorderly landscape in Japan results from the absence of order to observe. Even so, they are not in anarchy. Some consciousness seeking harmony is working in Japanese people’s mind. I call such harmony “nearest neighbors’ harmony.”

In a Japanese community, a unit of neighborhood is called “*muko-sangen-ryodonari*,” meaning a group of six homes comprising the next-door neighbors on both sides and the three neighbors across the street as well as one’s own home. Japanese people feel satisfied if they can maintain good-neighborly relations with the five nearest neighbors. They hardly think of building good relations with all residents of their community.

Likewise, when a problem arises, Japanese do not try to settle it completely, but instead they accept it as it is and try to change the situation gradually. It may be that the Japanese have no norm of behavior under which they act. Urban space can be put to better use if owners of “pencil buildings” share their lots for bigger buildings. But the Japanese hardly think of using land in such a way. They only seek to effectively use land just for themselves. In building houses, they only try to make maximum use of small lots by accepting the fact that they have to build small houses on small lots.

Japanese people appear to have the tendency of acting according to the situation they are placed in. Such an attitude can be seen not only in their view of urban landscapes but also in all aspects of life. They shy away from bringing in strong structure and try to manage their own affairs, seeking harmony around themselves by accepting realities. Japanese cities represent the total expression of such a Japanese attitude. **JS**

Photo 2:

JEF



Overlooking west of Tokyo: a hodgepodge of high-rises, sliver buildings and cramped homes

Photo 3:

JEF



Dense residential area in Shinjuku dotted by typical homes built in “mini-development” projects

Photo 4:

Yamaga kyoko



Young Japanese architects suggest construction of “small houses” of comfort in limited space.

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