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Cultural Hurdles for Adaptive Re-use of Historic Buildings in Japan

Cherilyn Widell



A major component of the success of historic preservation in the U.S. has been the adaptive reuse of historic properties. Train stations have won new life as restaurants; old factories now house luxury apartments; and even grain silos have been converted into hotels, all with minimal disruption to the exterior architectural character of the structures.

In Japan, however, the historic preservation movement is only beginning to expand into activities beyond the preservation of shrines and temples, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings is still very rare. The reasons for this provide important insights into the cultural aspects of the use of space in Japan and the effects of Westernization in the country.

Historic architecture in Japan can be divided into two main categories. Those buildings constructed in styles prevalent before 1868, when Japan was opened to the West, are categorized by architectural historians as “traditional,” and all those built in Western styles are considered “modern.”

The Meiji Shrine, built in 1920, is characteristic of traditional Japanese architecture. The shrine is designed in pure Shinto style, which is marked by dignified simplicity. Courtesy Japanese Consulate General, New York.

The year 1868 marked the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), when the new Emperor made it government policy to promote the art, business and culture of the West. This policy rapidly transformed the architectural landscape from one consisting exclusively of one- and two-story wooden and clay structures into one that included large clapboard, brick and stone public buildings that incorporated Western building techniques and architectural styles. Newer buildings differ greatly from traditional Japanese structures in the materials they use, the size of rooms, the amount of windows and light, the heights of ceilings, and the design of stairs and fireplaces. They even exhibit a different attitude toward wearing shoes indoors.

In 1921 Frank Lloyd Wright termed this imitative architecture “the cold dead forms Japanese architects go abroad to copy,” but today Meiji Period buildings provide refreshing visual relief from the concrete “tofu-like” structures that dominate the post-World War II Japanese landscape. Yet every day these buildings are being demolished rather than put to a new use. Why?

Many observers have speculated that the “tear down and build” mentality is drawn from the Shinto tradition of rebuilding shrines, such as Ise, at regular intervals. But for at least 125 years, Japanese buildings also have been



Century-old "working houses" in Yougetsu Minshukan, Kyoto. Courtesy Beth Blummer.

systematically demolished and replaced as a result of political, economic and natural forces such as the Meiji Restoration, the Great Kanto Earthquake and World War II.

Rebuilding rather than rehabilitating cities is a key part of the Japanese economic machine. The high value of land in Japan is legendary, especially in "urbanization promotion" areas, and older Western-style buildings usually occupy some of the largest single developable parcels in these areas.

Government policies also encourage rebuilding. The transfer of development rights (TDR), a key preservation technique in the U.S., is poorly understood and rarely used in

Japan. And local governments have established "fireproof zones," offering subsidies for replacing wooden structures with nonflammable buildings, making it difficult to obtain permission to put a new use in an old building.

"Traditional" buildings fare no better. The groups of "traditional" buildings that still remain in urban settings in Japan date largely from the Edo (1600-1867), Meiji, or Taisho (1912-1926) periods. They are called *machinami*, a term that relates not only to the linear and horizontal effect of the wooden fronts of the buildings lined up on either side of the street.

When a collection of these buildings is identified and designated as a *machinami* (historic district), the people and activities that occupy the buildings, including the products and foods and festivals they produce, are as important as the preservation of buildings. In fact, some believe that without the people using the buildings in the original manner, there would be no *machinami*. Still, few local preservation ordinances

like those used in the U.S. exist, and without some protective mechanisms, the future of *machinami* is threatened and uncertain.

The design of traditional Japanese buildings is inextricably linked to the traditions and culture of the community though subtle architectural details that are difficult or impossible to adapt to trends in retailing or living styles.

For example, in an old-style shop, the selling activity took place in a front room on a *tatami* (straw mat) platform about one foot above ground level. Customers removed their shoes, warmed themselves by sitting on the floor next to a *hibachi* (earthen container with glowing embers) and were served tea and sweets or even lunch while the proprietor spread goods before them from shelves in the workroom or *kura* (storehouse) in the rear. The owner of the shop also lived in the rear. The opening or closing of the shop was signaled by the hanging of the *noren* (a cloth sign) outside the sliding front doors. This selling procedure created a very strong connection between neighborhood residents and the merchants who also lived there, and remnants of this link pervade business and cultural practices in Japan today.

Adaptive reuse of these properties would be difficult and ultimately destructive to their architectural character. Simply allowing people to wear shoes in the building

In traditional shops, customers remove their shoes and sit on a raised *tatami* platform, on which the proprietor spreads his goods. Photo by Cathy Tuttle.





Modern commercial street, Kyoto.
Courtesy Beth Blummer.

would require the removal of the raised floor structure, drastically changing the scale of the rooms. Removing the *tatami* would change the smell and feel of the room. Accommodating the handicapped would require the removal of the wooden threshold that secures the sliding wooden front doors. Contemporary selling standards require lighted display windows on the front of the building and display shelves throughout the store.

Even changes in the typical Japanese diet have implications for adaptive reuse. The average size of Japanese young people has become much larger; consequently, the traditional-sized *tatami* mats no longer fit the average young Japanese physique.

The preservation of these areas depends upon a continuation of traditional lifestyles, which seems unlikely. The ageless disregard of the young for things old has a new twist in Japan. The sons of the proprietors of these old-style shops have turned these once lively communities into quiet “bed”

towns, from which they commute into the center cities as salarymen. They would much prefer a new American-style house to the inconvenience of an old building.

The movement towards modernization and Westernization has become a cultural imperative for most of the younger generation. This has popularized the use of beds, couches, tables, chairs, material goods and probably most important of all, locked doors, which provide privacy. Old Japanese spaces with thin paper *shoji* (sliding doors) were designed for communal living and open communication, requiring politeness and consideration to ensure comfort to the large number of people who might live in a small space. The Japanese acceptance of the Western desire for privacy and insular spaces is resulting in the breakdown of the entire cultural approach towards living and working spaces.

Protective legislation, public education and design guidelines can be effective at protecting the architectural skeletons of towns. However, preservation must go beyond saving facades. Economic and cultural change can sap the soul and regional character of buildings and towns. The essence of preservation should be finding the *machinami* of a place, the strong relationship between buildings, spaces, community and people, and helping it to survive.

BUDDHIST PRIESTS 2: DEVELOPERS 1

Cathy Tuttle

There is an old saying in Kyoto: “You can’t fight the priests.” In their rush to transform the city in time for Kyoto’s 1,200-year anniversary in 1994, real estate developers and Kyoto government officials are ignoring that proverb.

The priests are opposed to two current development proposals: the expansion of the main railroad station and a remodel of the Kyoto Hotel. Both projects take advantage of a 1988 law that allows buildings to exceed the 145-foot height of the five-story pagoda of Toji Temple, an enduring symbol of Kyoto, built in the late Heian period (799-1185).

Buddhist priests, organized in a group representing more than 1,000 Kyoto temples, have found an effective way to do battle against development: They are using the power of tourism to challenge Kyoto’s new high-rise construction boom.

Kyoto annually hosts 40 million tourists, who contribute one quarter of the city’s income. In the most recent conflict, priests