

The Cultural Landscape and Osaka: The Creative Use of Historic Buildings and the Cultural Landscape

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- Strasbourg and Le Havre

UN-HABITAT's 1966 "Istanbul Declaration" endorsed the concept of "the city as the engine of growth." From a global perspective, the world's population is expected to reach 8.2 billion by 2030. And it is this very "city" that will become the receptacle for this population explosion.

Unlike our discussions to date, in which the "city" was viewed merely as a breeding ground for various problems, from now on it will become imperative that we assume the stance of evaluating the "city" in a positive light; as a locus with tremendous potential for creating new cultures. Needless to say, in such cases, growth management or paying attention to "smart growth" will become indispensable.

It is evident that the unique landscapes that are the products of the unique history of each city are also elements that enhance the appeal of the city as "the engine of growth." In the fall of 2006, I visited a number of provincial cities in France, including Strasbourg and Le Havre, and conducted research on cultural administration and the implementation status of measures for preserving their urban landscapes. Strasbourg, in particular, is noted for having completely restored its city center – demolished in the bombings of World War II – to its former state by referring to materials such as pre-war photographs.

Le Havre, on the other hand, which was under German occupation during World War II, also had its city center destroyed as a result of the bombings of the Allied forces. In Le Havre's case, the renowned architect Auguste Perret drew up a master plan after the war and the city was restored as a well-planned urban district. However, the citizens did not necessarily embrace this newly emerged city skyline of concrete and steel and some even thought of the streets lined with office buildings as being "ugly." However, last year the architectural structures built from the 1950s to the 1960s were recognized as being "poetry in concrete" and subsequently designated as a World Heritage site. The tables had turned on the assessment of the landscape. This turnaround was not limited to the cityscape but also included the interior of the buildings. The apartments opened to the public have been restored in the style of the 1950s mode of modern living and are extremely attractive to the modern eye. This is a case where not only the city landscape, which had long been

considered “ugly,” but also the everyday living spaces that grew out of the “city” received global recognition and were recognized as a cultural asset.

The urban landscape, which had formerly been derided by its citizens, had now become the source of their pride. What is considered to be aesthetically pleasing? What type of landscape becomes the source of pride for its citizens? The assessments and criteria for such are relative. They tend to change with time according to the cultural context of the specific region, as well as the social context when considered from a global perspective. However, it is evident from the examples of the two cities, that the presence of historic buildings and the maintenance of the historic urban landscapes at least, have been instrumental in “restoring civic pride” and “arousing the creativity of the city.”

- The Cultural Landscape and the City

Turning our attention now to the cities of Japan, we must ask how we can evaluate the urban landscapes from a cultural perspective and turn this endeavor into a creative undertaking. Starting this year, I have been taking part in new investigative research on cultural landscapes endorsed by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. In Japan, historic sites and prominent scenic areas have been defined as “historic landmarks and places of scenic beauty” under a unique concept of cultural assets, somewhat similar to the concept of “cultural landscape,” which has come to be known by the term “world heritage site.”

The Agency for Cultural Affairs is currently conducting research in order to select “cultural landscapes,” a new concept in cultural assets, from superior industrial landscapes, which continue to flourish among the daily lives of their citizens to this day. Earlier agricultural landscapes such as rice terraces, forestry landscapes such as planted woodlands, and fishing landscapes such as fishing villages are also in the process of being registered.

In 2006, studies on mining and industrial landscapes have also begun. The framework for the studies has been expanded to include urban industrial landscapes, in addition to mines and factories. The Agency plans to seek recommendations from local governments, narrow down the prospective candidates in the coming year and thereupon commence detailed study. This movement by the government to have the industrial landscapes of modern cities registered as cultural assets is a world-first, and the stance of the government on recognizing the cities of today as the cultural fruits of mankind is certainly an ambitious undertaking and must be recognized as such.

In the process, the idea of the “cultural landscapes of the cities” that I propose will not be limited to historic landscapes but will also encompass iconic streets of

office buildings, scenically restored main streets, various neighborhoods including amusement quarters and shopping districts, and even hot springs resorts.

I hope to identify landscapes that are well-liked by today's citizens and that are trend-setting areas which provide the cities with their distinctive characteristics. Taking Osaka as an example, the main streets and business districts such as Midosuji, the landscapes of Senba dotted with leading examples of modern architecture, the waterfront landscapes of Nakanoshima, and the amusement quarters of Dotonbori come to mind.

- Raising awareness of historic landmarks

In October 2006 the Urban Research Plaza/Senba Art Café held the Senba Architectural Festival, for which I acted as producer. We rented a number of inner city buildings of modern design and "Machiya" (tradesmen's houses) that were constructed in the 1920s and the 1930s, exhibited installations by artists, and held dramatic and musical performances. At the same time, we formed a partnership with Asahi Shimbun and cosponsored a symposium on the uses of modern architecture. We also conducted community tours of historic landmarks with the cooperation of citizen volunteers. By using art as a medium, this project endeavored to raise citizens' awareness of the existence of modern architecture and consequently to heighten public interest in the many layers of historic landscapes embedded in the inner city.

During the Senba Architectural Festival, I also gathered the more than twenty-thousand postcards and other materials containing depiction of landscapes from my personal collection and out of the nearly ten thousand pieces on Osaka, selected a hundred or so examples, uploaded them on to a website and made them accessible to the general public in the form of a digital archive called the "Great Osaka Time Tunnel." One of the innovations of this archive was that it utilized a scheme of online payment, which enabled clearance of legal agreements on copyrights and ownership. The 1942 aerial photograph, which is a product of the research of the COE Program at the Osaka City University Graduate School of Literature and Human Sciences, is also linked to this archive.

This project, by storing the historical landscapes in digital archives, aimed to provide materials not only for research, but also for urban programs and citizen-based city planning. The series of undertakings described above of the evaluation of the cultural landscape, the reevaluation of modern buildings and the archiving of urban landscapes did not merely constitute the process of historical research, but also provided an invaluable perspective on utilizing historical assets, as well as basic data needed for actual implementation. Moreover, I feel, the project has given momentum to the revival of civic pride among citizens.

- The Great Osaka Era

In the following section I will take Osaka as an example in examining the creative uses of historic buildings and landscapes. Looking back through the ages, it must be pointed out that a number of eras stand out significantly when considering the Osaka of today, i.e. the era of the Naniwanomiya approximately 1400 years ago, when Shitennoji was built, and the era in which the Ishiyama-Honganji flourished. However, if we are to focus on the present day urban landscape of Osaka, it goes without saying that the age of construction of the castle town by the warlords under the ruling of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi was an epoch-making era in that it defined the placement of the city blocks and waterways of the city. Osaka was modernized by building on top of this premodern castle town.

Moreover the “Great Osaka Era” is also significant in that it laid the foundations for the modern day City of Osaka. In 1925, Osaka expanded its city limits by incorporating the neighboring cities and towns. In 1889 at the time of incorporation, the city of Osaka measured approximately a mere 15 hectares with a population of only 500,000, but by 1897, at the time of the first expansion of its city limits, Osaka had grown to 55 hectares with a population of approximately 750,000 and by 1925, at the time of the second expansion of its city limits, it had grown to a megalopolis with an area of 181 hectares and a population of approximately 2.1 million. The urban planning design implemented during this era went against conventional thinking in that it introduced the concept of acquiring surrounding non-urbanized farming villages and wastelands as land necessary for the city in the future.

With this second expansion of the city boundaries as the turning point, Osaka developed into an industrial city of such magnitude that it came to be known as the “Manchester of the Orient” and hailed as the “Greatest Commercial and Industrial City in the Orient” in the Osaka City Anthem. Osaka was at that time one of the world-class cities of East Asia and a leading modern city in Asia. Its citizens described the city as “Great Osaka.” Contemporary critics, however, saw Osaka as the incarnation of the mass production and mass consumption society of that time and called it “the America of Japan” or “the New York of Japan.”

Trunk road networks and high-speed railway networks took shape as a result of urban planning. In 1926 construction began on the Midosuji, under which a high-speed railway bisecting the city center from North to South was to run. This was a main street, which was to become a tangible symbol of the “three dimensional city.” At the same time, facilities indispensable to world-class cities at that time, including a central wholesale market, public markets, the Kita Municipal Hall, Nakanoshima Park, the Tennoji Museum, the Electric Science Museum, the reconstruction of the main

tower of Osaka Castle, the secondary construction repairs to the Port of Osaka, and an international hotel (Shin-Osaka Hotel), were developed.

What is noteworthy about these developments is the collaboration between the private and public sectors in major construction. In the Midosuji construction a system of beneficiary-payment was adopted, which required not only the beneficiaries along the route, but also the citizens of the neighboring city blocks to foot a portion of the construction bills. The main tower of the Osaka Castle, which is also a historical museum, was restored through the contributions of the citizens. The international hotel development became a model plan for other cities as it adopted the method of constructing the facility as a public-works project and then having it run by a private enterprise.

- Reevaluation of “Great Osaka”

In this section I would like to reevaluate the “Great Osaka Era” as a source of citizen pride and emphasize the implications of effectively utilizing historic assets reminiscent of the atmosphere of that era. The 1920s and 30s was a time when modernism was trumpeted as the ideal, traditional and foreign cultures were fused, and there was an eagerness for new creations that were completely different from what had come before.

I believe it is the revival of this “Zeitgeist” that is required from us today. Moreover, in the urban planning of “Great Osaka” major emphasis was placed on the concepts of “city character” and “urban beauty.” The basic principle behind the first issue of the monthly publication, “Great Osaka,” was that cities, like people, possessed “character” and the publication was intended to improve such “character.” Osaka was also unique in that it put a great deal of effort into the beautification of the city. In fact, Osaka was a pioneer among cities in establishing a “Scenic Area” in the heart of the city, which was a revolutionary concept in Japan at that time.

Osaka’s synchronicity with the other world-class cities, while embracing new creations grounded in tradition, embodies the very spirit of the “Great Osaka Era.” There we find the Osaka civilian temperament that frowns on “imitation.” The unique Osaka mind-set has led to a number of unique public works, including the selection of the ginkgo, which is a species of tree indigenous to the Orient, to line the Midosuji; and the restoration project of the main tower of the Osaka castle funded by private contributions, which recreated a rare concrete and steel replica of the main tower of the castle, based on the image of the castle found on a contemporary screen painting on the latter-day stone walls. The founding principle of the Osaka University of Commerce, the predecessor of the Osaka City University, also declared that (the school) “should not be a copy” of the Imperial Universities.

The endeavor on the part of the city of Osaka to utilize the historic buildings and landscape is not a product of mere “nostalgia” but rather an attempt to discover a newfound urban appeal and could potentially become the source of civic pride for its citizens. It is also a source of urban “branding” as well as a “center” and a “foothold” for all new creations.

The pamphlet “The Osaka Municipal Government of 1937,” published by the City of Osaka in 1937, marked the completion of reconstruction after the city was demolished in the massive flooding disaster following the Muroto Typhoon. In the beginning of the pamphlet we find the following passage:

There are never-ending disputes in the municipal governments across the nation. There are even reports of abhorrent scandals. However, Osaka alone is free of such notoriety. Our municipal government is the model for all governments throughout the country and we, the citizens, are the envy of the entire nation. I believe that one of the main factors that has made this possible is the government’s policy of putting “public works first,” in addition to the open-minded citizens who took on the burden of the public works. Our success has been a product of “the enterprising spirit and the volunteer efforts of our citizens.” It should also be pointed out that the existence of a strong platform for free speech for arousing public debate, untainted by politics, which stirred up “a fervent love-Osaka movement” in times of crises, was also instrumental in making Osaka an object of adoration for the entire nation.

I firmly believe that we should once again focus our attention on this relationship between the citizens and the municipal government, which was established nearly 70 years ago, and that the spirit of this relationship should be reflected in the practices of Osaka’s citizens and the municipal government.