

Characteristics of Japanese Housing and the Subject of Study on Culture of House

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Characteristics of Japanese House

1. Typology of Japanese Traditional House

Morphologically, the Japanese traditional houses can be roughly divided into four types. The first prototype is the detached farmhouse. The second is the detached house with a walled-in garden for samurai, court nobles, and priests. The type was called mansion or manor house. The difference is that the latter, generally has a clear demarcation by a privacy wall or fence.

The third prototype is a house combined with a shop for townspeople who were engaged in commerce or industry. This is located in lots, which are narrow in width and long in depth, with little space between neighboring houses. This housing type for tradesmen is called "machiya". The fourth prototype is the row house for craftsmen and laborers. It is a single-story row house that shares a ridge and each housing unit is divided by a party wall. Traditionally, the row house provided the largest number of accommodations in urban areas.

2. Japanese Townhouse (*Machiya*)

The basic unit for commerce and handicraft in Japanese cities in the pre-modern era was the townhouse, called *machiya*. It served as a place for both working and living. Usually the *machiya* is composed of the *mise* or shop, which faces the street, and the dwelling areas situated on the back.

The limited frontage available onto the street had to be shared among many merchants, and each resident had to pay a frontage tax. As a result, the lots become long and narrow. These *Machiya* seems to have been built continuously, but actually each building is an independent unit, i.e. the walls of adjacent buildings are separated. Some *Machiya* districts are specified as preservation areas that become popular tourist spots.

3. Detached House in Suburbs Before the War

In the Meiji Era, when the Japanese Modern Period began, the urban population rapidly increased due to industrial progress. In the course of modernization, landowners and landlords ran the business of rental housing. Tradesmen and manufactures that gained prosperity and the newly appeared salaried men also ran small rental housing business. Those rental houses were generally row houses, which give rise to high-density urban areas. Some of them

were built with high quality standards mainly for the new high-salary earners.

As the quality of the urban environment at the center extremely deteriorated, the suburb started to be recognized as residential area for families. It was the private railway company, which actively developed the housing areas in the suburbs.

On the pamphlet dated in 1910, there were the following description:

"The beautiful city once well known for its canals has past like a past dream, in the smoky town under a dark sky you live, you miserable Osakaites?.... Those who are planning to leave the dusty Osaka and set up a residence in a suburb, please look at the suburban residences built along the railway..... Those who are going to commute to the city to cudgel brains and ease tired bodies in their homes should wake up in the morning by a rooster's cry in a backyard, enjoy in the evening chirps of crickets in a garden, and taste homemade fresh vegetables...."

In Japan, just in those days, there was an increasing interest in the Garden City proposed by Ebenezer Howard, it can be said that Howard's Garden City did influenced the suburban development in Osaka. Although, Howard's city was self-sufficient, and in Japan the idea resulted in the "Garden Suburb" born in England around the same period as the Garden City. In these new Japanese suburban residential areas, the roads were generally laid in grid pattern, similar to those of the samurai district. All these suburban residential districts in Japan, developed during the first half of the 19th century, have now become high-standard residential areas.

4. Housing Development after the War

With the recovery of the postwar industry, the process of population inflow to the metropolitan area started again. As the result, private developers began to build and sell houses actively. The houses in the period can be roughly divided into two types.

One was "housing for installment sale" in the outskirts of the cities where the access was comparatively easy although the land price did not rise rapidly. Most of those houses were small. Nowadays, these areas are considered as inner area of Japanese cities, in which the housing has become old, and inhabited by old aged dwellers.

The second type includes the high-quality standard houses built in suburbs along railway lines. Among these kinds of development, the estate of multi-family housing and detached house were remarkable as a trigger for the housing industry development. The re-fabricated detached houses were usually supplied by house maker. Moreover, the rapid supplement of "Mansion" was caused by the progress of building technique.

Some Interesting Points of the Subject of Study on Culture of House

1. Inherited House

In Japanese traditional society, the concept of "ie," (which literally means a house), has played an important role in the family as a social unit. The "ie," far

from its literal connection, means a system of successive family genealogy. This idea of emphasizing "le" still remains strong in agricultural areas, where "le" should last forever with the farmland.

In the period of urban expansion many of the youth migrated from the countryside, formed nuclear families and now are facing their advanced age. Therefore, they left the "le" which still remains strong in their home communities. However, facing the advanced age in large cities, they wish to live together with son or daughter's family, an arrangement with they has not experienced. Additionally, they are going to leave a house behind which they did not inherit.

Even for a detached house, it is a rare case that a house has a continues succession by a single "le", especially in large cities. It is necessary to clarify the actual conditions on this matter, and then to consider both the inheritances systems of privately owned detached houses of people's opinion about it. Moreover, a detached house and be easily improved through remodeling or enlargement of its physical arrangement.

What functions and forms are required according to the life stages of a family? What kind of space is valued? How is realized the image of a desirable house? By such kind of consideration, the role of a house in conveying culture from one generation to another should be clarified.

2. Garden and Fence

In the Japanese house for common people, front yard of the main house of the farm (house) is called *Kado*, and *Niwa* is the earth floor inside of main house. At present day, Japanese word *Niwa* means garden, *Kado* could be interpreted as the *Mandan* of Korean house.

In the traditional town house *Machiya* there is a sophisticated courtyard called *Senzai*, and an indoor passage of earth floor called *Toriniwa*. The garden of morden detached house might be born as a completely new culture affected by these existence. The private garden has the important role to compose the network of greenery in the area.

Japanese detached houses are mostly surrounded by hedge. It has been popular in farmhouse, occasionally high to serve as a windbreak. In other cases, the hedge was sometimes used in Samurai houses. Prof. Takatori said that the area inside of hedge is protected by power of the spirit of the greenery, the same as the Japanese shrine is protected by the grove. In Japan, the hedge offers an important green environment to the street as public space. It is interesting phenomenon that hedge are rare in housing areas in Korean cities.

In Japan, boundary has a symbolic characteristic to indicate the relation between inside and outside, and does not result a strongly division. For example, boundary is sometimes set up by the change of level. It can be understood by the fact the Japanese at times say, "threshold is high". Inside and outside of Japanese house, there are many examples of such types of boundary, and Prof. Ito said that this effect of boundary is supporting on the mind.

3. Permanence of *Genkan* & Change the Traditional Way of Sitting

In Japanese house *Genkan* is one important space. *Genkan* is the "face" of the house, where people come into the house through it. Take off the shoes and come into the room. This spatial system is originated from Samurai house and we can see the trace of the characteristics of *Genkan* in the entrance of multi-family housing.

In Japan, sitting on the floor is a traditional culture, although sitting on chair style was introduced to the living room and dining room. Therefore, two sitting styles coexist in one house. According to a certain study, in Japan, in the room furnishes with table and chair, usually people sit on the floor when they feel relaxed. As a result of two mixed-ways of sitting, furniture and supplies are arranged in two viewpoints, and the interiorscape has a tendency to become confused.

4. Townscape Planning and HOPE Planning

In Japan, in the process of urban development, the interest in townscape become interesting. About this process, see "Method of Urban Design"¹. In the local environment, important methods to arrange the townscape have been applied. For example, the effect of hedge is significant; thus many towns attempt to improve the way to make or to keep the hedge in good condition. In such circumstances, Ministry of Construction of Japan carried out the HOPE Plan in 1982. HOPE is the abbreviation of Housing with Proper Environment, and the purpose is to promote the supply of housing fitted with proper characteristics of each region. Precisely,

- ① to create housing with high level of quality
- ② housing practice by initiative and ordinary of regional people
- ③ take a broad policy from regional housing culture to housing production system

Through the trial of HOPE plan, many subjects of environmental arrangement are recognized, in response of townscape planning.

In 1995, the great earthquake attacked the region around Kobe, and people have made big efforts for the recovery. Observing the actual condition of rebuilt area, some hints of the transformation of future living environment are understood. One of them is the outstanding use of prefabricate products. Considering this condition, in order to create a unique townscape it is necessary to consider even the use of pre fabricated products.

5. Necessity of Finding Out & Evaluating Spatial Context of Asian Cities

Vernacular or traditional urban areas of Asian cities are generally composed of wooden and low-rise buildings. Even in the inner area of Tokyo, the modern metropolis of Japan, volume ratio of used land is less than 100% on average.

¹ K. Narimi et. al.(1990). Method of Urban Design (in Japanese), Gakugei-shuppansha. Translated in Korean (1997).

This means, in inner area of Tokyo, stories of buildings are at most 2 stories on average.

The pressure to optimize land use necessitates the destruction of the low-rise wooden buildings and the construction of mid and high rise concrete buildings. From the end of 1960s, in European cities, high rise housing has a tendency to be avoided, on the contrary, in Asian cities they are in full boom.

It is an important subject of study that why in European cities high rise housing are avoided while in Asian cities welcomed. On the other hand, we have to pay attention whether this kind of changes are reorganizing or destroying the context of vernacular or traditional urban spaces of Asian cities. We have to find out how to control the spatial change by high rise housing and how to preserve the valuable urban area composed of wooden low-rise buildings.

In European cities, from 1970s, the method of carrying out environmental arrangement, which maintains the historic and cultural context of an area, has become popular. In Asian urban area, which wooden low-rise buildings compose presents a different condition.

However, the spatial context of Asian cities is unique and has its own values, which must be respected and maintained. Thus, we must consider what is unique and worthy of preserving. Even if we were not able to preserve the actual building structures in vernacular or traditional areas as it has been done in Paris and other European cities, I would like to propose that we should consider the preservation of the unique spatial pattern of Asian cities.

Biography

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Dr. Narumi's major field is urban design and planning, and has carried out many field surveys in Korea and Indonesia and other areas also.

He has published widely in the areas of urban design and planning, and received the prestigious Suntory Arts and Sciences Award in 1988 for his publication on "Urban Climax : Life-spatiology as Phenomenology, Chikuma-shobou Co. , in Japanese (1987), and OKUI Award by the Society of Urban Studies of Japan for his editorship on "Urban Arrangement from Town-scape Design", Gakugei-shuppansha Co. , in Japanese(1998).