

## Book Reviews

### *The Japanese City*

P.P. Karan and Kristin Stapleton, eds.

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Reviewed by **James A. Clapp**

Urbanization is too varied and too complex a process to be easily snared by a single metaphor. Yet at the same time, the city's protean nature can be daunting to engage without that most useful of linguistic conveniences.

Cities have long been viewed, more so by "right-brained" urbanists, poets, and lyricists, among others, in terms of their *personalities*: "brawny" Chicago, "frenetic" New York, "romantic" Paris, "mysterious" Venice, etc. Often, and sometimes because of such imagery, our actual experiences with such places confirm these metaphors. Even before my reading of *The Japanese City*, my candidate personality metaphor for a city like Tokyo would have been something like "ambivalent," or some equivalent term to indicate its seemingly unresolved identity. The same could not be said of Kyoto, or Nagasaki, but Tokyo is a "world" city, perhaps the world's most populous, and the buckle to Japan's flourishing megalopolitan belt. That salience is reflected in *The Japanese City* as well, a book of essays, written mostly by Westerners—and most of them geographers.

The majority of Americans of this reviewer's generation probably formed at least part of their impression of the Japanese city on one or two popular images. Mine were formed (and somewhat misinformed) on both such images.

The first image is of some guy in a silly-looking dinosaur suit climbing out of a soundstage pool and trampling through the center of a modular Japanese metropolis. The fire-spitting dragon and related megamonsters wrought havoc on Japanese cities (and even, New York City) in a long-running series of cult sci-fi "B" films.

The second image is more realistic, and more sinister: the vast panorama of flattened urban landscape and twisted towers and bridges, punctuated by the occasional shell of a building of sturdier construction, of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or fire-bombed Tokyo.

In the first images, Japanese and western movie actors overact in badly-synched dubbed dialogue, racing across the movie screen in search of the appropriate militaristic answer to vanquish the reptilian aggressor and save the city. In the second, newsreels and stills of shocked, scorched, and irradiated victims of nuclear holocaust are grim testament that military might and technology can be monsters of more devastating proportions.

The two images are, of course, not unrelated. *Godzilla* and related monsters of urban devastation seem apt products of a form of cultural paranoia that may well have had its roots when Perry's black ships pried open an unwelcoming Japan in the late 19th century. (True, a vanguard of Jesuits [in black robes] had arrived three cen-

turies earlier seeking souls and trade concessions, but that 'godzilla' came ashore very carefully.) And not to be discounted are the gods of the seismic netherworld that have conspired to make this shakey archipelago perhaps the most perilous perch for cities on earth.

But once wedged open, and despite its limited space, arable land, and an unstable geology, in a relatively short historical span Japan evolved from a country of castle towns and villages to a constellation of thriving metropolitan areas strung out along its southeastern shores. Japan had no history of great cities in an antique period like Athens, Jerusalem, Rome, and Memphis. It's first cities begin to appear, according to P.P. Karan in the first essay, in the Eighth Century Nara period. It appears that, at least in the capital cities, town planning was orthogonal, copying the grid layout with imperial and temple precincts and street orientation to the cardinal points of the compass familiar not only in the contemporaneous Chang'an but also mirroring the *cardo* and *decumanus* layout of early western European cities. Japan was fairly isolated, but not hermetically-sealed.

But most of Japan's cities were founded on the urban pillars of its feudal social organization. These consisted primarily the castle towns (*joka machi*) ruled by regional warlords and their *samurai*, as well as market, post-station, religious and spa towns. In the past 125 years, from the start of modernization in the Meiji era to the present the growth of cities on this feudal base was rapid. Following the familiar shift from a predominance of primary economic activity to manufacturing the proportion of population living in cities more than doubled from 1868 to 1930, increasing to 37 percent by 1950 (with a brief drop back in some of the biggest cities because of wartime evacuation). Today seventy-five percent of the population is urbanized, nearly two-thirds of which lives in the megalopolitan belt consisting of Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, but occupying only about 3 percent of the country's land.

Since we know what a small country this is (the U.S. has twice its population but is 26 times larger) a calculator isn't needed to demonstrate that Japanese urbanites live a rather high densities. Perhaps the most accessible to the general reader, Cotton Mather's essay on "Urban Landscapes of Japan" illustrates how this demographic is reflected in the physical features of Japan's urbanism. Mather presents and illustrates terms like "interdigitation" (what planners would call "mixed-use"), "compactness," "meticulous organization," and "immaculateness," as primary characteristics, and explains why Japanese cities favor gardens (although open space is a paltry one metre/person, compare to New York's 12 metres), eschew lawns, don't mind cobwebs of utility lines, and prefers walled and gated residential areas. Indeed, these are characteristics that even the casual tourist must notice and can appreciate having explained in terms of environment and culture.

There is another popular image--that of Japan as an 'imitative' or copycat society--that appears to have an urban counterpart. Whatever the validity of that image, perhaps formed in the immediate postwar days when "made in Japan" quite justifiably meant a product of inferior manufacture and quality, there is an ersatz character to Japanese contemporary architecture that points to a curious accommodation to modernism. Roman Cybriwsky's essay, "From Castle Town to Manhattan Town," recounts Tokyo's urban identity crisis as follows:

Tokyo is unusual among cities in having so many landmarks that copy those from abroad. This is a fascinating characteristic: here is an extremely powerful and influential city—indeed, one of the greatest urban centers in the world—yet, many of its most visible public identity symbols are taken from other cultures. More than that, they copy directly the very identity symbols of famous cities far away. This makes Tokyo appear to be a “wannabe” city and suggests some sort of urban inferiority complex is at work. When applied to Tokyo, urban studies might be the province not just of urban geographers, urban historians, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and the like but also a subject for “urban psychologists” and “urban psychoanalysts” (75).

More than one American architect has moaned at being invited to provide Tokyo or some other Japanese metropolis with a building or other development that resembles or mimes something in Manhattan, Paris, or Athens. This is a proclivity that is the urban equivalent of the fondness of the *parvenu* for the latest fashion, designer label, or other conspicuous emblem of the combination of monetary success and social aspiration.

This penchant for imitation doesn't seem to be moderated by the ever-present seismic precariousness of most of the cities in the Tokaidopolis. Joining the Icarian race for the world's highest building proposals such as that for Millennium Tower—a completely self-contained building in Tokyo Bay almost twice the height of Chicago's Sears Tower that would be home for fifty thousand residents—does not

seem to strike its proponents as a victory of vanity over sanity.

Other essays are more particularistic, the most interesting ones to this reviewer are those dealing with suburbanization, land-use regulation, and social stratification. The last of these, by Fujita and Hill, presents data and interpretation about social life in Osaka that makes for interesting comparison with the more socially-pluralistic American urban condition.

There are some selections that were arguably written for insiders about academic quibbles and that read somewhat like transcripts of disagreements between a couple of doctoral committee members. Kidder's paper on the important topic of environmental pollution gets detoured into side issues about whether another author's (not in the volume) theories about the psychological effects of environmental disasters apply to the Japanese urban context. Likewise, Burton's essay on “The Image of Tokyo in Sôseki's Fiction” squanders an enticing topic on meanderings among sub-references: “As a preface to a consideration of several of these critics findings, I would like to discuss an essay by the French critic Jean Jacques Origas that was influential in bringing Maeda and other scholars' attention to Sôseki as a chronicler of the city” (222). Sôseki gets lost like a tourist in the warren of Tokyo streets.

But in sum, for all of the pitfalls obvious in books that are collections of essays, this is a worthy contribution to a neglected subject in comparative urban studies. It is about time that more urban scholars are taking to trampling about in the Japanese city. If it can thrive in spite of atomic bombs, seismic subductions, and *Godzilla*, a few more curious urbanists cannot be much of a threat.