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M. R. G. Conzen and Japanese castle towns

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My only meeting with M. R. G. Conzen was at the ISUF conference in Birmingham, UK in 1997. He listened to my paper on Japanese castle towns and afterwards eagerly discussed it with me, especially the significance of a geographical approach. He also presented me with a copy of the second edition of his book on the English castle town of Alnwick (Conzen, 1969). Following the conference, I spent a fortnight visiting castle towns in England and Scotland, and was very conscious of some of their similarities to Japanese castle towns that Conzen had drawn to my attention at the conference. Some years later, after Conzen's death, I was intrigued to read a paper, written by him in 1980, that compared Japanese and British castle towns. My reflections that follow here were stimulated by that paper, which was part of a collection of his posthumously published writings (Conzen, 2004).

Conzen's remarkable insights into Japanese castle towns are founded on highly perceptive field study, an exceptional collection of maps and plans acquired during his travels in Japan, and his ability to view Japanese history and society both in terms of their commonalities with other parts of the world and their distinctive features. In light of his comparison of British and Japanese castle towns, I should like to add a few thoughts of my own.

British castle towns were constructed during the Middle Ages: they have undergone a long process of transformation, and each town contains vestiges of development, if not planning, that has taken place in various periods. Japanese castle towns, in contrast, were established within a short time span, between the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century. This was the beginning of the 'early modern' or 'Edo' period, which lasted until the mid-nineteenth century, when a centralized government was established in Japan and the process of industrialization began.

The model of the early modern castle town in Japan was developed under strong rulers, Nobunaga Oda and Hideyoshi Toyotomi, who had played an important role in the unification of the country in the late-sixteenth century. In the Edo period, castle towns were constructed by feudal lords as centres for their land governance. During this period, a number of rulers, such as Kiyomasa Kato, Cagetora Todo and Enshu Kobori, built fine castles and undertook the successful planning of towns. Sometimes they were ordered by Shogun Tokugawa to help construct other castle towns. Thus the practice of castle town construction spread through-out Japan within a short span of time. The head of each castle town, delegated by Tokugawa, was the sovereign of his territory as well as the governor. He was in charge of the administration of the castle town and its neighbouring areas during the peaceful period of the 'Pax Tokugawa' from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Japanese castle towns are symbols of regional integration: they were designed in relation to the surrounding topography. They embody rationality, functionality, and aesthetic sensibility. The whole town was made up of a grid pattern of street blocks. The land zoning based on social class that accompanied the feudal system in Japan also served as a means of functional zoning. This zoning system was restored during the modernization period after the nineteenth century. Most of the former samurai areas were maintained as residential areas, and the former *machiya* areas (townhouses with shops and storehouses) remained as commercial areas. Most of these planning arrangements and associated building styles continued at least until about 1960, unless there was a major fire

or other disaster.

Conzen understood the similarities and differences between British and Japanese castle towns. He analysed them in relation to a number of aspects. British

> towns with castles can have plans belonging to any historical period from Anglo-Saxon times to the fourteenth century, including the survival of Roman plan features. Also, persistence of towns on the same site throughout their historical life is the rule rather than the exception. Thus, towns with considerable growth during the Middle Ages have plans composed of parts belonging to different periods and therefore displaying different period styles of town planning. Their plans show historical layering or period compoundedness. Moreover, each period may produce a number of different regional plan styles (Conzen, 2004, p. 171).

In contrast, Japanese castle towns are based on a common conceptualization and methodology. Before the period of castle town building, the commercial area, the warriors' area and the temple area were physically separated. When the new castle town was constructed, it was a requirement that these areas were relocated within the new town but laid out according to the principles and methods used previously. In short, such towns may be referred to as 'assembled towns'. A well-defined system of functional and social-class zoning was implemented. Nevertheless, the towns were designed by adapting to the complex topography of mountains, valleys and rivers, and this gave each in detail a unique spatial form. Moreover, the design had provision for the effective utilization of underground water and was conceptualized with the aim of beautifying the landscape by ensuring scenic views and vistas.

Though Japanese castle towns follow common planning principles, there is no consolidated historical document on this subject. This contrasts with Japanese gardening, for which there is a formal textbook. However, Japanese castle towns were depicted in many picture maps as being worlds that were integrated with their surrounding areas, and these picture maps are valued as works of art. In a sense, Japanese castle towns can be thought of as products of designed diversification: common planning principles were followed but the outcome was diversity that reflected adaptation to topography. In contrast, the diversified form of British castle towns is more a product of a succession of historical 'layers', each of which reflects the fashions of the time when it was created.

According to Conzen (2004, p. 171), 'during most of the earlier and much of the high Middle Ages in Europe, geometrically conceived plan ideas commonly tended to lose their geometric rigidity in actual application to a site'. Put simply, curved streets and non-parallel grids were developed in Europe. This was done for two reasons: first, there was no overriding religious or geomantic prescript for town layouts; and second, a practical approach to town layouts was adopted, in that plan ideas were adapted to the existing morphological framework. The morphological diversification of British castle towns arose from this adaptive method rather than the prescriptive method of laying out towns.

Japanese castle towns were also laid out 'adaptively' according to topographical and climatic constraints with regard to matters such as the maintenance and quality control of the water supply and sewerage systems, and the planning of land use for water resource management. Landscape planning with regard to seasonal winds was also followed for the location of religious precincts. The early picture map of the town of Shinjö was drawn as a prescriptive model of the castle town, but in reality the town has a more diversified urban form, reflecting the application of the adaptive method, which involved the consideration of factors such as topography, river flow, and a vista towards Mt Chokai.

In western Japan the layout of the peripheral parts of castle towns, such as Himeji, was based on the *jôri* system, which is an ancient system for agricultural land management. The *jôri* system involves adapting to topography: for instance, grids were laid out based on this system. A warped grid was developed in which the layout of streets was influenced by the vista of the castle, main turrets, and mountains.

Morphological diversification of castle towns in Europe arose from the social system. Conzen (2004, p.172) states that

> the medieval European town was corporate in character, enjoying the freedom and measure of self-government bestowed by a town charter and thus a somewhat privileged position in feudal society. It involved a number of functional requirements of a communal character ... With the passage of time and town growth, the accommodation of these elements in the town plan gave rise to a great number of individualized solutions.

The layouts of castle towns in Japan were well preserved because the towns were constructed based on the feudal social-class system, and changes of form were influenced by this. However, in the period after the mid-eighteenth century, owing to the development of a market economy, townsmen rose in status and their communal power increased. In many instances a type of building complex (known as *machiya*), comprising retail space, housing for the owner's family and workers, warehouses and a courtyard garden, was enlarged. A physical transformation process occurred that was related to changes in civil society and the development of a market economy. However, even in the townsmen's quarters, changes in layout were not permitted, and the amalgamation of plots and the reconstruction of buildings were restricted. Indeed, in the warriors' quarters such activities were strictly forbidden. Most of the *samurai* were provided with very restricted accommodation.

Conzen refers to Yamori's research on the transformation of castle towns, and analyses the characteristics of the fringe belt in Japanese castle towns. He points out that the religious buildings and residences of the lower *samurai,* such as the *ashigaru* (common foot soldiers), were laid out along the fringe belts of castle towns. He focussed on the fact that these areas linked the town to its peripheral areas and gave rise to a fixation line. The functional structure in these fringe areas was weak and lacked a clear spatial planning pattern.

In the early stages of Japanese castle town construction, the plan of a town included a surrounding moat. Gradually, the plan was transformed and the line of demarcation between the castle town and its peripheral areas became blurred. This can be interpreted in several ways. One factor was the feudal practice of not providing any protection, such as a moat, to townsmen's quarters and lower samurai quarters. During the Pax Tokugawa (after the fall of Toyotomi in 1630), protective fortifications such as moats and castle walls posed hindrances to the enlargement of castle towns. Thereafter, the fringe belt was designed to serve as a strategic spatial defence system by locating townsmen's quarters, lower samurai quarters and religious premises in these areas. At the time of the expansion of a castle town, surrounding villages were incorporated within the urban area but retained their original layout. This was done in order to maintain water supply throughout the town and villages and to ensure the supply of vegetables by the lower samurai living in fringe areas.

Conzen suggested a number of reasons why the functional structure of British castle towns is not as clearly evident morphologically as in the case of Japanese castle towns. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, all classes were normally accommodated on the strip-plot and row-house principle. This tended to 'soften' class distinctions as represented in the town plan. Greater mobility between social classes within the mechanisms provided by European corporate town life tended to blur the social pattern in the plan still further (Conzen, 2004. p.177).

In Japan the residences of successful tradesmen and the upper samurai displayed their occupants social class. Residential buildings varied widely in architectural style. *Machiya* had varied styles of buildings that enabled their residents to live and work on the same site. In the samurai area, the building types ranged from row houses to upper-class samurai residences surrounded by large gardens. These spatial patterns of architectural styles, developed according to the social class of the residents and their income and wealth, were morphologically striking.

Conzen has opened up an important field of cross-cultural comparison. It is to be hoped that both British and Japanese researchers will build on his work.

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