

Learning from the Japanese city by *Barrie Shelton*, 2nd edition, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2012, 188pp. ISBN HB: 978-0-415-55439-8

This book is dedicated to those who are concerned with spatial diversity. Although Japanese urban space is somewhat hard to comprehend at first glance, I am convinced that *Learning from the Japanese city* will be well-received by those interested in and informed about Japanese urban spaces. It is by a Western scholar with a background in architecture and urbanism, and he perceptively decodes the nature and meaning of urban space through detailed explanation. Compared to the books of Augustin Berque, the interpretations here are explicit and the conclusions sharp. Yet what is it that the author would like us to learn about Japanese cities?

He reveals the apparent contradiction between modern Japanese architecture and traditional urban fabric, and promotes the view that the characteristics of Japanese cities, though rooted in national culture and history, have much affinity with contemporary ideas in science and philosophy which are mostly generated in the West. As a Japanese scholar, I am sympathetic to the book's claim that the beginning of a proper understanding of Japanese urban spaces is in Western thinking. Nevertheless, to conclude that the chaotic admixture of the modern and the traditional explains the diversity of Japanese urban spaces is to oversimplify. Whilst the book seeks to explain the features of diversity, oddity and eccentricity disclosed in Japanese urban space and architecture, it must be recognized that the Japanese way of thinking about urban space differs from that in the West. For example, Japanese thinking has more affinity with the concept of area, whereas that of the West has more to do with line. This inevitably leads to great differences in the role and meaning of spatial fragmentation, transformation and metamorphosis. A thesis that connects Japan and the West, seeking to uncover the role of modernity and its continuity with traditions inside the contemporary city, is therefore ambitious. The conclusion, in the chapter 'Learning from the Japanese cities', about Japan's capacity to both engage with *and* liberate itself from European traditions in architecture and urban planning is therefore interesting. Japanese urban space takes on a unique quality and status, with features within it that contrast with Western ideas of urban design. Attention by the author to matters of linear and sequential organization, spatial fragmentation and

integration, and urban transformation highlight this complex but important point.

As far as spatial theories are concerned, attention is given to matters that include *Machitsukuri* – town and community, its making and management – which has been integral to city planning in Japan for the past 40 or so years. In this regard *Machitsukuri* methods demonstrate the uniqueness of Japan's cultural background. In relation to scholars such as Yoshisaka Takamasa, an individual who has presented the theory of 'discontinuous continuity', they emphasize the unique character of the Japanese urban fabric. In a sense the author's viewpoint on urban space contrasts Japan and Western Europe. As the Japanese see it, this is in effect a contrast between *Machitsukuri* and planning systems in the West.

By seeking to explain the nature of elements of urban culture in Japan, the author tries to understand the whole cultural picture in the country. And given its form, Japanese urban culture demands the understanding of designers and urban planners through grasping the role, significance and multiplicity of nature, including what the Japanese label as its 'eight million deities'. Even native Japanese culture contains a dynamic multiplicity, and in recent years viewpoints have arisen that emphasize Japan's composition as a society of 'various individualities'. With this 'diversified Japan' concept in mind, as revealed in archaeology and coastal Japan's culture, *Learning from the Japanese city* ventures to unravel the presence and impact of elements of Chinese culture in Japan, and how these and other 'borrowings' shed light on several characteristic Japanese attitudes to space and design. As the author notes, China is an essential backdrop to Japanese urbanism and built form, both in historical and contemporary frameworks. Nevertheless, as important as it is to connect Japanese culture and Chinese culture, to solely focus on China would fail to explain the diversity and plurality of influences that have shaped, and are still deeply embedded in, Japanese cultural mores. Even native Japanese culture contains a dynamic multiplicity.

By trying to explain the making and patterns of architectural dynamics in modern cities, this ambitious book strives, using numerous illustrations, to enable its readers to better understand the complex and heterogeneous nature of culture and thus Japanese design. Both chaotic and ordered, focused and broad in its approach, this book refers to spatial recognition in a society of both deep urban traditions and modernistic outlook. Yet focusing just on fragments of Japanese urban

culture as a means to show the whole picture is tricky. Taking the issue of culture and nature in Japan, there is a need today, just as in the past, for designers and urban planners to fuse human built structures with the 'eight million deities' existing in nature. Whilst Japanese urban culture is humble and obedient to nature, this should not necessarily be viewed as stemming solely from care for material objects in natural settings: it is also a cultural response to thoughts and images of nature as they flow through time. Without comprehensively appreciating the flow of nature and its evolutionary phases one may not fully comprehend why in Japan views to green mountains are so common, and therefore so important.

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The evolution of urban form: typology for planners and architects by *Brenda Case Scheer*, American Planning Association, Chicago, USA, 2011, 129 pp. ISBN 978-1-932364-87-3

This book is an excellent introduction to urban typology and its use. The author discusses urban typology at a scale outside what could be called dense urban centres, such as midtown Manhattan or downtown Chicago, focusing on urban areas on the fringe of large urban centres – strip malls, industrial parks, and housing. As a professor of urban design I find this approach very informative.

The author raises the question as to why there are so many new strip malls, gas stations, apartment complexes, office parks, subdivisions, and big box stores built for every new 50 acres developed. She states that probable culprits according to designers are ordinary land-use regulations and, secondarily, that as a culture we have forgotten what is good design and need to be reminded through examples. The author proposes a new perspective, and relies on typologies as a first step towards good urban planning and/or design. She describes four theories of type: most buildings are exemplars of particular definable types; types emerge and evolve rather than being wholly invented; typological observation is an important urban analysis tool; and building types in and of themselves represent ideas that are carried forward in time.

All four of these theories have merit and could

be viewed as a foundation for typologies. The chapter that traces the history of typology is perfect for students. The chapter streamlines the long lineage of typology into a concise explanation. According to Scheer typology starts with the Age of Enlightenment, beginning with Abbé Laugier (1713-96), as described in his *Essai sur l'architecture*, followed by Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849), the first person to formally use the word *type*, and then J. N. L. Durand (1760-1834), who develops *type* as a building system. The lineage of *type* re-emerges in the 1950s with the Italian school of architecture in Venice, led by Saverio Muratori, followed by the Krier brothers. The chapter concludes by discussing the work of a British geographer M. R. G. Conzen and the school of urban morphology that he developed.

I cannot speak for the field of urban planning, but urban designers tend to overlook the field of urban morphology. An aspect of urban morphology that the author discusses is *urban tissue*; described by her as the arrangement of lots, blocks and streets, or the demarcation of the owned space of the city. She describes these demarcations, or property lines, as features that do not disappear even if the rest of the physical urban fabric is eliminated. According to her the *urban tissue* is planned and created to support a type of a certain scale. She goes on to explain that common building types arise within the context of a particular kind of *urban tissue*, and uses the example of the four square, which fits precisely on a lot of a particular size within a street and block pattern.

Towards the end of the book Scheer states that she has 'avoided embracing or endorsing any one definition of good urban design' (p. 112). However, with her focus on the typologies of large urban centres, strip malls, industrial parks, housing and areas outside the dense urban fabric, she sets the stage to critique New Urbanism, since New Urbanism tends to design and build new, low-density urban fabric, and joins these project areas to the typologies described in her book.

Typology is an admirable design tool for urban planners, designers and architects, and Scheer has written an excellent primer. I can even envisage a new edition in which the author begins to tackle other urban typologies and their possible use in design. As it stands, I plan to introduce the current edition in my course work.

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