

Nobuo I t o (Japan)

EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES IN THE CONSERVATION OF SMALLER HISTORIC TOWNS IN JAPAN

General Situation

Japanese cities and towns have a long history. The first city was built in the seventh century, and after that many cities and towns were constructed. But their buildings were always too weak to withstand disasters, such as fires and earthquakes, because they were invariably made of wood. The use of wood is characteristic of Japanese building. For this reason, most of the buildings now standing in historic towns are not very old. A building over three hundred years old is very rare and, generally speaking, even so-called 'old' buildings are only a little more than one hundred years old. These 'old' buildings, however, have a traditional appearance, and in groups they have great harmony and display the personality of a town, in a way which impresses the visitor most favourably.

After the Meiji Restoration, when Japan opened its doors to the world, we learned first about brick-work and masonry, and then about concrete construction. But the greater part of Japanese buildings are still made of wood.

For the past, one hundred years, the Japanese Government has made efforts to make cities and towns safe against fire and earthquake. In the central part of some big cities, such as Tokyo or Osaka, multistory reinforced concrete buildings are now usual. This can also make a kind of beautiful scenery, but it lacks the traditional or individual look.

Under the Town Building Laws (1919-50) and Building Standard Law (1950), new buildings are regulated in many ways. For instance, the ceiling of living rooms must be higher than the limit fixed by the law, and especially in fire-prevention areas, new buildings are obliged to be fire-proof or at least fire-preventive. A wooden building can never be fire-proof, but it can be considered as fire-preventive when its walls and eaves are clad in cement or plaster mortar.

In smaller towns rows of wooden buildings are still to be found, but whenever any of them are reconstructed under these regulations, the look and feel of the old town is changed little by little. At present, historic towns or quarters in which groups of old buildings are adequately preserved are the lucky exceptions. We should look for the way to ensure their conservation in the future.

I want to show you two examples of historic towns: Takayama and Kurashiki.

TAKAYAMA

Takayama is located in a valley in the midst of Japan surrounded by high mountains. The present population is 57,000. Many mountain climbers and other tourists visit it.

Takayama was founded in 1590 as a castle town. The castle was built on top of a small hill, and to the north of the hill, the town of Takayama, with an area of about 1300 by 700m, was constructed. Though the castle was abolished later on, the extent of the town has not changed for three hundred years. But buildings have been gradually rebuilt, and all of the existing buildings belong to the nineteenth century. Since the railway station was completed to the west of this old town in 1934, the city zone has more than doubled. But it is very fortunate that the old town has not been affected by this new development, thanks to the existence of a river, the Miyagawa, which acts as a natural boundary.

The movement for the conservation of this town had its origin in a campaign to improve the environment. The first step was the cleaning up of the river by primary school pupils, and adults also became aware of the importance of a good and beautiful environment for the town. Secondly, the movement for the preservation of old floats, i.e. decorated wagons drawn along streets on festival days of the Shinto Shrine, made people think of conserving the look of the buildings which form the background to the floats. The inhabitants of both sides of one street (the Upper Part of Street n^o 3) organized a preservation club, and promised each other that they would preserve the harmony of the street perspective, whenever they reconstructed their buildings.

The third step was the establishment by the municipal authorities of an ordinance for the conservation of the townscape. As the conservation of Takayama was initiated by the efforts of the inhabitants, this intervention by the authorities was disliked. But owing to the recent economic advance, the boom of redevelopment is threatening the old town and the efforts of individuals are no longer sufficient to protect the town. This is the reason why the ordinance was enacted in 1972. Though the area now delineated as a conservation zone is not very large, the municipal authorities are trying to conserve the whole area of the old town.

KURASHIKI

Kurashiki was a port town by the Seto-naikai (Inland Sea), in the western part of Japan. The foundation of the town dates from the last years of sixteenth century. The area now conserved is the central part of old Kurashiki. As Kurashiki means 'the place where warehouses exist', we can still find many warehouses on both sides of a canal.

There were several rich families in Kurashiki. In 1888, when the railway station opened to the north of the town, Koshiro Oohara, one of the rich men, established the Kurashiki Cotton Mill. This Mill, now called Kurabo, is one of the leading members of the spinning industry.

The Ooharas, Koshiro and his descendants Magosaburo and Soichiro, were all men of culture. They founded museums of fine arts, of folk crafts, and of archaeology. For these museums new buildings were built, at first in classic European styles and later in thoroughly new styles; at the same time old buildings were often

used. Sometimes old warehouses were moved here from other places and combined with each other. Though these buildings are made of wood, they are fire-resistant enough for a museum, because they are covered with a thick layer of clay, finally coated with plaster or tiles.

The white plaster and check pattern of tiles are the source of this town's beauty and individuality. In order to keep this feature, the Ooharas tried to conserve the buildings near the museums, with private advice and help.

After Mr. Soichiro's death, the Ooharas' influence in conservation has become weak, but instead of this family, the municipal authorities have taken the initiative in the conservation of the town. The ordinance for the conservation of the environment was enacted in 1968. Now the area designated as a conservation zone covers 20.7 ha. and of this 5.1 ha. is a special zone. A further extension of the zone has been requested.

In case of the conservation of Kurashiki, we must mention the architect Mr. Urabe's work. He is trying to harmonize with the character of the town through his design of new buildings. He has designed a hotel, a museum, and the citizen's hall of concrete in his own unique style. He, recently, converted the interior of a disused mill into a youth hostel. This hostel is named 'Ivy Square', because the brick wall surrounding the mill (which has been preserved) is covered with ivy.

Thus the conservation of Kurashiki has a long history, and Kurashiki is now famous for its beautiful scenery. Millions of tourist have visited it.

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A CONSERVATION DES PETITES VILLES HISTORIQUES EN URSS

A l'époque actuelle, la conservation de l'architecture des petites villes historiques est la préoccupation majeure des spécialistes du monde entier. L'intérêt particulier que l'on porte à ces problèmes est motivé par le danger croissant de voir disparaître complètement la physionomie individuelle des villes.

La raison essentielle qui conduit à la rénovation des villes historiques est leur vieillissement technique et moral. Tous les éléments de l'équipement urbain ne répondent plus aux exigences contemporaines: voirie, éclairage, logements inconfortables, locaux commerciaux, hôtels, restaurants, théâtres, et même les églises.

Dans certains cas, le changement de l'aspect de la ville est provoqué par l'installation d'une ou de plusieurs grandes entreprises industrielles. On peut aussi observer des cas de