Rebuilding Urban Japan
After 1945

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Change and Continuity in Postwar Urban Japan

Carola Hein

Change and continuity are the themes that mark the character of postwar urban Japan and unite all the contributions in this volume. Most immediately obvious are the changes: the air raids that destroyed large numbers of Japanese cities and killed many people; the military defeat that ushered in political, economic and social changes imposed by the occupation army; and the emergence of postwar Japan, with a new constitution, as a democratic, largely demilitarized country focused on economic leadership instead of military might. Nevertheless, the idea that the period after the Second World War represented a completely new beginning - a 're-thinking of fundamental attitudes', in the words of Tange Kenzô (1913-) - is illusory. The old structures and ideologies did not simply vanish: they continued to exist in the Japanese way of thinking and in the country's institutions. The persistence of the Japanese monarchy is the strongest example of institutional continuity.

Permanence and innovation during reconstruction

The participants in the urban planning process (both national and local) during the postwar period differ astoundingly little from those of prewar and wartime Japan. The only exception was the occupation army under the command of US General Douglas MacArthur, which had the power to impose sweeping changes, and in the early postwar years envisioned a major transformation for Japan. Several of these changes were implemented only partially, such as the dissolution of the zaibatsu (conglomerates); and others were realized, but later discontinued, such as the purge of wartime politicians and business leaders. Since the occupation was of limited duration, however, and even altered its aims as global politics changed, the strength of its policies gradually lessened.

As the contributions in this volume have demonstrated, the occupation authorities in Japan rarely addressed planning and reconstruction issues directly. The most influential postwar policy change in terms of spatial planning initiated by the occupation was agricultural land reform, aimed at breaking up and redistributing large land holdings. Even in Okinawa, for which the American military did prepare urban planning studies, as Ikeda Takayuki discussed in Chapter 7, the United States was concerned primarily with assuring the safety of its military installations and did not attempt to transform the urban environment. In contrast to East Germany, for example, where the Soviet Union imposed its ideas and practices on architectural and urban form, the American occupation in Okinawa controlled development primarily through financial assistance.

The US involvement in the political and administrative structure of Japan did influence urban planning indirectly, however. The occupation policy of demilitarization, for example, largely eliminated a major actor on the urban planning stage. Since the Meiji Period, the military had helped to shape urban planning; and military intervention had been critical for city planning in Japan's colonies, as David Tucker pointed out in Chapter 8. The changes occurring generally in Japanese society, together with the instability of the country's early governments, created a climate of openness that contributed to a flurry of legislative proposals (see the discussion by Ishida Yorifusa in Chapter 2). Yet many notable aspects of the previous administrative system remained intact. The occupation effectively reinforced the highly centralized mechanisms that Japan had established for 'total war', as well as the 'top-down' style of policy-making that still characterizes the Japanese government.

In West Germany, where a tradition of federalism existed, the Allied forces imposed a rigorous across-the-board decentralization immediately after the Second World War. Similar proposals made for Japan were implemented in the financial and taxation systems, but they did not affect urban planning. As Jeffry Diefendorf explained in Chapter 10, West German reconstruction was based on local laws and initiatives. Reconstruction in Japan, in contrast, followed the policies of the central government. As the occupation authorities relied on the centralized Japanese administration, their attempts to promote local independence did not get very far. Efforts by planners and the national government to reduce the density and size of major cities (as discussed by Ichikawa Hiroo, Hasegawa Junichi and Ishimaru Norioki in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the present volume) did not come to fruition. Even though reconstruction as

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outlined in the basic policy of December 1945 was aimed at controlling excessive urban growth and favoured smaller provincial cities through the allocation of recovery budgets, it was still guided by centralized planning and standards. The Shoup mission, which proposed reforming the Japanese tax system in 1949, further underscored the need to delegate city planning to local governments, but the Ministry of Construction ignored these recommendations, and clearly continued to exercise control beyond the war years.

Within the field of urban planning, the postwar administrative and legislative framework resembled its prewar operation. American reformers had broadened the Home Ministry (Naimushō), but the city planning authority remained largely unchanged when it passed from the jurisdiction of the Home Ministry to the Ministry of Construction (Kensetsushō) in December 1947. The authority of the central government went essentially unchallenged until 1968, when the New City Planning Act (shin toshi keikaku hō) replaced the 1919 City Planning Act (kyū toshi keikaku hō). This continuity of administrative power is mirrored in planning legislation and in the difficulty of introducing reforms. According to Ishida Yorifusa, attempts at change included drafts of a Building Act of 1946, a City Planning Act of 1952, and a Building Land Act of 1947, all of which proposed innovative solutions for detailed zoning, land-use control and fireproofing, as well as a distribution of city planning authority to local governments. These were not realized, however. Similarly, the financing of the city-planning budget through subsidies also survived the war basically unaltered.

Instead of introducing innovative new laws that could respond to urban needs beyond reconstruction, including the control of sprawl, the urgency of immediate rebuilding led to the aptly named Ad Hoc City Planning Act of 1946. Nearly identical to the Ad Hoc City Planning Act of 1923, it (like the older law) focused on land readjustment and addressed only built-up areas. Tokyo had been battling sprawl since the 1920s via the 1919 City Planning Act; however, the division of the large land holdings into small plots through rural land reform made land readjustment in suburban areas difficult, and did not allow for the control of new construction on the outskirts of the cities. The longevity of prewar laws and the fate of innovative proposed legislation point up the fact that the postwar reconstruction period did not necessarily encourage change in urban form, and may even have discouraged it.

Although the reconstruction period did not promote decentralized urban planning effectively, some cities did enact local initiatives and policies. Okinawa, which was under American occupation and not subject to regulations issuing from the central Japanese government, is the most obvious example, as the Japanese reconstruction policies did not apply there. Osaka, a city with a long history of local planning, had to obey central government directions; the city nonetheless succeeded in realizing projects relevant to its particular situation. The interests of local politicians, business leaders and citizens in matters of reconstruction and its direction are also reflected in the discussions on the future form and function of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (examined by Ishimaru Nortoki and Matsumoto Shōji, respectively, in Chapters 5 and 6).

The role of architects, planners and the public in the reconstruction

In the immediate postwar years, as seen in the example of government-sponsored land-use studies for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, high-profile cases such as the Peace Centre in Hiroshima and drafted urban projects, there was greater engagement by architect-planners, who were otherwise largely unemployed at this time, and a stronger focus on urban design. This involvement soon abated, however, and urban planning leadership after the war thus remained in the hands of technocrats and civil engineers, establishing continuity with the prewar period.

Few visionaries, however, considered what the tools of reconstruction might be, and how they could be used to produce the schemes they had conceived. Ishikawa's proposals, as well as projects by Kobayashi Ichirō (1873–1957), Takizawa Mayumi (1896–1983), and Nishiyama Uzo (1911–94) for low-density cities with green belts, public spaces, wide avenues and high-rise buildings, reflected wider international discussion, but their authors did not specify how these projects could be realized within the existing framework of landownership and planning laws. While the postwar reconstruction period seemed to display a greater collaboration between architects and planners, since that time the two disciplines have drifted apart again.

In spite of the temporary rapprochement between architecture and planning in the immediate postwar era, not only was the differentiation between the two fields and the dominance of the engineers preserved, but administrative continuity also translated into the continuity of the uninterrupted careers of individual planners. Contrary to the prevalent Japanese custom of transferring government employees periodically from one location to another, in several cities the same individuals remained in control of planning from the prewar through the postwar era. Men such as Ishikawa Hideaki (1893–1955, in Tokyo, 1933–51), Kēzu Toshihisa...
as Hasegawa Junichi suggests (in Chapter 4), rarely became an opportunity for citizen involvement, and never became an object of local pride, in contrast to the rebuilding of, for example, Coventry and Plymouth in England.

The most notable example of continuity in postwar urban planning is that of the primary planning tool: land readjustment (kukaku setori). Having proved its value in 1923, this method continues to be a central instrument of urban planning, as illustrated by the rebuilding of Kobe after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995. Even the Peace Centre in Hiroshima, its exceptional character notwithstanding, became possible only through land readjustment (the only difference being that the land exchanged was provided elsewhere in the city rather than in the same area).

Postwar reconstruction as long-term urban adaptation

While continuity appears to dominate postwar planning in Japan, the number of proposals for new laws made during reconstruction suggests a desire and readiness for change that would have repercussions during the following decades. The problems of Japan’s cities – the lack of fire-resistance and fire-prevention measures, and the insufficiency of land-use ordinances and building controls – remained unchanged from the prewar period as urban areas continued to adapt to modernization and new technologies. Innovative solutions were necessary and had been outlined since the prewar years. It took many decades, however, to implement them. The issue of deconcentration in Tokyo, for example, had been addressed before the war, as exemplified by Fukuda Shigeo’s (1887–1971) ‘New Tokyo Plan’ of 1918. His proposal for a dispersal of housing and services in a ring around central Tokyo is reflected in Ishikawa’s reconstruction proposal, realized since the postwar period in the creation of sub-centres on the ring formed by the Yamanote railway. The concentration of postwar land readjustment in areas fronting major railway stations on the Yamanote line thus fits into the larger project of deconcentration, an example of change achieved as a result of coinciding with the larger needs for the transformation of Tokyo.

In Tokyo, it is the continuity between pre- and postwar conditions that is most evident, of course. The city was reconfirmed as the capital after the Great Kanto earthquake, and again after the Second World War. Contrary to decentralization policies, occupation authorities reinforced Tokyo’s status as a political, economic and cultural centre, selecting as its headquarters the Marunouchi business district, located just outside...
the Imperial Palace gates, and the heart of Japanese politics and commerce since the Meiji Period.

Continuous development also characterizes Osaka. As Hasegawa Junichi explains in Chapter 4, the city used the Ad Hoc City Planning Act of 1946 to implement a new road system and increase the amount of green space. In spite of interference from the central government, it also addressed the sinkage of the harbour area, which was critical to the city's economic health. Identified before the war, this problem had to be solved even if it was at the expense of reconstruction projects. Similarly, other cities, including Nagaoka, Nagoya and Hiroshima, took advantage of postwar reconstruction to improve prewar urban conditions.

The reconstruction of Nagoya — a case that requires further investigation — often praised as bold, forward-looking and adaptable to change and new planning needs, can also be interpreted as a symbol of continuity in planning. The creation of the two 100-metre-wide boulevards is clearly an achievement that came out of the centuries-old attempt by the Japanese to fireproof their cities by creating open public spaces and zones known as firebreaks. In fact, the rebuilding of Nagoya was realized because it was consistent with an urban planning that focused on measures related to infrastructure, particularly street widening and land readjustment. Nagoya's dedication to road construction, however, meant a missed opportunity for creating new planning practices and tools. Nagoya has been referred to as the legacy of the twentieth century and its rebuilding, continuous with its past, was appropriate for this high-growth period; from a contemporary perspective, however, it is not necessarily a model for the twenty-first century.

Continuity in planning — change in architecture

The planning approach in the postwar period is thus continuous with the prewar era. André Sorensen even argues that postwar reconstruction was the best application of the 1919 City Planning Act, which focused on the creation of streets and parks. Infrastructural development and land readjustment came to characterize postwar reconstruction, while proposed changes in land-use planning and urban land reform were unsuccessful. The continuity in planning approaches is surprising in view of recurrent problems, such as illegal housing. In fact, the reconstruction of high-density, shoddily built housing was widespread after the Great Kanto Earthquake and after the Second World War in Osaka, Hiroshima and Okinawa, as detailed in Chapters 4, 5 and 7.

Architecture, in contrast, exhibited a different pattern of continuity and change. As Ichihara Norio and Cherie Wendelken discuss (in Chapters 5 and 9, respectively), the decision as to which buildings to preserve, alter or demolish is an essential contribution towards establishing continuity. It reflects political and cultural choices for the city and the nation, just as new construction — Hiroshima being a powerful, if exceptional, example — clearly expresses change. Wendelken's discussion of postwar aesthetics and the attempts to define Japanese architectural tradition after wartime destruction and defeat further highlights the different approaches of architects, planners and technocrats towards reconstruction. While the latter two worked within existing power structures and used proven tools, such as land readjustment, architects believed that their role was to translate the new condition of society into tangible form. These differences reflect the fact that planners were responding to urban structures and landownership patterns that had largely survived the bombing, whereas architects focused on the damage done to the buildings, the opportunities for major transformation, and the voluntary and conscious establishment of new traditions. The new building materials and techniques available to them further supported their desire for innovation. In examining continuity and change in various Japanese cities, it becomes clear that continuity outweighs change in postwar reconstruction, while the desire for change and a redefinition of Japanese culture and traditions dominate architectural design. Urban changes often took years, if not decades, to realize. They took shape — often in spite of discontinuous policies — if they continued to meet the needs of the leading elite. Finally, reconstruction was characterized by a continuity of techniques carried over from prewar times within the framework provided by wartime destruction, rather than by a continuity defined as the pursuit of a long-term, clearly delineated view of the future city intended to guide future rebuilding. The result is what Japan scholar, Erich Pauer, calls 'the Japanese variant of incremental policy-making'. In fact, Japanese urban planning during the reconstruction period reflects Pauer's assessments of the cultural characteristics that may explain the perceived lack of concepts or principles, the flexible and pragmatic approach, and the apparent discontinuity of decision-making in Japan's socioeconomic sector.

Japanese urban planning historically has not followed doctrine, but rather established broad goals and concentrated on projects in limited areas. Parts of cities change as a result, while neighbouring areas remain undeveloped, or are transformed later from a different perspective.
The legacy of reconstruction and lessons for the future

In continuity with earlier attempts, beginning with the Meiji Period, to adapt the Japanese metropolis to modern needs, reconstruction planning focused on infrastructural improvement. Instead of transforming an entire urban area, or even establishing a coherent network, reconstruction projects—like their predecessors—remained interventions limited in scope and intent, and as such constitute part of the incremental planning process mentioned above. While the lack of coherent planning was criticized by foreigners for many decades, since the 1980s, Japanese cities have begun to draw new attention from the West after critics attacked modernist planning. Previous commentators criticized for its lack of order (as seen through Western eyes), the typical Japanese urban form—in particular, constantly changing Tokyo—was now held up by observers outside Japan as a model for the future and an inspiration for urban planning. This view reflected the famous portrayal of Tokyo by the well-known Japanese architect, Ashihara Yoshinobu (1918-), who has described the city's 'hidden order'. For Ashihara, Japanese cities are defined by their social and cultural content, and by undeveloped built forms that provide them with an unrivalled potential for evolution. The form of the Japanese city may even be said to be specifically Asian—according to the contemporary architect and theorist Maki Fumihiko (1928-)—in its lack of obvious visual and functional order, which allows for the coexistence of many different elements. This results in extreme adaptability and tolerance on the one hand, and confusion on the other. The vitality of Japanese cities, their 'complexity and contradiction', and the richness of their patterns have also inspired the American architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, to whom Tokyo serves as a sequel to their study of Las Vegas in relation to vernacular urban form. Art historian Kaori Kitao has spoken of the 'shrouded character of meaning', which she links to the evolving character of Japanese cities and the idea of incremental planning, or 'bricolage'.

These views convey a very positive image of contemporary Japanese cities, yet the elements admired—vitality, the mixture of functions, and adaptability—have not been implemented through planning in general, or reconstruction planning in particular. On the contrary, they often exist in areas that have been 'spared' redevelopment. One might naturally conclude, then, that postwar reconstruction planning, in its focus on specific parts of the city, rearranging landownership to provide building sites, and widening streets to reduce the risk of fire, has destroyed the historic cityscapes. This assessment, however, would not be completely accurate. Wartime destruction and reconstruction per se did not shape contemporary urban form. Kyoto is a case in point. One of the few major cities that was not bombed during the Second World War, it nevertheless generally resembles the chaotic cityscapes of other metropolises that had been devastated in the bombings.

The historic buildings for which Kyoto is famed are today embedded in a modern city. In fact, Japanese cities as a whole might not have looked any different from how they do today, had they not been subject to wartime bombings. Some historic monuments might have been preserved unchanged, but economic development and modernization, the introduction of new functions, new building materials, new laws and new actors on the urban planning scene since the 1960s might have brought about similar changes. The destruction of the 'old' city thus is not primarily a result of the use of specific planning tools or design options (such as land readjustment), but rather of economic development and the choices made by political or business leaders. Just as architects in the early postwar period often did not consider specific methods by which their schemes could be realized, the fascination with, and praise of, these contemporary Japanese cities as models for the twenty-first century rarely involve an exploration of the roots of contemporary cities and the inherent reasons for their particular urban form, or a clear recognition of tools that may be used to enhance it.

Acclaim for unplanned areas often goes hand-in-hand with criticism of land readjustment for failing to create a liveable and beautiful urban form. Such criticism is misdirected. Land readjustment: can be used to create any form, as the Hiroshima Peace Centre and examples in Germany since the transformation of Hamburg after the Great Fire of 1842 demonstrate. The form achieved through land readjustment depends on those who use the technique. As long as technocrats, bureaucrats and engineers are in control of these methods, the image of Japan's cities, and specifically of the 'improved' areas, will not change. Specialists in the urban environment, including architects, must join together to define goals for the contemporary Japanese city—adapting existing planning techniques or devising new ones in order to realize them.

Recent attempts to incorporate citizen participation into land readjustment practices exemplify the possibility of transforming a tool of centralized planning into an instrument of consensus-based community building, and other initiatives involving the public are being tried out.
as well. Kobe's Noda Hoku neighborhood, which was partly destroyed in the 1995 earthquake, offers an example of a recent attempt at district planning with citizen participation, a first in Japan.

Based on collaborative measures, the District Plan for the Guidance of the Appearance of the Townscape (machimai yudagata chiku keikaku), combines the widening of streets with the rebuilding of physical structures, and the establishment of a convenient and comfortable neighborhood. The creation of 'semi-private' zones, for example, an important feature of traditional Japan, contributes to and reflects the neighbourly quality.

Enacting regulations similar to those described here in the context of district planning could complement reformed land readjustment. Even though they may not be ideal solutions for the future - district planning in Noda Hoku, for example, is based on a deregulation of land use control, which may lead to further densification - they indicate at least a direction in which to move. New regulations could also include attempts at three-dimensional planning, without necessarily prescribing concrete architectural form.

While these issues cannot be resolved in these pages, it is clear that developing an approach to urban rebuilding - one that considers the lessons of the postwar reconstruction period - is an urgent concern for Japan, but also a lesson for others. What, then, are the lessons that can be drawn from the examination of the reconstruction period in this volume? And what do they teach us about contemporary cities? The rifts between architecture and planning - between two- and three-dimensional planning, essentially; between ideas and visionary projects on the one hand, and tools and techniques of realization on the other; and between public authorities and citizens, continue today. These patterns, as well as Japanese urban particularities, need to be addressed through planning. A major concern is that Japanese cities are extremely vulnerable to disasters; the threat of a devastating earthquake in Tokyo, for example, is constant. In order to avoid central government control over reconstruction and domination by technocrats and engineers (a likelihood in the case of an immediate response to a disaster), politicians, planners and urban designers, together with citizens, must develop in advance appropriate planning methods and procedures, including citizen participation for rebuilding after a disaster. The formulation of future-orientated concepts requires the development of planning tools that integrate urban and architectural viewpoints and are orientated towards the needs of the new century. Continuity and change observed in the reconstruction period continue to shape Japanese cities and urban planning. This knowledge should be put to conscious use in the design of Japan’s twenty-first-century cities.

Notes

1. In Germany, the concept of 'Zero Hour' alludes to a complete new start, but is similarly illusory. See Jeffry M. Diefendorf, In the Wake of War (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

2. In the case of several European countries, monarchies collapsed or were dismantled after wars, or the monarch was replaced. In Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate after the First World War, and his Italian counterpart, King Umberto, was pressured to abdicate after his return to Belgium in 1930, because of his attitude during the Second World War, thus leaving the throne to his son. In the case of Japan, the Americans and Japanese worked together to maintain the emperor system - with some changes - to assure the country's stability. The connection between the emperor and the Shinto religion, however, was never really resolved, and in spite of the constitutional separation of religion and state, the Ise Shrine is still a central place of worship with close ties to the Imperial Household. For a discussion of these issues, see John W. Dower, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (New York/London: W. W. Norton/The New Press, 1999); Laura Hein and Mark Selden (eds.), Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Atomic Age (Ammonk, NY/London: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), particularly the article by Ellen H. Hammed, 'Commemoration Controversies: The War, the Peace, and Democracy in Japan', pp. 100–21.

3. See John W. Dower, Embracing Defeat, Japan in the Wake of World War II.

4. See also Ishida Yorifu, 'Local Initiatives and Decentralization of Planning Power in Japan', paper presented at the Urban and Environmental Studies Section of the 9th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAWS), Lathi, Finland, 23–26 August 2000, p. 10; and Ishida, Ch. 2 of this volume.

5. Betterment levies had been proposed before the war, and capital gains taxes were suggested after it, but neither was realized.


7. As Ichikawa Hino points out, urban changes, such as the construction of highways, did not occur in the immediate postwar years, but only later, particularly during the 1960s, a period of economic growth. See Ichikawa, Ch. 3 in this volume.


9. Sorensen comes to a similar conclusion in his discussion of postwar urban reconstruction in Japan, in The Making of Urban Japan.


13. Pauer, ‘Rules, Goals, Information’. Pauer contends, first, that Japan does not follow fundamental beliefs or principles, but rather acts according to rules; second, that decisions are made following vaguely conceived goals instead of clearly defined targets; and third, that because of the absence of principles, Japan collects a wealth of information in search of feasible rules, and moves forward in a trial-and-error fashion instead of following a single path.

14. Conceptual differences between Western and Japanese planning exist. They also influence the mutual interpretation and understanding of planning systems and urban form. As planning principles evolved in the West, Western analysis and interpretation of Japanese urban form changed.


20. The same observation is true for Europe and the United States, where cities have endured destruction through modernization and historical reinvigoration throughout the postwar period. Many buildings and urban structures that survived the extensive bombing of Berlin, for example, have been destroyed since the Second World War. The demolition of the Hohenzollern Palace under the Nazi German government is one such case; and the reinterpretation of the remains of the Reichstag through the destruction of its Wilhelminian ornamentation is another. But even cities that were not bombed have been largely transformed. Following its naming as the capital of the European Union, Brussels has been largely rebuilt, and many of its buildings and urban features destroyed. Although the Second World War did not touch the soil of the continental United States, the scale and scope of American urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s equals that of the rebuilding activities in Europe. In fact, the theme of postwar reconstruction meant economic as much as physical rebuilding.

21. The importance of the neighbourhood has been recognized in Japan in recent years, and community building (machi zukuri), a bottom-up approach to urban design based on citizen participation and social organization, has become a central theme of Japanese planning since the 1960s. In fact, it often stands in opposition to the top-down approach of urban planning (toshib keikaku) as a comprehensive, encompassing approach to the overall city, strongly focused on the physical structure and the techniques shaping it. Recent attempts at urban planning in co-operation with citizen groups are a positive result of this type of planning approach and highlight the changing role of planning and planners since the postwar reconstruction era. See Uta Hohn, Stadtplenung in Japan. Geschichte – Recht – Praxis – Theorie (Dortmund: Dortmund Vertrieb für Bau-und Planungsliteratur, 2000); and Watanabe Shun’ichi, (ed.), Shimin sanka no machi zukuri [Community building with citizen participation] (Kyoto: Gakugai Shuppansha, 1939).

22. See Carola Hein, Toshikeikaku and Machi zukuri in Japanese Urban Planning: The Reconstruction of Inner City Neighborhoods in Kobe, Jahrbuch des DfI (Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien), vol. 13, 2001, pp. 224–52. One of the main aims of the district plan is to enlarge the roadside space physically and visually to improve both the fire resistance and the quality of life for residents. While property owners are not allowed to erect fences, gates or walls in the setback area, they may use this zone for planting trees and bushes that can be seen from the street.

23. Areas on private property that are open to the public and not shut off through walls or fences.