In 1994 the League of Historical Cities was established in Kyoto as an inter-municipal entity of international character that differed from other state-based organisations. This international organisation relied on the accumulated experiences of cities (cities as political entities with much longer histories than national states). This internationalisation illustrates the entrepreneur spirit that has historically and consistently supported urban development in Kyoto, a notion greatly contrasting the well-spread impression of Kyoto as a city of traditional heritage repository.

Kyoto’s urban development has generally been characterised by an innovative use and management of the city’s material heritage; the urban historian Nishikawa Kōji was among the first to recognise this fact. During the Symposium for the Preservation of Traditional Culture in Kyoto and Nara organized by UNESCO and the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs, in September 1970, Nishikawa commented on how much the citizens of Kyoto disliked the word ‘koto’ (ancient city and former capital), because the city’s new functions over time.

... an interest for the material culture of everyday life came to the fore.

Modern structures and technologies, not just a traditional heritage repository

Urban innovation in Kyoto
Novelty in cultural heritage making

Andrea Yuri Flores Uruihama

Kyoto electric railway route map
Source: Kyotocity toshikaihatsu kyoku toshikeikakuka 1972, page 7.
centre, taking into consideration the fact that the city had escaped the wartime attacks and consequently fires. This project was officially launched in 1950 with the creation of the ‘Law for the Construction of Kyoto into a City of International Culture and Tourism’ [kokusai bunka kankō toshi kensetsu hō].

During the war, the city’s physical pattern in terms of buildings, roads and other infrastructure managed to be mostly preserved – including ancient features and modern urban infrastructure. One area was cleared to create a ‘safe’ open space in case of air raids. Following a national air defence law, strategic areas for ‘building evacuation’ [tatemono saka] were established to create a neonatal urban block case of air raids. The Kyoto Municipality enforced the total clearance of an area of about 133ha, including the castle area and the base for air raids. The eventual result, in 1952, was 2¼ new road sections, 2½ public squares, 29 urban parks, and the extension of the Hanshō, Oike and Gosō streets. These interventions added to the subsequent suburban expansion and the ongoing redesign of the urban fabric.

As a matter of fact, the postwar urban expansion advanced out of a rigid control oriented towards preservation. This project was realised by the Realization of Kyoto as an international cultural centre, the vision of private developers, most often under the influence of the Ministry of Education, when considering the creation of new tourism-oriented services and industries, and the construction of new urban areas. Joshu, roads and other facilities – e.g. museums, universities and conference halls. This vision was criticised by local urban improvement organisations that had become influential in banning undesired projects, among them, the interdiction of a theme park construction on Mount Hiei in 1955, and the construction in 1956 of a 131m high hotel in front of Kyoto station and a hotel on Nanabashi Hill. The ‘Protect Nanabashi-goka’ civil society movement echoed movements taking place in other cities; for example, the Tsunagakko Hill in Kamakura. These civil society movements triggered the enactment of the ‘Ancient Capitals Preservation Law’ (1956) on a national level, and raised concern for preservation. An awareness emerged of the long-term interactions existing between everyday human activities and natural settings, in processes of physical shaping.

In the case of Kyoto, located in a river basin surrounded by mountains, the technical possibilities of different periods, heavily based on wooden building techniques, greatly shaped the physical appearance of the city. Even until the mid-1960s, most of the housing in central areas was composed of two-story wooden structures known as machiya, some of which still exist today. However, the majority of the city is composed of modern structures and technologies, which represent a new interpretation of traditional forms. Entrepreneurship is the dominant notion permeating throughout the urban development of Kyoto, despite Nishikawa Kōji’s best efforts to advocate for a revival of the use of indigenous styles and techniques in Japan; he felt that modernisation was generally thought to equal westernisation, which led to a negative view of traditional aspects of the indigenous culture. Eventually, through negotiations among different agents, Kyoto has preserved the multifunctional character of neighbourhoods centred around public schools, and a mobility pattern heavily grounded in collective transportation, bicycles and walking. This is, however, still in dispute concerning the use of traditional wooden materials in construction. The motorisation, methods, technologies, resources and institutions, which supported the making of Kyoto, with their particular features, may provide models of uneasy reference for other Asian cities. Nevertheless, an exchange of ideas, concepts, and theories, from the communication, academics and practitioners of Kyoto, with their counterparts in the rest of Asia, would certainly prove useful in supporting innovative city making in Asia in fact, but also in ancient cities in other regions of the world.

Andrea Yuri Flores Urushima
Specially Appointed Assistant Professor, Kyoto University, CIAS
andurosh@ciias.kyoto-u.ac.jp

Notes
2 Kindai Kyoto no tōshijikiku keikaku kensetsu hō [The planning of Kyoto: a City of International Culture and Tourism] (Kyotoshi keikakukyoku [Department of Urban Development of Kyoto City] 1972).
3 Anonymous. 1960. ‘Genesis and Evolution of the Kyoto urban area expansion map, 17th century ~ 1965. Source: Kyoto shi keikakukyoku [Department of Urban Development of Kyoto City].’

The history of the traditional wooden buildings in central areas has unfortunately often been overlooked since the end of the war. The large-scale destruction of cities during the war (fast spreading fires during bombings) led to the number of local communities and even professionals who were aware of the specific needs and characteristics of everyday life in ancient cities. In 1972, the structures built before the end of the war comprised 18½% of all buildings in Kyoto, and the Kyoto planning office placed these structures into the category of ‘deteriorating housing’ (kikyōka), and the replacement of them with new modern structures became an urgent matter. The municipality classified ‘neighbourhoods dense with wooden structures as areas of high fire risk,’ which included the Nishijin textile neighbourhood on the western side of Kyoto, a neighbourhood slowly shaped over a long period of time, consisting of family-based small-scale industrial installations, in which the workplace was integrated in the everyday life of the community.

Urban change and the improvement of everyday life

The large urban changes that took place in the 1960s generated a demand for specialists on urban and regional planning, and led to an increase in the number of local communities and even professionals who were aware of the specific needs and characteristics of everyday life in ancient cities. In 1972, the structures built before the end of the war comprised 18½% of all buildings in Kyoto, and the Kyoto planning office placed these structures into the category of ‘deteriorating housing’ (kikyōka), and the replacement of them with new modern structures became an urgent matter. The municipality classified ‘neighbourhoods dense with wooden structures as areas of high fire risk,’ which included the Nishijin textile neighbourhood on the western side of Kyoto, a neighbourhood slowly shaped over a long period of time, consisting of family-based small-scale industrial installations, in which the workplace was integrated in the everyday life of the community.

The desire to keep Kyoto’s image as one of a centre of the Japanese traditional culture. As a matter of fact, the postwar urban expansion advanced out of a rigid control oriented towards preservation. This project was realised by the Realization of Kyoto as an international cultural centre, the vision of private developers, most often under the influence of the Ministry of Education, when considering the creation of new tourism-oriented services and industries, and the construction of new urban areas. Joshu, roads and other facilities – e.g. museums, universities and conference halls. This vision was criticised by local urban improvement organisations that had become influential in banning undesired projects, among them, the interdiction of a theme park construction on Mount Hiei in 1955, and the construction in 1956 of a 131m high hotel in front of Kyoto station and a hotel on Nanabashi Hill. The ‘Protect Nanabashi-goka’ civil society movement echoed movements taking place in other cities; for example, the Tsunagakko Hill in Kamakura. These civil society movements triggered the enactment of the ‘Ancient Capitals Preservation Law’ (1956) on a national level, and raised concern for preservation. An awareness emerged of the long-term interactions existing between everyday human activities and natural settings, in processes of physical shaping.

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