



Kyoto electric railway route map.  
Source: *Kyotoshi toshikaihatsu kyoku toshikeikakuka 1972, page 7.*

# Urban innovation in Kyoto

## Novelty in cultural heritage making

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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' organised 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 municipal officers and citizens of Kyoto made their best efforts to develop the city with a progressive view towards the incorporation of new technologies and new concepts of urban living. Nishikawa explained how this enterprising spirit was fundamental for allowing the city to adapt to the social and economic changes that emerged after the function of 'capital city' was transferred to Tokyo during the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the preservation and revival of the material heritage of the city was based on the active and permanent invention of the city's new functions over time.

### Innovation in Kyoto's modern city making

During the entire modern period, and particularly after the transference of the Emperor to Tokyo in 1869, the most influential residents of Kyoto started to press local officers towards the improvement of the city. Just before the Meiji restoration (1868) the population of Japan had reached about 34 million, with approximately 3 million inhabiting cities, and more than 90 percent of the population living in ordinary farmhouses. Although Kyoto has an urban

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.

history of more than 1200 years old, during the mid-19th century the general image of the city was marked by rurality: from the wooden built typology of constructions to the size of urban parcels and districts, and the overall landscape still dominated by agricultural fields and forested mountains. However, during the transformation from a former imperial capital into one more local city competing for national resources, instead of reinforcing the agricultural basis of the economy, the local elite chose to orient city improvements towards innovation. It is worth remembering that the national government only issued the first official city planning regulation as late as 1919. This left a regulatory gap that allowed local officers, local merchants and other influential residents of existing cities to autonomously decide and implement city improvements. This autonomy was added to the fact that Kyoto reached the modern period with an accumulated experience in urban making from its long history as an imperial capital.

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As one of the largest cities of the period –after Tokyo and Osaka– Kyoto competed in attracting rich merchants to revive the local economy. This was achieved through city improvements related to hygiene and prevention of epidemics, as well as the improvement to urban services such as electricity and transportation. After the completion of the large-scale 'Lake Biwa Channel' infrastructural project (1885-1890), Kyoto built the first hydroelectric power generation plant in Japan –the 'Keage Power Station' – followed by the city's pioneering project of an electric streetcar railroad, whose operation began in 1895.<sup>3</sup> In addition to infrastructural improvements,

significantly sized cities in Japan have a history of competing in the attraction of large scale events, such as industrial exhibitions. This competitiveness continued to be evident during the postwar period, for example, during the process of selecting the host city for the Expo 1970 (eventually going to Osaka), when local governments in the Kansai Region struggled

against the powerful local governments of the Kanto Region (where Tokyo is located).<sup>4</sup> Early records boast the occasion when Kyoto hosted the 'Fourth National Industrial Exhibition' in celebration of the 1100 year anniversary of the city's foundation. This exhibition was held to the south of the actual site of Heian Shrine, with a total venue area of 178,000 m<sup>2</sup> and a total site area of 47,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The event served to showcase the first electric streetcar ever installed in Japan and the innovative features of a city supplied by electricity. It also presented the occasion to enlarge streets and improve the supply of accommodation in the city. These urban improvements supported the long-term process of transforming Kyoto into an important sightseeing destination.

Upon the establishment of Kyoto municipality in 1889, the city counted around 279 thousand inhabitants. In 1918, the city of Kyoto incorporated 16 towns and villages that resulted in a suburban expansion in which the municipal land area doubled. The development of roads and the electric street car, and the creation of new housing sites accompanied this expansion. The most important variations in population growth occurred during the modern period until 1935 and after the war until 1970. The population increased to about 521 thousand in 1920, reaching over 1 million in 1935, and about 1.5 million in 1970, after which numbers stabilized.<sup>5</sup> The modern period population growth was mainly related to the variations in city limits involving the successive incorporation of surrounding towns and villages. In contrast, the postwar population growth was generally the result of internal migrations from rural areas. Although the population grew vastly until 1970, during the postwar period the rate of growth in Kyoto was modest when compared to other cities, such as Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya or Yokohama.

### Redefining postwar urban development

Kyoto city witnessed the challenge of redefining new objectives for urban development during the postwar period, similar to other local cities involved in dynamic processes of population movement towards metropolitan regions.<sup>6</sup> As described in the Kinki Area Development Law (1963), the municipal government enthusiastically embraced the project of transforming Kyoto into a cultural

centre, taking into consideration the fact that the city had escaped the wartime attacks and consequential 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 improvements—with one exception: one large 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 sokai*] were established to prevent the spread of fire in case of air raids. The Kyoto Municipality enforced the total clearance of an area of about 133ha, including the displacement of the area's inhabitants. After the war, 74ha were used for road construction, 63ha for the creation of public squares, and 6ha for urban parks. The eventual result, in 1962, was 24 new road sections, 28 public squares, 28 urban parks, and the extension of the Horikawa, Oike and Gojō streets. These interventions added to the subsequent suburban expansion and the continued redesign of the urban fabric.

As a matter of fact, the postwar urban expansion advanced out of a rigid control oriented towards preservation. For the realisation of Kyoto as an international cultural centre, the vision of private developers, most often supported by municipal officers, relied on the creation of new tourism-oriented services and industries, and the construction of new urban infrastructure, hotels and cultural facilities – e.g. museums, universities and conference halls. This vision was criticised by local communities that started to become influential in barring undesired projects, among them, the interdiction of a theme park construction on Mount Hiei in 1960, and the construction in 1964 of a 131m high hotel in front of Kyoto station and a hotel on Narabigaoka Hill. The "Protect Narabigaoka" civil society movement echoed movements taking place in other cities; for example, the Tsurugaoka Hill in Kamakura. These civil society movements triggered the enactment of the Ancient Capitals Preservation Law (1966) at 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 features of the townscape. Up until the mid-1960s, most of the housing in central areas was composed of two-storey wooden structures known as *machiya*: townhouses that together form a specific townscape called *machinami* [the 'lined' town]. Also known as *kyo-machiya*, this urban typology began to develop when merchants and manufacturers established themselves in the capital during the Heian period (794-1185), and is still present in Kyoto.

The long 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 bombing raids) led to the creation of national regulation favouring the use of reinforced concrete structures. The Building Standard Law (1950) introduced severe fire-proof regulations for the construction of new buildings in high-density areas. In 1972, the structures built before the end of the war composed 58.4% of buildings in Kyoto, and the Kyoto planning office placed these structures into the category of 'deteriorating housing' [*rōkyūka*], 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; these included areas such as 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 increment in the number of locally trained professionals who were aware of the specific needs and characteristics of everyday life in existing cities, towns and villages. New discussion channels were opened with the inauguration of universities and the increase in numbers of students dedicated to city-planning. In the context of disputes among community, specialists and officers about the most suitable patterns of urban interventions, an interest for the material culture of everyday life came to the fore.

In this context, independent propositions issued outside governmental offices flourished. Noteworthy is the 1964 Kyoto Plan, headed by the Kyoto University professor, Nishiyama Uzo. As early as 1960, Nishiyama strongly advised against automobiles in Japanese cities; he considered central urban areas to be public spaces deserving of similar care afforded to the interior of Japanese homes. Nishiyama considered automobiles sources of dirtiness and noise, and thus, in the same way that Japanese people remove their shoes before entering a home, automobiles too should be left outside the homely part, or central areas, of cities.<sup>7</sup>

The autonomous plans of the period demonstrated a well-informed, relatively independent opinion, which sometimes diverged from official documents, for example in relation to the preservation of wooden constructions. In contrast, the question of controlling the number of automobiles in central urban areas was a generally accepted idea. Until the 1970s the image of automobiles was often associated with danger, pollution

and nuisance in several official documents. According to the municipality of Kyoto, automobiles posed a risk to urban dwellers in Japan. Streets were considered to be urban spaces of vital function to public life, accommodating water, electricity, sewage, and fire prevention systems. Thus, having this vital element of cities blocked with the traffic of individual cars meant large scale risk and disturbance to the entire functioning of the city. Consequently, in the late 1960s, although the number of cars and roads increased, especially in suburban areas, the car continued to be regarded as a nuisance, and its uncontrolled use was believed to eventually undermine the quality of the collective life. Thus, investment in collective transportation systems gained priority above the enlargement of streets in central urban areas.

In terms of measures taken for natural and historical landscape preservation, a succession of regulations at local, regional and national levels started to abound after the middle of the 20th century. Before that period, at the national level, the 'Law for Preservation of Old Shrines and Temples' was established in 1897. At the local level, in Kyoto, a 'Scenic Landscape District' of 3400ha was established in 1930 in order to protect certain areas, including the areas of the Kamo River, and the Higashiyama and Kitayama mountains. Since 1957, the municipality restricted the installation of outdoor advertisements, which later culminated in the 'Kyoto City Ordinances on Outdoor Advertisements' (1960). At the regional level, the law for conservation areas in the Kinki Region reinforced the preservation of green areas in the suburbs of the city. In 1966, the law for preservation of ancient capitals anticipated the urban landscape municipal ordinance (1972), followed by the 1975 national designation of special areas for preserving traditional buildings. Although the surrounding mountains, temples, shrines and imperial properties of Kyoto were preserved during the prewar period, measures, actions and programs aimed at landscape preservation inside and in the surroundings of the city, started to abound mostly after the 1960s.

### Conclusions

Townscape preservation was for a long time a theme of minor concern to the municipality of Kyoto, especially during the modern period. The preservation of the city after the wartime bombings largely supported the construction of a postwar discourse of Kyoto as a centre of the Japanese traditional culture. The desire to keep Kyoto's image as one of a national cultural centre, transformed some areas into scenographies that exemplify just one of the invented images of 'Japanese traditional culture'.<sup>8</sup> However, the great 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. There is, however, still a dispute concerning the use of traditional wooden materials in construction. The materiality, methods, technologies, resources and institutions, which supported the making of Kyoto, with their particular features, may provide models of uneasy reference for other Asiatic cities. Nevertheless, an exchange of ideas, concepts and theories, from the community, academicians and practitioners of Kyoto, with their counterparts in the rest of Asia, would certainly prove useful in supporting innovative city making – not only in Asia in fact, but also in ancient cities in other regions of the world.

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### Notes

- 1 *Kyotoshi toshikaihatsu kyoku toshikeikakuka* [Planning section of the department of urban development of Kyoto City] (1972). *Kyoto no toshikeikaku: Sono genjō to tenbō* [The planning of Kyoto: its present condition and future prospects]
- 2 *Kyotoshi keikakukyoku* [Planning Department of Kyoto City] (1967). *Kyotoshi toshijiku keikaku kenkyū hōkokusho* [Research report about the axial urban planning of Kyoto city]
- 3 Itō Yukio (ed.) 2006. *Kindai Kyoto no kaizō: toshikeiei no kigen 1850-1918* [The remodelling of modern Kyoto: the origins of municipal administration 1850-1918] Kyoto: Mineruba Shobō.
- 4 Flores Urushima, A. 2011. 'The 1970 Osaka Expo: Local Planners, National Planning Processes and Mega Events', *Planning Perspectives* 26(4):635-647, pp.637-639.
- 5 *Nihon tōkei kyōkai* [Japan statistical association] (ed.) 2006. *Nihon chōki tōkei sōran* [Japan historical statistics]. Tokyo: Nihon tōkei kyōkai.
- 6 Flores Urushima, A. 2015. 'Territorial Prospective Visions for Japan's High Growth: The Role of Local Urban Development', *Nature and Culture* 1(1): 12-35.
- 7 Flores Urushima, A. 2007. 'Genesis and culmination of Uzo Nishiyama proposal of a model core of a future city for the Expo 70 Site (1960-1973)', *Planning Perspectives* 22(4):391-416, p.403.
- 8 See more on invented traditions in Vlastos, S. (ed.) 1998. *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [Research report about the axial urban planning of Kyoto city]



Kyoto urban area expansion map, 17th century – 1965. Source: *Kyotoshi keikakukyoku* 1967.<sup>2</sup>