

## **Conserving the Walkable Environment in the Neighbourhood: A Case Study of the Improvement Effort in Kyojima, Tokyo**

**Toshio KITAHARA**

### ***Abstract***

Japanese cities have been traditionally walkable. Its street was intimately narrow and almost pedestrianised, because the wheeled vehicle had been scarcely developed there. Even today, some old neighbourhoods in Japanese cities still provide such a humane condition, though they rather lack the functional efficiency in the motor age.

Kyojima is a neighbourhood situated in the eastern inner city of Tokyo. It was rapidly urbanised without any planning after the great earthquake in 1923, and had a quite high density of 800 persons per hectare in the 1950s. There remain a traditional community, a lively shopping street, many wooden tenement houses and tangled narrow alleys. People enjoy an intimate and walkable environment, but at the same time, they are constantly threatened by the danger of disaster, such as earthquake and big fire. Though it is necessary to solve this problem, we hope to do it not by the redevelopment clearing off the existing neighbourhood but by the improvement without destroying the walkable environment.

In 1971, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government made an urban renewal scheme that proposed to sweep away old houses in Kyojima and build high-rise blocks in open space. But fortunately, influenced by the new wave of the town planning, it abandoned that plan in 1974 and began to look for an alternative way. There gradually grew the partnership between the local people and government in the 1980s, and they were building up a step-by-step improvement process to conserve the humane and walkable environment. Now some new streets of moderate width have been laid out, tiny pocket parks put in street corners and low-rise community housings constructed, while there still remain many difficulties.

My paper explains the history and characteristics of Kyojima, and discusses the way to conserve the walkable environment in the neighbourhood.

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### ***Introduction***

Japanese cities have been traditionally walkable. Its street was intimately narrow and almost pedestrianised, because the wheeled vehicle had been scarcely developed there. Even today, some old neighbourhoods in Japanese cities still provide such a humane condition, though they rather lack the functional efficiency in the motor age.

Kyojima is a neighbourhood situated in the eastern inner city of Tokyo. It was rapidly urbanised without any planning after the great earthquake in 1923, and had a quite high density of 800 persons per hectare in the 1950s. There remain a traditional community, a lively shopping street, many wooden tenement houses and tangled narrow alleys. People enjoy an intimate and walkable environment, but at the same time, they are constantly threatened by the danger of disaster, such as earthquake and big fire. Though it is necessary to solve this problem, we hope to do it not by the redevelopment clearing off the existing neighbourhood but by the improvement without destroying the walkable environment.

In 1971, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government made an urban renewal scheme that proposed to sweep away old houses in Kyojima and build high-rise blocks in open space. But fortunately, influenced by the new wave of the town planning, it abandoned that plan in 1974 and began to look for an alternative way. There gradually grew the partnership between the local people and government in the 1980s, and they were building up a step-by-step improvement process to conserve the humane and walkable environment. Now some new streets of moderate width have been laid out, tiny pocket parks put in street corners and low-rise community housings constructed, while there still remain many difficulties.

In this paper, I explain the history and characteristics of Kyojima, and discuss the way to conserve the walkable environment in the neighbourhood.

### ***Profile of Kyojima***

Tokyo was virtually built in the early 17th century as the capital of the Tokugawa shogunate government. There spread the diluvial heights in its western part, and the alluvial low land in the eastern one. The castle of Tokugawa sat on the tip of the former, where now occupies the Imperial Palace, and dominated the town on the latter.

Kyojima, the subject of this paper, is a neighbourhood located in the lower town beyond the Sumida River, which was the east boundary of the town in the early days. It was once the countryside out of the original Tokyo, and even in the late 19th century there remained a vast spread of paddy field and marsh. At the beginning of the 20th century, two railway stations were constructed on the northern outside of Kyojima, and a number

of factories were constructed. But most part of the area was still occupied with paddies and marshes.

It was after the great earthquake in 1923 that the Kyojima area has been really urbanised. Many wooden tenement houses were constructed to accommodate people from the destroyed town. These houses stood along winding paths and on the swampy land behind them. The growth was so rapid that irrigation brooks turned into sewers and marshes into trash heaps. The construction of arteries came afterward: four-lane Meiji-dori Street on the east edge of the area in the late 1920s, two-lane Takara-dori in the 30s and then two-lane Oshiage-dori on the north edge. But the area surrounded by them had almost no street but a mazelike network of quite narrow alleys.

The Allied fire-bombings of 1945 devastated most of Tokyo. After the World War II, Kyojima, one of a few areas saved from the war damage, began to grow rapidly again. People came into surviving tenement houses that were one- or two-storeyed wooden buildings stood closely together along narrow alleys. More than twenty thousand people lived there in about 25 hectares area. Tachibana Ginza, a local shopping street in Kyojima, drew many customers from its own area and neighbouring ones.

Though narrow alleys, some of which have the width less than 2 metres, are rather gloomy, sometimes unhealthy and poorly fireproof, there is a human scale, car free and walkable environment. Local people often go out without locking up their houses, chat with their neighbours in alleys and embellish them with lots of flowerpots. Little children play also in alleys disturbed by no car. Alleys in Kyojima usually provide people with a kind of intimate outdoor room.

Tachibana Ginza is about 5 metres wide and has more than a hundred shops along it. Most of the shops open up onto the street, and there is always a lively public life.

### ***Urban Renewal Scheme in the 1960s and 70s***

An official report in the 1960s said that the lower town Tokyo would lose fifty-five percent of its inhabitant when there was another great earthquake as severe as 1923. In 1965, the central government proposed to build 16 Disaster Prevention Bases in the east of the Sumida River. The typical Base was a vast open space of more than 25 hectares surrounded by double or triple walls of high-rise housing blocks.

In 1971, the metropolitan government published the urban renewal scheme of Kyojima. Though it suggested avoiding the usual redevelopment clearing off the neighbourhood, both of two proposed alternatives still followed the functionalistic model of towers and open spaces: one with fifteen-storeyed and another with five- to eleven-storeyed blocks. Jan Gehl criticised that the functionalistic planning has removed life between buildings from new housing areas. Throughout the history of human habitation, he said, streets and squares had formed focal points and gathering places, but with the advent of functionalism, they were replaced by no man's lands with roads and endless grass lawns.

It was the Research Report in 1974 that marked a turning point in the history of planning in Kyojima. It advocated making the community planning according to the proper context of the area and proposed the following three improvements:

- to protect alleys from car traffic,
- to keep evacuation routes open, and
- to rebuild dilapidated houses.

It pointed out five features to be conserved:

- dwelling houses combined with other uses,
- houses flexible to be extended and/or remodelled,
- semi-private space under eaves and transparent facade,
- maze-like alleys, and
- continuity.

And though the report drew no detailed plan, it suggested four guidelines:

- conserve low-rise character of the area,
- don't adopt unnecessarily massive solution,
- create rich outdoor space with wide open corridors and terraces, and
- don't stick to parallel arrangement of blocks.

The metropolitan government carried out the Housing Project Research and prepared the Structure Plan in 1978. The plan divided the area into five types: to be cleared off, renovated, rehabilitated, restored and conserved. The government still retained the clearance type renewal but took an opinion poll to incorporate citizens' choice into the plan.

### ***Efforts of Community Planning***

The community planning in Kyojima has been actually established in the 1980s. The Community Planning Meeting was founded in 1980 with the board of the neighbourhood association, the metropolitan government, the local government of Sumida City and planners, and it was evolutionally reorganised to the Community Development Conference in 1981. The conference began to prepare a district development plan, held public hearings and then published the General Principles of Community Development in 1982.

The General Principles showed four purposed features of the future Kyojima:

- a neighbourhood with a humane living environment according to the context of the area,
- a neighbourhood with a proper mixture of dwellings, shops and factories,
- a safe neighbourhood well resisting a big earthquake, and
- a lively neighbourhood with ten thousand people.

The Principles also proposed policies for local service roads, houses and community facilities. The policy for local service roads said that:

- a few service roads, essential to the community development, were to be widened or opened,
- service roads of six or eight metres wide were to be laid out at intervals of about 100 metres, and
- the existing network of walkable streets and alleys was to be respected.

The policy for houses said that:

- seriously deteriorated houses were to be replaced to improve the quality of living environment,
- houses were to be made non-combustible,
- too small plots were to be assembled to build moderate size housing, and
- the area was to be divided into three zones according to the condition of houses: to be cleared off, improved and conserved.

And the policy for community facilities said that:

- the area surrounded by the arteries was to be treated as one community,
- a community centre, containing a meeting room and a nursery, was to be built as a central facility of the community, and
- moderate size playgrounds were laid out at proper intervals.

The metropolitan government planned to clear off deteriorated houses and build community housing in accordance with the Principles. It was the first plan in Tokyo that put up rehabilitation and citizen participation for the key concept. But participation was not going well. Some people soon opposed to the plan in 1982, and the chairman of the conference disappointedly resigned his post. The plan came to deadlock. In the 1980s, the community housing project could construct only 29 units in two blocks.

In 1990, the Sumida City became responsible for the community development project instead of the metropolitan government. It founded the Community Development Centre in the area to have close communication with the local people. The centre encouraged self-financed rebuilding and joint replacement. And it adopted a new policy to reduce the size of community housing to about ten units and locate such small housing blocks in strategic sites. The project began to go smoothly. The subsidy of the central government was effectively introduced into the joint replacement project, and the community housing of 137 units in sixteen blocks had been built before the end of the 1990s. New service roads also began to be constructed slowly but steadily.

### ***How Do We Conserve the Walkable Environment?***

The basic concept of the General Principles was still one of towers and open spaces. The local government and planners modified it in several ways according to the character of the area. They incorporated the citizen participation into the implementing process, replaced clearance type renewal with small infill project, and prepared varied programmes instead of the single model. But there appeared some problems as the project was going on.

There are many old people in Kyojima. They live quite comfortably and are warmly looked after in the neighbourhood with low-rise tenement houses and intimate alleys. But they become helplessly alone in new multi-storeyed apartments. A car free alley is a social gathering place for adults and a playground for children, but eight-metre street with traffic lanes and pavements may be too wide to foster public life in this neighbourhood.

My university's team has been working with the local people since 1995 to review the project. The faculties and students discussed with people, and had town trails with children to discover community resources. In last May, Japanese and Danish students

had a joint workshop with pupils of the local primary school to examine possibilities and problems of the area.

### ***Conclusion***

Kyojima is a unique neighbourhood with a humane walkable environment. But the urban renewal policy in the 1960s and 70s neglected this quality and proposed the functionalistic model of towers and open spaces. The community development effort in the 1980s and 90s modified the policy and respected the proper character of the area. Still, it could not sufficiently conserve the walkability.

How do we conserve the walkable and livable environment in Kyojima? What kind of public space should we choose for the future neighbourhood? What type of housing should we establish? And what does Kyojima suggest to the current planning? These are our issues.

Though we have no definite answer now, some hints have emerged through our five years' experience. It may be inevitable to build a few moderately wide streets against disasters, because the earthquake of 1995 in Kobe re-evoked the fear of the local people. However, new widened streets should not be for cars but for people. In Kyojima, the people have used a street of eight metres wide, which runs meanderingly through the neighbourhood, as a stage of their community festival for many years. It has no pavements and becomes a kind of pedestrian-oriented street for lack of through traffic. We hope to integrate new streets into the local fabric in this way.

There have been built sixteen blocks community housing of 137 units during the last thirteen years. Though they are three- or four-storeyed blocks of flats and not so huge on scale, old people who have been removed to those apartments feel isolated. In old wooden tenement houses, they used to chat with friends passing along alleys by their windows and go round frequently in the neighbourhood. But new apartments cannot provide such an opportunity. In Kyojima, the future housing should not be a block of flats but keep close contact with the social network of the area. We are groping for a prototype that interweaves alleys with houses.

Then, children are gradually joining in the community planning process. The Community Development Conference has recognised that it is crucially important to involve the younger generation in its activity, and now tries to provide them with frequent opportunities for learning about the neighbourhood. The local primary schools willingly cooperate with the conference and adopts the community learning programme in its curriculum. And the university also work together with the local people to have community planning workshops for the children.

Though it will take much more time to achieve the goal, I am convinced that in Kyojima the community planning is steadily building up the development process to conserve and rehabilitate the walkable environment. And it is also bringing up the next generation who can enjoy and support the human-oriented neighbourhood.

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