JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

From private to public and back? Kyoto's cityscape councils and the urban commons

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Scholarly and public debate on the urban commons is burgeoning, but building exteriors and the cityscape these constitute are surprisingly absent from it, despite their considerable significance for and impact on residents and visitors. After reflecting on the cityscape as a commons, the article turns to Kyoto, the former capital of Japan and acclaimed stronghold of history and tradition. Decades of conflict about the built environment led to a new building code in 2007 that continues to enjoy broad support. Details of building design, however, are now left to 'local cityscape councils', volunteer bodies that discuss construction plans with developers. Officially, local amateurs meet non-local professionals here, but ethnographic fieldwork in 2019/20 revealed that both technical expertise and Kyoto ties are present on both sides. State representatives are also less absent than officially proclaimed. This case demonstrates that mixed management of the urban commons by the state and civil society can lead to amicable solutions that rise above vested interests, so that state involvement and 'commoning' should not be posited as mutually exclusive.

'Frankly, we're disappointed! (*Hakkiri tte, gakkari shimashita!*)'. The middle-aged speaker remains calm, but what he says, in a Japanese context, is confrontational. Together with fifteen others, I am sitting in a room above a shop on Sanjō Street that is used as an exhibition space on other occasions. Five men and one woman on one side of a long table are members of the Sanjō Cityscape Council (Sanjō keikanzukuri kyōgikai). This is a volunteer body striving to protect the visual appeal of the central city section of Kyoto's former high street, whose notable collection of early Western-style buildings and *machiya* (traditional wooden town houses) attracts sizeable numbers of strollers and lifestyle retailers. On the other side of the table sit six men and one woman, all formally dressed, who have travelled all the way from Tokyo. Representing the developer of a small lot 300 m further west on Sanjō Street, they have brought plans for a two-storey restaurant building. The digitally drawn floor plans and elevations are supposed to reflect the council's demands in the preceding two meetings. The hosts are unimpressed by the results, however: the façade drawing (Fig. 1) lacks imagination

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) **00**, *1-24*

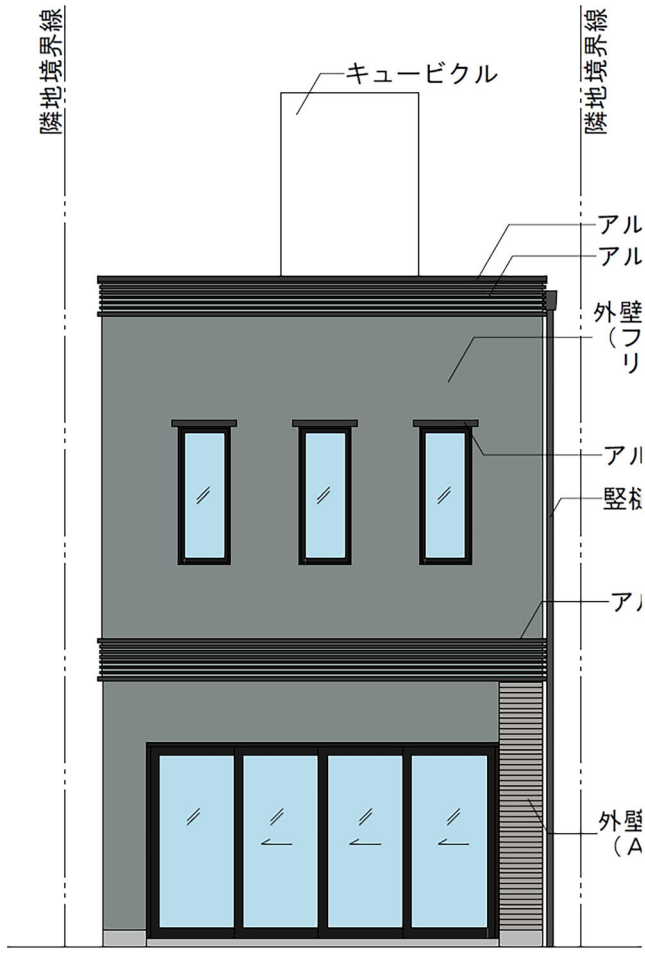

Figure 1. Elevation of Sanjō restaurant building. (Sanjō Cityscape Council. Reproduced with permission.)

and refinement (*kufū*), they say, it is disproportionate, with the upper floor being too high, and features cheap-looking window frames and wall tiles. Also, the suggestion to establish design links with nearby historical buildings was not taken up – this is no better than the initial plans, they complain. One member takes offence when the suggestion to align the height of the ground floor with that of the building next door prompts the admission that no measures have been taken – he really wishes not to hear this again, he says. Council members also mind that the developer prepared no perspective drawings and models, ostensibly owing to lack of time. The guests defend their design, claiming that much thought went into it and that cost is an issue, and the discussion of possible amendments goes in circles, with uneasy silence descending several times. At last, and after confirming that the size of the interior – the developer's main concern – can remain as is, the visitors agree to thinking it over and meeting yet another time. While the shop-owner sees them off, the other members grumble about

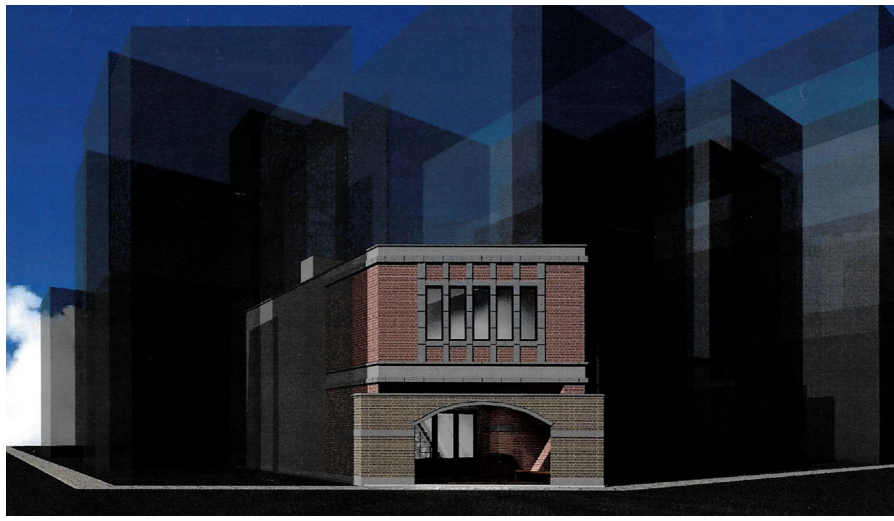

Figure 2. Perspective drawing of revised version of Sanjō restaurant building. (Sanjō Cityscape Council. Reproduced with permission.)

the visitors' approach: they are all real estate agents, not architects or designers, the council's main speaker – himself an architect – is sure.

Expectations are therefore modest before the next meeting two months later in March 2020, in the same location and with almost the same set of participants. This time round, however, the developer has revised the plan substantially (Fig. 2). The façade design now takes up the red and grey hues and the brick pattern of the post office diagonally opposite, a much-beloved nationally listed monument that the council had highlighted as a possible inspiration (Fig. 3). The floor heights are better proportioned and the wall on the ground floor aligns with the height of the ground floor next door. The guests have also brought a perspective drawing and a model, with all of us peering at it from different angles so as to imagine how the completed building will appear to passers-by. The council members quickly settle on one of two alternative options and confirm to the visitors that they can take these plans and the model to City Hall on the next day to initiate their building application. After the guests have left, council members express their surprise about the improvement, for which they should be grateful (*kansha*). Nobody objects when I venture that the cityscape council system seems to serve its purpose.

In the following, I shall first explore what this encounter has to do with the urban commons, a recently trending scholarly and political concern. I argue that cityscapes are an overlooked but very elementary urban commons, although a rather special one, as the buildings that constitute it are often privately owned and independently designed. Next, I show how the cityscape councils mark a new turn in the public management of Kyoto's cityscape, with two further case studies demonstrating the broad range of dynamics and outcomes. I then dispel two convenient fictions, namely that the councils are 'local' and that the state is absent from their activities, arguing that it is precisely the ambiguous character of the councils that allows for success in some cases. Based on this, I finally stress that in managing urban commons, the cityscape is a case where the state

Figure 3. Prewar post office building on Sanjō Street. (Photograph by the author.)

and bottom-up initiatives, instead of being inherently opposed, can actually co-operate in fruitful ways.

The cityscape as an urban commons

So what legitimizes the cityscape councils and their 'consultation meetings' (*iken kōkan-kai*) with developers, as these encounters are called? Proximately, it is Kyoto's municipal government that has installed the system; ultimately, it is the idea that the façade of a building such as the planned restaurant does not just affect its guests, staff, and owners but also those who will never step inside. This is because the building faces the street and with the size, shape, colouring, and design of its exterior contributes to the cityscape, the visual quality of the built environment. Public space is the most elementary shared good in cities: whatever the size, density, and accessibility of the buildings and however little unbuilt space they leave, publicly accessible space between buildings is indispensable for people, things, and infrastructure to reach them and make the city work. In addition to providing connection, this space is used for its own sake, with people walking, driving, cycling, socializing, playing, exercising, eating, drinking, trading, parading, demonstrating, performing, begging, or sleeping rough in it. Urban theorists of all times have asserted the civilizing and inspirational effects of communing with strangers in public space (cf. Amin 2008: 6); anthropologists and human geographers have provided sensitive accounts of how such space is read, used, and appropriated (e.g. Kim 2015; Low 2000; Reed 2002; Sorensen 2009; Wildner 2003); and architects have produced observational surveys of people's behaviour (Gehl & Svarre 2013), in addition to guidance for designing public space (e.g. Carmona, Heath, Oc & Tiesdell 2003; Gehl 2010). Most urban residents, commuters, and visitors venture into public space on a daily basis, and although certain portions may be reserved for specific purposes (such as roadways or pavements), and security concerns, notions of propriety,

or fears of surveillance may impose practical constraints, use as such is free for all at no cost. Moreover, in contrast to most buildings, streets and squares are usually state property. All this means that public space in cities constitutes a commons or collective good. More precisely, it is a public good: use by specific individuals cannot easily be prevented, but unless congestion arises, it does not impinge on other individuals' use, unlike 'common-pool resources' (Ostrom 1990), which are subtractive and 'rivalrous'. It follows that the visual quality of the built environment, as it is perceptible from public space, is a public good and urban commons too.

Scholarly (Eidelman & Safransky 2021: 793) and popular debate about urban commons has burgeoned since the 2010s, adding to the natural, implicitly rural resources (such as pastures, fisheries, or water reservoirs) discussed in early contributions (Hardin 1968; McCay & Acheson 1987; Ostrom 1990) and the 'new commons' (such as scientific knowledge or the internet) addressed in the 2000s (Hess 2008; Hess & Ostrom 2003). The cityscape, however, has been rarely taken up. The label 'urban commons' has been applied to a broad range of phenomena (cf. Feinberg, Ghorbani & Herder 2021), leading to conceptual fuzziness and misunderstandings – ironically, agreement is highest as to the novelty of the topic and research field (cf. Foster 2011: 62; Foster & Iaione 2015: 285; Harvey 2012: 88; Hudson, Rosenbloom & Cole 2019: 2; Huron 2017: 1063; Nonini 2017: 23-4). One part of the discussion addresses natural residues in cities, such as waterbodies and wetlands (e.g. Kuusaana, Ahmed, Campion & Dongzagla 2021; Mundoli, Unnikrishnan & Nagendra 2019), but human-made resources are a much more common focus. There, most of the literature is concerned with, and often sympathetic to, forms of politically progressive 'commoning' (Harvey 2012: 73; Linebaugh 2008: 279): that is, the appropriation or recuperation of urban space for collective benefit. Examples of commoning include urban gardening on vacant lots or pavements, squatting, the conversion of derelict buildings into community spaces or refugee shelters, and the occupation of squares and parks for political protests, such as in the Occupy movement, the Arab and Turkish Spring, or the Nuits debouts (e.g. Bresnihan & Byrne 2015; Foster & Iaione 2019; Pan & Shin 2018; Stavrides 2016; Susser 2017; Susser & Tonnelat 2013: 111). Where these activities concern space that is already public, they usually strive to intensify use and/or widen the user community. This does not make such spaces unambiguously 'more public' in all cases (cf. Wang 2018: 162): tents erected on a central square, for example, inhibit possible other uses, but they give presence and voice to urbanites marginalized by gentrification and the retrenchment of welfare services. One also sees 'urban commons' used for the sharing economy of car, tool, clothing, furniture, and book exchanges; food banks, barter networks, and local currencies; and public amenities such as subsidized housing, public transportation, or schools (e.g. Bruun 2015; Huron 2015; Kalb 2017: 68; Nonini 2017; Özkan & Büyüksaraç 2020*b*: 2-3; Susser & Tonnelat 2013: 110-11). Space is not always central for these institutions, however, and while they might be seen as shared amenities – unless they turn into members-only providers of 'club goods' – the resources they distribute are often meant for individual consumption, with the publicly subsidized flat being as private a home as an unsubsidized one.

Communalizing urban spaces and installing sharing economies and other public amenities are intentional acts, however, so I see the cityscape as more akin to what is taken up in yet another strand of the literature. Kornberger and Borch (2015: 5-11) posit 'atmospheres' as a key urban commons (see also Löfgren 2015), and in contrast to the resources discussed so far, consumption of an attractive street life or urban vibe does

Figure 4. *Manshon* sales leaflet and *machiya* detail. (Reproduced with permission from Brumann 2012: 308.)

not necessarily subtract from the resource, but can on the contrary add to it – *flâneurs* (cf. Benjamin 1991: 524-69) and *flâneuses* are not just observers but also being observed, even when they do not care or even notice. Cities are all about the agglomeration effect of multiplicity and diversity in close proximity, and if this attracts further people and institutions, this can be to everyone's benefit. Such commons therefore do not shrink but rather grow through use, and several authors identify this counterintuitive dynamic as a special feature of urban commons (Foster 2011: 58-9; Foster & Iaione 2015: 297-300; Harvey 2012: 72; Kornberger & Borch 2015; O'Brien 2012: 468).

The cityscape is similar to urban atmospheres in that it is largely a by-product for those who, through individual construction activities, contribute to its provision. A new building does not automatically enhance the cityscape, however, and a dilemma may arise: although buildings must have exteriors for properly enclosing the space inside, their key rationale is these enclosed spaces, not the exteriors. Owners and tenants may welcome an aesthetically pleasing or impressive façade, if only for its effect on visitors and onlookers. Apart from landmark architecture, however, external impressions are rarely the topmost priority, and most buyers and renters, particularly those of single apartments or offices, will prefer to see finite resources spent on their own interior spaces, rather than on beautifying the façade. Builders, then, have an incentive to economize, leaving the upkeep of an attractive cityscape to others.

This dynamic is illustrated by a sales leaflet I picked up when beginning my Kyoto fieldwork in 1998 (Fig. 4). The apartments advertised are in a ten-storey *manshon* (condominium) under construction, and the copy and map highlight its centrality and proximity to commuting hubs. In addition to the building proper, however, the leaflet also features photos of nearby attractions. One of these shows a 'nearby *machiya* (*shūhen no machiya*)', the façade of a freshly renovated traditional town house. Still present in sizeable numbers in a city centre untouched by the Pacific War, these prewar

wooden houses had begun to be refashioned for all kinds of residential and commercial purposes at the time, so including them in the leaflet made sense. High-rise *manshon*, by contrast, had only arrived in the late 1980s and were controversial because of their overwhelming scale, unpopular appearance, and massive social impact on established neighbourhoods.

Clearly, then, Kyoto's cityscape and its components are an urban commons with commercial potential for the city's residents, visitors, and property owners, but clearly also, it is not of the self-sustaining or even self-inflating kind. The façades of central-city *machiya* add to the attractiveness of public space for Kyotoites, confirmed in my own survey of people's façade tastes (Brumann 2012: 211-19), which found the *machiya* almost universally liked. By way of the leaflet, however, they are used to sell apartments in *manshon* that were almost universally disliked. *Manshon* residents might patronize shops and restaurants in refurbished *machiya*, but the one in the photo looks like a domicile closed to strangers; new and large buildings such as *manshon* are charged the highest property taxes, but such municipal revenue is shared with all Kyotoites, not just *machiya* owners and tenants. The *manshon* developers were therefore free-riding, profiting from *machiya* proprietors' contributions to a public good which they themselves impaired.

On a more general level, David Harvey has pinpointed a similar dynamic:

> What if we … think … that it is the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common [*sic*] produced by the collective labor expended on and in the city? The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have had a part in producing it … the real problem lies with the private character of property rights and the power these rights confer to appropriate not only the labor but also the collective products of others (2012: 78-9).

Harvey is not the first to notice – in 1902 already, Ebenezer Howard identified urban real estate value as essentially relational, not due to anything the owner does, but owed to the presence of a large population, that is, a 'collectively-earned increment' (1902: 29). As Martin Kornberger and Christian Borch aptly phrase it: 'The building owner is only able to capture the "unearned increment" through cutting the building off from its surrounding environment and turning it into an isolated, tradable object; its value results from mistakenly attributing network effects to the building itself' (2015: 7).

Surprisingly, the cityscape is rarely singled out in these and other explorations of the urban commons and the 'right to the city' as a collective product (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1967; McCann 2002), and in the urban planning literature as well, sustained reflection is hard to come by (but see Carmona *et al.* 2003: 50). Yet with the cityscape, we have a key site of unearned, even unintended, increment, as it is composed of building exteriors (the interfaces of enclosed spaces with public space), and as these building exteriors are shaped by all kinds of motives, of which their contribution to the cityscape (their visual emissions, so to speak) may be secondary only. Nevertheless, the cityscape is a crucial resource in many urban areas, sometimes the one thing that most attracts visitors and residents, and, by impinging on property values and development prospects, a major factor in urban change.

This then raises the question of how the cityscape is best sustained, the central question of the vast commons literature right from the outset. While Garrett Hardin's kick-off contribution (1968) saw state control and privatization (i.e. de-commoning) as the only ways to ward off 'tragedy', anthropologists (starting from McCay & Acheson 1987) and other social scientists (Dietz, Ostrom, Dolšak & Stern 2002) have

described numerous cases of sustainable commons usage and scrutinized the 'design principles' (Ostrom 1990) of the governing institutions. Not always closely connected to this research, the aforementioned sympathetic academic and political writings see 'commoning' as an alternative to both private and public property and control, a viable way of bypassing both state *and* market in urban governance (e.g. Chan 2019: 149; Eidelman & Safransky 2021: 795; Gidwani & Baviskar 2011: 42; Özkan & Büyüksaraç 2020*a*; Pan & Shin 2018: 355; Susser & Tonnelat 2013: 107). There are adamant calls to reserve the term 'commons' for only such instances that keep their distance from both (e.g. Stavrides 2016), irrespective of the challenges of scaling up what may work in small, face-to-face settings, particularly when hierarchies are taboo (Harvey 2012: 84). Romanticism has been diagnosed here (Jerram 2015), and Anne-Christine Trémon sees sympathies for such positions as nurtured by post-Marxist suspicions of the state and anthropologists' soft spot for small-scale communities and reciprocity (2022: 10). She objects that popular demands are often for the state playing its proper, provisioning role, rather than for bottom-up self-organization, so that in many urban political struggles, 'publicizing' is no less important than 'commoning' (Trémon 2022).

Therefore, if we accept the cityscape into the urban commons fold, are the cityscape councils a viable institution for sustaining it, and is this what they mainly do? Addressing this question requires some more familiarity with Kyoto and the way its cityscape has heretofore been managed.[1]

Governing the cityscape of Kyoto

Kyoto was founded as the seat of the emperor in 794, replicating the plan of the Chinese capital Chang'an, and with some sixteenth-century modifications, the resulting orthogonal street grid of the central area continues until the present day. The lots and buildings filling the grid, however, went through countless divisions and permutations, encouraged by the wars and conflagrations that repeatedly swept the city (Fiévé 2003; Stavros 2014). Size was controlled by timber as the main building material, and into the postwar period, long rows of most often two-storey wooden houses dominated the city. The initial advance of modern architecture was low- or mid-rise only, and the construction of Kyoto Tower – a 131-m-tall observation tower in front of the railway station that stirred controversy in the 1960s – remained a one-off event. From the 1980s on, however, high-rises became more common and contested, and the new postmodern railway station complex and the rebuilt Kyoto Hotel – both 60 m tall and benefiting from special exemptions – drove controversy to unseen levels, as they also affected the celebrated views of the hillside surrounding a flat city. The relative weakness of public planning powers in Japanese cities (cf. Hohn 2000; Sorensen 2002) made themselves felt now. The central city height limits of 45 m (along major roads) and 31 m (along the narrow backstreets) encouraged redevelopment, rather than restraining it, few design regulations or other constraints on the builders' fancies existed, and the preponderance of small-sized lots in dispersed but legally well-protected ownership allowed for little co-ordination. Although central Kyoto continues to be characterized by flights of densely set buildings only rarely interrupted by squares, parks, or greenery, it was as if there were no contiguous urban space and public good, only an archipelago of private assets, whose owners were left to fight out any conflicts, such as over *manshon* casting next-door *machiya* into perpetual shadow, among themselves (Fig. 5).

As a consequence, in my initial fieldwork in 1998/9, discord was rampant and 'cityscape disputes' (*keikan ronsō*) had become a standing expression (Brumann 2009;

Figure 5. *Machiya* overtowered by *manshon* next door. (Photograph by the author.)

2012): many neighbourhoods protested against *manshon* construction in their midst; the mayor's plan to copy a Parisian footbridge over a scenic river was shelved owing to vociferous opposition; movements to protect the dwindling numbers of *machiya* and early Western-style buildings gathered pace; and architects experimented with giving local flavour to modern structures, most often by citing *machiya* stylistic features. Salient as well was the intensity of the public debate, with multiple civil society initiatives staging protests, organizing public meetings, and launching pilot projects and Kyoto City responding by way of surveys, symposiums, neighbourhood mobilization initiatives, and a specialized community centre. Kyoto's status as the 'ancient city' (*koto*), acclaimed stronghold of national heritage, and unmatched tourist attraction full of exquisite temples, shrines, palaces, and gardens (most of them in the suburbs) was widely felt to be endangered. Yet while my own conversations and surveys showed considerable support for stricter building rules, city officials told me that these would come too soon, as consensus had to be built first.

In the early 2000s, however, developments snowballed: a number of particularly massive *manshon* projects in central city locations prompted business leaders to add their voices to those of critical activists, and a new 'Landscape Law' (Keikan-hō) adopted on the national level gave stronger planning powers to local governments. Under the leadership of a vice-mayor on temporary dispatch from the national ministry of construction, city officials thus worked out a new building code, the 'Landscape ordinance' (Keikan jōrei), and the city assembly adopted it in 2007, with little of the anticipated opposition arising.

This move established the strictest planning regime of any large Japanese city: almost forty prominent vistas into the hills, onto the city, along the rivers, and from major historical buildings were made inviolable, with new structures no longer allowed to reach into them. For the city centre in its nineteenth-century outlines, colours and design features inspired by the *machiya* became mandatory for new construction. The sizes, colours, and positioning of shop signs and billboards were tightly regulated, with non-conforming signs removed in 2014 when the grace period ended. Video screens on building fronts and blinking neon signs were banned throughout Kyoto, defying the stereotype of the flashy East Asian city. Yet, most importantly, height limits dropped by around 15 m in the city centre (to 31 m and 15 m, respectively). The backstreets that dominate this part of town – typically offering no more than 6 m of unpartitioned space to pedestrians and vehicles – allow only for five storeys now, not up to eleven as before, so that bulky towers are no longer feasible. More than 600 structures in Kyoto, including the *manshon* in the ad, became technically illegal, exempt from retrospective application of the new rules but not to be rebuilt with the same height once their (in Japan, comparatively limited) lifetime ends. Political and economic leaders asserted that the cityscape was the shared property of all Kyotoites, even when this demanded sacrifices from some of them. At a time when high-rises in Tokyo and nearby Osaka grew ever taller, this was nothing short of revolutionary. Activists were dumbfounded by the turnaround – for a long time, their pressure had achieved little, but now, all of a sudden, their wishes had come true, in a dynamic that clearly ventured beyond its initial mandate (Brumann 2008; 2012: 334-52). Long after the events and back in his ministry, the vice-mayor leading the initiative confided to me that he had been completely in the dark whether the city assembly would adopt their new plan or shred it to pieces.[2]

The new rules went unchallenged and still stand today, however, with only minor amendments and exceptions made, and until recently (see below), they enjoyed broad support across the political spectrum, with no organized opposition to speak of. New buildings with historicizing design features spread widely, outnumbering the original *machiya* in some areas (Fig. 6). There was no sign of feared negative consequences such as plummeting land values – in a country with high levels of home ownership and a political economy pegged to real estate. Tourism in Kyoto soared, at least until the COVID-19 pandemic, with the number of foreign visitors tripling in the 2017-19 period. Until that time, the city also preserved its population level much better than predicted two decades ago. In Japanese planning circles, the Kyoto case is widely known, and the rules for shop signs, billboards, and public advertising in particular have found imitators across the nation, as city officials told me.

The cityscape councils

What did not follow, however, was the second step envisaged in 2007: the new building code was to be topped up by neighbourhood-specific plans with more fine-grained

Figure 6. Recent buildings with *machiya* design features. (Photographs by the author.)

rules. Yet Kyoto's government found itself so busy with administering what it had unleashed that in the first revision of the new policy in 2011, it did not add much. Instead, it installed the 'local cityscape councils' (*chiiki keikanzukuri kyōgikai*). Now, whenever a group of citizens drafts a 'cityscape plan' (*keikan keikaku*) for a given area of the city, the mayor of Kyoto can appoint that group as the local cityscape council for that area. Then, anyone wishing to conduct construction activities in that area – for a new building, a renovation, or even just a new shop sign – must meet the council and talk through their plans with it. The developer is to prepare a summary of the debate, which must be approved by the council and then submitted to Kyoto City when applying for the building permit. Kyoto City does not specify periods of office, council members' qualifications, or minimum standards for the (often aspirational rather than very concrete) 'cityscape plans', and it provides no remuneration – the councils are

entirely voluntary and self-nominated bodies, presumably of architectural laypeople from the area. But then again, this is soft law at best: developers and councils are not obliged to reach consensus or produce tangible results in their negotiations, and any promises made lack legal binding power. Still, for developers, there is no way to get around at least one such 'consultation meeting'.

I heard about this system from a key interlocutor in 2019, given that his own neighbourhood initiative had been appointed a local cityscape council, too, and, facilitated by his introduction at the councils' year-end party (*bōnenkai*), I could interview all eight cityscape councils active in my main field of interest, central Kyoto, over the following months.[3] Two of them bar outsiders from their meetings, but the other six allowed me to join their internal working meetings, consultation meetings with developers, and other activities such as information exchanges and neighbourhood inspection walks with city officials.

Most council territories (Fig. 7) focus on a specific street or two, but Meirin and Shūtoku in the west cover large areas with more than a thousand households each. The council territories in the east are tourist and/or nightlife hotspots, and among these, Gion shinbashi and Ichinenzaka/Ninenzaka were put under façade-oriented conservation regimes already in the 1970s, inaugurating the category of 'Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings' (*dentōteki kenzōbutsu-gun hozon chiku*) in the national cultural heritage conservation system. But the territories in the west contain ordinary, very centrally located city space, with offices, shops, and considerable numbers of domiciles intermingling and only the general 2007 building code in place. Much of the central city is outside council territories, but the council areas have role model potential, known as they are as contributors of floats to the famous Gion festival parades (Meirin; cf. Brumann 2012: 156-208); forerunners of grassroots activism and *machizukuri* ('town-making', i.e. bottom-up planning: Shūtoku and Aneyakōji); the city's former high street (Sanjō); and past and present *hanamachi* ('flower quarters', i.e. geisha districts: Pontochō, Gion shinbashi, and Ichinenzaka/Ninenzaka). In addition to their character, the councils differ in how they conduct business, such as by meeting developers individually or collectively, appending the consultation meetings to internal working meetings or convening them separately, or the degrees of formality and officialdom they employ. Diversity is such that some activists themselves wonder whether there is much they can profitably share. Yet before returning to such questions, let us look at two further cases of the councils' work, both of them concerning larger buildings, in order to better understand their potentials and limitations.

Successes and failures

The aforementioned key interlocutor is the leading figure in the Aneyakōji Cityscape Council one street north of Sanjō.[4] Here, the real estate subsidiary of the local electricity provider contacted the council for planning a hotel on what then was a car park. A consultation meeting was scheduled in January 2020, with three men in suits meeting the dozen or so men and women the leader had mobilized in the office the council usually uses. He himself led the charges and these were only partly about the hotel exterior, although this was criticized as well (Fig. 8). More problematically in the council's eyes, the building was to fill every last inch of the plot, leaving only minimal parking space for cars and bicycles. Guests would be encouraged to arrive by public transport, the builder's representatives explained. To the council, however, it was obvious that they counted on occupying public space: taxis, delivery trucks, and

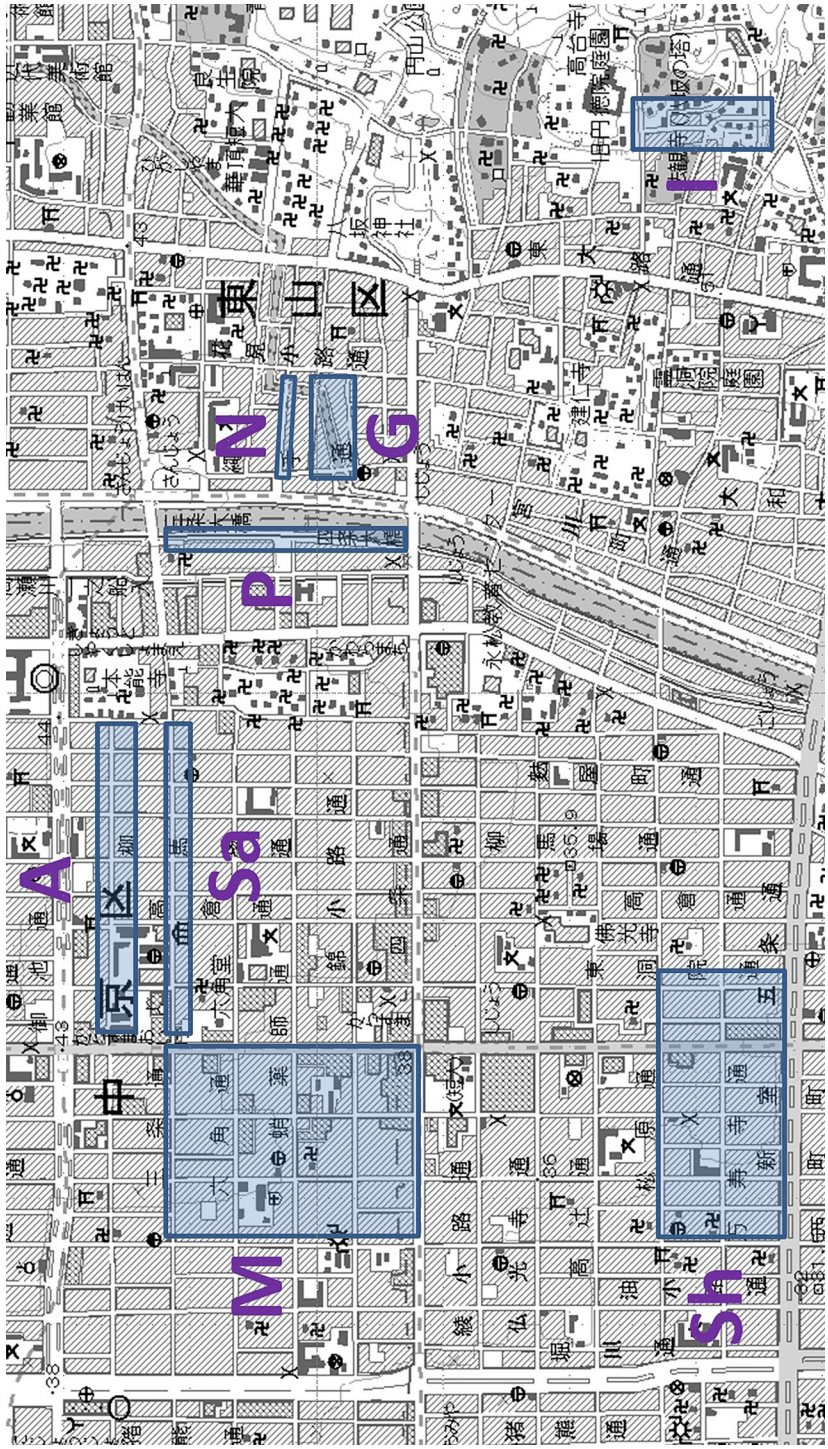

Figure 7. Local cityscape council territories in central Kyoto, 2020. (Author's adaptation of Google Maps base map, reproduced with permission.)
A = Aneyakōji; G = Gion shinbashi; I = Ichinenzaka/Ninenzaka; M = Meirin; N = Nishinochō; P = Pontochō; Sa = Sanjō; Sh = Shūtoku. Boundaries are simplified.

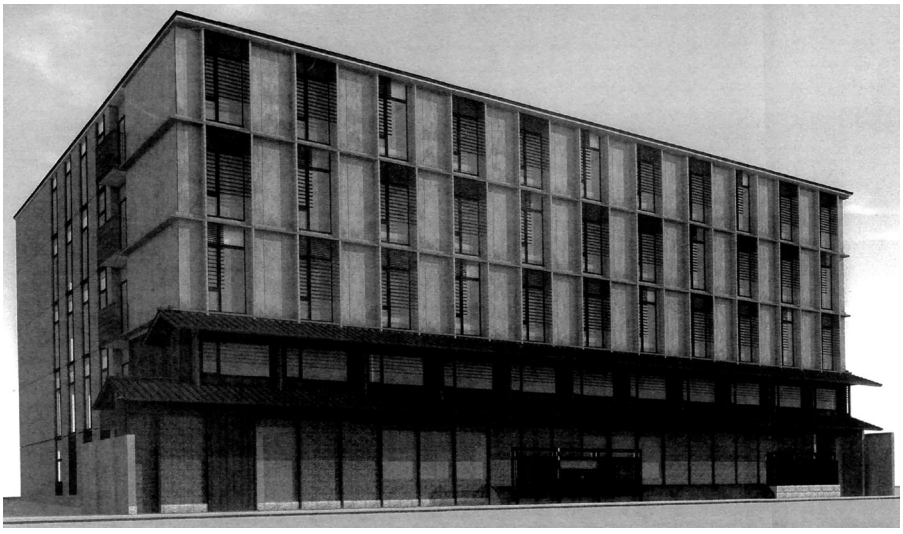

Figure 8. Initial perspective drawing of Aneyakōji hotel building. (Aneyakōji Cityscape Council. Reproduced with permission.)

employees' bicycles would clog the narrow street in front, to the cost of other traffic, pedestrians, schoolchildren, and their safety in this busy part of town. Here as well, after an hour of enduring rather frank and animated criticism, the builder's representatives said they would reconsider the plans and then left.

And here, too, a follow-up meeting was held two months later, and the real estate corporation – replacing two of the three representatives with more senior-looking managers – had entirely revised its approach. The new plan did provide sufficient parking space and included a smoking room inside the building, rather than using the outside. The new façade plan also gave a more ambitious impression, taking up the *machiya* pattern in more depth (Fig. 9), and the developer indicated willingness to hire a renowned architect as consultant. It would also retain ownership of the property, thus remaining accessible for any grievances, and representatives said they were looking forward to long-term co-operation with the neighbourhood. When they left after about an hour, promising a further meeting, the council members were satisfied; the leader, however, was less impressed, arguing that this was the approach the builder should have taken right from the outset.

A third case will prevent the picture from getting too rosy. In February 2020, the Shūtoku Cityscape Council held a consultation meeting over a hotel planned in one of the neighbourhoods. In a large room inside the Shūtoku Community Centre, seven representatives of the project firm met nine residents of the affected street section – all at least in their sixties – and the council leader and his deputy. Here as well, the plan provided parking space for just a single vehicle, so that cars idling in the street or trespassing into the free space in front of the *manshon* opposite could be anticipated. For cost reasons, the plan placed air-conditioning devices on the hotel balconies, facing adjacent buildings, rather than on the rooftop, where noise and waste heat are less of a nuisance. Windows had been positioned without even thinking about those of the buildings next door and mutual visibility. The humdrum façade design

Figure 9. Revised perspective drawing of Aneyakōji hotel building. (Aneyakōji Cityscape Council. Reproduced with permission.)

(Fig. 10) was criticized as well, but this clearly paled beside the other externalities of the planned structure. The tone became rather confrontational at times, with one neighbour accusing the guests of lying, but the company representatives insisted on their right to use that property efficiently within the legal limits. After ninety minutes or so, the council leader closed the meeting, and everyone dispersed. Contrary to the other two cases, nothing tangible came from this encounter, and no second meeting was summoned. Success of the council system, this means, is not a foregone conclusion.

Local lay councils and external developers as convenient fictions

Let us now look at the social constitution of these meetings. Ostensibly, the new system empowers local amateurs (the cityscape councils) to negotiate with external or, rather, placeless professionals (the developer representatives), all without interference by the state (Kyoto City's bureaucrats), in the hope that what finally reaches the state (the plans submitted for the building permit) will thereby become more acceptable to everyone. All of these assumptions, however, require qualification.

For a start, the cityscape councils are neither particularly local nor particularly non-professional. Of the seven Sanjō council members present at the two meetings, four are trained architects, two of them still practising. Only one member is an old-time shop-owner on Sanjō Street and two members live in the area; the other four commute to Sanjō workplaces from elsewhere in Kyoto or have no special connection, aside from having worked with the residents in an architectural association's project many years ago. The leader of the Aneyakōji council has lived in a *machiya* on that street almost all his life and one shop-owner is also an old hand. Most other neighbourhood residents present at the meetings, however, moved in more recently, and they are

Figure 10. Perspective drawing of Shūtoku hotel building. (Shūtoku Cityscape Council. Reproduced with permission.)

outnumbered by people from outside the neighbourhood who have become interested in the area, such as Kyoto university professors and their architecture and planning students. The leader himself is a retired construction engineer and his main collaborator who usually chairs the meetings is an urban planner and university professor – he does live in Kyoto, but not particularly close by. In the Shūtoku council, about half of the working meeting regulars were born and raised in the area, most of them laypeople. The leader, however, is an architect who moved his home and practice from elsewhere in the city to a Shūtoku *machiya* he renovated, and his deputy, a still more recent immigrant, teaches urban planning at a university. Both say they still receive a newcomer treatment by the old-timers. Further architects attend the council's working meetings, but they have moved away from Shūtoku or never lived there in the first place.

The assembled technical expertise, this means, is considerable: of the six councils I followed, the Gion shinbashi council is the only one lacking members with a specialist background, a fact it deplores. Moreover, the most vocal activists of the Sanjō, Aneyakōji, and Meirin councils have the experience of leading citizen groups: twenty years ago when I first met them, they battled with developers and Kyoto City over *manshon* projects, the demolition of *machiya* and other historical structures, and the Parisian footbridge plan. In comparison, neighbourhood roots play a lesser role. There is always at least one long-standing resident or shop-keeper who liaises with other old-timers and the established neighbourhood associations, and this kind of local anchor is

indispensable, as everyone confirmed. People from elsewhere in Kyoto with an affection for the neighbourhood, however, are part of all councils except Gion shinbashi, and in some of them, they outnumber the true locals.

In some cases, this has generated friction between the councils and the established neighbourhood associations: membership in the latter is conditional on property, residence, and/or business activities in the neighbourhood, and people born and raised there often dominate, just like has been described for these ubiquitous pillars of local self-organization elsewhere in Japan (Bestor 1989; Robertson 1991). To avoid such rifts, the Shūtoku council makes a point of holding the consultation meetings separately from internal working meetings, giving immediate neighbours much room in the consultation meetings. After the meeting described above, the leader told me that he did not even know the woman who had talked most, relentlessly imploring the builder to exercise more restraint. The other councils, however, are less compunctious in privileging locality, and not all of them and not all members are popular with everyone in their territories, as they themselves pointed out. Still, I gained the impression that there is tacit delegation: clearly, the councils do what many locals approve of but are unwilling to shoulder themselves.

Turning to the developers' representatives, in line with the official premise, professionals were always included, if not architects, then real estate specialists. Developers were not as locally detached as imagined, however: in the Sanjō case, the firm was the real estate subsidiary of a department store chain with Kyoto roots and an outlet within walking distance. Council members saw this a factor for the developer's relatively co-operative stance, in a case where the concession made – revising the façade design – was not overly costly in the first place. In the Aneyakōji case, Kyoto links played an even stronger role, as the developer's parent company is the successor of the formerly state-owned monopolistic energy provider, which is a semi-public entity in many Kyotoites' eyes. This encouraged the leader's strategy in the time between the two consultation meetings: he complained directly to the mother corporation, pointing to the more sophisticated hotels and condominiums that the real estate daughters of Kyoto's gas and telephone providers had built in the area. He alerted an old acquaintance of his who happened to work for the developer, a man with whom they had managed to realize a co-operative planning process for a nearby *manshon* years ago. He mobilized his press contacts, with one journalist publishing a critical article in the city's biggest daily. In response, corporation representatives visited the leader's home twice, and the second time, he took them on a tour. This included not only the aforementioned hotels and condominiums, but also a famous traditional sweet shop and one of Kyoto's most renowned *ryokan* (traditional inns), all in an effort to convey the special character of the Aneyakōji area. Evidently, this swayed the developer to give the project more attention, abandoning the initial low-cost, run-of-the-mill solution for something more ambitious. Evidently also, much of this effort would have been wasted on a firm with no Kyoto connections and no local image to be concerned about.

In the Shūtoku case, however, the developer had no public face to be mindful of. It was just an ordinary, Tokyo-based business that – in a hotel construction rush unseen in Kyoto – was realizing already its fourth project in the Shūtoku area. As the company had made no concessions previously, expectations were limited from the outset, and there were no surprises in this regard. Obviously, the absence of local connections encouraged a hard-line approach.

The absent state as a convenient fiction

In a further deviation from how the councils are officially imagined, Kyoto City – the official guardian of the public interest – is not as absent as it seems. The Cityscape Policy Department of the City Planning Bureau has assigned one junior bureaucrat as a liaison to each of the councils, and this official usually attends the internal working meetings. Most council activists praise the current head of department for instituting this policy, following on a period when they felt ignored. Some councils make a point of barring the officials from the consultation meetings, believing that these should feature independent, citizen-led action, but others purposely invite them, hoping for an intimidating effect on developers. The Pontochō council does not only assemble all developers in one room, given that there are up to a dozen cases a month; it has about a dozen Kyoto City bureaucrats attend as well, because this narrow lane with its hundreds of bars and restaurants is a key concern for the fire, water, and electricity departments and the police. The two-monthly internal network meetings of the eleven councils also attracted at least half a dozen city officials as guests, and when the NGO tasked with organizing that meeting withdrew in 2022, the bureaucrats took over the task of convening it. At the year-end party I mentioned, almost a dozen officials came as well. By and large, council activists see these bureaucrats as allies, even when their position requires them to stress neutrality. None of this is too clearly spelt out, however, and officials themselves are sometimes uncertain as to when exactly they are welcome, as one of them told me. Significant in these state-citizen encounters, however, is the fact that council members orchestrate the proceedings. This is a reversal of the usual pattern in joint activities: in public symposiums, neighbourhood workshops or Kyoto City's deliberative commissions (*shingikai*), bureaucrats always take the lead.

The division of labour can be intricate: in the Aneyakōji hotel case, the head of the Cityscape Policy Department summoned company representatives to City Hall, urging them to take the council's demands seriously. Conversely, the council leader asked a retired senior official from the City Planning Bureau to join him for the developer representatives' two home visits, thus having a respectable witness. Kyoto City has also authorized bottom-up initiatives coming from the councils: the Pontochō council drafted its own rules for shop signs, in order to prevent these from entering into an arms race for the biggest and flashiest, and once these rules had local approval, Kyoto City incorporated them in a municipal ordinance, thus giving them binding power. The recent burying of the overhead supply lines on the lane – a major boost to its visual appeal – would also have taken much longer to realize without the townscape council finding volunteers to put the required transformers on their private land, thus clearing the most difficult bottleneck.

Harmony is not guaranteed, however: in early 2019, the councils learned of an internal meeting of Kyoto City officials where the possibility of relaxing building heights along the avenue in front of City Hall (one street north of Aneyakōji) was on the agenda. Several hotel developments along that avenue had pressed for a relaxation that would grant them one extra floor. The Aneyakōji council leader was furious that the councils had not been consulted over such a momentous cityscape question. Therefore, he talked the other councils into jointly submitting a public petition (*yōbōsho*) to the mayor, urging him to leave the height limitations untouched, and the press duly reported the move. The head of the Cityscape Policy Department saw this as an over-reaction: this meeting was merely for internal brainstorming, he told me, and nothing had been decided yet. Yet to avoid such run-ins in the future, he vowed to step up communication

with the councils. He also conceded that the petition had served its purpose, as the relaxation plan had been shelved right away. Evidently, it was not worth estranging the councils that the city itself had empowered.

Reflecting on all this, the aforementioned professor from the Aneyakōji council told me that he could not imagine a more advantageous system for Kyoto City (*kore yori arigatai seido wa nai*). The consultation meetings work as a buffer, preventing a good deal of conflict from landing on city officials' desks, and what developers hand in to the city after going through the process is often improved from initial versions. The council volunteers' local knowledge, architectural expertise, self-confidence, and experience with tense encounters often far exceed those of the junior bureaucrats tasked with discussing building applications with developers. The councils can also make 'unreasonable' demands, deliberately testing the limits, while city officials must play by the rulebook. Furthermore, owners, builders, and tenants are more likely to compromise with future neighbours than with city officials whom they might never meet again. Occasionally, furious developers ring city officials to complain about the councils' demands, but this is a moderate nuisance. Tasking specialized bureaucrats or external consultants with the councils' work would also be far costlier than council members' self-exploitation, which amounts to unpaid second jobs in some leaders' cases.

The councils are also acceptable for Kyoto City, I think, because of their experimental, grey-zone nature. Surprisingly little about them is fixed, but in the end, their negotiations with builders are consultations only, lacking legal substance. In case of a major crisis, such as if a schism had several groups compete for council status in the same area, or if council members started to accept personal favours for scaling back their demands (a possibility that actually worried one of them), I doubt that Kyoto City would hold on to a system that, given its weak legal grounding, could be dropped quickly. But in the absence of such problems, Kyoto City lets the experiment run on, accepting the councils as the authentic voice of the local common person – which, as both bureaucrats and councils know full well, is a simplification.

Council impacts

Had COVID-19 not hit Japan in spring 2020, the buildings of the three case studies would all stand by now. Yet with the country's borders closed and most nationals staying home, Kyoto's tourism dropped to near zero and its gastronomy was also hard hit. Therefore, both the Shūtoku hotel and the Sanjō restaurant were called off. Both lots remain unbuilt, and when I last enquired in early 2023, the Sanjō developer was looking for a new tenant and the Shūtoku developer, which had installed a meter-operated car park as interim use, was looking for a buyer. Only the hotel in the Aneyakōji area had been completed as planned, and relations remain friendly, with the owner firm donating money to the council's activities. The pandemic thus had a much larger impact on the urban landscape than the councils, and so did Kyoto City's 2021 decision to decree wheelchair accessibility for all new hotel rooms. Critics could not help noting that such commitment to minority rights came at a convenient moment: years earlier, with the Tokyo Olympics in sight, the mayor had vowed to bring up the number of hotel rooms from 30,000 to 40,000, but with 46,000 reached by 2019, complaints about over-tourism became difficult to ignore. The new barrier-free rule completely squashed the market for cheap hotels with narrow rooms, my informants write, and real estate momentum has shifted back to condominiums. Kyoto City slightly relaxed height limits in some

fringe areas in 2023, ostensibly to encourage residential construction for families and thus reverse the population losses of the previous two years. Against all these larger waves, the councils' efforts produce mere ripples. Yet the councils continue their work, and three new ones, all in the centre, have been appointed by the mayor since 2020.

While this must mean that members perceive council activities as sufficiently rewarding, is what they do in everyone's interest? After all, the councils do not just focus on building appearances, and even if not exclusively, they do include locals. Such residents of and commuters to their territories are on average more exposed to a building exterior than other Kyotoites and more likely to be affected by other than visual externalities, such as sun blockage, noise, construction dust, smells (such as of new restaurants), traffic effects, or littering. The Shūtoku council meeting described above in particular had a NIMBY ('Not in my back yard!') feel about it: close-by neighbours living in *manshon* that themselves are no feast for the eyes focused on very localized nuisances, such as waste heat and visual privacy. But the façade and its design were discussed in all three example cases and almost all others I witnessed or heard of. Based on my aforementioned survey and my long-term ethnographic observations, there is no doubt that an overwhelming majority of Kyotoites would prefer the final versions in the Sanjō and Aneyakōji cases over the initial proposals, and while plans did not change in the Shūtoku case, I have yet to hear of consultation meetings that led to *less* acceptable outcomes. Some results are quite spectacular: for the new luxury Park Hyatt Hotel in the Higashiyama district, the Ichinenzaka/Ninenzaka council kept discussing the plans with the developer for over two years, and both in the council's eyes and by general Kyoto standards, the final buildings are greatly improved over the first drafts.

Clearly, and whatever else they do, the councils' activities improve the cityscape as an urban commons, and this goal featured as an important motivation when council members mused about their own engagement. The councils are not just defending their neighbourhoods for their own benefit, and the city officials' support acknowledges this.

Conclusion

Decades of controversy about the built environment confirm that in Kyoto, too, the cityscape is an urban commons. It is dear to the hearts of many residents and visitors and clearly increases the value of private goods, such as local real estate and the products and services of Kyoto businesses. But in the social perception of other cities as well, the visual aspect of the built environment is an important factor, underlining the weight of physical urban space and of buildings as the most lasting constituents of that space. In the burgeoning scholarly and political discussion about urban commons, the cityscape therefore deserves more attention than it has heretofore received. It is a special commons, however, as it is constituted by the externalities of private goods – the exteriors that urban buildings cannot fail to have, even when they are mainly built for what they enclose – and is most often assembled incrementally rather than in one co-ordinated swoop. This comes close to what others have said about urban atmospheres, yet, contrary to what has been claimed for additional street life participants increasing the urban vibe, the additional façade is less likely to be a boon to the commons, particularly not if it fails to live up to what it replaces. How cityscapes arise out of building exteriors in people's perceptions is therefore a rich field for further study.

So also is the question of how particular patterns of governance work with cityscapes. Part of the lack of attention in the urban commons literature may result from the fact that state control has been the most widespread mode, unlike the bottom-up

initiatives to which much of that literature has been drawn. When preparing a public presentation of my results to a Kyoto audience in 2021, for example, I was asked to compare the city with my native Germany, a kind of promised land of participatory urban planning in many Japanese specialists' eyes. My enquiries revealed intricate procedures in which citizens' feedback is extensively sought. But while final plans must be accompanied by detailed justifications of how citizen input was adopted, modified, or disregarded, municipal bureaucrats are in the driving seat. State interference with private properties thus remains a top-down affair, and proofing the final plan against private legal challenges is a key objective.

Kyoto's local townscape councils, by contrast, build on voluntary citizen initiative. The councils do not focus on cityscape matters exclusively but do not neglect them either, and what they achieve in this regard is in line with what most residents and visitors wish to see. Coping with frustration about unresponsive developers and their own limited powers is a perennial challenge for the members. Yet the councils deliver in terms of their self-set task, and in a city where the built environment is such a prominent concern, this is no mean feat.

It would be too simple to celebrate this as a story of bottom-up empowerment, however, much as a good deal of the urban commons literature is partial to doing so. While most of the observed council members have liberal political persuasions, theirs is a reformist rather than revolutionary quest, and despite their frequent complaints about bureaucratic inaction, we do not see them unhinge the state. Instead, their mandate comes from the mayor and they co-operate with city officials in often subtle ways, even when this is partly undeclared. The weak legal grounding of the arrangement and the hazy lines drawn, while leaving some things unsettled, work as a boon overall: I did not have the feeling that all developers fully grasped the councils' limited weight, making them more likely to compromise than they might otherwise be.

Consequently, the case of the cityscape councils refutes an inherent contradiction between state control and the urban commons. It is closer to the examples from US cities provided by Sheila Foster (2011), such as park friends' groups, neighbourhood patrols, and Business Improvement Districts. As the local state does in these cases, Kyoto's municipal government plays a 'collective action enabling' role (Foster 2011: 63) by delegating powers to the councils, all the while retaining legal control and the right to call off the experiment. We see a 'polycentric approach to local governance' that 'locates commons institutions between the market and the state' (Foster & Iaione 2015: 333), by way of empowering civil society to address what public authorities, for want of resources, capacity, or competency, are reluctant to tackle.

Overdrawn dichotomies clearly fail to help us elucidate these cases. Rather, Kyoto's cityscape councils demonstrate that mixed management of the urban commons by public authorities and private citizens can be productive, rising above mere NIMBY action. The interplay of state, civil society, and urban commons can take multiple shapes, and when studying it, we are well advised not to take too much for granted.

Acknowledgements

Research was conducted in conformity with the Ethical Guidelines of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA) (*https://www.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GAA_Principles-and-Procedures-for-Ethical-Reviews.pdf*), as encouraged by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPI). I am deeply indebted to my Kyoto interlocutors, who, following established practice, will remain

anonymous but did not object to the use of their organizations' real names. Support by the department Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia, headed by Chris Hann at the MPI, is gratefully acknowledged. For their insightful remarks about earlier versions, I thank my colleagues in that department, the successor department Anthropology of Economic Experimentation, my research group Constructing Urban Futures in Asia, as well as the audiences of presentations to Machizukuri kyōdō kenkyūkai, Kyoto, in 2020, and the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, in 2021. I also thank three anonymous reviewers, the Editors, and copy-editor Justin Dyer for their helpful comments.

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

NOTES

[1] This builds on ethnographic fieldwork in 1998/99 (sixteen months), 2001 (two months), 2007 (one month), 2012 (two weeks), 2016 (two and a half months), and 2020/1 (six months).

[2] One reviewer missed a discussion of cultural heritage. Yet heritage conservation requires proprietor consent under Japanese law, and owing also to the limited financial and other incentives, this is rarely given for private residential and commercial buildings. Focusing efforts to shape the cityscape on planning (i.e. controlling new structures) rather than the existing building stock therefore offers itself, and state-led conservation plays only a minor role in what I report.

[3] I left aside the three councils with suburban territories as they face substantially different conditions and concerns.

[4] In earlier work (such as Brumann 2012), I referred to Aneyakōji Street as Miyako Street, but my main interlocutors prefer full identification.

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Du privé au public et retour ? Les conseils du paysage urbain de Kyoto et les communs urbains

Résumé

Dans le débat académique et public émergent sur les communs urbains, l'extérieur des bâtiments et le paysage urbain brillent étonnamment par leur absence en dépit de l'importance considérable qu'ils revêtent pour les habitants comme pour les visiteurs. Après une réflexion sur le caractère de commun du paysage urbain, l'article se concentre sur Kyoto, ancienne capitale du Japon et bastion reconnu de l'histoire et de la tradition. Des dizaines d'années de conflit à propos de l'environnement bâti ont donné naissance, en 2007, à un nouveau code de l'urbanisme qui reste aujourd'hui encore largement accepté. Les détails de la conception des bâtiments sont cependant laissés à des « conseils locaux du paysage urbain », composés de bénévoles qui discutent des projets de construction avec les promoteurs. Officiellement, des amateurs locaux y rencontrent des professionnels de l'extérieur. En réalité, un travail de terrain ethnographique mené en 2019-2020 a révélé autant d'expertise technique que de liens avec Kyoto d'un côté comme de l'autre. En outre, les représentants des pouvoirs publics sont moins absents que ne le proclame le récit officiel. Ce cas démontre que la gestion mixte des communs urbains par l'État et la société civile peut déboucher sur des solutions à l'amiable dépassant les intérêts en présence, et que l'action des pouvoirs publics et celle des communs ne doivent donc pas être considérées a priori comme mutuellement exclusifs.

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