Book Review

Learning from the Japanese City – West meets east in urban design Barrie Shelton, E & FN SPON, ISBN 0-419-22350

In *Learning from the Japanese Cities*, Barrie Shelton questions the standard Western response to Japanese built form, a response which has rarely been positive. Shelton himself admits that he was 'baffled, irritated and even intimidated by what he saw' on his first visit to Japan. Yet, he was eventually fascinated and inspired by the chaotic vitality of its cities. As an urban designer in Australia, he realised that it is a mistake to attempt to appreciate or judge the Japanese city by reference to Western norms and theories about good city form (well-defined public spaces, coherent groupings of buildings, etc). In opposition to the conventional Western view, he tries to extract the positive implications for contemporary urban design from the chaotic, fragmented and decentralised urban places of Japan. His investigation extends beyond a mere visual examination of built form and architecture, and reaches to the deep cultural roots behind appearance, by reference to religion, language and philosophy.

As a background, Chapter One presents an account of changing Western interests in Japanese city form over the time. Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruno Taut are introduced as the first admirers of traditional Japanese building design, and the discussion is then extended to more contemporary attitudes and prejudices from the West. The second chapter starts with an examination of the nature of Japanese writing (the *kanji* characters) in order to get an insight into the peculiarly Japanese way of arranging spaces. He points out the difference in visual organisation between Japanese and Western writing scripts and observes that according to the standards of Japanese aesthetic the unidirectional and linearly arranged Western writing is rather ugly. Through a comparison with Western graphic and design conventions and their implied understanding of spaces, the discussion moves from writing on paper to dwelling, to urban form and landscape. The next chapter presents an array of Japanese urban characteristics and building types ranging from historic urban dwellings such as *samurai* and merchant houses; to the evolution of urban structures including streets, signboards, sidewalks and bridges; and finally to the work of

contemporary Japanese architects. Chapter Four examines the various qualities of culture and religion which underpin the values of Japanese urban form and space.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarises the fundamental differences between Japanese and Western interpretations of space. In order to illustrate the Japanese approaches to space design, the author examines Hiroshige's drawings showing traditional Japanese landscapes and a set of work by contemporary Japanese architects which implies a clear relationship between the nation's tradition and the latest technology. While the Western city is neatly controlled by orders and forms, the Japanese are more keen on place-making through the profusion of signboards, lights and animation which sometimes cover whole buildings. Although the Japanese city is seemingly chaotic and lacking in order, the author argues that this is a positive attribute, entirely appropriate to the contemporary pluralistic and fast-changing world. Westerners could learn much from the flexible Japanese affinity with contemporary ideas in science and philosophy, most of which have been, ironically, generated from Western society.

The value of this fascinating book lies in its departure from conventional ways of evaluating the Japanese city based on theories derived from Eurocentric design prejudice. Unlike Westerners who appreciate continuity, completeness and spatial order on the surface and façade of built form, the Japanese have traditionally found their aesthetic within confusion (*ranchou*) representing the states of mismatching, fragmentation, flexibility and temporariness. Since Westerners have very different philosophical beliefs and styles from the Japanese, their judgement of the Japanese city has been biased and superficial, arising from an ignorance of Japanese tradition and culture. Although Shelton's insights into Japanese life is limited in terms of its geographical and temporal coverage, he clearly succeeds in presenting and analysing the values of the Japanese city from a new point of view which is very different to that of conventional Western urban design theory.

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