

High Density, Low-Rise Housing: Learning From Japan

Seeking to curb suburban sprawl, U. S. planners look toward Japan for ways to combine comfortable living with high-density housing.

BY ELLEN SHOSHKES

When 33 American and Japanese urban planning and design professionals met in Japan last summer, to conduct case studies on regional structure, world city development, and urban design, it promised to be the beginning of a long relationship, hopefully, resulting in new perspectives and the exchange of ideas on metropolitan planning problems and solutions. This summer, a second group of thirty such professionals will gather in the New York metropolitan area to conduct case studies based on planning issues in Hoboken and Princeton, in New Jersey, and the Tribeca area of New York City. Through these case studies of the Tokyo and New York regions, the US-Japan Metropolitan Planning Exchange Program (Metro-plex), co-sponsored by the Regional Plan Association (RPA) and Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR), hopes to improve the quality of metropolitan planning processes in Japan and the United States.

Housing and community development are among the principle problems that planners of metropolitan areas need to address. Today, similar issues affect the design of housing and residential

communities in both Eastern and Western nations, including:

- A shift from public to private sector production systems;
- The high cost of land and scarcity of buildable land;
- The need to redevelop existing urban



Kouichi Nagashima, Principal of AUR Consultants used the "machiya" house as a prototype and building block in his competition submission, "Development Proposal for Small Scale Court-Yard Type Residential Unit."

and older suburban neighborhoods;

- The recognition that housing is just one aspect of overall community development;
- Changing demographics and the increasingly diverse needs of households; and
- Increased prefabrication in the home building industry.

Many Japanese families have adopted the American residential ideal of a detached dwelling on its own plot of land,

but the consequences of urban sprawl have now convinced planning professionals in both nations to focus on higher density residential prototypes instead. In both Japan and the United States, extensive development has made vacant land close to urban centers scarce and extremely expensive. Families must move further and further from job centers in order to find affordable housing, resulting in long commutes and congested roads. Moreover, municipalities in the fast growing metropolitan fringe areas must weigh new housing development against the need to preserve open space and farm land. As a result, in both Japan and the U.S., new housing must be built at relatively high densities in order to be affordable to families with low or moderate incomes. But many higher density housing projects built since World War II were standardized

in design and built at a large scale. As a result, many people have a negative image of high density housing, which they perceive as lacking qualities such as privacy, security and individual identity, that are associated with detached, suburban housing.

There are many examples of older suburbs and urban residential neighborhoods, however, that combine relatively high density with a gracious urbanity. These older neighborhoods offer many

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meet the changing needs of a family or unknown future occupants. Again, circulation around the interior courtyard facilitates such changes, either by reorganizing the interior layout or by building new additions, until the maximum allowable site coverage is reached.

Mixed Income/Mixed Use

The potential for including commercial space in the front of a single family dwelling enables people to work at home, a concept that is also now being promoted by both American and European "housers." for example, the program for The New American House competition included a home workspace. One essential difference between the Japanese and Western versions of such a prototype, is that the shop front of the "machiya" is designed of as an integral part of the dwelling façade. During the day these sliding shutters open to welcome the public, at night the shutters close and a private "homelike" appearance is restored. This flexible enclosure is designed with the same materials and detailing as the rest of the house, which facilitates the integration of such small commercial enterprises in residential districts. Signage is also handled as an integral part of the façade; understated, it is compatible with the private, residential nature of the building.

Another benefit of the understated design of the façade is that behind this unassuming public front the family's private quarters may be either modest or prosperous. Passersby cannot identify the social status of the occupants based on the external appearance of the machiya. The fact that the appearance of the home is not a status symbol facilitates the use of this form in the creation of neighborhoods in which housing units for various income groups may be mixed within the same architecturally cohesive fabric.

The machiya is an appropriate prototype for construction in new residential neighborhoods—that are typically planned around transit stations and a commercial zone—as well as for scattered site infill in urban neighborhoods and the older ring of suburban towns. One draw-

back for modern families is the difficulty of accommodating parking in this scale of development. This is not as much of a problem as it may appear to Americans, however. In Japan, you may only buy a car if you can prove you have a parking space for it. Many Japanese rely on mass transit and bicycles.

A final consideration, is that in Japan some traditional neighborhoods of machiya type structures still exist. There is growing appreciation of the cultural value of preserving these districts. Moreover, an increasing number of municipalities are recognizing that historic preservation and adaptive reuse offers a good vehicle for economic development, as many of these older neighborhoods are within easy walking distance of com-

mercial centers and transit stations. The traditional Japanese towns were built around such a balance of mixed uses and mixed incomes within pedestrian oriented neighborhoods, which modern planners are rediscovering is vital for sustaining healthy communities. ■

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to the distinctiveness of Houston and Santa Monica, part of the explanation rests in political culture. Specifically, the role and location of a "sixties" protest culture in facilitating or suppressing political change in cities across the United States should be recognized.

Sixties activism was a generational phenomenon that was most broadly felt along the Washington, D.C. to Boston corridor and in California, where demonstrations against the war in Vietnam were most intense. It is in these areas that most rent control laws have been passed. Sixties culture was both place specific and generational in terms of its overall impact and its ability to provide ongoing social movement resources. Houston has no legacy of protest culture, while Santa Monica has been greatly impacted by sixties protest leaders like Tom Hayden, Derek Shearer, and Carey Lowe.

While Santa Monica is far from perfect and has been attacked from both left and right political perspectives, it provides a model of progressive municipal reform and "new urban populism" that sparks the necessary vision for cities to seize upon across the nation. According to the new Undersecretary of Commerce, Derek Shearer, (1989:293)

The new urban populism is based on a

vision of the city as a place where people should be given priority over buildings, cars, and businesses— and a place where citizens have basic rights as residents of the city whether or not they own property.

With environmental and slow-growth movements gaining ground nationwide, Santa Monica represents the future and Houston the past in terms of governing cities. As we move toward the year 2000, an increasing number of cities will move away from the free enterprise approach and embrace the progressive managerialist form of running a municipality. Community or commodity? This question raised by the tenants' movement shares common grounds with other movements for social change and poses a powerful challenge to existing definitions of the "good city" and social relations in a capitalist culture. ■

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