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Debates on History and Heritage between East and West

Sara Stroux & Marie-Thérèse van Thoor

The collaboration between KIT and TU Delft started out with the central theme of machiya, a traditional type of wooden townhouse, known in Kyoto as kyomachiya. Rather than Kyoto's pre-eminent monuments like shrines, temples or one of the 17 world heritage sites, the vernacular architecture of the kyomachia seemed to be the ideal study subject, addressing conservation issues and the need for adaptation to both contemporary demands and new uses. With over 40,000 machiya still in existence, this building type is very characteristic of the cultural landscape of Kyoto. Machiya, built on narrow parcels and recognizable by their closed street facades (*omoté*), originally combined a residential function with a commercial one.

However, traditional machiya are increasingly disappearing from the Kyoto streetscape. Complicated ownership and inheritance structures prevent young people from buying or inheriting traditional machiya. The fact that machiya do not provide any parking space and do not satisfy contemporary Japanese living standards, are just two of the reasons why wealthier people prefer to live in new apartment buildings. Occasionally they own a machiya as a second house. But a lot of machiya are still inhabited by older people, who have great difficulty maintaining these wooden structures with earth walls and floors. What is more, the number of craftsmen capable of restoring and

renovating traditional machiya is steadily declining. Today, while a lot of new buildings imitate certain features of machiya architecture – mainly the design of the street facade and the building volume – they employ fundamentally different construction methods and materials. In recent years traditional machiya have been renovated, extended or transformed for other functions, such as popular hotels (B&Bs) and restaurants. Unfortunately, a lot of machiya are simply demolished and replaced by modern buildings.

In the following chapters, researchers from KIT and TU Delft present the findings and outcomes of their research, conducted for the most part during their field trips to Japan. Depending on their individual scholarly background and research focus, the authors studied various topics related to machiya architecture and the challenge of preserving this specific Japanese heritage for future generations: from the urban organization of machi, concepts and methods of conservation theory and practice, and design approaches to adaptation and reuse of machiya, to the significance of craftsmanship and detailing and the question of which essential features of machiya architecture can (and should) be preserved. A selection of design proposals by students of KIT and TU Delft complement Lidwine Spoormans study of design strategies for adaptive reuse.

Most of the results are based on close reading, site visits and interviews with craftsmen, architects, academics and other heritage professionals conducted during short visits to Japan. Aware that all observations made here are influenced by either an Eastern or a Western background, and given the limited research time and lack of English literature on the topic, this publication does not claim to be exhaustive. It aims—like the entire exchange programme between KIT and TU Delft—to stimulate the debate on history and built heritage between East and West.



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