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Parks and landmarks: planning the Eastern Capital along western lines

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Abstract

Urban parks became an increasingly common feature of European and American cities in the 19th century, and by around the middle of that century had begun to elicit the interest of visiting Japanese leaders. This paper discusses the introduction of the concept of the urban public park to Japan by the country's new Meiji oligarchs. It does this in the context of the radical re-shaping of the nation's capital city, Tokyo. The story is told through the prism of two sites. The first is a hill in the north of the city with longstanding associations with the Tokugawa shogunate; the second is a parade ground next to the site of the castle–palace. The hill became a park in name but in practice remained a site for public celebration, while the parade ground was transformed with considerable difficulty and over many years into a consciously fashioned recreational space. By drawing on these contrasts, this paper explores the hesitations that surrounded changing understandings of the role of capital city and its shifting symbolic landscapes, as well as the gradual process of domestication of the concept of a public park.

Keywords: Tokyo; Parks; Symbolic landscapes; Westernisation; Capital city; Recreational space

Parks in modernising cities

In the context of urban modernisation, parks can be seen as spatial affirmations of new values, imposing on existing practices of recreation moral considerations of rest and health. Like railway stations, department stores, factories and office buildings, parks are archetypal sites of modernity. They are part of a process of growing commodification of time and functionality in the use of space.

The present work concerns itself with some of the hesitations and problems surrounding the concept, planning and creation of a 'public park', its introduction into an apparently alien urban environment and the transitions it underwent in the context of changing ideas of urban space in the capital of Japan.

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It examines evolving ideas and praxis through the prism of two specific places, Ueno hill and Hibiya Park, but it makes reference en passant to other sites within the capital. In so doing, it seeks to create a wider framework of discussion, one that connects developments in Europe with Japan (and occasionally by inference China) while at the same time exploring the changing use of space within a Japanese historical context.

As did China, and indeed many of the countries of Europe, Japan imported physical elements of urban modernity, constructing where it could approximate replicas of the buildings, streetscapes and green areas that its emissaries and students found elsewhere. It hoped thereby to ingest both the techniques and the spirit of a modern, western, industrial capital city, state and society. This process, however, was a difficult one, negotiated with hesitance. It was given shape and coherence through the continued use of various, important symbolic sites in the city, so that while buildings were torn down and new ones put up in their place, the city's symbolic geometry changed far more slowly. All the time, however, there was a gap between elite aspiration on the one hand, and on the other constraints imposed by tight financial resources and divergent popular readings of urban space.

The changing use of space as cities modernise and industrialise has particular reverberations in countries like Japan, where modernisation has been considered the driving force behind urbanisation and where it has been seen as co-terminous with westernisation.[1] Planned cities had existed in Japan since the construction of a series of new capitals in the eighth century. Those early capitals, and their immediate successor, the city that came to be known as Kyoto, were modelled more or less on Chinese imperial patterns. Centuries later, at about the time of the foundation of Edo, later Tokyo (meaning Eastern Capital), in 1590, a new type of city reached maturity, the castle town. With the enforced residence of the military class in these castle towns and the consequent influx of merchants and artisans, early modern society in Japan became unusually urbanised, with, according to one calculation, about 16% of the population living in settlements with a population of over 3000.[2]

When Japan came to position itself in a wider world, its political centre took on a new level of meaning. The planning debate that ensued concerning the nature of the new capital city was framed very much around alternative readings of western concepts, into which Japan was placed and from which it was presumed that Japan should profit. Prominent Europeans were invited over to teach or to design aspects of the new imperial capital. Some of them drew up ambitious plans for the construction of new districts; others, more modestly, for new buildings. Before long, however, their place was taken by young Japanese engineers returning from years of training in Berlin and Paris.

The Japanese experience and the choices made by Japanese leaders are of particular interest when compared with what was happening in China at around the same time (or, since Japan was frequently a model, with a couple of decades' delay). At one level, similar moves were being made in Beijing as in Tokyo, with the creation of broad new avenues and a wider armoury of modern urban installations.[3] Both countries were involved in what Joseph Esherick calls a quest for recognition by proving their modernity.[4] At another level, however, there were important differences. Among the Chinese elite there appears to have been a consensus behind the need to preserve 'traditional' urban spaces and buildings as a way of safeguarding identity. Beijing lent itself to this insistence, and became the principal theatre for the creation of a specific vision of the country's imperial past.[5] In the emperor's new capital of Tokyo, perhaps precisely because of the greater continuity that prevailed there than in Beijing, there was no such under-current of support for the preservation of buildings and monuments. To some extent, this was replaced, as we shall see, by an attachment to certain symbolic sites and to the activities that were pursued there. And to some extent, Kyoto came to fulfil the function of repository of culture