

Background Information For Tour of Japanese House

Notes from a meeting with Karen Zien

November 8, 1982

(Karen Zien is founder of the Japanese Program at the Children's Museum and was the Developer when the Japanese House came here. The following comments come from a meeting we had in the house to fill in some of the gaps in my own information.)

The original owners of our house, who were weavers, were old friends of the Sumiyama family. When the last member of this family (Hirayami) left Kyoto, he asked the Sumiyamas to take care of the house. They eventually took ownership of it. When Mr. Sumiyama's nephew (unclear) needed a place to live in Nishijin, the Sumiyamas were going to tear down this house and erect a new one. A relative who was working at Kyoto city hall learned of this and suggested that instead the old house be donated to the city. The Children's Museum had already put in a bid to bring a house to the new Museum; in fact, by then they had given up on getting an old house and were going to have one built at exorbitant expense. Things worked fast after that and we were offered this old kyō no machiya instead. So, in fact, the house did not belong to the Sumiyama family but it cost them a great deal to donate it and many of the furnishings came from them later.

Nishijin is not officially designated as an area for historic preservation in Kyoto because, they say, one can't find rows of these old houses there as one can in other parts of the city. It is true that as you walk along the streets from which this house came, it is a jumble of houses, shops, factories, etc.

One can find the machiya, ie. urban townhouse, style throughout Japan. They are all 1 1/2 stories high (the actual term is ichi chu ni-kai; ie. half-way between one and two stories) and long and narrow to fit a particular size of lot. The model for these houses is the kyoto style machiya which is special because of kyoto's long and continuous history as a center for Japanese life and the central role of its merchant class. So the kyoto house is the model for urban attached house development in Japan.

What made Kyoto special was that from the beginning it was a planned city. It was, in fact, built based on a Chinese model with a grid pattern of broad avenues crossed by smaller streets. At different points in Kyoto history, the city was redesigned but always with the entire city in mind, ie. this is not the usual random development that one sees not only in most of Japan but in most of the world.

The plot size, then, was established early, in fact in the 8th century when the city was built. These plots were long and narrow and the houses are colloquially called "unagi no nedoko" (eel beds), though this is not an architectural term.

These early houses did not have enclosed gardens as ours did. Instead they belonged to working class people who shared a common area in back where they did the cooking, shared a well, worked, etc. Often the houses, in fact, were only two rooms plus kitchen, ie. the back zashiki (parlor was part of the common backyard. There was no second floor.

Our street exemplifies an old neighborhood concept called sangen ryōdonari (3 houses (across); one on either side). That means one had a special neighboring relationship to five other households; the two on either side and the three across the street. This was not a legal concept; the basic unit for taxation and political purposes was the gonin gumi, the five family relationship. The sangen ryōdonari system meant that everyone was interdependent.

In the early mid 18th century (the Genroku era) these townhouses became more elaborate, elegant and standardized. This is the period in the Tokugawa Era when the merchant class began to come into its own and while the laws of the Tokugawa government kept the merchants in an inferior status (according to Confucian thought society is divided into a hierarchy of classes, in order, as samurai or warrior; farmer; artisan and merchant. By the 18th century,

however, the ideology didn't match economic reality and eventually, in the 19th century, the merchant class took over).

Because government sumptuary legislation restricted the merchants to the size and type of house they could own, they had to show their new affluence inside their houses. They built on second stories that weren't visible from the street. They built elegant zashiki and tea rooms and enclosed gardens. The common land was swallowed up by private families. Their tokonoma, matting, tea utensils, whatever bespoke their new status as people of wealth and culture.

The Sen family, whose founder had established the Urasenke school of tea ceremony, lived in Nishijin and were neighbors of these merchants who turned to the Sen family for advice on how to build tea rooms on their second floor.

So, by the mid 18th century the kyo no machiya style was becoming stabilized. The lumber used in building had become standardized so, for example, the pillars were all the same height. Wall-to-wall tatami had replaced wooden floors and the tatami was the basic unit for determining the aesthetics of the rooms. The uniformity of facade for the houses also became established with the lattice work (or koshi) as a hallmark of kyoto-style houses.

After a major fire in Kyoto in 1730 the city urged people to use ceramic roof-tiles on their dwellings rather than thatch or wood. Because of its long history as a city of temples and other structures with tiled roofs, there was a large body of skilled tile artisans in Kyoto. These people now turned their attention to domestic architecture and the tiles became famous for their beauty of design. Kyoto style tiles are called kyōgawara.

Another feature of kyoto urban houses that became standard are the walls. Sand from rivers in Kyoto was used for the sand and plaster finish which workers added to the basic structure of mud mixed with straw which had been applied over a bamboo and vine lattice. This special kyoto-style finish is supposed to



last longer. These days, however, builders use a synthetic finish which is applied with a spray gun over plasterboard. In fact, our house has these modern walls, rather than the old ones.

Besides the basic kyoto machiya style, this house also exemplifies two other styles in Japanese architecture. The first is the Shōin style (shoin means "desk") and refers to the style of, for example, Katsura Villa outside Kyoto. It is the style of the wealthy, cultured scholar who can sit at his desk and contemplate his garden. The windows in our tokonoma illustrate shoin style (not that the scholar would sit in the tokonoma! but such a window would appear in the area where his desk would be placed.)

The other basic style is the Sukiya style which is associated with tea ceremony architecture, where concepts like wabi, sabi, at a come up. The best examples of this are the tea huts one finds at, for example, Daitokuji temple in Kyoto. Our upstairs zashiki where tea is in fact served and our two gardens are on the Sukiya idea.

Other information

The Sumiyama family has been involved in Nishijin and in weaving for generations. Originally family members actually were weavers, most recently weavers of obi. But the present head of the family runs a small ribbon factory in Nishijin.

The original houses did not include a number of items, many of which the Sumiyamas later contributed to us. For example, the noren is a merchant's noren; in other words, the people who lived here wouldn't have had such a noren. The mon is read Yamaka ( for yama or mountain and  is the katakana KA)

The lantern boxes have Mrs. Sumiyama's family's mon on them.

The hoteisan were collected over many years and have no particular significance beyond being a family collection.

The kamidana and butsudan were also (I think) added later.

Of course, houses did not originally have indoor plumbing. The earlier bathrooms were in separate structures somewhere in the garden. There was a stairwell from the second floor engawa down to where the present lavatory is. The present bathroom area was added by the Japanese when the house came here.

One distinctive feature of kyo machiya in the Nishijin part of Kyoto was that there was no ceiling in the front room. This was to allow light and air into the front room where the weaving was done. Other machiya had similar distinctive features to suit their uses, eg. for pottery making, whatever. When the merchant class developed, one of their additions was the type of elegant ceiling one sees in our front and rear rooms. Note the ceiling in the middle room is quite bare, reflecting the role of that room as a purely family, multi-purpose space.