

Machizukuri (Neighborhood Making): Collective World-Making in Traditional Japanese Neighborhoods

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Machizukuri (literally “neighborhood making”) is a recent approach to community development in Japan, beginning in the 1960s, that aims to empower local communities in the development of their built environments through “more participation, independence in the decision-making process, and the establishment of a true democracy that [gives] voice to the whole scope of the Japanese population.”[1] Those of us “who use or visit those places as dwellers, visitors, and guests... have [a] role to play in the project of world-making,” and *machizukuri* places local communities at the center of this world-making.[2] Residents and small business owners work with government administrators and corporations to address local concerns, often represented by organizations that derive “from traditional autonomous townspeople management groups that have existed since the Edo period [1603-1868]... [T]oday, the majority of households in Japanese traditional residential areas engage in these neighborhood associations.”[3] *Machizukuri* plays a key role in maintaining a sense of cultural tradition in the neighborhoods of many Japanese cities by allowing local citizens to participate in this world-making.[4]

Nowhere are these conservation efforts more apparent than in the architecture of many parts of Kyoto, where refurbished *machiya* – “a traditional type of Japanese merchant house, composed of a shop, living spaces, warehouse, and workplace”[5] – enable a neighborhood to maintain its traditional atmosphere, even when it contains all the things

found in a flourishing modern city, like cafés, fashion shops, galleries, or offices. Maps and other historical records also inform new development, promoting historical continuity in urban planning.[6] The results are that much of this new development does not aesthetically interfere with the existing architecture in the traditional neighborhoods of Kyoto, which contain several buildings from the Edo, Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishō (1912-1926) periods.

While much effort is put into the restoration of existing *machiya*, many new buildings are also built in the local vernacular, with tiling (*kawara*), eaves (*tōri-hisashi*), and latticework (*kōshi*) that take their cues from the past. Like the design of many old shrines and temples in Japan, the design of these newer buildings also emphasizes horizontal lines through their tiling, in a style called *ichimonji-gawara* (single-line tiling), so as to create a unified feel to the whole street (Figure 1).[7] The exteriors of many modern buildings clearly take their cues from these traditional elements, maintaining a consistency and familiarity (Figures 1 and 2), and even acclaimed architects, such as Tadao Ando, acknowledge the importance of engaging with local communities through *machizukuri* when designing works. Ando claims that he tries to “enhance the history, tradition and value of a city without damaging it.”[8]

The grassroots *machizukuri* approach to community building stands in stark contrast to the top-down planning pervasive in much twentieth-century architecture.[9] A recent example of *machizukuri* in the restoration of a traditional neighborhood demonstrated that the process can “directly materialize the image of life in the town that the residents had ideated.”[10] Here, the process involved both owners and users of the neighborhood, who determined everything from the design of physical buildings to the placement of benches and flowers in shared public spaces—giving strength to the idea that world-making can be a collective pursuit. [11]



Figure 1: Machiya in the Kyoto neighborhood of Nishijin. At left, a traditional machiya sits alongside more recently built homes that refer to the same vernacular. At right, a modern apartment building, which features tiling, eaves, and latticework in the same vernacular, sits next to an old machiya. Photos by the author.

Authentic reconstruction of an architectural conception is viewed by Robert Wicks as akin to a musical score, where “a faithful refabrication re-instantiates the architectural work, and is as authentic as the ‘original’ [work], just as a good [musical] performance... is as authentic as any other performance which similarly complies with the musical score.”[12] For the *machizukuri* in the traditional neighborhoods described here, the musical score describes an entire architectural vernacular. Just as a good performance of a musical score is an authentic expression of it, so too is the expression of the vernacular in both refurbished and new buildings. The community desire for authentic representation through the familiar demonstrates genuine aesthetic understanding, and the *machizukuri* approach offers evidence of world-making as a shared pursuit.

As Yuriko Saito notes, world-making is a project that is not just the domain of professional designers and aestheticians, as we all “participate in this project insofar as we recognize and respond to the aesthetic expression of care and respect.”[13] This expression of care and respect perhaps manifests most strongly towards one’s own immediate surroundings. While

machizukuri in Japan is not always aimed at (re)constructing particular forms of architecture, in many traditional neighborhoods it does help to maintain an architectural language that rhymes with a rich past.[14] The architecture in many of Kyoto's neighborhoods continues to sing a familiar tune.



Figure 2: The wall of Myōkenji temple in the Kyoto neighborhood of Nishijin, at left, and the wall of The Mitsui Kyoto—a modern hotel south of Nishijin, at right, both use the ichimonji-gawara (single-line tiling) style. Photos by the author.

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Endnotes

[1] Shigeru Satoh, “Evolution and Methodology of Japanese Machizukuri for the Improvement of Living Environments,” *Japan Architectural Review*, 2, 2 (2019), 127–42.

[2] Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170.

[3] Satoh, “Evolution and Methodology of Japanese Machizukuri for the Improvement of Living Environments,” 140.

[4] See, for example, “Kyoto Machiya Machizukuri Fund,” Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration, <https://www.kyoto-machisen.jp/fund/>, accessed September 7, 2022.

[5] Satoh, “Evolution and Methodology of Japanese Machizukuri for the Improvement of Living Environments,” 141. When discussing Japanese minimalism in Paul Haimes, “On Japanese Minimalism,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020), accessed September 7, 2022, I neglected to acknowledge the role of repair and renewal in minimalist Japanese aesthetics. See the relationship between the tradition of *wabi* and repair in Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta),

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>, accessed September 7, 2022.

[6] Satoh, “Evolution and Methodology of Japanese Machizukuri for the Improvement of Living Environments,” 134.

[7] “Kyoto machiya and the culture of living [In Japanese],” Cultural Affairs Bureau Kyoto City, <https://kyoto-bunkaisan.city.kyoto.lg.jp/kyotoisan/nintei-theme/kyoumachiya.html>, accessed September 7, 2022.

[8] “Special interview – Tadao Ando [in Japanese],” Comforts, <https://www.comforts.jp/person/314/>, accessed September 7, 2022.

[9] See Le Corbusier’s plans for the North African city of Algiers, for example, which had clearly been designed without meaningful consultation with the city’s residents. In Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 201. Also, the architectural vision expressed in Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

[10] Satoh, “Evolution and Methodology of Japanese Machizukuri for the Improvement of Living Environments,” 134-135.

[11] *Ibid.*, 134.

[12] Robert Wicks, “Architectural Restoration: Resurrection or Replication?,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 34, 2 (1994), 163–169, 165.

[13] Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making*, 170.

[14] For a deep exploration of *machizukuri*, see André Sorensen and Carolin Funck, eds., *Living Cities in Japan: Citizens’ Movements, Machizukuri and Local Environments* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007).