

Bryn Mawr College

## Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

---

Growth and Structure of Cities Faculty Research  
and Scholarship

Growth and Structure of Cities

---

2006

### Review Essay: National Traditions and Foreign Influences in the Architecture and Urban Form of China and Japan

Carola Hein

*Bryn Mawr College*, [chein@brynmawr.edu](mailto:chein@brynmawr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs)



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

#### Citation

Hein, Carola. "Review Essay: National Traditions and Foreign Influences in the Architecture and Urban Form of China and Japan." *Journal of Urban History* 32 (2006): 491-497.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.  
[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs/23](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/23)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

## NATIONAL TRADITIONS AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES IN THE ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN FORM OF CHINA AND JAPAN

JEFFREY E. HANES, *The City As Subject: Seki Hajime and the Reinvention of Modern Osaka*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. pp. xii, 348, bibliography, index.

JONATHAN M. REYNOLDS, *Maekawa Kunio and the Emergence of Japanese Modernist Architecture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. pp. xviii, 318, bibliography, index.

JEFFREY W. CODY, *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's "Adaptive Architecture" 1914-1935*. Seattle: University of Washington Press/The Chinese University Press, 2001. pp. xxiv, 264, bibliography, index.

GIDEON S. GOLANY, *Urban Design Ethics in Ancient China*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001. pp. xvi, 312, bibliography, index.

Keywords: China, Japan, architecture, urban form, national traditions, international exchange, capital cities

European and American architects and planners have intervened in China and Japan for centuries and their work has influenced stylistic debates in those countries. Simultaneously, practitioners from these East Asian nations have studied in the West, bringing back knowledge about methods and technology, interpreting and transforming their findings, and injecting them into their home context. Nations with long-standing histories and independent traditions, such as China and Japan, experienced tumultuous decades while modernizing and westernizing.

Only recently has there emerged a thorough investigation into Chinese and Japanese architectural and urban history that investigates the acceptance, transformation, and rejection of Western models. Some specific features of architectural and urban culture in both countries, for example the imperial Chinese capitals and the Japanese imperial villas, have long been part of international architectural and urban history, but for decades Westerners picked up only specific elements, chosen to underline their own points of view and interest. Designers adopted Chinese and Japanese decoration on Western objects in the nineteenth century (as Chinoiserie and Japonisme), and modernist architects studied Japanese traditional buildings to further their own cause.

Four new books start to fill in the blanks of transnational architectural and urban history—a field that so far has strongly relied on Western sources and interpretations—introducing an English-speaking audience to Chinese and Japanese built form. Among the four books, Gideon S. Golany's work stands out with regard to topic and time frame as an examination of traditional city form from pre-urban settlements to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The other three publications by Jeffrey Cody, Jeffrey Hanes, and Jonathan Reynolds investigate three individuals who shaped architectural and urban form in China and Japan in the late-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although primarily biographies, the latter three

books also provide comprehensive insight into the larger Chinese and Japanese design issues.

The so far limited scholarly exchange between the West and China on the ancient Chinese philosophy of urban design inspired urban designer Golany to write *Urban Design Ethics in Ancient China*. Hoping that his findings on ancient cities might be used in contemporary urban design, especially in the West (p. ix), Golany studied Chinese spatial forms as “expression of a given socio-economic, political, or moral conduct, behavioral norms, customs, habits, and accepted codes of spatial design ethics” (p. viii). The first part of the book (Ch. 1-3) focuses on the interaction between Chinese culture and spatial ethics of design and features a stimulating examination of the relationship between Chinese philosophy and environmental design. Investigating Fengshui and cosmology as well as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and other Chinese schools of thought in their specific attitudes towards urban design, Golany argues in chapter 2 that Confucian principles in regard to formality, symmetry, and human dominance over the environment characterize Chinese houses; Daoist principles of informality and irregularity are more evident in Chinese gardens; and the most important Buddhist contribution to the Chinese urban landscape is the pagoda (p. 67-69).

Major differences in the perception of cities in the West and in China exist, as Golany demonstrates in chapter 3. He postulates that the Chinese view of the city is that of a market and administrative center and not a “practical tool for expansion or a monument symbolizing religious or political power” (p. 81). Furthermore, Golany posits that the Chinese concepts of monumentality and eternity differ from the Western ones. Whereas the mainly wooden structures of Chinese cities are rapidly and easily replaced, the transmission of urban design forms over several thousand years expresses lasting political power, and as Golany writes: “Instead of focusing on a single structure, the Chinese viewed the entire city as a whole, cohesive monument” (p. 81). That observation, however, also applies to European cities, for example, in the Renaissance period.

In the second part of his book (Ch. 4-6), Golany analyzes the rise of imperial capital cities and their design as prototypes for provincial capitals and other cities, as well as design elements of imperial cities and palaces. In chapter 4, applying his “Neighboring and Contrasting Zones Theory” to the location and distribution pattern of Chinese capital cities throughout history, Golany gives one explanation for the development of a capital cities zone in central China (p. 116-141). He argues that the existence of two contrasting geo-economic zones has led to the creation of an interactive trade zone, which corresponds to the location of most imperial capital cities. Golany’s analysis of traditional cities highlights aspects that are specific to Chinese cities and provides the background based on which the country’s modernization and westernization occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries.\*

Western design activities in Republican China are at the heart of *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy’s “Adaptive Architecture” 1914-1934* by the architectural historian Jeffrey Cody. This easy-to-read investigation is conceived as a first step towards a more comprehensive examination of the transforming Chinese urban environment in modern history. Cody examines the life and work of the American architect Henry K. Murphy through five chronologically organized chapters focusing on his activities in China between 1914 and 1934. Better known in China than in his native United States,

Murphy was instrumental in promoting the adaptation of traditional architectural forms to early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings in China.

Murphy's connection to Asia was unpredictable from his training and early work. A Yale graduate and a commercial architect educated in the Beaux-Arts tradition, he founded his first firm, Murphy & Dana, in 1908. It specialized in residential commissions, particularly Colonial Revival Architecture, and more importantly educational buildings in the United States (discussed in Ch. 1). Connections to Yale, a client and Murphy's alma mater, led to the first commission in China, the Yale-in-China campus at Changsha in 1913. Murphy's clients knew what they wanted: a building that appeared as little "foreign" as possible (p. 37). The idea was not to reproduce, but to show what could be done in a modern renaissance with contemporary building technology. Murphy pursued this approach throughout his career. His designs in China, discussed in chapters 3 and 4, include landmark building complexes such as the Chinese style Ginling College—a women's university inspired by American liberal arts institutions for women such as Smith, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr—and Yenching (Beijing) University, as well as commercial buildings in Western gowns.

Murphy's clients for educational projects were primarily foreigners, but in the field of city planning he was working for the Chinese government. In his fascinating fifth chapter, Cody examines Murphy's city building activities in Guangzhou and Nanjing. Between 1923 and 1930, American-trained Chinese and most importantly Sun Ke, son of China's revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen and former student of city planning and politics at UCLA and Columbia, tried to bring American municipal modernity to Chinese cities. Guangzhou became a major testing ground for a municipal Commission government with Sun Ke as mayor, assisted by six Commissioners, three of whom had studied in the United States (p. 175). The new administration provided incentives for industrial development, decided on the design of new parks and civic centers as well as urban infrastructures, destroying traditional patterns to create modern American-style urban landscapes. Murphy was called to Guangzhou in 1927 and elaborated his own plan, but came too late to prevent the destruction of the city wall (p. 184). In 1928, Murphy was hired as advisor for Nanjing, the city that Chiang Kai-shek had selected as capital the year before. In Nanjing Murphy tried to preserve historical buildings and traditional styles. Many of Murphy's architectural projects in China were built, but his urban plans were less successful. The difference in the level of project realizations illustrates the difference between these two fields. It is much easier for a foreign architect to construct an individual building in a different country than to intervene in urban planning, a field restricted by local traditions of land-ownership, public spaces, expropriation, etc..

Native planners who studied in Europe and America have often been vehicles for the integration of Western influences into Chinese and Japanese urban planning. The Japanese political and social economist turned social urban reformer, Seki Hajime (1873-1935) is an example in point. Seki concerned himself with improving the urban living conditions of the working class using his European experience. In *The City as Subject* the historian Jeffrey E. Hanes examines this outstanding Japanese personality in the larger context of modernizing Japan, demonstrating how the Meiji period commitment to increasing industrial production (*shokusan kôgyô*) influenced the emerging fields of political and social economics as well as urban planning in Japan. Hanes proceeds chronologically from the introduction through six chapters, taking the reader from Seki's

youth to the theoretical works of his early career and to his achievements as vice-mayor and later as mayor of Osaka.

Trained at Tokyo Commercial College, Seki was strongly influenced by his stay in Europe (1898-1901), first in Belgium than in Germany (discussed in chapter 2). Seki, like other Japanese scholars, was well informed on contemporary Western debate in his field. Intent on using his findings in modernizing Japan, Seki's attitude changed from uncritical acceptance in the early Meiji years to a more selective approach in the 1920s. Influenced by the teachings of the German economist Friedrich List and his students, and aware of the writings of Karl Marx and the harsh urban realities produced by industrial capitalism, Seki attempted to combine the seemingly opposite ideas of both thinkers, adapting them to the Japanese context (p. 50). Through numerous quotations from primary sources, Hanes examines Seki's evolving brand of social urban economics in relation to other leading figures of his time in chapters 3 and 4—clearly the heart of the book—before focusing on Seki's career change from scholar to administrator in the last two chapters. In the early years of his career a defender of industrialists and their protection by tariffs, as Hanes points out, Seki tried to reconceptualize the Japanese economy as a people's national economy (*kokumin keizai*). Interrogating the labor question, he attempted to design a modern moral economy that would enable Japan to sustain economic growth without undermining social stability. Worker's protection for Seki was intimately related to urban issues.

Called in as vice-mayor of Osaka in 1914, Seki devoted himself to the city's transformation, and under his guidance Osaka displayed cutting edge social urban policy making (p. 203). Seki's central objectives were comprehensive and forward-looking master planning beyond the urbanized areas, residential reform and the creation of working-class suburbs. Hanes's investigation of Seki's urban work lacks the detailed investigation given to his economic thought in the early chapters. Further analysis of the precise knowledge he had and of Seki's impact on Japanese urban laws and planning—including the 1919 City Planning Law—remains to be done. Hanes nonetheless clearly demonstrates Seki's intention of transforming Osaka. In unison with European and American critics of the industrial city, Seki particularly asked urban social reformers to confront speculation on the city's outskirts (p. 190).

Seki could not overcome the forces set against him. The leading elites conceived of city planning as a tool for economic development, concentrating on beautification projects, while ignoring the slums (p. 179-180). Landowners opposed Seki as they developed the suburbs in search of profits, the central government refused sufficient support and the municipal government lacked financial and political resources to realize his plans. In the end, Seki became famous for the opposite of what he had earlier promoted. People associate his name today with the Midosuji Boulevard, an avenue through the heart of Osaka, which Hanes discusses only briefly. Seki's efforts for more municipal authority and decentralization of political and financial power provide important clues for understanding the functioning of the highly centralized Japanese state today. In accordance with Seki's work, Hanes concentrates more on theories than on concrete realizations. While Seki influenced several important laws, his achievements in Osaka appear meager when compared with his visions. In spite of Seki's lack of tangible achievements, this important book provides an extensive analysis of his thought and

work, showing that social progressivism developed in Japan almost simultaneously with and in response to similar movements in Western countries.

Jonathan Reynolds takes the investigation of Western influences in Japan into architectural history, examining the life and work of the modernist architect Maekawa Kunio (1905-1986) through seven chronologically organized chapters. In the mid-1920s, when Maekawa studied architecture at Tokyo University, Western practice and education was already well established in Japan and modernist groups existed, as Reynolds's discussion of the architectural profession in Japan shows (ch. 1). Following his architectural studies Maekawa traveled to Europe in 1928, and worked for two years in Paris for the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier. On his return to Japan in 1930, Maekawa joined the office of another major foreign figure, the American architect Antonin Raymond, before starting his own firm in 1935. Influenced at a young age by these two outstanding figures, Maekawa maintained lifelong relationships with Western architects and institutions and acted as an ambassador of Western practice in his native Japan. Maekawa, who is known worldwide, particularly for his public architecture including Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall (1957-61), stands for the Japan that has successfully exported itself (ch. 4).

A central element of Reynolds's analysis is how Maekawa negotiated the transition in Japan between prewar and postwar architecture and integrated traditional elements in his work while exploiting new technology and building materials. Attempts by Western architects to Japanize buildings—similar to the works by Murphy in China—were rejected early on in Japan, even though among Japanese architects the desire to define a modern Japanese style had already emerged in the late nineteenth century. These attempts to define national identity through architectural style were an important theme in Japan before and after World War II (p. 196). Modernist architecture was perceived as un-Japanese but leading modernists—including Maekawa—consistently affirmed their respect for Japanese architectural traditions (p. 214, 217). Maekawa strongly resisted being labeled un-Japanese, and argued that the spirit behind his project was Japanese and that Japanese vernacular could provide inspiration for Japanese modernism (p. 97-98).

In Japan the distinction between modernists and non-modernists has never been as sharp as in the West. As Reynolds points out: “Because Maekawa and other modernists would go on to incorporate selected pre-modern elements in their designs, their opponents would find it difficult to accuse them of being anti-Japanese in the same way that the opponents of the Bauhaus accused German modernists of being anti-German. At most, critics like Itô [Chûta] could claim that modernism was not ‘Japanese’ enough” (p. 101). Maekawa's stylistically traditional contributions to the Japan-Thailand cultural center competition in 1943 did not discredit him for the modernist movement (p. 131). Similarly, the use of traditional rice straw mats (*tatami*) in Maekawa's aggressively modern Harumi Apartments in Tokyo (1958), strongly influenced by Le Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation* in Marseilles, did not blemish his modernist renown (p. 207-208). In the postwar period, housing became a major concern for Maekawa who advocated a people's architecture in a democratic society (ch. 4). His prefabricated housing (Premos) projects in particular addressed the postwar housing crisis.

Maekawa finished his career with a return to more traditional forms. In the 1960s when other Japanese developed megastructures, Maekawa, as Reynolds argues, stayed true to his values, supporting technological innovation instead of fantasy architecture.

Over the years he had become disillusioned with modernization and westernization. Maekawa feared that “while the Japanese had assimilated Western institutions quickly, they had done so without comprehending the intellectual and spiritual underpinnings of Western civilization” (p. 230). Maekawa’s concern that cultural differences might be too big for meaningful communication with the West reflects the need for a better integration of architectural history in the West and the East.

As part of a larger project of interdisciplinary research on transnational exchanges, the publications by Golany, Cody, Hanes, and Reynolds, while focusing on history, architectural and urban history, and planning, add important aspects to the debate on questions of Chineseness and Japaneseness, cultural identity, architectural practice and urban design. They elegantly open a field in which much research still needs to be done.

—Carola Hein  
Bryn Mawr College

#### NOTE

---

\*Golany’s work may be compared to that of various scholars who have examined issues in the history of Japanese urban form from its early history until today. David Kornhauser, *Urban Japan: Its Foundations and Growth* (Longman, London and New York, 1976), gives a similar overview of Japanese geography and early cities through chapters one to five, as a background to the urban transformation after 1868, which he investigates in the later chapters. In a section on the “Chang’an plan abroad,” Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt analyzes the influences of Chinese city planning on Japanese capitals of the seventh and eighth centuries in her book *Chinese Imperial City Planning* (University of Hawai`i Press, Honolulu, 1999). An edited volume by Nicolas Fiévé and Paul Waley, *Japanese Capitals in Historical Perspective: Place, Power and Memory in Kyoto, Edo and Tokyo* (Routledge Curzon, London, 2003), deals in its first two parts with issues of urban form before the Meiji restoration of 1868. William Coaldrake in *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (Routledge, London, 1996), examines traditional Japanese architecture in chapters one to eight, before investigating Meiji and contemporary architecture in the last chapters.