Defending our urban landscape and life-style

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1. The Aneyakoji neighborhood

Our neighbourhood is located a ten-minute walk west of Sanjo bridge, final destination of the famous Tokaido route with its 53 way stations starting at the Nihonbashi bridge in Edo (present-day Tokyo). Elegant old shops and inns line the streets, and the wooden signs above their entrances bear inscriptions by artists and writers such as Rosanjin Kitaohji or Tessai Tomioka. (ph.1)

ph.1 Aneyakouji-neighborhood with long-established stores

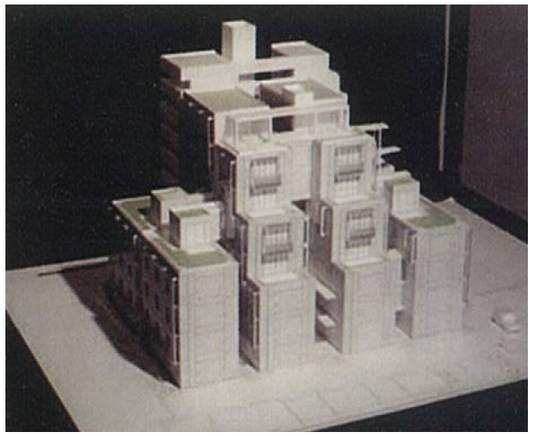
As an everyday environment, the area transmits Kyoto's cultural atmosphere in a casual way. The two-storied wooden town houses called machiya that rarely rise more than 8 meters are still widespread, and many residents combine workplace and home in traditional fashion. On its entire stretch of 700 meters between Karasuma Avenue and Teramachi Street, the Aneyakoji neighbourhood is still free from high-rise condominiums and round-the-clock convenience chain stores, and although located in the heart of the commercial district, it has retained a quiet atmosphere characteristic of Kyoto.

2. The birth of the movement

In April 1995, it was announced that on a vacant plot of land owned by a private corporation which was then used as a parking lot, a 31-meter tall condominium would soon be built. The immediate neighbours were showing signs of resigned acceptance. At that time, my employer had dispatched me to the Tokyo office, but in order to think about countermeasures, I started to return to Kyoto every weekend.

In order to start such a movement, the crucial point is to reach a consensus among the neighbours of the project site. And indeed, few people objected when we appealed for the public visibility of the owner corporation and for a building that Kyoto and the neighbourhood could be proud of. When we held the founding ceremony of the Aneyakoji Neigbhourhood Association in Tenshoji temple and made Kazuhiro Ichiko the first president in October of the same year, the local newspaper Kyoto Shinbun reported 74 participants. And maybe because our demands had found a sympathetic echo, the building plan was suddenly shelved a year later.

After an interim of several years and with Kyoto City's Centre for Townscape and Urban Planning (Kyoto-shi keikan machizukuri senta) and Professor Mitsuo Takada from Kyoto University as mediators, local residents and the owner corporation of the lot started direct negotiations. And after 17 meetings over a two-year period, we agreed on a plan for the "Urbanex Sanjo Mansion". Its ambitious structure is based on the skeleton-infill method that, unusual for Japan, guarantees 100-year stability, and instead of the more common strategy of selling the apartments individually, they were rented out. The design concept became a kind of prototype for condominiums in Kyoto and developed into a model case for the new urban planning guidelines adopted since then. (ph.2)



ph.2 Urbanex Sanjo condominium building miniature

The owner corporation's laudable initiative thus resulted in a pioneering move for Kyoto's townscape preservation. It is therefore highly appreciated by local people and has also received a prestigious award by the City Planning Institute of Japan.

But just a few months after that happy ending, another high-rise condominium plan violating all our movement's goals was announced for a lot right across the street from Urbanex Sanjo Mansion. And again a short while later, plans for a still more gigantic building 45 meters high and 86 meters wide on Oike Avenue, just one street north of Aneyakoji street, came up. Like a big wave, the high-rise condominium rush threatened to wash over the neighbourhood.

3. New planning regulations

For condominium developers, it is most profitable to build huge boxes with as many apartments as possible that can be offered to buyers at affordable prices. But it should not be overlooked that the costs of this business method are borne by the old-time neighbourhood residents. When costs and benefits diverge, it is necessary to respect one another's limits of endurance. As part of their everyday wisdom accumulated over long years, Kyoto's residents are particularly sensitive to practicing such circumspection. But when the corporations behind these condominium plans rejected any dialogue, I couldn't help but appeal to respect Kyoto's customary ways through my home page (www.aneyakouji.jp). A German volunteer helped with translations, and graduate students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology came to study the area and develop planning proposals.

At that time, Kyoto City did not have planning instruments that would have allowed it to exercise leadership, and it eventually permitted the construction of the condominium on Oike Avenue despite its excessive and unprecedented height. (ph.3)
As a neighbourhood, we thus had to find ways to protect the area ourselves, and by appealing to all residents, we managed to bring around 100 households to signing a voluntary building covenant.

For this covenant, we took the self-set building rules of the Edo-period urban neighbourhoods called choshikimoku as a model, and with the input of specialists, we met for study meetings over an entire year. In what we called the "Aneyakoji Neighbourhood Heisei-Period Choshikimoku", we formulated six fundamental goals for urban planning. (fi.1)

These were highly praised by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, and as a kind of reward for our efforts, we were awarded a national townscape realignment project grant. Within the first 8 years of this ten-year plan, 18 building facades have been restored.

I would like to present two examples. One is the Iyama family house on the corner of Aneyakoji Street and Tominokoji Street. The estate continues since 1630, and since its traditional storehouse (kura) did not burn down in the devastating Kinmonnohen fire of 1864,

ph.3 Street view of Oike-dori with a new high-rise condominium; it was prohibited to construct a building over 31m height until 2002. There can be seen extra four floors of protruding unfinished steel frame.

this is where we found the aforementioned choshikimoku. Located on a street corner, beautification has a signal effect here, and the restoration works continued for about two years. Through the use of high-class building materials, we managed to recuperate a Kyoto-like atmosphere.(ph.4)

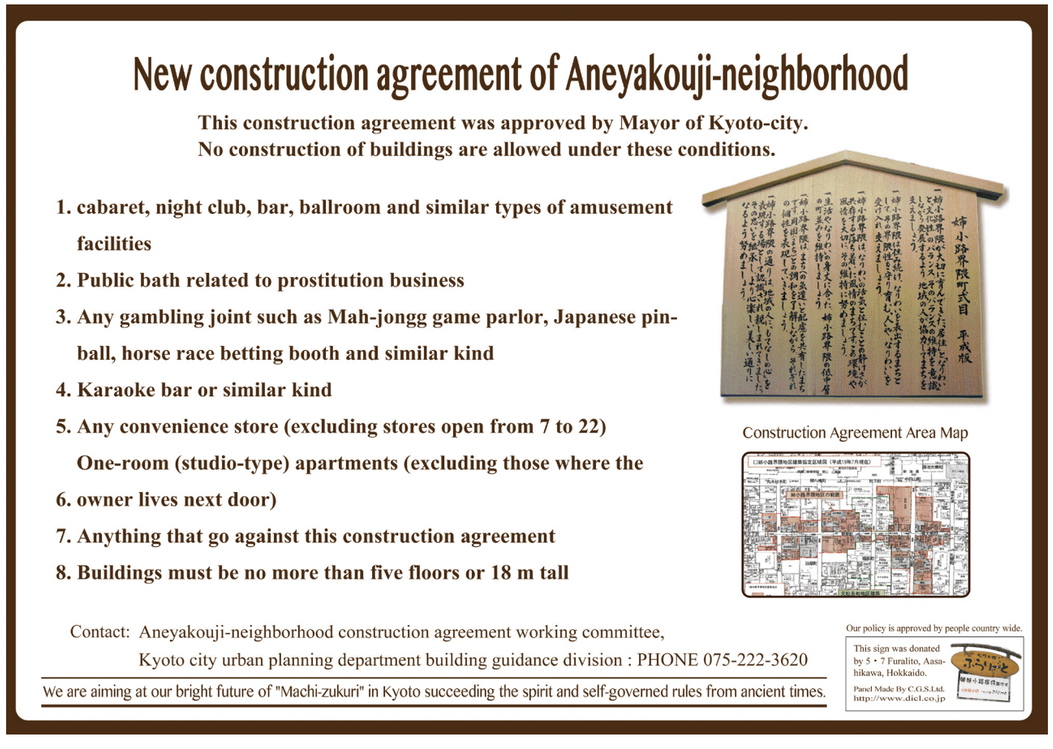
For the design, we were also consulted by Ikuko Naito from the Kyoto Society of Architects and Building Engineers.

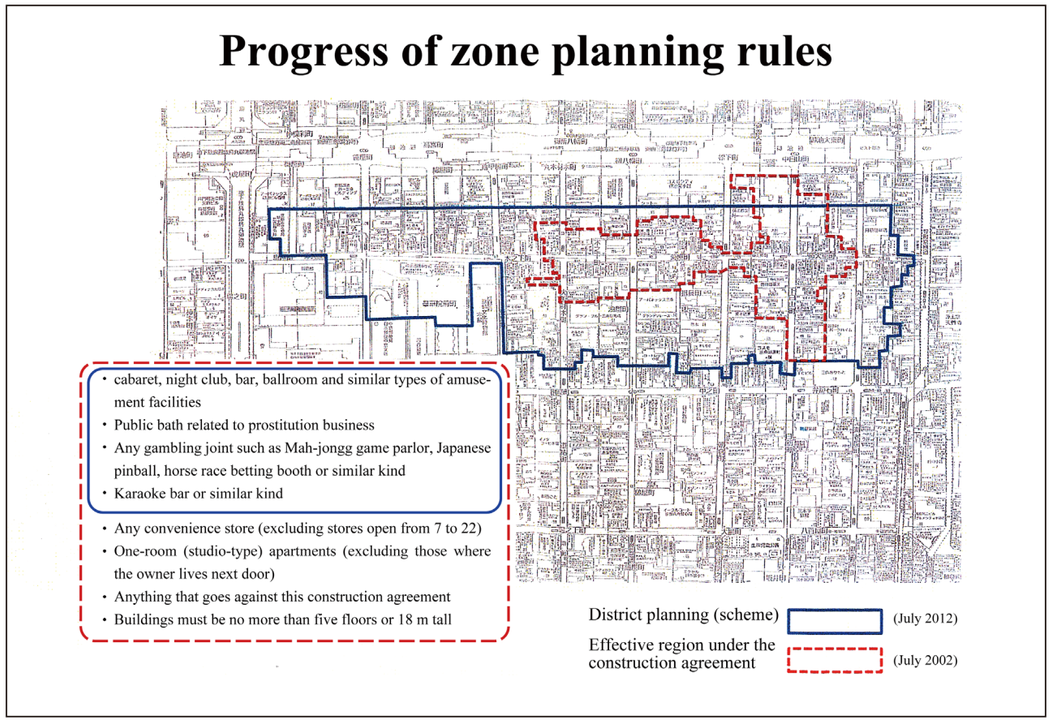
The second example is the Aoki family house located just a few steps further south. This is a machiya town house built in 1930, and just recently, we completed the reconstruction of the traditional earth wall (hei) separating a former parking lot in front of the house from the street. The Aoki house has a traditional facade, but the living room features a heating system and stained-glass windows that were a novelty at the time. It is thus an excellent example of early

ph.4 Mr. Iyama's residence retaining Edo-period's town statute book

Western-Japanese cultural fusion. The original plans and blueprints have been preserved and could thus serve as an inspiration. "Architects die, but their houses survive." This is a charming dwelling, and Kyoto City has initiated procedures for listing the house as cultural property. I believe that the balance of old and new with the neighbouring house designed by star architect Tadao Ando is also very well taken.

fi.1 New construction agreement was announced





4. Protecting our everyday life

The building covenant is ten years old now, no problems have ever arisen, and it is welcomed by the area's residents. This is because they share the wish to live in a quiet environment, exercising cooperation and considerateness, and they want to continue to live in secure surroundings. Precisely because of this attitude, they feel a strong affection and pride for their neighborhood. Also, the building covenant does not only bring emotional satisfaction, it also provides security by protecting the land values of those who own property in the area which would drop if it were cluttered with high-rises.

Last year, a person who had just acquired land in the neighbourhood immediately joined the building covenant and, after consultation with us, built a house that harmonized with the existing townscape. This was a very fortunate case, and things cannot always be expected to work out quite as smoothly. This is because the building coventant rests on the good will of those who voluntarily join it, and it cannot bindingly regulate the forms and purposes of the buildings that future buyers of property in the area might construct. If for example sex shops, game centres or other establishments violating the character of the Aneyakoji neighbourhood were to intrude into the area, this could not be prevented by a voluntary agreement based on the consensus of the current residents.

We therefore decided to start working for a double safety net in which the current building covenant is backed up by a legally binding district plan. In a questionnaire we distributed to all property owners in the targeted area, over 90 per cent indicated agreement with the adoption of such a district plan. There was only some division on the question of mahjong parlors and karaoke boxes, with some responses

arguing that mahjong parlors are places of communication, karaoke boxes can be made soundproof with appropriate measures, and both kinds of entertainment are culture too.

But even if mahjong as such is an innocent game, most members were concerned that it might be coupled with gambling. And while karaoke parlours too are not to be objected, it is a fact that wherever they exist, they invite round-the-clock street noise, flashy advertising boards and neon signs, and parked bicycles and motorbikes blocking the sidewalks. Questioning whether this is really in tune with the townscape and living environment of the Aneyakoji neighborhood, we were able to gain the understanding of the initial opponents, and nobody strongly objected to the plan.

5. Future plans

After one year of preparations, we have now submitted a request for issuing a district plan to Kyoto City, and we expect its adoption as a town-planning ordinance this summer.(fi.2)

Kyoto City is promoting "Walking city Kyoto" as one of its current key initiatives. By reducing the influx of automobiles to the city centre, this is meant to retain a walking-friendly urban environment. As one measure, driving lanes will be reduced and sidewalks widened on Shijo Avenue, one of the major thoroughfares. But this bears the risk of diverting cars to the narrow back streets such as Aneyakoji Street and might end up increasing their traffic burden. So in the first experiment of this kind, the width of the traffic lane on Aneyakoji Street has been reduced from 3.50 to 3.00 meters. (ph.5)

Sidewalks have been widened correspondingly, and as a bicycle lane is now separately marked, providing for a more relaxed walking

ph.5 Kyoto-cities' first-ever narrowed drive way from 3.5m to 3.0m

experience. We also wonder whether the current coin-parking lots can increase their community contribution, for example by adding facilities for bicycles or by greening parts of their lots, and we would appreciate creative input by architects on this point.(fi.3)

For all these efforts, we believe it is essential that the neighbourhood takes the initiative, joining forces with specialists and the city government.

6. The bearers of urban regeneration

Since founding the Aneyakoji Neighborhood Association, we have revived the old custom of lining up self-made paper lanterns along the streets for seasonal events. (ph.6)

These lanterns have been hand-painted by senior citizens in the neighborhood and the children of Nakagyo Moegi Kindergarten and of Kyoto Oike Junior High School. In the night before the summer festival Jizobon, the brass band of that school and a duet of young people from the neighborhood fill the street with captivating sounds, forming one of the high points. (ph.7)

We are happy that this attracts people not only from the immediate neighborhood but also from the much wider school district.siryou On a more quotidian level, we have been offering a machiya town-house workout for seven years now. (ph.8)

fi.3

ph.6 The handbill of the seasonal event.

Participating women have greatly increased their fitness by the stretching and bending exercises. We see this not only as physical training but also as urban regeneration in its own right. When invigorated people join their powers, remaking our neighbourhood will become a more intimate task and much more fun.

As an engineer by training, it has been my mission to contribute to building a society which is good to live in, and I have worked as an architectural consultant in my professional career. I am committed to continue making use of my experiences and would be happy indeed if they could contribute to a Kyoto which is good to live in.

ph.8 Seven-years lasting Machiya-Taiso (exercise coaching)

ph.7 Brass band club members of Oike junior high school & Mayor of Kyoto-city: Mr. Daisaku Kadokaw

Mr. Shimpei Taniguchi

Professional Engineer (P.E. Jp, Civil Engineering)

Born in Kyoto in 1946

B.A. in Civil Engineering, Osaka Institute of Technology

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Osaka Institute of Technology

After two hitchhiking trips in Europe, joined Pacific Consultants Co., LTD. (PCKK) being engaged in roadway, bridge & tunnel research analysis and designing

After retirement, keeping an effort in researching, consulting, and renovating community development (Machi-zukuri) in Kyoto-city