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Japan Travel Essay

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From my experience of Japan, two drastically different moments have emerged as the most resonant points during my first journey to the Far East. The first encapsulates the modern impressions that most westerners assume about the country of Japan and it takes place in the bustling train station: platforms that swell with people during the morning and evening rush, flashy advertisements that render most westerners illiterate, and a train map that is as complex as physiological chart of the human circulatory system. The second encounter embodies a classical impression of Japan's religious temples and shrines that are nestled within an intricately curated garden. Traveling to these places captures the other extreme in landscape and experience. Both proved important because they challenged my American perceptions of culture and space. Especially because New Orleans is a city that struggles with affordable mobility for its citizens and is in constant flux with the natural landscape because of its tropical and water based location.

The natural landscape of Japan varies from New Orleans with its direct relation to the coast and its hilly mountainous terrain. It is no surprise that the ideal locations for spiritual centers was in some form of seclusion on a hill side. However, this seclusion was was not only about location but about a created landscape that carves out a path and defines the edge of the spiritual place. There are many variations on this landscape but all of these sacred place had three things in common: a threshold that defined its separation from the "regular" landscape, a structure to house the sacred entities and a path that takes the visitor from the threshold into or around the landscape. The progression of the path varied, sometimes it was a direct route, sometimes it was several circuitous paths that composed infinite combinations through which one might traverse in contemplation.

The structures also varied but all presented a sequence of spaces that included a covered outdoor area with interior rooms.

This presents a direct connection to the traditional New Orleans plantation. The oak alley serves as a man-made gateway that leads visitors along a path to the plantation house. This arrangement of space is incredibly important in the traditions of the southern home because it requires protection from the harsh environment and a lush, well kept garden helps to maintain comfortable temperatures. This method of creating a thermal environment has been preserved in some parts of New Orleans and all but abandoned in others. Even so, appreciation for the immense oak trees runs culture wide almost to a degree of respect. It is clear from the delicate but deliberate way that the trees of Japan are tied to wooden “crutches” and trained to grow in specific ways and the constant attention given to manicure a grove of bamboo that trees are also respected, if not revered in Japan. They become the nodes that mark the non-linear paths around the temples. Even the wood that was used to make the temple is treated so thoughtfully that moving through the spaces of the temple is a tactile experience of woodgrain and texture.

While New Orleans might succeed in creating oasis-like gardens that have the ability to transport the mind and the spirit, it severely lacks in its ability to transport its citizens physically through the city. There are no thriving locations that collect people who wish to move throughout the city. The locations of New Orleans public transit connection points are truly non-places. They lack definition, they lack public amenities, and ultimately they lack users. The Streetcars are simply vestigial organs from another time and remain in the city for the nostalgic pleasure of one sector of the city’s population. The public bus system is there to move the other, less affluent New Orleanian through the city. The New Orleans Union Terminal train station that connects New Orleans to the rest of the country is not far from the heart of the city but because the lack of density in New

Orleans it feels as if it is in the middle of nowhere and completely overshadowed, literally and figuratively, by the highway.

In Japan, this not so. The train stations are vibrating hubs. They are filled with retail and restaurants and people. One of the most intense examples of this is Kyoto Station. Kyoto Station, opened in 1997 and was designed by Japanese architect Hara Hiroshi. The aboveground portion of the station is an enormous structure that includes shopping malls, restaurants, a theater and a hotel. There are two solid “bars” that are filled with program and between these is a open space covered by a glass ceiling. This space is several stories high and dwarfs the human scale. The massiveness of this space speaks to the nature of a train station that reaches beyond simply being a covered platform and a track. The Kyoto Station is a threshold to the city of Kyoto, a valve that connects heart to artery. It is obvious that this is a location of significance and not a non-place.

The comparison of these two experiences and of these two places can be distilled into a negotiation between landscape and culture. Both require maintenance and attention to the nuances that make them both special. In my experience of New Orleans the landscape commands attention because of the extremes in temperature and weather. Even the ground itself is unique and unstable and constantly effected by the body of water that once was the main artery to this city. In this way, Japan and New Orleans share a special awareness of the landscape and its ability to destroy the lives that it supports. From that understanding stems an important relationship with the landscape that is based on the respect of its power and a humility within the human existence.

For a landscape in flux, preservation of culture becomes intrinsic to the conversation of urban development and architecture. How does a city successfully incorporate the needs of contemporary society and the needs that growing density creates? The cities of Japan answered these questions differently then New Orleans and, after the devastation of World War II, the

redevelopment of urban fabric was not only desired but necessary. The nature of the rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Katrina seemed to have been geared towards returning the city to the condition it was in before its destruction and as such, New Orleans has returned to a kind of stasis. The city of New Orleans, nearly a decade after Katrina, has yet to conclude its recovery process. I believe this is because the city remains as divided as ever and that without any major changes to the cities infrastructure and public transportation systems New Orleans will continue to plod along at status quo, clinging to the nostalgic vestiges of the French Quarter. To reconstruct urban infrastructure through transportation is an investment in optimism that a country, as precariously located as Japan or a city in as much danger of demise as New Orleans, that only enhances the culture of that place and make it worth preserving.





