

JAPAN STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM 2013

The Urban Morphology of Kyoto and New Orleans

Rena Foster

Understanding Kyoto and New Orleans through their people

Though I have lived in New Orleans for over a year, I still feel more like a tourist or passerby than a local New Orleanian. Prior to moving for graduate school in August 2012, I had vacationed to the city, but just for a week. With this in mind, I feel that I can compare the cities of New Orleans and Kyoto with a tourist eye and not as a local of one city and a tourist of the other. As a visitor of both Kyoto and New Orleans, I have come to really enjoy and appreciate both cultures. However it is the people that keep the culture alive and it's the people that enlighten me. I would like to share my observation of the two cultures and the understanding of their cities through interactions with their people. To get a sense of the people, I feel a few facts are important. While the age of the cities are vastly different; Kyoto at just over 1200 years and New Orleans (a quarter of that) at less than 300 years, the populations are similar at 1.5 and 1.2 million respectively. With similar sized cities, it is amazing at how different yet similar the people and their cultures are.

Both cities have people who are extremely friendly. However they are friendly in much different ways. The Japanese were not outright talkative, but if they spoke English, they did engage in conversation as would the people of New Orleans. However, I have never been exposed to a culture that was as friendly and helpful as the Japanese. In New Orleans, we have had multiple examples of attending an event, those that greeted us were friendly, but if there were instructions that we were missing, they were not about to point them out... not especially helpful. For example, while attending a concert at the football stadium, our tickets were checked with a smile but without further instruction of where to go, once we eventually found our seating section, we were missing wristbands, it was not until we were about to be seated when we were turned back to the entry we came in through to get our required wrist bands. The ticket checker could have easily guided us, but New Orleanians are not helpful in this way. In Japan, we went to a baseball game. They were incredibly helpful and informed us of all the things we may need or want to know before entering the stadium. They would go above and beyond to make us feel welcome. The Japanese were much more accommodating. Another example was in the train stations in Kyoto, we had members of our group lose items both in the train and in the station on multiple days. When we called to find the items, all of them were recovered. That is unheard of elsewhere. I visited New Orleans and had left some items in a drawer in my hotel room, just hours later I realized that I had left, and recalled exactly what drawer I had forgotten to check. When contacting the hotel, they were not only unaware of anything that was left behind,

but after having to call back, no one was able to locate the forgotten items. Not to say that our culture is not honest, but from experience it is clear that if you lose something, you have a better chance of having it returned in Kyoto than in New Orleans.

The organization of the Japanese was also very impressive in multiple ways. First, if items were lost in the train station, the records kept of the items. Not only did they have record of the items that had been left on the train, but they had record of what train the item was lost on, and which station it was being held in. Ask any American about tracking down lost luggage after flying. If your bag is lost while flying, there is not much for assistance in tracking down your luggage. Some are lucky and get it back the same or next day, while others can wait weeks before their bags are returned. Another example of how people in Kyoto and even Tokyo are more organized is how they line up. They are always in line in the train station correctly, especially when it can be so crowded, they stand on the proper side of the escalators and line up just right for the trains. In New Orleans, if you find yourself in a crowd to get on a bus, there may eventually be a line, but if we don't start with a line, then we crowd our way to the door. I find our culture to be pretty organized, but if there is a large crowd taking the escalator in the airport, you will not find the crowd sharing so that those who may be in a hurry have room to walk by on one side.

I was also very impressed by their acknowledgement of the rules. We tend to see rules more often as good guidelines. This may be a generality; however it was quite clear how rare it was for a Japanese citizen to jaywalk. While confronted with a red light and no traffic, most New Orleanians, would look both ways to double check the traffic and cross the street.

Both cities have been amazing to experience. They both have such an incredible sense of culture and in such unique ways. Both cities seem so proud of their history and passion for food. It is so amazing to me that with similar rules and guidelines for peaceful living, the cultures can react to these rules so differently. I think I would love to live in Japan and experience the culture for at least a few years as I will have done in New Orleans. However, I don't see myself wanting to live in New Orleans long term. Kyoto, if it was not so far away from home, seems like a city that I would want to live in for much longer than a couple of years. I am so glad I was able to experience it and the amazing people that make it what it is today.

