Scales and Meanings of Japanese Urbanism and Architecture in Sapporo

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Abstract

This paper examines the urbanism and architecture created by the Kaitakushi (開拓使) in Sapporo in the 1870s. In comparison with the forms and concepts of the so-called traditional Japanese house that developed during the Meiji period, the houses built for Kaitakushi officials show jarring juxtapositions of Japanese and non-Japanese frameworks. From the level of the city to the scale of residential interiors, the Kaitakushi’s projects show attempts to create spaces based on conventional social status and function. This desire, though, often conflicted with the goals of introducing non-Japanese architectural forms and technology. The resulting hybrids, which were among the first consciously modern Japanese houses, reveal the ways in which modern Japanese architectural identities were inherently eclectic and experimental. In contrast to the more explicit and theoretical debates on Japanese identity in the 1880s, the discourses surrounding the Sapporo houses helped create a pragmatic, de facto set of spatial, formal, social, and technological identities for modern Japan.

Keywords: Kaitakushi, Sapporo, houses, eclecticism, colonization

Introduction

Many casual observers of the traditional Japanese house see it as the embodiment of timeless and quintessentially Japanese forms, elements, and spatial patterns. More critical scholars, however, examine the process through which the image and values of the ostensibly traditional house have developed.¹ For instance, numerous researchers have examined the warrior-class houses that provided the elements of the modern “traditional” house. In fact, the durability and ubiquity of the concept of the “traditional” house are testaments to the power of the discourses that shaped it during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This paper examines an alternative set of projects, the hybrid buildings and planning executed by the Kaitakushi (開拓使) in the 1870s in Sapporo. These experiments reveal that basic concepts of Japanese space, structure, and social relationships were redefined as they encountered novel Western concepts on the almost-virgin soil of Hokkaido. These encounters provide early examples of the de facto development of “Japanese-ness” in modern Japan. Several reasons make Sapporo particularly useful for exploring these issues.

First, the planning and building of early structures in Sapporo paralleled the development of the nation-state and modern Japanese identity; this was the time when notions of modern Japan were being created. The built environment of Sapporo shows how cities and buildings were involved in this process. Second, the on-the-ground collisions of Japanese and non-Japanese frameworks in Sapporo suggest alternatives to the more explicit discourses on Japanese identity that occurred slightly later in fields such as literature and art. For instance, in the 1880s, the debates concerning Tokyo School of Fine Art (東京美術学校) and the writings of the Seikyōsha (政教社) explicitly addressed the question of Japanese identity. In contrast to these verbal and visual discourses, the Sapporo buildings offer material, spatial, and social discourses that suggest alternative constructions of Japanese identity.

A third reason why Sapporo and its houses are useful for examining “Japanese-ness” is that several distinct discourses collided in the construction and use of houses. In attempting to synthesize disparate practices and concepts, designers, builders, and occupants inevitably produced experimental buildings. Residences, more than institutional buildings, embodied difficult accommodations of divergent practices. This paper begins with a brief look at international contexts at the colonial and urban scales and then turns to the houses built in Sapporo in the 1870s.

**The Colonial Scale**

Japan’s development of Hokkaido developed from the international context of colonial empires. China’s experiences against England in and after the Opium Wars offered Japan grim warnings about the need to maintain sovereignty over its territory. The Russian threat from the north spurred systematic Japanese attempts to colonize Hokkaido. Other factors, such as the desire to provide former samurai with land and income, provided further motivation. Although exploiting the region had been a longstanding goal of the previous government, the specific goals and methods of the Kaitakushi were derived from modern international practices such as colonial administration, agricultural technology, and higher education. For this paper, two points are relevant. First, because the Kaitakushi turned to the United States for expertise, architecture in Sapporo developed in a context separate from that of the British-dominated Department of Public Works (工務省) in Tokyo. Second, the international context of colonization overlapped but was not congruent with the international context of architecture. Although architecture, urban planning, and colonization were global phenomena, their contours differed. In other words, even though the international context of colonialism provided many of the motives and means for developing Sapporo, the execution of the city and its buildings relied on a different set of international networks.

**The Urban Scale: Ambiguities of the Sapporo Plan**

The planning of Sapporo exhibits the multi-valence and complexity of spatial strategies in Hokkaido. On one hand, both Japanese and foreigners often saw the grids of Sapporo as non-Japanese. **Fig. 1.** For example, William Wheeler, an American professor at Sapporo Agricultural College, wrote, “Sapporo is
laid out better than any other city I have seen in the empire, having very wide streets—as they say here ‘in foreign style.’” Wheeler undoubtedly meant that local residents saw Sapporo as being non-Japanese; however, because Sapporo existed outside historical Japanese territory, even Japanese-style urbanism was in a sense a “foreign style.” Since the area lacked any history of large-scale urbanization, there was no indigenous urban form: both Japanese and Western approaches were new to Hokkaido.

Moreover, Sapporo’s layout evoked both nineteenth-century American grid cities and Edo-period Japanese cities. The city’s grids, oriented towards the cardinal directions, bore superficial similarities to cities of the American west such as Salt Lake City. Grids were also common in Japanese castle towns (城下町), but they were usually used piecemeal rather than as a single, unified planning system. In addition, Japanese castle-town planning differed from American planning because of the emphasis on social and political order. The grids of Japanese castle towns generally reinforced social segregation, whereas the grids of American towns more often reflected commercial convenience. In Sapporo, the Kaitakushi divided the city into zones based on status; for instance, the northern part of the city was reserved for the relatively spacious lots for official buildings and residences, while the southern part was assigned to the townspeople. In sum, then, the relevant context for Sapporo’s planning included both historical Japanese cities and American cities. It was impossible to read Sapporo completely within either paradigm. Thus the first capital of Hokkaido was by nature neither clearly Japanese nor obviously American; the earliest major new city of modern Japan was hybrid in source and in interpretation.

**International Motives for New Types of Houses**

In Sapporo, the Kaitakushi hoped to establish a clear socio-spatial order on scales ranging from the city to the house. The first houses it built, such as Sōseichō house number 7 (創成町第七号邸), were based on conventional Japanese houses. Fig. 2. However, soon after these houses were built both Japanese and American figures argued that the development of Hokkaido required new types of houses. The dominant figure in the Kaitakushi was Kuroda Kiyotaka, who became acting commissioner in 1871 and

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2 Wheeler to mother, 10 August 1876, William Wheeler Collection, Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.
commissioner in 1874. He had studied cold-climate residences abroad, visiting the United States, Russia, and Germany in 1871 and also examining buildings used by Russian residents in Sakhalin. In 1876, looking back over several years of construction in Hokkaido, Kuroda wrote, “Because they are constructed along the customs of the past, the houses of the residents of Hokkaido are extremely crude and incorporate absolutely no considerations against cold . . . In particular, houses are the most important thing for protecting against cold, and unless old customs are at all accounts improved, increasing the population and establishing a base for industry will be difficult.”

Figure 2 Sōseichô House Number 7

Horace Capron and other Americans hired by the Kaitakushi shared Kuroda’s belief in the need for new houses. Capron, who had been the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, served as Kaitakushi commissioner and advisor from 1871 to 1875. In January 1872, he recommended twelve steps necessary to develop Hokkaido, including “Radical changes in the style of dwelling for the settlers of Yesso [Hokkaido], substituting substantial wood and stone houses for the thin paper ones in use.” However, Capron never visited Hokkaido in the winter, and his recommendations were based on idealized visions of cold-weather living. For instance, he wrote of cold-climate residents in Europe and the United States, “In their comfortable houses, constructed to resist the cold, and made cheerful by the liberal fire upon the hearth, they listen to the raging of the elements without, with calm satisfaction.” Although Capron and Kuroda agreed on the need to learn from non-Japanese models, there was no clear template for the Kaitakushi houses. As outlined below, they were strange amalgams of Japanese and non-Japanese precedents.

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The Residential Scale: Exteriors

Japanese carpenters completed the first set of “Western-style” houses in 1873. This group included eleven structures for Kaitakushi officials plus two residences for foreign employees. The various elements of the houses partook of international discourses of form, technology, finishes, and social use. However, rather than attempting the reproduction of any one type, the builders used various sources for the different aspects of the houses. The analysis below begins with exterior appearance and works inwards.

On the outside, the 1873 houses depart from Japanese conventions. For instance, the white clapboards, glass windows, pivoted doors, and exterior symmetry of the Chokusôtei (勅奏邸), the largest of the 1873 houses, suggest American rather than Japanese roots. Fig. 3. Although a few drawings by the Japanese builders suggest combinations of conventional Japanese elements with novel Western ones, the executed houses appear superficially non-Japanese. The builders may have learned these Western forms from Western-style buildings in Yokohama and Tokyo, from English-language books and journals, and from the American Kaitakushi employees.

The Residential Scale: Structure

Inside the walls, though, the structure of these houses often was ambiguous. For example, the only remaining house from the era, the Yôzôka (洋造家) of 1878, shows structure that combines different modes of construction. The wall structure, which Murakami Kôichi describes as “balloon frame,” comprises square columns (125mm x 125mm) with studs (mabashira, 50mm x 120mm) at 600mm intervals. This pattern was undoubtedly influenced by American framing techniques, but as the architectural historian Dell Upton has noted for the United States, the adoption of balloon framing

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“normally took the form of yet another reinterpretation.” In other words, the balloon frame was inherently ad-hoc and local. In Sapporo, the Japanese builders of the Yōzōka and other “Western-style” residences synthesized the novel balloon frame and conventional Japanese structure. In fact, some drawings of the Yōzōka omit the studs and show only the square columns, making the structure look more like that of a typical Japanese house. **Fig. 4.**

Moreover, the Kaitakushi constructed all of its Sapporo houses from wood rather than brick or stone. In Tokyo, foreign-style architecture was associated with masonry construction, for instance in the new brick buildings of Ginza. In contrast, the Western technology brought to Sapporo involved mill equipment imported from the United States; the change was not in material but in techniques. Construction was executed by Japanese builders, though, and in some buildings machine-milled lumber coexisted with members hewn with traditional hand tools. In sum, then, the structure of the Sapporo houses can be understood only as a synthesis of Japanese and American tools, techniques, and concepts.

**The Residential Scale: Interior Finishes**

Like the structure of the houses, the interior finishes suggested combinations or syntheses of Japanese and non-Japanese practices. Some elements were coded unequivocally as either Western or Japanese. For instance, the rug or canvas mat that covered the wooden floor of the Chokusōtei reception room signaled a Western space. Other living spaces were floored with tatami, which could be seen only as Japanese. Some interior finishes, though, could be read as either Japanese or foreign; notations on the Chokusōtei drawings suggest that the walls and ceiling of the main rooms were wallpapered. **Fig. 5.** Wallpaper was a common Japanese item that could in this case denote Western décor. It thus functioned as point of tangency between Japanese and Western architecture that eased the synthesis of the two.

**The Residential Scale: Spatial Patterns and Uses**

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Just as the Kaitakushi mapped use by zone in Sapporo, it framed institutional status in the spaces of its houses. An 1869 document stipulates the room types and sizes for various official ranks. As Endō Akihisa notes, these guidelines were drawn from typical warrior-class houses. In spite of the seemingly Western exterior of the 1873 Chokusôtei, the type and size of its spaces generally conformed to the 1869 guidelines, and thus to relatively conventional Japanese residences. Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room</th>
<th>1869 guidelines</th>
<th>1873 Chokusôtei</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>genkan</td>
<td>玄関</td>
<td>4 mats (畳)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reception</td>
<td>御用談の間</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>living room</td>
<td>居間</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sleeping room</td>
<td>寝所</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female servant</td>
<td>女中部屋</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male servant</td>
<td>侍部屋</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle room</td>
<td>中間部屋</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kitchen</td>
<td>台所</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: room sizes are given in tatami mats; one mat equals 1.98 square meters; all numbers for the 1873 Chokusôtei are approximate.

**Table 1 Comparison of 1869 Guidelines with 1873 Chokusôtei**

In addition to the above rooms, there were toilets, bathrooms, and other service spaces. The grouping of spaces suggests that conventional Japanese concepts of spatial organization appeared in slightly altered form. Fig. 5. The interior comprises three zones. Entering the central door, the main living quarters are to the right; the kitchen and servant areas lie to the left, and the main toilet and bath areas are in a wing at the rear. The combination of this social and spatial arrangement with the strict symmetry of the exterior creates awkward adjacencies. For instance, the servant’s room, normally relegated to the back of a house, now adjoins the veranda at the front of this house. In an even greater violation of Japanese conventions, a toilet takes pride of place at the left end of the veranda on the most public side of the house. Despite the descriptions of the Chokusôtei and other 1873 houses as Western, in fact the layout and thus the social arrangements appear to have been more closely related to conventional Japanese houses.

**Residential Scale: Modifications**

How did the Japanese residents of the Chokusôtei, Yôzôka and other buildings react to these novel hybrid houses? To some extent, the fit between the buildings and the occupants can be deduced from modifications made after the Kaitakushi sold off the houses in 1876.

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11 The 1869 figures are drawn from a Kaitakushi document (shotome) of 1869 in the Archives of Hokkaido (北海道立文書館).
For example, it appears that the new owner of a Daishutentei (大主典邸) added both Japanese and Western elements. Fig. 6, 7. The addition of the engawa and amado, conventional elements of Japanese houses, created outdoor spaces useful for household work and relaxation. The insertion of a chimney, an element not common in pre-Meiji houses, suggests that a stove or fireplace was added to the main living quarters; the original house had no provisions for heating. Needless to say, these modified houses continued the experimentation and hybridization that, it can be argued, is fundamental to modern Japanese architecture and identity.

Conclusions

In this brief précis of the various scales of intersections between Japanese and non-Japanese concepts, elements and uses, there is of course one general conclusion. Namely, the planning and buildings of early Sapporo demonstrate how disparate sources combined to produce hybrids that could not fit within the simple categories of Japanese and non-Japanese. William Smith Clark, the first president of Sapporo Agricultural College, described his lodgings by saying, “The buildings are constructed in a mixed style of architecture, one third Japanese, one third American, and one third German.”\(^\text{12}\) In fact there is no evidence of any direct German influence in Sapporo’s buildings; perhaps Clark meant only that one third of the building defied categorization. At any rate, the Kaitakushi officials, carpenters, and advisors deserve attention for their ad hoc, pragmatic attempts to define houses for modern Japan. Although other kinds of figures would develop more explicit and theoretical approaches to the question of modern Japanese identity in the 1880s, the Kaitakushi’s spatial, technical, formal, and social experiments served as early examples of the eclecticism and syntheses that would become a de facto, implicit quality of modern Japanese identities.

Figure credits:
1, 2 (left), 3, 5, 6, and 7: Northern Studies Collection, Hokkaido University Library.
2 (right) and 4: Archives of Hokkaido.

\(^{12}\) Clark to S.W. Leete, 5 August 1876. William S. Clark collection, Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.