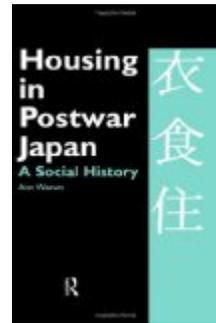


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Ann Waswo. *Housing in Postwar Japan: A Social History*. London: Routledge, 2002. x + 145 pp. \$104.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1517-6.

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Narrow Confines—by Design

It is impossible for visitors to spend any time in Japan and not take note of the rather crowded patterns of Japanese housing—dwellings encroach upon not only forests and rivers but also on highways, railways, and airport runways. Living with Japanese provides the opportunity to become more intimately acquainted with these accommodations, but contrary to what foreigners often expect, Japanese domiciles are often as cramped and cluttered inside as they are packed together out.

At last the mundane yet fundamental topic of Japanese housing is getting scholarly attention.[1] Albeit slim, the work under review adds to this effort by providing a concise yet informative overview of the recent history of the subject. Ann Waswo does so intelligently, working from the premise that when it comes to considering Japanese housing, comparisons with western Europe are more relevant than with North America (pp. 1, 127-128). She also notes that because the capital city is an exceptional case, she elects to treat Tokyo separately (pp. 1-2, 108-123).

After a brief explanation of what *tatami* is and how it is used in Japanese houses (pp. 2-3), Waswo launches her study with a useful illustration—the translated memoirs of a housewife recounting her experiences with Japanese housing between 1961 and 1970. (Along with the bit on *tatami*, this section, entitled “Experiencing the Housing Crisis,” should be made required reading for all undergraduates preparing to visit Japan.) Here we see the choices confronting an average, educated family, choices that reveal all too clearly that the economic prosperity of

the era did not generally trickle down.

Waswo then proceeds to discuss the reasons behind the emergence of these patterns. First, she notes the wartime changes in the urban housing market. While prewar rental properties were typically purchased to supplement retirement incomes, that method of supplying housing became insufficient to meet demand after the first decade of the twentieth century (pp. 41-43). This was despite the fact that some dwellings went so far as to rent out individual *tatami* mats (p. 44)!

Unfortunately, Waswo only sketches how the prewar Japanese government became involved in the housing system. She notes that the process began slowly but accelerated as Japan mobilized for war, as the Home Ministry involved itself in not only encouraging construction but also in implementing rent controls. This early experience proved important because, despite the American disbanding of the administration that oversaw these early endeavors, new postwar institutions (especially the Construction Ministry) returned with a vengeance, aided in part by well-connected politicians such as Tanaka Kakuei.

The re-emergence of such institutions occurred in large part as a response to a crisis in housing, one that resulted from wartime destruction and Japan’s rapidly growing urban population (pp. 46, 55). The Construction Ministry responded to housing shortages, however, only in ways the Ministry deemed appropriate—by providing housing only for those who were gainfully employed. Yet since their incomes were low, it seemed only right to the

Ministry that such people should not have large houses (pp. 52-53). The result was the construction of a new kind of housing complex (*danchi*) across Japan, units that were initially welcomed.

The creation of new kinds of structures, however, inevitably entailed changing the way Japanese lived, a process Waswo describes as a “lifestyle revolution” (p. 62).[2] This was because new accommodations were designed with the promotion of new lifestyles in mind. Flush toilets appeared, kitchens became sleeker (requiring tables and chairs), and sleeping in separate bedrooms was encouraged. New units also used less (and smaller) *tatami* mats as architects sought to use space more efficiently and progressively (p. 75). For these reasons, *danchi* were initially perceived popularly as modern. By the late 1960s, however, they were less so, as what Japanese came to expect in housing shifted to include more (p. 79). The term *danchi* itself consequently took on more negative connotations.

Despite the widespread appearance of new complexes, however, Waswo contends that the goal of most Japanese is a family-owned home. Yet purchasing homes is no simple task in Japan, given the high costs of materials and land. Thus, home-ownership in Japan was an ideal that had to be encouraged, argues Waswo, pointing out that not only did the growth of the construction and the private railway industries help make this possible, but even corporate Japan played a role. This was because it was cheaper for corporations to lend money to employees for their mortgages than it was to provide corporate housing for all, a practice many had begun because of the initial postwar housing shortage. This proved doubly beneficial, for, at the same time, providing loans added another means of insuring good labor relations (pp. 92-94).

What kinds of family lodgings eventually emerged? A variety, according to Waswo, but a variety that represented well the realities of the Japanese economic “miracle.” For example, the drive to maximize the efficient use of space resulted in most house plots becoming small (p. 97). Alternatively, some developers noticed that many Japanese preferred to live in large structures in the city, encouraging developers to experiment with the creation of more modern condominiums (eventually called “mansions,” *manshon*), as well as scaled-down versions for the masses (*taishu manshon*) (pp. 99-107).

Tokyo sensibly occupies an anomalous place in Waswo’s study, for in the capital, prices, demand, and the concomitant pressures to make living spaces smaller

have consistently been greater. Home ownership rates are also lower in the city (in the Tokyo Metropolitan Prefecture, to be exact). These pressures eventually resulted in the vertical growth of the city, which, despite some protests, became an accepted practice as most Japanese came to recognize it as “progress” (pp. 116-120).

For Waswo, the application of industrialized production methods and rationales is key to understanding contemporary patterns of Japanese housing. As such, Waswo’s study demonstrates a continuing Japanese pursuit of modernity. Central to this pursuit is the lifestyle revolution, because Waswo asserts that “it is [the] shift in the mode of living that distinguishes the social history of housing in modern Japan from that of the West” (p. 125). Waswo thus implies that the changes made by Japanese on the home front—such as adjusting to chairs and tables—were more revolutionary than changes occurring elsewhere in the world. This claim, however, could be better substantiated. The use of chairs by European or Chinese peasants did not necessarily render their transition to modernity any less revolutionary—they too, for example, often had to make rooms serve multiple purposes (moving the chairs out of the way at night). Perhaps the important thing to note is that the Japanese transition to modernity occurred more rapidly than that in most other contexts, perhaps even the Chinese (as that process remains ongoing).

In any event, as the history of postwar Japanese housing dovetails nicely with any discussion of postwar Japanese society at large, this book is a fine supplement to any course considering recent Japanese history.

Notes

[1] Other recent publications include Jordan Sand, *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space, and Bourgeois Culture, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Yukio Noguchi and James M. Potterba, eds., *Housing Markets in the United States and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Also relevant is Andre Sorenson, *The Making of Urban Japan: Cities and Planning from Edo to the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 2002). For an article somewhat critical of government policy see Kazuo Hayakawa, “Japan,” in *Housing Policy Systems in South and East Asia*, Mohammed Razali Agus, John Doling, and Dong-Sung Lee, eds. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 20-37. This is only one of several articles by Hayakawa in English, see also Willem van Vliet, ed., *International Handbook of Housing Policies and Practices* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); and

Seong-Kyu Ha, ed., *Housing Policy and Practice in Asia* (London: Croon Helm, 1987). For an enlightening discussion of premodern housing, see Susan B. Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), esp. "Housing and Furnishings," pp. 25-50.

[2]. Short discussions of the lifestyle revolution

apparent in prewar Japanese housing in Manchuria can be found in David Vance Tucker, "Building 'Our Manchukuo': Japanese City Planning, Architecture, and Nation-Building in Occupied Northeast China, 1931-1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1999); and William Sewell, "Japanese Imperialism and Civic Construction in Manchuria: Changchun, 1905-1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 2000).

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