

Preservation as Art: Japanese Waterfronts

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will look at preservation as public art... and this art as a contributor to an area's perceived identity. Whether a single object in an urban space, or a series of related objects, it can enrich the larger area it lies within.

As art can add character and interest to a setting, preservation can as well. It can heighten an area's uniqueness through a balance of predictability and surprise. The preserved elements may create the fabric of an area or act as a series of historical highlights in an otherwise modern setting.

The preserved past does not have to be strongly differentiated from the everyday. However, a site may not be noticed unless it is somehow set apart from its surroundings. A site or area's 'specialness' becomes highlighted when set against a contrasting background. A historic building within a larger historic area will not be as noticeable to a visitor as a historic building within a larger contemporary area.

Beyond merely noticing the historic structure in this setting, this one building has the potential to affect people's perceptions of the larger area, as well. There is an element of predictability and surprise in the landscape that helps make places distinctive. The more common newer buildings (in the above example) become the predictable background. The surprise is the single preserved site. The combined area then takes on a more unique overall character, as well.

Preservation also corresponds to site art in how it can emotionally and intellectually stimulate people. At one level, a historically preserved site can add beauty to the environment. At another it can make people think about an area's past and their own connections with that history.

In many examples of historical preservation, the exteriors of structures are preserved to evoke the past, rather than the interiors or the functions within them. Yet, even the exteriors can be meaningful artifacts that serve as useful conceptual entrees into their origins.

A preserved structure can be viewed as a sculptural object or a functional container. It can be approached and examined in detail or stepped back from and seen in a larger context. This physical artifact from earlier times may only hint at the rich history behind it.¹ Still, understanding the history is made easier by viewing a physical object that links to that past literally.

This preserved object becomes a visual anchor for a deeper meaning. Lowenthal suggests that "however depleted by time and use, relics remain essential bridges between then and now. . . . We respond to relics as objects of interest or beauty, as evidence of past events, and as talismans of continuity."²

Case Studies will be drawn from several waterfronts within Japan. I visited these locations to see if historical aspects of the sites were used to enhance their distinct identities. They include the

¹Priscilla Boniface and Peter J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in 'the global village'*. (London: Routledge, 1993), 73.

²Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1977), 187; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), xxiii.

preservation of a single site in Kobe, a district in Otaru, and a series of interrelated sites in Yokohama.

KOBE

Kobe is located within the southwest portion of Honshu, the main island of Japan. It is situated nearby Osaka. Located along the waterfront, there are a series of sites both new and preserved that were created to attract visitors to the water's edge. They include an observation tower, maritime museum, amusement park, and assorted walkways.

The most powerful site along the waterfront, however, is a small section of ruptured pavement frozen in time from 1995. That was the year of the recent earthquake that devastated the area.

That small preserved section of paving is part of the larger Earthquake Memorial. This memorial also contains a series of explanatory plaques of the earthquake and subsequent rebuilding efforts. Though this extreme example of preservation was from a very recent time, it struck me as succeeding on many levels.

Initially, the contrast of the shattered paving against the pristine condition of the newer surroundings, brings attention to the preserved site itself. It makes it distinct from the surroundings and therefore noticeable and special.

More importantly, the frozen section of pavement reveals the power of the earthquake. You can sense the helplessness that a person must have felt during that time. The contrast of old and new has the added meaning of highlighting evidence of the dramatic recovery.

The section of pavement and nearby explanatory tablets are not located within a building, but rather along an outdoor plaza. This allows people to easily wander in and out of the space. Through the text and photos on the tablets, people can learn about the history of the area without having to enter a separate building.

Visited during a light rain in mid-December, there were still a number of people experiencing the memorial. Overall, an important historical aspect of Kobe has been highlighted with this preservation. The monument has become an integral part of the larger landscape.

OTARU

Otaru is a small city on the northern island of Hokkaido. One of the prime preservation sites within Otaru is its canal. The canal was formed during land reclamation in the 1920s. By the 1980s, the need for a working canal was no longer vital for Otaru's economy. It came close to being totally filled in and destroyed. Citizen reactions created a compromise.

The canal was only partially filled in. The part that remained was then reduced in width to create a walkway. Stone and brick

warehouses that lined the canal were preserved and converted to uses such as antique shops and restaurants.

Stone warehouses are rare structures in Japan. The canal and walkway within the city are also very different than the surrounding streets with their cars, paved roadways, and sidewalks. The canal brings attention to itself through its contrast with the surroundings.

Where the surrounding architecture of the city becomes the 'predictable' for this setting, the preserved canal becomes the 'surprise.' Together, they create a unique identity for the larger city.

While strolling along the walkway overlooking the canal and stone warehouses, the maritime history of this city is casually brought to mind. Informational plaques mounted nearby further detail this history.

Additionally, there is a picturesque beauty in this walkway and canal. A stroll along it has become an attraction of this city and a strong element in its identity. The city of Otaru, for visitors especially, has become known for this preserved canal district.

The spaces in between buildings, the views, scale, colors, and textures all contribute to the subtle feel that makes an urban space unique. Individual site preservation, as important as it is, can often lose that quality since it is focusing on the parts, not the whole. Otaru uses a broad approach to preservation that includes focusing on districts as well as individual buildings.

YOKOHAMA

Yokohama is located about 20 miles from the largest city in Japan, Tokyo. It is a relatively young city by Japanese standards. It was nothing more than a small fishing village until the middle of the nineteenth century. But then it quickly grew, as did its importance in recent Japanese history. Two very different waterfront areas within Yokohama will be briefly discussed, Yamashita Park and Minato Mirai 21 (MM21).

Yamashita Park is located in the Kannai district of Yokohama. It was originally completed in 1930 and at first glance appears to be a simple, informal park. It is very open in layout with crisscrossing paths and a continuous promenade along the shoreline. The park itself is not inward looking, but rather opens outwards towards the bay. People can casually come to the park to look out over the water, to meet others, or to people watch, as they wish.

Nothing appears dramatically new or old within this setting. However, within Yamashita Park is a series of small landmarks, sites that are distinct, some of which clearly point back to history.

One of the focal points within the park is the India Memorial. This unique object attracts attention to itself by its difference from the surroundings. It appears somehow exotic and historical. At this level it may evoke a historical ambience. It may reassure a visitor that the area has a rich past, without specifically defining it.

Whether an explanatory plaque tells a story or the structure itself serves as a physical clue of a story to be told, the site still can act as a historical reminder. The India Memorial may serve as an ornate canopy that a passerby admires for its aesthetics. It may serve functionally as a seat in a shaded area, or spiritually as a space for contemplation. It may also serve as a physical clue for questioning and delving into the history of the area. Why is this object here? Why does it look different than everything else around it? Why is it located in Yamashita Park?

Questions like this allow people to historically and geographically anchor these locations and possibly themselves within them. If they did not already know, they could learn some of the history of the area from either a plaque or brochure. They also might learn from a companion who is familiar with the monument's history. The sites become physical reminders for stories, values, and communal memories.³

Through understanding the India Memorial, people might also learn of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. They would learn that there were many foreign residents from India living in this area at that time. Those residents donated this structure in memory of all the assistance they received in rebuilding. People could also learn that Yamashita Park itself was built from the rubble of the earthquake, which was dumped on the water's edge as part of the rebuilding plan.⁴

The Hikawa-maru is another site within the setting of Yamashita Park. It is an ocean liner that travelled between Japan and the U.S.A. from 1930 to 1960. Now, permanently moored alongside the park, it is used as a restaurant and beer garden. It is also an example of historic preservation, a ship no longer travelling, but still afloat.

With only the horizon line in the background, it is set off as a distinct and special place. It is firmly rooted in the nautical history of the area and serves as a physical reminder of it. The ship also adds an element of interest and beauty to the overall scene.

An interesting counterpoint to Yamashita Park is MM21. It is the major new development on the waterfront of Yokohama. The 21 of MM21 stands for the 21st century. It is a third sector project in Japan, meaning it includes both private and public sector investment.

Begun in 1983, it is built on former industrial sites, as well as new landfill. It includes commercial, residential, cultural, and recreational facilities. The population for this area when complete is projected to be 190,000 people working there and 10,000 living there.

It is conceptually and physically a distinct site from the rest of the city. Most of downtown Yokohama appears to be mid-20th century architecture, which at this point in time seems fairly subdued and nondescript.

In contrast, MM21 jumps out at you. At first glance it appears startlingly new and high-tech, set off from everything around it. It includes the Intercontinental Hotel whose shape was inspired by a sail.

It also includes high-tech commercial developments within it, such as Queen's Square. Within this structure is an internal arcade

³Keith H. Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 61.

⁴"Yamashita Park," available: <http://www.city.yokohama.jp/me/yoke/theyoke/yscene/y.park/park.html>, 2 April 1999.

lined with retail shops, offices and another hotel. Landmark Tower is another highlight of this new district. At 70 stories, it is the tallest building in Japan.

These sites and others contribute to the overall image that many people have of MM21. Yet surprisingly, even within this sea of 'new' there is a series of historic sites that were preserved in some way. One of the most dramatic is at the base of the extremely contemporary looking Landmark Tower.

It is called Dry Dock #2 and harks back to the industrial history of the site. Originally used for large ship repairs, this dry dock was filled with water to float the boat in. It was then drained so repairs could be made to the hull. And finally it was filled again to float the ship out.

Dry Dock #2 has been preserved and is presented devoid of water, creating a dramatic space with its huge rough-hewn stones. Functionally, it provides one way to access a retail mall beneath the tower, as well as serving as a gathering space for large events. As importantly, it also acts as a visual and historical counterpoint to the tower above. It provides a dramatic hint of the area's earlier history.

Dry Dock #1 has also been preserved. Not outwardly as noticeable as the other, it has been filled with water. An old sailing ship, the Nippon Maru is permanently docked within it.

This dry dock and ship are both part of the Maritime Museum. The museum building itself is subdued in design and actually partially bermed beneath ground level. It is the masts of the ship that act as the landmark for the museum.

A very different preserved site in this area is Kishamichi Promenade. This is actually an old railroad bridge with its tracks converted to pedestrian use. The bridge was originally built at the turn of the 20th century to allow freight trains to move materials to and from nearby warehouses. No longer needed for trains, a boardwalk has been built along it, while still leaving the original rails exposed at grade.

This promenade also includes two early steel bridges manufactured in the U.S.A. and the U.K. They are significant in that they were imported prior to major steel manufacturing in Japan. One is original to the site, the other relocated from elsewhere in Japan. There are plaques along the bridges briefly explaining the histories.

Kishamichi Promenade is a subtle integration of new and old. It is far less dramatic than the dry docks, but possibly more appreciated. It is preserving more than a structure, but a location as well. The site offers a sense of seclusion from the main portion of MM21. The wood walkway helps give it a more informal and less 'master planned' feel than much of the development.

It also allows a view of the new, futuristic MM21 structures from a distance both geographically and historically. You can gaze at the gleaming future while standing on its industrial past.

These locations are the tip of the iceberg for the area's history, physical remnants hinting at the past.⁵ The structures can spur stories from locals who knew this site before its transformation. Informational plaques, brochures of the area, and the Maritime Museum can also add additional layers of explanation and meaning to the area.

⁵Priscilla Boniface and Peter J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in 'the global village'* (London: Routledge, 1993), 73.

The extreme contrast of these sites against their futuristic surroundings strengthens their power as cultural anchors in the landscape of Yokohama. They provide dramatic spaces and contemplative ones. The historical sites are linked together physically and conceptually as visitors wander through the grounds of the development.

They are interrelated and speak of the industrial and shipping history of the area. Yet ultimately, these preserved sites work together with the contemporary ones to create a unique identity, both for the immediate area of MM21 and for the larger Yokohama.

CONCLUSION

A measure of good preservation, like good public art, is whether it is appreciated by the public. While in Yokohama, I had conducted a survey of over 100 people. Participants were shown 36 recent photographs of various sites along the waterfront, both new and preserved. They were then asked to choose the locations they liked or found most interesting.

The top 3 locations in order of preference, were Kishamichi Promenade (photo #23), Landmark Tower Shopping Mall Atrium (photo #18), and the Hikawa Maru (photo #34). Notably, two out of the top three favorite sites include examples of historic preservation.⁶

⁶ Richard W. Berman, *Assessing Urban Design: Historical Ambience on the Waterfront* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1999).

As good art often does, preservation can affect people intellectually and emotionally. Hopefully some preserved structures will add an element of beauty into the environment, as well.

Many cities are now trying to emphasize their uniqueness and capitalize on the qualities and physical forms that set them apart from other locations. The goals are often to attract visitors and businesses, as well as to satisfy local residents. Preserved structures, whether kept intact or adapted to new uses, have the potential to strengthen an area's unique identity.⁷

⁷ The Japanese waterfront sites discussed within this essay were all visited during November and December of 1997. The visits and initial research were sponsored and supported by the Japanese organization, WAVE (Waterfront Vitalization and Environmental Research).