

# **Cultural Construction of Urban Uniqueness: Regeneration of the Traditional Consumption City Kanazawa**

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## ***Abstract***

The studies of urban culture have changed their approaches from exploring the universalistic dimensions of modernity in city to the particularities of urban uniqueness. The uniqueness of a place is culturally constructed through the selective construction of urban history, the reinterpretation of traditional culture, and the creation of new cultural elements. This paper deals with the City of Kanazawa in Japan as a distinguished example of the cultural construction of urban uniqueness. Kanazawa, having been one of the greatest feudal cities in Japan during the Tokugawa era, has lagged behind the modernization since the late 19th century. Although having accomplished the industrialization of light manufacturing, Kanazawa failed to develop the heavy and chemical industries in the post-war period. Thanks to the historical fact that it was spared from the destruction by US air raids during the Second World War, however, the historical and cultural resources reminding of the history of the traditional consumption city survive and are revaluated recently. The city has reconstructed its distinguished urban culture through the discourses of the post-Fordism and the creative city. Here can be found an attempt of (re)construction of urban uniqueness by combining the traditional urban cultures with modernity.

## **Introduction**

### *Urban Culture from Modernity to Urban Uniqueness*

The sociological approach to urban culture is twofold. One is to explore the universalistic dimensions of modernity in the city (Simmel 1951, Wirth 1938, Fischer 1984, Sassen 2001). The other is to focus on the particularities of urban uniqueness (“urban meaning” for Castells 1983, Paris for Benjamin 1985). As recent globalization has stimulated the competition between localities, not only urban modernity but also the uniqueness of a place has attracted much attention as a source of urban competitiveness. For small and medium size towns in particular, the uniqueness of the locality, when successfully constructed, has its own value in attracting worldwide attention and by doing so cities can avoid the zero-sum

game of intercity competition and eventually lead to the diversity of local cultures in the globe.

The uniqueness of a place is culturally created through the selective construction of urban history, the reinterpretation of traditional culture, and the creation of cutting edge cultures. Every city has its own history, but the history is not a series of events, but a narrative that is selectively constructed from infinite number of episodes. Some cities have definite, well-known, and officially constructed histories as narratives. When a city succeeded in constructing its distinguished history, it would help to establish its identity and the uniqueness of the locality. Just as the history is constructed, so is the tradition. Traditional culture is not the past in the present but the present of the past. Some cultural items, tangible or intangible, become traditional when they are interpreted and created as the tradition. Modernity also constitutes the uniqueness of the city inasmuch as it implies that the city continues to create various cutting edge cultures. Certainly large cities have an advantage in this respect, but medium size cities are able to create new cultural elements on the basis of its own local cultures. Great traditions are supposed to evolve in such a way.

This paper deals with the City of Kanazawa, Japan, as a distinguished example of the cultural construction of urban uniqueness. Kanazawa is the center of the Hokuriku region, locating at the middle of the coast of the Japan Sea. Although Kanazawa had been one of the greatest feudal cities in Japan during the Tokugawa era, it has lagged behind the modernization since the late 19th century. It has again failed to develop the heavy and chemical industries in the 1960s, the heyday of the industrial development in post-war Japan. Fortunately, however, it was spared from the destruction by US air raids during the Second World War and the reconstruction thereafter. Therefore, the legacy of the traditional consumption city has been likely to survive in Kanazawa. Since the 1970s, the city has attempted to reconstruct its distinguished urban culture as cultural capital. It is affected at least in part by the discourses of the post-Fordism and later of the creative city. Here can be found an attempt of (re)construction of urban uniqueness as cultural capital by combining the traditional urban cultures such as crafts with the modernity like contemporary arts. Since the opening of the *Shinkansen* between Kanazawa and Tokyo in the spring of 2015, more and more tourists have been visiting the city. This paper focuses on how the city has created its uniqueness by selective construction of the urban history, historical contingency, the reinterpretation of its traditional culture, and the creation of new cultural elements in consonance with the constructed tradition.

## Historical Conditions of Constructing Urban Uniqueness

Urban uniqueness is not produced in a vacuum. There are instead historical conditions objectively under which, and subjectively from which, urban culture is constructed as the uniqueness of the locality. In the case of Kanazawa, the foundation of the city, the delay of industrialization, and some historical contingency seem to be significant conditions for constructing urban uniqueness.

### *The Origin of the City*

The uniqueness of a place is culturally constituted through the selective construction of its history. In fact, Kanazawa was founded twice in its urban history. In the late 15th century, it was founded as one of the centers of the Buddhist rebellion, *Ikko Ikki* and held regional autonomy as the “peasants ruling country” for about a century. Then a feudal landlord built a castle and ruled the region, followed by Maeda Toshiie who came to govern as a feudal lord in the late 16th century. During the Tokugawa era, the city had been one of the greatest feudal cities in Japan.

Both historical facts are well-known, but almost all remnants of historical and cultural resources are associated with the tradition of the castle town. The traditional crafts such as gold leaves, print silks, and incrustations were matured during the feudal age. Even the Buddhist tradition of peasants was merged with the culture of castle town and of the warrior class as ruling elites, as well as with the merchant and artisan class cultures. However, these are not just the historical facts but indeed discovered, reconstructed and emphasized in later years. We can find in modern history how the narrative of the history of urban tradition is constructed.

### *The Delay of Industrialization*

Kanazawa has lagged behind the modernization since the 19th century. The city developed the light manufacturing and related industries by the 1890s. The production of *Habutae* silks for export and looms as the means of production for the textile industry flourished in the turn of the century. The textile and related machine industries have been major in the urban economy until recently. The heavy industries such as steel, shipbuilding and aircraft did not develop in Kanazawa however. As a result, while there are a few but important ‘niche’ industries developed within the machine industry, the traditional craft productions of gold leaf, print silk, japan ware, and Buddhist home altar are more likely to survive in Kanazawa than other cities. Most of these industries are supported by small local firms. These

characteristics of urban industry in Kanazawa are likely to be illuminated by the post-Fordist discourse and defined it as the craft city.

The central government adopted the regional development policy during the 1960s, aiming to move the population and industries concentrated in the large metropolitan areas along the coast of the Pacific Ocean to other regions. The government designated fifteen middle size city-regions as the “new industrial cities” in 1963, aiming to produce industrial space in order to attract the heavy and chemical industries. Kanazawa aspired to be a new industrial city, but failed to be designated (Committee for Editing the History of Kanazawa City 2006, pp.740-742). Not all designated cities succeeded in attracting industries, however, and those that succeeded were likely to suffer environmental problems (Miyamoto, 1973; 1976). Eventually, Kanazawa found that the city has an advantage in urban amenities and then turned to historical preservation after the 1970s.

#### *Historical Contingency*

Historical contingency also contributed to the historical preservation in Kanazawa City. Almost all major cities in Japan were destroyed in 1945 due to US air raids, but fortunately Kanazawa escaped from the damage. The fact that old streets and buildings survived prevented the city from implementing the postwar reconstruction projects aided by the national government. The city missed a chance to enforce a modern urban planning at the moment (Committee for Editing the History of Kanazawa City 2006, p.745), but later realized that there is an opportunity to utilize its historical and cultural legacy.

### **Culture and Landscape**

Kanazawa visualizes its own cultural capital through preserving historical areas and establishing various museums and embedding them in urban landscape.

#### *Historical Preservation*

According to a former mayor, Yamade (2013, p.155), the city attempted to preserve an old teahouse district in the 1970s, but could not obtain local agreement. In 1975, Cultural Asset Preservation Act was revised and established the rules for preserving a set of traditional buildings as a district. According to the Act, Kanazawa City decided its own code for preserving districts of historical buildings and tried to apply it to one of the traditional teahouse neighborhoods, Higashiyama Higashi district. However, the attempt has failed because the local residents did not agree with the city government. Then, it was not until 2001 that local citizens agreed to apply the Major Historical Preservation Act to the area.



Now, four neighborhoods are designated as the historical preservation areas and reconstructed traditional landscape (Figure 1 for Higashiyama Higashi District).



**Figure 1** Preserved Old Teahouse Street in Higashiyama Higashi District

Old modern buildings were utilized too. One example is the Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History, using old red brick buildings renovated in 1986 (Figure 2). The buildings were originally constructed as military armories in the 1910s and after the war used by Kanazawa College of Art<sup>1)</sup>. Another is Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center, using red brick warehouses originally built for a textile plant located in the periphery of the old city. Since 1919, the site was used by Kanazawa Textile Co. and succeeded by Daiwa Textile Co. In 1993, when the factory was closed, the city purchased the land and buildings, renovated the warehouses as facilities for creating plays, music, art activities by 1996 <sup>2)</sup>, and delegated its management to the Kanazawa Arts Foundation (Figure3). The facilities are used for citizen's studios as well as the Kanazawa Institute of Traditional Crafts.



Figure 2 Ishikawa Prefectural Museum for History



Figure 3 Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center

### *Scholarship, Literature and Arts*

Kanazawa is often called the city of scholarship. Indeed, the city has been a distinguished center of scholarship and literature. In the old education system before 1947, eight prestigious high schools were located in major cities. They were the special preparatory

schools to the national universities. In Kanazawa, the Fourth High School (called *Shiko* in short) was established in 1878 and produced a lot of elites. Under the new education system, it was reorganized as Kanazawa University in 1949. Thus, Kanazawa has accumulated cultural and social capital through the institutions of higher education, reflected in social science discourses on Kanazawa discussed later. As landscape, the academic tradition is visualized by preserving an old school building as the *Shiko* Memorial Hall, displaying the tolerance for ‘unconventional’ students and scholars in the traditional consumption city (Figure 4). The traditional and refined culture of the castle city has been superimposed by the modern academic culture since the 1880s.



**Figure 4** Preserved old school building as *Shiko* Memorial Hall.

The city also produced famous modern novelists: Tokuda Syusei (1872-1943), Izumi Kyoka (1873-1939) and Murou Saisei (1889-1962). Itsuki Hiroyuki (1932-) has been in Kanazawa, getting married with a daughter of a socialist mayor, Oka Ryoichi. The City set up museums for these novelists respectively, which make local cultural capital visible in the urban space.

Other than the traditional crafts, the city invested considerable money and efforts to promote modern arts. It set up the Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center at the site of a closed textile factory in 1996 as described above. In 2004, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa was opened, obtaining high reputations on its exhibitions and architecture and attracting 10 million visitors for the first six years<sup>3)</sup> (Figure 5).





**Figure 5** 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

Finally, D. T. Suzuki Museum is a highbred example of the mixture of the old and the new. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966) was a famous Zen-Buddhist philosopher born in Kanazawa. It is the Kanazawa Association of Corporate Executives that suggested building it and the city built it in 2011 on the site near the castle where a high-rise condominium was to be built against which local residents protested and the city acquired the land for the museum (Yamade 2013, p.34). It is designed by an architect Yoshio Taniguchi whose father, Yoshiro was also an architect born in Kanazawa. The design is extremely simple symbolizing the spirit of Zen and it is very interesting that it is designed by a modernist architect (Figure 6).



**Figure 6** D.T. Suzuki Museum

These examples indicate that the city visualizes its cultural capital through preserving historical areas and establishing various museums and embedded them in urban landscape. The focus is not only on the traditional culture but also contemporary one and the new is in consonance with the old with the idea that the living tradition is always evolving through innovation.

## Social Science Discourses

### *From the Criticism of Developmentalism to the Indigenous Development*

Social science discourses also affected the urban policy in Kanazawa. Miyamoto Ken'ichi, graduated from *Shiko* and Nagoya University and teaching at Kanazawa University in the early 1960s, was a Marxian economist who heavily criticized the regional development policy adopted by the central government. According to him, the petro-chemical and heavy industries attracted by the regional development policy have no positive effects on the local economy, only producing external diseconomy such as air pollution, water contamination, and the loss of natural environment (Miyamoto 1976; Miyamoto ed. 1977). Instead, he recommends the indigenous development of local economy, referring to Kanazawa as a good example (Miyamoto, 1980, 2007).

### *Post-Fordism and the Creative City*

In the 1980s, the indigenous development argument became close to the post-Fordism discourse, appreciating the autonomous development of craft production and the dense inter-industry relations embedded in local communities. Kanazawa was considered as the typical example in Japan (Nakamura ed. 2008). Finally, the creative city discourse (Sasaki 2012 [first edition 2001]), referring to Kanazawa as a model, was introduced into the city, affecting the urban policy in the 2000s. Sasaki Masayuki, who was a student of Miyamoto Ken'ichi and a professor at Kanazawa University, was an adviser in the city's accession to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2009 (Yamade 2013). Thus, Kanazawa has been considered as a model of "indigenous development" and post-Fordist "creative" city in the social science discourse in Japan.

## Changing the Concept of the City

The concepts of the city observed in the planning documents reflected changing orientation of urban policies. At the beginning of the post-war period, mayor Taketani Jintaro suggested the cultural city as the concept of the city and founded the Kanazawa College of Art in 1946 (Committee for Editing the History of Kanazawa City 2006, p.661). "Culture" and "Art" in this context signified the local tradition of art and craft. The "Fifteen-years Long-term Plan"

made by mayor Tokuda Yokichiro (LDP) in 1964 aimed at an “industrial and cultural city” with 400 thousand people (ibid., p.742). It aimed at the industrial development, and the term “cultural” seemed to reflect naïve consciousness of a historical city. In 1970, the later period of the Tokuda administration, the mayor proposed the “Vision of Kanazawa City with a Population of 600 Thousand,” reconciling the industrial development and the environmental preservation policies in response to the increasing criticism of the regional development (ibid., p.744-747).

In 1972, Oka Ryoichi, a Socialist Party’s right-wing politician, elected mayor. The new administration made the “New Long-term Plan,” which was a Civil Minimum planning toward 1985. The idea of Civil Minimum, referred to as a minimum standard of collective consumption the city government should provide (Matsushita 1973), diffused to progressive local municipalities from the late 1960s to 1970s. In passing, the influential advocate, Keiichi Matsushita, a professor of political science at Hosei University, was again graduated from *Shiko* and the University of Tokyo. Like many other urban municipalities, Kanazawa turned its policy orientation from the developmentalism to creating urban amenity.

In the 1980s, the city identity of Kanazawa moved toward a castle city. Under the Noboru Egawa administration (1978-90), the city celebrated 400 years anniversary in 1982, emphasizing the historical background as a castle city (ibid., p.722)<sup>4)</sup>. In 1985, the city decided the “Basic Concepts” of urban policies, one of which was the “international city of culture and industry.” The “culture” took a priority over the industry in the phrase, expressing the self-awareness as the historical city and beginning the policy for the cultural construction of urban uniqueness.

In the 1990s, the city concept evolved toward a creative city. Mayor Yamade Tamotsu (1990-2010) proposed the “Vision of World City Kanazawa,” aiming at “a small but brilliant city,” in which we can find an influence of the indigenous development and post-Fordism discourses. Further, in the 2000s, the concept of the post-Fordist “craft city” was transformed into that of a creative city. The Yamade administration addressed a series of cultural projects such as the Citizen’s Art Center (established in 1993), Izumi Kyoka Museum (1999), historical preservation of the teahouse streets (2001), the 21st Museum of Contemporary Art (2004) and so on. In 2009, the City of Kanazawa was approved to be a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. In so doing, the city completed the narrative of the craft city Kanazawa, telling the evolution of craft production from the age of the traditional consumption to a contemporary creative city.

## Summary and Conclusion

The studies of urban culture have changed from exploring the universal dimension of modernity in the city to focusing on the particularity of urban uniqueness. The uniqueness of a place is culturally constructed through the selective construction of urban history, the re-evaluation of the traditional culture, and the creation of new cultural elements.

Kanazawa, having been one of the greatest feudal cities in Japan during the Tokugawa era, has lagged behind the modernization since the late 19th century. While developing the textile and related mechanical industries, Kanazawa has failed to attract the heavy and chemical industries. Thanks to the fact that it was spared from the destruction in the Second World War, however, the historical and cultural resources reminding of the traditional consumption city are likely to survive and revaluated recently.

The city has become aware of its distinguished urban culture through the social science discourses and attempted to construct urban uniqueness as cultural capital by combining the traditional urban culture with modern and contemporary ones; the branding of the traditional crafts, the historical preservation of streets and buildings, the visualization of its cultural capital of modern scholarship and literature, and embedding contemporary art and architectures into the urban space.

Since the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen, more and more tourists have been visiting the city. Thus, the uniqueness of the locality, when successfully constructed, seems to have its own value in attracting world-wide attention and may strengthen the competitiveness of the place.

- 1) Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History: <http://ishikawa-rekihaku.jp/about/index.html>
- 2) Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center: <http://www.artvillage.gr.jp/history/>. See also Yamade (2013, pp.104-111).
- 3) 21st Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa: [https://www.kanazawa21.jp/data\\_list.php?g=50&d=1](https://www.kanazawa21.jp/data_list.php?g=50&d=1)
- 4) *The History of Kanazawa* described that there was a dispute whether it should be a 400 years anniversary of the castle city or a 500 years anniversary of the rebellious city.

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