east-side story – japanese *machizukuri*, neighbourhood planning, and localism in england

Drawing on Japanese experience, Gavin Parker and Lorayne Woodend argue that neighbourhood planning in England is attempting to circumvent the longer-term commitment to community development that a lasting localism requires

Gavin Parker

Above

Minato ward, Tokyo – mixed use at a human scale

Policy-makers and practitioners may be forgiven for not keeping a close eye on planning and community development in Japan;[1] there is so much change in England, let alone in the UK, that extending our vision towards the Far East might be considered somewhat of a luxury. Planners in England have been dealing with many other pressures and priorities and it would have been understandable if, prior to 2011 and the Localism Act, some readers did not place concerns over domestic community development and the localisation of decision-making high on their agendas.

This contribution adds to the ongoing and lively debate over localism and planning in England that has been aired in this journal and elsewhere in recent years and which may be located within a broader contestation of neo-liberal governance. This resonates with longer-lived questions over legitimacy in planning and decision-making and a worldwide concern over the instrumentality of state action. Associated whys and wherefores of engaging communities in planning have been emphasised for a generation or more; as part of a prescription for collaborative, co-produced planning agendas. Despite many competing concerns and immediate pressures, the topic has still attracted considerable attention from students and practitioners of planning – if not always matched by application or successful implementation.[2]

In this context we reflect on community-led activities in Japan that go under the label of *machizukuri*,[3] highlighting what can be learned from the mix of circumstances and history that is shaping this grassroots trend. We argue that lesson-drawing from Japan on this topic is far from a luxury; the objective distance and mix of similar and contrasting conditions and policy trajectories outlined here make for a very useful comparison. The insights offered highlight both why community-led planning is developing vigorously in Japan and why this both encourages and – unless some fundamental features and pre-conditions are addressed – problematises a durable neighbourhood planning in England.

Drawing lessons for localism

Experience tells us that lesson-drawing from other places must be considered carefully. It is well understood[4] that direct comparison and application of experience from one place or time to another is unlikely to be successful without modification. Such reflective learning also needs to be anchored in a careful understanding of context and historical factors. This highlights that lesson-drawing is as much about

exploring why something may *not* work elsewhere as it is about the potential for policy transfer. The key is to understand what would need to change: the policy mechanism or conditions of operation, or both, and whether such adjustment is possible.

The principle of fostering a more localist approach that genuinely enhances engagement in local policy-making and planning decision-making is seen as a normative good. However, although the Japanese experience has its own difficulties and some unique conditions, there are significant barriers that the Japanese context helps to demonstrate – the most relevant similarities and key differences that we see structuring *machizukuri* contextualise this piece. More deep-seated critiques of efforts to foster dialogic planning are omitted for want of space here,[5] but suffice to say that uncritically accepting that the localism agenda can flourish in England would be somewhat naive.

Japan and the UK – a basis for comparison

Japan, like the UK, is a developed island nation with an advanced economy and a generally well educated and increasingly socially and environmentally aware population. It has a demographic profile similar to that of the UK, with an ageing population, but is experiencing a population decline[6] with low birth rates and continuing urbanisation and rural depopulation, presenting a range of social and economic issues. Despite this, Japan's overall population still amounts to twice that of the UK (126.4 million in 2013, compared with the UK's 63.7 million).

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Historically there has been top-down, centralised control of public policy in Japan, similar to the UK. The Japanese state has been reluctant to devolve significant power to municipalities or to neighbourhoods, and power has predominantly remained highly centralised. However, since the 1990s there has been gradual decentralisation, partly prompted by fiscal crisis and enabled by reforms to local governance. The land use planning system was not effective until the post-Second World War period, although a US-style zoning-based system was adopted in contrast to the UK approach. Both countries have planning hierarchies, with national policies set by the national government, although Japan also has a national land use plan. Beneath this, Japan has prefectural plans drawn up at prefectural (county/sub-regional) level and lower-tier municipal plans, which are the equivalent of local plans in England.

Natural disasters, notably earthquakes and tsunamis, are accepted as inevitable and regular occurrences in Japan. Past experience and anticipation of such environmental risks set up a key difference in terms of attitudes and behaviour, which impact on a wide range of policy areas. The structure of land ownership and property rights is highly fragmented – something exacerbated after the 1949 land reforms[7] – and natural resources, including productive land, are scarce. Concern over resilience and food security has remained higher on the political and planning agendas than in the UK. Population shrinkage and rural depopulation sharpen a concern to address issues of local economic development, and such circumstances may have helped to bolster an already more generally accepting attitude to development than that typically found in the UK.

Compared with the UK, a different attitude to the separation of land uses has given rise to urban areas with dense populations in compact housing (and live-work) units, a vibrant mixing of uses, and retention of many small-scale and locally owned services and facilities (for example shops, small businesses, clinics, restaurants, bars, public baths, shrines) in close juxtaposition. This has been accommodated in the Japanese codified planning system.

The *chō-naikai* – neighbourhood associations

The preferences and aspirations of communities tended to be confined to informal initiatives with little commitment to public engagement from the local state until the 1990s. Below the level of municipal or city councils there persist informal neighbourhood associations, despite there being no formal requirement or enabling legislation. These cover the *chō* (neighbourhoods) and are known as *chō-naikai*.[8] They are in some ways roughly equivalent to parish councils and have a comparable role, yet this is an entirely obligation-based system and so direct comparison is difficult.

Historically the state retained a semi-formal hierarchy that included the system of *chō-naikai* operating as neighbourhood scale units of governance. After the Second World War they were effectively removed as formal entities. However, in many areas *chō-naikai* have continued as informal units of local organisation and have developed as self-organising bodies to support communities in a number of ways – such as organising *matsuri* (festivals), community cleaning, sports activities and other tasks and events. Often, leaders of the *chō-*

naikai will liaise with local politicians and local government officers to act as conduits or intermediaries. All residents in the *chō-naikai* area are expected to pay an annual membership fee, which is used to support community activities.

Neighbourhood associations appear in some areas to have more influence than their equivalents in the UK, and although there is now a variable level of *chō-naikai* activity and enthusiasm across Japan and their roles vary from place to place, in essence they are borne of rational self-interest and an understanding that mutuality and self-help within a neighbourhood is necessary and desirable.

The *chō-naikai* are important features of community cohesion that have provided a pre-formed and key part of the soft infrastructure needed to mobilise and maintain community-led forms of planning in Japan. In Kawaguchi City, in the Saitama prefecture, there are 231 *chō-naikai* groups. In others there is yet still more potential in these historically rooted local associations to act as platforms for community scale agenda-setting, but their lack of formal status and governance rules mean that there are some persistent issues with representativeness.

Gavin Parker

Above

A typical *chō-naikai* signboard, in Kawaguchi City, Saitama, indicating different types of activity

Machizukuri – social and cultural factors

There are cultural and historical reasons for the tradition of and basis for collaboration at the local level in Japan, as mentioned above. Fragmented land ownership and scarcity of natural resources such as water for agricultural use are two factors that led to more collective endeavour in feudal times. Group culture, in which the benefits of co-operation were valued over those of individual action, became deeply ingrained in Japanese society and has shaped Japanese institutions. Some of the historical and cultural factors that strong community ties in Japan may be attributed to include:

- stable local populations – many families stay in one place;
- multi-generational living – several generations may live together (generating vertical and horizontal ties within and across neighbourhoods);
- limited in-migration – building dense networks of obligation and respect;
- the role of local shrines and temples and their leaders – as focal points and for moral leadership;
- the roles of the sexes – the historical role of women at home (which is slowly shifting) and therefore physically located in the neighbourhood for most of their time; and
- mixed-use communities – a vibrancy and proximity derived from having multiple land uses interspersed and woven into the neighbourhoods.

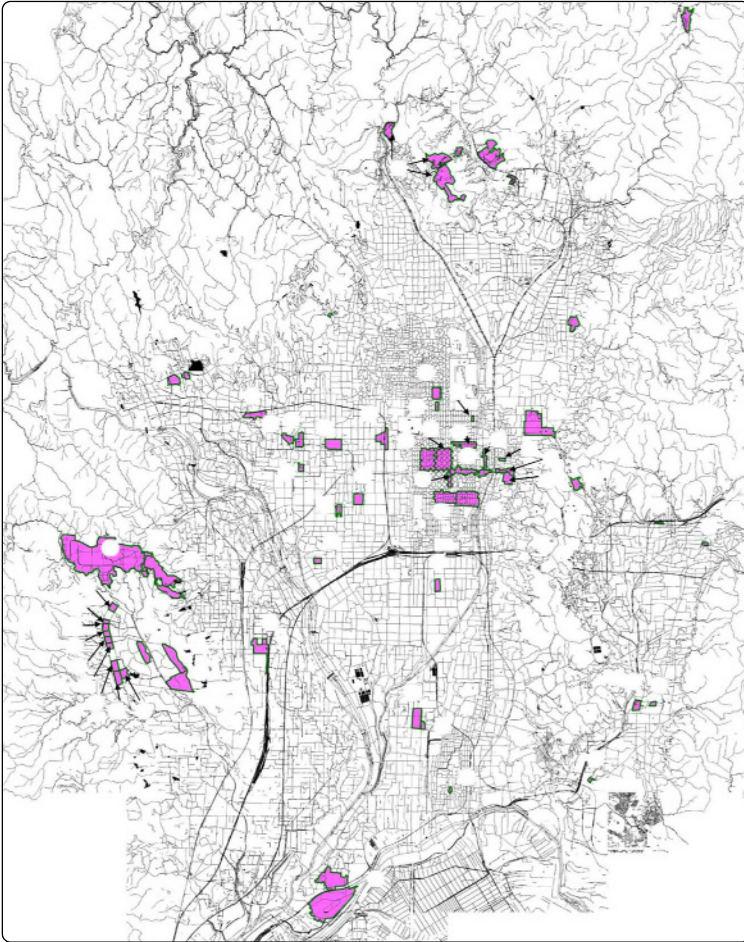
The legacy of very stable and propinquitous communities and relations of co-operation, which by and large have remained ingrained in Japanese culture, has maintained dense networks and an overlap of collective and individual interest. This is typically played out in terms of loyalty to family, company and neighbourhood. Moreover, social attitudes towards the environment appear to focus less on the preservation of private amenity and more on general overall concern for community and liveability, partnered with a demand for convenience and modernisation.

There is also a more prevalent acceptance of authority, with an historic tendency to see people serving the state rather than the state serving the people; but increasingly there has been frustration and discontent about the inadequacies of the state and local state in reflecting the preferences and priorities of the population (particularly in the post-bubble economy era). Despite this, there is:

- a stronger willingness to co-operate between a range of actors, including local authorities, consultants, non-profit organisations, academics/academic institutions and businesses – these effectively form support networks for communities;
- a positive relationship between communities and local authorities – with some increasing degree of mutual interest in economically straightened times; and
- a willingness on the part of municipalities to work *with* the community as an equal partner and to value the contributions of communities working *independently*.

Machizukuri – policy and legislative underpinnings

Much *machizukuri* activity prior to the 21st century appears to have developed despite central and local government attitudes, i.e. with little support and as a reaction to the state. *Machizukuri* may therefore be seen as demonstrative of communities pursuing their own ideas and projects with little or no reference to local or national policy



Left

Fig. 1 Kyoto district/*machizukuri* plan areas
District/*machizukuri* plan areas are shaded pink

or priorities, and often because of a gap in public and private sector undertakings or services.

Given the organic nature of *machizukuri* endeavours, the label has been used to cover a very wide range of activities that have been developed and implemented by groups (not exclusively *chō-naikai*) across Japan. Actions are characteristically community-led, initiated by a core of concerned active citizens supported by or featuring co-operation with the local authority, other public agencies, non-profit organisations and private sector companies, and possibly in liaison with, if not led by, a committee of the local *chō-naikai*.

The 1980 revision to the Japanese City Planning Act gave local governments and communities the right to prepare a local district plan, but it was not until the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) Act of 1998 that restrictions on voluntary organisations holding budgets or having any legal standing were eased. This was seen as a turning point in the growth of civil society in Japan as it meant that community groups could finally hold bank accounts, rent offices, employ staff and upscale activities – effectively formalising a third sector. This gradual change was further consolidated through the Decentralisation Act of 2000, which strengthened local government powers and included provision for *machizukuri* ordinances to become formal policy.

Neighbourhood associations often take on the role of preparing (with support from the municipal council) or initiating *machizukuri* or district plans or *machizukuri* ordinances covering their areas in collaboration with the community. *Machizukuri* ordinances are seen as particularly useful in peri-urban areas, which are subject to fewer planning regulations as they fall outside of areas covered by the City Planning Act, but are close enough to the urban cores to experience significant development pressure.

Such ordinances often cover details of the structure and parameters of local *machizukuri* activity and can include an agreed participation approach and the rights and responsibilities of citizens and other parties, such as the local council or mayor (for example, as in Niseko Town, Hokkaido). Others set out provisions for a *machizukuri* committee to be formed to guide the preparation of a *machizukuri* plan, or require that permits are sought for certain sizes or types of

development in areas otherwise largely unregulated in planning terms (as in Hotaka, Nagano, for example).

The ordinances are subject to local referenda and once passed have legal recognition as policy. *Machizukuri* plans, such as that currently under preparation in Kyoto by the Shutoku-Gakku *machizukuri* committee (a sub-committee of the neighbourhood association), cover things such as supplementary guidance on local building heights and design, and can evolve into more detailed plans identifying infrastructure requirements and new uses for local buildings and brownfield sites. *Machizukuri* and district plans are examined by the local authority and, if agreed, are adopted as policy (Fig. 1 shows district/*machizukuri* plan coverage in Kyoto).

The identification of topics tends to come from the community in response to local issues or local manifestations of wider (often national) issues. Activities typically begin with a narrower or single-issue focus but can result in multiple outcomes or wider coverage – for example heritage conservation-based projects such as those in Kashima, in Saga prefecture, that deliver benefits to the local economy such as regeneration, retaining young people in the local area, housing young families, providing new community facilities, and reinvigorating traditional skills. They tend to seek to improve the overall liveability, viability and sustainability of the neighbourhood – in UK terms, part of the legitimate scope of spatial planning on a very local scale.

At its best, *machizukuri* activity appears to be giving local people a sense of empowerment and genuine influence over what happens in their area. Projects and outcomes are seen to support community ties and serve to strengthen relationships between a range of actors. Some examples demonstrate means of influencing local and national government, too. There are some obvious similarities to the scope and potential of neighbourhood planning in England, but there are crucial differences in terms of the scope and the flexible organisation of *machizukuri* activity and the adoption or formalisation of project outcomes.

Localism and neighbourhood planning

Machizukuri appears to involve the very things that the UK Government wants to promote under the guise of localism, such as devolving power, volunteering, engagement with local social issues, and community ownership. But our experience of Japan also leads us to questions about the conditions that appear to support the groundswell of *machizukuri*. If neighbourhood planning and similar community-led activity tied to planning and wider local policy-making is to grow and become embedded, there are some serious questions to be confronted.

The overriding point we stress is that (enough) people appear willing to engage and shape their own environment in Japan, in urban as well as rural areas (there is a latent capacity to do so), but such propensities appear contingent on a number of key factors, as discussed. The statutory footing of neighbourhood planning in England brings some guarantee that the outcome will be confirmed and carry weight; what is not present is the network, the commitment from others, and the sense of reciprocity that Japanese socio-cultural conditions have engendered. The Japanese have been developing *machizukuri* from existing, historic and organic roots and are fortunate to retain significant degrees of local cohesiveness and mutuality. Neighbourhood planning in England cannot be said to enjoy such starting conditions, nor has it provision to develop such environments.

Many Japanese neighbourhoods do not have the extra difficulties presented by super-diverse and fluid local populations – these are common circumstances that can complicate neighbourhood planning for community groups in the UK. Neighbourhood planning may be particularly daunting for some neighbourhoods who lack certain necessary skills, or frankly do not care enough, or assume that their efforts will not make any material difference to their situation. And there is an extra burden on areas that are not parished to try to develop consensus over their own boundaries, representativeness and legitimacy before substantive deliberations can even begin.

It is therefore important to ensure that structures and policies that lead to active engagement with planning and policy-making are in place, with adequate incentives for participation and sufficient likelihood of influence on agenda-setting. Clearly, neighbourhood planning depends upon the right support, resources and guarantees. There is a long way to go before the kind of networks and relationships that persist in Japan can be developed and sustained in England.

Our view is that neighbourhood planning is attempting to circumvent the necessarily longer-term commitment to community development that localism requires and which the *machizukuri* experience illustrates. Japanese conditions should be reflected upon and replicated as far as possible. Those arising from historical and cultural contexts are givens in Japan, but key areas where action could be taken lie in the creation of support networks and in ensuring that relevant actors are committed to involvement. Our view is that the Government will need to look at some longer-term issues and changes to help communities build the necessary foundations.

There are resource-led prescriptions that can help, including an appropriate re-allocation of inputs and support and a re-assessment of priorities that reflect the stated importance of localism. There is also an enhanced role for enablers and

intermediaries here, in working with communities to identify existing strengths, how local community activities can help to meet local (local authority) objectives, and what particular approaches are needed to support them – each community will have different needs. The idea of working in parallel with established community councils/associations also appears to gain further credence when reflecting on the *chō-naikai* – this is not a new idea in (urban) community development.

Conclusion

A key lesson overall is the need to understand the local context and the macro-structuring factors that shape the behaviour configuring local community action. An understanding of the issues that must be addressed locally – the prompts and constraints – is needed.

We have made assumptions about the capacity of communities to deliver on neighbourhood planning, but one further reason (among many) why *machizukuri* may be so successful in Japan is that local authorities have found themselves able to shift their focus onto *supporting* communities, working 'with' rather than 'for' them, as they seek innovative ways to deliver services. As such there is both recognition of the potential and benefit of *machizukuri* and the *chō-naikai*, and also a more pragmatic space of opportunity that has emerged in the light of squeezed public finances (exacerbated by the declining population and tax base in Japan). In the UK some similar opportunities are being explored: Community Budgets and the 'Our Place' programme in England are examples of the new environment[9] which may well influence the operation of neighbourhood planning.

Our view is that the Coalition Government's efforts to engender neighbourhood planning and related localist change in England illustrate that it has opted for an approach which attempts to reify examples of community-led planning that have been successful in certain limited conditions. Neighbourhood planning attempts to institutionalise localist activity through the planning system, and while the Localism Act provides status and some element of motive and locus for communities, it also introduces bureaucratic burdens and controls. The Japanese experience shows that there are alternative ways in working towards co-produced plans and policies that rely on more organic ideas and action – which have then led to formalised policies.

We believe that, in support of neighbourhood planning, a model that recognises or is at least aware of the fragilities and prerequisite needs of *machizukuri* and community-led planning is needed. Co-production and the sustained nurture of a social and cultural milieu to support effective localism should be a priority if future governments are serious about localism and about developing more mature and dialogic planning. Recent work in this area also indicates that focused research could yet bear further fruit by examining in more detail how *machizukuri* has been initiated and sustained and how the protagonists interact. In particular, such work may usefully reveal the dynamics and relations involved in co-producing *machizukuri* ordinances and district plans.

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Notes

1 There have been several pieces on Japanese policy in this journal in recent years – see G. Parker: '*Michi-no-eki:* an opportunity for the rural economy'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2010, Vol. 79, Jul., 342-6; and W. Galloway: 'Of suburbs and cities'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2009, Vol. 78, Jul., 322-7

2 See, for example, M. Baker, S. Hincks and G. Sherriff: 'Getting involved in plan making: participation and stakeholder involvement in local and regional spatial strategies in England'. *Environment & Planning C: Government & Policy*, 2010, Vol. 28 (4), 574-94

3 Translated as 'community building' – the word *machi* means town, with an inflection towards the inhabitants, and *zukuri* refers to making or shaping. See also A. Sorensen and C. Funck (Eds): *Living Cities in Japan: Citizens' Movements, Machizukuri and Local Environments*. Routledge, 2007

4 See, for example, I. Masser and R. Williams (Eds): *Learning from Other Countries. The Cross National Dimension in Urban Policy Making*. Geo Books, 1986; P. Healey and R. Upton (Eds): *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices*. Routledge, 2010; and O. James and M. Lodge: 'The limitations of policy transfer'. *Political Studies Review*, 2003, Vol. 1 (2), 179-93

5 There are well developed critiques of the localism agenda that see consequential 'dialogic' planning as little more than façadist – see, for example, C. Mouffe: *On the Political*. Routledge, 2005

6 The UK had an estimated population growth of 420,000 in 2012-13, compared with a drop of 244,000 in Japan over a similar period

7 G. Parker and M. Amati: 'Institutional setting, politics and planning: private property, public interest and land reform in Japan'. *International Planning Studies*, 2009, Vol. 14 (2), 141-60

8 See B. Read and R. Pekkanen: *Local Organizations and Urban Governance in East and Southeast Asia: Straddling State and Society*. Routledge, 2009. The alternative label of *jichi-kai* is used in some areas

9 See the 'Giving local authorities more control over how they spend public money in their area' webpage, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2 Oct. 2013. www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-local-authorities-more-control-over-how-they-spend-public-money-in-their-area—2/supporting-pages/community-budgets