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# From Private to Public and Back? The Townscape Councils of Kyoto

A virtual *u:japan* lecture by Christoph Brumann

Thursday  
2021-05-27  
18:30~20:00  
online



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For over half a century, Kyoto has not just been a stronghold of history and tradition but also of conflicts about the built environment and how to shape it. The famous townscape debates (*keikan ronsō*) reached a climax around 2000 and provoked the new building code of 2007 that regulated heights, shapes, designs and views to a degree unseen in Japan. Daring as this imposition of public control on privately owned urban space appeared at the time, it is widely seen as a success today. Instead of following up with more fine-grained rules for individual neighbourhoods, however, Kyoto City introduced the “local townscape councils” (*chiiki keikanzukuri kyōgikai*) of which there are a dozen by now. Whenever such a group forms and receives the mayor’s blessing, builders must consult it for building anything within their territory, in the assumption that locals know best what fits their area. Building on two decades of ethnographic

fieldwork, the lecture discusses the experience and significance of these townscape councils. The city’s move of empowering the locals may appear regressive, as a re-privatisation of what had just been made more public. Closer inspection reveals, however, that the councils are not the local layperson’s voice they are made to be, and tacit cooperation with city officials also arises. Reviewing cases observed in 2019/20, I will show that the councils, despite the non-binding nature of the consultations, can achieve major improvements. When builders do not care for their local reputation and instead wish to profit from real estate speculation and hotel construction fed by the (pre-Covid) tourist boom, however, limitations are obvious and frustration is mounting. A full sharing of urban space therefore has still some way to go, even in the Japanese city that has gone furthest in making it a public concern.



Christoph Brumann is Head of Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, and Honorary Professor of Anthropology at the University of Halle-Wittenberg. His earlier work on Japan led to the book *Tradition, Democracy and the Townscape of Kyoto: Claiming A Right to the Past* (2012), the co-edited volumes *Making Japanese Heritage* (2010) and *Urban Spaces in Japan: Cultural and Social Perspectives* (2012), and articles and book chapters on these topics as well as on utopian communes and gift-giving practices. He also wrote *The Best We Share: Nation, Culture and World-Making in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena* (2021) and *Die Kunst des Teilens: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung zu den Überlebensbedingungen kommunitärer Gruppen* (1998), co-edited *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives* (2016) and *Monks, Money, and Morality: The Balancing Act of Contemporary Buddhism* (2021), and published numerous anthropological journal articles, including on the concept of culture and the cultural consequences of globalisation.

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