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# Sky and Water: The Deep Structures of Tokyo

Henry D. Smith II

Andō Hiroshige  
*Tanabata festival at Shichū Han-ei,*  
from the series *One Hundred famous Views*  
of Edo. 1857  
color woodblock print  
19 x 15, 48.3 x 38.1  
Collection Elvehjem Museum of Art,  
E.B. Van Vleck Collection,  
Bequest of John Hasbrouck Van Vleck,  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Literal-minded visitors to contemporary Tokyo may find little of relevance or appeal in the city's "sky and water." The sky is alternately invisible as they wander dazed through boundless subterranean spaces, opaque as they traverse central intersections where digital monitors display decibels of noise and parts per million of pollutants, or carved into a crazy-quilt skyline of wires, signs and unmatched buildings. "Water" seems even less accessible, with grand old moats shadowed by looming freeways, once-pure streams reduced to concrete channels of refuse, and the great Sumida River almost completely shut off from casual view.

But if they really "we," the outside observers look again, beyond these surface observations and quick judgments, look back through the history of the city to its Edo origins almost four centuries ago, we come to learn that "sky" and "water" in fact control the form and spirit of Tokyo. We discover no matter how the content of sky and water change, their underlying deep structures persist.

"Sky," we discover, is the structure of horizontality, of an unbounded and uncentered expanse against which the graphic vertical "face" of the city is written. "Water" is the structure of periodic gathering, of momentary release from everyday strictures of discipline and authority, of that familiar yet hard-to-place milieu called the "floating world."

## Edo Sky

Like most historic settlements in Japan, Edo was oriented toward hills and mountains—but in a unique way. It lay not in a cozy basin, like the ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto where forested mountains were close and familiar, but was founded, rather, at an intersection of three low-lying landscapes, with true mountains hovering far in the distance as low anchors of a sort wholly unprecedented in the mainstream of Japanese culture before the seventeenth century.

Edo's two landscapes to the east, Edo Bay and the Sumida-Arakawa-Edo River delta, were landscapes of water, low and flat. But from a different perspective, the true flatness of Edo lay rather in the hilly terrain to the west, toward the area that in modern times has come to be known as the Yamanote (literally, "toward the mountains," or Edward Seidensticker's "High City"), an irregular pattern of interlaced valleys and hills, with the highest elevations lying in a range of sixty to eighty feet above Edo Bay. These tiny "mountains" are in fact merely the eastern

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1. Edward Seidensticker, *low City, High City:*  
*Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake* (New York:  
Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).



(detail)  
Map of Edo. 1632  
color woodblock map  
Courtesy Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library

(opposite)  
Andō Hiroshige  
*Jūman-tsubo Plain at Susaki, Fukagawa*,  
from the series *One Hundred famous Views of Edo*, 1857  
color woodblock print  
13% x 8 1/16, 33.8 x 22.2  
Collection The Minneapolis Institute of Arts,  
Gift of anonymous St. Paul Friends

edge of the more extended flatness of the Musashino (Musashi Plain), which is epitomized in an ancient poem as follows:

The plain of Musashi:  
No mountains  
For the moon to enter;  
It rises from the grasses,  
Sinks back into the grass'

This landscape, so uncanny to the ancient Japanese mentality, finds visual expression in a genre of screen painting depicting it, showing the tangled grasses of poetic fame with a moon rising eerily from among them. Above the grasses, as though in a wholly different space, is the far distant mountainscape anchored by the sacred peak of Mount Fuji.

Architectural historian Shinjird Kirishiki has suggested that the actual street plan of downtown Edo, as laid out in the first decades after the founding of the city in 1590, was consciously oriented toward the hills of the Yamanote at close range, and the mountains of Fuji and Tsukuba at a far more distant range.' It is only the latter, however, which seem to have survived in the pictorial imagery of the city. Fuji is the greater in both absolute and symbolic size, and its unmistakable form came to constitute the most distinct element in the Edo sky, constantly reasserting the horizontality of the Edo world. Although the highest mountain in Japan (12,388 feet), Mount Fuji lay at a considerable distance from the city, almost exactly one hundred kilometers from Nihonbashi, and as such was only a diminutive presence within the visual field; yet its symbolism was so powerful, reinforced during the Edo period (1603-1868) by a religious cult dedicated to its worship, that Mount Fuji came to constitute the central focus of the Edo landscape.<sup>4</sup>

Mount Tsukuba was less distinctive than Fuji when seen from Edo. Closer than Fuji but less than one-quarter its height, Tsukuba was less often visible and less distinctive in form. It was a critical presence nonetheless, anchoring the skyline to the northwest just as Mount Fuji anchored it to the southeast. Whereas Fuji was seen over the hills of the Yamanote and the intermediate Tanzawa range of mountains, Tsukuba was seen beyond the low-lying flats of the broad delta area. Both silhouettes are frequently captured in such classic representations of the late Edo landscape as Andō Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (*Meisho Edo hyakkei*, 1856-1858).

This essentially centrifugal orientation of the Edo landscape toward distant mountain anchors was abetted by a weakness of visual focus within the basic plan of the city itself. Such focus had not always been absent. On the contrary, the great five-story donjon of Edo Castle, probably the tallest permanent wooden structure ever erected in Japan, dominated the urban landscape with its sumptuous gilt finials for a half century after it was first erected in 1607. It was the greatest central monument the city would ever know: rising 275 feet above Edo Bay, it dominated the surrounding hills and the neighboring flatlands alike.

The destruction of this great landmark in the devastating Meireki Fire of 1657 marked the end of an era, and the start of the progressive decentralizing and blurring of the castle as a primary focus of Edo. The honors for height now passed to the Fujimi Watch of the Main Enceinte and the Fushimi Watch of the West Enceinte, the two greatest of nineteen such

2. Akira Naitō, *Edo no machi-kyodai toshi no tanjō* (*The City of Edo: The Birth of a Metropolis*) (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 1982), vol. 1 of 2, p. 6.

3. Shinjird Kirishiki, "Tenshō-Keichō-Kan'ei-ki Edo shigaichi kensetsu ni okeru keikan sekkei," ("Planning for Views in the Layout of Edo Streets in the Tenshō/Keichō/Kan'ei Eras"), *Tōkyō toritsu daigaku toshi kenkyū hōkoku*, no. 24, August 1971, pp. 1-22.

4. For the worship of Mount Fuji, see Koichirō Iwashina, *Fujikō no rekishi* (*The History of the Fujikō*) (Meicho shuppan, 1983). On the general problem of Edo's relationship to the mountain, see my "Fuji Inside Edo: Putting the Mountain in Place" (unpublished paper, presented at Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, 21 March 1985).



Fushimi Watch of the West Enceinte of Edo Castle.

(gatefold)

Artist unknown

Mount Fuji and Miho Matsubara,

seventeenth century

pair of six-fold screens; color on gold leaf

66 x 144, 167.6 x 365.7

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Peter Brest

towers, both still standing today as familiar symbols of the city. But the concentrated impact of the castle was now diffused among a diversity of watches and gates.

Some other massive structures, notably Buddhist temples, continued to stand out against the Edo skyline, but the traditional forms of Japanese architecture assured that the formal thrust was outward rather than upward. The dominant roofs led the eye down and out, while the lack of eye-stopping facades encouraged a sense of progression through linear complexes of buildings, deflecting attention from the structures themselves to the surrounding landscape and enveloping sky.

These deflecting vectors of built form were reinforced by the constant expansion of vegetation throughout the Tokugawa era, the result of the systematic cultivation of trees and shrubs in the gardened environs of shrine-temple compounds and elite samurai estates. This is graphically conveyed in later depictions of Edo Castle itself, showing masses of trees competing with and even submerging the projecting watchtowers. Whereas the Edo landscape was largely deforested in the early years of the city's history, giving a disproportionate emphasis to buildings, by the early nineteenth century it was a city of densely green and cultivated aspects.<sup>5</sup>

The distant mountain anchors of Fuji and Tsukuba, however important symbolically, were only one element in the drawing out and de-centering of Edo. Equally important was a temporal factor, whereby patterns against the sky were not only appreciated but expressly cultivated for a sense of time. This was true of the viewing of Mount Fuji, which even under the clear skies of Edo could only be seen on about one day out of three, so close was it to the horizon and so common was the natural occlusion by fog, haze, heat and rain. The appreciation of Fuji was an appreciation of a momentary perception, rendered all the more poignant by the sublimity of the mountain's form.

And so, more broadly, the Edo conception of the sky was one inevitably mediated by atmospheric interference, as the Meiji period (1868-1912) geographer Shiga Shigetaka persuasively argued in his classic work, *The Japanese Landscape*. He noted the special importance of water vapor (always a critical element in Japanese landscapes) in Tokyo, with a humidity of over eighty percent from May through October:

... water vapor is like a great ocean, a distant haze across the heavens, from which there appear and then disappear temples, palaces, and pagodas, with the peal of a temple bell pressing its way through now and again (in the words of Bashō, 'is it Asakusa or is it Ueno?').<sup>6</sup>

This is the essence of the aesthetic known as *miegakure* (in effect, "now you see it, now you don't").

This same aesthetic applies to the miscellany of vertical accents that punctuated the Edo sky at odd moments and seasonal intervals. No cultural expression better captures this aesthetic than Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. Their vertical format reflects the artist's concern with manifestations of temporal moment within an essentially horizontal landscape. In certain famous scenes, it is nature that "captures" the sky, but for the most part it is the upward thrusts of seasonal celebration: the arc of shuttlecocks at New Year's, or the fluttering decorations of the Tanabata Festival.

Within this quintessentially flat landscape, where verticality distinguished itself by its ephemerality, one homely and wholly functional up-

5. For a detailed study of greenery and the cultivation of plants in late Edo. see Noboru Kawazoe, *Tōkyō no genfūkei—toshi to den'en no kōryū* (Tokyo's Primal Landscape: The Interaction of City and Country) (Tokyo: NHK Books, 1979).

6. Shigetaka Shiga. *Nihon fūkei ron* (The Japanese Landscape) (Tokyo: Kōdansha Gakujutsu bunko edition, 1976), vol. I, p. 86.

7. The concept of *miegakure* in Japanese urban design is also treated in Toshi dezain kenkyūtai, *Nihon no toshi kūkan* (Japanese Urban Space) (Tokyo: Shōkokusha, 1968), p. 60, and in Fumihiko Maki, et al., *Miegakure suru toshi—Edo kara Tōkyō e* (The Visible and Hidden in the Japanese City—from Edo to Tokyo) (Tokyo: Kajimashuppankai, 1980).

ward element persisted, the fire-watchtowers (*hinomi yagura*), whether free-standing or mounted atop buildings. They may be detected in many landscape prints of the city, but rarely are they focal. Whereas the watches of Edo Castle were of no use but to be seen, these familiarhinomi scattered throughout the city were of no use but to be seen from.

The essence of the Edo “sky” was thus the horizontality of a city plan that established no clear boundaries and set up no defining walls. The early focus on the shogun’s castle diminished with time, allowing the natural evolution of a city where the sense of place relied less on a grand geometrical scheme than on minutely designed progressions of a wide variety. In ‘moving along these variegated routes, certain places were denser, more active, more sociable than others. These places constituted the “water” of Edo.

## Edo Water

Virtually every great city in world history has been sited on the sea or along a great river, usually both. Edo was no exception, located where the Sumida River emptied into Edo Bay, a critical junction in the geography of the Kantō Plain.

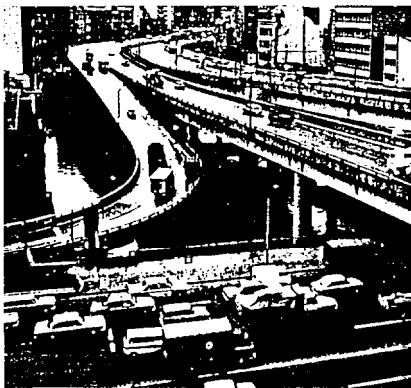
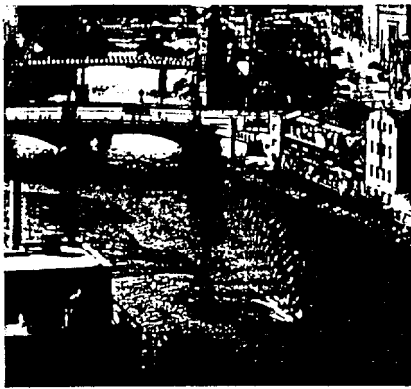
Yet with Edo there is a difference, a difference that I would explain as a latent structure of opposition between two separate systems of water.<sup>8</sup> One was the formal system, the manmade network of moats and canals which so often earned Edo the epithet of “Venice of the East” among mid-nineteenth century Western visitors. In actual fact, Edo was no more canal-dependent than Osaka, Hiroshima, or various other Japanese cities built out over swampy river deltas and land reclaimed from the sea; yet there was something that made the city seem an especially apt parallel to the Queen of the Adriatic.

That something was the deep structure of “water,” the sense of water as more than just a conduit for the prosperity of the city, rather as the medium of sociability, as an environment of gathering and relaxation. What set Edo apart in particular was the special role played by the Sumida River, the quintessential expression of water in Edo, opposed almost by definition to the structured, manmade, productive implications of the formal system. The Sumida came to stand for informality and for release-in short, for a kind of anti-structure.

The framework of the formal system of water is well expressed in the formal siting of the city, as explained by Akira Naitō.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese system of geomancy, as adapted by the Japanese for city plans, demanded that the gods of the four directions (*shijin*) be in proper topographical alignment, with a mountain to the north, a river to the east, a pond or ocean to the south and a road to the west. The topographical particularities of Edo, however, demanded an ad hoc rotation of the geomantic compass by over ninety degrees counterclockwise, so that Mount Fuji, located to the west-south-west, corresponded to Gembu, god of the north. By this logic, the road to the west was the Tōkaidō, and the two water directions were Edo Bay to the south and the Kanda River to the east. This orientation of Edo was preserved in virtually all traditional maps of the city, which placed the west at the top, awarding primacy to Mount Fuji overlooking the city as a whole and to Edo Castle as the highest point within the city itself.

8. For the concept of the Sumida as “nature” and release, versus the castle and its moats as a formal “system,” I am indebted to Ai Maeda, *Toshi kūkan no naka no bungaku (The Space of the City in Literature)* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1982), p. 66. For another provocative analysis of the Edo-Tokyo waterscape, which unfortunately appeared after I had written this essay, see Hidenobu Jinnai, *Tōkyō no kūkan jinruigaku (The Spatial Anthropology of Tokyo)* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1985), ch. 2.

9. Naitō, *op. cit.*, *Edo no machi-kyōdai toshi no tanjō*, pp. 12, 13.



(top)  
View of Nihonbashi, 1932

View of Nihonbashi district, 1971, in which the elevated roadway makes the river virtually invisible.

Astonishing feats of civil engineering were required for the construction of this formal system of waterways.<sup>10</sup> The Kanda River was used as a source of water for the walled moats encircling the shogunal castle, a function it retains today. The river originally ran directly into the inner moat of the castle, passing then via Nihonbashi into the bay. The threat of flooding, however, demanded a separate outlet, which involved the laborious bisection of Kanda Mountain, leaving a deep east-west cut that provided a classic view of Mount Fuji and that today remains dramatically visible at Ochanomizu Station.

The moats of the castle formed a great spiral shape that unwound clockwise into the Kanda River drainage. The spiral was not self-contained, however, for from its easternmost loop exited three outlets, spreading into a gridlike pattern of canals that defined the commoner's city below the castle (hence the "Shitamachi," or "Low City"). The system then spread more eastward still, through another canal network on the left bank of the Sumida, and then on up the Sumida and Edo Rivers into an intricately maintained system of navigable waterways throughout the Kantō Plain.

Edo Bay was the other formal waterfront of the city, the point of entry for many of the essential commodities supplied from western Japan such as rice, oil, and cotton. It was also from Edo Bay that much of the land that became the heart of downtown Edo was reclaimed, just as Tokyo Bay today is the source of constantly expanding acreage for the city. And yet somehow, Edo Bay has always been a curiously passive, even negative presence within the culture of the city, in curious contradiction to its practical importance. This is seen in the astute observations of the Swiss envoy Aimé Humbert, who visited Edo in 1863-1864:

**No city presents a more inhospitable appearance than Edo as seen from the sea. It seems like a vast park to which access is prohibited. One can distinguish little which accords with our own notions of a port, with its quays and wharfs: everywhere there are walls and palisades, nothing in the way of stairways, piers, or anything which invites one to set foot on land."**

Humbert went on to note that there was no environment to which the Edo commoner was less sympathetic than this "treacherous element, the sea, the vast bay."<sup>11</sup> This vague and even hostile conception of Edo Bay is one of the great perplexities of Edo culture. At most, the citizens of Edo appreciated the bay for its productive harvest of fresh fish, a legacy that remains today in the phrase *Edo-mae* (in front of Edo) as a synonym for sushi eaten raw (rather than pickled, as in western Japan). They also loved to gather shellfish at low tide in the flats near Tsukadajima or Shinagawa, but this was at best a nervous treading on the fringes of the bay. In striking contrast to the functionalism of the moats and canals, and to the aloof unsociability of Edo Bay, lay the Sumida River, the source of true hospitality in Edo culture. In modern times we call it the "Sumida," but in Edo this was only one of several names. Most commonly, it was called simply Okawa, the "Great River," but it also enjoyed a variety of localized names depending on the stretch of river involved: around Asakusa, it was Asakusa River, while residents a bit farther upstream knew it as the Miyato River. This fluidity of name suggests the cultural softness and adaptability of the river.

The Sumida was the only element of Edo's topography besides the Musashi Plain that partook of the ancient poetic tradition of a "famous

10. For details on the evolution of Edo-Tokyo waterways, both natural and manmade, see Masao Suzuki, *Edo no kawa, Tōkyō no kawa* (*The Rivers of Edo and Tokyo*) (Nippon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, 1978).

11. Aimé Humbert, *Le Japon illustré* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1870), vol. I, p. 308.

12. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 44.

place "(*meisho*)".<sup>13</sup> Its most celebrated classical citation is in *Tales of Ise*, where some travelers from Kyoto spot an unfamiliar bird while crossing the Sumida; learning that it is a "capital-bird" (*miyako-dori*), one of the lonely courtiers composes a verse:

If you are what your name implies,  
Let me ask you,  
Capital-bird,  
Does all go well  
With my beloved?"

This mood of melancholy and separation was given even more profound expression in the medieval Nō play *Sumidagawa*, in which a mother discovers that her son has died far from his native Kyoto and has been buried on the far bank of this isolated river. Such deep poetic memories of the Sumida, steeped in a sense of loneliness and separation, formed throughout the history of Edo an ironic undertone to the sense of integration that was central to the contemporary cultural meaning of the river. Even today markers of these legends remain: Kototoi Bridge takes its name from the early poem, and the grave of the lost child Umewaka may still be visited at Mokubo-ji on the far bank of the river.

In early Edo, the Sumida was the eastern border of the city, but after the Meireki Fire, the Tokugawa authorities decided to colonize the left bank of the river to alleviate crowding. It was from this time that the Sumida River began to evolve as a medium for relaxation and release. The river was wide enough to allow a variety of pleasure boats without competing with the functional traffic, while the riverside was extended enough to offer many sites for restaurants and teahouses.

The true sense of the Sumida, however, was to be found at the junction of the river with the great bridges that spanned it. Chief among these, and the oldest within the city proper, was Rydgokubashi, completed in 1661 as part of the policy of left-bank settlement, just south of the point where the Kanda River flowed into the Sumida. At both ends of the bridge, Japan's closest approximation of a Western plaza (*hirokōji*) was maintained as a firebreak, and from the early eighteenth century here emerged a center of pleasure and entertainment. Ryōgokubashi was the true center of the deep structure of water in Edo, the ultimate place of release, escape, variety and self-expression. No single site was more often celebrated in the woodblock prints of the period, none more rhapsodically described in the gazeteers or novelettes of the city.

Rydgokubashi was the symbolic entrance to water. Just below the bridge was a boat landing where one could rent a great covered *yakatabune*, a pleasure vessel capable of holding several friends and an appropriate contingent of entertainers, while just north of the bridge were the stalls of the small and swift *choki*, perfect for taking *one* or two dapper souls upstream to a Yoshiwara brothel with neither undue delay nor unseemly haste. And nearby lay a variety of teahouses and restaurants fronting on the river, allowing communication with the water from a secure land base. Rydgokubashi was also the site of the greatest of Edo's many festival gatherings, the Kawabiraki, the "opening of the river" to pleasure traffic in July, a grand celebration best known for the spectacular fireworks set off from boats near the bridge. (Suspended in the 1940s and then

13. For the *meisho* tradition, see Jacqueline Pigeot, *Michiyuki-bun—Poétique de l'itinéraire dans la littérature du Japon ancien* (Paris: Editions G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982), ch. 2.

14. Helen McCullough, *Tales of Ise* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968). p. 76.

again after 1958, the Kawabiraki has been recently revived, but at a site farther upstream.)

Ryogokubashi on the one hand brought together all classes of Edo society, submerging the manifold distinctions of rank and office. At the same time, it offered a passage, however ephemeral, from the everyday world to the world of celebration and festivity. In this sense, it partook of the two contradictory meanings of *ukiyo*, the celebrated "floating world," on the one hand, the world of everyday life, and on the other the secret anti-world of carnal and theatrical pleasure. Water was the intersection between these realms in Edo.

## Tokyo Sky

Over a century of industrialization and Westernization has inevitably had a dramatic impact on the Tokyo skyline, encouraging the widespread sense that "Edo" and "Tokyo" are basically different cities.<sup>15</sup> A close consideration of the actual changes in the visible face of the city since the name change in 1868, however, reveals that the deep structure of Edo "sky," the structure of horizontality, persists in Tokyo today.

Consider, for example, the commonsensical matter of air quality. I have already suggested that one element in the appreciation of the Tokyo landscape was the aesthetic of *miegakure*, by which distant buildings were alternately obscured and revealed by the changing effects of ground haze and precipitation. So within limits, an increase in industrial pollution made no great difference in an environment where constant clarity was not particularly prized.<sup>16</sup> At any rate, it was not really until the 1960s that the levels of industrial development in Tokyo brought about a serious degradation of air quality. Remember that the Japanese never took to the chimney, which so transformed Western cities. Edward Sylvester Morse remarked in 1886:

It is a curious sight to look over a vast city of nearly a million inhabitants, and detect no chimney with its homelike streak of blue smoke. With the absence of chimneys and the almost universal use of charcoal for heating purposes, the cities have an atmosphere of remarkable clearness and purity; so clear, indeed, is the atmosphere that one may look over the city and see distinctly revealed the minutest details of the landscape beyond. The great sun-obscuring canopy of smoke and fumes that forever shroud some of our great cities is a feature happily unknown in Japan."

This exquisite clarity has unfortunately been sacrificed in twentieth-century Tokyo, and one notable casualty has been the visibility of Mount Fuji, which could be seen for one day in three until the early twentieth century, but which by the smoggy 1960s was visible only one day in ten.

Other familiar features of the modern Western cityscape have challenged the traditional sense of flatness and expanse in Tokyo. One of the earliest and probably the most persistent has been the familiar tangle of utility poles and wires. This "terrifying wirescape," as the British architectural critic J.M. Richards characterized it in the early 1960s, has been a source of aesthetic irritation to visiting Westerners for over one hundred years now.<sup>18</sup> It made a "horrid impression" on Lafcadio Hearn in 1897, while the British writer Peter Quennell in 1930 offered perhaps the most chilling description of all:

15. For a more extended discussion of the historical problems of separating "Edo" and "Tokyo," see my essay, "The Edo-Tokyo Transition: In Search of Common Ground," in Marius Jansen and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

16. For a modern defense of murkiness over clarity as the basis of Japanese aesthetics, see Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1977): 7.

17. Edward S. Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1886), p. 3.

18. J.M. Richards. *An Architectural Journey in Japan* (London: The Architectural Press, 1963), p. 21.



Photographer unknown  
Ginza with Horsesdrawn Trolley, circa 1910  
printed from a lantern slide  
Collection Peabody Museum of Salem

Vague and slatternly, a sprawling skyline of wooden houses overlooked by a massive procession of telegraph poles that marched-r rather staggered-up its slope, linked together by loose wires in a drooping curve . . . These telegraph poles, as though conscious of their superiority, never take the trouble to stand straight. Like street bullies, their hands deep in their pockets, they lurch drunkenly over the cowering shabby roofs and lean at affected angles on strong supports. The old Japan is changing in their shadow; the future belongs to them and all they symbolize.<sup>19</sup>

A look at a revealing photograph of the Ginza in 1910 certainly tends to confirm this sense of the domineering power of the telegraph poles (although in fact the new generation of poles to the right in the photograph, each boasting fully 160 insulators, were probably awaiting the wires of telephones, then spreading rapidly through the city).

But still more revealing is the aesthetic that the Japanese tend to bring to this "wirescape." In contrast to the frequent Western denunciations, Japanese artists have long found a positive aesthetic in wires against the sky, from the woodblock prints of the Meiji period to the drawings of contemporary artists. It does not seem to be, as one formulation has it, that the Japanese are sensitive to beauty but not to ugliness, but rather that they actively appreciate the striking graphic qualities offered by the wirescape (and, perhaps, the communicative power that it symbolizes). This graphic aspect of the urban skyline is an essential corollary of the basic horizontality of Tokyo.

Another profound change in the cityscape has been the introduction of monumental buildings in the Western manner, a process that was first prevalent in governmental buildings of the Meiji period and that soon spread to commercial architecture as well. Monumental facades and the sense of volume they express tended to draw attention to buildings in ways that traditional architecture did not. Only in such places as the government center of Kasumigaseki or the business center of Marunouchi, however, has Western architecture been massed in ways that contradict the traditional anti-monumentality of the flat cityscape.

The greater impact of Western architecture has been to enable the construction of buildings much higher than in the Edo tradition. Until fairly recently, a height limit of thirty-two meters (in effect eight stories) was maintained for fear of earthquakes. But this was achieved only for major buildings in the city center, thus working to accent rather than transform Tokyo's low and level skyline. A wholly new phase in the verticalization of the city was introduced, however, with advanced anti-earthquake construction techniques, beginning with the thirty-six story Kasumigaseki Building in 1968, and since, spreading to over a dozen true skyscrapers in the fifty to sixty-story range, seven times higher than the old limit.

A final realm of skyline transformation, the one that most overwhelms the foreign visitor, is the Tokyo signscape. Indeed, both the "wirescape" and the building facades are best seen as mere variants in the chaotic sea of signage that decorates the city. This in part reflects the minimal level of control exercised over outdoor advertising in Japanese cities, although a recent proposal by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government would attempt to restrict at least its density ("total quantitative control").<sup>20</sup> Yet precisely this "disorderly flood of outdoor advertising that deluges streets with eyesores to the cityscape" (in the words of the city report) is what seems so characteristic of modern Tokyo, as expressed in a 1931 photo-essay on "The Character of Great Tokyo."

19. Lafcadio Hearn. *Letters from Tokyo* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1920). p. 74; Peter Quennell, *A Superficial Journey Through Tokyo and Peking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932). p. 54.

20. "'Total Quantitative Control' on Outdoor Advertising Recommended by Tokyo Metropolitan Deliberation Council on Advertising," *Tokyo Municipal News*, 34:3, Autumn 1984. pp. 1-3.

Whatever personal aesthetic one may bring to the issue, there seems little doubt that the density and variety of the signscape is central to the profoundly graphic quality of the city as a whole. Indeed, the linguistic signs of advertising may be seen together with the “wirescape” and Western-style facades as part of the much broader tendency in Japanese civilization to graphicness, to an emphasis, as Roland Barthes has persuasively argued, on writing as the fundamental act of representation.<sup>21</sup> The “writing” of the Tokyo sky, by wires, billboards and facades, has served not to contradict but to complement the essential horizontality of Edo.

The continuing qualities of horizontality and unboundedness in modern Tokyo have been reflected in a variety of comparative observations about the city over the past century. The characteristic emphasis among Western observers is on uniformity. Isabella Bird, writing in 1878, noted that “The hills are not heights, and there are no salient objects to detain the eye for an instant. As a city it lacks concentration. Masses of greenery, lined or patched with grey, and an absence of beginning or end, look suburban rather than metropolitan.”<sup>22</sup> A generation later, in 1915, one A.M. Hitchcock called it a “monotonously gray city, closely packed for the most part, practically cellarless, and hugging the earth-length and breadth in abundance, but lacking a noticeable third dimension.”<sup>23</sup> Or still today, Donald Richie has noted, the initial impression of Tokyo is that of “an unvariegated mass. One thinks of the backside of a silicon chip made enormous, and sees only dread uniformity.”<sup>24</sup> I shall return to this class of observations shortly, to emphasize the complementary structure of “water” which they offer, but suffice it here to note the overwhelming agreement on the city’s uniformity.

A somewhat different perspective was offered by the Japanese philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji in his *Climate and Culture (Fūdo)*, first delivered as lectures after his return from a trip to Europe in 1928. Watsuji was struck by the relative narrowness of streets in Tokyo, which he saw as “more basically a reflection of the broad and level structure of the Japanese city.”<sup>25</sup> He explained this structure as reflecting both the Japanese attachment to the single detached house (in contrast to multi-storied European tenement) and the Japanese lack of a cooperative civic spirit of the sort that produced unified plans and monumental urban structures in Europe. Watsuji was probably wrong about the Japanese house (since most Edo/Tokyo residents have always lived in one or two-story tenements, rather than detached houses), but correct about the lack of a Western-style civic tradition as one key explanation for Tokyo’s apparent formlessness.

This lack of civic unity has also been reflected in the weakness of any strong, centralized authority that might wish to impose a coherent plan. City planning in modern Japan has generally meant the fine adjustment of property boundaries in order to straighten and widen streets. This limited function in large part reflects the strength of the traditional Japanese attachment to land, a tenacity which makes it difficult for the government to move established landholders (or for landholders, for that matter, to move established tenants). Even after the devastating earthquake in 1923 and bombings in 1945, when large areas of Tokyo were literally flattened except for isolated ferro-concrete skeletons, the city sprouted up again like mushrooms from hidden spores, just as it always had done in the wake of an Edo fire. Unlike most other world cities, Tokyo has had its roots in the ground, not in the monuments erected over it.<sup>26</sup>

21. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

22. Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (London: John Murray, 1880), p. 169.

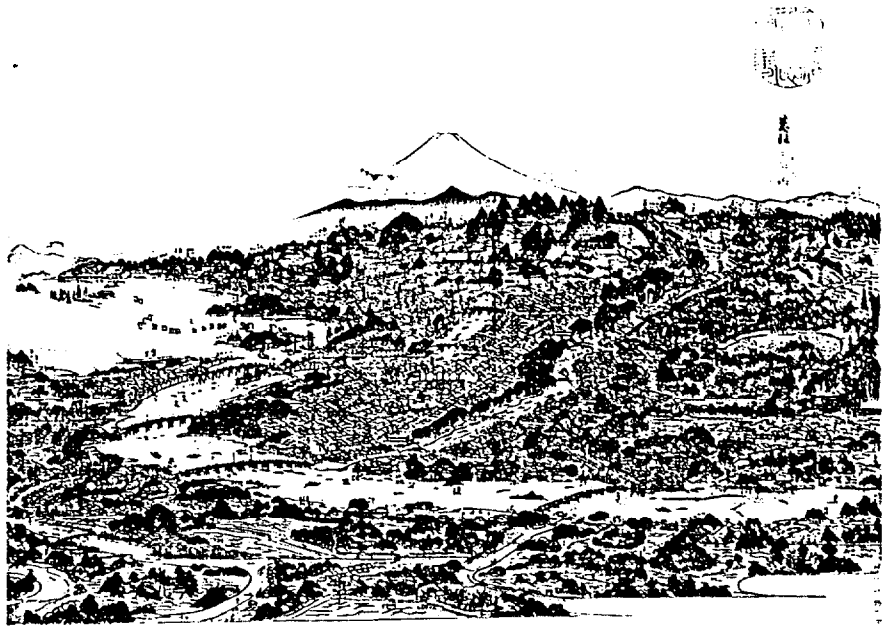
23. Alfred M. Hitchcock, *Over Japan Way* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), p. 36.

24. Donald Richie, “Tokyo-The City of Villages,” *Connoisseur*, 215:879, April 1985, pp. 103, 104.

25. Junzō Karaki, ed., *Watsuji Tetsurō (Watsuji Tetsurō)*, from *Cendai Nihon shisō taikai (Anthology of Contemporary Japanese Thought)*, vol. 28, (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1963), p. 260. For a complete English translation of this work, see Watsuji Tetsurō, *A Climate-A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 1961).

26. For more on the evolution of urban form in Edo and Tokyo, see my essay, “Tokyo and London: Comparative Conceptions of the City,” in Albert M. Craig, ed., *Japan—A Comparative View* (Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 45-99.

Keirin  
Bird's-Eye View of Great Edo, circa 1860  
color woodblock print  
Collection Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library



## Tokyo Water

Even for the confirmed anti-sentimentalist, it is difficult not to feel a profound sense of loss in looking back over a century of systematic destruction of the Venice-like qualities of traditional Edo. Beginning in the 1880s, the shift to land-based systems of urban transport worked to decrease the number of moats and canals. Many old waterways were filled in and converted into wide roads to accommodate growing numbers of motorized vehicles, while others have been barricaded in the interests of flood control. Such is the sad fate of the great Sumida River, which has been rendered not only inaccessible but even invisible to those who pass nearby. The most devastating assault on these ancient canals and moats was the construction in the 1960s of an elevated highway that runs directly above one of the grandest and most historic stretches of Edo water, the Nihonbashi River.

A sense of loss of the essence of Edo as a city of water was consciously articulated by a variety of Japanese writers from early in the twentieth century. For men like Kafū Nagai and Mokutarō Kinoshita, the watery environs of the old Shitamachi provided a certain sensuous and atmospheric quality that was constantly threatened by the ideology of the Meiji state and its capital of “land-based Tokyo” (*oka no Tōkyō*).<sup>27</sup> For these “medievalists,” as the architectural historian Takashi Hasegawa has called them, the appeal of the Edo landscape was essentially pictorial, as framed in the prints of Hiroshige or Kobayashi Kiyochika (1877-1915), just as their architectural preferences favored the qualities of line and plane over the mass and monumentalism preferred by the Meiji state. Here we can see the intersection of the horizontality and graphicness of the “sky” principle with the appeal of “water” for its encouragement of moods and atmosphere.

The chief culprit in the sacrifice of the watery medium of Edo culture was the wheeled vehicle. As borne out by the observations of Western visitors to late Edo, one of the most uncanny features of the city in

27. Takashi Hasegawa. *Toshi no kairō—aruiwa kenchiku no chūseishugi* (The City Corridor: Medievalism in Architecture) (Sagami shobō, 1975). p. 56.

comparative terms was the lack of the clatter and speed of horse-drawn carriages. Watsuji, in the essay mentioned earlier, saw the problem as one of scale, comparing an electric trolley running along Tokyo streets to a "wild boar rampaging through fields," dwarfing the low one and two-story buildings.<sup>28</sup> The nature of the vehicle has changed with time, from the horse-drawn carriages and jinrikishas of the 1870s to the motor vehicles of today, constantly escalating the threat to the pace and texture of the surviving city of water.

Yet if we take a second look, not at the literal waterways of Tokyo, whose sacrifice is undeniable, but rather at the deep structure of the Edo waterside, as a place of gathering, relaxation and informality, then the continuities with Tokyo begin to emerge more clearly. I would propose that this structure of "water" has in fact persisted in the city, but in a different context. "Water" has quite simply moved onto dry land, and now survives most characteristically in the areas of the city known as *sakariba* (thriving places). The *sakariba* are dense clusters of facilities for consumption-shopping, eating, drinking and amusement—which have typically formed around a transport node.

In Edo, as we have seen, the most notable such node was Ryogokubashi, a place that linked roads, waterways and riverbanks into a single complex of gathering. Today the nodes are usually train stations, or rather complexes of interlinked stations, such as the great subcenters of Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Ikebukuro.<sup>29</sup> There is nothing mysterious about the siting of Tokyo *sakariba*; urban geographers have studied them closely, and can easily explain them in terms of modern location theory.<sup>30</sup> The critical point is that they are determined not by conscious and coordinated planning, but in spontaneous response to the logic of the transportation system and the marketplace. Like the Sumida River in Edo culture, they represent freedom from the strictures of control from above; they are the new "nature." Nowhere is the sense of waterlike flow and change more pronounced than in the vast underground spaces that serve to unify the largest of the stations into self-enclosed megastructures.

This pattern of "water" as a type of clustering is an essential complement to the pattern of "sky" as a structure of unbounded and uncentered flatness. The unity of "sky" and "water" is particularly clear in descriptions of Tokyo by Western observers, where the quality of uniformity and expanse mentioned earlier is almost inevitably countered by the remarkably persistent metaphor of Tokyo as a city of "villages."<sup>31</sup> The earliest use of this image which I have yet encountered is by Isabella Bird, quoted above for her perception of Tokyo's "lack of concentration." In the same passage, she attributes this diffuse quality to the city's historical origins as "an aggregate of 125 villages." As far as I can tell, there is no truth to this particular assertion, but the image of Tokyo as an aggregate of "villages" has survived to the present.

A close inspection of this enduring metaphor reveals that the definition of Tokyo's "villages" varies widely, depending on the observer and the time of observation, but may in the end be reduced to two prototypical conceptions. One is precisely the *sakariba*, the nodal point of gathering. This is what Roland Barthes had in mind in his incisive essay "Station," a virtual definition of the principle of "water" in contemporary Tokyo. Quite accurately, he referred to the great station-centered nodes of Tokyo as "districts," each with its name: Ueno, Asakusa, Ikebukuro, . . . and so

28. Watsuji. op. cit., *A Climate—A Philosophical Study*, p. 158.

29. For an analysis of the evolution of one such subcenter, see Peter Gluck and Henry Smith, "Shinjuku," *A + U: Kenchiku to toshi*, August 1973, pp. 132-156.

30. For a thorough study of the *sakariba* by an urban geographer, see Keijirō Hattori, *Sakariba—Ningen yokubō no genten* (*Sakariba—The Meeting Point of Human Desires*) (Kajima shuppankai, 1981).

31. I have traced the history of the "village" metaphor of Tokyo at greater length in "'Village' to shite no Edo-Tōkyō" ("Edo-Tokyo as a 'Village'") in Shinzō Ogi. ed., *Edo-Tōkyōgaku josetsu* (*Introduction to Edo-Tokyo Studies*) (Sanseido, forthcoming).

(detail)

Utagawa Toyoharu

Panorama: Edo and the Sumida River at the Ryōgokubashi, Edo period, Ukiyo-e school painting on silk

28% x 73%. 73.1 x 185.9

Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution

(03.217)



forth. "Each name," he then wrote, "echoes, evoking the idea of a village." <sup>32</sup> Others as well have detected the villagelike quality in the names of the great *sakariba* of Tokyo. To give a single example, Donald Richie, in the essay cited earlier, continued beyond his remarks on the initial impression of "dread uniformity," to emphasize the differences, precisely as Barthes had done, among the names: Asakusa, Ueno, Ginza, Roppongi, Harajuku, . . . and so forth.

But other Western observers, indeed the majority, have discovered the "villages" of Tokyo in a very different place, not in the cacophonous commercial clusters but rather in the traditional back alleys so reminiscent of Edo, the narrow *lanes* enclosed by the graphic lines of one and two-story wooden residences, occasionally shops, and dense with the greenery of potted plants. Whether or not these "villages" bear any sociological resemblance to the traditional forms of rural community (probably not), they do conform to the principle of "water" in basic ways. They are points of gathering, in the sense that the narrowness of the streets forces people together; wheeled vehicles pass, but only on the condition of peaceful coexistence with pedestrians. At the same time, like the station-centered *sakariba*, they are passages, a waterlike flow. While they gather, they also disperse: as Barthes says of the station, "an incessant departure thwarts its concentration." In the words of Takashi Hasegawa, who has written so eloquently of the city of "water" in early twentieth-century Tokyo, the back alleys of Tokyo are "rivers without water," apart from the harsh mechanical systems that dominate the main streets. <sup>33</sup>

And so in these two different environments, in the bustling centers and in the back alleys, we find the continuities with Edo. These are the "water" of Tokyo, the places of passage where people stop, now and then, to gather, to relax and to enjoy themselves. It is this pattern that ultimately gives meaning to the spatial structure I have called "sky," the structure of unboundedness and of writing, a structure that encourages neither concentration nor meaning. Only in combination with each other and with the Edo past do the "Sky and Water" of Tokyo finally come to make sense.

32. Barthes. *op. cit.*, *Empire of Signs*. p. 39.

33. Hasegawa. *op. cit.*, *Toshino kairō-aruiwa kenchiku no chūseishugū*, p. 93.