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Deconstructing the Pont des Arts: Why Kyoto Did Not Get Its Parisian Bridge

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Given that Minpaku—host institution of the JAWS meeting—has a strong historical connection to Kyoto, I think it only appropriate not only to end this workshop with a trip to that city, but also to start it with a kind of pre-tour into Kyoto’s contemporary debates. In the following, I will attempt to analyse an event that according to a local newspaper—the *Kyoto shinbun*—was the city’s news of the year 1998, beating both the reelection of the prefectural governor and the sensational defeat of the LDP candidate in the Upper House election. The event in question was mayor Masumoto Yorikane’s withdrawal of the plan to build a pedestrian bridge over the Kamogawa. That bridge was to be modeled on the Pont des Arts, an early 19th century bridge over the Seine in Paris, right in front of the Louvre. It would have connected the geisha quarters Pontochō and Gion, standing halfway between the Sanjō and Shijō bridges.

It is not rare that controversies over building projects make big news in Kyoto, and there has even been a special expression—*keikan ronsō* (“landscape debates” or maybe better “cityscape debates”)—coined for these disputes. Already in the early 1990s, citizens were divided over the high-rise rebuilding of the Kyoto Hotel, right next to City Hall, and over the construction of the new station complex, allegedly the largest building in all Asia. For these projects, the city loosened its regulations so that both buildings could reach the heretofore prohibited height of 60 meters. Although both were widely protested against, they were eventually built as planned. This caused much bitterness, especially in the case of the Kyoto Hotel, since there, management had seemed willing to give in to the opposition particularly of the Bukkyōkai, an organization representing a number of famous temples only to proceed without amendments a short while after. Signboards refusing entrance to the guests of that hotel, at tourist attractions such as Kiyomizudera or Ginkakuji, had not been removed as of May 1999.

Given this history of pushing through widely opposed projects, the withdrawal of the Pont des Arts received all the more attention. After all, this was a pet project of the mayor, had been approved by all prescribed advisory committees (*shingikai*), the city council, and the prefectural assembly and governor, and had been allotted a budget in the city’s household. Public projects at that stage in Japan are almost

impossible to stop, yet in this case at least, to quote the *Mainichi shinbun*'s headline, "*shimin pawā ga katta*"—citizen power has won. In the following I will offer you my attempt to explain why such a rare thing could happen. I will start, however, with a more detailed account of what actually happened.

CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

Although the necessity of building a pedestrian bridge between the Sanjō and Shijō bridges had been argued since 1980, and a planning decision to that extent taken in 1987, serious talk had been stopped by local opposition whenever it came up. This suddenly changed, however, when the mayor of Kyoto attended an evening reception of the visiting French president Jacques Chirac in November 1996. On the very next day, he announced that a pedestrian bridge modeled on the Pont des Arts would be built over the Kamogawa, according to him on Chirac's initiative. As former mayor of Paris and a frequent visitor to Kyoto, the French president allegedly proposed to celebrate the anniversaries in 1998 of the French-Japanese friendship treaty and of the sister city relationship between Kyoto and Paris with that project. Matsumoto was enthusiastic and apparently did not mind that the French side would contribute the design but not much else. Not only would the bridge deepen French-Japanese friendship, it would also respond to the allegedly strong local demand for a footbridge in addition to the two other, eternally crowded bridges; it would provide a safe and easy passage for bicycles, wheel chairs, and baby prams as well as an emergency exit from the narrow Pontochō street; and it would create a new attraction for Kyoto's ailing tourist industry, recreationally oriented as the bridge would be with benches and flower pots on it. The mayor also emphasized that the bridge, although a steel construction placed on concrete pillars, would have a light and transparent design and wooden planks as a walkway, just like its model in Paris.

Opponents did not at all agree with this assessment. Steel and concrete would not harmonize with the wooden house fronts of Pontochō lining the river banks. The celebrated view of Kitayama—the mountains north of Kyoto—that is especially beautiful from Shijō bridge, would be destroyed, and the wide open space between the two existing bridges would be cut apart. The narrow Pontochō street would lose its intimacy when opened up by the 10 meter wide access to the bridge, and ill-behaved youths that had started to roughen up the neighboring Kiyamachi street on weekends might spill over. The hasty decision process itself of course also provoked irritation, but perhaps more than anything else the idea of merely copying an already existing foreign bridge in that prominent location enraged many citizens.

At first, however, all went well for the mayor. Planning funds were allotted in the budget and the prospective building costs placed at ¥600 million. The city held explanatory meetings (*setsumeikai*) in local neighbourhoods in what informants experienced as a very one-sided and high-handed fashion, and in August 1997, the

design of the bridge was made accessible to the public, who were invited to submit their opinions. From early summer on, however, a sizable opposition movement arose, and a series of petitions demanding the reconsideration of the project reached the mayor between August and October. In September, the French newspaper *Le monde* reported the events and criticized Chirac, and after that Kyoto newspapers, too, started to cover the dispute. The French side took a careful position: responding to a letter from one Buddhist priest active in the conflict, Chirac emphasized that although he supported the project, it was up to the citizens of Kyoto to decide what they wanted, and in late autumn, prime minister Jospin wrote again to clarify that France had never officially asked for that bridge to be built. In early October, the popular *News Station* on TV channel 6 brought a feature showing both the *o-chaya* (geisha houses) and the *geiko* of Pontochō as opposed to the project, thus giving the debate nationwide attention. First signatures demanding withdrawal were collected and delivered, and late autumn saw a whole stream of public meetings, symposia, and seminars over the bridge plan. Newly founded citizens' groups gradually formed coalitions with the already existing ones so that at the end of 1997, two major oppositional formations remained. One was supported by the JCP and the city officials' union, with a former candidate for mayor and a lawyer as the most well-known figures. The other was supported by non-affiliated citizens, including the Buddhist priest who had written to Chirac and another prominent lawyer and activist.

Meanwhile, the project passed the municipal and prefectural administrative bodies in an extraordinary speed, approved by everyone except the JCP councillors. Obviously reacting to the protests, the mayor announced that the bridge would neither have to stick too closely to its model nor retain the French name, and in a surprising move, three alternative proposals for the design of the walkway, lighting, benches, and flower pots were put to public vote from December 1997 on. However, the mayor cast no doubt on his determination to build the bridge, and accused opponents of nationalism. In February 1998, a budget was allotted to the construction of the bridge, which was scheduled to start in the summer.

Therefore, the JCP-affiliated movement took to the streets: in January 1998, it started weekly campaigning, delivering speeches from loudspeaker vans and collecting signatures in front of City Hall, station buildings, and on the Shijō bridge, which proved to be an ideal location. Signatures were collected for, and lobbying activities concentrated on, the freezing of the budget set aside for the bridge. But connected with this traditional strategy was the new one of a former professor of literature, a film director and a *kyōgen* actor sending out a letter to celebrities in the media and art world all over Japan asking for support in April. More than 300 responses came in and were widely reported by the press. Also new was a human chain which was formed around the prospective building site in late May and aroused wide media attention.

The non-affiliated movement also employed a new strategy. Advised by its lawyer, it decided to take recourse to the referendum clause that is included in the

Chihō jichi-hō (Regional Autonomous Bodies Law). Residents of any local administrative unit can ask their assembly to issue an ordinance (*jōrei*) to hold a referendum, provided that they collect the signatures of two percent of that administrative unit's voters within a given period—one month in the case of a city. If the assembly grants that wish, a referendum will be held, and its result is to be respected (*sonchō*) by government authorities. Since the assembly is neither forced to hold the referendum nor legally bound by its results in case it does, this system is a weak weapon; and not surprisingly, almost all initiatives for referenda in Japan have got stuck in either of these two bottlenecks. To the non-affiliated movement against the bridge, however, calling for a referendum appeared as the only way left. Therefore, it started preparatory meetings, and then officially founded a Pont des Arts Referendum Association in June 1998 to prepare for the collection of signatures. The activities of this group were very widely reported, given that referenda—as a major new political development—are currently a fashionable topic.

All these activities guaranteed that the bridge remained in the headlines, and had consequences when in April 1998, the incumbent governor was reelected but lost many votes in the city, especially in the areas close to the site of the bridge to which he had consented. Knowledgeable informants tell me that already after that election, the mayor started to ask around for advice on how best to drop the project. In any case, he delayed the start of construction from May to September, officially in order not to interfere with the business of the *Pontochō* bars and restaurants who use their verandas in summertime. In June, the Upper House election followed, and for the first time in almost half a century, the LDP candidate lost his seat, with the two seats going to the JCP candidate who had opposed the bridge and a young independent candidate who had avoided the issue.

After the Upper House election, rumours that the bridge plan would soon be cancelled started to spread, so much so that it seriously inhibited mobilization in both opposition movements. An uneasy wait, however, continued until the *bon* holidays. On 22nd August, the mayor called a press conference and announced that the bridge project would be withdrawn (*hakushi tekkaï*) for the time being. While he chided the opposition movement as overly emotional, he nonetheless admitted that information about the bridge might have been insufficient. Besides, future cooperation between City Hall and citizens, supposed to be built on *pātonashippu*—a truly magic word in current local administration and planning—would be endangered by pushing the project through, and Japanese-French relationships might also be damaged. The withdrawal was big news not only in Kyoto but also as taken up by the national media, with extensive coverage especially in the *Asahi shinbun*. The JCP-affiliated movement declared that the mayor had got what he deserved, although triumph was mixed with dismay about how much media credit for the withdrawal went to the referendum group. The latter also scolded the mayor for having turned a deaf ear to citizens' complaints for such a long time, but nonetheless valued his decision. Thus, the curtain was closed

on the Pont des Arts affair—or so it seemed at least.

CAUSES OF DECONSTRUCTION

How, then, could the Pont des Arts project have been stopped? Several factors spring to mind immediately. First of all, and in contrast to the new station building and the Kyoto Hotel, very few people could expect immediate financial gain. Only a few local shop owners on the eastern side of the river supported it actively, and the building costs were so small that construction companies were probably not interested enough to put pressure on local politicians. The altogether different experience of the referendum movement against the planned airport in Kobe lends support to this reasoning. Although signatures of more than one third of all voters were collected in the autumn of 1998, the mayor and the governing coalition in council refused even to discuss whether the earthquake had changed the situation for building an airport—at a cost that would suffice to construct more than 3000 Ponts des Arts. Another factor for the withdrawal, which that was repeatedly brought up by informants, was the death in May 1998 of the director of the Wacoal lingerie company and former head of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Tsukamoto. Having received a decoration from the French state, he is said to have seen—and supported—the project as a return. Furthermore, it is said that the mayor visited Paris in summer 1998, saw the original Pont des Arts, and did not like it.

Aside from money and personal power play, however, there were four important—in my view decisive—factors that were different from the earlier controversies about the station building and the Kyoto Hotel. Let me take them up one by one.

The first factor is the active network of citizens' groups in Kyoto, which has become stronger in the years since the earlier controversies. The general political climate in Kyoto is favourable to such activities: for more than two decades after the war, Kyoto prefecture has had a communist governor, and the JCP still has more members and gets more votes than anywhere else in Japan. There is the highest concentration of universities, students, and professors in the country; and many writers, artists, and creative people also live in Kyoto. Against this backdrop and in the shadow of the major controversies about the station building and the Kyoto Hotel, citizens' groups have celebrated important victories when opposing e.g. the planned construction of a dam on the Kamogawa north of Kyoto and two golf course projects in the hills surrounding the city, all between 1990 and 1994. This does not of course mean that every controversial project has been stopped, and the all-party coalition—everyone but the communists—that runs City Hall is far from progressive when it comes to citizen participation or disclosure of information (*jōhō kōkai*). Complaints that any political controversy in the city is soon turned into a LDP vs. JCP battle that overshadows the issue at hand are also widespread and repel a lot of otherwise interested citizens.

Nonetheless, there is a sizable potential opposition, and the many previous

controversies and recently also the COP3 conference in Kyoto have allowed it to form stable networks that include both groups concerned with the cityscape and environmentalist groups. The differential willingness to cooperate with the JCP has led to a bifurcation also on previous occasions, but in the case of the Pont des Arts the fact that there were two movements does not seem to have diminished their effectiveness. It is from this social background that both movements against the bridge got their initial activists and their experienced, skilled, and—because of their previous achievements—moderately prominent leaders. And it is there that these leaders acquired the contacts which the mass media and celebrities that they employed.

However, the perspectives of these veterans would have been limited, had they not found wide support among ordinary residents; this being the second factor. All informants agree that citizens showed much more concern than in the previous controversies which were seen by many as private conflicts between City Hall on the one hand and the JCP and—in the case of the Kyoto Hotel—the Bukkyōkai on the other. Both organisations are disliked by not a few Kyotoites. This time, however, the Bukkyōkai signaled that it would keep out of the debate at an early stage, and the JCP-affiliated movement avoided mention of the party and the unions, both as a conscious strategy and also because these organisations willingly provided printing services and loudspeaker cars, but did not show so much eagerness beyond.

Ordinary citizens did, however, and these included a considerable number of women and young people, who on average are less willing to engage in political disputes than men and older people. Even school children offered their help, said one activist of the JCP-affiliated movement, and complaints that the bridge plan was simple stupid (*baka*) were readily voiced also by people who appeared as unlikely supporters of political causes. In both movements, central members and office holders included veterans from previous controversies but also quite a few new people who had no experience in citizens' groups, several of them living close to the bridge site. In the case of the referendum group I am most familiar with, the central members came from very diverse backgrounds: a buddhist priest, a lawyer, a university administration official, a graphic designer, an architect, a garden architect, and a computer specialist had been active previously also, but a gallerist, a brokering firm employee, a gardener, a craft gallery owner, a student, a journalist, an artist, and two former company employees who were both victims of *risutora* (downsizing) were beginners or at least had not been standing in the front line of political groups before. All in all, the Pont des Arts affair probably aroused the maximum concern among ordinary residents that any cityscape problem could, and the only serious poll, taken by the *Asahi shinbun*, showed the opponents of the bridge plan to be in a slight majority in the entire city.

The third factor to some extent explains why so many ordinary citizens became interested and active, and why the JCP and the unions did not. Much more than previous controversies, the bridge plan was understood as a cultural problem rather

than a political one. The privatization of public space for the mayor's personal project and the autocratic decision process were duly denounced by the opposition movements, but this alone would probably not have sufficed for mobilizing large numbers of people since many citizens are simply too much used to this to complain. But the idea of copying a foreign bridge into one of the heartlands of traditional Kyoto did enrage people, and probably for most opponents, the Pont des Arts simply was the French bridge (*Furansubashi*) against which the slogan "*Gaikoku no hashi wa iranai*" caught on. Thus, the affair also mobilized people who would have felt less comfortable with a politically conceived dispute, which might explain why so many women, young people, and prominent and widely respected *bunkajin* such as the architect Isozaki Arata or the critic Katō Shūichi lent their voices to the opposition movement. And while top business leaders publicly sided with the mayor, there was outspoken criticism in the next rank among younger company presidents who would probably have been less straightforward in debates conceived of as genuinely political. Significantly, more than half the members of the referendum group who took the trouble to fill out the questionnaire I sent them are working in the creative field. The assessment of a professor of urban planning that there would have been no problem at all in building the very same bridge had it not been called a French bridge is probably only slightly exaggerated. If it wasn't for its *katakana* name, the Pont des Arts would be standing today, is what he told me.

Again, however, even the possibility of conceiving of the Pont des Arts as a cultural problem would have had less effect without the fourth factor. This is that in contrast again to earlier controversies, people felt that they had a *right* to interfere with the mayor's plan. This was brought home to me most vividly in an interview with the *okamisan* (owner) of a former *chaya* (geisha house), now a restaurant in Pontochō. A well-known figure in the city, she became the front woman of both movements and collected no less than 30,000 signatures against the bridge from among her regular clients all over Japan. The cost of sending the letters and also of taking down an illegal billboard on her rooftop that now aroused the municipal authorities' concern which it had failed to attract for a decade was considerable. Nonetheless, she would not demand the same financial sacrifices of others and considered it only justified that the investors in the Kyoto Hotel and the new station building would seek economic return for their land investment, even if this meant building high-rises. More than that, she rather detests the stubbornness of the Bukkyōkai temples that do not take away their notorious signboards although the Kyoto Hotel has long since been completed.

Behind this there is an attitude about land ownership in Japan that is very different from most Euroamerican countries. "*Tochi wa zaisan*" (land is wealth), meaning that land is first and foremost considered as an investment. When the cost of a plot can still easily be double that of the building coming to stand on it and can be even higher in the cities, buildings remain utterly secondary, and are first and foremost vehicles to the end of getting a return for one's investment, rather than

values in themselves. For determining property taxes (*kotei shisan-zei*) and inheritance taxes (*sōzoku-zei*), land is assessed at estimated values which in recent years have been steadily approaching the real market value. Since this means that land is hardly distinguished from other sorts of wealth such as money or shares any longer, however, there is also an equally strong reluctance to interfere with the rights of owners beyond the aforementioned taxes. Thus, no building can be protected as a historic monument without the consent of the owner, a situation that would be unthinkable in e.g. Germany. When, three years ago, the family owning one of the most beautiful *machiya* (traditional wooden townhouses) in Kyoto decided to demolish this to build a *manshon* (modern condominium) instead, one citizens' group, supported by many foreign residents, ran an international appeal against this and tried to talk the city into buying the property. The building was not a protected monument, however, and even most of the *machiya* residents, researchers, and fans active in the *machiya* preservation movement remained silent, believing that they had no right to interfere with a family's attempt to protect its financial interests. The fact that one of the owners was the head of the organisation that runs a famous traditional festival did not at all change this attitude. The members of the referendum group are no exception: while three quarters of them would have approved of stricter regulations in the cases of the Kyoto Hotel and the new station building—both of them built by big companies and/or with public funds—only one third would have in the case of that family-owned *machiya*.

This general reluctance to restrict proprietors' rights also applies in urban planning. National laws do not emphasize zoning regulations, and even in Kyoto, where regulations concerning building heights, sizes, shapes, colours, and purposes are stricter than in any other big city in Japan, standards are way beneath those of comparable historic cities in Europe or the United States. Besides, regulations are not really enforced, especially when the infringements concern a family's effort to get as much living space as possible out of the tiny plot that it has acquired with the savings of long years. Here, city officials as well as courts are very lenient.

The fact that Kyoto is not just any Japanese city but supposedly "*Nihon no kokoro no furusato*" does not help much to change this attitude. Kyoto residents do care about their cityscape, and concern about the way it has changed in the last twenty years is readily voiced by almost anyone. Yet down to those active in the preservation movement, many residents feel that it should be the owners' better judgment, not stricter regulations, that should deter them from putting up overlarge and ugly buildings. An extreme case is one informant who owns a particularly beautiful old *machiya*. When he moved back into it after the death of his father and managed to remove a long-term tenant from the front part twenty years ago, this house had been refashioned into an almost completely westernized appearance. After long years' work, getting the necessary material from second-hand dealers and trash heaps, he managed to restore the house to its original appearance, well before *machiya* restoration became a wide-spread fashion. Even he, however, expresses disinterest in making this a movement cause, and he opposes a financial

support system for *machiya* preservation. In his eyes, it is the owners' personal responsibility to care for the outer appearance of their property, and people should once again take pride in doing this properly just like they supposedly all did before the war.

Behind this, one can glimpse a concept of Kyoto as not a public space, but simply a vast collection of private spaces. Given this attitude, the Pont des Arts case was an ideal target since the bridge stood on everyone's land or—spanning a river—on no land at all. The Kamogawa is very important for many citizens: I keep distributing a checklist of famous things in Kyoto to informants asking them to mark those items without which Kyoto would no longer be Kyoto, and the Kamogawa is picked almost without exception. Strong feelings toward the river are fostered at an early age: a study by a professor acquaintance showed that the Kamogawa, together with Hiei-zan mountain, is the most-often mentioned landmark in the school anthems of Kyoto's elementary and middle schools.

Dabbling with this public space and gracing it with a project born out of a somewhat theme-park like approach to the city, then, was not acceptable. It is interesting, however, that even here, the opinion of the immediately concerned neighbourhoods was given a special place in public discourse. As one of his major arguments, the mayor kept asserting that there was a strong local demand for a footbridge while opponents kept proving that there wasn't. Moreover, one activist of the referendum group told me that among the many acquaintances she had asked for their opinion, everyone without fail felt urged to concede not living close to the bridge site before commenting on the plan. It almost appears that even in this case, people tried to locate an owner for the bridge, suggesting that there cannot really be such a thing as a truly public space in Kyoto.

RECONSTRUCTION?

Perhaps the most curious aspect about the whole Pont des Arts affair is that the bridge does not die. The idea of copying a French bridge was definitely laid to rest last August, and by now the anniversaries are over. But the mayor emphasized the general necessity of building a footbridge in that location and the planning decision in question remained unchanged. Shortly after, interested shop owners on the eastern side of the river started to collect signatures, this time *for* the construction of the bridge, and officially in response to their petition the city council confirmed its intention to build in December 1998. Parallel to this, but allegedly on his own initiative, a design professor at a university in Kyoto worked out new plans for a footbridge and presented these to the city. In the budget for 1999, ¥30 million has been allotted to setting up an expert commission to discuss the realization of the bridge. All this would hardly happen without the consent of the mayor, and informants do not have a ready answer why he does not keep his fingers out of such a painful failure, with his election coming up next year. Tentative hypotheses offered suggest that pressure from extremely limited groups—such as the owners of

fishing rights in the Kamogawa that would qualify for indemnities in case a bridge would be built, or people interested in developing the grounds of the former Sanjō tram station close to the prospective bridge site—may play a role. If this is true, private interests would once again take precedence over those of the public. But although the citizens' group backed by the JCP put in an official protest, most opponents do not really believe that anything substantial will happen in the near future. And no matter what will come up in the long run, the Pont des Arts project has definitely been washed down the Kamogawa.