

Planning and Conflict: The Story of Otaru, Japan

by Kunio Yamaguchi

Though city planning is needed for making a better environment and developing the economy, it is not always easily adapted to by local citizens. A plan can lead to conflict. While conflict in the planning process may lead to negative results, sometimes it yields a positive resolution. This has been the case in Otaru, Japan.

1. OTARU, JAPAN.

Otaru is a relatively small city in northern Japan, famous for its many gentle slopes and historical waterfront environment. The character of Otaru has changed dramatically since 1890. From the 1890s to the 1930s, Otaru was the most prosperous city in the Hokkaido region. Not only was it an important seaport, but it served as a regional commercial and financial center. However, structural changes in the maritime industry reduced the port's viability, and the city's vitality (and population) steadily declined. Otaru was a rare case during these early times, in that it suffered from the "caved" phenomenon — the massive loss of a city's industrial base. As a result, Otaru's waterfront suffered neglect for many years, so that to many people it seemed to be dead urban space.

In those days, the City of Sapporo, located near Otaru, became a well-developed and modernized urban city, growing to be the largest city in Hokkaido. In terms of economic development, Otaru was defeated by young Sapporo.

But recently, the small city of Otaru, has been attracting the attention of planners and, more importantly, the attention of tourists. Why? What happened?

By strengthening its own unique character and geography, Otaru has become one of Japan's most promising cities. This success story, whatever else one might say, began after years of conflict.

[Editor's Note: It can be informative to read about planning in other countries. What may strike you most, however, in reading this account of "planning and conflict" in the small city of Otaru, Japan, is not the differences, but the similarities between the issues faced in Otaru, and those confronting many North American cities.]

2. PLANNING AND CONFLICT

How do governments cope with declining cities? Most local governments in Japan have sought to stimulate economic development by focusing on developing strong highway networks. Major roadway projects have often been planned with the belief that large enterprises and economic development will follow. Little consideration has been given to the impact these projects will have on the city's character. This was the approach taken by the Otaru government when it released the city's new plan for development.

The Otaru plan called for "reclaiming" the land on which the city's historic canals and stone-warehouses were located in order to build roadways. The government believed that completing the roadways was necessary for Otaru to become a modern, well-functioning metropolis. Unfortunately, the historical features in the waterfront area stood in the way.

Many citizens opposed the plan after it was disclosed. They believed that the inherent character of Otaru was in the environment created by canals and stone-warehouses. They felt that economic development policy should coexist with the nature of the city's own character. Citizens who loved Otaru's character became preservationists.

People in Otaru were divided into two groups. They debated about a future desirable city image. To be developed or to be preserved — that was the question facing the citizens of Otaru.

Needless to say, the concept of "bal-



Above and opposite: Otaru's historic district. Photos by the author.



anced growth” is difficult to implement. That, in fact, may be the eternal issue in city planning. The debate in Otaru continued for more than ten years between the development side and the preservation side, including citizens groups, business communities, and government.

Eventually, the Governor of Hokkaido called for a conference where both sides conferred at the same table. The participants concluded it was necessary to try to develop a new plan for Otaru by working together. After the conference, the planning process became clearer and a new planning organization, the “110 Citizen Advisory Committee” was set up.

 *Citizen Planners in Japan.* They did not want to finalize the plan in a short time, as they had learned from long previous periods of conflict that “haste makes waste.”

The new planning organization established the following fundamental policies to guide the preparation of Otaru’s new “urban regeneration” plan:

- The new urban regeneration plan should be dependent on the city’s own character and human resources through substantive consultation with neighbors.
- The new plan should not be dependent on big projects or the invitation of a few large enterprises.
- The new plan should utilize the city’s physical environment.

Otaru adopted a new plan, based on these policies.

3. THE NEW PLAN FOR OTARU

The old planning process caused conflict in Otaru. But now, with the implementation of the new urban regeneration plan, there is a working partnership of all sectors. The old plan that proposed reclaiming the canals and destroying stone warehouses was altered. As a result, Otaru today can boast of a beautiful street environment on the waterfront, in which modern features coexist with historical stone-warehouses. The picturesque canals were preserved as well.

Many people have begun repairing the historic stone warehouses. Local capital has helped new stores and pubs move in to some of these buildings. The result has been to create new and attractive places in Otaru. In the case of Otaru, planning and conflict served as the prologue to a story of successful urban regeneration. ♦

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Planning Association conference in Toronto; if you are interested in meeting him, please contact our office].



Citizen Planners in Japan

In Japan, unlike America, local planning commissions (called planning committees) usually include 15 to 20 “specialists,” such as professors, heads of business groups, members of the city council, etc. The Otaru effort, involving a broad range of citizens, was quite unusual, not only because it went beyond the types of people who usually serve on city planning committees, but because of the very large number of people — 110 — involved.



Japan’s Development Boom

Many cities in Japan were well developed by the 1970’s. The unemployment rate went down rapidly and city life became more convenient. But the development boom changed many historical cities to flat and dull ones as they gradually lost their own character.

On the other hand, there have been notable exceptions. The well-known city of Kyoto has been developing in coexistence with its historical environment. For example, Kyoto has adopted special preservation zoning. One requirement is that no building can be higher than the roof of the famous Touji wooden tower built in 1644 (the roof is 45 meters high). New buildings are designed to harmonize with the historical environment. Citizens and business people in Kyoto know that maintaining the city’s historical atmosphere helps keep Kyoto an attractive city. Nevertheless, even in Kyoto conflicts still arise between development and preserving the city’s historic character.