

Component 1, Part 1

Japanese Cultural Landscapes: General Characteristics

Geographers Cotton Mather and P.P. Karan have spent many years studying and analyzing the Japanese cultural landscape and have synthesized their observations into a number of general and specific characteristics that accurately portray it.¹ The eight general characteristics they identify are broad generalizations about Japan's landscape. This part provides examples of these characteristics using photos taken during a study tour of Japan in 2006 and other images from a variety of sources, including Google Earth and relevant books. Mather, Karan, and Iijima (1998) explained that the existence of these characteristics on the Japanese landscape can be attributed to several factors, including responses to Japan's limited land base, attempts to organize and maximize the utility of land, and considerations for aesthetics.

The eight general characteristics of the Japanese cultural landscape are:

1. The paucity of idle land
2. The scarcity of level land
3. Compactness
4. Meticulous organization
5. Immaculateness
6. Interdigitation
7. Tiered occupancy
8. Extensive use of underground space

General characteristics of the Japanese cultural landscape:

1. The paucity of idle land

A fundamental feature of Japan's geography is that it has a large number of people on a small amount of land. Japan ranks fourth among countries in terms of population density. Only Bangladesh, South Korea, and the Netherlands rank higher. As may be seen throughout this module, this high population density effects every aspect of Japanese daily life and has a profound influence on the appearance of landscapes. As a result, Japanese land does not go unused. In the United States, land will sometimes lie idle as owners wait for the right price before selling it. This use of land for speculative development reasons rarely happens in Japan, as most land is put to some use, even if it is temporary and there are plans for more profitable use in the near future.



Figure 1-1: Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

Look at this photo closely. Do you see any land that is not being used for some purpose?

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-2: Very small rice field (Aichi Prefecture)

Why would someone go to the trouble of planting rice in this extremely small field?

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-3: Small structure on a street corner, Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Even this small street corner has enough room for this traditional wooden structure.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

2. The scarcity of level land

Population density can be measured in several ways. One way is arithmetic density, or the number of people per unit of land. Japan's arithmetic density is 338 people per square kilometer. However, with only about 20 percent of Japan being level land suitable for human development, most of the country's 128 million people are crammed onto coastal plains, mountain valleys, and any scrap of level land. This suggests that Japan's population lives with higher densities than its arithmetic density indicates. A better measure of population density in Japan is physiological density, or the number of people per unit of arable land. Japan's physiological density of 1,693 people per square kilometer better represents the very high densities in most populated areas of Japan. Another important feature of level land in Japan that is suitable for human development is that it is not contiguous, but, geographically fragmented. This has forced considerable investment in transportation systems to facilitate integration between them.



Figure 1-4: Raised/shaded relief map of Japan.

Color all the level land that you can find. Notice how these are geographically separated from one another with mountainous areas in between them.

Source: http://130.166.124.2/world_atlas/7/files/7-1005-full.html



Figure 1-5: Portion of Hyogo Prefecture.

There is not a single valley in this view that has not been intensively settled.

Source: Google Earth

3. Compactness

Another result of Japan's high population density on the cultural landscape is the tendency toward small, compact things. As these photos show, this compactness is expressed in many aspects of daily life.



Figure 1-9: Small neighborhood grocery store, Hirose (Shimane Prefecture)

Traditionally, the geography of Japanese retailing has been characterized by small stores spread throughout residential neighborhoods, such as this one in Hirose (population 8,700). This dispersed nature is evident by the fact that on a per capita basis, Japan has twice as many wholesalers and retailers than the United States (Karan, 2005). However, the geography of retailing is slowly changing (see the next photo). **Source:** photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-10: JUSCO store, Yonago (Tottori Prefecture)

The geography of retailing is slowly changing with the emergence of large stores such as this one. JUSCO stands for Japan United Stores Company and is a chain of general merchandise stores found in Japan, China, Taiwan, and several Southeast Asian countries. **Source:** photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-11: 7-11 convenience store, Kyoto (Kyoto Prefecture)

Convenience stores are ubiquitous on the cultural landscape, with 7-Elevens and Lawson Stations constituting two of the more popular companies. These two companies combined account for 52 percent of total convenient store sales in Japan (http://www.7andi.com/en/ir/pdf/corporate/p34_39.pdf). Japanese convenience stores tend to have a greater variety of items than American convenience stores, especially food. They offer meals, not just snacks, and because home storage space is limited people must frequent them more often. This 7-Eleven store represents a typical convenience store in an urban setting.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-12: Coco! convenience store, Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Japanese convenience stores offer a greater variety of items than American convenience stores because home storage space is limited and people must frequent them more often. This store is in a more rural setting than the previous photograph. What are some of the items that this store sells?

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-13: Parking garage, Kyoto (Kyoto Prefecture)

The thin, tall profile of this parking garage attests to the compact nature of the Japanese culture and landscape.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-14: Small parking garage, Hiroshima (Hiroshima Prefecture)

While this parking garage does not hold many vehicles, it does maximize the number of cars that can be parked in this particular space.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-15: Van, Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

Most Japanese vehicles are smaller than American models. Many companies, like Toyota and Honda, make smaller models for the Japanese market that are not available in the United States. From the American perspective, I guess this vehicle could be classified as a mini-minivan.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-16: Gasoline station, Kyoto (Kyoto Prefecture)

In many of Japan's larger cities space is at such a premium that gasoline pumps hang suspended from overhead structures to free up more ground space.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-17: Golf course design, east of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

One result of the scarcity of land is that land is very expensive. The high cost of land forces the population to develop innovative ways to conserve and maximize the use of existing space. Golf courses provide an interesting example of how the Japanese landscape maximizes activity on the least amount of land. Some golf courses, to conserve space, place two greens at the end of one fairway, as in this example east of Nagoya. This way the course can promote having 18 holes, but, consume the space of a nine-hole course.

Source: Google Earth



Figure 1-18: Golf driving range, Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

One of the most ubiquitous features on the Japanese landscape are golf driving ranges. Many ranges are found in the middle of urban or suburban environments with multiple levels and tall net fences.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

4. Meticulous organization

The Japanese are very careful in how their landscapes are organized and pay much attention to the aesthetics and details of each landscape. A major reason for the meticulous care they take in organizing their landscapes is due to the scarcity of land. With a limited land base, they must pay more attention to the details of their landscape in order to maximize and optimize the use of each piece of land.



Figure 1-19: Teahouse, Matsue (Shimane Prefecture)

While this is only a small courtyard at one teahouse, it is apparent the care that the landscape's creator has taken because it appears as if every element of this scene—including the statues, rocks, plants, and bowls—are strategically placed for optimal effect.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

5. Immaculateness

For the most part, my impression of the Japanese landscape is that it is neat and tidy. Within Japanese society there tends to be a sharp distinction between inside and outside space. Inside space tends to be the areas around and inside someone's home or business. The Japanese keep these spaces very clean and neat. Karan captured this trait well when he said the Japanese have an "obsession with cleanliness" (2005, 91). However, areas beyond these inside spaces, such as many public spaces that are shared by everyone, may not be as clean.



Figure 1-20: Entrance to a traditional Japanese inn (ryokan), Yasugi (Shimane Prefecture)
This scene represents the considerable attention to the cleanliness of inside space usually present in Japan. The cleanliness of this scene is evident—from the spotless wooden floor—to the perfect arrangement of slippers and shoes.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-21: Inasanohama Beach, Taisha (Shimane Prefecture)

Some public spaces such as this beach on the Sea of Japan, which does not fall within the concerns of someone's inside space, may be less than clean.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

6. Interdigitation

Interdigitation means to be interwoven, comingled, or interlocked. The Japanese landscape is comprised of many small parcels that are extremely diversified from parcel to parcel in types of land use, unlike the United States, where large areas of similar types of land use are common. A contributing factor to this difference is that in Japan, land is sold by the tsubo, which is equivalent to about 36 square feet, compared to an acre which is 43,560 square feet. A single

view of the Japanese landscape often includes a variety of land uses including agriculture, industry, commercial, and residential.



Figure 1-22 and 1-23: Suburbs of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

How many different types of land use can you identify in this scene? Use colored pencils and shade in as many different types of land use as you can find, such as residential, agricultural, commercial, and industrial. What visual clues can you use to identify the difference in land use types?

Source: photo by Alice Tym



Figure 1-24: Roadside scene, near Izumo (Shimane Prefecture)
Notice that the rice field is immediately adjacent to the commercial or industrial building.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-25: Neighborhood scene, Hirose (Shimane Prefecture)
Notice that the rice field is immediately adjacent to the house.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 1-26: Rice seedlings, Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

These trays of rice seedlings have been grown in an adjacent greenhouse, which is located in the middle of a suburb. They are out of the greenhouse in preparation for being planted in a nearby rice field.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

7. Tiered occupancy

The tiered nature of Japan's landscapes is evident at several scales. At the broadest scale, the coastal plains, occupied by most of Japan's population, have a layered effect with a lowland and an upland portion. At a much smaller scale, local landscapes are also tiered with terraces to make wet-rice cultivation possible.

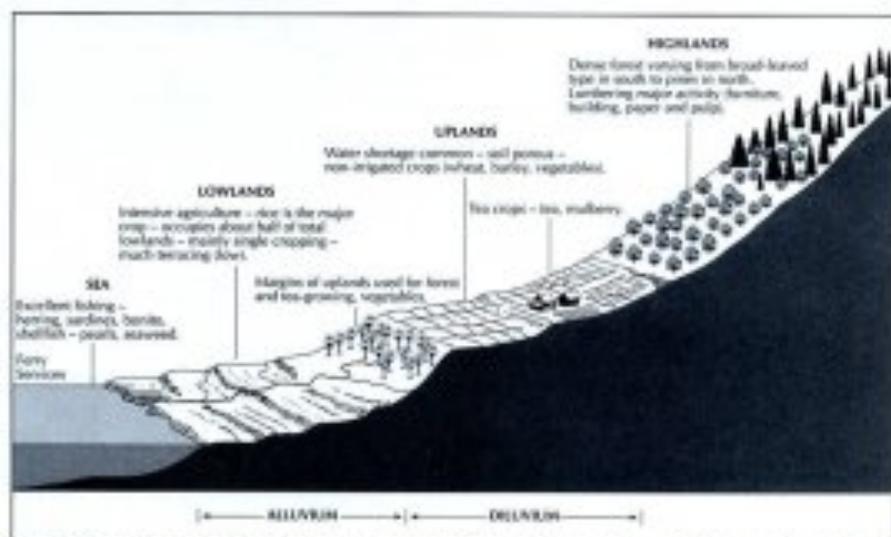


Fig. 2.5. Land use by terrain. Based on Ran L. Andrews, *Japan: A Social and Economic Geography* (Melbourne: George Philip and O'Neil, 1971).

Figure 1-27: Japan's tiered land use pattern according to terrain

The lowland portion of the coastal plains is occupied by the highest density of population and much of Japan's rice crop. The upland portion of the coastal plain is also densely settled, but

include more cropland with non-irrigated crops like wheat and vegetables. Highlands are predominately forest covered with lumbering as a major activity, but many of Japan's golf courses are found here, too.

Source: photo by Karan 2005, 17



Figure 1-28: Rice fields, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Even the smallest areas require terraces to make wet-rice cultivation possible.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

8. Extensive use of underground space

With the lack of level land, Japan has developed underground space in urban areas. Most of this space is retail and found in the central areas of major cities and connected with subway stations and commuter rail stations.





Figures 1-29 and 1-30: Sakae district, downtown Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)
The Sakae district is an entertainment and shopping district in the center of Nagoya. Under this district is a large underground space that includes over five miles of hallways, 70 entrances, and 600 shops (Karan, 2005).
Source: photos by Craig R. Laing