Planning for the slow lane: The need to restore working greenspaces in maturing contexts

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1. Introduction

Landscape and urban planning must shift gears, if it is to adjust to the "slow lane". Lower growth trajectories—the slow lane—increasingly shape the direction of our field. Nowhere is the slowdown more acutely felt than in Japan, where full throttle growth has been replaced by entrenched stagnation, a super-aging and declining population, mounting deficits and a diminishing tax base. However, Japan is not an exception. The maturing societies of Europe and North America, as well as many of our Asian neighbors, are also faced with lower birthrates and aging populations. To keep pace with and direct these lower growth trajectories, planners must maximize the potential for slower, sustainable progress.

A key task is to develop concepts and approaches applicable in the slow lane. Those forged in the field's youth are not guaranteed to be effective in its maturity. Large public parks and flagship greening projects made the careers of our planning heroes, but are pursued in vain in the slow lane. Moreover, while the "parks and projects" paradigm remains appealing, it is an increasingly smaller piece of the more complex puzzle planners are confronting today. Accordingly, shifting into the slow lane is an opportune time to check the rearview mirror to identify concepts and approaches applicable today.

Many societies are facing slowdown, but Japan's troubling economic and demographic forecast makes it an important experiment in low-growth landscape and urban planning. In the following sections, we highlight key issues and responses emerging in research and practice. We show how concepts and practices maligned in high-growth modernity are being reinvented today. Our specific focus is the restoration of urban agriculture and peri-urban woodland management. However, by addressing key themes—productive urban greenspaces and leisurely work—we provide a sketch of concepts and approaches applicable to planning for the slow lane more generally.

2. Agriculture in the city, citizens in agriculture

Urban agriculture is recognized today as an essential component of urban sustainability. This is highly significant because, while farming in the city is not new, agriculture has often been excluded from urban areas. Following planning doctrines of separating urban and agricultural into neatly colored zones, cities with long histories of urban–rural fusion cleaved them apart in the rush to modernize (Yokohari et al., 2000). For example, despite being one of the world's largest cities in the 1800s, Fujii et al. (2002) estimate that 40% of Edo (present-day Tokyo) was in agricultural use. Paddy and vegetable plots in residential neighborhoods provided fresh local vegetables while absorbing urban waste as fertilizer. Edo was an exceptionally large city, but its urban agriculture was not. Cities throughout Asia had similar systems historically, and urban agriculture maintains a strong presence in many cities, particularly in the global south.

There are many reasons to bring multifunctional urban agriculture back to the city today. Yokohari et al. (1993) describe eight key ecological functions provided by agricultural land in urban areas.
A key issue spurring the restoration of urban agriculture in Japan is the crisis of domestic agriculture. Trade liberalization and global competition challenge the viability of Japan’s small-scale family farming enterprises. Moreover, even amidst Japan’s super-aging population, the farm population stands out as extreme, with most farmers in their seventh generation and lacking a successor. Domestic food self-sufficiency is below 40%, and import dependency is an increasingly troubling fact of life. Concerns over the safety, quality and accessibility of food have surfaced repeatedly in tainted food scandals involving imported products. Concerns over the quality of food are spurring a counter-movement of farming in urban areas.

Urban agriculture can only make a small contribution to improving food self-sufficiency, but the “agro-activities” of urban farmers are an essential step towards enhancing the quality of local food and agriculture. Farming the city is an alternative lifestyle and an effort to re-localize food production by developing safe, local and fresh alternatives. This movement is led primarily by the waves of post-employment baby boomers for whom agriculture provides a second career (Fig. 1). While agro-activities were, until recently, confined to statutory allotments, urbanites are increasingly taking on semi-professional agricultural careers by joining the operations of aging farm households (Yokohari, 2003; Yokohari et al., 2010). Semi-professional farmers represent a new class of agriculturalists that blur the line between hobby and commercial farmers. Although their activities continue to be seen as leisure, a yearlong analysis of urban farm production found that groups of dedicated urban farmers with advanced skills can actually be more productive than commercial farmers.

Planners have an important role to play in realizing the potential of existing urban agricultural lands, and in expanding farmland in shrinking cities. In Japan, the extensive area of agricultural land remaining in urban areas provides a foundation for developing local food production and resource cycling systems today. In an analysis of Tokyo’s peri-urban periphery, Kurita et al. (2009) found significant potential to build micro-foodsheds at the neighborhood level by restoring abandoned agricultural plots. These mixed urban–rural areas also bear significant potential to redevelop systems of circulating kitchen waste and agricultural products between residential and agriculture areas.

Urban agriculture provides an equally effective strategy for managing Japan’s shrinking cities. Vacant lots are rapidly emerging in a spontaneous and unplanned urban retreat that is challenging to predict and manage. One promising strategy is to use these spontaneously and discontinuously emerging spaces to weave community gardens back into the urban fabric. This dynamic and opportunistic approach to urban decline is a means of rebuilding productive urban landscapes and enhancing community cohesion.

3. Restoring peri-urban satoyama for fuelwood and fun

Similar to urban agriculture, forestry in urban areas offers potential for working greenspaces. The concept of urban forestry has so far been associated primarily with planting and care of urban trees. However, peri-urban woodlands have histories of providing urban areas with forest products. As urban agriculture flourished in the Edo period, village grasslands and woodlands—satoyama—near urbanizing regions were coppiced to produce fuelwood and charcoal for expanding urban markets. However, with the advent of the “fuel revolution” in the postwar period, woodlands were devalued and cleared for suburban development. Peri-urban woods that escaped development were abandoned, becoming densely overgrown with bamboo grass that negatively affected their ecology, aesthetics and recreational potential (see Yokohari and Bolthouse, in press). Restoring these woodlands provides potential for carbon emission reductions and leisurely work. However, realizing such opportunities is a litmus test for planners.

In recent years, satoyama woodlands in peri-urban areas have become the focus of conservation and restoration activities by volunteer groups that are transforming former village commons into “new commons” (Takeuchi, 2003) (Fig. 2). In these new wooded commons, many retirees are finding a post-retirement career as woodland manager that allows them to stay active, form new social identities and engage in forms of ‘minor subsistence’ in the outdoors, all while contributing to their local place. However, restoration presents challenges for both volunteer groups and for planners. Volunteers are often limited to clearing overgrown ground cover in small park-like spaces and there is concern about the longevity of group activities. In addition to these practical challenges of extending restoration, satoyama presents planners with the more prosaic question of what to restore (Yokohari and
Bolthouse, in press). Satoyama are dynamic landscapes. It is impossible to return them to any past condition without finding uses relevant to current social needs that can keep alive the relations between people and landscape.

We developed the metaphor of “re-fueling” to describe an approach to re-energizing restoration (Terada et al., 2010). This term refers literally to reviving the practice of managing satoyama for wood energy as a practical, bottom-up approach to climate change. We also use “re-fueling” metaphorically to describe the new energy that woodfuel utilization brings to restoration. In a recent study, we found volunteer groups are producing large amounts of woody biomass, but lack of opportunities to use these resources. Re-fueling can provide satoyama volunteers with more authentic restoration experiences and draw both public and private sector support for their activities. To put our metaphor to the test, we are embarking on an action based research project with partners in local government and the voluntary sector to examine the challenges and opportunities of re-fueling peri-urban woodlands.

4. New directions

What will fuel landscape and urban planning in an era of challenging slowdown? An important source of fuel can be found, as our re-fueling metaphor suggests, in fusing productive urban greenspaces with leisurely work. To gauge and direct this potential energy, landscape planners need to make both, and more importantly their fusion in urban landscapes, focal points of research and practice in the years ahead.

Productive urban landscapes have already become a key focus of research in recent years as evidenced by numerous publications. Future research must, however, continue to push beyond a professional legacy of public parks and zoning to promote opportunities for emergent greenspaces. The challenges and opportunities of restoring urban agriculture and satoyama provide a case in point. In shrinking cities, rapidly proliferating vacant lots are key targets for the restoration of urban agriculture and community gardens. However, these open spaces emerge in a spontaneous patchwork that challenges both planners and local authorities. Research needs to identify the mechanisms behind their emergence and persistence as well as effective strategies for developing urban agriculture or other multifunctional land-uses in the spaces of urban retreat. In the case of satoyama woodlands and farmland in urban areas, changing resource uses and globalizing food production have rendered formerly productive spaces increasingly underused. Increasingly, however, citizens groups led by retiring baby boomers are restoring and managing these spaces as emergent “common” property. Landscape planning can play a role in identify strategies for multifunctional use and common proprietary and in legitimating group activities through action research projects.

Emergent productive greenspaces are often sites for practices that blur the bounds of work and leisure. To understand and facilitate these practices requires conceptual approaches to hybrid forms of leisurely work. In leisure studies, Stebbins (2007) has developed the concept of “serious leisure” to describe “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience” (p. 5). Drawing on anthropological studies, Kitoh (1996) uses the concept of “asobi-shigoto” (play-work) to describe the hybridity of work and leisure in “minor subsistence” practices such as gathering, fishing and gardening. In practices such as urban agriculture and satoyama restoration, we see the need for a synthesis of the human development focus of serious leisure with the socio-metabolic focus of minor subsistence practices. Joining these complementary frameworks will be a key area for research, and an important practical direction for planning in the slow lane.

The professional identity of landscape planning has long been rooted in physically structuring cities and regions, particularly in countries such as Japan where modernization was largely conceived as an infrastructural project. However, to direct low-growth trajectories towards sustainability, landscape planning in Japan and beyond must begin to place equal emphasis on the physical structure of cities and regions and the social qualities they inspire.

References


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