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| Title | Walking Downtown Naha |
| Author(s) | Snyder, Gary |
| Citation | International journal of Okinawan studies, 2(1): 3-6 |
| Issue Date | 2011-06-30 |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/33993 |
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Walking Downtown Naha

Gary Snyder*

那覇のダウンタウンを歩く

ゲーリー・スナイダー

本稿では那覇の中心部を歩きながら、風景をエコシステムとして考える視点から都市を見る。つまり、戦前からの伝統的な建築物や戦後のコンクリートの建造物まで、都市の「遷移」を、自然観察者の立場から分析してみたい。本稿で描写されているのは1988年の那覇であり、それゆえ本稿は凍結された瞬間を記録したものである。あの時点から那覇はだいぶ変容したであろう。しかし、人間だけでなく、地球という惑星も含めて、すべては流動している。ナチュラルリストとして、そして詩人として、都市と郊外を健全にすることに貢献したいと思う。ウィルダネスについて書くこともすばらしいことであるが、次に必要なステップは都市のエコロジーを観察し、それについて書くことである。

My friend Yamazato gave me a sketchy idea of how to walk into the old shopping alleys of downtown Naha from my hotel. I followed the flow of cars and trucks on a main road to a green-painted iron pedestrian overcross and dropped down to a narrower set of streets. The world of buildings seen from the overpass was almost entirely a post-World War II regrowth. The city was flattened during the World War II invasion of Okinawa, particularly by the air raid of October 10, 1944, which is referred to as *tetsu no bofu*—the “typhoon of iron.” The earlier city was composed of compact one-story wooden houses with red tile hip roofs. It was rebuilt into a rolling and staggered colony of reinforced concrete cubes. The designs though hasty were creative. Countless tiny cement buildings were poured, each somewhat unique. The warm climate allows exterior staircases winding up the wall with balconies projecting out, gridwork rail designs, stairstepped floors with tiny observation rooms or final bedrooms on the roof. The most elaborate are ziggurat-like, with green plantings on the ledges and spreading up the walls. They are painted all colors, but mostly cream, tan, or left natural concrete. The last take on free-form gray mould and stain patterns in time that give them the mottled earthy look of Bizen pottery.

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Laundry flaps from balconies and rooftops. They are mini-buildings, with rarely more than three short stories. They follow the street layout of the old city, not a right-angled grid, so they are jumbled, skewed, winding, tangential, and they rise and break with the rolling terrain.

Okinawa is mild in winter and hot and breezy in summer so the balcony and roof spaces are well-used. In time the buildings will become covered with vines and creepers, trees will grow taller and thicker alongside, and the narrow streets with their tiny delivery vans and motorscooters will be over-arched with a glowing canopy.

I had picked out an alley from the overpass that ran a northeast course toward my rough destination, though against the grain of the many lanes that entered it. It was raining and I unfurled a small folding umbrella. The upper stories are homes or apartments but the street level is almost all small shops and services. Hair-do parlors and Tabako shops (“Tabako” the Carib Indian word that has entered most of the world’s languages)—strong coffee shops—on a relatively quiet lane where you must hug the wall when a car passes. Ads and signs everywhere: my eyes couldn’t leave the writing alone. Some part of my mind effortlessly soaked up long-forgotten Chinese characters and syllabary-written loan-words and sallied out to reassemble its old fluency. A few more bends and the lane was heading due east. Too far this way would be off. There were path-wide breaks paved in between structures, some might be passages. Then a student in a blue dress came up one so I took it and was carried through (descending steps and being funneled between old stone walls) to a wider street totally packed with cars and trucks, lined with storefronts and signs, a basin of rumbling and honking. An intersection brings in a street I had been seeking, *Kokusai dori*, “International Street,” which should take me to the shopping bazaars of long ago. The stores are more various here. Some are for the Japanese tourists now coming to Okinawa. They had jewelry of shell and coral, traditional Ryukyuan fabrics, and a large conch shell such as I dived for and brought up when I lived on Suwa-nose island a few hundred miles to the north back in the sixties.

The street went over a canal. Looked down, and there was a two foot diameter drain line entering the ten foot wide stream with a gush of brown water. The stream surface was solid with five inch fish crowded up to the incoming water. The smell that rises was too rank and rich. I hoped those fish were built to handle that stuff. There was a space beyond the canal where a few buildings had been torn down and it looked like a mini-freeway right-of-way was being taken. Through the break in the wall of buildings I could see back in to some elder structures: dark gray wood with the old style roof. Old-style Okinawan, more south Chinese than regular Japanese in look, solid and subtropical with those tiles each mortared down against the typhoon winds. These houses in their little cluster near the canal were survivors from the typhoon of iron. A tiny island of relict architecture, a bit of highly endangered diversity.

Okinawa was once the Ryukyu Kingdom, the “Great Loo Choo,” an independant island nation that had separate relations with the Chinese court. China declared that this nation of less than a million people was the most skilled in courtly manners of all the

tributary realms. The Shimada Clan Lord of southern Kyushu invaded the unarmed Ryukyu capital of Shuri in the seventeenth century, made the king into a puppet, and gradually transformed the islands into a fellaheen colony growing cash-crop sugar cane. Many Okinawans hoped they would regain their freedom after World War II and felt betrayed when the US handed them back to the control of the Japanese.

The forests of Okinawa, mostly gone, once supplied wood for housing. The shortage of wood pushed postwar builders into the ingenious forms of poured concrete. New habitat, new energy, new style. Though the thought of a greenly overgrown garden city of boulders and cliffs is charming, I doubt that these small buildings are the final phase. They are already being shaded out, here and there, by new high-rise hotels and office buildings that are owned and financed from Japan—a flow of investment southward following *naichi* (“mainland” Japanese) tourism. Eventually all these tangled boxy and crenellated multi-colored houses will fade before a monoculture of tall buildings, to look like the new Hong Kong. (The high-rise buildings, like the little ones, are all built of aggregate: river or beach-washed gravels and sands, borrowed awhile from the earth and made to stand on end.) The tall buildings will be a sort of climax for this town, at least until the cash-and energy-flow osmosis that lifts such things skyward fades away.

It was past noon and I stepped into a noodle-shop. It served Okinawan soba and with a few deft touches (indigo-blue fake *kasuri* cloth, *goza* mats on the benches, folksy pottery) echoed ethnicity and the rural. The waitress was not up to trying her English so she absolutely did not see me until I spoke out in Japanese—“Elder sister, some Okinawa soba please.” Smiles of instant rapport. The noodles came in a ten-inch bowl with large chunks of pork, and a cup of chilled country-style tea.

I walked on up the intensely active street. I began to feel the landscape with my skin, a somatic sensation of mirroring or echoing that comes with re-cognitions that are below the conscious threshold. Then I saw my conscious goal: the short slope down into a roofed shopping lane, a gate to a cave, with the words above it, *Heiwa dori*, “Peace Lane.” I stopped before the cave-mouth full of memories of a different Naha City, 1957, when I had explored the town on foot as a seaman ashore off a tanker. It had all been so much poorer and plainer then, and only Heiwa-dori had the glitter and bustle that seems to cover the whole town now. I had been taking a break to earn money between Kyoto Zen Buddhist study sessions, and the Naha tanker stop was en-route to the Persian Gulf. So the bazaar was a place to buy a 3 X 6 *goza* mat, a small teapot and a teacup, some green tea, and a carpenter’s saw. (The saw I saved til much later, but the mat, pot and cup served me well on shipboard. In the Indian Ocean I spread the mat on the boat-deck, slipped off my zori, sat down crosslegged, faced the sunset, and poured *ocha*. Sometimes a shipmate would join me. They amiably said “Snyder you’ve gone totally Asian.”) I catch myself standing there watching the self of thirty-two years earlier walk up the same lane—“You can dive into the past and emerge in the future” the Hua-yen Sutra commentaries say.

So I walked it again. An arching canvas roof covered the length of it, beginning to drum in the increasing rain. Herbs, snacks, boutiques, a shopfull of Mainland China prod-

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ucts, but no loose green tea or carpentry tools today. Halfway back down the lane I noticed a side path with ragged cobble paving. I checked it out. At first it looked like a dead-end, going around a shabby shed to a stone wall. Looking above, a rare sight: the tops of large leafy trees. Something is *there*. The stone path didn't end, it took a turn and went through a break in the wall up steps to a wooded hillock park surrounded by the town. Birds were calling and flying from tree to tree—evergreen glossy broad-leafed trees like Camphor and *Tabu*. Several stairflights higher, at the top, I stood in the shelter of an overarching Banyan tree as the rain pelted down.

Wind and rain from the sea. The birds flitting back and forth, and a young cat stalking. Stone benches, old cut stone edges to the dirt platform, and below, one tiny “ancient house” from the pre-war city. Standing there watched and washed by this world of sky and rain—and the trades and jobs and families of my fellow humans in this wide warm new-growth city, for a moment I was completely at home. At home in the rain with the cat, the banyan, the alleys and the apartments, in a world I barely knew, a stranger in Okinawa, and yet as at home—for this moment, here—as I would be anywhere. And maybe back home as much a stranger there as here, only not seeing it. Memories and our old pathways are woven like ghost nets invisibly filling the landscape of our days. I stood for a moment with the image of ancient forests, clearcuts, and the fresh green new growth of my native West coast mountains shining through these thoughts of the rise and fall of cities and families, all one in the net of nature.

Down the other side of the hill was another maze of little houses and shops, and in great good cheer I plunged on down to find a way back to camp, in this case simply my hotel.

First published as “Naha Pathways” *East West* IX.2 (Spring, 1990) pp. 17–20, Honolulu. Then included in the Counterpoint Press book *The Gary Snyder Reader* 1999. This is a revised version of the original essay.