Kyoto-machiya (Kyoto Traditional Townhouses)

Kyoto hosts a wide variety of traditional machiya buildings, which has a spiritual connotation and influences the daily lives of Kyoto people in both their homes and work places.

Exterior Characteristics of Kyo-machiya

Straight-line Roof Tile (Ichimonjigawara)

One of the major characteristics of Kyo-machiya townhouses is that each eave is parallel to the street. This gives the whole streetscape a sense of unity. In order to emphasize this horizontal line, the lower eaves edge of roof tile is cut in a straight line. This is why the name ichimonji –the Chinese letter for one, “一” has been given to this type of roof tile.

Zheng Kui Dolls (Shoki-san)

Many Kyo-machiya can be found with a small status of “Shouki-san (Zhong Kui doll)” made from roof clay on the eaves above the main entrance. Zhong Kui was originally a Chinese legendary figure. According to the legend, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang China had a dream in which Zhong Kui appeared and later he recovered from a serious illness. Kyotite people decorated the house with these dolls in the hope of expelling epidemics such as malaria.

Types of Kyo-machiya

The “Kyo-machiya Community Development Survey” which was carried out in 2008-2010 stated that approximately 48,000 machiya in the categories shown below are found within Kyoto City.

“Se-miki” or “Hana-miki”

(Proper Two-story Houses)

This style of house, perfected from the late Meiji period to the Taisho period (around 1900-1920), has equal heights on the ground floor and the first floor. The first floor usually features wooden frame glass windows, has equal heights on the ground floor and the first floor.

“Chu-miki” or “Tsushi-miki”

(Houses With Mezzanine)

This style, perfected around the middle of the modern era and built until the late Meiji period (late 19c), has a lower ceiling on the first floor which forms a mezzanine. “Insect cage windows” (mushikomado) are usually obvious on the first floor which forms a mezzanine.

Three Storied Houses

Three storied houses with the characteristics of Kyo-machiya.

Single Storied houses

Single-storied houses with the characteristics of Kyo-machiya.

Features of Kyo-machiya

- The layout of typical Kyo-machiya is more or less similar, although they can vary according to the size of the building.
- The typical layout includes the “mise-niwa (shop area)”, the “hashiri-niwa (kitchen passage)”, the “toriniwa (earthen passage)”, and the “zashiki (a reception room or a guest room)”.
- The layout is made to accommodate smaller houses mainly the draftsman’s “nagaya” for communal living. The illustration below is called “omoteya-zukuri” (shopfront layout), a relatively large machiya, which has two roofs, one for the shop area in front and the main house for the inhabitants.

Smoke Shaft (Hi-bakuro)

A stairwell located above the earthen passage is referred to as the “smoke shaft (hi-bakuro)”, as it is used for smoke and ash from the cooking area. Usually the beams of the stairwell are beautifully crafted and arranged to show the grandeur of the architecture. A skylight is installed in the roof or high up on the wall to allow sunlight into the passage.

Earthen Passage

(Arrow for Evacuation)

A narrow earthen-floor passage which penetrates from the front to the rear of Kyo-machiya is generally referred to as “toreiwa”. A door in the middle divides the two parts: the front is called “mise-niwa” (shop garden and the rear is called “hashiri-niwa (kitchen passage)” which is used for cooking. This passage functioned in many ways in the former days, as an entrance for workers such as carpenters and gardeners, or a passage for the sewage collector from the rear toilet to take the sewage away the front. This is the reason why an earthen passage is used.

Sheemaya

(Houses with Attached Fences)

Some shimaya houses built by prosperous merchants, have attached fences. There is a high wall in front of the house so that the building does not face directly onto the street.

Backyard

This is an entrance for workers such as carpenters and gardeners, or a passage for the sewage collector from the rear toilet to take the sewage away the front.

Shop Area (Misenoma)

One of the major characteristics of kyo-machiya is that working and living spaces are integrated. There is a shop place or public working space (misenoma) with the private living space at the rear.

Rear Garden

Landscaping.

- Not only a cool breeze in summer, but also adds a pleasant green to the house.

References:

- "Handbook on Kyo-machiya Renovation – to keep living in your house –" (Issued by Kyoto Centre for Community Collaboration)
- Translated And Edited By: KyoToyo Executive Committee