

WHEN EAST MARRIES WEST

My views of Japan after a trip home

By THOMAS DILLON

On a quick trip to the United States last winter, I had my sister pull over as we sped down a country road. This road provides a convenient link to the local interstate and my family members use it almost everyday. I did too, back in my distant youth.

Yet now I was astounded at what I saw. Which was . . .

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The fields lay barren — not bursting with corn as in summer. The gray earth, sugared with frost, spread out before me like a bed sheet, and stretched on and on, flat and void, clear to the horizon. Only in the distance — how far? a mile? — did a few bare-branched trees huddle together against the wind. Farther off stood a stone farmhouse, silent and majestic like a castle.

"Get back in the car! It's cold!" my sister called.

Yet, I was spellbound. For the bracing emptiness seemed so beautiful.

My sister soon reminded me that the world holds much more beauty than a frozen cornfield and I agreed. Japan, for example, boasts jagged coastlines and soaring mountains.

Yet, most of my personal views of Japan are far more mundane. Maybe I could see the horizon in Hokkaido, and I might enjoy pastoral scenes galore throughout most of rural Japan. But where I live, in a nook of the Kanto Plain, I routinely open my eyes upon this:

Walls. That's the view from every window in my house, unless I glance skyward.

We live encircled by the homes of neighbors, a separation of only two or three meters in most places. We can gain a farther vista — to an asphalt road, 30 strides away — only from our kitchen. But to do so, we must lean from the window.

The walls continue throughout our neighborhood, as most Japanese homes and their Thumbelina yards stand enclosed. The road from our house to the station twists, rises and falls between those walls.

Sometimes it crosses intersections that fan out into "panoramas" of suburbia, with a football field of space or more in every direction. Other times it presses against city "parks," blessed with but a sandbox, some swings, and a worn oval of dirt.

The road passes "fields" as well, fields not big enough for a pitching wedge. Where ball-capped farmers work and rework the land all year round, turning out a few bushels of produce to match each season.

Near the train station, the view widens farther, but now the obstructions change from homes and apartments into the polished fronts of office buildings and the sign-plastered welcomes of restaurants and stores.

The ride into the city presents the very same views, only in blurs: walls, enclosed streets, buildings, stores, and an occasional enclave of green.

Downtown offers taller and shinier buildings that stand packed into each block like cigarettes in a carton. Train stations dazzle and numb with their neon veneers. And every scene is spiced by people and cars, who flow like rivers down all walkways and roads.

Certainly there are thoroughfares where the city stretches and breathes and you can truly "cast your eyes" rather than reign them in on a leash. There are genuine parks too, with rolls of rich grass, shady trees and — unfortunately — far too many picnickers.

Yet, the overall impression is one of proximity. Concrete, glass, wires, lights, autos and people, all too close together. The trip out of the city is just as confining as that going in.

But if one took the train just a little farther, there would come significant change. The train would rumble over rivers with broad banks of grass and stones. In spots, the houses would push away from one another, like PE students spreading apart for calisthenics. And in the not-so-distant distance would come the low shadows of foothills and, behind them, mountains.

Yet, who even looks? Everyone being too worn and wearied by the pace and crunch of the city.

In the end, my principal view of Japan is not outdoors at all. It is instead our family living room: six tatami mats, with paper *fusuma* on two sides and *shoji* screens before the windows, the walls a sandpaper beige.

My wife reclines on a flat tatami chair and giggles at the TV, which rules one corner. I sit beside her at the *kotatsu* and nurse a cup of black coffee. If I reach behind to slide open the *fusuma*, I can peek into our dining room/kitchen. Bereft of sunlight, the largest room of our house more closely resembles a cave. The table and chairs and cabinets loom like stalagmites in the dark.

A winter cornfield and a cave . . . Perhaps it's not quite fair to compare settings. Urban life too has plusses aplenty.

Yet, after 30 years in Japan, I find I am not immune to culture shock.

All it takes to bring it on is an empty field.

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