



Shrines have sacred groves

When was the last time you thought about shrines? Shrines are places that are close to us although they are not given much thought in our everyday lives.

The deity enshrined in Suwa-jinja Shrine in Yanaka is called Osuwa-sama, protecting the area from Nippori to Yanaka.

Source: PIXTA

You may be surprised to know that Japan has about 80,000 shrines, which are more than the number of convenience stores in this country. In Tokyo, of course, the number of convenience stores exceed that of shrines, but there are still more than 1,800 shrines here. What do shrines have that temples don't? Torii gates and *komainu* guardian dogs may come to mind, but there is another very important difference—green spaces.

Japan has many shrines, ranging in size from big to small, which are protected by sacred groves rich with trees. Many of these shrines retain the

The Significance of the Lasting Presence of Shrines and Their Groves

Sustainable green urban development

Naoko Fujita



Zelkova-lined path of the Baba Gate of Ootakamadaira Shrine, Fuchu City

Source: PIXTA

natural form and indigenous plants rooted in the climate of their respective areas, and they have also served a role in carrying on local culture such as festivals. But there was a time from around the end of the 1990s when over 150 hectares of shrine land were lost annually. This was due to shrines turning a portion of their lands into parking or housing lots for real estate revenues, or providing land for roads or public facilities in response to local government requests. But there were hardly any cases of the shrine itself being lost. This is because of the reverence the Japanese have for the shrine's deities and the land itself.

"Reading the land" for proper green plans

The people of the Edo period had shrines carry various messages, showing that the shrine was a very important spot in their community. In this way, shrines and their groves are messengers

connecting the people from the Edo period and before to those of us who live in this present age. We must gain the ability to "read the land" in order to read those messages and have the land serve as a foundation supporting modern urban life.

In recent years, an active trend has emerged to consider urban green spaces from the perspectives of spatial distribution and networks. This kind of approach makes it possible to give value to aspects of urban green spaces that are not able to be appraised through conventional data such as green coverage rate and area, which have been used in the analysis and evaluation of urban green spaces. As this also makes it possible to clarify the overlooked potential of green spaces, this could be very meaningful for future greenery plans.

In order to understand the features of green spaces from this kind of perspective and position it in urban greenery plans, it would be necessary to understand that each green space has been positioned according to a sense of values and to grasp the characteristics of the distribution of green spaces. To that end, it would be important to not handle green spaces in a uniform manner, but to take the perspective of understanding that they form the foundation for the cultivation of culture and history, and that there is a connection between their actual space and their history and location, and then spatially understand the features of their respective distributions. While shrine sites have no cohesiveness and are randomly distributed, they are more strongly connected to the land than temples or parks, and exist in all areas with no agglomeration or tendency for localized distribution. In the same way, temples and urban parks also possess different site qualities.

In this way, if green spaces with different site qualities are connected by utilizing their defining features, it could generate a new urban greenery design that we have not been aware of up to now.

"Shrine power" of the shrine site

It could be said that shrine groves are precious green spaces in built-up urban areas. For example, when considering landscape design that contributes to conserving biodiversity, knowing about the area's past natural plants and their distribution will add more temporal and spatial dimension to the design. And, when thinking about what trees should be placed where, in order to create a biotope network that connects green spaces such as shrine groves and parks, it would be helpful to learn the history of the shrine's site and use this information.



Meiji Jingu Shrine and Yoyogi Park offer a huge green space in the city center. The trees lining Omotesando avenue to Meiji Jingu help form one of Tokyo's leading landscapes.

Source: PIXTA

that we must take the position of respecting the role of this site, which was selected from the experiences of those who came before us, and by learning from this, use this to the fullest. From now on, rather than environmental design to conquer nature, green urban development requires an approach that actively takes in design that embraces nature and applies this in society.



The torii gate and greenery along the path to Hie-jinja Shrine in Nagatacho, Tokyo, which was built to protect Edo Castle.

Source: PIXTA



Naoko Fujita

Professor, Faculty of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba

Naoko Fujita completed The University of Tokyo Graduate School of Frontier Sciences, Dept. of Natural Environmental Studies, Division of Environmental Studies, and received her Ph.D. in environmental studies from The University of Tokyo. Assumed her current position from April 2019 after serving as The University of Tokyo Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences Research Fellow, National Institute for Environmental Studies Postdoctoral Researcher, Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute Research Fellow, and Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Design, Kyushu University Faculty of Design. She specializes in landscape ecology.