

Daniels, Inge 20108. *The Japanese House: Material Culture in the Modern Home.* (Oxford York: Berg). x + 243. ISBN 978-184520-517-1.

This volume by Inge Daniels who teaches in the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford is an absorbing ethnography of contemporary middle-class Japanese homes and houses. It is accompanied by insightful and discerning photographs taken by Susan Andrews who lectures at the London Metropolitan University. The volume is very well written, based on solid data and theoretically informed. Daniels brings us into the houses of thirty specific families in the Japanese urban area of Kansai (roughly Kobe, Osaka, and Kyoto). The focus on concrete homes both allows her to anchor her analysis in very rich ethnographic data and facilitates the link between her investigation and broader developments in current-day Japan. The dwellings where the families live are diverse and include detached houses and apartments in large and small blocks (called “mansions” in Japanese), owned and rented units. In addition, given that the families are demographically varied Daniels well portrays the diverse features and dynamics of kinship and neighborhood in the country. As an anthropologist with long experience in Japan (and to be fair, as one cited in the volume), I found myself time and again learning new things about Japanese homes and thoroughly enjoying this insightful ethnography.

Let me briefly sketch out the book’s contents. Chapter 1 explores ideas about the house and home in contemporary Japan through an examination of the importation of “Western” notions of domesticity (an ideal dwelling comprises a kitchen, living room and “master” bedroom). In addition, it examines how family relations are formed within homes. Chapter 2 is devoted to the spatial boundaries and the relations crossing these boundaries between residents of houses and their surroundings. This part includes a fascinating investigation of such things as fences and walls. Chapter 3 brings readers inside again to portray the spiritual aspects of domestic space through a focus on family alters and rituals, and the material culture protecting the family from malevolent forces. Chapter 4 is especially interesting since it critiques the often romantic idea of the Japanese house as characterized by a minimalist aesthetic. In concentrating for example, on tatami rooms Daniels shows the diversity of their use and their often crowded organization. Chapter 5 again is fascinating for the way it describes and underscores the inherent tension between display and storage in all homes. Indeed, Daniels convincingly underlines consumption patterns that have led to a material surplus flowing into Japanese homes. Chapter 6 is a wonderful explication of the difficulties of disposing of objects from the home. It demonstrates how the value of many objects (primarily gifts received) is related to a sense of duty towards the relationship within which they were exchanged.

The book successfully achieves a number of aims. First, it accompanies readers into Japanese homes to examine domestic lives and ties through showing the social significance of such often taken-for-granted issues as adornments and exhibits, furniture and tatami floors, the exchange of gifts and family centered rituals, and the places where people eat, bathe, socialize and sleep. Second, it provides excellent illustrations (some of which mirror Japanese aesthetics) of homes, rooms, fixtures, equipment or storing places that provide readers with a feel for domestic spaces. Third, the volume links specific analyses to wider issues in contemporary Japan as gender and marriage, neighborly ties (or their lack) and consumption, ideologies of the middle-class as well as the frictions and tensions (such as generational ones) that characterize any family. Fourth, the ethnography convincingly cites and uses scholarly work and data in the Japanese language so that readers who do not have access to this scholarship are rewarded.

As stated, throughout the book Daniels provides photographs taken by Susan Andrews. These photos not only complement and illustrate the argument found in the text but can be read and analyzed in their own right. For example, chapters are divided by photo spreads that offer another way of looking at homes and houses and their diversity. Readers are thus offered insightful peeks into street gardens, neighborhood surveillance, alcoves, doll festivals, or humor and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the spreads' value lies in provoking sociological questions such as the importance of neighborly social control, notions about disposal of material culture and ending social ties or the reasons for seeking spiritual assurance.

To conclude, this very well written volume will definitely appeal to an array of students (from the introductory to the advanced levels), to scholars interested in Japan , architecture, domestic space and family dynamics, and to general readers interested in the subject. Rich in textual and visual data, well placed in the study of material culture and theoretically informed, this is a model ethnographic work.

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