

Alumni Interview with Professor Chester Liebs

Your Fulbright Only Begins With Your Fulbright: Reflections From an American Fulbrighter

**An Interview with Chester Liebs,
1994 Senior Researcher, 2006 Lecturer/Researcher
by Marigold Holmes, Manager for Public Affairs**

Professor Chester Liebs is currently a visiting professor in the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Urban Engineering and an Adjunct Professor in the Graduate Program in Preservation and Regionalism at the University of New Mexico. He is also a University of Vermont Professor Emeritus of History. He received two Fulbrights, one in 1994 as a Senior Researcher affiliated with Tokyo National University of Fine Arts & Music and another in 2006 as a Lecturer/Researcher at the University of Tokyo. His interests lie in Heritage Conservation as something that can make an important contribution to the future, with his most recent Fulbright teaching and research focused on lessons for livable communities from the everyday intangible cultural heritage of Japan.

During my career I have written countless recommendations. Back in 1990 a professional colleague (Cherilyn Widell) had quite an innovative idea to study the adaptive reuse of historic buildings in Japan. I reviewed her Fulbright proposal and after writing a recommendation I jokingly said to her "be sure I get invited to Japan if your application is successful." To my surprise she did. During her Fulbright I received an invitation to meet a professor at *Geidai* (Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music), Masaru MAENO, who she thought shared many interests with me. She was right. Just two months after our first meeting in Tokyo, in March 1992, Professor Maeno and I were in Japan's Okayama prefecture conducting a joint exchange with his *Geidai* and my University of Vermont graduate students in the endangered traditional communities of Tamashima and Takahashi. The following year we held a similar exchange in the U.S. for we had discovered that buildings, place, and cultural traditions can speak volumes across language barriers.

These exchanges also made me want to learn a lot more about Japan. As a landscape historian I'm very visually oriented and Japan is a very visual and context oriented country. Soon I started learning Japanese and began traveling to Japan at least once a year. Finally, I decided I had better stay for an extended time and applied for a Fulbright. My application was successful and I arrived in Japan as a Senior Researcher at *Geidai* in September of 1994.

The 1995 portion of my Fulbright year was a tragic time for Japan. The nation was shocked by an aberrant religious cult's sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and even more so by the *Hanshin Daijishin* (the great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake) which devastated the City of Kobe—the first powerful earthquake to strike a major Japanese City since the Great Kanto Earthquake leveled Tokyo in 1923. Given my background in historic preservation, I took part in a mission from *Geidai*, with Professor Maeno, shortly after the tremor struck, to do a preliminary survey on the quake's impact on traditional buildings with an eye to making similar structures safer in the future. It was like stepping into a war zone. Buildings had been flattened, or tossed on their

sides, and one could see oranges placed by collapsed houses as food for the spirits of departed loved ones. While we were shocked for weeks after the survey, we were also awed by the incredible self-help, bravery, and the way the people comported themselves in that emergency.

When I returned to the States in June 1995 I soon discovered that your Fulbright only begins with your Fulbright, and I say this from my heart. My Fulbright didn't simply stop. Relationships I had developed with people and organizations in Japan continued well after my Fulbright year. My second life of service, as a bridge between Japan and the U.S., had begun.

First, the Japan National Trust asked me to help plan and speak at their Kobe Earthquake Conference in December 1995. Then I discovered that the lectures I was invited to give on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places for the Japan Agency for Cultural Affairs during my Fulbright may have had some small influence. In 1996, in the aftermath of the Kobe disaster, a Japan National Register was enacted to expanded protection to more of the nation's cultural resources. Later on agency staff helped me gather research for an article introducing this law to the English-speaking legal community in the *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* (June 1998).

My engagement with Japan continued in other ways as well. I gave one of the keynotes at JUSEC's 1996 Tokyo celebration of the 50th anniversary of the global Fulbright program; spoke at a fundraiser in Tokyo to save a traditional Japanese building in Philadelphia, the *Shofusho*; worked with Professor Maeno on a survey of an historic village near Nara, Ouda-cho; showed a Japanese news commentator the restoration of Grand Central Terminal for the Japan Society of New York to encourage the saving of Tokyo Station; and organized a professional exchange, with the Japan National Trust and the Glynwood Center in the U.S., to the threatened Japanese World Heritage village of Shirakawa-go. So my Fulbright led to my playing a role as a sort cultural ambassador-without-portfolio.

From such involvement with Japan, I was invited to serve for a year as Visiting Professor at Tsukuba University and subsequently at *Geidai* for three years. After leaving *Geidai* in 2003, and after six months of somewhat severe reverse culture shock, I moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Luckily I arrived just in time to become one of the founding members of Santa Fe *JIN*, the brain child of several leaders of the city's small Japanese community. The emblem for the organization is the *kanji* character *jin* (人). The term *JIN* has a dual meaning. While *JIN* means "person" in Japanese it also stands for Japan Intercultural Network (JIN). I was also appointed adjunct professor in the University of New Mexico's new Graduate Program in Historic Preservation and Regionalism and was able to incorporate much Japanese content into my lectures. So, from that initial letter of recommendation back in 1990, the Fulbright program in Japan has continued to be a part of my life. The long-term value of this program and its influence on people and the exchange of ideas are enormous.

In 2006, I received a second Fulbright, this time to teach and

conduct research at *Todai* (The University of Tokyo) under the rubric "Lessons for Livable Communities from the Everyday Intangible Cultural Heritage of Japan". As with my work in 1994, I continued to take great interest in everyday places and what they have to teach us for the future. While Americans have much to be proud of, we also need to be somewhat humble and realize that we can learn a great deal from other countries.

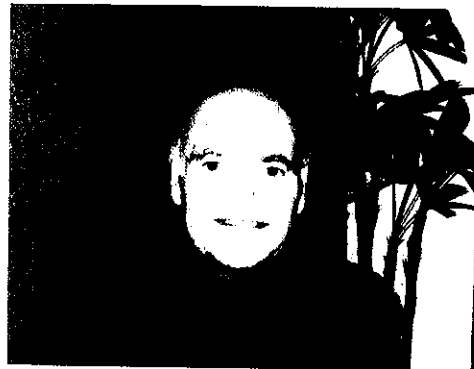
For example, in an age of climate change, one can find many already existing planet-friendly practices as part of daily life in cities like Tokyo. Its highly-dense yet safe and livable neighborhoods, the proximity of *shotengai* (local shopping districts), and arguably the world's most efficient public transit lend themselves less to automobiles than walking or using bicycles—an estimated 80 million of which are in practical daily use as a means of getting about. Ironically, while these are the very types of things American urbanists are trying to emulate as an alternative to energy-wasting sprawl, they are so ordinary a part of life in urban Japan that they are seldom recognized as being extraordinary. Such issues have also been overlooked in the recent flurry of international media stories praising Japanese government PR campaigns like "Cool Biz" (alleged to conserve energy during the summer by encouraging people to wear cooler clothes such as short sleeved shirts without jackets or ties) at the same time that the country is busy building energy-intensive highways and suburban shopping centers.

Japan today is certainly different from the Japan I first visited in the early 1990's. New buses sport motors that automatically shut off and on when the vehicles stop and go, and more energy-efficient *K-jidōsha* (very small but surprisingly spacious cars) are in use. On a less positive note, there is also what I call the "bicycle war," an increasingly negative attitude by local governments towards people using bicycles. Though it has some legitimate aspects as bicyclists sometimes ride recklessly or abandon their old vehicles irresponsibly, I've seen many cases where anti-bicycle restrictions are simply based on image. In Tokyo, for example, a row of parked bicycles is often seen as something ugly that isn't emblematic of a "world-class city" by developers, designers and public officials, rather than a boon to a healthy climate. To help explore this issue with my *Todai* Urban Design students, many of whom will become the nation's leading urbanists of the future, I conducted a "*Mamachari Zemi*" (Japanese for mother's shopping bicycle seminar) and also wrote a feature article on the subject for *Japan Newsweek* (September 12, 2007).

Some of my Japanese colleagues think there is a disconnect between symbolic gestures to limit climate change and how ordinary Japanese have traditionally, and mostly unknowingly, carried on a "green" style of living. How do you build on this tradition for the future? Can Japan become the first post-over-consumption society? It's a hard question. Though the world seems at the moment to be more interested in other parts of Asia, I think that the Fulbright program has the potential to shift the focus to the great possibilities here.

If someone works in another country for only a few months they

might have a considerable impact, but never know it unless they keep up the relationship after they return. For me, having had the privilege of living in Japan for a year or more at a time has allowed me to establish relationships that last. I have been fortunate to have had two Fulbrights, an opportunity to teach at *Tsukuba*, *Geidai* and *Todai*, and the honor to work with exceptional Japanese colleagues such as Professor Maeno, and *Todai*'s Professor Yukio NISHIMURA. I also recently had the luxury of feedback, not the official, ceremonial kind of feedback one hears upon saying good-bye, which is very nice and heartfelt, but feedback from graduate students I taught five, ten years ago. Through their comments I've been able see that in some small way I have contributed to what they are now doing. So again, it ties in with the Fulbright experience, which initiated these relationships. There is great satisfaction to the knowledge that one has had some small influence—influence doesn't always come through your mouth, but from how you look at things... the way you relate to people.



I think that in a world where you can't always trust who is awarded what because of commercialization and politicization, the fact that there is a stringent peer review in the Fulbright selection process gives the program great integrity. Obtaining a Fulbright isn't just a free ride; you've got to really think through what you're doing. By having that peer review and then the review by each nation's host administration (in Japan JUSEC), you know you've been really vetted. Over the years many people have passed through that sieve who have great cultural sensitivity and are thoughtful ambassadors for our country—students as well as adults. For any American who wants to contribute to the global future, I can't think of a better way to do it than to see if they can make the cut to be a Fulbrighter.

To put this into rather American competitive terms, the experience of applying for a Fulbright lets you ask yourself, "Are you good enough?" And if you are and you're selected you can look in the mirror and know that you'll have really earned it. The experience of applying for a Fulbright, thinking through your proposal, and learning the language and cultural background that you need to live in another country and function well, will serve you for the rest of your life.