

Because of ambitious new projects such as a massive aquarium, critics fear that Kyoto's ancient allure will be lost and tourism will dwindle further

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Out with the old, and in with the new

A dolphin pool, a penguin park and a giant wave pool could soon join the imperial-era townhouses and ancient Buddhist temples in Kyoto, Japan's former imperial capital.

As early as next month, work will begin on a mammoth aquarium complex in central Kyoto, in leafy Umekoji Park at the center of the city. A brainchild of the Orix Real Estate Corp, the project could breathe new life into Kyoto's tourism industry by attracting more than 2 million visitors a year, developers say. But to opponents, the proposed aquarium, set to open in 2012, is a misguided enterprise that threatens to destroy Kyoto's historic ambience. Adding to the disgrace, they say, is Orix's plan to showcase dolphins in a 1,765m² pool at a time when the nation is under fire for hunting thousands of dolphins and porpoises each year.

"Kyoto should not be building concrete boxes," said Shinsho Kajita, head priest at the Honen-in Buddhist temple in Kyoto and leader of a growing local protest movement against Orix's plans.

"Kyoto's residents and its visitors care more about preserving old neighborhoods," he said. "We have the wrong idea of economic development, and it is destroying our city."

Whether or not Kyoto gets the aquarium, experts say Japan clearly needs to re-examine its approach to tourism, a US\$944 billion industry worldwide — bigger than autos, bigger than steel.

Despite choice destinations such as ancient Kyoto and modern, bustling Tokyo, as well as beach and ski resorts, Japan attracted just 8.4 million foreign visitors in 2008 — a small fraction of France's 79 million, the US' 58 million or China's 53 million, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Last year, the number of foreign visitors to Japan dropped 18.7 percent, to 6.79 million, amid the global recession, according to Japan's government.

Japan earned just US\$10.8 billion from foreign tourism in 2008, a tenth of the US\$110 billion the US earned from overseas tourists

that year. Ukraine and Macau each attract more foreign tourists a year than Japan.

"Japan has the potential to be a tourism superpower," said Hiroshi Mizohata, who took over as commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency in January.

Mizohata, former president of a popular local soccer team, has set an ambitious goal of increasing the number of foreign visitors to Japan to more than 10 million in two years and to 20 million by 2016. "With new ideas and initiatives, I believe we can meet these targets," he said.

Government officials blame the lack of budget-travel options in Japan, as well as its high costs, for the country's unpopularity as a tourist destination.

But critics point out that until now, the tourism market has been geared almost exclusively to domestic travelers, which means that much of Japan's tourist infrastructure does not meet the expectations of foreign tourists.

Japan's tourism strategy also has been driven by investment in engineering projects and theme parks rather than the protection of the country's natural and cultural riches, an oversight that some experts say has cost the country dearly in tourism dollars.

Nowhere is Japan's weakness in tourism more evident than in Kyoto, said Alex Kerr, a longtime resident and founder of Iori, a company that since 2004 has restored 10 old town houses, or *machiya*, in the city to rent out to visitors.

In the postwar period, Kyoto has shown little concern for preserving the traditional neighborhoods that would most appeal to foreign tourists, he said. The pace of

destruction gathered speed in the 1990s; more than 40,000 old wooden homes disappeared from central Kyoto that decade, according to the International Society to Save Kyoto.

Though ancient temples and gardens remain in the city, they are overwhelmed by the sprawling mass of gray buildings and neon signs that dominate the skyline — the product of ineffective zoning policies in the city, Kerr said.

Visitors to Kyoto are greeted by the peculiar, needle-shaped, red-and-white Kyoto Tower, as well as the Kyoto Hotel Okura, a 16-floor granite building in the heart of the city that had to seek a waiver from local height restrictions when it was rebuilt in 1994. Three years later, Kyoto Station — a structure nearly 805m long, with a glaring glass facade in its latest incarnation — opened in the city center.

Besides the aquarium, local politicians are pushing for more big projects in Kyoto's city center, including a new 30,000m² Railroad Museum built by the West Japan Railway Co, slated to open in 2014. The deals are expected to bring the city lucrative rent income.

All the modern construction can obscure the city's charms, especially for foreign visitors. "This all looks the same as Tokyo," said Delaina Hutchinson, a tourist from Australia, after a hike up the Kyoto Tower in February. She and her husband and two young daughters planned to spend just a day in Kyoto before returning to their Tokyo hotel that evening. "I wish we could get away to somewhere quieter," she said.

According to Kerr, the government has long neglected investment in tourism, which it



Top: Kyoto's Rokuon-Ji Temple. Above: A dancer rehearses prior to the Kyo O Dori (Kyoto dance) festival.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA

sees as an industry that supports only menial, low-paid jobs. Officials overlook the economic activity generated by architects, landscape architects and similar professions, he said.

"Making things has been a Japanese obsession, something that advanced economies do, while tourism was for poor countries," Kerr said. "Now the importance has flipped: in today's economy, it's software over hardware. But they have been asleep in Tokyo."

Kyoto officials say that tourism can coexist with modern development.

"Of course, we care about Kyoto's scenery and will work to preserve it," Keiji Yamada,

governor of Kyoto Prefecture, told a group of visiting foreign reporters earlier this year. "But we must also compete with the world."

Local officials say the aquarium will be especially good in attracting tourists from China, more of whom have come in recent years. The Chinese have many ancient temples of their own, Miyako Murozaki, a tourism official at Kyoto's chamber of commerce, noted. "They like new things," she said.

Orix says the aquarium will be an "interactive and educational space" that will showcase both local and exotic marine life. "We have been holding many meetings with local residents, and we intend to consider their views," said Tetsuya Nagai, a company spokesman.

Anger ran high among local residents at a recent protest meeting. "I want them to leave Umekoji Park as it is," said Yasuko Hirano, a 60-year-old homemaker. "As a little child, I remember playing in the garden of a local temple, but now it's turned into a car park," she said. "What's being destroyed and what's being built — they are both tragedies."



Above and left: Men dressed in traditional costumes tow a cart during the Gion festival in downtown Kyoto. Dating back to the 9th century, the festival is celebrated annually on July 17.

Right: A woman dressed in late Heian Period (794 to 1192) costume walks in the Aoi festival procession at the Shimogamo Shinto shrine in Kyoto.

PHOTOS: EPA

