

# The Scenic Loss and Preservation of District Shrines at the Fringe of Tokyo

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## ABSTRACT

With their deity groves, Japanese Shinto shrines form unique green spaces. Further, many shrines are located between a settlement and the rural or natural environment. This location relates to the nature-worship of the Shinto tradition. However, when visiting present shrine precincts, it gives the impression that their original landscape location and green space is impaired by urban changes. This study focuses on the point how the scenic condition of district shrines at the fringe of Tokyo is challenged in the present, and presents an example of a successful preservation in the urban area. The key point of such preservation is that it goes beyond the shrine precinct itself. If there still exists a natural or beautiful scenery next to a shrine with some distinct historical or religious relationship, both shrine and scenery should be preserved together.

*Key Words: District Shrines, Landscape Location, Green Space, Urbanization, Preservation*

## 1. Introduction and Purpose

This paper deals with the green space of Japanese Shinto shrines and their landscape location. First, in order to demonstrate the context of shrines and the surrounding landscape, a basic definition is presented. The document 'Basic terms of Shinto' defines a shrine as 'a building and place' where deities are enshrined; it states further "---the shrines were the matrix from which the villages developed. The shrines assume various forms, large and small, in accordance with their history; but all are located in pure natural surroundings of great beauty..."(Shinto-Committee 1958).

This citation extract contains important clues. First, shrines do not only consist of a building complex, but are above all a religious *place*; second, they embody the cornerstone of former village development in Japan, and third they are closely related to a beautiful, natural scenery. One key factor is that in the past, there have been no shrine buildings, but only sacred places in the forest. Accordingly, the location of many shrines next to the natural environment relates to the nature worship as part of the Shinto tradition(Sonoda, 2000; Ono, 2005). In detail, one can frequently see that a shrine site is

situated towards a slope in the northern direction, while the village or town lies in the south. The approach road(*sando*) connects the town with the shrine, and the deity grove(*chinju no mori*) at the backside of the main building complex (*shaden*) often forms a link between the shrine and the adjacent scenery.

However, due to a fast urbanization, the landscape next to many shrine precincts is affected by changing land uses, like road constructions, dense buildings, or high rising apartments. Further, it could be observed that it is attractive for a shrine to use or rent parts of its site as a parking place often on cost of its green space. Thus, there is some doubt about both the preservation of the adjacent environment and the green space within a shrine precinct(hypothesis). The purpose of this study is to understand the present condition of the green space and the surrounding environment of the ordinary shrine. Further, it asks for the extent of changes in the 20th century(past 60 years). Finally, it looks for an example that might serve as an appropriate model of a better future preservation.

Looking at previous studies in the same field, one paper deals with the spatial transformation of shrines in the urban area(Kato, 1983). Other recent works discuss the meaning of the deity grove and reasons for their conservation and loss

(Ueda, 2000; Sonoda, 2005). A further important study investigates the spatial location of shrine sites within the natural environment and its religious meaning (Ueda, 2003). However, there are no studies about the scenic condition of district shrines at the urban fringe.

## II. Methods

### 1. Case Study Selection

This multiple case study contains 28 district shrines (*gosha*, 郷社) at the fringe of Tokyo. The reason to select these shrines is their relatively low rank. It relates to the former system of shrine order (*shakaku*), which has been established by the government of the Meiji era in 1871. Though it does not have any official validity today, it has a meaning in the historical context. All shrines with a lower rank than *gosha*, the village shrines (*sonsha*); and the shrines without any rank (*mukakusha*), were likely to be forced to move or have been abolished after the end of Meiji era. By contrast, the *gosha* represent the lowest rank of shrines within shrines keeping their historical continuity until today. At the same time, their size and meaning is just appropriate to discuss the state of the environment of local communities. They are more likely to be challenged by urban environmental changes than the famous shrines. According to Meiji era sources (Meiji Era Shrine Organisation, 1912), it was possible to determine 99 *gosha* shrines in present Tokyo, Saitama and Chiba prefecture in an area up to 40km from Tokyo city centre (*Nihonbashi*). Next, in order to study those shrines where relics of the natural environment can be found most probably, this study concentrates (a) on shrines at the fringe of Tokyo and (b) where still a distinct green space on (or even next to) their sites exists.

Both points have been checked with the help of maps and satellite pictures. Accordingly, 28 suitable study sites at the fringe of Tokyo have been selected. Their names and location are shown in Table 1.

### 2. Site Inspections

First, all 28 case study sites have been inspected, including their location and the surrounding environment (scenic features like forests, rivers, lakes). Further, the green space of each site has been studied. In detail, the scenic vista provided by trees along an approach road and the spatial depth of the

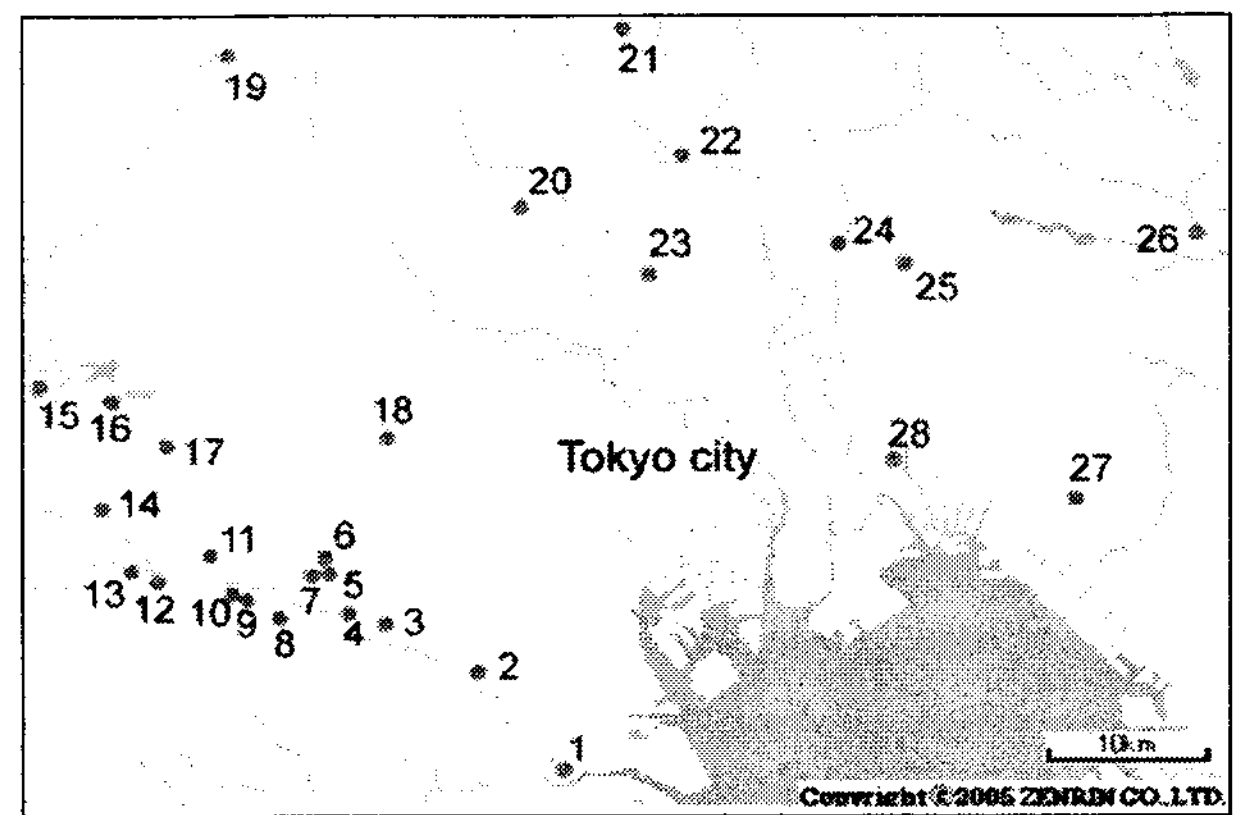


Figure 1. The case study sites at the fringe of Tokyo

Table 1. The case study sites at the fringe of Tokyo

No.	Name of shrine	Japanese name	Location
1	Rokugo shrine	六郷神社	大田區東六郷
2	Usa shrine	宇佐神社	世田谷區尾山台
3	Hikawa shrine	氷川神社	世田谷區喜多見
4	Izumi shrine	伊豆美神社	狛江市中和泉
5	Kohaku shrine	虎柏神社	調布市佐須町
6	Aoi shrine,	青渭神社	調布市深大寺元町
7	Fudaten shrine	布田天神社	調布市調布ヶ丘
8	Anasawaten shrine	穴澤天神社	稲城市矢野
9	Aoi shrine	青渭神社	稲城市東長沼
10	Ōmatonotsuten shrine	大麻止乃豆乃天神社	稲城市大丸
11	Ono shrine	小野神社	府中市住吉町
12	Ono shrine	小野神社	多摩市一ノ宮
13	Hachiman shrine	八幡神社	日野市三澤
14	Suwa shrine	諏訪神	立川市柴崎町
15	Azumamiten shrine	阿豆佐味天神社	西多摩郡瑞穂町
16	Toyokashima shrine	豊鹿島神社	東大和市芋窪
17	Shinmeigu shrine	神明宮神社	小平市小川町
18	Hikawa shrine	氷川神社	練馬區石神井台
19	Hikawa shrine	氷川神社	川越市宮下町
20	Hikawa nyōtai shrine	氷川女体神社	さいたま市宮本
21	Hachiman shrine	八幡神社	春日部市粕壁
22	Hisaizu shrine	久伊豆神社	越谷市越ヶ谷
23	Minegaoka Hachiman	峯ヶ岡八幡神社	川口市峯
24	Akagi shrine.	赤城神社	流山市流山
25	Katori shrine	香取神社	流山市前ヶ崎
26	Takeuchi shrine	竹内神社	我孫子市布佐
27	Ninomiya shrine	二宮神社	船橋市三山
28	Hachiman shrine	八幡神社	市川市八幡

Table 2. Items of examination

Aspects	Details of observation	Sources of evidence
<b>The present state of district shrines</b>		
1. Landscape position	The position of a shrine site in the landscape, its relationship to the landform and to local scenic features	Site inspections, satellite pictures, maps
2. Green space	Size & form of the deity grove and the green vista of the approach road	Site inspections, satellite pictures
<b>Changes in 20th century</b>		
1. Scenery	Scenic changes around the shrine sites in 20th century (focus on past 60 years)	Historical maps, historical air pictures (since 1947), interviews
2. Green space	Distinct change of size / structure of the green space	Historical maps, photos & air pictures, interviews

deity grove around the main building complex have been examined (Table 2).

### 3. Air Picture Analysis

Second, satellite pictures of all shrine sites have been analyzed with the purpose to understand how far the process of urbanization around the shrines actually goes. Since the shrines at the fringe of Tokyo city have been rural areas earlier, historical air pictures have been collected as well. All in all, 280 air pictures between 1947 and 2007 have been studied (10 per shrine). Within this period of the past 60 years, pictures with temporal intervals of at least ten years have been chosen, in order to clarify how much the environment and the shrine groves have changed (periods of 1947-48, 1961-63, 1974, 1989 and 2007).

## III. Results

### 1. The Present State of District Shrines

Most of the investigated shrines are located in a flat area near waters, mostly rivers (Figure 2-a, Table 3-1). This correlates with the landform of the Kanto plain. There is no definition up to what distance a river relates to a shrine. However, as a tendency, it can be said that the larger a river is the more away it can be. Further, there are historical

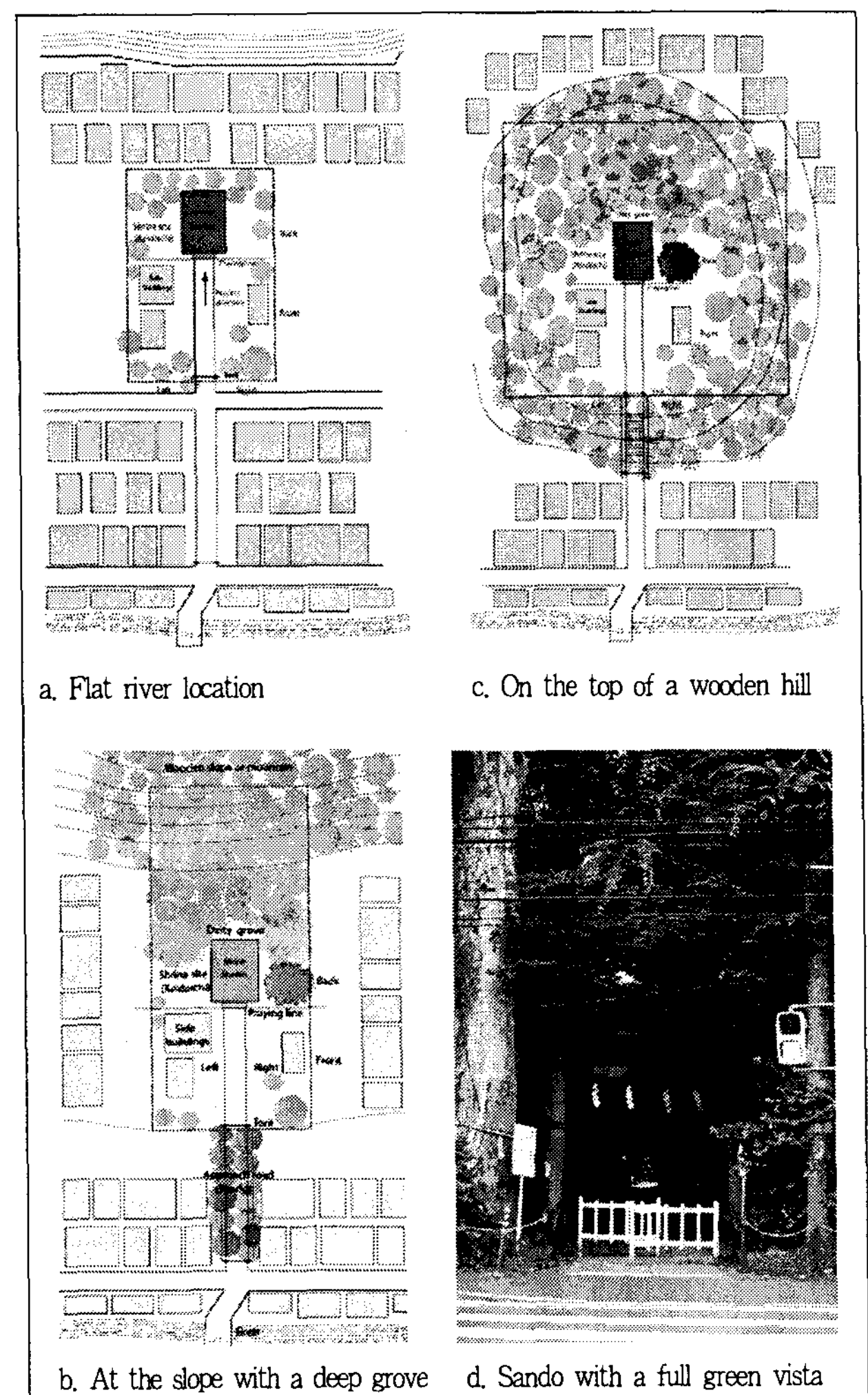


Figure 2. Frequent patterns of sites &amp; green spaces

and religious reasons that indicate the river relationship of a shrine, e.g. if a shrine's position has been next to a river and it moved later or if the *kami* of the river is enshrined. A further reason to count a shrine related to waters is if there exists spring water on the site. On this basis, the shrines have been classified. However, at the same time, 50% of the case study sites are (also) located at the foot of a mountain, top of a hill, or at a slope, which can be regarded as the classical position. In such cases, a shrine becomes often a landmark of the local area (Figure 2-b, 3-c, and Table 3-2).

Regarding the green space itself, the most frequent pattern that could be observed is a deity grove with a distinct spatial depth of at least 30m and a high view density (18 cases). Usually, such a grove extends behind the main building, in some cases even the shrine precinct (Figure 2-b, Table 3-3). There are also cases where the grove surrounds the whole



Table 3: Result of examination

Shr. No.	The present state of district shrines					Changes in 20th century		
	Landscape Position		Green space			Scenery/Green space		
Point	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)
1	0					0*	0	0
2	0	0	0			0		
3	0		0	0	0	0		
4**	0				0	0		
5	0			0		0		
6**	0	0				0		
7**	0		0			0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0		
9	0				0	0		
10**	0	0	0	0	0	0		
11						0		
12	0		0	0		0	0	
13	0	0	0			0		
14**					0	0*	0	0
15		0	0					
16**		0	0			0		(0)
17**			0		0	0	0	(0)
18**	0	0	0		0	0		0
19**	0			0		0*	0	
20**	0	0	0			0		(0)
21**	0		0			0		0
22**	0		0		0	0		0
23**		0	0		0	0		(0)
24**	0	0	0	0		0		
25		0				0	0	
26		0	0	0		0		
27**	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
28**					0	0*	0	
Total	19	14	18	9	12	27	8	11

\*\* : formal interview held and recorded<sup>1)</sup>

- 1) Next to rivers, lakes, and spring water (due to a spatial & religious relationship)
- 2) Position at slope, hill, or mountain
- 3) A deity grove with a distinct depth and view density (>30m spatial extension)
- 4) A deity grove which encloses the whole shrine precinct
- 5) A tree-lined approach road that provides a full green vista (like a green tunnel)
- 6) Distinct change from a rural to an urban area/\*already urbanized until 1945
- 7) Reduction of deity grove
- 8) Loss of grove density & Sugi tree species (only density)

precinct (Figure 2-c, and Table 3-4). By contrast, the remaining sites (usually at flat places) only possess quite small

groves, as shown in Figure 3-a. Finally, a further component is the tree-lined approach road (Figure 3-d and Table 3-5). In general, the trees of a *sando* are not distinguished from the entire deity grove. However, according to the results in hand, it is reasonable to count a *sando* that provides a full green vista like a tunnel as an independent green space component.

## 2. Scenic Changes in the 20th Century

Concerning the major scenic changes around the district shrines, a very distinct urbanization could be discovered (by air picture analysis). Actually, nearly all sites are surrounded by urban settlements (Table 3-6). By contrast, despite the surrounding urban growth,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the shrines were able to preserve their green space within the shrine precinct. Though in about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all cases, a distinct loss of size of the deity grove and a loss of Japanese Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) had to be noticed (Table 3-7, 8). One revealing example of such a loss is illustrated by air pictures and historical photos in Figure 3. In the top left-hand picture, a dense forest, covering the major part of the Suwa shrine precinct in Tachikawa, can be seen (3-a, 1947). By contrast, the top right-hand picture shows the present state (3-b, 2007). At the first glance, there seems to be still a forest, but in fact, only fragments of the original remain. The difference is also shown by picture C and D. Both pictures are taken from the same position, at the starting point of the access road (direction indicated by white arrows in pictures A and B).

## 3. An Example of Successful Preservation

Finally, the well preserved Shakuji Hikawa shrine in Nerima-ku (No. 18) will be introduced. It is one of the rare cases among all investigated case study sites where the shrine precinct is integrated into the landscape preservation. The Shakuji Hikawa shrine is located at the southern slope of the adjacent Shakuji park, on the highest point of elevation. It relates to this park historically and scenically. Parts of the present park are remnants of the former Musashino landscape, especially the Sampoji pond, which was fed by natural spring water until 1971. Concerning the degree of urbanization in the course of time, Shakuji is no special case. However, the crucial point is that in 1930, the present park and the surroundings were designated as a scenic preservation

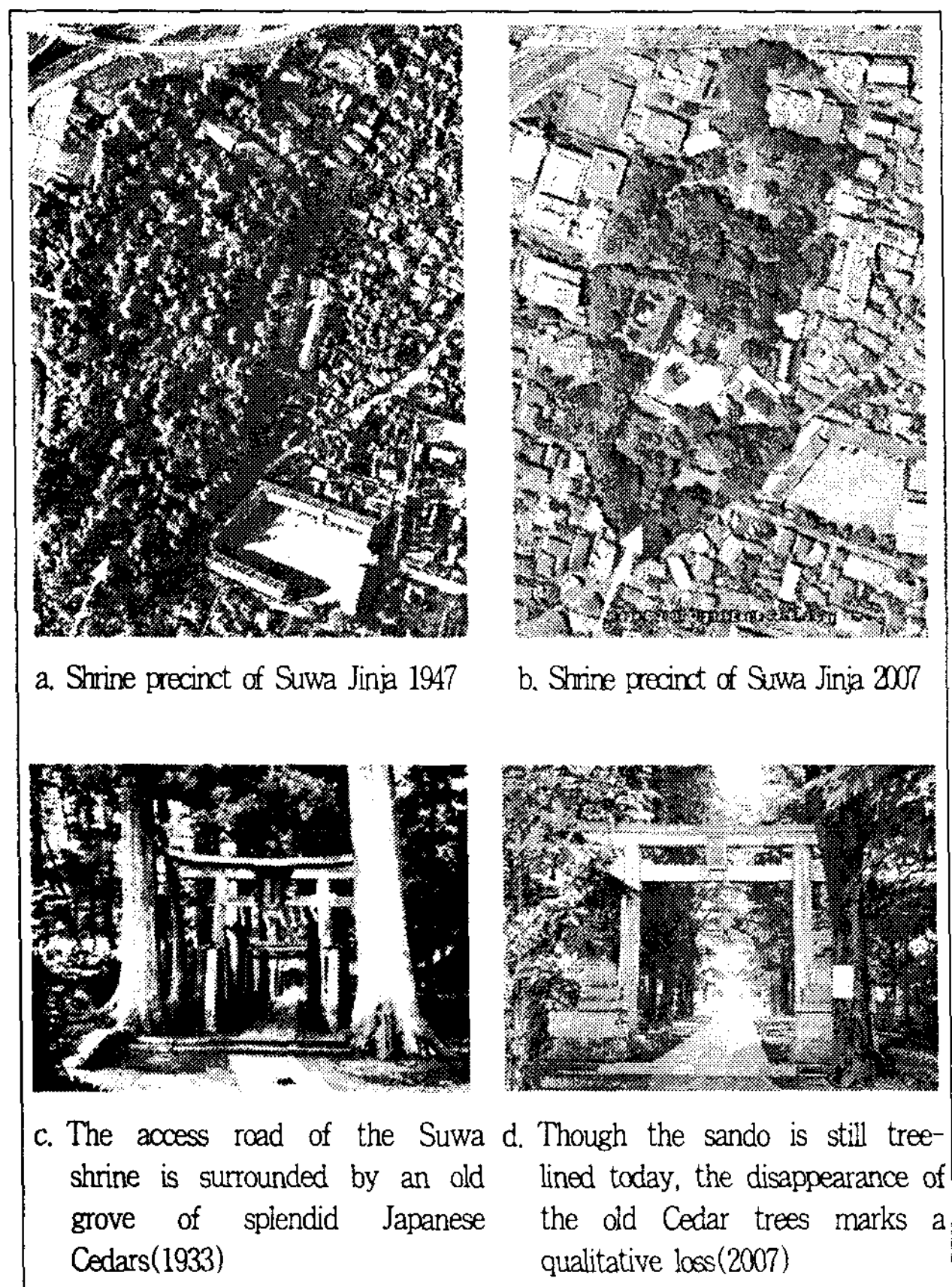


Figure 3. An example of loss and change of green space. The grove of Suwa shrine, Tachikawa(No. 14)<sup>2)</sup>

zone(*fuuchichiku*). Further, in those days, local residents started activities to preserve the remaining natural relics and wildlife. As a result, the Sampoji pond and its water plants were designated as a natural monument in 1935. In short, even today the Shakuji park provides an outstanding natural scenery and wildlife. In addition, the main part of the Hikawa shrine precinct lies within this zone of scenic preservation (Figure 4-a, b, e). Its deity grove is not limited to the border of the site; it is in fact scenically connected with the adjacent Shakuji park(Figure 4-f). Therefore, despite parts of the shrine precinct are surrounded by residential houses today, the original landscape context can still be experienced.

#### IV. Discussion

The found patterns of site locations confirm the point that shrines relate to both the topography and local scenic features. However, the fact that the majority of shrines are located in the flat area, near rivers, underlines that the usual image of a 'mountain-shrine relationship' should be extended.

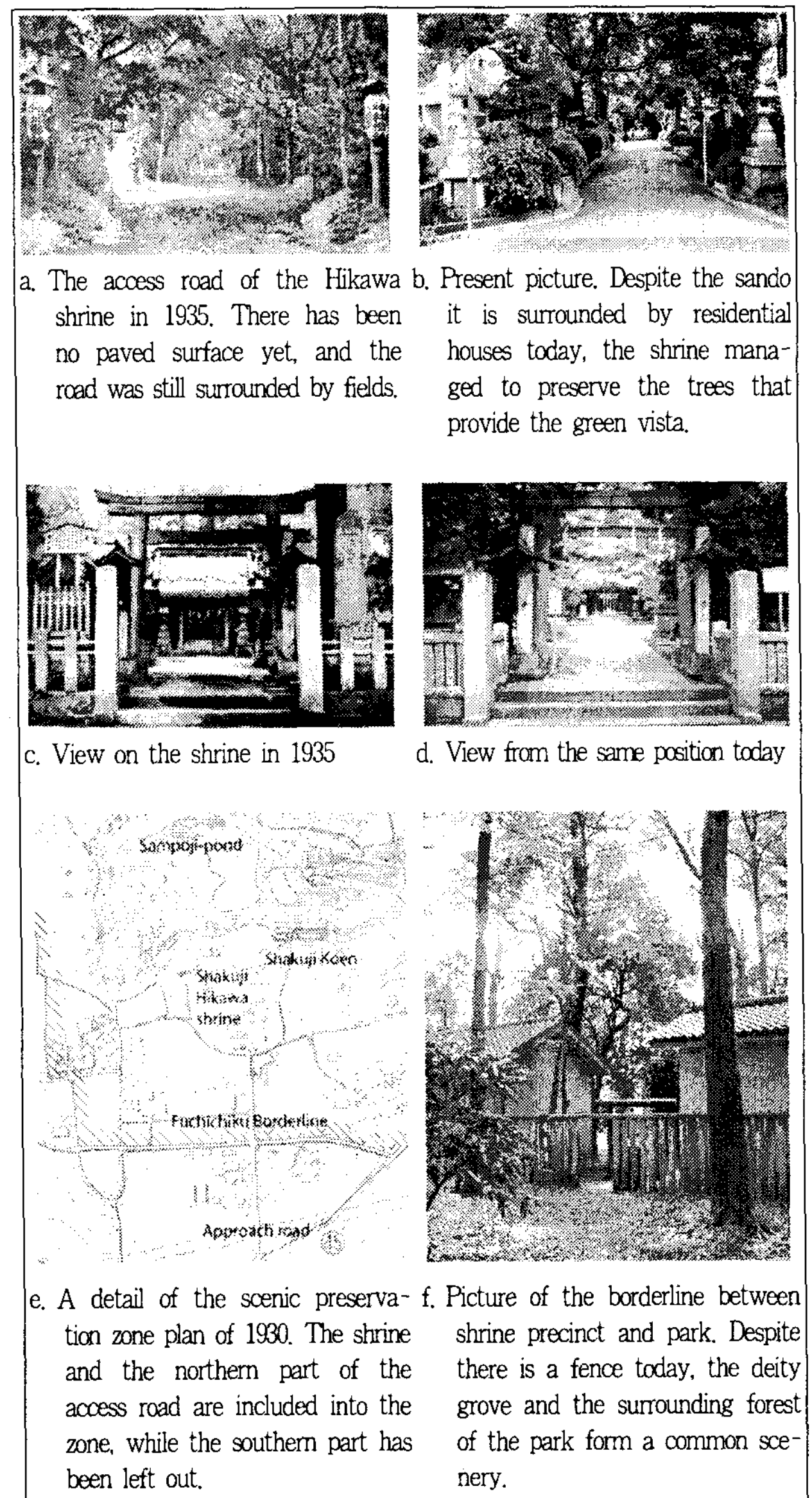


Figure 4. The Shakuji park & Shakuji Hikawa shrine<sup>3)</sup>

Furthermore, regarding the green space, not only the deity grove around the main building, but also the tree-lined, green approach road plays an important role for the scenery of a shrine site. The crucial point is that a 'full green vista' has a strong effect on the spatial quality. If a visitor enters such a green pathway, the situation suddenly changes from a bright and often noisy townscape to a shady, quiet and refreshing green space. Walking along such a green path has the function to let people relax before they reach the praying hall(Figure 3-d). The significance of this point 'to create a space of transition' is clearly supported by comments of shrine priests.

Concerning the changes during the 20th century, the results



show a distinct contrast. On the one hand, according to the hypothesis, the environment of the shrines drastically changed from a rural to an urban area. On the other hand, it was possible to preserve most deity groves, because the shrine priests have the control over their own precinct. At this point, it is interesting to note that there is nearly no loss of deity groves in case of shrines that are located at a slope or on the top of a hill (Table 3). The relief obviously protects the grove because it is difficult to build there. By contrast, in the flat area, due to urban pressure, the green space within a precinct is likely to be impaired. For instance, since there is an increasing traffic volume, there is a growing demand to provide larger parking places for the visitors, which is one cause for the reduction of shrine groves.

In any case, the limitation of urbanization is high desirable but goes beyond the power of landscape planning. However, as the example of the Shakuji Hikawa shrine shows, there exist effective instruments (like the *fuuchichiku* preservation zone), which can mitigate urban sprawl. Its successful usage depends not only on a good policy, but also on a high level of awareness for typical scenic elements. For the shrines, this means that if a shrine site is still surrounded by some natural beauty, the task is to demonstrate the scenic and religious context of the approach road, shrine site, deity grove and neighboring scenery. Even in case of the praised Shakuji Hikawa shrine, there remains some work for the landscape planning. The fact that only half of its approach road has been inserted into the preservation zone shows that there is still a lack of awareness for the context of a shrine and its surrounding scenery (Figure 4-e).

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes & Sources

1. The author also interviewed priests of the involved shrines about their perspective concerning the shrine groves and its changes by half-structured, qualitative interviews. Due to a limitation of space, it was not possible to present these results.
2. While all present photos are taken by the author, the support by historical sources is very appreciated. The past photo of Suwa shrine (3C) from: 今昔寫眞集・諏訪神社, 昭和62年1月11日發行(1987), 「今昔寫眞集・諏訪神社」編集委員會, 發行 宗教法人諏訪神社.
3. The historical photos of the Hikawa shrine (4A, C) from: 練馬區立郷資料室. The fuuchichiku zone plan (4E) from: 東京グリーンアーカイブズ.

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