

At the Flick of a Switch

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Prefab life is, as I've discovered this past month, rather like renting a holiday cottage in the hills. For the first week it's great getting away from all the trappings of civilisation, living close to nature, being TV-less, telephone-less, newspaper-less. By week two one is still pretending it's all fun while secretly craving home comforts. My situation is not at all bad. People after all make permanent homes in prefabs. I have electricity, running water (cold), a telephone (at last), an outside privy and, joy of joys, a bath in a tin shack with piping hot water. Even though it does involve a foray through snake-infested territory or occasional torrential rain to reach it, the risks are minimal compared to the relief of getting clean sometimes. The BBC brings me daily news of bombings in the Gulf and other lesser world news so being without commercial-ridden TV or a Japlish newspaper is no great loss. Phone call confirmed today that not even a rip-off monthly fee will induce the Mainichi paper-boy to brave the tortuous track to the prefab, instead it will come with the postman who, although just as reluctant, has by law to deliver the mail wherever one lives. Visitors meanwhile come in droves; locals out of curiosity, friends to check that I'm still alive. Those in the know without 4-wheel-drive vehicles wisely leave their cars outside the territory on firm ground. Ones who venture in risk getting trapped in the mire, like

the town vacuum truck last week. In the end we had to get a crane to haul it out of the mud.

A friend in the wilds of North Yorkshire heavily into self-sufficiency, you know, oil lamps, spinning wheels and looms clacking, goat cheese fermenting in the larder, rows of bottled berries, that sort of thing, scorned my need for electricity. What better than wind or water power, she said. I agree in principle but in practice it does make life easier to have a commercial source of instant power. The initial fear of possibly being without it makes me even more appreciative of its benefits now I have it. The change wrought by those 13 new poles, ugly though they are, strung across the rice fields to light up this previously virgin mountainside is incredible even to me. To the locals it's nothing short of a miracle; civilisation at the flick of a switch. Even better, as their increasing friendliness shows, is the added value electricity brings to their land. Dead tracts of mountain preciously designated uninhabitable except by squirrels and wild boar have become potential building sites overnights. All this sudden development-mindedness is a bit disturbing. The worst aspects of civilisation which I've tried so hard to avoid by opting for such an isolated outpost may yet follow in my footsteps. One of the penalties of living on an overcrowded island I suppose. Mercifully the area surrounding my plot is protected forest, i.e., protected from development companies. That doesn't stop, however, the village, its communal owner from turning it into some kind of Nose Disneyland. Lack of local imagination backed up by lack of funds is likely to prevent this heart-curdling idea from ever becoming a reality.

New problems have loomed as fast as the previous ones have been solved. An innocuous water channel bisects the lowest part of the land carrying crystal clear river water to the paddy fields of around the other side of the mountain. Harmless, even pleasant, I thought at first sight until I discovered local peasants have the right to walk along it any time they please. Left in situ it could spell trouble at a future date, i.e., peasant

claiming savaging by dog(s) and apart from this worry it kind of gets in the way of future buildings, so it's got to be moved. Putting up half a kilometre of electricity wires is nothing compared to the problems of moving a water channel. The flow of irrigation water to their paddy fields is as important in Japanese eyes as the flow of oil for their industry. One must apply to the county, or rather the prefecture, to have a channel moved. To confuse things further, the path running alongside the channel belongs to another village not to this one which has the water rights. Sometimes I long to be in a country where money magically oils a path through bureaucratic processes. Alas, not in Japan, at least not in the lower ranks of the bureaucracy.

We have a bridge but not one you can cross. It stands forlornly unfinished, erratically angled, a lasting monument to gnome-mismanagement. (K.T.O. July '87). Whether we'll ever be able to drive across it is debatable. The arguments are likely to be protracted and ugly. Maybe a thousand years from now archaeologists will unearth it and marvel at its freak engineering. How did the motorised inhabitants ever cross the river to their home on the other side, they will wonder.

The die is cast and bridge or no bridge we're here to stay. A new house is planned, but it's a race against the elements to get it under way. The old house went down without a murmur under the ruthless onslaught of one man on a bulldozer. 50 years of patiently grown timber and the labour of maybe a year smashed to matchsticks in an hour. All is not wasted however. The chicken coop is now graced by shoji doors, the goat house boasts of pillars finer than those found in any new town house, while the shattered remains will be burnt to keep us from freezing when winter really sets in.

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