

# History of the Kyoto Imperial Palace

: As Seen Through Site Plans of the Dairi



KYOTO  
GOSHO





# KYOTO GOSHO

The Kyoto Imperial Palace preserves the architectural traditions of the ancient *Daidairi*, the “Greater Imperial Palace” of the Heian period. Until 1869 (Meiji 2), it served as the residence of successive Emperors and was the center of Japan’s refined court culture, passed down through generations.

However, its history has not been without hardship. Repeated fires forced the relocation of the Imperial residence outside the original *Daidairi* compound. During these times, the estates of court nobles in the city served as temporary palaces, known as *sato-dairi*. Even after the palace was permanently established at its current location in 1331 (Genkō 1), it continued to suffer from devastating fires.

What is worse, the present Kyoto Imperial Palace, rebuilt in 1855 (Ansei 2), fell into disrepair following the relocation of the Imperial Palace to Tokyo during the Meiji Restoration, and many buildings were dismantled in large-scale evacuations during World War II.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of many people over the centuries, the Kyoto Imperial Palace has overcome numerous crises and continues to be preserved to this day.



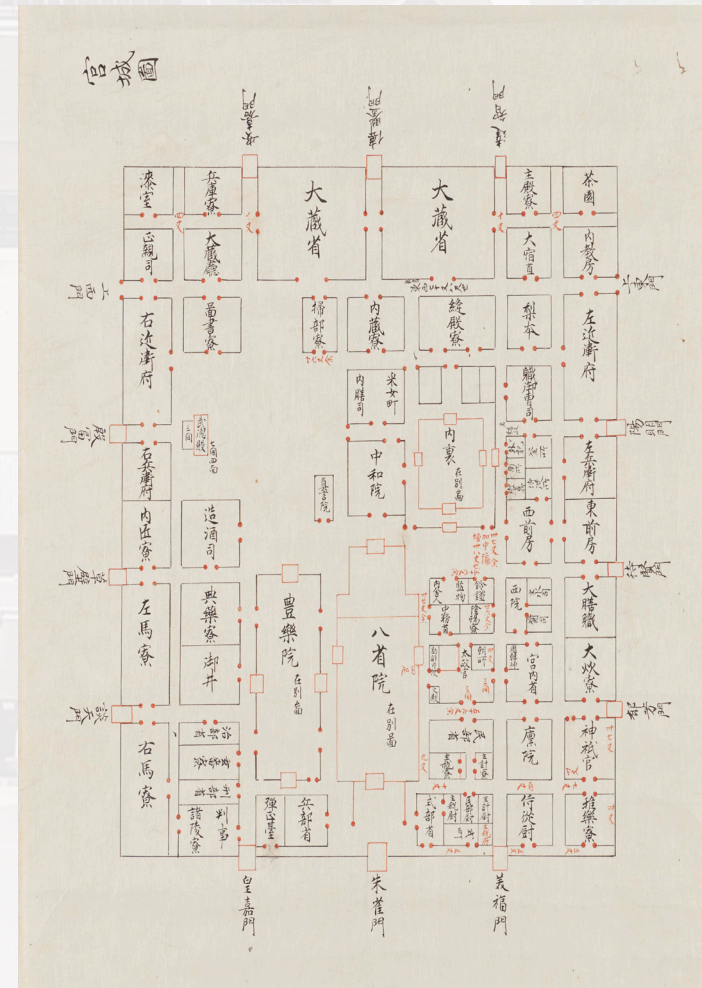


[illegible]

## -Heian-kyō and the Heian Palace-

In 794 (Enryaku 13), Emperor Kanmu relocated the capital to Heian-kyō. At the northern center of the city, a vast palace complex known as the *Daidairi* or *Heiankyū* was constructed, measuring approximately 1,146 meters from east to west and 1,373 meters from north to south. Its main gate, the Suzakumon Gate, faced the grand Suzaku-ōji Avenue, which ran through the center of the capital from north to south.

Within the *Daidairi* stood principal government institutions such as the Hasshōin and Burakuin, where state ceremonies were conducted, along with administrative offices under the ancient *Ritsuryō* legal system, including the two ministries and eight central government departments. At the heart of the complex was the *Dairi*, the Imperial Palace. While many buildings were constructed over time following the capital's relocation, the *Dairi* was among the first to be completed, serving as the symbolic and functional core of Heian-kyō.



「宮城図」(『宮城図』より)江戸中期写 宮内庁蔵

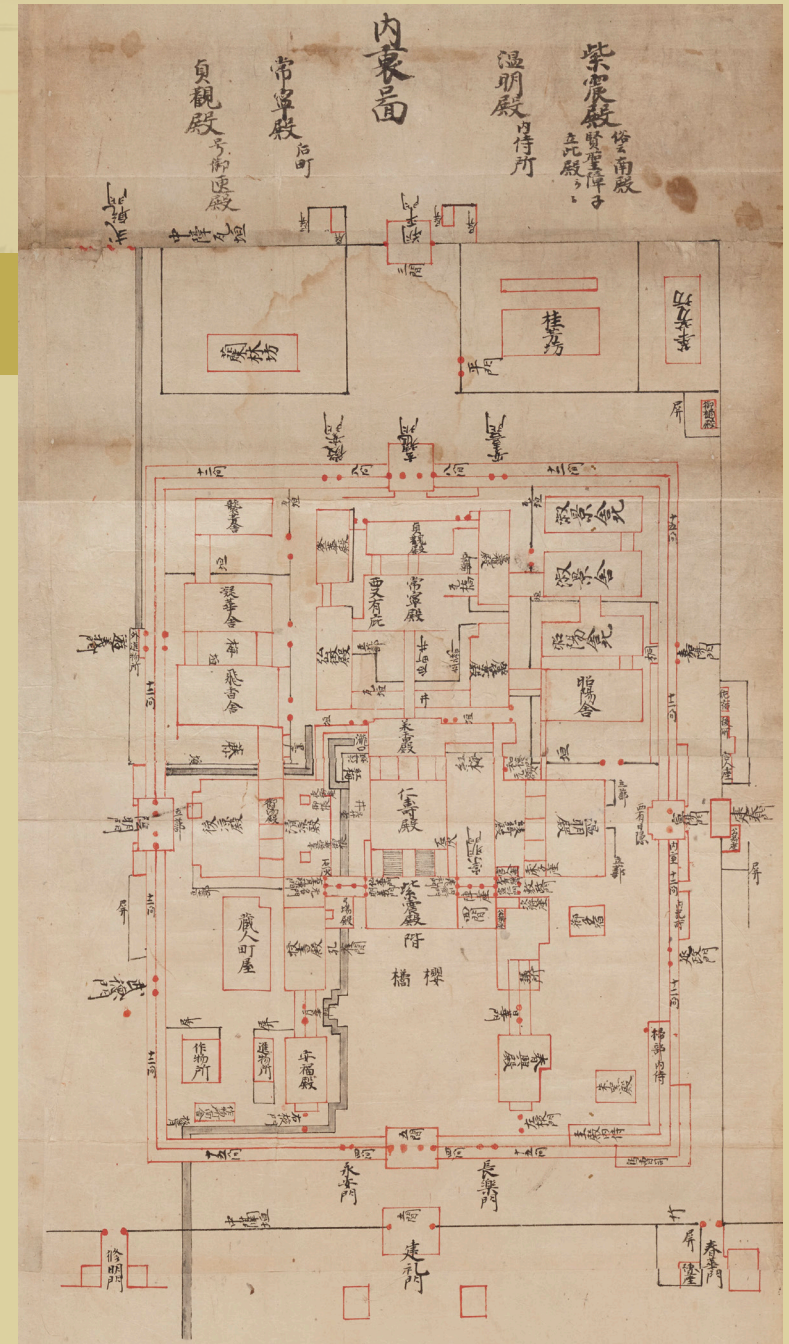


## *Dairi* in the Heian Period

## -Heian-kyū Dairi and Court Culture-

The *Heian-kyū Dairi*, which refers to the Emperor's palace within the *Daidairi* during the Heian period, was located approximately two kilometers west of today's Kyoto Imperial Palace. Its southern outer wall featured the main gate, Kenreimon. Within the palace grounds, the central ceremonial hall, Shishinden, was surrounded by principal buildings such as the Seiryōden and the Jijūden, which served as the Emperor's residence; the Unmeiden, where the Divine Mirror was enshrined; and the Shōkyōden along with eleven other buildings, which functioned as the Kōkyū (inner palace), the residence of the Empress and Imperial consorts. These structures were connected by covered corridors.

During the Heian period, the palace was the setting for numerous court ceremonies and rituals. Furnishings and court attire became increasingly refined as Japanese-style culture developed. Meanwhile, in the inner quarters, court ladies produced some of the era's most celebrated literary works, making the Heian Palace a center of cultural brilliance during its most vibrant period.



「内裏図」(『大内裏図』より) 室町期写 宮内庁蔵

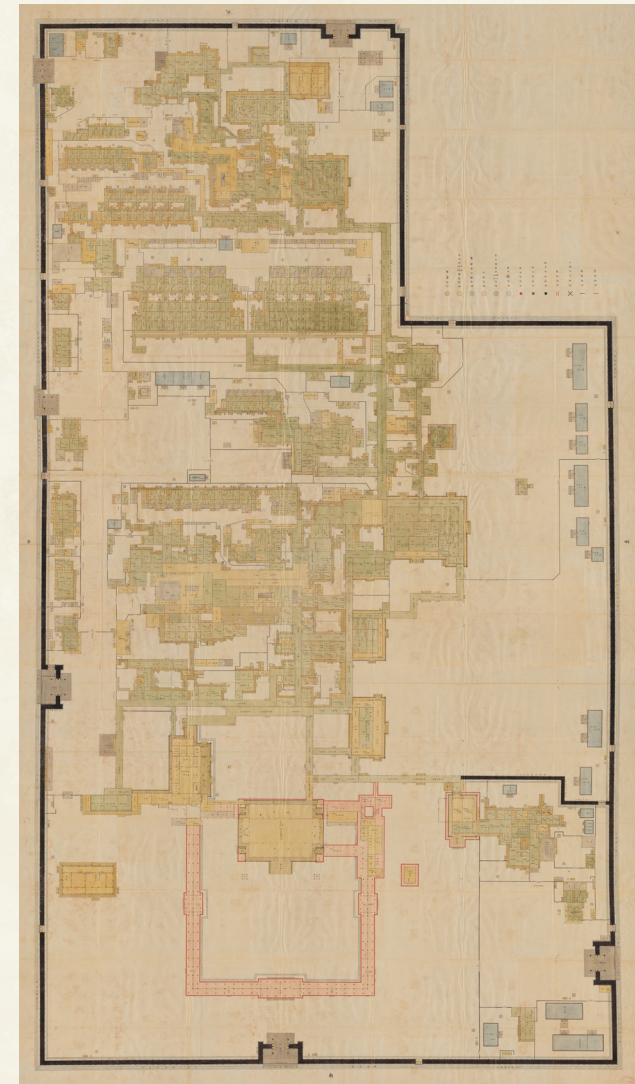


# Revival of Heian Traditions and the Ansei-era Palace

In the Imperial court, the ceremonial practices of the Heian period were regarded as the ideal model for later generations. However, the simplified architectural spaces of temporary palaces (*sato-dairi*) were inadequate for restoring ancient rites and conducting grand ceremonies such as enthronements in their original form.

The predecessor of today's Kyoto Imperial Palace, the Kansei-era Palace, built in 1790 (Kansei 2), was a revival-style palace inspired by ancient Heian traditions, an aspiration long held by successive Emperors since the medieval period. Under the guidance of Emperor Kōkaku, formal ceremonial buildings were reconstructed based on meticulous architectural research by Uramatsu Mitsuyo (1736–1804), a scholar of *Yūsoku-kojitsu*, the traditional study of court ceremonies and customs. Meanwhile, the residential quarters were designed to meet the practical needs of daily life in the Imperial court. Every aspect, from structural design to materials, was carefully selected to balance tradition and functionality.

The Ansei-era Palace inherited the fundamental principles of the Kansei reconstruction. It reflects the refinement of palace architecture, shaped by a deliberate revival of ancient styles and thoughtful adaptations to suit both ceremonial and residential purposes.



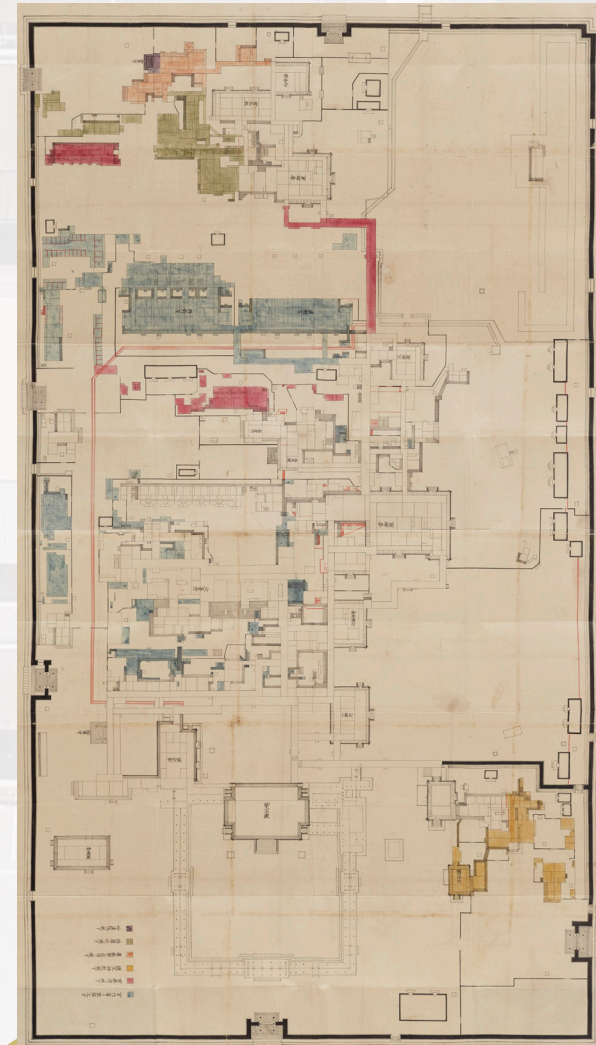
「安政度内裏指図」 宮内庁書陵部蔵



# Kyoto Imperial Palace in the Meiji Period

## Preservation Efforts Following the Imperial Relocation - Pre-Restoration Phase -

After Emperor Meiji relocated the Imperial Palace to Tokyo in 1869 (Meiji 2), the Kyoto Imperial Palace and the surrounding estates of court nobles gradually fell into disrepair. Many of the vacant residences were dismantled, and the area was reorganized into what is now the Kyoto Gyoen National Garden. Subsequently, a detailed on-site survey of the palace was conducted by officials including Iwakura Tomomi. Based on their findings, decisions were made regarding the dismantling or donation of unused palace buildings. This site plan, submitted to the Emperor in February 1880 (Meiji 13), categorizes the unused buildings by color according to their intended disposition, either to be dismantled or granted to Kyoto Prefecture, Goō Shrine, the Bureau of Nobility Affairs, or other organizations. The buildings slated for removal included the Naishidokoro-kariden, Kogōgū-okuruma-yose, Bukeshikō-no-ma, Tōzai-tai-no-ya, and others.



「京都御所御不用建物取解図」明治13年 宮内庁蔵



# Kyoto Imperial Palace in the Meiji Period

## Preservation Efforts Following the Imperial Relocation - Post-Restoration Phase -

As a central policy of the preservation project, important palace buildings and those used during Imperial visits were retained. In addition, fire prevention infrastructure such as reservoirs and waterways were reinforced, *kokera-buki* (shingle roofs) were replaced with tile roofing, and repairs were made to perimeter walls and fences. Surveys and inventories were also conducted for treasured items housed in earthen storehouses, as well as for trees and stones in the palace gardens. Subsequently, large-scale restoration work was carried out, including structural corrections from the foundation level to address warping, rethatching of *hiwada-buki* (cypress bark roofs), and replacement of tatami mats. (This site plan was created in May 1880 [Meiji 13]).

Emperor Meiji held deep affection for his hometown of Kyoto. During his visits to the palace, he enjoyed traditional court pastimes such as kemari (ancient football game), horseback riding, and boating. He also toured the palace with his attendants, engaging in playful activities such as estimating the distances between buildings connected by winding corridors, later verifying the measurements. Through these interactions, he shared knowledge about the architectural features and historical significance of the palace and expressed his wish for its lasting preservation.



「京都御所御建物改正図」 明治13年 宮内庁蔵



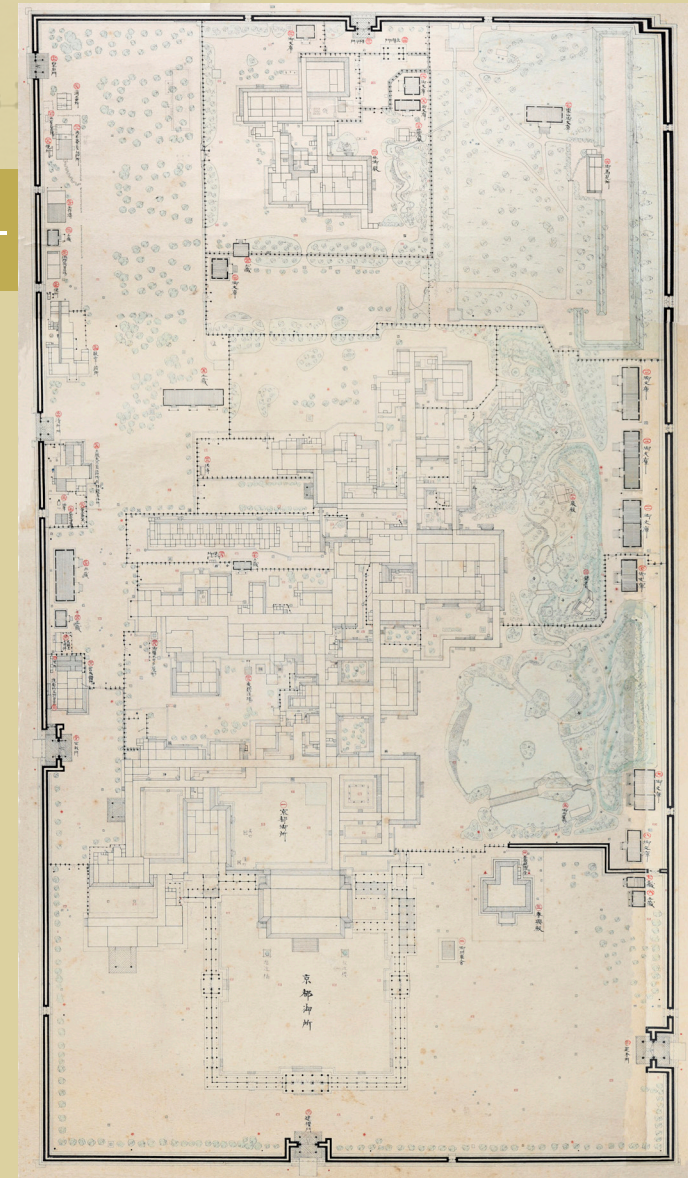
# Kyoto Imperial Palace in the Taishō Period

## - The Enthronement Ceremony of Emperor Taishō -

Following the establishment of the Imperial House Law in 1889 (Meiji 22), which stipulated that the Enthronement Ceremony and the Daijōsai (Great Thanksgiving Festival) were to be held in Kyoto, Emperor Taishō's Enthronement Ceremony took place at the Kyoto Imperial Palace in November 1915 (Taishō 4). In preparation, new buildings were constructed, and existing structures were renovated, particularly in the southern section where the ceremonies were held.

On the west side of the corridor, the Shin-mikuruma-yose, a new entrance porch, was built to accommodate the Emperor's arrival by ceremonial carriage. The exterior featured newly adopted glass windows, while the interior was carpeted and equipped with Western-style lighting. It also served as a gathering space for attendees, including distinguished guests from abroad.

On the east side of the corridor, the Shunkōden was constructed to enshrine the Divine Mirror, one of the Three Imperial Regalia, for the Kashikodokoroōmae-no-gi. Modeled after the Kashikodokoro in Tokyo, the building was roofed with copper plates. Its spacious forecourt was enclosed with temporary fences and a gate, creating a formal setting for the ritual.



「京都皇宮総図」 大正9年 京都事務所



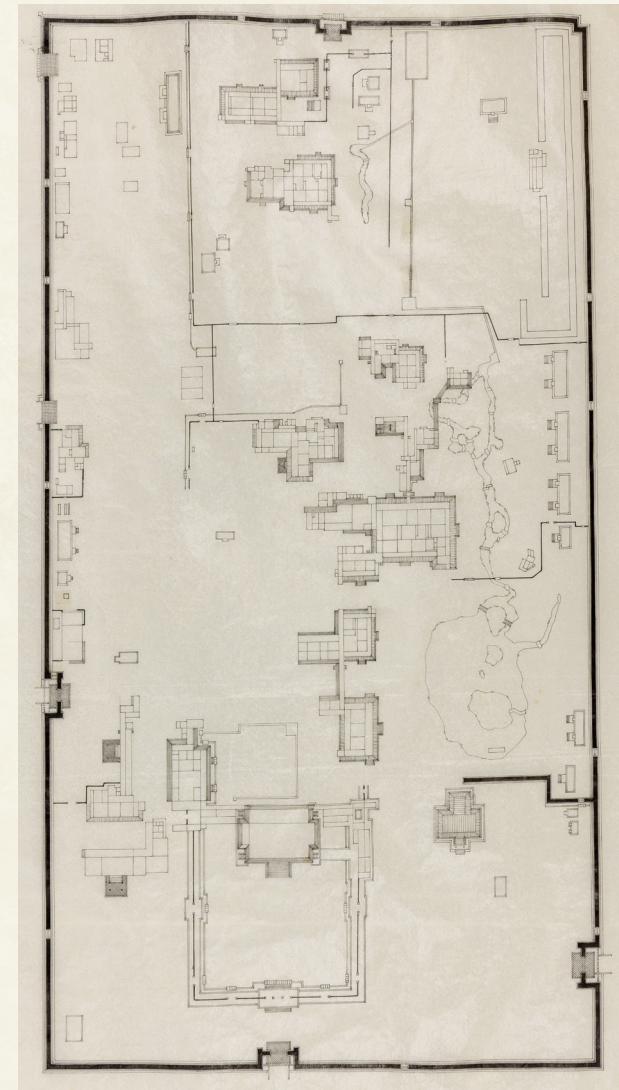
# Kyoto Imperial Palace in the Shōwa Period

## - World War II and the Dismantling of Structures -

Around July 1945 (Shōwa 20), during the final stages of World War II, several covered corridors connecting principal buildings, along with auxiliary buildings, were dismantled to prevent the spread of fire in the event of air raids.

The palace architecture, traditionally composed of buildings connected by covered corridors, had long been associated with the serene atmosphere created by small courtyard gardens known as *tsuboniwa*. However, under wartime conditions, the removal of these corridors was carried out hastily, with exposed joints merely covered with old boards. As a result, the distinctive elegance of the palace was lost.

In the years that followed, visitors and scholars who witnessed the deteriorated state of the palace called for its restoration. Between 1967 and 1974 (Shōwa 42–49), a restoration project was undertaken. The work was guided by extensive discussions among experts in *Yūsoku-kojitsu* (court customs), traditional architecture, and garden design. The project included the reconstruction and renovation of buildings, the enhancement of fire prevention facilities, and the restoration of the palace gardens.



「京都御所修理前総図」(『京都御所渡廊及び附属建物復元工事報告書』より)  
昭和53年 京都事務所



# Kyoto Imperial Palace Today

## - Preserving and Sharing the Legacy of Court Culture -

The Kyoto Imperial Palace reflects a variety of architectural styles that were adapted over centuries to accommodate the diverse functions of the Imperial residence. As a result, it offers insight into the historical transitions of palace architecture from the Heian period onward. Throughout its history, the palace has undergone many changes—sometimes under difficult circumstances—guided by careful decisions about what should be preserved for future generations. Through these deliberate choices, what may be called the very essence of the palace has been maintained.

Today, preservation efforts include maintenance projects informed by historical documentation, conservation science, and monitoring experiments. Seismic reinforcement work is also planned for various palace buildings to ensure their long-term stability. Since July 2016 (Heisei 28), the palace has been open to the public year-round without the need for advance application, allowing more people to experience its cultural heritage firsthand.

With over 1,200 years of history, the Kyoto Imperial Palace remains a living legacy—and we are committed to preserving and sharing its traditions for generations to come.



「UAV画像」 令和元年 京都事務所