

EVOLVING LANDSCAPES AND CHANGING ARCHITECTURES IN MODERN JAPANESE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The aim of this short paper is to introduce some open-ended considerations on the process of formation and evolution of the modern Japanese urban landscape in the second half of the 20th century, a process that unfolded since the end of the WWII and heavily relied on the outcomes of the economic growth and social mutation based on the technological innovation and infrastructural development.

The peculiar and distinctive urban landscape of modern Japanese cities resulted by the combination of innovation of foreign origins and also by the re-interpretation of some elements of the local culture and aesthetic tradition. The extreme fragmentation and the patchwork like nature of the urban tissue of most of the Japanese cities is linked to the frantic pace of changes and the overlapping of eclectic forms, dense functions and mixed activities which combine and integrate with the use of a new aesthetic language based on the acceptance of the power of change of the latest technologies.

Legacy of the war

After the end of the WWII Japan was defeated and for a while an acute sense of tragedy, humiliation and frustration became the distinctive notes in the society and was present at all levels of the culture. The atomic disaster, the collapse of the economy and the destruction of the old cities left the Japanese in a state of torpor. In a few years the situation was about to change: the threats and opportunities brought by the Korea War in the context of the larger Cold War exerted a great influence on the development of Japan in terms of economic growth, cultural revival and design vitality and innovation for the following 2-3 decades. Industrial renovation and economic expansion became the engines which prompted a grandiose process of urbanization which enacted a progressive mutation of the society and its lifestyle. The economic miracle of Japan during the rapid economic growth which began in the late 1950s was essentially set on the interrelationship of industrial capitalism, aesthetic and technology which primarily influenced the formation of a consumerist society and the progressive transformation (or adaptation) of the traditional values, social and personal needs, and eventually of the physical form of the cities.¹

The golden age of Showa Japan, named after the emperor Showa (1926-1989), coincided with the economic expansion of the nation in these years, and the formation of the middle class was driven by the surge of salarymen (salaried worker). The policy of the government aimed at encouraging the consumption led to the fast expansion of the Japanese middle class which prompted the spread of a new urban lifestyle which rapidly wiped out the traditional frugal living of the past and instead was more and

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more directly attracted by the comforts inspired by western models of life and consumerismⁱⁱ. The JHC - Japan Housing Corporation, a governmental body set up in order to resolve the housing shortage and to design and prepare schemes to improve the housing condition of the citizens, was engaged in a titanic effort to satisfy the pressing demands for new shelters with more adequate living condition for the urban workers. New mass housing complexes were built and new towns were planned to balance the population growth and sustain the economic growth. Indeed the investments in the development of modern infrastructures had the priority, and this resulted in a general lack of attention for the design of urban amenities and for the achieving of basic standards in the housing sector, a problem which coupled with a progressive erosion of the environmental quality and the spread of serious cases of pollution and diseases, with the consequent degradation of most of the urban areas in the Japanese industrial cities.

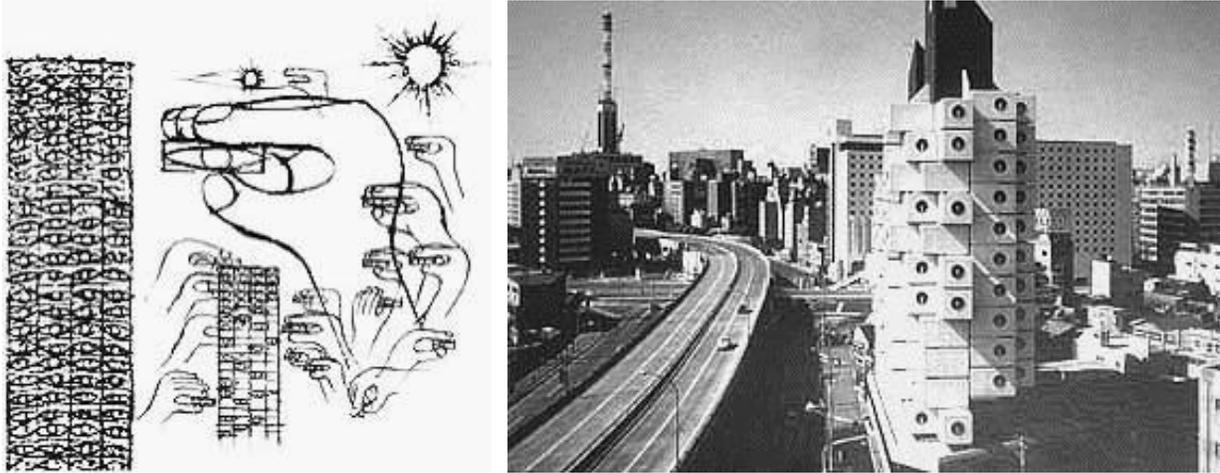
The radical transformation of the Japanese cities to foster the industrial development and promote the national re-birth through economic success meant the massive alteration of coastlines, the urban renewal of the traditional districts, with the consequent loss of historic heritage and the construction on site of high-density urban enclaves mean the development of new strategies, technologies and techniques for the creation of a new form of city with a very peculiar image and new functions for a modern society.

Technology became a source of inspiration for the design of a new urban landscape and a new form of city, which was directly linked to the frantic transformation of the structure of the postwar Japanese city. The large scale of the phenomena of urbanization, population growth, economic development and industrial and scientific progress of those years had the most powerful sponsor in the projects of Kenzo Tange and especially of Metabolism, a group of architects and designers who expressed the optimism in the future and their proposal for a new image of the city in a mass and technological society through a series of bold and very influential utopian projects.ⁱⁱⁱ

The success of Metabolism, which draw attention from the international audience of architects and planners, and gained the support of the economic and cultural elites in homeland, owed much to the response to the crisis of Modern Movement's concepts and methods and to the specific problems of overcrowded and uncontrolled expansion of the Japanese cities; especially important was the Metabolism stance in defining and proposing a new model of mass-housing prototypes and the creation of a new totally artificial model of city which was expressly proposed for a forthcoming society of the future, built of some traditional values of the Japanese civilization such as the concept of impermanence and adaptation to the possibilities offered by the technological innovation. The low cost houses built with prefabricated system of production and made of wooden and rice paper proposed in the late 1940s-early 1950s by architect Kyoshi Ikebe, an economical way to provide new houses for the large masses in and outside the cities, became the model for the new Metabolists capsules proposed in the early 1960s, now built in steel and plastic and intended to be plugged-in to high-rise towers in futuristic cities in the air and on the sea, as expression of a new genuine contribution of Japan to the research of new way of imagining the city and the urban life in the Atomic Age; but especially the proposals of Metabolism became a stage which allowed the most sensible and advanced professionals to create an alternative and more fascinating image of the city of the future in opposition to the reality of the concrete Japanese city, where industrial plants and manufacturing factories became the dominant elements of the townscape contributing to the generation of a dreadful urban environment less and less suitable for the life of the emergent middle class.

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*Figure 1. An urban community in the 1960s as conceived by the industrial designer Kyoshi Awazu
Figure 2. Nagakin Tower, a capsule type tower designed by Noriaki Kisho Kurokawa in 1972*

Transportation and the formation of a new urban environment

Among the factors that mostly contributed to the reshaping of the Japanese urban environment during the aftermath of the Pacific War and at the end of the second half of the 20th century were the modernization and expansion of the industrial system and the development of an efficient and very well interconnected and extensive public transportation network; indeed is the latter the resulted in the acceleration of the urban growth of the pre-existent urban areas and their continuous development which often resulted in forms of sprawl. Since the modernization of Japan in the Meiji era and especially at the beginning of last century the railway led the restructuring of the hierarchy of the Japanese cities in adjusting to the necessity to be part of the main rail network, and their internal urban structure.

The excessive cost of plans of expansion of roads inside the congested cites proved a major incentive for transportation companies to look at the areas on the urban outskirts for future growth. The competition among several private rail companies (trams and then subway and metro) and the expansion of their networks from the core to the suburban areas of the cities, where most of the new residential areas were built on cheap land to house the growing working class that fled the countryside and rural districts to work in the urban factories, resulted in the relieve of the congestion of the central districts and in the effective urban explosion of all the main industrial cities in japan. The new transportation networks and especially the presence of new railway and metro stations had a decisive impact on the morphology and general master planning of the pre-existent city especially in the central core, where 2 nuclei of commercial areas began to compete to attract customers and activities: the traditional market of the city, located usually in the central district of the city, had to face the power of attraction of a new commercial zone generated by the presence of the railway stations mostly built on the outskirts of the old business centers, where the land was cheaper. The continuous and regular flow of commuters and the progressive growth of several additional shops, services and markets, quite often sponsored by the same transportation companies,

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created a new commercial district in the Japanese city which, by increasing the density of mixed functions, eventually was integrated to the urban center and became effective part of the whole urban structure.^{iv}

The case of Tokyo is exemplary of this process of urban growth driven by the expansion and integration of the transportation development. As the capital of the Country and most important political and industrial and economic center of the nation, the transformation of Tokyo into a model of megacity whose urban landscape extends at regional scale, the need of an efficient, capillary and very extensive transportation network is vital for the daily activities of her inhabitants, who commute long hours from suburban residential districts to central working areas. The city is a clear example of what has been termed “railway urbanism”, a process of urban organization which disregard cars as main means of movement and, heralding the modern T.O.D. design approach and planning methodology, conceiving the city as a hierarchical network of mass transport pathways (expressways, metro, railway lines) which intersect in sub-node-points always connected to major nodes of services and movement (major railways and subway stations). The easy access of commuters and the special linkages between private railways/metro companies and commercial and market groups has created an urban landscape where the location of the main chains of department stores and shopping malls is essentially close or literally built around huge decks/plazas in front or above subway and railway stations or interchange stations, which are truly fundamental urban nodes thanks to their efficiency and reliance of the citizens on public transportation.

Indeed a peculiar aspect of urbanization of modern Japanese cities is the role of railways stations, which are not only terminals and interchange points for mass transit lines (bus, subways, metro) but also (and primarily) providers of additional services such as commercial spaces, entertainment and cultural areas, relaxation spots. Through the enhancement of the integration with the surrounding urban areas and by maximizing the walkability for pedestrians by rising the railway tracks and platforms above ground, these are very much the containers of essential daily activities of the mass of commuters moving from the suburban dormitories to the urban cores of large conurbations (around 30% of people in Japan use regularly the railway for transportation, compared to 8% in Germany and just 1% in USA).^v

The necessity to rely entirely on the efficiency of mass transport system in terms of movement and services has inevitable consequences on the development of a very peculiar urban landscape and lifestyle in a high-density city like Tokyo and other Japanese cities. Geographer Yasuo Masai, who has well understand the reality of the “megapolitan” or regional scale of contemporary Tokyo, describes her as a huge railroad city whose residents have no choice that to live near the stations^{vi}, and architect Toyo Ito, who also has perceived movement and the constant exposure to different spaces and places as an intrinsic quality of the current urban life of the contemporary city, considers the present day city dwellers as a sort of artificial habitat for “urban nomads”^{vii}, who commute influencing the “urban daily rhythm” (according to which the population in the central districts decreases sharply in the evening) and enjoy a constantly mutating urban milieu made of kaleidoscopic multifunctional spaces, fascinating consumerism areas and hybrid and eclectic public scenes. Indeed change, impermanence and technological efficiency seem to dominate the physical spaces of the Japanese urban landscape and daily life of its people.

The Japanese city as city vital and collage of artificial realities

When it comes to the urban image and architectures of the city, it is generally assumed that the Japanese have an attitude to rebuilding instead of preserving the buildings, in this driven by the search for a more profitable economic return. Also that the fine urban grain of the urban tissue and the lack of a clear visual and hierarchical organization of the townscape led to a general sense of confusion and an not always pleasant mixture of apparently incompatible functions and forms. Indeed all the most industrialized Japanese cities have retained very little of their historical heritage and traditional urban landscape, and to the general visitor they give a sense of chaos and alienation. The anthropologist Gunther Nitschke as this to say regarding the quality of the modern Japanese city^{viii}:

“..As Japan rebuilt her devastated city after 1945 and lunched the high-growth economy, the sense of transient resurfaced on a gigantic scale and in a complete secular mode. The Japanese city of today is largely a haphazard, interchangeable mosaic of postage-stamp land parcel that seem rather messy form the view point of classical aesthetics. Yet it is hygienic, efficient and very adaptable to rapid change, and hence an important underpinning of the world’s second largest economy. The Western concept of “City Beautiful” and even “Urbs Eterna”, centered on the civic square with splendid and hardly changing public institution, has as his counterpart in Japan the “City Vital”, flexible and energetic with constant easy access to entertainments and information. While the masses indeed sleep in “rabbit hutches” they work and play in cities that have no equal anywhere for liveliness, visual complexity and social dynamics.”

Nitschke reconnects with the idea of the city as a system which interconnects different places and spaces and creates a sense of perpetual impermanence and transience, and furthermore recognizes among the elements which characterize the life in the contemporary Japanese city qualities such as livability and flexibility, and the fact that in physical terms the city is an energetic and dynamic patchwork of styles, forms, functions and spaces. The geographer Cotton Mather also recognizes some peculiarities of the Japanese urban landscape and classified them into 5 primary characteristics which are: a) a paucity of idle land, b) compactness, c) interdigitation, d) meticulous organization, and e) immaculateness, which essentially related to the very nature of Japanese archipelago, a land with few plains and high mountain chains covered with dense forests. These geographical and topographical conditions in turn create a condition of absolute necessity to maximize and carefully manage the use of the space available in rural and urban contexts. Thus the Japanese urban landscape presents few underused areas inside the intricate urban fabric, is extremely compact, hosts diverse and numerous functions on the same limited extension of soil, and call for a high standard of organization of the activities while showing a high degree of cleanness and efficiency.^{ix}

Another quite striking and effective description of the contemporary Japanese townscape comes from the analysis of the geographer and orientalist Augustin Berque, who observes how the experience of moving and living inside a city like Tokyo is something that has few parallel in the Western world; he rightly recognize that for the typical Tokyoite (but the same can be said for most of the Japanese cities) the city is not a world of objects, as can be perceived by the western eyes, but a visual filed or space where the

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reality tends to fade the materiality of the forms and objects, and where it is difficult to distinguish the inside from the outside of this realm. Describing the experience of moving from the interior of a metro or railway station to an underground department store or shopping arcade to the inside of a high-rise building tower which contains an interior road of restaurants from which it is possible to enter a private room surrounded by sliding panels, along this progressive process of moving/entering different zones and spaces a person will not perceive the well-defined forms and physical areas of a real object through which is proceeding, but only the progression through a labyrinthine system of functional interiors of a immaterial and undefined space, and the hidden paths of an invisible city.^x

The image of the traditional (and modern) European city is mostly built according to some well-preserved and rooted canons, such as the organization around major vistas and the main perspectives focusing on monuments or certain elements of the landscape, the regularity of the plan, the clear hierarchy of zones, streets and buildings, therefore the city appears to be generated to be observed and understood at a glance; the urban design of the traditional and modern Japanese city follows different rules and aims at different goals, and the most interesting aspect is the preference for what seems to be a process of progressive organic growth of fragmented parts, and in general the rejection of the visible forms as main generator of the urban composition. What to the occidental observer seems to be disorder and confusion in the Japanese city instead is perceived by the Japanese as permeated by what Yoshinobu Ashihara calls a sort of “hidden order”, a peculiar quality of Tokyo and by extension of most of other urban settlements in Japan, which refers to the importance and preeminence of the regeneration and integration of functions, and the flexibility and the variety of the activities and landscapes present inside the city, which is not designed and built on an imposed order and rigid pattern, as often is the case in the West.^{x1}



Figure 3. Multi-level urban landscape near Osaka Station
Figure 4. A shopping street in the undergrounds of Osaka Station

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Conclusion

Commenting on the transformation of the townscape of Tokyo during the last boom of urban redevelopment projects in Tokyo in the late 1990s, the Japanese critic Hiroshi Suzuki compared this city to an “island universes”^{xii}, where the competition in a global economy and the search for further modernization of the existed urban environment in the name of a city-branding ideal has produced a series of microcosms of self-sufficient urban communities mainly as high-rise towers areas rise as oases amidst an overall ocean of chaos and evolving forms.

Certainly the total acceptance of the artificial landscapes and the constant contrast between human-scale and mega-scale are indeed elements always present in any part of the city all over Japan, shaped by the concerns especially of the state and big corporations to provide pleasant and effective mass consumerism spaces for the people, who indeed enjoy the spotless and carefully designed public and semi-public areas scattered in the urban realm. The constraints of the limited space in the city, together with the constant risks of natural disasters, have been functional in an approach to technology as a necessary tool to improve and make safer the daily life in the large metropolises. The Japanese urban environment as a complex mosaic of fragmented landscapes composed of high densities mixed used blocks, vast mono-family residential enclaves and compact buildings which expand as high rise towers or as artificial mines in immense underground developments are something fascinating and often inevitable to satisfy the current standard of life of a sophisticated and highly sensitive society.

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