ZEN SPACES AND NEON PLACES

REFLECTIONS ON JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

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To my parents — for recognizing my Japan-ness far before I did.

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For most non-Japanese architects and urbanists, particularly from the West, Tokyo epitomizes the extremes of contemporary urbanism. It has been described as a "tremendous" megalopolis; a "labyrinthine magma-like whole;" a "frightening city, the largest and ugliest in the world;" an ephemeral city where "what goes up must come down;" and even a city built on "compact layers of pornography." In other words, like that early Western curiosity with pre-Meiji Japan as the exotic other land, Tokyo has now become the global traveler's urban cynosure, albeit differently. It is a curious urban polemic that in so many ways outguns everything held believably urban, and from which one takes back tales of unalloyed extremes.

Statistically speaking, compared to European and American cities, Tokyo does present some startling contrasts: The cost of living is more than 50% higher than New York. The amount of private space per capita is 66% lower. Paris constitutes merely 5% of its land surface in comparison to 30% in London. But despite these delectable densities, the amount of space actually occupied by its over nine-million occupants on its 23 km or 625-square-kilometer spread is only around 32% (though it rises up to 70% in central areas) (fig. 11.1).

Compared to other Asian mega-cities such as Hong Kong, Mumbai or Shanghai, Tokyo may still stand out in certain respects but it is certainly not an anomaly. And of course, none of these seemingly extreme numbers mean anything to most Tokyoites, for whom, the city is in fact a mosaic of discrete social worlds, urban neighborhoods, districts, streets, destinations, efficient trains, thousands of cafes and social places, all defined through their own cultural means and ends. In this insider's Tokyo is an elaborate and enchanting framework of invisibility, where residents link to one another through webs of informal social, economic, and cultural ties. This side of Tokyo is less known to most casual outsiders. Were they to see it, their first impulse would perhaps be to read it as the antithesis of the major trends of modernization that associate with Japan, and therefore probably not be as excited about it.

In this final chapter, I wander around Tokyo, contemplating how to read what in many ways is the ultimate crescendo of the Japanese built environment. Where are the lines that overlap and in turn separate the outsider's and insider's impressions?
and experiences of Tokyo? For decades, Tokyo's seemingly chaotic urban form, hyper-density and mobility, and sex culture has titillated foreign observers to a point of becoming a stereotype. By reflecting deeper into how various such aspects actually shape the everyday ordinary life of the city, this chapter argues for a far more mature understanding of contemporary Japan, beyond isolated first-impressions and exaggerated proclamations.

NEIGHBORHOOD & COMMUNITY

Most travelers to Tokyo make it a point to witness first-hand the sheer energy of the Shibuya Crossing (discussed in Chapter 9). But few wind up the hill through its back-streets and alleys towards Yoyogi Park. On this route, it is hard to miss the contrast between the iconic commercial node and the generic neighborhood fabric climbing up the terrain. Such neighborhoods typify the Tokyo fabric, with a mesh
of two and three-story structures facing intimate streets and lanes with bike-stalls and vending machines, random interruptions of taller buildings, small islands of shiny, ad-hoc neighborhood shops, and parking lots or small parking structures— all existing any formal urban design (fig. 11.2). The architectural image of such places is non-descriptive, with unfinished plaster bones sometimes clad with other finishes, most embodying how to squeeze residential density in small lots. Private open space is minimal, limited to small balconies and terraces. Such generic urban indistinct neighborhoods neither have the gridded historical order of the Asakusa Temple district (discussed in Chapter 8) nor the cavernous street profiles of Shinjuku or Ginza (discussed in chapter 8). But this is what ordinary Tokyo is all about; this is where the ordinary Tokyoite dwells.

In the book "Neighborhood Tokyo," anthropologist Theodore C. Bestor offers an insightful portrait of the lives of ordinary people in this vibrant global metropolis. His study was focused on Miyamoto-chō, located at a distance of about a ten-minute walk from central Tokyo. In the late eighties, when the book was being written, there were some 2100 residents living in some 750 households on around 18 acres of land. The neighborhood was structured on a single one-way shopping street, with the northern "upper" half given to residential uses, and the lower to a mesh of commercial uses, shops, and small factories. At the center of the community was a shrine whose patris included Miyamoto and six other surrounding neighborhoods, with other civic amenities including a temple, ward branch office, and an elementary and high school. Through elaborations on the community's patterns— formal, social, political—Bestor asserts the contrasts between this intimate side of Tokyo and its central metropolitan landscape.

Prior to the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923, the Miyamoto shrine parish was an agrarian hamlet. It was gradually incorporated into a village, then elevated to a town status, and circa 1932, with the expansion of Tokyo, eventually became Ebisubashi, one of the twenty new wards added to the fifteen original ones. In other words, as Bestor asserts, neighborhoods like Miyamoto are not a relics of a historic past or remnants from a pre-industrial and semi-feudalistic age. They are in fact the products of an ongoing urbanization which began with Japan's industrialization. They are living evidence of Tokyo's recurrent rebuilding and re-emergence from unforeseen and unforeseen catastrophes, with its own order of planned and unplanned regimes. (fig. 11.3) One of the reasons this generic matrix of neighborhoods remains eroded is because few really know the significance of how the Tokyo we see today came to be.

BOOM

 Founded as a fortified settlement in the 1400s by the name of Edo (literally "estuary"), Tokyo from the beginning, had a far more robust undercurrent when compared to more spiritually inclined sites like Nara and Kyoto. The name "Tokyo" (meaning "Capital of the East") came much later, in 1608 with the Meiji Era, marking the dawn of a new era for Japan. Between these two dates, in circa 1619, the Edo Castle was completed, even though it suffered serious damage in the Great Fire of Meireki in 1657. In 1872, another fire consumed the districts of Ginza and Tsukiji, but again, by the turn of the nineteenth century, Tokyo had more than 800,000 inhabitants. In 1923, Tokyo was hit by the Great Kantō Earthquake, destroying more than half of all its wooden buildings. Succeeding reconstruction was guided by an ambitious plan with sixteen experimental middle-class settlements built between 1925 and 1927. Following a stipulated pact, Japan joined World War II as German and Italian allies, and in 1941, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Tokyo suffered 70 air raids before Hiroshima and Nagasaki were annihilated in 1945, and the country was forced to surrender. At the end of the war, more than a fourth of Tokyo, and more than 700,000 houses had been razed to the ground. The historic Meiji jingu and the Edo castle, once the central symbol of the city's power, was a heap of rubble. In as little as two years, Tokyo's population dropped by four-collision, a quarter of it as victims of the war. But even though it appeared as if the domain of Japan's emperor could not hope to recover, the 1950s saw not only an overwhelming population increase, but also the beginnings of an even greater economic growth. Within twenty years since what seemed like an apocalypse, Tokyo was one again reborn.

What is less known is that a lot of this rebirth, in the physical sense, happened largely without formal planning. The planning proposals in the fifties included
decentralization at both a regional and city scale through the creation of multiple centers, beginning with Shibuya, Ikebukuro, and Shinjuku, followed by Asakusa, Oshiage, and Kamakura, and eventually spreading into the reclaimed islands within the Tokyo Bay. The government initially followed this post-war recovery plan focusing on infrastructure and disaster relief, but gradually, deviating from the plan’s most ambitious recommendations, left housing and commercial development to local forces. Public housing systems such as the Public Operated Housing (POH), and the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDC) built dwellings to be rented or sold to the more needy classes, but this was only a small part of the eleven-million odd new dwelling units that cropped up between the late fifties through the early seventies. Most of them were single-family ownership homes and modest rental units all managed by private parties, and created by the local construction industry, relying on homeowner participation and traditional building practice.

By 1960, Tokyo had more than nine million residents, living in an expensive city that had in it a deeper drive of rapid reconstruction, swallowing up its surrounding countryside.

Tokyo’s urban evolution is unique in this regard, revealing spasm of urban explosions and destructions, and their replacement with new urban patterns and grids previously unseen. Only Edo castle, it’s now “empty center”, remains a visual reference point to this city in flux. The apparently planned Tokyo is largely in its commercial center surrounding dominant transportation infrastructure, in large-scale industrial and public housing development and in suburban new towns. The rest of Tokyo is something else — tiny social units, that by American standards are perhaps far too small geographically and demographically, to be considered “neighborhoods.” They may be missed by casual eyes, but to Tokyoites and particularly to the residents of any given subsection of the city, these are the socially significant and geographically distinguishable divisions of the urban landscape.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EXTRUSION

Another aspect that typically catches Western observers is Tokyo’s towers — mainly because of their random locations, their extreme adjacencies with low-rise futilities, their sporadic clusters and their inability to amount to an overall cogent urban
form. If Manhattan is the epitome of the flat high-rise grid, and Central Hong Kong a warped terrain of high-rises without a grid, then Tokyo is something else altogether.

With the radical increase of height limits by the government in 1963, Tokyo saw an unstoppable process of high-rise development. Starting with its earliest towers, the Sony building by Yoshio Taniguchi (1965), and the Shinjuku Press and Broadcasting Company by Kenzo Tange (1967), both in Ginza, land pressures began to cause a dramatic upward expansion of the historically horizontal city. In the book "East Asia Modern: Shaping the Contemporary City," Peter Rowe has identified four circumstantial patterns in this regard: The first happened through the piecemeal vertical extension of historic lots as evident in low lying areas next to the Sumida River. Here the historic bridges were filled and converted into roads, and traditional blocks were overlaid parcel by parcel with taller commercial structures along its periphery to face canals and streets, with living tucked behind and entered through gates and narrow lanes – an antaka-gawa configuration, with a soft or low inner core and a hard or tall periphery. With typical lot sizes of around 60 feet x 120 feet in blocks of around 250 feet x 400 feet, the result of this structured upward expansion is "a very sharp gradation of tall, thin pencil buildings, placed side by side," with an equally "sharp disruption of moving from bustling, high-rise urbanity to quieter, small-scale traditional circumstances." (Fig. 11.4, 11.5.)

The second happened on the eastern end of the Sumida River in the low wetland areas that had escaped the 1923 Kanto earthquake and fire. Here, the antaka-gawa configuration has a more spontaneous and organic form, as can be seen in neighborhoods like Kotojin in Sumida-ku, reflecting the underlying pattern of rice fields and streams, with new streets and highways superimposing a rectilinear order. The third involved large-scale conversions of relatively open sites: The high-rise fabric of Shinjuku, today one of Tokyo's densest sub-centers occurred through the impetus of rail road and subway development. In the subsequent building boom in the seventies, relatively open height limitations produced the large concentration of high-rise urbanity in Japan.

The fourth was the densification of Tokyo's hillsides, once the setting for the walled compounds of daimyo estates and monasteries. Initially thought of as ideal sites for government institutions and museums such as Ueno Park, pressure of
Top: The urban hexagonal configuration, with high-rise buildings enclosing a low-rise fabric.

Figure 1.5 Right: Figure illustrating the urban grid around Shibuya Station. The design shows the surrounding street grid that emerges in response to the tender going up hill towards Yoyogi Park and Meiji Shrine. Opposite page below: The accompanying photo shows the dramatic transformation of high and low-rise development that makes up the black figure seen in the diagram.
property values generated ad-hoc high-rise development, with developers assembling various pieces of land for large-scale structures. Particularly during the eighties Heisei Boom, when Tokyo was forced to welcome the increasing flow of (often illegal) immigrants, areas like Minato-ku and the entire western hill-belt of Yamanote became dense with high-income residents, many of them immigrants, and began looking more and more like the very American and European downtowns they had left behind.

By the end of the Heisei Boom in the late nineties, Tokyo had become a transnational system “with fourteen of the fifteen largest banks in the world...and the whole Asian economic system, itself in rapid growth, linked in with it.” Much of original bay area city project had been developed between 1980 to 1990, and the city was now spreading towards to the southern waterfront of Toyosu. By 2001, it appeared as if the very center of Tokyo was gradually shifting to the bay. Today, Tokyo’s land values continue to rise. The reclaimed land footprint is still enhancing, occupied by massive waterfront office buildings with large verdant orchards and wide sidewalks — in other words a thoroughly planned place that is quite literally the antithesis of central Tokyo’s unplanned fabric (fig. 11.6).

Indian architect Kevin Lacz in his book “Tokyo: City and Architecture,” observes how Tokyo’s towers stand in “chaotic, fragmented, spars amidst relative minute buildings, on an uneven billy terrain defying any urban logic except their location on prominent streets and their accumulation around main subway stations,” and yet he argues, they endow the city with “a greater energy than San Paulo, Kuala Lumpur, Pudong in Shanghai or Chicago, and, maybe even that New York.” Lacz’s proclamation typifies the potemkin glorification of Tokyo in a titillating antipode to the formal clarity of the European city. But it must be recognized that this dimension of Tokyo’s history has had as much do with economic pressures as physical constraints. Even more significantly, all of these towers having mushroomed after the 1950s, are blatant advertisements to what many take for granted — the perpetual nervousness of this resilient city. We cannot dismiss the aspirations behind Tokyo’s towers, and we must not necessarily accept these unequivocal extrusions as urban models to be emulated, we must simultaneously understand the complex forces that have shaped them — and therein read them for what they truly are.

**Resilience**

It is hard for many of us to contemplate living in a city that you know will be destroyed from time to time. This is another side of Tokyo — where people measure their city’s history as events between disasters. In January 2012, the Earthquake Research Institute at the University of Tokyo reported a 70% chance of a 7.0-magnitude or higher quake to strike Japan’s capital by 2016. Such an event, the scientists said, could mean a death toll of up to 11,000 people and $1 trillion in damages on the world’s third-largest economy. Two years after a 9.0-magnitude quake and resulting tsunami devastated northeastern Japan, the country’s disaster-response experts are more nervous than ever about the ground beneath their feet. Japanese seismologist Kazuhiro Ishibashi has noted that “there hasn’t been a large-scale earthquake around Tokyo since 1923...there’s a high probability a violent tremor will strike the region (in the foreseeable future), stronger than the one that hit two years ago.”

In Tokyo, as in many other places across the country, each district has its own evacuation spot, emergency road, and temporary facilities with its own hazard maps showing the areas of possible major damage and fire. For a long time, evacuation spots in Japan were located within the local community, with public schools and local parks as the main places for temporary evacuation. Today around 200 locations are registered within Tokyo for temporary emergencies including local parks, public schools, gas stations, and convenience stores. These are also more than thirty larger designated evacuation open spaces (with a minimum area requirement of 90-square-kilometers) with hazard maps created by local communities and the city government showing the emergency routes for getting to these areas safely and directly. A simple water utilization facility called purification has been set up by local residents in the Tokyo’s Mukiwada district, wherein rainwater is collected from the roofs of private houses for garden watering, fire-fighting and drinking water in emergencies. The system also serves as a public place where community members can share their ideas towards survival during a natural disaster.

Additionally in 2012, The Tokyo Metropolitan Government announced a disaster preparedness plan that uses the city’s fire hydrants as water stations for tenches
in the event of an earthquake or similar disaster. Roughly 130,000 fire hydrants throughout the city (according to the local government's Bureau of Waterworks) will be able to provide fresh water to as many as 5,000 refuge shelters, serving nearly eight million people who are predicted to be stranded in Tokyo in the event of a major earthquake. To prepare for the fire hydrant plan, necessary supplies to turn them into water stations, like water hoses and sandbags, are being distributed to Tokyo's wards, cities, and towns. In April 2012, it was determined that as much 45% of Tokyo's water supply could be cut off in a major earthquake leaving access to water only in stockpiled bottles and water tanks at the approximate 200 emergency supply bases throughout the city. The government has subsequently announced that it will also offer training programs for residents on how to supply their own water.

In February 2012, Martin Fackler reported in the New York Times that in the "darkest moments" of the 9.0 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, Japanese leaders not knowing the actual extent of damage at the plant "secretly considered the possibility of evacuating Tokyo." It did not happen, but the catastrophe has inspired impelling large-scale planning efforts centered on an entire backup city for Tokyo. The plan is titled "Urban Plan B," and calls for the construction of a new city to be called JRTBIC (Integrated Resort, Tourism, Business, and Backup City) or NEMIC (National Emergency Management International City) and to be located on the site currently occupied by the Osaka International Airport at Inami. JRTBIC would be designed to take on all the functions of Tokyo in the event of a catastrophe. The centerpiece, a 650 m-high tower, would house 50,000 residents and accommodate a work-day force of 200,000 people from the Osaka region.

In Tokyo, disaster preparedness is at work at all levels—from modest neighborhood-centered efforts and city-wide programs to entire regional strategies—relying both on the old and the familiar, as well as the new and the innovative. And while it seems counterintuitive that an urban geography of recurring quakes, tsunamis and typhoons should be compacted rather than spread out, thereby increasing its susceptibility to disasters on a larger scale, as Vihaan Chakrabarti argues "spreading out really leads to oil dependence and further environmental degradation, which in turn leads to sea-level rise and fiercer storms surge." In its ongoing patterns of "planning for the unplanned," Tokyo compels us to reconsider the definition of disaster planning from an exception to a normative aspect of strategy and policymaking.

**TRAINS**

In their essay "Four Hours: Occupation of Time-space" Solomon, Morita and Dimmick call attention to a daily Tokyo pattern occurring every twenty-four hours around midnights. As train services discontinue for an approximately four-hour period during the night, they observe, Tokyo "experiences a fundamental shift in its patterns of commuter circulations"—people rushing to finish their respective chores or grab a instant snack to reach the station as fast as possible to get home. They argue this to be a "significant void at the heart of Japanese cities" and posit for a twenty-four hour operation of city trains as a potential impetus for urban revitalization. This "void" is an intriguing aspect of Tokyo particularly if one knows that in its thirty-million-strong metropolitan area, annual urban rail ridership is approximately double that of the entire public transport industry of the United States. From subways to overhead trains, Tokyo takes its inhabitants with extreme efficiency to its limits and back.

Japan's first railway line opened in 1827. It was a mere 29 kilometers from Shimbashi to Yokohama and used British technology and rolling stock. The Meiji government had initially decided to develop a state railway system, but with lack of sufficient capital, and an eager private sector ready to invest in new technology, the government permitted private businesses to build and operate railways while offering some financial assistance. But circa 1907, the nationalisation of major trunk lines belonging to seventeen private railway companies spurred a sudden expansion of the government railways' network at the expense of private railways. By 1910, 90% of the rail was run by the government changing the destiny of Japanese mobility. Following the way, the railway became one of the most important tools for urban development. With a weak planning system, and a relatively underdeveloped road infrastructure, commuting by train and subway became the most effective travel means for those who lived in the suburbs and worked in the city center.
Gris 1959, Japanese workmen finished installing the high-speed rail system in as little as five and a half years. The tracks officially opened on October 1, 1964, just in time for the Tokyo Olympics. The Shinkansen Bullet Train was the new prototype of public transit. Originally running the 320-mile track between Tokyo and Osaka and costing 640 million dollars to build, it would grab both national and international attention for its comfort, punctuality and 125 miles-per-hour speed (now 300 miles-per-hour), and go on to become the most popular form of transportation in modern Japan. During the Shinkansen’s 48-year history with nearly seven billion passengers, no passengers have been killed in train accidents since the service began. There have been no passenger fatalities despite frequent earthquakes and typhoons with only one derailment during the Chubu Earthquake on 25 October 2004. Today the Asa’s Shinkansen is part of an endless line of Shinkansen trains running from Tokyo to Nagano with stations on all Shinkansen lines efficient enough not to steal too much space in the populated megapolis (fig. 11.2).*10

Tokyo’s train stations have no dead spaces. They pack the utilitarian aspects of a transitional node with commerce, leisure, media, fashion and other advanced spaces for creation and innovation. Shinjuku Station for instance occupies approximately fifteen acres, and serves four light rail companies. It has two underwater levels for the subway trains, and two high-rise department stores and restaurants, with drugstores, lockers, shops and bookstores at almost all levels. Multiple entrances connected to the streets extend into bus and taxi depots, shuttle pick-up to airports, and finally entire underground passages directly linked to high rise buildings. What these stations have done in effect is recalibrated the city into a series of clearly identifiable transit clusters that perform at three levels: that of the streets, that of the high-rises that surround them, and that of the sophisticated subterranean world connecting them.

There is then, another reading of Tokyo — as a series of train rides from district to district. Stephen Barber’s book “Tokyo Vertical” is organized precisely on this experience. It moves from district to day to night — from Shinjuku, “Tokyo’s burning heart in the late 1960s,”*10 to Shibuya, where “the providing deity is Hello Kitty,”*10 to Otsuka, Tokyo’s massive relocated streets, to finally the Imperial Palace — evolving a bewildering series of urban sensations and images (fig. 11.8, 11.9). During such rides, and between these districts, the train window is literally a lens on Tokyo’s history, showing frame by frame, the immemorable moments of an compact accumulation of modest planter buildings and neighborhoods, urban ghettos, back alleys, train tracks, old canals, and spaces of commerce and retail all mangled in a rich frenzy of Japanese signage (fig. 11.10, 11.11, 11.12). All this ends near midnight. It is when the taxis take over, with their immaculate roof lights, clean interiors and soft-spoken drivers. And when one takes to the road one begins to comprehend another reading of Tokyo: there are no signs or landmarks to add any kind of navigable structure. On the one hand are streets retaining characteristics of their old feudal framework, originally conceived to slow down enemies by multiple dead-ends and close.*9 On the other are the massive expressways, pedestrian bridges, and railroad tracks skimming through the fabric. This double suspended network is built without any figural intention or hierarchy, even though it is created to reduce traffic intersections. It ultimately results in a labyrinthine form, where comprehension seems less through speed and mobility, as if moving through a contorted grid placed on a perpetually fluctuating terrain. Tokyo’s modality infrastructure is arguably the most visually conspicuous dimension of its urbanism. It is what enables the city to go on impeccably, reliably, and efficiently, proving that ultimately, the rationale of a closely malleable urban form is but one of many.

**EIRS**

“Tokyo is built on compacted layers of pornography” wrote Stephen Barber.*9 Many Japanese natives or perhaps even non-natives who have lived in Japan for a long time would perhaps strongly disagree with his suggestion that Japan is sex-driven. But as a transvestite outsider, Barber was referring among other things to the comic books, internet guides, and manga pamphlets that he observed Tokyo salarymen take in compulsively each day. He was quoting another transen-eyed outsider Romain Slocum’s full-page black-and-white photographs in “Tokyo Sex Underground” ranging from the first transvestite naturalistic to the eerily kinky, and from demurely contained nuns to fetish parties.*9 He was referring to the hospital rooms and the neon streets, where he had seen Slocum’s “Broken Dolls” in plastic casts and
bands, as victims of unknown traumas in a city seething with undercurrents of sexual violence and bondage.\(^{60}\)

The fact is that Tokyo, like any city, reserves another world in its sexual enclaves. For me, the most Japanese of these are the rubi hostess or love hotels that continue to enable Japanese couples to engage in acts of intimacy beyond their own small spaces. Here, you pay to have sex in two-hour units in a room of your selection. This trend runs deep in Japanese culture. Love hotels can be moved back to tea-places or shi-ro-kaya during the Edo Period, where couples were served tea and cake before being left alone to engage in sexual activity. Later in the 20th century, no-h/ small establishments with interior-mat spaces, and no-h/ no, noodle shops with upper floors rented out usually for prostitution, became the new meeting places for geishas, clients and couples (fig. 11.13).

Unlike regular hotels that are usually situated in the core urban areas along arterial roads to increase visibility, love hotels are requested in the urban back streets. As Cybezsky notes, the physical framework of Japan’s urban centers is distinguished between the main-dori or front streets where skyscrapers and major shopping malls are situated, versus the side-dori, or back streets or alleyways tucked behind the tall buildings — where love hotels are largely located.\(^{59}\) Many hotels are built in concentrated clusters, such as “Love Hotel Hill” in Shibuya, with approximately thirty hotels huddled in less than a quarter-mile radius of the Dogenzaka section behind the popular Shibuya 109 department store (fig. 11.14). The exterior architecture of love hotels displays thematic idioms — from bright and colorful pairs, and fairy-tale castles to Victorian mansions, with signage navigating pedestrian flow to these discrete places (fig. 11.15, 11.16).\(^{60}\) They stand out in their dependence on neon to assemble nonsensical silhouettes into castles of the imagination, and in their attempt to transform the mundane into the magical.

Love hotels were once defined in the same category as massage parlors, pachinko parlors, and strip clubs, but in 1985, the Japanese government passed the Entertainment Law by regulating love hotels in an effort to address social issues. With Japan’s least zoning restrictions, love hotels were not only operated within red light districts, but they could also be found next to a school or retirement home.\(^{60}\) Some hotels were even located near religious areas. The law re-defined love
hotels as a place to rest for a short detour, and not a traditional hotel or ryokan (Japanese inn). In other words, as West notes, the Entertainment Law reclassified love hotels as a sex-related business because they were not operating for the purpose of guest lodging. The law now regulates that hotels may not operate at least 200 meters from schools and libraries.

Meanwhile, intruding between Shintō’s sacral and skyscrapers is Kabuki-cho, a snow-blanked enclave packed with sex shops, love hotels, clubs, bars, pachinko parlors, and pleasure houses catering to both sexes (fig. 11.17). It got its name from the originally planned and eventually abandoned Kabuki theater in this district, and its proximity to the train station catalyzed the proliferation of forbidden pleasures as early as the seventies. Although prostitution is illegal in Japan, everyone seems to ignore what goes on behind these closed doors that are strictly bounded from the rest of the city with clear divisions between a shopping district and recreation area. Within the enclave, however, compared to other cities in the world, these shops are wide open to the public, some blatantly facing the main street with decoupled neon sign boards that in fact render a street scene where one can easily pass by without feeling awkward.

There are three dimensions to this neon economy: the first is the maiko shibai, the women protagonists, mostly of Japanese descent but with an increasing number of foreigners from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines, all part of a long-established sex trail. The second is the sorrowful or white-collared worker who patronizes the miss-shibai on his employer’s account. The third is the package that owns and manages the business. With tattoos that stretch across their entire body, these members of organized crime groups maintain formal offices, but remain veiled in public life, operating behind brutal currents, as the benefactors of Japan’s counter-culture. These aspects of Japanese culture stand out for many outsiders, perhaps more so than other cultures where they also exist, because of their unshelled contrast with what we immediately associate with Japan — the calm of a dry sand garden, the refined sex on a dais, the meditative silence of a tea room.
BLUE TENTS

We also do not immediately associate Tokyo with homeless. Japan's reputation as a middle class paradise has led to a persistent myth that homelessness is rare or even non-existent in the country. Yet today, more than 30,000 people live on streets, with at least 10,000 in Tokyo alone. These numbers do not include residents of capsule hotels, or those that sleep overnight in 24-hour Internet cafes and saunas. While these numbers may not seem significant compared to other cities around the world, for Japan, this is a new dimension not encountered in recent history. With the economic collapse, laborers that previously worked in the construction industry were immediately affected, and with many international businesses declaring bankruptcy, there was a parallel increase in younger homeless men in their twenties and thirties. The rise of homelessness is surging new issues in Tokyo that cannot be underestimated for the future of Japan.

In 1996, for instance, the homeless people of Shinjuku's high-rise town were forcibly evicted by private guards and police. Even as supporters were assuaged, questions such as "who owns public space?" or "what should be given priority: human lives or local regulations?" surfaced as dominant rubrics. Once needs a fixed address to qualify for welfare help, and be eligible to receive 38,000 yen a month and lodging to the value of 1,900 yen a night. But many homeless in Tokyo as the end of January choose not to claim state help. Turner Ishizuka has suggested that this is a political issue: "The welfare benefits are given in an attitude of codescending, patronizing charity. The laws, regulations, the pre-conditions required, the bureaucracy and the smug arrogance of officials all combine to act as a powerful deterrent." My own experiences in Shinjuku (cited in the spread before this chapter) have revealed another side: the many homeless have in fact formed street shelters, in response to a need for personal pride. In turn they have formed micro-communities, of modest timber structures provide by the state, and launched micro-businesses such as collecting beer cans sold each week to the state for a price significantly less than the stipend they are entitled to.

Today, blue tents – in Ueno Park, Shinjuku or along portions of the Sumida River – are blatant symbols of Japan's homelessness phenomenon. Less blatant, yet the capsule hotels. Two decades ago, when Japan was pulling back from its bubble economy, the capsule hotel Shirakawa had opened its tiny 6 feet x 5 feet plastic cubicles as a night's refuge to salarymen who had missed the last train home. Today, these capsules offer an affordable option for people with nowhere else to go. Rents are set at a per-night fee of 600 American dollars, but cheaper than anywhere else in Tokyo, with residents having reduced their possessions to only that which can be stored in a locker.

On May 18, 2013, the British magazine "Economist" featured a cover story on Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's vision of a prosperous and patriotic Japan. Since he was elected for his second term, the stock market rose by 50%, and consumer spending prebilled growth as the first quarter to an annualized 3.5%. How this will all eventually play out is another subject but at Japan endures its worst recession since World War II, such figures are crucial signs of optimism for a country of over 127 million inhabitants that is confronting new gripping realities.

As the global architecture and urban community continues to see Tokyo as a dynamic ground for new ideas on architecture and urbanism, we must not forget the deeper issues that this agglomeration now dives headlong into. They will also be the depth of Tokyo's resilience, and ultimately of its evoking ethos as a global city (fig. 11.18, 11.19).

TOkyo – At Tokyo

Where an outsider's and insider's Tokyo overlap is in its non-figural and accumulative urban form, and its dense, compact disposition on limited land. Where an outsider's and insider's Tokyo separate is in the manner in which this physical setup is understood and experienced. For one would argue that Tokyo remains one of the most livable and walkable cities in the world. Physically, its most dominant experience is an ancient fable of unprominent architecture on equally unprominent but perpetually active streets, with immutable micro-lenses of eating, shopping and socializing, all weaving together in an impressive subterranean as well as elevated mobility infrastructure. It reminds us that cities can in fact be conceived, experienced and understood beyond the normative and dominantly Western parameters of physical
form, and that visually ambiguity should not be confused with the richness of daily urban life. Tokyo's seemingly visual cacophony might not be a model for other cities, but its livability quotient, inscrutable efficiency, and diverse scalability are things every other city should aspire to.

As Asia's first global megalopolis, Tokyo pioneered what is now an evolutionary trajectory of many rapidly urbanizing Asian mega-cities - from Hong Kong to Shanghai, where severe land pressure among other things forces process and forms of urban growth that are unheard of in the West. Additionally, Tokyo also epitomizes what is now being seen by many urban scholars as one of the most relevant lessons Asian cities are imparting to Western cities: the seamless coexistence and juxtaposition of aspirations, of globalization and quotidian life, or what Jeff Hoy calls "vertical urbanism and horizontal urbanity." For instance, when one admires the Nakagin Capsule Tower, now long fallen into disrepair, one must not fail to notice the cacophony of restaurants and stores that occupy every inch of space beneath the Japan Railway tracks a walk away from the seventies architectural icon. As Hoy observes, "much more than the iconic tower, these mundane structures and shops embody the vision and reality of (Tokyo's) urban metabolism, without singular architectural expressions."

In Tokyo, like other Asian cities, compositional clarity is subverted to constant appropriation and change - leading many visitors to misread its hidden order as a visual chaos. When I look at Tokyo as an Indian native, I am tempted to compare its urban energy to Mumbai, and then just as quickly remove the colossal informal economy that dominates India's financial capital. Tokyo is also parallel to Mumbai in its apparently visually chaotic physical disposition, but it is far closer to a European city when we look at its cleanliness, order, and daily efficiency. When in turn I look at Tokyo as a resident of Los Angeles, I am tempted to see them as contrasting parallels: their massive urban growth from modest settlements into global mega-cities, their visible urban infrastructure, their fragile disaster prone natural geographies on the one hand, versus Los Angeles' vast horizontal explosion in contrast to Tokyo's land-pressure driven implosion on the other (fig. 11.20). The point is that Tokyo must ultimately be seen on its own terms - typical in many respects, unique in others.
As an event in time, Tokyo stands at a crucial juncture. On September 8, 2013, Tokyo was chosen over Madrid and Istanbul to host the Olympic Games in 2020. Some 2,000 supporters who had gathered at a gymnasion near Komazawa stadium — originally built for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 — cheered as the decision was relayed via a big screen. This was a landmark event, particularly because Tokyo’s bid for the games appeared to be fading amid the slew of bad news from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, 140 miles to the north. Eleventh-hour assurances from Japan’s prime minister Shinzo Abe, that radiation from the destroyed Fukushima plant posed no threat to Tokyo paid off. But given the size of Japan’s public debt — “now more than twice the size of its $6-trillion economy” — there are those that have questioned Tokyo’s decision to bid for the Olympics. Those among the 160,000 people forced to evacuate after the March 2011 tsunami and Fukushima plant meltdown have argued that money would be better spent on fixing leaks and decontaminating towns. While this debate will no doubt continue, the bill for the 2020 Games has been estimated at just under $8 billion, and the city already has $45 billion in an Olympic reserve fund. And according to SMBC Nikko Securities, hosting the event is estimated to bring positive economic effects of more than $40 billion and create more than 150,000 jobs. If this is an opportunity for Japan to make a significant global statement, then it has been long awaited. The 1964 Tokyo Games, held less than two decades after Japan's defeat in World War II, symbolized the country’s re-emergence from its biggest military misadventure.

Tokyo then is an urban phenomenon where the term disaster translates into cyclic occurrence, where the term chance translates into J. Somogyi’s definition of an “order to be deciphered” and where the term density translates into a mechanism for survival. Tokyo’s perception as an extreme city is a Western construct, an exaggeration born out of a comparative bias from the standpoint of the European and American polls. If therefore we as outsiders can shift our perceptions on remolding Tokyo — on its own terms — it may offer us significant takeaways to question our own preconceptions of what cities are or ought to be. If one has not failed to notice the losing ticket-collector in the Shinjuku station, train, and I have admired as much she visits from the grounds of the Senso-ji temple in Asakusa juxtaposing its curved roof with a love hotel in the distance (fig. 11.21). This is why in Tokyo, my narrative ends as naturally as it began at Ise — because I have journeyed to Japan’s cultural extremes, because I do not need to search for cultural thralls anymore. Ise and Tokyo are in their own way equally Japanese and will always be — there is nothing like them anywhere else in the world.
Epilog

Moving across Japan in time and space, the chapters in this book have traversed through numerous layers of history, tracing how cultural patterns and expressions were discovered, imported, assimilated, built on, interrogated, engaged with, and eventually made "Japanese"—in our case, specifically those of architecture and urbanism. They have simultaneously reflected on a wide range of factors that have shaped the Japanese built landscape—from historic epochs to recent crises; from individual buildings to entire cities; from ecological dilemmas to political challenges; and from philosophical concepts to physical places.

Readers who expected my "Reflections on Japanese Architecture and Urbanism" to celebrate the cutting-edge of contemporary Japanese architecture, architects or cities might be disappointed. Their disappointment, I would argue, stems from a stereotypical short-sighted understanding of the built world, of how to read it, and how in turn to see their role in shaping it. This book is a counterpoint to their fixed, highly biased, definitive—and therefore for me myopic—treaties on architecture and urbanism. The mind of multi-faceted angles and themes in this book is my way of attempting to truly understand Japan on its own terms without any pretension or self-imposition to objectify it. My understanding of Japan is complex, not simplistic; multi-faceted, not linear. That is because it has evolved over multiple visits, stays, studies, projects, observations, readings, conversations with my Japanese hosts, discussions with Japanese and non-Japanese peers, etc.—indeed from an up and down, deeply personal—very spiritual—relationship with this culture for nearly 10 years. I believe Japan deserves this kind of understanding.

As stated in the book's Introduction, I have attempted to shift the emphasis on how we choose to read Japanese architecture and urbanism. If "architecture" is the making of individual buildings, and "urbanism" the making of what is between them, then diffusing the boundaries of these two disciplines is only as natural as their separation is a convenient detail. Nothing in our built world exists in isolation: individual buildings are only parts of larger places and districts that nurture everyday life. These places in turn are ingredients of a city that in itself bears indelible relationships with the natural world within and around it. While this may seem like an obvious point, current dominant attitudes in architecture and urbanism seem far removed from this truth. Additionally, buildings and places are judged by both architects and citizens largely by how they look—that is, as static end products. They are hardly read through how they have come to be or what they are becoming—that is, as evolving entities in time; or how they contribute to something bigger than themselves—that is, as agents for social reform and change.

In looking beyond stereotypes, this book calls for an alternative reading of the built landscape—as a complex evolving mosaic of cite-crossed issues and trajectories. The themes in the book's various chapters highlight this: There are ecological trajectories (Chapter 2—the dilemmas surrounding the future of Ine shrine's reconstruction); social trajectories (Chapter 8—street life); political trajectories (Chapter 10—the meanings and manifestations of democracy); external influences (Chapter 9—the East-West dialectic); deep religious and philosophical blueprints (Chapters 3 & 5—Zen and the consciousness of temporality); cultural tastes and propensities (Chapters 4 & 6—the aesthetics of rectilinear compositions and the propensity for dimness); populist forces (Chapter 9—everyday Japanese objects); and circumstantial limitations (Chapter 11—land scarcity or waste). In other words, the built environment is always an intertwined physical, political, social, cultural, ecological and anthropological composition.

As investors, agents & recipients of the built environment, how do we situate ourselves in these dimensions? How do we engage with these numerous trajectories as we make singular or collective decisions about a culture's past, present and future? The book's multifaceted narrative suggests several pointers in this regard:

1) By Excavating Deep Hitozetsu—For instance, the book reveals how the perceived landscape of the Ine Shrine, one of Japan's most revered places, actually extends far beyond the shrine complexes into the palimpsest path, surrounding forest and natural geography (Chapter 1). Thus, even though the complexes are meticulously preserved, the continuing ambivalence towards its adjacent town and macro-landscape is a degradation of the sacredness of the shrine itself. What places like Ine need is a deeper application of this knowledge-based towards real action—in other words a more reflective integration of deep scholarship with deep praxis.

2) By Probing Evolutionary Patterns—By tracing the evolution of Zen landscapes (Chapter 3), or the changing attitudes to traditional aesthetics of darkness (Chapter 6), or the shifts in patterns of publicness in post-war Japan (Chapter 10), or Tokibay's evolution from a feudal castle town to a global mega-city (Chapter 11), the book reminds us that cultural expressions and products are always evolving constructs. Assessing what has endured, what has changed, and what has precipitated these shifts, is not a passive anthropological exercise, but an essential part of responsible intervention and decision-making.

3) By Tracing Cross-Cultural Currents—The book demonstrates this in several ways. First, by tracing the contemporaneous trajectories of other cultures—such as the comparative chronological analysis of Kyoto and Renaissance Rome (Chapter 7). Second, by identifying parallel themes—such as the aesthetics of Mannerism paintings and the shrine indarice (Chapter 4). Third, by investigating cultural symbols—in this case the reciprocal influences of Japan and the West soon after the Meiji Era (Chapter 9). Fourth, by studying the results of instilled or imposed external influences—in this case, the advent of Western democracy and beyond (Chapter 10). Such trans-cultural examinations offer us refreshing lenses to probe deeper into how and where cultural propensities overlap, and where they truly separate.
4) By Rethinking Heritage and Heritage Conservation – Not too many people know about the Japanese idea of Ningyo Kokosha (Living National Treasure). It refers not to buildings but individual certified as Preservers of Important Intangible Cultural Properties. As such, Japan expands the mainstream global rhetoric of heritage conservation through several counterpoints: First, for Shinto’s cyclic reconstruction offers a direct challenge to conventional notions of building preservation globally (Chapter 1 & 2). Second, the demolition of major Modern icons such as the Imperial Hotel by Frank Lloyd Wright, or the dialog surrounding the potential demolition of the Nakagin Capsule Tower reveals the difficulties of preserving a recent past in the wake of other pressing issues such as land pressure (Chapter 9 & 11). And third, by showing how several Japanese historic wooden landmarks are being painstakingly restored and preserved (Chapter 1 & 2), this study also dispels the stereotype that historic preservation is in the Western sense – it is not existent in Japan.

5) By Balancing Popular Expression and Formal Design – Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ginza, and Takashima-dori are not experienced as formally designed places, but as complex urban ensembles juxtaposing popular appropriation, improvisation and flux (Chapter 8), leading to the common impression that formal urban design has no place in Japanese cities. But as this study shows, it is in fact around the framework of carefully designed places, from Omotesando to Ueno Park, and landmarks, from the Sensoji Temple to Tokyo Tower, that a city like Tokyo spins and thrives (Chapter 8 & 11). It is the juxtaposition of these contrasts, and the diversity of choices that makes it so compelling. The question therefore is: where should a city demand and embrace formal design, where in turn should it step back?

6) By Engaging with Power and Administrative Structures – The built landscape of any culture, at any point in its history is a reflection of its extant governance entities and regimes. For instance Nara and Kyoto’s urban form as a grid without any apparent plaza or square was a direct reflection of a non-egalitarian, non-democratic society with the diacrony in its parts (Chapter 8). The uncomfortable introduction of the Western plaza as a symbol of post-war democracy is an extension of this rubric (Chapter 10). Thus, the current urban forms, trends and workings of Japanese cities must also be understood as manifestations of their current decision-making processes. If the lynch-pin for urban transformation is not architecture or urban design but the specific power and administrative structures of a place, how do we create the catalysts to engage with them?

7) By Interrogating “Ideal City” Berowers – The book shows how Tokyo for instance represents an urban conundrum when seen from the West. Its compact footprint, mobility efficiency, and pedestrian density are things many Western cities would aspire to. On the other hand, its seemingly ad-hoc urban form or spatial density per person would be considered un-liveable by Western standards. The book discusses the dilemmas surrounding homelessness in Japan, and also highlights the resilience of Japanese cities to recurrent disasters and crises (Chapter 11). Particularly for a Western outsider, the Japanese city poses a mind-boggling question: Who ultimately defines “livability”, “sustainability”, “democracy” or “social equity”? While there are certain fundamental concepts that cannot be disputed, the eventual subtleties of how we choose to understand such of these terms remain subjective.

Thus, while the content of this book is focused on Japan, the message of this book goes far beyond it: Eventually, all cultures are both unique and typical; they all have traits that set them apart, versus those that remain common. Reading a culture is always a relative exercise of negotiating histories, impressions and personal biases. For example, India (where I was born and raised) from a Japanese standpoint can be compared to a palimpsest: Mohenjo-daro, the Aryan influx, the Golden Age of the Gupta, the glory of the Mughals, the British Raj, and post-independence is a historic continuum of constant revisionism, rewriting a new script right upon the one before. In turn, Japan, looked at from India, is comparable to a pearl: I think of the more-than-a-thousand years in which the seed of Buddhism that reached this prosperous archipelago from India was recurrently coated with cultural interpretations – from the massive temples of Nara, to the sand gardens of Zen – all hardly known to or influenced by the rest of the wider world. When I think of India and Japan together, I see the contemporaneous emergence of two born-again nations, two industrial democracies that both got there through two tumultuous events – India’s freedom struggle with the British rule, and Japan’s defeat in World War II. I think of how different our histories are, and yet how they overlap in so many ways.

As architects and urbanists, as well as other actors who play a role in shaping built environments, especially in a time when cross-cultural fluidity is less viscous than ever before, the final takeaway of this study is to strive to read, understand, and intervene with cultures on their own terms. To do this, we need to be far more open minded and sympathetic, and far more inclusive and expansive in our knowledge base to understand the complex cultural threads that weave deep histories and contemporary aspirations. We need to characterize our relationship with a culture not as a static one-way outlook, but as a flowing two-way discourse that enriches both sides. I like to believe that I am all the more rich for engaging in a dialog with Japanese architecture and urbanism, as much as Japan benefits from keen observers like me. My approach to understanding Japan is only part of a fluid process that will continue to evolve long after this book is published. This book, twenty-years in the making, is thus less a stopping point on a continuing journey – an important stopping point, but a stopping point nonetheless.