public space in japan
the rise of civic space

After having spent only a couple of days in Tokyo in the year 2000 the visual disorder that entered my eyes wherever I looked was one of the phenomena that challenged my perception of a city. I have to add that Tokyo has been the first Asian city I ever visited.

This visual disorder as I felt it was directly related to the bustling, vibrant city, bursting with energy. In the central parts I could see people rushing around almost everywhere, market streets with shop owners noisily announcing their latest bargains, trains and cars on elevated tracks and roads. There wasn't any place to escape that rush, nowhere to relax it seemed.

What I was looking for was a simple bench, somewhere to sit down, to rest from restlessly running around. As it turned out, I wasn't able to find any. The reason is not that benches are simply non-existent, but that I was looking for them in places where they are usually placed in my own country, Germany. I was looking for benches at urban places, like city plazas or near fountains or within parks or temple areas or in market streets. One reason for the lack as came to my mind is surely the Japanese tradition of sitting on the floor and truly I saw construction workers eating their lunch box while sitting on the street, even between their cars.

Picture 1: a chair, not for sitting but to advertise hospitality of a restaurant, a typical pattern in Tokyo

But what startled me even more than just the lack of benches was the absence of many urban spaces as I was so used to. There were no plazas with statues or wide boulevards or market squares with fountains. At this point it may be helpful to understand the historical concept behind these kind of so called 'public spaces' in the West, that I was subconciously looking for. As Habermas (1962/1989) has analysed, prior to the 18th century European culture had been dominated by a 'representational' culture where the mighty publicly represented their power before the common people. This can be said to be true for the masters of the *oikos'* in the Greek *polis*, the Roman *castra* or military camps that are an origin for many cities and for the knights and kings during the feudal medieval times. Even the churches and city halls that frame so many market squares belong to this kind. The impact of 'representational' culture

Picture 3: *koban* in Udagawaracho, Shibuya, community police station as public image of security

can be directly seen in urban spaces and it could be argued that this kind of representational city planning continues until the modern times, see Baron Haussmann's plan for Paris, Albert Speer's unrealised plan for Berlin, Oscar Niemeyer's plan for Brasilia, Le Corbusier's plan for Chandigarh or the city plans of Washington D.C. and Canberra.
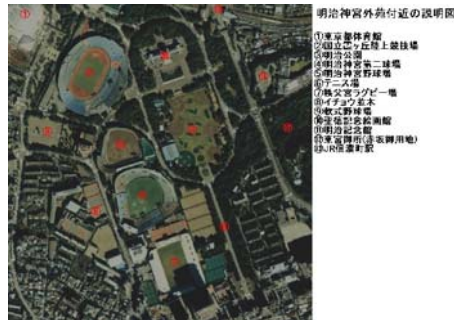
Picture 2: The Outer garden of Meiji Shrine, an example of representational public space with the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery as the perspectival focal point of the central axis.

An example of similar shape can be found even in Japan at the Outer garden of Meiji Shrine. But in general, representational spaces in Japan are slightly different. As Nakashima (1999) has pointed out, the garden surrounding the Imperial Palace together with other parks of Tokyo, *Akasaka Gosho* (Crown Prince's Palace), *Shinjuku Gyoen* (Shinjuku Imperial Garden), *Meiji-jingu* (Meiji Shrine), *Meiji-jingu gaien* (Outer garden of Meiji Shrine), *Hamarikyu-teien* (Garden of Hama detached palace), and *Ueno-koen* (Ueno Park), basically all larger parks in central Tokyo, together with dedicated forests throughout Japan, *Meiji no mori* (Forest of Meiji), *Showa no mori* (Forest of Showa), *Shinrin Koen* (Forest Park), *Kokumin no mori* (Forest of the Nation) and *Kenmin no mori* (Prefectural Forest) represent the non-political nature as well as the political nation for the

people. As a more direct representation of public security and order I would name the many small neighbourhood police stations called *koban*, unique in itself as the represent an architecturally separate building typology (picture 3). But ultimately, if the vast nature and small boxes are images of public 'representational' spaces, than what is left for urban buildings?

Back to Habermas, in contrast to representational spaces he saw the rise of political *Öffentlichkeit*, 'public sphere' or publicness during the 18th century, when private people came together to discuss matters of public interest and publish their opinions in print media like newspapers to express their opinion on state decisions. These bourgeois' circles didn't enter into the established representational spaces, but were occupying interior spaces like salons or coffee houses and using newly established mass media to communicate, a decentralised and unpredictable challenge to state power. A similar, anti-authoritarian and egalitarian tendency can be attributed to Japanese tea house culture.

The common element of both, pre-18th century 'representational' and after-18th century *Öffentlichkeit* culture in Habermas' discussion is the existence of an inherent 'private' realm that is constituted by the family household (which roots back to the Greek *oikos*) or individual ('Cogito ergo sum') as its smallest member as opposed to the 'public' common realm.

If I reflect on Tokyo than it becomes obvious that the lack of a necessity to represent allows for facades to be plastered with commercial signs.

The absence of representational urban public spaces is counterbalanced by a sheer endless number of commercial interior spaces, from shops and restaurants to department stores and shopping malls, that advertise their services on the non-representational exterior shells (pictures 4, 5). Ashihara (1986/1989) has emphasised the strive for content before form as the hidden order that underlies Japanese cities. But content in Ashihara's sense is not merely an internal function of a building but "to give sufficient attention to humane and natural environments". With focus on the human dimension he interprets individual dwellings merely as "bedroom" and reads the city as an extension of it, where parks serve as "family rooms", office buildings as "parlors", airports and harbors as "entryways", and the like. If taken this concept further I can even say that the dwelling is not more than a 'part-time bedroom', other places can be the train, manga and internet cafes, massage chairs on display in department stores, capsule hotels, the desk at work or in the lab, the car as for many taxi drivers, love hotels that can be rented on an hourly basis or overnight, and even on top of a motorbike or bicycle a resting person can be seen (picture 6). Traditional *sentos,* public baths are the 'bathroom', free public 'toilets' are a Japanese novelty unknown in other metropolises and *conbinis,* so called convenience stores that can be found in close range provide services similar to a 24/7 'refrigerator'. In this sense the city seems to be filled with amenities that attract and serve basic human needs. It is the vision of an adjustable and humane city for living in contrast to a solidified and formal city for representation. The Japanese commodity based private city versus the European political public city.

But the reality is not as simple or opposed as this comparison may suggest. Neither purely public nor purely private interests can guarantee a livable city or the quality of the urban environment. It is a continuous balancing act between partly mutually exclusive interests, especially in times of continuing urbanisation. A slightly different light on the issue of urban quality is shed by Sorensen et al. (2008). Even though Ashihara's view emphasises the humane aspect of Tokyo, it widly ignores the fact, that urban planning did exist since the Meiji era, but with top priority on economic development over quality of urban life or environmental preservation. As neither the market (economic private interest) nor the government (authoritive public interest) can guarantee for quality, local communities have started to demand improvements and define visions for the future of the neighbourhood. Such movements are generally called *machizukuri* and are by now an accepted method of local governance, the rise of the political civil society (Sorensen, 2008; Watanabe, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Quality urban spaces of the 21st century will be civic spaces, that are "those spaces in which people of different origins and walks of life can co-mingle without overt control by government, commercial or other private interests, or de facto dominance by one group over another" and "in which civil society

Picture 4: Shinjuku downtown, a collage of commercial signs, advertising the interior services

Picture 5: facades not architecturally designed but branded signs of the contemporary city

Picture 6: a biker sleeping on his motorbike

Picture 7: Hachiko Square, an example of a railway station as a public meeting point, here the JR Shibuya station.

Picture 8: Yoyogi Park, an example of busking, street musicians.

groups have the physical, psychological, and social space to create their own new norms, shared values, and shared imaginaries for the future of neighbourhoods as shared spaces" (Sorensen et al., 2008).

As I finally understood the differences in concept and the meaning of truly civic spaces I found many of such spaces also in Japan, traditional places with an ephemeral seasonal character as for instance shrines and temples during festivities, public streets or parks during celebrations like hanami or hanabi, private cafes during daytime, *fureai* called meeting places in metro stations, train stations in general as meeting places in a city where adresses are difficult to locate (picture 7), street musicians in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo (picture 8), the glass facade at the entrance of an office building that turns into a mirrored stage for dancing lessons of young people, small landscaped areas in front of high-rise buildings as part of 'specified block system' developments (floor area ratio bonus in exchange of open space), openly accessible university green areas, rather symbolic pocket parks of local communities as a result of *machizukuri* activities and so on. As a general rule, such spaces are not so obvious like the plaza type urban place, but once understood, their number is manifold and as they can be found virtually everywhere their decentralised locations are very convenient and appropriate for a mobile urban society.

REFERENCES

Ashihara, Y. (1989). *The hidden order.* (L.E. Riggs, Trans.). Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International. (1986).

Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press. (1962).

Nakashima, K. (1999). Representing Nature and Nation: National-Land Afforestation Campaign and the Production of Forest in the 1960's~1970's Japan. In T. Mizuuchi (Ed.). *Nation, Region and the Politics of Geography in East Asia* (pp. 13-29). Osaka: Osaka City University.

Sorensen, A., Koizumi, H., & Miyamoto, A. (2008). Machizukuri, civil society, and community space in Japan. In A. Daniere, & M. Douglass (Eds.), *The Politics of Civic Space in Asia: Building Urban Communities* (pp. 33-50). New York: Routledge.

Watanabe, S.J. (2007). Toshi Keikaku vs machizukuri: Emerging paradigm of civil society in Japan, 1950-1980. In A. Sorensen, & C. Funck (Eds.), *Living Cities in Japan: Citizens' movements, community building, and local environments* (pp. 39-55). London: Routledge.

PICTURES

1   author's archive
2   http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Jingu_gaien_air2.jpg
3 – 6   author's archive
7   http://studio360.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/hachiko-statue.jpg
8   http://www.mikesblender.com/indexblog77.htm