

Shinonome—New Concepts of Public Space

Public	Public Space	Public Housing
Public Culture	Community	Cooperative Planning

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Tokyo's Neo-Public Spaces

Along with the spatial re-structuring of Tokyo from an industrial city to a post-fordist global city, a large number of new developments have ushered in a renaissance of public space and place making. Most of these spaces have been produced in high-profile commercial redevelopment schemes like Shiodome, Roppongi Hills, or Ebisu Garden Place; transforming inner city brownfield sites in new multi-functional urban centres. Public space framed with cultural, entertainment and retail facilities came to be understood as a means to promote a distinct area identity. Through their constant promotion in the media they effectuate a change of ordinary people's notion of the city and public space [Zukin 1995: 13]. The majority of these new public spaces in private property appear as commodified spaces. Although they evoke the *image of public space*, they cater only to a public, which comes together in a transitory market situation, devoid of the authenticity of daily life. Against this backdrop, Canal Court Shinonome—situated on a man-made island in Tokyo Bay—offers an augmented facet of Tokyo's new public spaces. It shares with other developments the desire for a corporate identity for which a unified and integrated public space is considered a universal panacea. It deviates for the fact that it is a residential housing project of less commercial nature and that the public spaces provide in the daily lives of residents of diverse social backgrounds.

Codan and the legitimacy crisis

The semi-governmental Urban Development Corporation [UDC]¹, Japan's main provider of social housing, has been redeveloping a 16.4 hectare site of a former Mitsubishi steel factory in Shinonome into a residential quarter with a projected 6000 housing units after its completion in 2012. Central motive of the mixed private-public housing scheme is an unparalleled open cooperative planning process along with an elaborate system of public spaces on various scales. After the burst of the bubble economy, also the UDC was hit by the shockwaves of an economic crisis that resulted in mounting difficulties to find occupants for its outmoded and sub-standard housing units, and thus doing harm to the image of public housing. The so-called 'Lost Decade', painful years of stagnation, led to a diversification in lifestyles, which in turn increased demand for more individualized, high-quality, and responsive urban environments. At the same time the number of private competitors in the housing market put additional

pressure on the UDC. Moreover, citizens and planners came to realize that the rapid urban development of the boom years took place at the expense of the degradation of once vital communities and the quality of life. The need was felt to abandon the purely economic development modes of the past and to return to a new social dimension in city formation. Therefore UDC felt urged to revise its previously functionalistic and 'manualised' modes of spatial reproduction.

Canal Court Shinonome_ cooperative planning

Liberated from the constraints of context and only in a 5 kilometres distance to Ginza, the prestigious commercial centre of Tokyo, the cleared out project site offered an ideal opportunity for the revival of the UDC, also symbolised through the new brand name *Codan*, under which the project is marketed. Contrary to earlier more secluded planning practices, Codan initiated a pluralistic open planning process. In an *Area Planning Conference* external expertise was invited. Together with opinion leaders from various fields such as composers, TV producers, business consultants and venture entrepreneurs, future forms of urban housing and public culture were discussed. Self-evidently this was not an end in itself but it secured the attention of the media, helping to develop the image of an area which previously only existed in the collective subconscious. Based on this conference, a master-plan was drawn up, prescribing for example the exceptional high density of 400 percent FAR [Floor Area Ratio], the layout of the public spaces system or the sub-division in an outer perimeter consisting of privately developed residential towers along the Tatsumi Canal and Harumi Avenue and in a closed perimeter block in the core, containing public housing to be developed by Codan itself.

Codan meets the architects and the public

To guarantee a wide variety of solutions, this block was further subdivided into 6 units, each assigned to a different architectural team: Riken Yamamoto & Field Shop [Block 1], Toyo Ito & Associates [Block 2], Kengo Kuma & Associates [Block 3], Yama Architects & Partners [Block 4], ADH Architects and Workstation [Block 5], and team of Makoto Motokura, Keisuke, Yamamoto, and Keiji Hori [Block 6]. Virtually in the centre of the development is an elaborate system of public spaces for which's design the landscape planning office ON-SITE was commissioned. The central motive is an S-shaped street which structures the development and integrates it in its urban context by connecting the near-by Tatsumi subway station and a shopping mall. Along this passage, pocket spaces, stages, playing grounds, a kindergarten, and basic shopping

¹ UDC was reorganised into the Urban Regeneration Organisation in July 2004 and is now operating in a more independent fashion.

facilities are lined up like beads on a string. It is within this public space that one is allowed the rare Tokyo pleasure of coming to a halt - a stop, a rest - without being committed to consume or to rush. To safeguard a unified appearance and to facilitate a close cooperation between all parties involved, Codan set up a design conference, which devised a design code under Riken Yamamoto, who was also appointed as design coordinator. The return of famous architects to the long neglected and abandoned grounds of public housing is clearly reminiscent of the heroic days of modernism. Public housing in Japan was less subject to design by well-known architects. Instead it was re-produced by a government bureaucracy, while a chronic housing shortage guaranteed for constantly high occupancy rates. The use of architects with well-known –almost brand– names was therefore an important means together with a carefully orchestrated publicity campaign, to gain public attention for the project and in the end, to improve marketability. Who would not desire to win a lease in a real Ito apartment through a lottery? Indeed, while other social housing projects suffer marketing difficulties, apartments in Shinonome were subject for up to 210 applications each, so that even Riken Yamamoto was surprised by the rush.

Reclaiming community?

The rapid urban growth of Tokyo during the last decades alongside fundamental socio-demographic changes have caused the dissolution of many, once vital communities. Conventional housing schemes, both public and private, attempt little to overcome the strong tendency of encapsulation between single housing units in a building, or between a building and its locality. Within every subsection of the Codan block one can clearly sense the planners' ambition to address issues of community, of instigated communication and purposeful togetherness. Transparency takes this endeavor to extremes. The translucent entrances of the housing units invite the public into the very privacy as they entail impressions of the *genkan* - the doorway of the traditional Japanese house. Like in the *genkan*, dwellers are offered the possibility to manipulate and share the entrance experience; opaque screens serve as means of control. These vitrines provide opportunities to stage one's public appearance to the outside world, but they are also an attempt to increase the probability of social contacts between principally unrelated individuals. Like a mask it has the ability to create narratives; a narrative of ones sophistication in reading - placing books, or souvenirs indicating the last travel. The large number of completely sealed-off entrances or those abused as storage go against the planner's intentions and show how idealistic their suppositions were; deviating from the social realities and desires for seclusion. In Yamamoto's block, even more aspects of the dweller's life are exposed– his mask has to tell even more, as the buildings' façade allows full exterior views of the

apartments. Semi-private and public terraces are another recurring motive which can be found in many variations in each of the 6 blocks. To expand the social interface between the individual and community, voids are spared out from the facades. They are intended to offer visual connections from the private realm to the common spaces, but also to make communication among residents more probable. A closer look at the actual use of these spaces is rather disappointing, because their full potential is never realized. Idealistic and abstract ideas of a need for communication and social exchange collide with realities when most of the terraces are used as storage or simply left unused. It gives the impression that generic notions of a desired public behavior, such as the Italian talk over the balcony, or the barbeque with a neighbor do not necessarily match the spatial practices in contemporary Japan.

According to Highmore [2002] cultural heterogeneity or homogeneity asserts itself through the “stubborn insistence of the body, of childhood memories and cultural histories.” Yoshida [1999] or Iokibe [1999] describe that the deeply internalized notions of *public* in Japan have long been monopolized by the exclusive idea that *public equals government* or officialdom. Only since short, a more pluralistic and inclusive concept of a *public of the people* is evolving [ibid.]. Consequently, also *public* space is charged with different meanings and with controversy, as it stood hitherto as an official space, only temporarily granted to the people, rather than claimed by them. Goheen [1998] suggests that public space is what “the public collectively values; space to which it attributes symbolic significance and to which it asserts claims [...] Citizens create meaningful public space by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes” [Goheen 1998: 479]. Where lies the future of Tokyo's new public spaces? How will these neo-public spaces be claimed by the people and how will the spaces in Shinonome unfold to their full potential? Certainly, the repertoire of urban and architectural design, applied to encourage a sense of togetherness represents the state of the art. Yet, we get the impression of a fissure between visionary plans and contradicting patterns of spatial practice.

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