

Urban Spaces in Japan

Cultural and social perspectives

Edited by Christoph Brumann and Evelyn Schulz

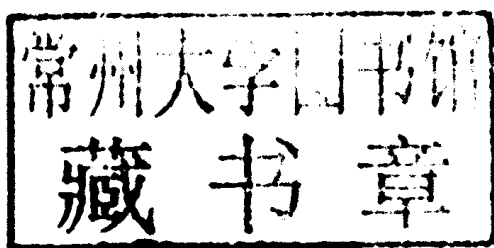
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Urban Spaces in Japan

Urban Spaces in Japan explores the workings of power, money and the public interest in the planning and design of Japanese space. Through a set of vivid case studies of well-known Japanese cities including Tokyo, Kobe and Kyoto, this book examines the potential of civil society in contemporary planning debates. Further, it addresses the implications of Japan's biggest social problem – the demographic decline – for Japanese cities, and demonstrates the serious challenges and exciting possibilities that result from the impending end of Japan's urban growth.

Presenting a synthetic approach that reflects both the physical aspects and the social significance of urban spaces, this book scrutinises the precise patterns of urban expansion and shrinkage. In doing so, it also summarises current theories of public space, urban space and the body in space which are relevant to both Japan and the wider international debate.

With detailed case studies and more general reflections from a broad range of disciplines, this collection of essays demonstrates the value of cross-disciplinary cooperation. As such, it is of interest to students and scholars of geography and urban planning as well as history, anthropology and cultural studies.

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1 Introduction

*Christoph Brumann, Christian Dimmer and
Evelyn Schulz*

Space, very generally speaking, has been a less salient category in social theory than time. Perhaps this is related to the crystallisation of social science in a historical period obsessed with progress and development, when theories about the evolution of species, the rise and future demise of capitalism and the advance of humankind from savagery to (Western) civilisation captured scholarly and lay-people imagination. But ever since as well, we have seen recurring predictions of a growing irrelevance of space and distance, all the way from Karl Marx in *Grundrisse* – ‘Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it’ (1973: 524) – to David Harvey’s diagnosis of a ‘time-space compression’ in contemporary society (1989). And who could deny that previously insurmountable distances have shrunk in the face of jet-speed transportation and lightning-speed information flows. Yet for all the proliferation of mass media, Web 2.0, mobile phones, cheap airfares and container shipping, the insight dawns on us that for most people, their immediate surroundings in non-virtual reality continue to be experientially important. And often enough, we find space coveted and contested, rather than stripped of its political or economic relevance.

So while an ‘end of history’ – viz. time – has been proclaimed, nobody has postulated an ‘end of space’ yet, and one instead sees claims to a ‘spatial turn’ (Soja 1989: 39, Jameson 1991: 154; for overviews see Bachmann-Medick 2006, Döring and Thielmann 2008, Hallet and Neumann 2009, Warf and Arias 2008) – sometimes also a ‘topographical’ or ‘topological turn’ (Weigel 2002, Hård *et al.* 2002) – across the social sciences and humanities, also in Japan (translated as *kūkanteiki tenkai*). As with most other recent ‘turns’, there is some debate whether the magnitude of the actual reorientation justifies such a grandiose appellation, and a well-defined paradigm uniting all proponents is nowhere in sight. Geographers complain that under the buzzword, other disciplines try to reinvent theirs although they themselves may have invited such trespassing by often treating space ‘as obvious, as self evident and not really in need of further examination’ (Crang 2005: 199), as some from among their own ranks complain. Yet attention to space is without doubt growing, and increasingly across the social

and cultural sciences it is seen from a relational perspective: space is not – or not only – simply Euclidean, an unproblematically given container in which human social and symbolic interaction unfolds; rather, it is strongly influenced by such interaction, if not produced by it in the first place. Space is not just there – to a significant extent, we ourselves make it, and social life is ‘both space-forming and space-contingent; a producer and a product of spatiality’ (Soja 1989: 129). The way we make space calls for scrutiny, then, and not just within the confines of a specialised discipline but in all kinds of social and cultural analysis.

In this volume, we bring such a focus to the making of space in Japan. The uses of space in that country have certainly been widely studied, and great refinement has been detected in the ways space is apportioned, utilised and put on display in traditional architecture, gardening and the visual arts. In a more metaphorical way, too, social relations have been found to be undergirded by a keen sense of situation, position and distance. Admiration for such elaboration has rarely extended to Japanese cities, however. If at all, it is the efficient exploitation of limited space – such as in the notorious capsule hotels – that arouses popular attention here. Landmark buildings are celebrated too but Japanese urban spaces more generally are not widely praised for their sensory, environmental or democratic qualities, even when – for example in the human scale and homely feel that many an inner-city neighbourhood manages to preserve – this could well be justified. Certainly, conditions for managing urban spaces have been difficult indeed: bringing close to 100 million villagers to the Japanese cities in less than a century – and one in which a war laid most of them to ashes – meant relentless, often mindless development and change beyond recognition. Where more housing units than in postwar Great Britain, France and West Germany taken together had to be built (Waswo 2002: 59), there was little room for reflection, and urban visions always lagged one step behind behind the chaotic realities of uncoordinated development. As a consequence, not only foreign observers but also the Japanese themselves often deplore the spatial degradation of their urban centres, sometimes to the point of overlooking the attractions these do hold.

The growth curve is reaching a turning point now, however, as general population figures in Japan have entered a steep and long-term decline and many cities too are verging on shrinkage. Not all of them and not all their parts will be equally affected but for many a suburb, industrial area, commuter town or provincial centre the consequences will be quite dramatic (see Chapter 2 by Flüchter). Competition for residents, visitors, employers and investors is intensifying correspondingly, bringing new demands beyond those of quantity and functionality. After two decades of economic slump, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, and with the unprecedented destruction and human suffering caused by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear contamination of 2011 to be dealt with, no overnight revolution can be expected, but the possibilities are certainly exciting. Japanese urbanites can finally afford to take a step back and assess the qualities of their surroundings more critically, and great change lies ahead for urban planning which – now that the pressure to provide basic infrastructure is subsiding – may finally come into its own.