

Some observations on urbanization and communication in Japan

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In principle, Japanese cities exhibit the same phenomena that are apparent in the cities of other information-oriented, post-industrial societies, but at the same time, there are developments there that are particularly Japanese.

Rapid development of the mass media

According to a study by the Ministry of Postal Services, the amount of information consumed in Japan totals 304¹⁰ bits a year.

The development of communication technologies capable of producing and handling this enormous quantity of information has been striking and the technologies continue to become larger, more varied, more complex, and at times "overlapping." A single company can not only produce television or radio programs but can publish a newspaper, produce motion pictures, subsidize a record company, lend a hand in book publishing, and even run an art museum. In looking at the consumer who receives all this information, one is struck by how easy it is made for him to tune in on a variety of programs by a switch of the knob, to read in a convenient digest edition the gist from a wide selection of publications, to copy important passages by a quick reproduction process, and to be able to consult everything from the telephone to the encyclopedia. Yet there is always the danger

that, seduced by the ubiquitous and convenient media, consumers may lose the power to make decisions for themselves.

Why is Japan continuing to become, at a remarkably rapid rate, an information-oriented society? Many reasons could be advanced, but the following are what I regard as particularly important ones.

- Curiosity and a strong desire to learn and to emulate are strong characteristics of the Japanese, who possess a capacity continually to assimilate new and different ideas. When the national broadcasting network brought out a text to accompany a television course on computers recently, 200,000 copies were sold immediately. That the recent book by Peter Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity*, was published in translation at the same time as the original in the United States to become a best seller in Japan is another illustrative example of the Japanese traits.
- On the other hand, there exist in the national character an obedience to control and a vulnerability to manipulation from above.
- Furthermore, a population of more than 100 million people above a certain economic and educational level provides a most desirable market for the mass media. An especially important point is that a unique situation exists in

COMMUNITY SCALE		I	II	III	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
EKISTIC UNITS		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
		ANTHROPOS	ROOM	HOUSE	HOUSE GROUP	SMALL NEIGHBORHOOD	NEIGHBORHOOD	SMALL POLIS	POLIS	SMALL METROPOLIS	METROPOLIS	SMALL MEGALOPOLIS	MEGALOPOLIS	SMALL EPEROPOLIS	EPEROPOLIS	ECUMENOPOLIS
ELEMENTS	NATURE															
	ANTHROPOS					●							●			
	SOCIETY						●							●		
	SHELLS												●			
	NETWORKS							●						●		
SYNTHESIS: HUMAN SETTLEMENTS																

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Japan, where the exorbitant price of land and the consequently substandard level of the residential environment for the general public leave the pursuit of leisure time activities and the buying of cars, television, and other goods as outlets for consumption. An interesting story serves to illustrate this point. In 1960, a newspaper requested specialists in several fields to speculate on the future urban facilities and commodities of the next ten years. In 1970, their speculations were compared to reality. As a result, it was revealed that among what tended to be overestimated were the rate of road construction, the rate of housing construction, and the amount of parks built. On the other hand, televisions, telephones, automobiles, and household goods were underestimated.

Mass communication and changing consciousness

It goes without saying that as a large part of the population receives the same commercialized information via the mass media, there develops on a large scale a strong tendency for people's consciousness to be homogenized. Since Japan is a small country geographically, nearly everyone uses the same sources of information. For example, a few newspapers dominate the scene, from one end of Japan to the other. And as formal organizations become more established, they feel an incessant urge not to fall behind social developments, thus accelerating further the homogenization.

The population will be more or less divided into two groups: one, the majority of the people who will try to conform to the homogenized behavior of an organization, and the other, a minority who will try to achieve a real autonomy. In this way, the desire for stability will remain unchanged. And we can naturally expect formal institutions to become even more powerful, as mechanisms for achieving stability.

On the other hand, as information increases and becomes more varied, a fragmentation of consciousness also results. Since decisions in an information-oriented society are made through choices within the available information, there will necessarily be contact with an increasing number of persons and organizations as each will have different opinions and a sense of value to cope with this multi-dimensional society which inevitably demands of an individual an extremely complex structure of consciousness.

Again, in considering living patterns and patterns in the use of time one can notice fragmentation; i.e., as people increasingly perform simultaneous tasks, the consequent physical patterns too become complex. Moreover, in a world where decisions must be made quickly, briefings become more welcome than long

reports, and the pattern of understanding needs to be more "planar" than "linear," i.e., the visual ability instantly to comprehend a matter in broad outline is particularly prized.

We will increasingly experience the sort of "special event" such as the landing on the moon seen via TV, something that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. Similarly, we ourselves will travel to distant parts of the globe in the future. The non-routine event becoming routine is also characteristic of an information-oriented society.

One of the first reactions of an individual to the homogenization and the formalization of consciousness is the desire to "drop out." Among the current favorite phrases of the mass media in Japan are "salary man drop-out," "my-home drop-out," and "dropping out of Japan." All this can be presented as proof of the existence of a strong desire for disengagement.

Still another reaction to receiving all information through the mass media is called "on-the-spot-ism" (*genbashugi*), the feeling that one should go to the scene oneself, inspect it with one's own eyes, and come to an independent decision. In other words, it is the attitude of seeking to use the sound information that the media offer but at the same time of realizing the limits of their effectiveness. In an advanced case of "on-the-spot-ism," one is no longer satisfied with merely observation but feels the desire to become involved and to influence events oneself; i.e., the "desire for participation."

Three types of this "desire for participation" can be found. One is the desire to participate in a more powerful position than one occupies at present; this is particularly noticeable in cases where upward consciousness is strong; i.e., in people who are status conscious and power conscious. A second type is the desire not to fall behind in the so-called progress of society, and this is closely related to the conformist behavior mentioned earlier. A third type of the "desire for participation" manifests itself in the establishment of small voluntary groups within which individuals try to attain a goal or to help a cause.

Consciousness in the shape of *reaction* and *formal institutions* act on one another and produce a variety of new *informal social organizations*. For example, in the case of education in Japan, tutorial schools, adult education classes, and flower arrangement and cooking schools stand as informal counterparts to the formal educational system. Also in Japan, against the formal financing organizations such as banks and insurance companies, there exist informal financial institutions such as *mujin*, where acquaintances will put their money together and allow drawing rights by lot.

The existence of such informal organizations that stand in a complementary relationship to the formal organizations is an important feature of Japan's

information-oriented society. In the back of this lies the fact that throughout Japanese history, the common people, while extremely obedient to the rulers of the period, at the same time distrusted their betters and had a store of wisdom ready in order to protect themselves, a behavioral pattern not dissimilar to modern practices.

Although very few in number, lone wolves and individualists have existed in Japan. Of course, the "individual" of the mass media age is something different; he stands at the receiving end of the media network, a figure manipulated by centralized institutions. Individualism often stands as a counter force to the formalization of society. Yet it is a unique feature of Japanese urban society that conflict does not exist in that form. Rather, opposition to formal organizations bypasses the individual and takes the shape of informal organizations, which in turn often experience formalization.

A most apt example is the organization of Japan's artists. As in France, an academy has long been a part of the Japanese circle of painters. Naturally there have been painters critical of such authority who have chosen to remain outside the field. Yet a much more Japanese reaction has been the organization of different groups to counter the academy. And as the leaders had strived to establish their counter-groups, eventually what began as loose collections of lone wolves and eccentrics were transformed into organizations rivaling the academy in power. It is a curious sight and one well illustrating a Japanese feature to see these counter-groups now being criticized by independent painters as being authoritarian.

Since even among artists (whom one would expect to be the most independent of men) there exists such a tendency, it is no surprise to find that the ranks of company's executives or the leaders of a labor union, a university's faculty or the ranks of student extremists are divided into incomprehensibly small factions. It is a fact known even abroad that Japan is actually run by powerful informal groups, the four or five major factions within the Liberal-Democratic party and the Keidanren (Federation of Economic Organizations), a group of top executives from the largest corporations.

The physical structure of Japanese cities, communication patterns, and life styles

It has taken some length to reach this point, but what I should now like to show here is that there exists a strong connection between the behavioral patterns that continue to mark Japanese urban society and those physical aspects of city life thought to be particularly Japanese. In order to do this, the special attitude toward cities held by the Japanese throughout history must first be explained.

What reasons lie behind this? First, Japanese cities were never thought of as being antithetical to nature. The southern Pacific coastal belt where most major Japanese cities developed is favored in climate, flora, water resources, and adjacent rich agricultural lands. Thus the urban landscape stands not in opposition to nature, but is merged with it, a fact that is observable in the Edo period *ukiyo-e* prints. Even the less well-to-do who could not afford to accommodate nature in a large garden chose to integrate their environment with nature by tiny 10-square-foot gardens decorated with *bonsai*. And as for water, in the past what caused the problem was flooding, not a lack of water supply. There never has been anything in Japan like the case of certain Near Eastern cities, abandoned when the water supply gave out. Of course fire and earthquakes have visited Japanese cities on countless occasions, leaving them in ashes, but the activities always have been rebuilt — no permanent, solid artifacts. Therefore, the relationship of city to country has not been that in Europe; the city dweller and the farmer stood not in opposition, nor did there exist a clear boundary between the urban and the rural landscape. The system of *sankin-kotai* (the system in which feudal lords alternated between Edo and their own domains as a place of their residence every other year) under the Tokugawa Shogunate in the Edo period further smoothed the flow between the periphery and the center, the rural area and the city.

Men from the countryside found it psychologically easy to become assimilated into city life and did not meet the stigma and constraints attached to immigrants into the cities of the West. But for very exceptional cases, the city never stood in opposition to the power of the central government. To the central governments of Europe a powerful city or a city-state was a danger to their authority. An "ideal" state always had to be alert lest a hostile city intruded into its territory like foreign matter. Nothing like such confrontation with the national government ever took place in Japan, nor did a civil war occur in which a city itself played a major role and in which combatants or defenders fought to the last man. Even during the feudal era, in battles between warring lords, the defense of the castle, not the defense of a city, marked the climax. Furthermore, being an island country, Japan never had to fear an invasion by a foreign people.

What significance did all this have on the concept of their cities for the Japanese? For most Japanese, the city was never a "fortress" against authority or nature. Thus (and here, I think, is the most important feature of the urban consciousness), the people never felt the city to be their protector, or to put it another way, they never felt they owed the city any duty or obligation. And this absence of a feeling of obligation extended even to the administration of the city itself. For example, the city never built water lines or sewers, and the citizens found it adequate to

use nearby streams or to dig wells for themselves. As to roads, there have been only a few notable exceptions in history such as Nara and Kyoto, where a road network was laid out to serve as the skeleton for the city's physical structure. Since a place would be named after the settlement (*cho*), and roads only came into existence as space between houses, Japanese cities lacked, until quite recently, a numbered address system.

Free from the racial conflict or the conflict between immigrants and those that preceded them that troubled the Western nations, Japanese urban society, apart from interference from the lords or the samurai classes, remained great gathering places for working, living, and a nurturing ground for culture. It is thus easy to understand in the transition to an information-oriented society how the mass media could so easily propagate, how in some aspects of daily life and values consciousness and life styles could be homogenized, and how throughout Japan little Tokyos could develop.

Indeed, if one inspects Japanese cities, one sees, whether in a large metropolis or an outlying city, similarly-grouped and similar-looking elements — such as the area in front of the railway station (*ekimae*), the little town corner, the cluster of small shops, and the quiet residential area. But if one looks closely, what seems the same is revealed to have differences in character and one can see the tiny attentions that have been bestowed, eliminating the monotony that plagues American suburbs.

This leads to my second working hypothesis that *a great gathering place is also an assemblage of many small places*. Why has the homogenization not homogenized everything? Although there are several reasons, one which is particularly important is that, much as it may be a mass society, a strong informal way of living has survived in Japan and continues to resist the formal homogenization of society. Since city planning did not exist, and urban problems such as traffic congestion became acute only recently, the need for planning was not felt, and a hierarchical physical organization did not exist in Japanese cities. Even Kyoto's formal structure, expressed by the main promenades, has been *internally informalized* by small districts that have served as fill-ins during its history. The streets which were originally intended to mark district boundary lines eventually came to mark seam lines as communities developed *across* streets. Homogeneity is not ordered by a higher authority but rather is a product of choice, wherein can be found variety and enough room for individual expression.

Furthermore, the housing shortage since the war has left people with little chance for them to choose where and how they will live. And a heavy inheritance tax serves to cut residential lots into smaller ones and to contribute to a fragmentation and atomization of

land use. This allows the Japanese full play in practicing their particular skill in small scale environment manipulation.

Certainly, in commercial activities, for example, the small retail store is feeling the pinch in the competition from American-type supermarkets and big department stores. Yet how are we to interpret the persistent survival of the retail stores in the face of this pressure? Of course the current Japanese economic prosperity and inflation is a large factor, but it is, I think, also due to a continuing interest in an informal way of living.

Large cities, especially Tokyo and Osaka, have many small districts, each with its own distinct ambience and function. One district might be a working class, another extremely chic, one might be traditional and another for the young. If it were simply a matter of this, there would be nothing to distinguish the phenomenon from that found abroad. But yet a subtle difference exists in each of these districts and this difference is reflected from store to store. And the "finess" and sheer number of the *kawaii* mark them apart from those in foreign countries. (*Kawaii* refers to a district with a variety of activities and an ambience.)

A small district or, at times, a building will be *kawaii-ized*. Hotels and department stores have extended their functions beyond the traditional ones of renting rooms and selling goods, thereby undergoing *kawaii-ization*. While hotels in the past catered to foreigners and the privileged few, today they are places for international conferences, fashion shows, wedding ceremonies, swimming and physical exercise, the sale of expensive imported goods, dating among the young, and family outings. And department stores no longer just sell goods; they also serve as galleries for art exhibitions and they offer places for adult education.

Similarly, there is an increasing number of buildings appearing in Japan, usually named "such and such a center," having a multiple function. Here again we can see the informalization of a formal institution and in turn their eventual transformations into a more structured form. This process is another feature of an information-oriented society.

Many have already noted the unprecedented power of the mass media in manipulating information and in creating the desire for products and services in a consumer society. Japan is no exception. What is particularly Japanese is the way *land* and *facilities* comprising what is normally called the physical environment are exploited to the last bit of monetary interest that they will yield. This is not rare in other countries. But in Japan the lack of any traditional relationship that held the citizenry responsible for protecting the quality of the environment, and today's overwhelming demand for land, together have increasingly caused an abnormal "merchandising of the environment." Since entertainment is impossible at home, people are forced to dine out. They take

their children to a *leisure-land* (a commercial entertainment complex) since there are no parks for them to spend the day picnicking. In short, even the most basic human activities are being merchandised. And this creates demands which make land more and more a merchandise, driving land prices up and completing a vicious circle. In Japanese cities it has come to the point where one pays a fee not just to enjoy consumer goods but to enjoy the environment.

Then on a smaller individual scale there exists the *agito*. *Agito* is short for agitation points, used by political radicals to mean a sanctuary, and in common usage to refer to places where one can find people with like interests and establish a group identity. In frequenting the *agito*, one can enjoy a familiar ambience different from the anonymity of the *kaiwai*. In England, the pubs serve such a purpose. In Japan they are usually the numerous small drinking and/or eating places. The best known are coffee shops; one may be used for important business transactions and another may be frequented for its recorded jazz music. An *agito* may be a place to go to after a formal working day to do the work one is really interested in. Or several young people might rent a room in which to hold discussions, to gain and exchange information, or to study together. Rooms rented by small groups for such purposes are currently emerging around Tokyo's universities. Thus, a Japanese city, while seemingly just a collection of stereotyped development of big office buildings and big housing estates, nevertheless shows the dynamic growth of just such informal places. In other words, despite an absence of "community," there exist innumerable overlapping "territories" with which one can identify.

This situation of the city being a "great gathering place" has some disturbing implications. Since the city and its citizens had no sense of mutual obligation, how were the problems of a community handled? When the people could not solve their own problems, they turned to their town or district (population approximately 500), organized into a *chonaikai* (neighborhood association). The *chonaikai* collected money for annual expenses from each household and was run by a committee and presiding secretaries. Its activities included seeing to security measures, transmitting local information, (in the past) cleaning drainage, organizing festivals and picnics, and generally helping out each household. Of course,

the degree to which the organization was active differed from area to area, and it tended to be more vigorous in commercial downtown areas than in residential ones. A "society of acquaintances," it was intricate but managed to perform community functions and could truly be called an informal mutual administration.

Today when the over-concentration of people, cars and factories in cities produces unprecedented levels of pollution, problems exist that obviously cannot be solved at the level of the *chonaikai*. There is a sense of urgency over the problems of shadows cast by tall buildings, of safety, and of rising crime. Grass-roots volunteer groups prove themselves ineffective in combating the roots of these problems.

The media can reach the individual directly and explain national and international issues immediately and powerfully. But on an intermediate scale, on regional matters where the interest and general relevance of an issue differ from area to area, the media prove totally ineffective; there is no way for people to get together and help each other out.

Recently, the term "mini commi" has come to be used to mean the opposite of mass communication. This refers to any intermediate-scale network of communication, designed for a limited number of people, and has taken several forms, including printed matter. UHF can also be used as a means to alleviate the dissatisfaction felt by many over the formalization of mass communication.

What can we learn?

While the discussion has focused mainly on uniquely Japanese features, and while problems such as pollution exist, *the city as a great gathering place comprising many small places* can be regarded as one ideal form of a metropolis. If this is so, then Japanese cities have significance for scholars, politicians, and others who are interested in the direction that the information-oriented society will take.

Being an architect and not a social scientist, I cannot undertake the required research, nor do I have a concrete proposal to make at this time. I welcome ideas from others.