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EXPERIENTIAL FEATURES OF JAPANESE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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Experiential Features of Japanese Built Environment

An analysis of certain invisible features of Japanese urban context revealed by the communal activities taking place in space.

Experiential features of Japanese built environment

For many visitors, the majority of Japanese cities appear as chaotic, not the least due to the lack of an orderly layout pattern, or even an inclusive address system. However, there is a different type of order in which invisible features are more significant than the visible ones. As these indications of a hidden order are mainly articulated by the activities taking place in the Japanese built environment, this paper focuses on the way people experience their context in terms of spatial participation. This view of one's built environment also can be regarded as means of social order, as Augustin Berque has suggested in his studies on Korean cities. Hence, the focus of this paper is the concept "empty center" of Japanese cities, famous for Roland Barthes' descriptions on Tokyo. This semiotic paradox, or binary opposition in Derridean terms, exposes not only the noticeable difference in the appearance of "Western" and Japanese cities, but also the value-laden and ethnocentric categorization of signs in the structural interpretations of their meaning. Whereas the former cities are typically characterized by a center marked by the culture's symbols, such as a church, a town hall, a cluster of company headquarters, and so on, the absence of *anything* in the center of a Japanese city is often interpreted as "hollowness" which completely disregards the plurality of meanings in this cultural framework examined in this paper.

Except for the castle cities and imperial capitals, most Japanese cities do not have a perceivable center at all – neither "full" or "empty" – and even Kyoto eventually lost its planned Chinese-type orthogonal, grid-patterned, axial and symmetric layout with a centralized imperial palace. In many Japanese cases, only the procession of local Shinto festivals hints at the location of certain places of significance, that is, where the festival events *take place*. Because investigations on the structure of these rituals also reveal a hidden organization of the city or a building complex itself, the primary goal of this paper is to provide new means of analysis by looking at the spatial layering of Japanese architecture in terms of the communal festival experience and its interrelationship to the built environment. As will be shown below, contrary to the conventional view of most foreigners visiting Japan, these cities are far from chaotic and instead relatively ordered from the perspective of the local residents. The order, and the centers, are just marked by the events, in other words, by a bricolage of temporal behavior of the community, rather than by any permanent structures.

INTRODUCTION

A personal experience long time ago was the beginning of my contemplation on the meaning of center in Japanese culture. On April 29, 1988, early in the morning, I was queuing among thousands of people outside the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, the former Tokugawa Castle of which nothing now remains visible beyond the outermost embankments and moats. This was the birthday of Emperor Showa, the day when ordinary mortals were allowed in the palace compounds to present their congratulations to the emperor. However, I was there for a different reason. I was interested in seeing the buildings of the palace area, which Roland Barthes describes as the “sacred nothing” in the “empty center” of Tokyo;¹ called the “forbidden forest” by Augustin Berque.² One at a time, small groups of people were allowed through the outermost gate of the palace, until it was my turn to start this annual ritual through several spatial layers. Later I described the experience in my doctorate dissertation as follows:

Finally, we entered a small square where it was permitted to stop until the next appearance of the emperor – and what did I see: A façade of a building, not even the whole of it, not to mention the other buildings that were covered by bushes, trees and inner embankments, which probably keep on continuing like the twelve-layered wedding kimono (*junihi-toe*) worn by the royal brides. After the emperor had welcomed the citizens from behind the bulletproof window, we had to move forward in order to give space to the next group of people. At the exit gate, I was terribly disappointed. I had seen no-thing!³

In retrospect, I find this experience an important step in my long journey of understanding Japanese culture in general, and Japanese architecture with its spatial layering in particular. Already then, just a few hours later “while sipping *sake* and eating *yaki-tori* under the nearby tracks of Yurakucho, I understood that I had been in the ‘empty center’ [...] even if I, at first, did not realize that, due to my expectations of seeing some-thing.”⁴

And more often than not, I was lost in the maze of the unnamed streets and overwhelming visual signs, recalling my readings on Barthes. Yet, even if most visitors blame the lack of an address system for the “chaos” of Japanese urban environment, there actually is a system, just not based on street names (except for some biggest avenues). Rather than naming the lines separating the building blocks, this spatial organization is based on numbering the order in which each block was divided into plots, built, further sub-divided, and so on – only a mailman, not even a taxi driver, fully comprehends it today. In other words, the Japanese urban structure is defined by the building activity that has taken place in it, while this evolution is still depicted by various rituals meaningful for the local community.

AXIS MUNDI

For the purpose of this paper, this space-time concept of Japanese architecture is discussed from the perspective of the regular Shinto rituals. Of these, the most significant in many ways is the ritual renewal of the Ise Shrines every 20th year, including not only rebuilding the main shrine complexes on one of the two adjacent sites of both Naiku (‘inner shrine’) and Geku (‘outer shrine’), but also those of the ten auxiliary shrine precincts, in addition to remanufacturing the about two thousand artifacts and treasures housed in the shrine buildings. Without delving into the many interesting phenomena of this vicennial custom, continued since the 690s, with some

interruptions during wartimes⁵ (the latest completed in 2013), we look at the concept of center and its representation in the architecture of Ise Shrines. In this respect, the ‘sacred center column,’ or *shin-no-mihashira* (also called ‘august central pillar’), is of most interest from the perspective of the “empty center,” as in Naiku it is completely buried, while in Geku a little more than half of it is above the ground level. As such, the pillar is entirely separate member from the shrine structure and covered with its own hut-like shelter. Also, in both cases the column with its shelter is under the elevated floor of the main shrine hall, *shoden*, where it is completely invisible even for those very few who are allowed to enter this innermost part of the three-layered shrine precinct.⁶

Although invisible and non-structural, the importance of Naiku’s *shin-no-mihashira* is clearly indicated by the placement of the most important imperial regalia, the sacred mirror, right above it in the *shoden*, which metaphorically creates the *axis mundi* that signifies the emperor’s role as the representative of the higher forces on earth. (Naiku is dedicated to the Sun Goddess, *Amaterasu Omikami*, the antecedent of the Japanese imperial line based on State Shinto mythology.) Furthermore, while several communal Shinto festivals, or *matsuri*, take place during the years-long rebuilding process of Ise Shrines, such as the ceremonies held on the mountains prior to cutting the timbers and the log-pulling festivals in which these highly valued Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) logs are hauled to Ise by thousands of participants, the ones related to the *shin-no-mihashira* take place in the darkness of the night only by the priest performing these esoteric rites.⁷ Also, there is evidence that already originally some rituals were performed under the shrine hall⁸ and, according to Bock’s account of the renewal rites in 1973, after the completion of construction “the Superintendent of the Shrines and sixty shrine priests congregated beneath the main sanctuary to perform the rite of strengthening the main central pillar.”⁹ Moreover, the *shin-no-mihashira* is the only part of the old shrine that is not demolished after the new shrine is completed and stands in its shelter on the empty plot till the next rebuilding on it begins. In other words, it marks the center of the plot even without the other structures and indicates the temporal duality of Shinto symbolism with two central pillars existing simultaneously.

The concept of a “cosmic pillar” as an indication of the *axis mundi* and the “center of the world” is, of course, a common phenomenon in numerous cultures, and there are many other examples of it in Japan, too. One is the Izumo Shrine that has a square floor plan with eight pillars in the outer perimeter (four corner pillars and four in the middle of each wall) and a ninth, central pillar that, like in the *shoden* of Ise Naiku and Geku, has no structural function. In Izumo Shrine, it continues through the elevated floor, though it is shorter than the other pillars and does not reach the roof trusses; meaning that its only practical function is to support the floor (not even necessary for that) and the interior non-bearing screen behind which the sacred objects are placed (which could be provided by other means).

Even if not part of a structural system of a shrine, the middle pillar is a significant part of East Asian cosmology, as it refers to the nine cells of the basic mandala diagram, with the most important one in the middle; the empty center also is of utmost importance in the *sunyata* (‘emptiness’) philosophy and particularly significant in Zen Buddhism.¹⁰ For instance, the floor plan of Izumo Shrine is regarded as visualization of this kind of a mandala with each column depicting one of the nine cells. To mention another of the many examples, the same applies to the ideal tearoom of four-and-a-half *tatami* mats, in which the central, half *tatami* is the center of

focus. This type of a floor plan, based on the mandala concept and developed by the Zen priests (Sen-no-Rikyu in particular), visualizes the anti-clockwise rotating swastika, or sauvastika, in which the half mat is the center and the full mats, each comprised of two mandala cells, form the arms of the sauvastika (sometimes seen in the clockwise order as well); the tea ceremony's procedures themselves follow the same order, emphasizing the visual concept by the activity that takes place around the center.¹¹

The conception of a cosmic pillar also appears in Japanese residential architecture with the sacred central pillar, or *daikoku-bashira*. It is not even necessarily located in the geometric center of the house, but its role in defining the *ie*, meaning both the 'house' and the 'family,' in relation to the society and the cosmos, is revealed by its association with the guardian deity of the household (*Daikoku-sama*). Moreover, although the *daikoku-bashira* of a house is typically an integral part of the structural framework and sometimes slightly larger in cross-section than the other structural members, visibly it is not very different from the other members of the completed building. Its function in the house building rituals, however, is clearly distinguished. In the ridge-pole-raising ceremony (*muneageshiki*), which completes the main framework of the house, the *daikoku-bashira* is decorated with various Shinto symbols, such as white *heishoku* paper-cuts and a wooden plate (*mune-fuda*) including prayers to the *kami* (deity) who protect the family, while an altar containing offerings to the *kami* is placed on the foot of the post; in addition, the altar includes the carpenters' tools, signifying their art. The carpenters are in an important role during the ceremony as well by assisting the Shinto priest in the various rites, ending in the transference of the 'corner rice cakes' (*sumi mochi*) from the altar to the four corners of the roof from where they are thrown diagonally across the center of the house; in the ceremonies I attended, rice and sake was thrown from the ground level corners towards the center as well.

The four corners and the center are emphasized in the ground breaking ceremony (*jichinsai* or *chiniisai*) prior to the construction, too. In this rite, the sacred area in the middle of the plot is depicted by a pole or tree branch and a sand cone (*rissa*), while smaller poles or tree branches (usually *sakaki*, pine, or bamboo) are located in the four corners and connected with a *shimenawa* rope decked with *heishoku* paper-cuts. The symbolic ground breaking includes hoeing the sand cone by a ritual pick, among many other rites around the altar in the enclosed area, after which the priest and the participants visit the four corners of the site and offer rice and sake there.¹² It is important to note, however, that the sacred central pillar, contrary to its name, is usually not in the geometric center of the building. In most cases it is close to the hearth – in other words, the metaphorical center – regardless of its actual location in the house layout and merely indicated by elements and activities around it, not at it.

EMPTY CENTER

In addition, centralized organization has been fundamental in the layout of East Asian capital cities ever since the Chinese Zhou Dynasty (1027-421 BCE) and the publication of the "Record of Artificer" (*Kaogong ji*) with illustrations of a model capital city. This kind of orthogonal, grid-patterned city structure, with three concentric parts (outer city, inner city, and imperial city), again, refers to the mandala configuration, while the north-south thoroughfare of the city and the central palace on it stands for the *axis mundi*; in the Chinese case, this depicts the socio-political

concept of the Mandate of Heaven based on which the emperor, the Son of Heaven, ruled his subordinates as the Heaven's representative on earth. Together with Buddhism, Confucianism, and other mainland-Asian phenomena, these principles became known in Japan by the Asuka period (ca. 550-710 CE) and were used in the layout of all Japanese capitals from Fujiwara-kyo till Heian-kyo (Kyoto); this is evident even in the aforementioned axial layout of the Ise shrines and their orientation towards north, instead of the sacred mountains which was the supposed original orientation.¹³

From the perspective of this paper, it is noteworthy that the late Heian period (794-1185 CE) was characterized by the absence of official interaction with the mainland for almost three hundred years which led to the Japanization of many features of Japanese culture. Not only did the Japanese residential architecture transform from the Chinese-type, axial *shinden-zukuri* to the asymmetric layout of *shoin-zukuri*, but city planning principles changed as well. Even the layout of Kyoto did not achieve its planned axial symmetry along a north-south oriented thoroughfare and, in fact, the western part of the city was never built. On the other hand, with the rise of the samurai class, a number of daimyos' concentric castle cities were built mainly in the Muromachi-Momoyama period (1335-1603), in which the central fortress certainly was an imposing representation of power. This culminated in the Tokugawa castle in Edo (today's Tokyo, though the castle does not exist anymore in the imperial palace grounds) that was the real political center of the shogunate, while the imperial seat in Heian-kyo lost its factual power. Also, an impressive, fortified residence, Nijo-jo, was built near the Kyoto Gosho imperial palace for the Tokugawas while in the imperial capital.¹⁴ In other words, the city remained a symbol of the empire, just as the emperor was only a symbolic ruler till the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

In spite of the centralized feudal system of the shogunate, most Japanese smaller cities built in the Edo period (1603-1868), seem to lack visual signifiers of the central authority, at least in the center. Instead of a monument or any kind of a symbol of power in the middle, the most significant buildings, like Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and mausoleums, are in the perimeters of these towns. Among numerous examples, the small fishing village of Shingu in northern Kyushu sheds light onto this phenomenon. Unlike many Japanese towns that grew almost organically, Shingu was planned by the feudal authorities in the 17th century. In addition to the interesting contemplations by Arne Kalland on the geomantic practices in Shingu, he points out that the various Shinto festivals and location of certain objects of importance can be regarded as representing the life course of the villagers, and implicitly the structure of both the community and the town. For instance, the Isozaki-jinja Shrine in the northeast symbolizes the birth with its fertility stones; this is also where the babies born in the previous year are brought for the *Hassaku* ritual in September, as well as three- and seven-year-old girls and three- and five-year-old boys for the *Shichi-go-san* ('7-5-3') festival in November. Further to the southeast there are other symbols associated with youth, nothing notable in the south, and the Sainen-ji temple with the cemetery in the west, the direction of Amida Buddha's paradise. Moving further clockwise around the center without anything notable there, we do not see any religious buildings in the north, until the *torii* gate leading to the Isozaki-jinja in the northeast, which starts the eternal lifecycle again.¹⁵

The both diametric and concentric structure of Shingu, evident also in the Ise Shrines, is further expressed by the *Gosengu* festival that is arranged every eighteen years. It is the occasion when

the geometric center of Shingu at the crossing of a lane and the Nakamachi ('middle town') Street, the main east-west thoroughfare in the middle (as the name implies), is activated by the festival rites – otherwise there is nothing else there than an ordinary intersection.¹⁶ The same applies to the Kakunodate city's annual festival, *Oyama-bayashi*, every September of which Fred Thompson has published an inspiring study that is particularly relevant to the argument of this paper. The procession takes place between the two shrines of the town, Shinmei-sha and Yakushi-do, with a stop at the house of Satake, whose ancestors were the representatives of the central government in town during the Tokugawa shogunate; like Shingu, Kakunodate was rebuilt in the 17th century by the feudal authorities. The foci of the festivities, however, are the neighborhood altars, or *hariban*, which are constructed for every festival and demolished afterwards – in other occasions, these sites might be parking places or other mundane spaces. During the festival, there is one *hariban* in each of the distinct districts of the town called *cho-nai*, further divided into several units.

In the feudal period, the *cho-nai* system restricted the mobility of the townspeople, as there were watch-gates at the boundaries of each district. Although there has been many changes in the physical and social structure of Kakunodate, and the watch-gates have long been gone, this invisible division is still mostly preserved in people's minds which becomes demonstrated in the *Oyama-bayashi* festival activities. Namely, every year the entire community re-organizes itself into the feudal *cho-nai* teams for the festival in which each team moves a portable shrine wagon along the streets. The goal of the teams is to visit as many *hariban* as possible without being blocked by other teams. In this wild game of complicated rules, the teams change their status depending on whether they are approaching a *hariban* (*nobori*, 'going up' and having the way of right), or proceeding to the next *cho-nai* after having visited a *hariban* (*kudari*, 'going down' when other teams 'going up' have the way of right); after a team has crossed the invisible border between two *cho-nai*, it is in the state of *nobori* again and has the way of right. The whole procedure can be considered a representation of the social hierarchy and re-bonding of the communal relationships, which is also expressed by the communal eating and (usually excessive) drinking of sake; important elements of any *matsuri*.

Despite the conceptual dichotomy, it is important to note that in Shinto theology there is no separation between sacred life, known as *hare*, and secular life, or *ke*. As stated by Thompson, "*matsuri* is referred to as *hare-no-hi*, the days of *hare*. It is the time when *ke* is restored to its original state and the communion takes place through the ritual of renewal."¹⁷ He connects this spatial mode of social integration with the concepts *kaiwai* ('activity space') and *ma* ('space-time') by stating that "what was commonplace for the Japanese was a communal ordering of physical spaces through a variety of rituals, non-festive and festive, rather than conceptual formation of permanent monuments and civic spaces. Underlying this physical organization is the inherent quality of *ma*, which implies that, by themselves, the spaces are void, but with activity they take on forms which are meaningful to the participants."¹⁸

In conclusion, by these means of activities the Japanese built environments represent the on-going cyclic process of life of both the community and its people, defining cosmos from chaos by the various applications of the *axis mundi* concept. And in all of these cases, whether sacred or secular, the organization of a city or a building complex is indicated and strengthened – in other words, regularly renewed by various rites and other activities. This occurs by the

concentric commotion of the partakers around the seemingly “empty” center, whether it is a void or indicated somehow, which bears close resemblance to the mandala diagram. From a phenomenological perspective, it is apparent that rather than any built structures it is the communal participation that defines the ‘sense of place,’ or *genius loci*.

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¹ Barthes, 1982: 30-32.

² Berque, 1995: 249.

³ Sarvimäki, 2000: 208.

⁴ Ibid: 209.

⁵ E.g., Bock, 1974: 56, 58, 60.

⁶ Sarvimäki, 2000: 201.

⁷ Bock, 1974: 61.

⁸ Nitschke, 1993: 17-18.

⁹ Bock, 1974: 61.

¹⁰ It must be pointed out that, although Shinto belief is mainly discussed here, most of the time since the introduction of Buddhism in Japan in the mid-500s there has not been a sharp contradiction or separation between Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism, and many similar conceptions appear in both.

¹¹ Sarvimäki, 2000: 192-195.

¹² Ibid: 199-201.

¹³ In the prime imperial shrines in Ise, this merge of thoughts is expressed by the “Chinese axis” and “Japanese details.” For more on East Asian cosmology and its transformations in Japan, see Sarvimäki, 2000.

¹⁴ In addition to the many urban transformations in the layout of today’s Kyoto, the original imperial palace, that would have been along the central axis had the western part of the city been realized, was abandoned after a few fires. One reason why it was not rebuilt after the last fire in the early thirteenth century might have been the lack of imperial authority. Hence, the former imperial side-palace (*Tsuchimikado-dono*) became the *de facto* imperial palace; now known as Kyoto Gosho in its mainly rebuilt condition. Coaldrake, 2002: 81-93, 138-162.

¹⁵ Kalland, 1996: 27-28. Like in most cultures, east is associated with birth and west with death. In Japan, most weddings take place in a Shinto shrine and funerals in a Buddhist temple.

¹⁶ Ibid: 29. Here Kalland refers to Claude Lévi-Staruss' classification of two settlements patterns: (1) the diametric structure divided into two halves by an axis, and (2) the concentric structure with circles around a center.

¹⁷ Thompson, 1984: 15.

¹⁸ Ibid: 28.