

FINDING SPACE FOR PUBLIC ART: THE EXAMPLE OF TOKYO

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Tokyo “as capital of the 20th century” is a powerful image. This is its expressive quality, a Western architect recently declared.¹ Tokyo is where even the 21st century is visible, a TV programme claimed at the time of the 1991 Japan Festival in Britain.² An academic study of modern Japan supports this view of Japan as showing what the future will be. “As Japan develops into an economic superpower, whose trade performance appears to threaten other industrialized societies, it has become common to suggest that it is the country which others must emulate..... Japan has come to be seen as the most modern society on earth, and as a beacon lighting the path which others are destined to follow.”³

However, the capital city presents itself to a visitor in contradictory terms: modern and quaint, foreign and familiar, permanent and changing, crowded and sprawling. In particular, the city also displays both a conventional and an innovative handling of public spaces. Its monuments, its ornamental sculpture are not especially suprising in appearance or placement, but innovation is manifest in public spaces which make use of traditions long associated with landscape rather than city design. Borrowed scenery allows borrowed space, viewing stations allow protected space and limited access. As space and access are matters to which public art is often directed, it is relevant to a study of public art to look at what is being attempted in contemporary Tokyo.

The city's past is preserved in the city's topographical layout, and the future is heralded by major developments on the periphery of the old city, for example, Tokyo Bay, the Airport and, of particular interest for this study, the new City Hall complex. It is well to remember that Tokyo's vigorous building is partly inevitable as well as deliberate. Twice in this century much of the city was erased. The 1922 earthquake and World War Two firebombs caused in some areas almost total destruction. As Seidensticker writes, “Tokyo contains scarcely any building from the first two centuries of its metropolitan existence, and not many from the 19th century either.”⁴ The ‘void’ to which Barthes refers remains the city's identifying feature.⁵ The Imperial Palace, its walls and moat, mark a central, astonishingly spacious site but one kept largely separate from the city.⁶ Within the city proper there are few boulevards and plazas to organize urban space, to provide settings for sculpture as in the great designs of Western capitals. The

¹ Donald Stewart (interviewer), ‘Gaetano Pesce: Cities and My Work’, *Japan Architect*, 1991–3 Tokyo, p. 198.

² Promotion of the high tech image of Tokyo was behind the comment.

³ Gaven McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto, *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 1.

⁴ Edward Seidensticker, ‘Forward’, in *Tokyo Now and Then*, Paul Waley, Weatherhill, 1984, p. ix.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 30.

⁶ In the late 1960s a portion of the Palace grounds was opened to the public, unintentionally timed to the international development of sculpture parks.

reason for Tokyo's organic structure is of fascination to urban planners, but of significance to this study is what it affected. The absence of urban design is palpable; it is evident in the continuous construction throughout the city and in the defacing overlay of transportation routes. Even the Sumida no longer opens up the city as other rivers do. Its course is often nearly hidden by a proliferation of roads and bridges.

When looking for public sculpture in Tokyo, one desires to find the unexpected. The truth is that sculpture celebrating heroes, traditional virtues, and commerce is very much the same in Tokyo as anywhere else. The sites are similar as well: plazas, corporate lawns and foyers, and parks. Tokyo's parks, though fewer in number than any other city of comparable stature, seem to have been part of the Westernization undertaken during the Meiji Restoration. One of the most popular, Ueno, contains a spread of sculpture that seems to reinforce the park's multi-functional confusion, common to many space-starved cities. A statue of the leader of the Satsuma Rebellion is a prominent fixture, and the Ulysses S. Grant relief commemorates a well documented state visit to the city in 1879. Nearby the founder of the Japanese Red Cross is represented as an equestrian warrior. Well into this century, Rodin's Gates of Hell was placed in the grounds of the National Museum of Western Art.

In the urban congestion of Shibuya, a small statue is given great attention. The unlikely subject of the monument is a dog. He waited faithfully 10 years for the return of its master, who died while at work. The piece, therefore, marks a site, an event, and a sentiment clearly understood. Now another kind of pet, the statue of the dog is used as a meeting point in a busy place. In a business district a number of uninspired buildings display sculpture as corporate property. Most of this sculpture, abstract and anonymous, looks like copybook 60s work. However, in 1969, a more sensitive handling of sculpture in the out-of-doors was signaled by the creation of a sculpture park at nearby Hakone. A site of natural beauty, it was one of the first sculpture parks anywhere. *Art in Japan Today* alludes to Hakone's opening and several major sculpture exhibitions at that time as having "greatly enlarged the number of opportunities for sculptors."⁷

Corporate plazas show little innovation. CI Plaza does provide a literal recess from city life, its sunken terrace providing plenty of seating space, plant beds and reflective columns to catch the light. It seems however almost too private and quiet with a waterfall screen to watch like a TV image. Mitsui Plaza, built in 1974 as the Bank's showplace, is similarly detached and unrelated to life of the city. It too focuses on an unnatural waterfall, and the selection of sculpture for the terrace of the building does not contribute much meaning to the space. Instantly understandable, however, is a minor piece, the image of a mamekineko or beckoning cat, beckoning to attract customers and custom, appropriately placed near an area map. Other city work often seems to be treated as part of a general civic improvement package, like the two empty and strangely scaled ornamental shapes placed at either end of an ordinary footbridge near Ueno station.

As the city is not organized for public display of sculpture in the familiar Western fashion, some of its landmark structures seem to have been appropriated as monuments. They are fairly recent and do not relate to Tokyo's past. Tokyo Tower, built in 1958 as a TV tower, carries obvious reference to the Eiffel Tower and it too has become a city symbol. It features on

⁷ Shuji Tashina, 'Modern Sculpture', *Art in Japan Today*, S. Takashina, Y. Tono, Y. Takahora (eds.), The Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1974.

postcards, guidebook covers, and the 1991 publication of the 3rd Long-Term Plan for the Tokyo Metropolis.⁸ The recent skyscraper profile at Shinjuku has been similarly adopted. Here the corresponding analogy might be New York city's Empire State building. One of the clustered skyscrapers provides a popular observation station for an earlier landmark, Mt. Fuji, otherwise now almost impossible to see from the city. The newest construction on this site is the relocated Tokyo City Hall, the work of one of the most widely known Japanese architects, Kenzo Tange. The complex is enormous, composed of three interrelated skyscrapers and outriding terraces, subterranean level walkways and even a subway. It is already being discussed as emblematic of late 20th century Tokyo.

Skyscrapers are a new feature for Tokyo. They show off urban growth in a way long familiar to the Westerner. A distinctive interpretation was given skyscrapers by a Japanese visitor to New York less than 10 years earlier, "I found that the shadows (of the skyscrapers) made the space, which meant to me that light creates space. It was then that I understood what space is in Western culture."⁹ This statement cannot fail to recall Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* which points out a very different aesthetic sensibility to any Western reader. Miso soup, for example, like the skyscraper, is appreciated for the absence of light, (its)..... "muddy, claylike colour, quiet in a black lacquer bowl beneath the faint light of a candle..."¹⁰ Expectations of difference between East and West are to be found in most exchanges, whether by traveller or exhibitions. The Japan Festival in Britain is a good example.¹¹ The official brochure reasonably assessed, "So Japan is similar, different and very different."¹²

The work of the French designer, Philippe Starck, overturns this sculptural blandness and decorum. On the roof of the Asahi building, built in 1989-90, rests what Starck would be pleased to call a monster.¹³ The Golden Flame, as it is known, becomes a sculpture because the emblem uses the building as its pedestal. No additional space is needed.

So it is to the newer architectural developments that one looks for innovation in the use of space. One might first recall a daring model already close to two decades old in the heart of Tokyo. In 1977 Isamu Noguchi was invited to design an interior space for Tange's Sogetsu School of Flower Arrangement. "I made the area into a hill more like nature. Railings were replaced by boulders, the steps were realigned to meet the water flow, and the ceiling was opened up with squares of sky."¹⁴

A number of Japanese architects seem to be concerned for public space in their designs. Tadao Ando wrote in 1988, "Cities in Tokyo have too few public plazas and parks for its citizen to enjoy. Urban living could be vastly enhanced if a city would procure such space, well beyond individual means and make it available to a public."¹⁵ Fumihiko Maki's Tepia, completed in 1989, includes a planned garden space. It has many features: paving, planting, a

⁸ *The 3rd Long-Term Plan for the Tokyo Metropolis (Outline)*, The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 1991, cover.

⁹ Jo Kondo and Joseph Love, 'What is Natural?', *Artforum*, April 1985, p. 70

¹⁰ Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Jonathan Cape, 1991, p. 28.

¹¹ In the same year the Japan Festival was held in Britain, CIHA (Comite International d'Histoire de l'Art) met in Tokyo to discuss 'Japan and European Art History', each event based upon consciousness of difference.

¹² Ian Reader and others, 'How Different in Japan?', *Japan Festival 1991, Official Programme*, The Corporate Publishing Division of Redwood Publishing, 1991, p. 70.

¹³ O. Boissiere, *Philippe Starck*, Taschen, 1991, p. 25.

¹⁴ Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, Harry N. Abrams, 1987, p. 180.

¹⁵ Exhibition label, 'Tadao Ando', RIBA, London, 1993.

waterway and a reflection pool. A dramatic exterior staircase, spanning the pool, leads from the garden to the first floor of the building. Maki's design for the site was critically reviewed as "an attempt to compensate for the absence of a public realm in traditional Japanese cities and its further disintegration in the modern metropolis."¹⁶

A project of the 1990s, Tokyo City Hall provides for public space in unequivocal style. It is "the primary feature of the master plan., ...the creation of a major plaza in the center group of high-rise buildings forming an open urban space unparalleled elsewhere in the world."¹⁷ By every possible device the inhuman scale of this place is accentuated. The two towers, 243m and 163m respectively, represent the extreme of the city's vertical growth.¹⁸ Spanning the great plaza is a giant arch, seemingly split apart by the effort to cover the full extent. Bukichi Inoue's title for his piece, 'My Sky Hole', seems aptly descriptive but is also a direct reference to an earlier site-specific work at Hakone. A marked paving also measures out the site, which can be viewed from a number of levels. A distinct gradient directs the feet "towards a stage where open air performances can be enjoyed by the public."¹⁹ and at the back of this theatre-like space is a row of contemporary sculpture considered offensive by femi-nists.²⁰ The space is made for a spectacle, for a crowd, not the individual. Is there any link here with other spacial models already preasent in Tokyo, for example, Disneyland and Makuhari Messe? One Japanese critic cites these when speaking broadly of Tokyo and the danger of conditioned expectation. "...those who seek stimulating spaces are seduced by the exclusively introverted humanly, the eccentric and the freakish... There are no stet-scaled urban images."²¹ Interestingly though, Arata Isozaki speaks of a need for 'theatricality' in the modern city when he discusses the design of his own plaza at the Tsukuba Science City Centre. "...the buildings are the backdrop, plaza the stage, and the people assembled there the leading players."²²

Tokyo City Hall's stage-like environment seems curiously at odds with the caring, intimate image promoted by the Tokyo Metropolitan government in its published long-term plans.²³ There is an unmistakable reference to the Imperial Palace in the raked walls of heavy square stone that support the terraces on the sloping side of the extensive site. The broad terraces, mall and the plaza itself are ornamented with sculpture, a collection which could be interpreted as a broad display of contemporary Japanese work.²⁴ The behind-stage spaces are of particular interest. Small garden areas serve as spaces to view rather than to enter. They are seen from terraces or observed en route around the City Hall site. At the Tepia site too, some

¹⁶ Lynne Breslin, 'Judith Turner photographs Tepia', *Picabia*, Tokyo, April 1990. Despite Breslin's comment, there were no photographs of the garden in an otherwise lavishly illustrated article.

¹⁷ *Japan Architect*, 21991-3 Tokyo, 'The New Tokyo City Hall Complex', p. 16.

¹⁸ The true dimensions of the towers were lost in mist the day I visited. Their ghostly appearance enhanced the impression of inhuman scale.

¹⁹ *Japan Architect*, op. cit.

²⁰ Professor Midori Wakakurwa mentioned to me at the CIHB Colloquium in September 1991 that a number of her female students had initiated an investigation critical of the representation of women that the predominance of nudes at the new City Hall complex seemed to propose.

²¹ Yutaka Hikosaka, 'Tokyo 1940-2000: The Death of the "City" and the End of "Theories of Tokyo"', *Japan Architect*, 1991-3 Tokyo, p. 13.

²² Arata Isozaki, 'Of City, Nation, and Style', in *Postmodernism and Japan*, Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (eds.), Duke University Press, 1989, p. 50

²³ *Long-Term Plan for Tokyo Metropolitan*, "My Town Tokyo"-Heading into the 21st century', The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 1989, p. 11.

²⁴ A George Rickey construction at one side of the plaza is a puzzling inclusion.

of the same devices are employed for spacial expansion. The bridge entrance provides an overview of the garden. Baffles along the border of the building site limit the views and access to space beyond the given boundary. A sense of enclosure is important, a room-like environment, a feature suitable for a city.

Can the handling of the spaces at the City Hall and Tepia, in particular, be an example to other cities? What is important about ideas seen at these sites is the reference to familiar and respected conventions. This is not as public art often operates, working reactively to solve certain urban problems. I suggest that in the best of Tokyo's recently designed urban spaces, some sense of a positive and traditional reference operates. Borrowed scenery, enclosure, viewing stations are features which are recognizable to all who visit and use the space. This is what an outsider can at least sense in the midst of Tokyo's driving technological energy. Perhaps this is the contradiction that works.

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