

ASYNCHRONIES OF THE JAPANESE CITY: INNOVATION AND PERSISTENCE

Background

The city of today resembles a 'living organism' involved in continual processes of change and adaptation. Yet most cities date back for centuries at the same site, are still located on the banks of the same river or the slope of the same hill, even if they outgrew the initial set-

ting. Today's urban life happens in streets that were surveyed on behalf of one or another ancient emperor, in houses whose foundations date back a millennium and celebrate heroes or saints in temporary patterns that might be formed by long gone centuries and obsolete political systems.



Tokyo Nihonbashi, section from Kidai Shōran, 1805, Berlin Museum of Asian Art (public domain)



Panorama of Edo by Felice Beato, 1865/66 (public domain)

Research Project

Cities are entities that are shaped by inertia as much as by innovation. If we aim to understand the workings of innovation in an urban environment, especially with an attempt at development planning, it makes sense to look at the synchronies and asynchronies of the city. Even if we ignore the very long periods of time in which geology, evolution or climate operate, religious values, law, institutions, cultural narratives, buildings and infrastructures tend to persist against many trends, revolutions or innovative processes and are often seen as hindrances of modernization and urban development. While this should apply essentially for every city, Japanese cities are supposed

to be faster to adopt to change than European cities. How come and which processes are involved to counteract inertia?

Based on the hypothesis, that the dynamics of Japanese cities might result from cultural perception as much as from actual changes in urban fabric, the project looks at modern Tokyo as a case study. It superimposes four levels of potentially different time patterns: Long-term developments like infrastructure or land reclamation, medium-term phenomena like dwellings and refurbishment of urban space, narrations of identity and city marketing, and the social practices of perceiving the urban within the fields of urban studies.



Panoramic view of Tokyo from Tokyo Skytree by Yodalica, 2014 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Preliminary Results

The initial survey of source material shows highly heterogeneous temporalities. The most easily traced macrostructures of land-reclamation – outside the existing urban pattern – and traffic infrastructure – within the existing pattern – show a slow but persistent development over a span of more than a century in which significant occurrences are clearly marked by publications and public attention. The same high public attention is on the construction of skyscrapers and landmarks, resulting in text and images which will allow for tracing the temporalities of skyscraper districts and the shift in skyline(s). The same is possible for signature buildings like Nakagin Capsule Tower and Tsukiji Market. Two significant parts of the built urban environments are methodologically

more challenging: the residential neighborhoods and the small-to-medium-scale business districts. Despite the limited durability of the wooden houses, the neighborhoods show the highest level of inertia, while the highest level of transformation seems to affect certain business districts.

After relating the evidence on the built environment to narrative sources, I expect to find an intermingled discourse of contradicting perceptions and explanations in regard to the persistence of built environment. This should point towards the argumentation strategies for and against urban innovation and help improving development strategies that integrate citizens' needs for cultural stability.