The Asian City in the Urban Transition

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At the point at which modernist urban planning is under attack, either because of its failure to deliver the livable cities that it promised or because of its theoretical and conceptual limitations, the search for alternatives begins. Some, like Leonie Sandercock, see the solution to the invention of sustainable and attractive urban futures as lying in the direction of multiculturalism and the respect for 'difference'[1]; others such as Michael Dear see the salvation of cities and viable urban cultures as resulting from the embrace of postmodernism as the guiding principle of urban planning and architecture[2]. All such solutions retain at their core a fundamental Eurocentrism – the idea that the European city (or its derivative, the North American one) is the basic model of urban life. While the "Third World" city is indeed studied in the West, to a great extent it is done so because of its problems – excessive density, uncontrolled in-migration, pollution, ethnic and social tensions and segregation. Rarely in the West is the Asian city studied and learnt from not as a problem, but as a potential model, of a mode of urbanism in which a variety of cultures (Chinese, Indian, Thai, Japanese for example) have negotiated the problem of creating viable and desirable (socially and psychologically as well as physically) cities.

In the search for alternatives much can be learnt from looking to the Asian city, to a continent in which the experience of urban living is very long and in which sometimes very large cities, diverse in their ethnic, social and economic make up, have existed for centuries or millenia. What are often seen as being the emerging problems of the European city – in particular their increasing multiculturalism in a globalized world order – are problems that the Asian city has long confronted. But the Asian city is not only of interest because it is a potential source of ideas for solutions to European problems, but as a subject in its own right, interesting also for its theoretical and conceptual, even philosophical, challenges to the assumptions of Western city organization and plan-

ning practice. Furthermore, in a globalizing environment, the separation of cultures, or even what constitutes a culture, becomes increasingly problematic. Today the East penetrates the West as much as the West, via colonialism, the media and the spread of consumer capitalism, has historically penetrated the East. A Western city dweller's culture today is as likely to include Asian food, music, fashions and quite possibly even religions to much the same degree that in the past an Asian was likely to have been exposed to the same elements of Western culture. What interests me in particular here however is not this hybridity of cultures (true also of the ways in which different Asian urban and media cultures interpenetrate – Japanese pop music in Hong Kong, Taiwanese TV shows in Singapore, Indian movies all over Southeast Asia), but of the more basic question of the challenge of the Asian city to European notions of what a city must be like or how it should function.

Identity and the City

For much of Asia its dialogue with modernism has taken the form of cultural and political negotiation with three major forces: colonialism, "development" and globalization. The first has been the historical experience of most of Asia, excepting formally at least Thailand and Japan, and has taken the form of the imposition on those societies of European forms of government, economy, culture, religion, language and architecture in a way that allowed the West (the colonizing powers) to dominate and scrutinize the East, without the East having (until recently at least) the reciprocal power to interrogate or even dominate economically if not politically, the West. Development – the promotion of certain patterns of economic growth and industrialization, almost always bringing with it hyper-urbanization, a radical changing of the balance between the cities and the countyside and accompanying social and cultural transformations – while welcomed by some, is seen by many in Asia as the extension of Western colonialism by other means. Globalization – the integration (often however on very unequal terms) of all

1 Leonie Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis : Planning for Multicultural Cities*, John Wiley, Chichester, 2000
2 Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.

national economies into a single world system threatens the cultural integrity of societies, especially those not at the centre of the cultural productions that dominate the world media. All, and indeed the concept of modernity itself, have triggered intense debates about identity: in what language(s) should local authors write? Can, as the Japanese suggest, there be more than one route to modernity, including ones of a different nature than the Western historical experience and leading to different goals, that is, to different kinds of societies?

One of the key assumptions of modernity is universalism, but it is precisely this assumption that is challenged by the study of Asian societies and in particular the epistemological and ontological foundations on which they are based. Western assumptions about the separation of the mind and the body, or of the opposition of nature and society, or of the unique and isolated self and hence of individualism, are all questioned by Asian conceptions of the human being and of the nature of society. In the Asian city these conceptions of the nature of being and the structure of the universe are, quite literally, concretized. The traditional Asian city, the outlines and vestiges of which can often still be discerned beneath the sprawl of the modern, was a map of the universe, its spatial layout (think of Kyoto, Peking, X'ian, Lahsa, Yogyakarta, Pagan, Mandalay, Benares, the temple complex of Angkor Wat) reflecting a cosmology, an architecture of the heavens. Mapped onto this cosmology was also usually a sociological chart of the society – its ethnic and economic spheres – as even today in older Chinese or Japanese cities one will find streets occupied almost entirely by members of the same craft or of shops selling the same goods, or in Indian ones members of the same caste, religion or ethnic group, a pattern still almost perfectly preserved in the old city of Jerusalem. As Abidin Kusno has shown so fluently for Indonesia, it is in the cities that the confrontation with modernity takes its most intense forms and where issues of identity are embodied in architecture[3] which becomes in Asia, especially in the newly independent states, an arena for the symbolism of the new collective self in which cultural integrity is expressed and in which representations of memory and the reconstruction of history are embodied. And indeed the representation of the body itself becomes a political act in the construction of monuments and public art: architecture in Asia is consequently probably the most

political of all the arts and each building can become the reflection of a world view. In the Asian city then we find at least two things of interest: the city as a conscious and self-conscious representation of cosmology, of a world view not necessarily sharing much common philosophical or religious ground with its Western counterparts; and as a socially functioning organism in which different principles of order and relationship are at work. These are of great interest to any student of comparative urbanism, and it is to them that we will now turn.

Urbanism(s) and Social Order(s)

The "problem" for European cities is not primarily one of aesthetics – many would by any standards be ranked as the most beautiful in the world – but of making them work, of finding a fit or viable relationship between their built form and their sociology. Many succeed in the first, but fail on the second, as the all too familiar record of crime, segregation, homelessness attests. By comparison many Asian cities, although aesthetically messy (Tokyo, Osaka, Bangkok), work as social organisms. Asia is of course a very large place, and its cities are diverse in form and have their share of major problems – uncontrolled growth, poverty and pollution being amongst the leading ones. Different cases would take us in different directions, so here I will primarily concentrate on Japanese cities as a major example of a form of alternative urbanism, one both globalized (both Tokyo and Osaka certainly qualify as world cities) and yet remaining rooted in indigenous patterns of cosmology and aesthetics and in which priority is given to maintaining the social order on which their functioning ultimately depends.

Japanese cities, unlike many of those of South and Southeast Asia (New Delhi, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur) are not the product of a colonial history, but of an indigenous interaction between culture (very much including religion), environment, history and economics. Japan has no major river, is largely mountainous, and until it began to emerge into global geo-politics in the late Nineteenth Century, experienced a period of peace and internal stability, largely cut off from the outside world except for limited cultural intercourse with Korea and China, almost unprecedented in world history. Japanese cities as a result were not the product of alien concepts of architecture or city planning, but grew organically, unlike many of the Asian port cities or colonial capitals – Batavia (now Jakarta), Malacca, Hong Kong or Rangoon for example.

3 Abidin Kusno, *Beyond the Postcolonial : Architecture, Urban Space and Political Culture in Indonesia*, Routledge, New York, 2000.

Uncolonized, with virtually no foreign trade (during the long Tokugawa period of rule by the Shoguns 1603-1868 the only trading city was Nagasaki in the far west of Japan where a tiny trading community of Dutch merchants was confined to an island in the harbour) cities arose as court cities (Nara, Kyoto, and finally Tokyo), and as the seats of feudal barons. Around these basically political functions congregated an expanding community of tradespeople and craftsmen, who, excluded from political life and the privileges of the aristocracy and the warrior caste, the Samurai, developed both a large range of non-agricultural economic pursuits and a vibrant urban culture. The shops, theatres, pleasure quarters and temples of the Japanese cities were the product of the commoners, and Japan has long been one of the most urbanized societies in Asia, or indeed in the world.

The basic social structure created and consolidated during the Tokugawa period still provides the social foundations of contemporary Japanese society. When the Shogunal period ended with the restoration to political power of the Meiji emperor (the imperial system during the previous two centuries having been a largely symbolic and apolitical institution confined to its inbred cultural pursuits in the old court city of Kyoto, while real power was exercised by the Shoguns from Edo, modern day Tokyo) one of the most remarkable and largely peaceful revolutions in history occurred. The old samurai class, many by now impoverished and economically far less well off than the townspeople above whom they formally ranked, was abolished and many of its members entered the new civil service or the modernized army, while others entered trade, the newly emerging educational sector (Keio University for example, now one of Japan's premier private colleges, having been founded by Fukuzawa Yukichi, a former impoverished younger son of a minor samurai family and one of the first Japanese to learn Western languages – first Dutch and then English – and to travel to the West). As the aristocracy and the warrior classes ceased to exist, the towns came into their own and their typical cultural manifestations – Kabuki theatre for example – became more and more identified with Japanese culture as a whole, as it still is. Interestingly one of the major inner city pleasure quarters of contemporary Tokyo bears the name "Kabuki-cho" to this day. By the mid-Nineteenth Century, Edo (soon to be renamed Tokyo) was the largest city in the world, and Japanese cities still number amongst the world's mega-cities, with greater Tokyo having a population of over 22 million and the Osaka connurbation close to that number.

But this size has not prevented them from functioning, and visitors to Japan are often surprised at the apparent disjuncture between their scale and the intimate social order which seems still to organize their functioning: the largeness in practice divided into nodes and "urban villages", the almost complete absence of street crime, the unspoken rules for managing crowding and living in close proximity. While Japanese (and to a great extent other Asian cities too) appear as a visual mess, with no apparent zoning or separation of functions, underlying this is what the Japanese architect Ashihara Yoshinobu has called a "hidden order"[4]. This order is largely social in nature, but "social" understood in a special Japanese sense, including (unlike in Western social thinking) both nature and aesthetics. Humans in Japanese thought are not separate from nature, but are very much a part of it, and to a great extent what links humans and nature is aesthetics. Japanese traditional aesthetics (probably because of its Buddhist basis) is very much concerned with the transitory quality of things and experiences. Most Japanese art and poetry is about nature, and Japanese culture takes the emotions very seriously as being the real core of human life (rather than rationality as in the Western philosophical tradition). The Japanese house is ideally open to nature, with a very unclear boundary between interior and external environment, the transition being mediated by low balconies, garden or moon-viewing platforms or pavilions, the single-storied structure of the house itself and the fact that it is made almost entirely of organic materials – wood, reeds and paper principally and ideally should have running water or at least a pond within or adjacent to the house. Even the long and extremely narrow Kyoto town-houses contain a tiny garden and pond, often in the form of an interior courtyard, and the most modern urban house or apartment will still almost invariably contain at least one room furnished with traditional tatami (reed) mat flooring, paper window screens and a traditional sliding door. The famous Japanese art of bonsai or minature gardening is not only the attempt to make nature present even in a minute urban apartment, but is also highly symbolic, the pot often containing an arrangement of rocks and plants representing a traditional scene or a famous but full scale garden. The fascination of the Japanese city lies in part in this juxtaposition of scales: the size of the city in total, but the sub-division of that macro-environment into ever smaller and more minaturized zones with the relations between the parts

4 Ashihara Yoshinobu, *The Hidden Order: Tokyo Through the Twentieth Century*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1989.

mediated by cultural and sociological mechanisms. Even with the increasing corporate domination of the urban landscape this indigenous life goes on, and indeed modifies and limits the penetration of purely market forces and economic factors, which themselves will be reinterpreted according to the master code of the culture. Economics in other words does not have to drive out culture.

The Primacy of the Social Nexus

Layered into the structure of cities, regardless of how big they are, are localities. People live somewhere, they shop, seek entertainment and recreation. A key sociological question is not however the existence of localities, but how they work internally and how they relate to other neighbouring localities. It is to a great extent a sociological assumption in Western urban sociology that localities no longer form communities, and that the relationship between localities is often an antagonistic one. What the first means is that people live in a locality, but often have no special subjective relationship to it. They just sleep there, know few of their neighbours, do not participate in local level activities and do not associate their personal identities with that place: they are in other words increasingly likely, especially if affluent, to be "urban cosmopolitans". The second means that while at least one's own residential neighbourhood is familiar and probably culturally homogeneous, other neighbourhoods are not – they are considered unsafe, unfamiliar, ethnically or culturally alien and may in extreme cases constitute "no go zones" through which one never travels.

In Japanese cities such ideas would seem bizarre. Neighbourhoods, even if having a relatively floating population, such as districts with high numbers of students or young working singles, are assumed to exist, often spatially behind main streets and in the gaps between corporate buildings. Formally indeed everyone has to belong to a neighbourhood since residential registration in one is a legal requirement for every inhabitant except for tourists and temporary visitors, partly because local taxes are paid there. But what is more interesting are the cultural mechanisms for ensuring identification with a locality. Since Japan is relatively homogeneous ethnically for the most part the identification of a neighbourhood with a particular social or ethnic group is rare (although there are exceptions – Korean districts, Chinatowns or neighbourhoods with high percentages of migrant workers, day labourers or Buraku, the traditional outcaste group

in Japanese society once associated with butchering and leather work, both highly polluting tasks in a Buddhist society). Although there are class variations between neighbourhoods, by comparison with European cities this is a relatively minor factor, not only because of the low income differentials in Japanese society as a whole, but because of the residentially very mixed nature of most city wards. Within a neighbourhood there will be a dense network of associations of a number of kinds. Some of these are "modern" such as local branches or cells of political parties, while others have much older roots, including the local volunteer fire fighters (fires having been a major source of destruction in Japanese cities with residences mostly built of wood), now largely a drinking club however for middle aged and elderly men, the parish activities of the local Buddhist temple and Shinto shrine, and particular the Matsuri or neighbourhood festivals regularly sponsored by such institutions, guilds of local craftspeople and shop-keepers, cultural groups, organizations for the elderly, networks of housewives often organized around the cooperative marketing of organic foods imported from farms in the surrounding countryside and often extending beyond this to overt local level political activity and, at the most local level of all, the arrangement of individual households into *han* or *gumi* – groups of households that share information with each other about local events, construction work in the area that children should beware of and so forth, are responsible for looking after each other's properties when someone is away (including collecting mail or watering plants), shovelling snow from the sidewalks and streets (a service confined by city authorities to the main roads only). These groups, which had their origin in Tokugawa times when neighbours were held responsible for any crime or subversive activity in their immediate area, now provide strong local bonding mechanisms. When one moves into a new house or apartment in Japan indeed the first thing that one does is to buy small gifts (cakes, cookies or towels for example) and call on neighbours to introduce oneself and to be inducted into the *gumi* for which one thereafter shares mutual responsibility.

The study of the Japanese city (and by extension many other Asian examples as well) suggests a number of important principles that might contain lessons for urban planning and architecture elsewhere – including the necessity of understanding the city as a social organism of which the built environment is simply the container, the key element being the social networks that the city contains and makes possible. In a sense these networks

are the city, an environment in which civility, social interdependence and mutual responsibility and an orientation to nature are all maintained, even, or especially, in large cities where the danger of the erosian of communities is more advanced. Many of the principles enunciated by Leonie Sandercock in her vision of the future city – incorporation of the positive aspects of postmodernism, good but non-intrusive public transport networks to ensure widespread access to cultural and educational resources, incorporating nature (but not necessarily in the form of the modernist "garden cities"), protection of the sacred spaces, conviviality and with a high level of citizen participation in planning decisions – are already part of the indigenous understanding of the Japanese city. Indeed the way in which the Japanese have responded to postmodernism is interesting in this respect – having avidly embraced it, while all along arguing that Japan, and in particular its cities and urban cultures has always been in some sense postmodern. While this allows a local conceptualization of features of Japanese culture that do indeed correspond to many of the features of postmodernism as ennunciated by Western commentators – pastiche, indeterminancy, the decentred self and so forth – it also allows a Japanese critique of the universalist pretensions of Western social theory. If Japan has always been "postmodern", then it is in many respects ahead of and different from the West, that has only just arrived at this condition.

In discussing the semiotics of the Japanese city, the architectural historian Jinnai Hidenobu (on the basis of his own comparative analyses of Italian cities and Tokyo) argues that "The principles underlying the architecture and overall organization of European cities can be articulated rather explicitly. Not so in the case of Japan. Here, the essence remains invisible if the basic spatial structure, with its organic ties to nature and the universe, is not understood"[5]. He goes on to suggest that in "reading" the Asian city as a text, it is necessary to look not only at the contemporary urban structure, but at its history, modern Asian cities being built, layer by layer, on these hisorical foundations (think of Delhi with its pre-islamic. Moghul, colonial and post-colonial levels, built literally one on top of the other, or still existing in organic juxtaposition). Asian cities are testing grounds, on-going experiments in relating the architectural, the social and the economic. The Japanese city – unwalled, with its sacred

spaces (temples and shrines) marking its periphery rather than its centre as in the cathedral cities of Europe, and with its orientation to nature (the original street plan of Edo for example being oriented either to Mount Fuji to the southwest or to Mount Tsukuba to the north) and the whole city being oriented to water – the bay and the rivers that bisect it – suggests an alternative model to the classical Western one. Small living spaces, but intensively used, tiny parks which form playgrounds and a kind of outdoor community centre for the locality, the large number of small shops and craftspeople's studios which provide the economic basis of community life (only 20% of the Japanese workforce is employed in large companies, quite dissolving the myth of Japan as a corporate society), unspoken rules for managing crowding in public spaces are carefully observed, and in a society that considers itself one of the most secular, religion continues to play an essential social role both in structuring urban space and in providing the ideological basis for the *matsuri* or shrine festivals that are important events in the social life of almost every locality, and in some cases, such as the famous Gion Matsuri of Kyoto, involve almost the entire city.

Asian Cities and Urban Transition

Asian nationalisms in the immediate postcolonial period to some extent copied the modernist project (Sukarno's Jakarta with its boulevards, monuments, vistas), while simultaneously subverting it with the use of local architectural motifs, the renaming of streets, and the ironic use of space (the highly Islamic-Modernist national mosque in Kuala Lumpur standing across the street from the main railway station, built during the colonial period in Colonial-Moorish style). The Asian project of urban transition has consequently involved several elements – a concern to actively create the future, an almost utopian project of self-transformation from colonial dependence or subservience to Western cultural hegemony to self-reliance and cultural autonomy; the embodying of history in the built form, and in particular the maintaining or reassertion of those memory spaces essential to the cultural and social identity of the new political communities (Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the *Kraton* or palace of the sultans, in Yogyakarta); the maintenance of the social nexus and the primacy of social relationships as the key to satisfactory urban living; and the synthesizing of cultural elements from the past (usually a colonial one) and the native cultural tradition, together with aspects of the contem-

5 Jinnai Hidenobu, *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology*, Trans. Kimiko Nishimura, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

porary globalized world. A good example of the latter is the Peranakan culture of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia in which an almost wholly urban new culture has emerged in a community ethnically Chinese, but who have adopted many aspects of Malay language, food and dress, and certain aspects of European colonial culture to create one of the most interesting local cultures in Southeast Asia with a distinctive and highly attractive architectural style, still to be seen in Malacca, Penang and older parts of Singapore such as Emerald Hill. Another architectural example would be the Sino-Portugese townhouses and shops of the older parts of the city of Phuket in southern Thailand. A simultaneous recognition of the need for cultural traditions and a recognition of the fact that cultures evolve, merge and change through interaction has given Asian cities much of their cultural richness and their adaptability. The problems of social segregation and antagonistic multiculturalism in which cultures live together without recognition of positive and valued difference have in many cases been addressed in a wholly alternative and much more successful way in Asian cities that have always been multicultural: for them this is no new experience.

It would be a great mistake to paint a picture of Asian cities as a wholly positive one. In fact they too struggle with issues of over-population, poverty, pollution, social exclusion and social justice and still struggle to manage the psychic and physical scars of colonialism, for many of them still a very recent memory. But they also suggest alternative ways of addressing these problems – regarding the city as an organism, not as a machine, still oriented to nature and a reflection of cosmology, as a body in which the bodies of its inhabitants represent a kind of microcosm of the larger whole. In this context the search for the indigenous, while it often simply refers to quoting local architectural motifs, can mean much more – a process of cultural creativity, symbolized for me by the Peranakans of Southeast Asia, in which active synthesis and even ethnogenesis (the formation of new ethnicities) is constantly in progress – a kind of "critical globalism" in which neither the past nor the future are sacrificed to each other.

The extraordinary expansion of many of the Asian cities (Tokyo, Calcutta, Bombay, Shanghai, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila) together with the rise of some of them to world city status as global centres of trade, finance, fashion, film and music in their own rights, has put great strain on the "social resources" that have enabled many of them to become, remain or to enhance their position as centres of civilization in the fullest sense, and the immediate challenge for them will not to become more like European cities, but to become more like themselves – to preserve in other words both the cosmological principles on which they were originally constructed (Asian politics itself being largely tied to such principles) and to retain the social nexus which has given them their stability, longevity and livability, despite, or even incorporating, the pressures of globalization. In many cases, as Andre Gunder Frank has recently pointed out, Asian cities and the economies that supported them were historically far more globalized far earlier than their European counterparts[6] with extensive networks of trade, diplomacy and cultural interaction, and the language of hybridity, creolization, flows, migrations and transnational communities that contemporary Western cultural theory has only recently discovered, has long been the reality of Asian urban societies. The struggle for identity – of cities as social entities, of their inhabitants as citizens, of their countries as autonomous political units – occuring in many of the "new" states of the world (the postcolonial ones), and in the old states struggling to understand the relationship between their ancient cultural heritages and the globalizing and homogenizing forces of modernity, is simply the latest phase of a process of civilizational construction that in most Asian cases is already centuries old. Even globalization is not a new experience for these societies (although its specific contemporary incarnation as consumer capitalism may be). As the contemporary city undergoes its transformations there is much to be learnt in Europe about the Asian experience – of the rootedness of specific urban forms in particular histories, of the strategies that societies have used to manage the distortions of their cultural inheritances by colonialism and latter day capitalism and corporate interests and above all of the means of managing transition in ways that retains the social viability and livability of cities. Sustainability does not only mean the environmental and the economic: it also and most profoundly means the social, the life worlds that as urban dwellers we are forced to inhabit and in terms of the quality of which our success as planners, architects and managers of social possibilities will ultimately be measured.

6 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient:Global Economy in the Asian Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

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Picture 1: View over the midtown of Tokyo 1961