

Shapeless Cities & Invisible Architecture

By YOSHIMATSU Hideki

AROUND the time I started studying architecture, I was wondering with grief why Tokyo was in such disarray compared with European cities. In the 1990s, foreign architects began to value Tokyo's landscape anew as "energetic chaos." Still, I couldn't consider Tokyo beautiful from the bottom of my heart.

As a matter of course, beautiful landscapes exist in various parts of Japan. The rural scenery seen from *Shinkansen* train windows is as beautiful as landscapes in Europe. Terraced paddy fields in the mountains are wonderful. Delicate Japanese beauty can also be sensed in old rural communities and in religious structures. But I hardly discovered such Japanese aesthetics in Tokyo.

Chaotic Landscape

The chaotic scenes of such busy Tokyo shopping districts as Shibuya, Shinjuku and Akihabara flooded with signboards and big displays are livelier than urban scenery in Europe. It is understandable that foreign architects give Tokyo's downtown high ratings as a futuristic urban landscape. This is because the more effort is made to preserve the image of a beautiful town, the less dynamic becomes its scenery. To the contrary, Tokyo, a town with no fixed image, has little to preserve and can change in any way as if it were a living matter. European architects perhaps admire the freedom of chaotic Japanese cities because they regard European cities as already dead. It is not surprising for them to have such perception because they are intent on creating new architecture or new cities.

Meanwhile, old European cities, visited by tourists in large numbers, offer human friendliness for pedestrians and matured comfort unaffected by vogue. But these cities hardly change and are not stimulating to young people who are sensitive to information. They find European cities nothing but tombs. But tourists feel nostalgia when they see European cities. Intricate narrow lanes of old European cities, for example, are more complex and confusing than modern cities and their space changes diversely. Even contemporary architects discover universal attractiveness in the complexity and space diversity of old European cities.

It is possible to consider that neither Japanese nor European architects are daydreaming but are pursuing, from different angles, complexity and diversity missing in contemporary urban planning. Tokyo's landscape is not attractive in terms of space, but its superficial diversity ensures urban freedom. European urban landscapes, meanwhile, are fixed and lack diversity but are diversified in terms of space. It can be said that Japanese and European cities both express chaos.

Photo: Yoshimatsu Hideki



A superficial, chaotic landscape in Shinjuku

New Aesthetics of Urban Landscape

We don't see in Tokyo's landscape the beauty we do in European urban space. Why? As we ponder this problem, we realize that our landscape perception is rooted in our empirical aesthetics. Put another way, Japanese can find aesthetic values in stereoscopic chaos but not in superficial chaos. This is just as many people are fond of representational paintings, which are easy to understand, but find abstract paintings puzzling and hardly sense beauty in them. In other words, we are being urged to accept changes in the standard of the value of urban landscape just as in the history of 20th-century contemporary art. Tokyo's landscape may be something like Jackson Pollock's abstract paintings or sculptures of the *Arte Povera* movement (*Arte Povera*, meaning "poor art" in Italian, represents the art movement that occurred in Italy in the 1960s, and artists supporting it used free, cheap, minimum materials such as stones, wood and rags). To some people, these contemporary art works look like graffiti or rubbish, but others find new beauty in them.

Photo: Kimura Taro



"Venus of the Rags" by Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1967. Made of plaster and rags, 160 x 100 x 200 cm. Possessed by Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in Toyota City.

Will the unintended chaos such as Tokyo's urban landscape lead to the creation of new aesthetics of urban scenery? If so, the change in the aesthetic standard may be Copernican revolution because Tokyo's space experience is rooted in superficial chaos and will just continue to be replaced day by day even if its landscape creates new aesthetics of urban landscape.

Landscape in Low Resolution

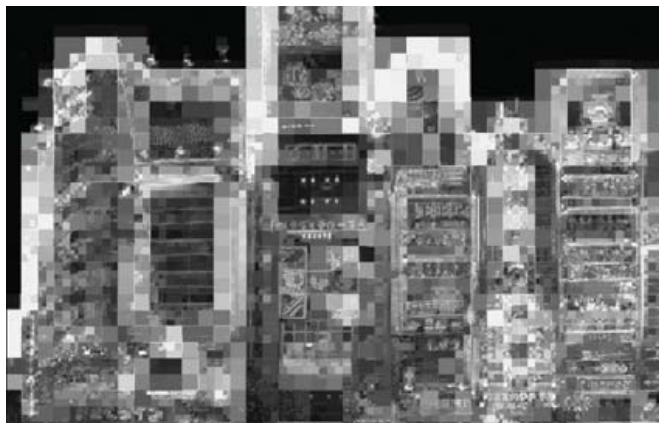
The present landscapes of Shibuya, Shinjuku and other busy shopping areas in Tokyo could change at any moment. They may be different tomorrow and could show entirely different appearances one year later. But the impression of these areas we get from their landscapes differs little. Tokyo's urban landscape is in a way a system and individual outward appearances (such as signboards) have no significant meaning.

It can be said that we continue to perceive Tokyo's landscape in low resolution. We are watching this big city just as we see an out-of-focus photo. We can discern the atmosphere even from a blurry photo. But we can hardly grasp details or notice changes from out-of-focus photos just as images on the website become blurred when enlarged.

Why do we perceive Tokyo's urban landscape in low resolution? It seems to me that this perception derives from our peculiar sense of shape different from Westerners'. Japanese are good at refining details, but their cognitive power is rather weak when it comes to the shape of things. This trait is perhaps rooted in our conception of life and religion.

The rebuilding of the Ise Grand Shrine every 20 years is just one example. Japanese pour their energies into the continuation of a system but spend little energy on the preservation of shape. This may have something to do with Japan's wood culture, in which structures are scrapped and built all the time, not preserved. It may be that due to their peculiar sense of shape, Japanese content themselves with changes in shape if it remains similar.

Photo: Yoshimatsu Hideki



Landscapes in low resolution: multi-resolution image

Shapeless Grave

I once designed a cemetery for the unknown in a community that was to be submerged by a dam. Local people wished that the graveyard be shapeless. They said that since Japan is a multi-religious society, the proposed cemetery should not symbolize any particular religion, but should be a shapeless site where everyone can worship. Their wish was indeed full of contradictions.

We should note that the Japanese have the concept of *Yaoyorozu-no-kami* (eight million deities), meaning that everything could become the object of worship and awe. Said simply, there are deities everywhere around us and everything is a deity. It seems that this polytheistic conception exerts a strong influence on our perception of shape.

Eventually I designed the cemetery for the unknown like this: 1) the ground surface of the graveyard is paved by stones collected from areas to be submerged by the dam, and 2) 1,500 stainless rods (each 9 mm in diameter) are erected all over the ground. Seen from distance, the thin stainless rods appear to be dimly floating in midair like the shimmering air. The stainless rods change their expression all the time as they reflect various colors of the surroundings when exposed to light. When I explained about the graveyard in overseas presentations, the audience took each stainless rod as a gravestone. To some Japanese, the rods look like sticks of incense.

This shapeless cemetery was easily accepted by local people. It perhaps reflects the fact that Japanese have the concept of shapeless space like the Buddhist concept of *kekkaï* – fixing the bounds of a sacred place – or perhaps testifies to the high Japanese receptivity to shape.

To my mind, the weak Japanese perception of shape has created Tokyo's present landscape, or the shapeless city of Tokyo was created by invisible architecture. Said another way, Tokyo may be creating new aesthetics of urban perception and urban landscape – that is, a weak urban image through weak architecture in contrast to the strong Western urban image and strong Western architecture. We are beginning to think that we have no choice but to agree to the “aesthetics of shapeless cities and invisible architecture.”

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Photo: Yoshimatsu Hideki



A shapeless grave: cemetery for the unknown

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