



Changing patterns of urban public space

Observations and assessments from the Tokyo and New York metropolitan areas

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This paper looks at new, high-profile redevelopment projects in Tokyo and New York City and their surroundings for examples of trends in the design of urban public spaces and changing patterns in how they are used. This includes new parks and other open spaces, landscaped plazas or public squares associated with new office towers, shopping centers and other large-scale commercial developments, and various popular “festival sites” such as those along recreation waterfronts. A comparison indicates that both cities have quite a few new public spaces that enhance the quality of urban life and add aesthetic appeal, but that also reflect certain social problems and divisions. We see the following common trends: (1) increasing privatization of spaces that were once more clearly in the public domain; (2) increasing surveillance of public spaces and control of access to them in order to improve security; and (3) increasing use of design themes that employ “theme park” simulations and break connections with local history and geography. In the Tokyo area there is also a curious trend to create large, landscaped open areas near new development projects that few people use. They can be called “planned wastelands” or “new urban deserts”. New York City, on the other hand, has succeeded in having more people come together for enjoyment in parts of the city that were once all but abandoned. The paper is illustrated with photographs, and draws on the examples of Times Square, South Street Seaport and Battery Park City in New York, and Yebisu Garden Place, Teletop–Daiba, Makuhari New Town and Minato Mirai 21 in the Tokyo–Yokohama area.
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Introduction

The transformation of cities from “industrial” to “post-industrial” and “modern” to “post-modern” characteristics, and of urban economic configurations from “Fordist” to “post-Fordist” modes, has come to be one of the dominant themes in contemporary urban studies (Godfrey, 1997; Knox, 1991, 1993; Ley, 1996; Schmandt, 1995; Smith, 1996; Smith and Williams, 1986; Watson and Gibson, 1995; Wyckoff, 1995; Zukin, 1995). Among the many changes that

have gained attention in the literature are reorientation of metropolitan areas from a focus on a single Central Business District (CBD) to a multi-nodal pattern emphasizing outlying commercial centers and “Edge Cities” in addition to the CBD; transformation of aging industrial districts and other derelict land uses to new uses, in many cases to so-called emerging landscapes of consumption and “urban good life”, such as waterfront commercial and entertainment complexes, sports stadiums and convention facilities, new parks and upscale residential developments; and architectural and design trends that beautify the city and present it with interesting buildings in place of the cold forms of modernism. Many of these changes

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are part and parcel of the much heralded “urban revival” in the United States, Great Britain and other countries, and fast-improving quality of life in cities that were once severely distressed and thought to be nearly dead (Hall, 1998). By contrast, other aspects of the urban scene today are highly problematic: heightened racial and class tensions in many cities; widening income gaps between rich and poor; and an unacceptably low quality of life in neighborhoods that have been neglected by both public and private capital, among other problems.

This paper looks at a specific aspect of the new urban landscape in two of the world’s most important urban centers: New York City and Tokyo. There is considerable precedent in urban studies literature for comparison of these two cities, particularly with respect to urban problems such as crime, congestion and pollution, the cost of living, office rents, the challenges of urban management and administration, and other topics having to do with the quality of urban life (Sassen, 1991). This is not surprising because not only are New York and Tokyo two of the largest and most influential cities in the world, they are both incredibly interesting places to study, friendly rivals on opposite sides of the globe, and well known around the world for their many attractions and distinctive problems. Furthermore, the fact that these cities are set in vastly different cultural contexts makes comparisons more interesting and more illuminating. Why Tokyo is one of the world’s safest large cities while New York has higher crime rates is an example of a topic in this vein.

This paper continues the tradition of comparing these two cities. It focuses on new trends in the design and use of urban public space in Tokyo and New York, and looks for points that the two cities have in common which would suggest wider trends in large cities more generally. It is based on fieldwork in both cities, which I know well, as well as reading about emerging issues relating to urban public space. The topic is appropriate for study of urban quality of life because a city’s most prominent public spaces are often emblematic of the city itself and reflect whether its citizens relate well to the city and to each other.

By public space, I refer to those parts of these new developments that are freely accessible to the public and are intended for social interaction, relaxation or passage. Such spaces can be either indoors or outdoors (although the former are more common) and may include walkways, parks and other open areas, landscaped plazas or public squares, the lobbies of many buildings, and various other areas where people may sit, gather or pass through. Such spaces, or their historic antecedents, have always been important parts of cities, having much to do with basic routines in a city’s life, as well as with the city’s overall image and reputation. The world’s best known and perhaps most successful public spaces, such as Central Park and Washington Square in New York, St Mark’s Plaza in Venice, and the nicely designed walkways

and sitting areas gracing the Singapore River, add immensely to the quality of urban life, pleasing locals and visitors alike. Indeed, prominent architects and urban planners have argued for some time that the quality of a city’s public spaces has much to do with whether a city (or a particular neighborhood) succeeds or fails as a place to live or do business (Bacon, 1976; Jacobs, 1961; Carr *et al*, 1992; Vernez Moudon, 1987; Whyte, 1988).

I have confined the study to high-profile redevelopment projects that have opened in recent years in New York and Tokyo and their surroundings, as well as new developments on reclaimed land at their waterfronts. In New York, the examples come primarily from Times Square, South Street Seaport and Battery Park City, while observations in and near Tokyo draw on Yebisu Garden Place, Tokyo Teleport Town, Makuhari New Town and Minato Mirai 21 at the waterfront in nearby Yokohama. Times Square is in the heart of midtown Manhattan and is one of the leading symbols of New York City. It has received considerable media attention recently because the district has been cleaned up and made safer, and its notorious pornography establishments have been expelled in favor of mass-market retailing and revived theater (Zukin, 1995, pp 133–142). South Street Seaport is an old fish wholesaling district in lower Manhattan turned shopping mall and tourist attraction, while Battery Park City is an enormous mixed-use development on reclaimed land at the mouth of the Hudson River next to the World Trade Center (Boyer, 1992, 1993; Gill, 1990; Goldberger, 1986). It includes high-rise office buildings, a shopping center and a large residential community. Yebisu Garden Place is also a mixed-use development featuring office, retailing and residences. It is on a prominent old industrial site to the west of Tokyo’s CBD. Tokyo Teleport Town, Makuhari New Town and Minato Mirai 21 are all on land reclaimed from Tokyo Bay. The first of these is within Tokyo itself and includes, among many other uses, a popular new beachfront community named Daiba. Makuhari is a large, new district of modern office buildings and convention center in neighboring Chiba Prefecture (Otani, 1990). Minato Mirai 21 is a huge, up-scale, mixed-use development that symbolizes the new look of Yokohama (Edgington, 1991). Thus, the list of case-study sites is varied in terms of type, land use and setting within the respective metropolitan areas, and represents a valid basis for generalizations (Table 1).

Observations at the study sites reveal at least three conspicuous trends that New York and Tokyo have in common in the nature and design of new urban public spaces: (1) public spaces that were once clearly in the public domain are increasingly under private ownership and control, although we still think of them as “public spaces”; (2) there is ever more surveillance of these public spaces to control access and improve security; and (3) the design of many public spaces has come to be more playful, often employing “theme

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