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Tokyo, a liquid city. Passages between post-modernity and traditional aesthetics

Federico Farnè

“Night city was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button”. It is the metamorphic metropolis of *cyberpunk*, with a sky the color “of television, tuned to a dead channel”. Incarnating the imaginative archetype of Tokyo, Gibsonian city of excellence for its unique ability to stage the *the future of the future*¹. Scenes of Tokyo’s vertiginous views and frantic infrastructure, like the connective tissue of an artificial body, stretch beneath spectacular architecture, giving life to amazing spatial choreography, and take the form of a fantastic city straight out of the sharp frames of a film (animated in particular), giving us a static image than we can presume is the final stage of the metropolis.

The immense Japanese capital is now the unmistakable destination for a third *Grand Tour*.

The first Grand Tour was centered in Rome, the conclusive location in 18th and 19th centuries of discovery, selected by the intellectuals and artists of Northern Europe, who sought the ancient and the regenerative power of the exotic. For the second Grand Tour, set in the vast spaces of the United States, the goal was New York, a city that has become, especially after the Second World War, the symbol of the most advanced progress, the magic door to a country of freedom and adventure where it is possible for every dream to come true.²

The charm of Tokyo, though far from being reduced to a *forma urbis*, which apparently blends futuristic architectures and short-circuit Escherian modules, seems to stem from the fact that “everything identified as the newest of the new is born directly from tradition in a sort of mystical coexistence of each temporality”³.

1 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace 1984), 7.

2 Francesco Purini, introduction to *Tokyo-To*, by Livio Sacchi (Milano: Skira 2004) 7.

3 Francesco Purini, introduction, 7.

Almost in a postmodern retelling of Periegetic literature of *wonders*, the Japanese megalopolis appears, at first sight, like an unintelligible reality where the neologisms of urban planners, sociologists, and philosophers such as *Ecumenopolis*, post-metropolis, cosmopolitan and global city, rather than providing us directional coordinates to decipher the substance, instead they seem to be blind attempts to escape the insensitive through a mere sense attribution.

If the Western city is a city of space governed by prospective laws, Tokyo differs from European and American metropolises for its absence of an urban project. It is nearly an immense, tumultuating and dynamically radical shipyard in continual redefinition, where architectural entities, accidentally accosted without any spatial hierarchy, self-organize by forming the interdependent cellular organisms of a *Gestaltic* reality, whose order flows from the very breast of chaos which, incredibly, seems deterministic to us.

The city entity seems lost forever, it is *Sprawl*, the metropolitan area without borders dominating its infinite and distorting *continuum*, whose figure is that of a multidimensional labyrinth structured for independent layers in which men and vehicles swarm as well as extras into a seductive and indifferent urban representation, implacably endowed with meaning and yet resistant to any logical restriction.

From within a station, for example, we can access an underpass on top of a *department store*, and from here descend into a subterranean place glittering with sophisticated shops, restaurant windows from which irresistible smells escape, multistory libraries that pull curious readers into new lands, [...] and anything else that can make us forget we are in an underpass so far as we have known in the West; to make us remember to let suddenly just before the entrance of a subway line with which we reach another city-like palace, different from the first [...] and so on, going through constant ebbs between internal and external, orthogonal waste and horizontal-vertical transitions, passages between perfectly homogeneous or surprisingly inconsistent building aggregates.⁴

In this context it is no longer possible to get lost, as Walter Benjamin when he spoke of the Western city, as in the largest Asian megacities you are already completely disoriented.

The individual is nothing more than an electric glow on the circuits of a hypertrophied *microchip*, appears to be completely transcended, for he does not just have a holographic

4 Francesco Lizzani and Laura Ricca, "Tokyo città aperta, capitale del XXI secolo. Ritratto di una città racconto" in *Sguardi sulle città in trasformazione* ed. Laura Ricca (Imola: La Mandragora 2012), 30.

appearance in the great mass transit where space is caught in an irreversible process of liquefaction; this is the perfect analogy between an urban and digital universe environment, that it seems inevitably spilling over itself.

This is all the more true when we analyze the seemingly unbridgeable gap that exists between architecture on the one hand and cities and urban culture on the other. While it is true that currently Tokyo is the most spectacular showcase for contemporary architecture, it is equally true that the strongest and most persistent impression, one that creates a real visual *shock* in the traveler, is not given to us, as is the case in Berlin in the last few decades, but rather comes from the chaotic nature of the built-up, invasive and pervasive infrastructure and the enormous electronic hyper-surpluses of Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Ginza. With this dazzling and lazy spectacle mesmerizing the careless traveler, Tokyo is never from the factories that make up its physical support.

It is no coincidence then that Vittorio Gregotti, in his editorial titled *Disoriented Modernity* states:

Japanese architecture reproduced in magazines is wide and often very good on a morphological and technical level; but those who want to trace this to a portrait of the country is essentially taking on a virtually impossible endeavor, even with the best indicators from the best architecture of those years.⁵

One must then wonder if the mutation of the Japanese metropolis, where the virtual dimension overlaps or replaces the physical, coincides with the last phase of a degenerative process of the contemporary city and is the first example of a hypermodern and vertiginous *post-metropolis*, wherein the physical substantiality of stable and solid characters of the city tends towards a progressive but inevitable virtualization. Whatever the answer, this phenomenon is rooted in the second half of the twentieth century when, as noted by Arata Isozaki,

during the war many Japanese cities lost all their forms, then were quickly filled by buildings that assumed to look prior to the ruins without any visual order. Steel and concrete were mixed with billboards, neon lights, and telephone poles. The cities lost their massive aggregations of substantiality behind oscillating, light, and superficial elements. They began to communicate their meaning more with their semiotic codes than with solid, actual forms. The

5 Vittorio Gregotti, "Una modernità dis-orientata" in *Casabella* 608-609 (1994), 3.

city is in a state of fluidity. Invisible, is virtually simulated by the codes that fill it.⁶

The liquefaction process, understood in the Zygmunt Bauman⁷ sense of the term, which tends towards the contemporary metropolis, leads to a collision, when not a conflict, between the virtual space real space, giving rise to a hybridization whose matrix has a viscosity of an unstable form in continuous redefinition.

The borders and walls become more and more volatile and multifunctional places, thus creating a syncretic interaction where the physical and architectural reality is blended with the digital sphere on different scales and different levels. We are faced with an urban augmented reality, made of assembled *pixels* and synthetic illusions, where smart screens, video projections, and interactive media mix with the material substrate of the traditional city. From this perspective, the online and digital systems of the contemporary city become counterparts to the ancient waterways, to the caravan roads, to the railways, and to the highway systems that have marked the historic city from antiquity to the twentieth century.

This continuous fluctuation of contemporary urban space in general, and of Tokyo in particular, between real and virtual, makes the contemporary post-metropolis similar to a labyrinth: the archetype and metaphor of the human condition, tragically poised on the brink of nowhere. It is no coincidence that it is “the dark place where the network of roads does not follow any rules. Chance and surprise reign supreme in the labyrinth, witnessing the defeat of pure Reason”⁸.

That’s why Tokyo is not a *city of space*, governed by the strict laws of perspective, but a *city of situations*, different at each point, in which the complexity of the blueprint, the interpenetration between volumes and the connection between distant levels, even opposite, of the urban text, requires the visitor to process dynamic and changing mental maps.

Also present in the Japanese city, taking the category themed by Nishida Kitarō, *basho no ronri*, is that which is understood as much a field as an opening of possibilities. Berque defines logic of the place or areolar space⁹, “to be understood in a perfectly opposite way to the geometric-Cartesian geometry of the modern Western city, but also to the reticular-orthogonal format of the Chinese capital city”¹⁰. All this creates an urban space that, proceeding for

6 Arata Isozaki, “Città e architettura come rovina”, in *Casabella* 608-609 (1994), 25.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity 2000).

8 Jaques Attali, *Chemins de sagesse: traité du Labyrinths*(Paris: Fayard, 1996) 23.

9 Augustin Berque, *Du geste à la cité*, (Paris: Gallimard 1993) 101.

10 Francesco Lizzani and Laura Ricca, *Dalla città celeste al labirinto metropolitano*, (Imola: La Mandragora 2013) 74.

successive waves, is temporalized, forming a dialectic relationship between the gestuality, the physicality of the movements, and the constructed environment. It wanders far from geometry and mathematics.

A similar state of affairs seems to be rooted in the very origins of the city. Edo in fact was born as *jōkamachi* (a fortified settlement) at the beginning of the second half of the fifteenth century. Likely founded by Ota Dokan, a small feudal lord of a cadet branch of the Uesugi family, Tokyo still betrays its military origins; not only for its labyrinthine road structure, made from a myriad of “T” junctions and closed inputs designed for defense purposes, but also for the strength and hardness that distinguishes its construction and urban structure, contrasting it to the aristocratic refinement of the ancient capitals such as Kyoto and Nara.

To the unwary traveler, the visual and cultural shock of the Japanese megalopolis is caused by a series of perceptual difficulties that, before complicating your orientation, makes you feel uncomfortable from a psychological point of view. It is no coincidence that Alberto Arbasino wrote in this regard:

Tokyo is pretty horrendous; [...] the streets and highways cross through irregular and exhausting plazas among immense skyscrapers that are brightly lit until late at night, and dry gardens, and sparse shops, and suddenly crowded streets, and absurdly narrow rural streets and houses made with the most miserable and perishable materials, like wood, emaciated metals, and crumbling cement in a state of limitless desolation.¹¹

Of a similar opinion, Cesare Brandi:

Tokyo is a scary city, the biggest and the ugliest in the world, oppressed by a constant blanket of smog, so you never see the sky, [...] urban planning is chaotic, does not exist. Like the dragons of their legends, but functional dragons, the elevated roads will climb over each other and seem, in some places, where you can get up to three over your head, like a caricature of Piranesi’s obsessive prisons.¹²

The image of the dragon, as opposed to that of kindness and grace, also recalls Raffaele Milani, whose deep gaze manages to get past that first discordant and disconcerting impact that springs from the irritating urban disorder that is Tokyo, revealing a dialectic between modernity and tradition, delicacy and harshness, that represents the style of not only the urban-

11 Quoted in Fosco Maraini, *Ore Giapponesi*, (Milano: Corbaccio 2000) 61.

12 Cesare Brandi, *Viaggi e scritti letterari*, (Milano: Bompiani 2009) 293.

architectural culture, but of Japanese culture as well.

The vision before us is [...] that of the dragon, evoked by a certain hardness, as a bitter and disjointed surface by a rough, uniform cortex. [...] From the shapes of the city, in reality not a city, it appears to almost spread an air of offense, something inhuman and flat. [...] Where then are there gardens and temples, traditional works, and examples of enlightened, modern architectural genius? To understand this split reality, we have to go and experience the overwhelming expanse of living and operating. Slowly we discover that there are woods and forests, just behind the dragon's robe, and that almost every home has a corner of garden, [...] and that tradition and modernity, monstrosity and lightness, can surprisingly coexist.¹³

Here then, with a gentle grace, the apparent architecture nothingness is revealed before our eyes. We begin to read it, to make it our own. It is kept hidden, lacking the ostentatious grandeur of the Western city. Indeed, what strikes us most in the Japanese city is the very absence of the monuments that characterize the great European capitals, because in the Far Eastern city, the historical and collective memory is entrusted "essentially in practices and customs deposited in the traditions, gestures, and collective rituals which have chosen the street as their home"¹⁴.

The city, far from being a mere physical-building complex, then reveals an intricate system of material relations, both symbolic and imaginary, rooted in a specific *Lebenswelt*. From this perspective we can also read Tokyo, decoding, little by little, the hidden semantics in which beauty and grace compete with monstrosity for the role of protagonist, in a report that, far from conflict, is slowly revealed as a *coincidence of opposites*.

Torn over the centuries by earthquakes that have shaken the foundations, by the bombings of World War II and, more recently, from the hectic and prevailing industrial domain - Tokyo appears to be a tumultuous shipyard - the cityscape of the Japanese capital still reveals fragments of a world that, through careful observation, manages to combine history with mythology, the fantastic, dreamlike world of creative design. Because "in the land of the East, even after great devastation, no one escapes the power of the dream: the flow of innovation is an integral part of the traditions that run beneath the surface in the delirium of incessant changes"¹⁵. As Roland Barthes already noted about Tokyo, it revolves around a hollow center,

13 Raffaele Milani, "La grazia e il drago. Impressioni di un viaggiatore", *Parol* 22 (2012): 212-213.

14 Lizzani and Ricca, *Dalla città celeste al labirinto metropolitano*, 18.

15 Raffaele Milani, "Trasformazioni e permanenze nella cultura del paesaggio e della città giapponese del dopoguerra" in *Kenzo Tange e l'utopia di Bologna*, Giuliano Gresleri and Glauco Gresleri (Bologna:

a place that is “puzzled together and indifferent, masked by dwellings of vegetation, defended by water moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen”¹⁶. A center that is “like an idea evaporated, does not radiate power, but offers to the whole urban movement the support of its central vacuum”¹⁷. The same case of the Japanese revolves around this evanescent and fluctuating identity.

Even in Japanese architecture, from the end of the twentieth century to the present, that often seems to prey on the various -isms of the Western avant-garde, we can observe signs that the traditional has not been abandoned, but rather hidden in essential forms; it belongs to the private sphere and is accessed in an almost subconscious way. An ancient heritage that has its roots in the “genetic heritage” of Japanese culture.

There *Engawa House* (2003) of the Tezuka Architects studio is, in this sense, a case in point. “The architectural originality of this building is [...] the revival of the *Engawa* concept that does not try whatsoever to follow in the example of the classic tradition - or interpretation, in more modern times, which was implemented in the house that is in front - while certainly keeping the meaning”¹⁸. The wood is what ensures and harmonizes the morphological unit of this house on a single floor, which is bordered to the south with the road, while in the north opening onto the green space that connects the interior and exterior. The *Engawa* of the traditional Japanese house, in this build, finds a new *raison d’être* in the glass that covers the northern wall, which replaces the most classic *fusuma*. In versatile simultaneity, it is the transparency of the glass in resonance with the natural space of man’s work. In this regard, it is worth remembering that, in the *Engawa* word (縁側) the first *Kanji* means affinity, relationship, to point out that in Japanese culture, unlike in Western culture, there is no cessation but instead harmony between the artificial and the natural space; one and the other are in continuity. Indeed, nature becomes almost the poetic principle of Japanese art. “Its essence precisely in the street lighting, which can be recognized in the form and in the sound of bamboo, in the light of the peach blossoms, the teaching of the wind among the trees, the way of the *satori* that impressed the mind of André Malraux: truth and reality, illusion and imagination vanish”¹⁹.

In fact, the *Engawa* embodies a concept of Japanese aesthetics, creating an intentional

Bononia University Press) 49.

16 Roland Barthes, *L'impero dei segni* (1970), (Torino: Einaudi 1984) 39.

17 Roland Barthes, *L'impero dei segni*, 42.

18 Leone Spita, *L'eco del wabi-sabi nei giovani architetti giapponesi*, in *Culture del Giappone contemporaneo*, ed. Matteo Casari (Latina: Tunuè 2011) 95.

19 Raffaele Milani, “Trasformazioni e permanenze nella cultura del paesaggio e della città giapponese del dopoguerra” 52.

continuity that connects the interior with the exterior, becoming a perfect representation of the *ma*. “As the space between one column and the other is called *ma*, also *Engawa*, placed between the interior and the exterior of the house can be defined as *ma*”²⁰. Its liminal essence in fact brought it to a place of mediation par excellence.

The pictogram of *ma* (間) is constituted by the radical *mon* (門) meaning portal, and *nichi* or *hi* (日) means that day and represents the sun²¹. From its graphical configuration, we can see that it calls the categories of time and space into correlation and binds them together. It is to be understood “as a “between”: a time within events, a space between things, a relationship among two people [...] is to pause attention, to ponder the existing gap between the perceptual and emotional state”²², captures the moment that cancels the duality of the act and of the mind and has to do with emptiness. A vacuum that, far from being somewhat similar to the Western *Nihil*, it opens to a profound cognitive experience as a manifestation of an original universal background. It is reflected in all levels of existence in Japanese culture; not by chance, a foolish person is called *manuke*, or deprived of *ma*. In architecture we are also found within the traditional home spaces (*chanoma*, *tokonoma*, *ima*, *nema*), so that the same schedule of the interior is the *madori*, literally to accommodate *ma*.

In *Tokyo City Hall Complex* (1991) by Kenzo Tange we can see on magnified scale a reinvention of models and classic shapes of some elements of the typical Edo house, such as: a closed-loop structure, the short partition that descends from the ceiling, and decorations placed over the sliding panels that separate the various parts of the house. Through this revival, “in work of Tange we can observe [...] criteria of distance, the *ma* which creates rhythm in an illusion of repeated geometric truth”²³. But here is the rhythm of *iki*, a seductive charm devoid of affection, renounced spiritual energy; in architecture, as in the example of *Tokyo City Hall Complex* tends to avoid curved geometric shapes in favor of a depth of interruption, an interval between vertical lines. “This progressive break is like the progress of the decorative *iki* lines, linear sectioning in architecture that can also be reversed horizontally, linked to the idea of simplicity and impermanence, and able to assert amazement”²⁴.

20 Seike Kiyoshi, “The role of ma in Japanese homes,” in *But. Japanese aesthetic sensibility*, Ed. Luciana Galliano (Turin: Angolo Manzoni) 142.

21 Laura Ricca, *Dalla città ideale alla città virtuale*, (Roma: Carocci 2014) 60.

22 Raffaele Milani, “Trasformazioni e permanenze nella cultura del paesaggio e della città giapponese del dopoguerra” 56.

23 Raffaele Milani, “Trasformazioni e permanenze nella cultura del paesaggio e della città giapponese del dopoguerra” 58.

24 Raffaele Milani, “Trasformazioni e permanenze nella cultura del paesaggio e della città giapponese del

Also *Omotosando Hills* (2006), a shopping center designed by Tadao Ando, is a perfect example of the creativity that elevates past and future together, as mentioned by Tange. From the start of its design, we can see the typical Japanese care to integrate natural and constructed space, creating a harmonic concordance. In fact, the height of the building was designed in accordance with the zelkova that grow there in front, in such a way that its height does not exceed that of the trees. Here too the sensitivity of the *ma* seems to permeate space, both in the interval, in that continuity capable of containing the discontinuity, which is realized in the relationship between art and nature, also referred to in the system of hanging gardens present at various levels in the build, as well as in its internal structure. Here, the internal space which develops the *spiral slope* is a perfect embodiment of *ma* in its being, at the same time both a local and temporal entity. It represents an interval, a pause that, in the era of rampant globalization, is a suspension and withdrawal from the compulsions of consumerism.

The last example I want to provide on the presence of *ma* at the urban level. The outside area of the *Tokyo International Forum* (1997). Here people can take a break in an extremely vital space, where artistic performances occur, and you can enjoy an outdoor cafe. A temporalized place, propped up by trees, creates a delicate alternation between the inner formality and the external informality. Another postmodern realization of *ma*.

These examples, which are not exhaustive, but rather glimpses of the unusual fragments of a city that appears to be discarded, create a new organic agglomeration in which you can trace “a place that has not lost the character of its roots that bind it to the earth and of the divine that bind it to heaven”²⁵.

dopoguerra” 58.

25 Leone Spita, *L'eco del wabi-sabi nei giovani architetti giapponesi*, in *Culture del Giappone contemporaneo*, 108.