



The Inner City

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CONTENTS

	Notes on Contributors	7
	Introduction	9
Declan Kennedy Margrit I Kennedy Ernest Erber	The Inner City in the Post-Industrial Era— A Study of Its Changing Social Fabric and Economic Function	18
Ray A Frieden Bruce D Mann van Ginkel Associates Richard Ridley Greater London Council Aditya Prakash Shun Kanda S G Thakurdesai	New Influences on Persian Cities — A Case Study of Kerman, Iran Movement in Midtown Metro Impact Study Living with Traffic Mobile Shops in Chandigarh The 'street' and 'hiroba' of Japan 'Sense of Place' in Greek Anonymous Architecture	46 54 68 72 78 85 94
John Wiebenson	A Public Information System for Adams- Morgan Streets	103
John Kinard	The Neighbourhood Museums in the Inner City	108
Mike Franks	British Inner City Planning—A Personal View	112
Ed Berman	The Save Piccadilly Campaign—An Annotated Dossier of Campaign Publications	126
C A Doxiadis Christopher Alexander Sara Ishikawa Murray Silverstein Dietrich Worbs	Order in our Thinking A Collection of Patterns which Generate Multi-Service Centres	136 141
Peter F Smith John L Taylor	Aesthetics as a Function of Retail Establishment	181
Ervin J Bell David Lewis	Mental Strategies in Architectural Design The Development of Urban Gaming-Simula- tion in Britain 'U-DIG' Game, a Tool for Urban Innovation A Community Determines what its Centre Is	197 204 212 215

THE 'STREET' AND 'HIROBA' OF JAPAN

SHUN KANDA

85

Human activities and needs find expression in forms and patterns which reflect and shape our lives. The built environment is the ultimate public statement of the human condition. Yet this man-made environment on the whole is insufficiently studied for information about the underlying infrastructure of human activity systems. The extant environment can be perceived, identified, studied for analysis; and it can be designed and altered.

The purpose of this investigation will be to demonstrate the interaction of spatial and physical expression with the non-physical forces at work within a cultural setting, and in the process to evaluate and develop a measure and understanding of the quality of the built-environment in meeting human purposes. The investigation may be addressed not so much to the Japanese mind, but more in order to stimulate those who live outside its cultural and societal orientation. In studying the characteristic Japanese sense of space and its expression, it is hoped that a better insight will be gained concerning public spatial expression in the realm of environmental design.

Historical perspective: the 'street' and 'hiroba'

To the west, the terms 'town square' or 'public square', are familiar. Cities in history, from those of the Greek civilizations up to the present day, had their expressions of community life in the square. Be it the 'agora' of ancient Greece, the 'piazza' of medieval Italy, the Baroque 'place' of France, the square purported to be the gathering place of the people, humanizing them by mutual contact — a three-dimensional physical public place, symbolizing the social, economic, cultural, political, and religious life of the community at large.

In Japan, no squares are to be found: that is, they are non-existent. To understand the particular absence

of this public spatial form, it is helpful to have an insight into the historical development of Japan. The socio-political pattern of ancient Japan, in fact of feudal Japan up to very recent times, could not be said to have fostered an egalitarian form of society.

The highly stratified social structure of Japanese society, whether it be the emperor and the royalty at the apex or the feudal *daimyo* residing at its helm, signified the basic determinants of the people's life and course of events. This is unmistakably reflected in the physical form and in the content of the community.

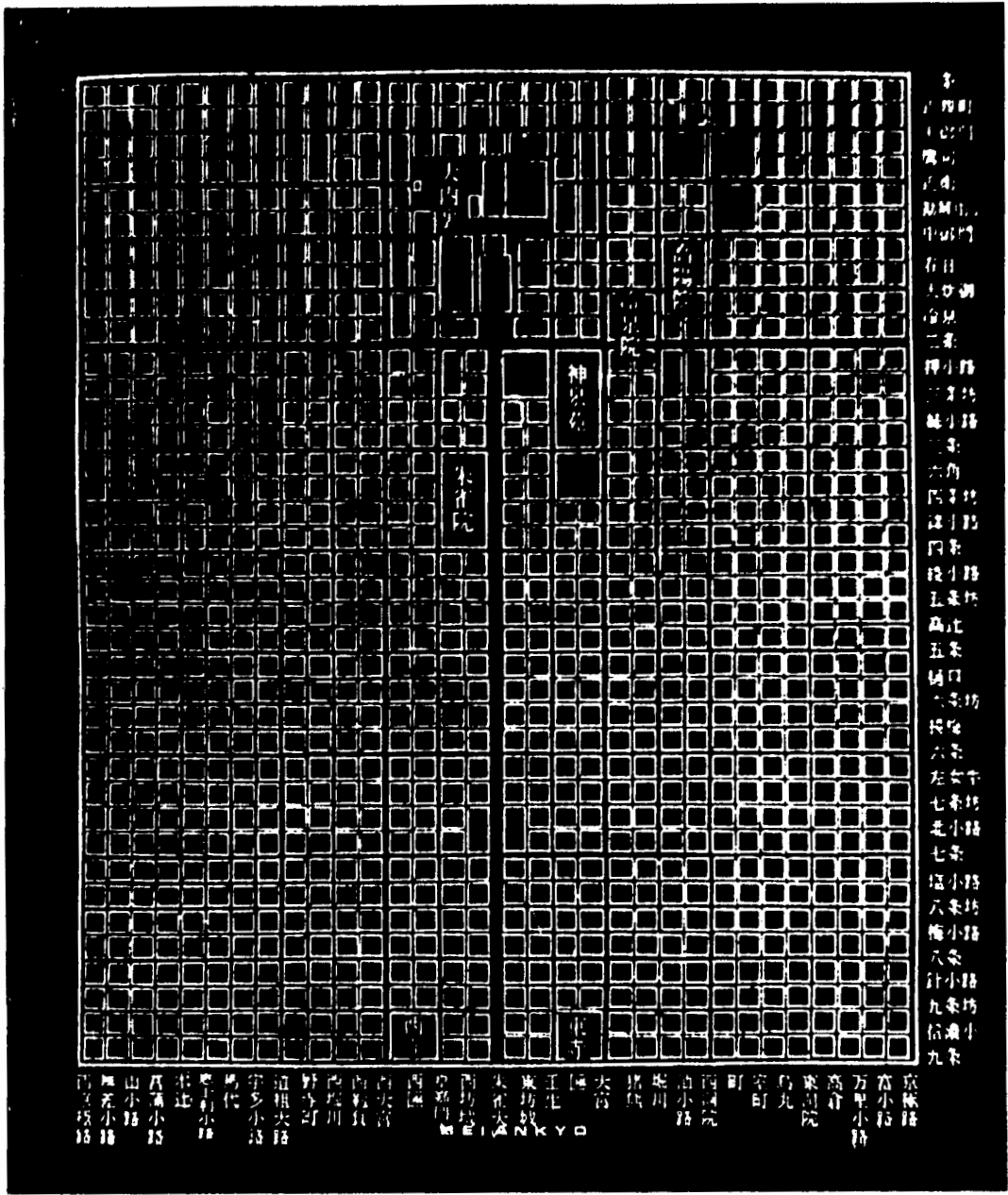
Ancient Kyoto, or Heiankyo as it was called, with its extremely geometric and ordered gridiron layout illustrates this case (*next page*): the city design concept of Heiankyo consisted of its boulevards and smaller streets. There is not a single identifiable public space in the plan. The only definition, other than the perpendicular streets at regular intervals, is the single main thoroughfare running across the centre, dead-ending at the Palace gate. The only exceptions to the regular block system are the several temples spottily located within the grid system. The temple complex and other public facilities are not centrally situated but simply exist off the street, scattered within the city. There is no square.

The Heiankyo plan represented the dominant socio-political image of that society. Every element was part of a total hierarchy. The palace, that enclave of the royal ruling clan, dominated everything else. This physical entity was central. It sufficed to contain one focal domain, and that certainly did not reside in the public.

A not too dissimilar pattern is reflected in the medieval feudal system of the castle-town where the public life of the populace was carried on outside its walls. Here the blacksmiths, the carpenters, the goldsmiths, the shoemakers, the weavers, the traders and merchants went about their busy daily tasks, reconciled to their position and place in society. There was no special need for public gatherings, no need to act en masse, when the patterns of their lives were largely predetermined. Their routine life was highlighted only by the occasional festivals and public ceremonies, either religious or political.

Religion in the ordinary life of a Japanese was a very private affair (and still is, today) and the temples and shrines in many ways were distinct from their daily activities. People worshipped within their humble homes, while the ecclesiastics enjoyed





the serenity, status and spaciousness of their rather independent isolated havens.

Where the significance of religion in public life is absent, and where the stratification of society into layers of docile, regimented social and cultural life patterns predominate, it is understandable that a physical accommodation for the assumed function of public life should not even be present.

What was significant in the city design of Heiankyo? What prototypical dimension of urban design and community presented itself in this ancient Japanese physical planning? It was the street.

In the absence of the public square in Heiankyo, the street itself was the setting of community life. All life in public presented itself on the streets. All social interactions were staged in this linear dimension. The typical individual house, stores, and workshops were tied to each other via the network of the streets. It was the street that linked the temples to each other and to the city fabric. The festivals and great mass gatherings never occurred in a single open space but characteristically entailed walking, strolling through the city, a processional form of activity. The street was not merely functional and circulatory — it professed the essential active urban living space.

It must be explained here that an indispensable factor which the Japanese street possessed was the unique nature of wood-constructed architecture. As will be discussed more later, the expansive flexible design of these buildings could transform the texture, character and spatial dimension of the ordinary street. Community and privacy flowed into each other via these semi-transparent facades on the street. The 'street space' or 'street architecture' served to unite the individual lives to the city as a whole.

The term 'hiroba', literally meaning 'open, or wide space, or ground', may represent the Japanese counterpart to the western idea of the square. The word *per se* has been in use historically, designating physical locations within the city. However, if 'hiroba' were taken to mean the fulcrum of perpetual community life, the physical focus of city design, this was not the case. It was simply a locational nomenclature.

The word 'hiroba', nevertheless, carries the connotations meaningful in describing the nature of the place of community life, of the occasion of the people's life in public. The usage of the term, especially in today's Japanese society, bears direct relation to urban design and community expression — not so much because it signifies a physical entity, but because it embodies identifiable socializing proces-



ses within the life of the city. 'Hiroba' is defined by human activity — in viable urban space and time. These activities can be characterized basically by certain contextual qualities which may distinguish the unique sense of the Japanese 'hiroba'. It will become apparent that the 'hiroba' is not necessarily perceived as a fixed physical expression but rather as an expression of a spatial consciousness — of a dynamic, spontaneous, coexistent and symbolic nature.

In the absence of the square, it could be said that in the cities of Japan, architectural space opens out to the street, that life flows between architecture and the street, that life and street, architecture and the city 'coexist'. The chief characteristics of Japanese festivals and public events is that the setting is out in the street. The form of much of the traditional festival activity and ritual entails winding through the wide thoroughfares as well as through meandering narrow alleys of the community. There is very little static form of activity, it is basically kinaesthetic and continuously changing.

As has been cited earlier, traditional Japanese architecture with its paper, wood, or bamboo screen walls and the hung wooden lattice facades lent itself uniquely to the phenomenal interiorizing of the street — the street space freely filtered through beyond the facade. The typical physical street is extended and an altogether different spatial entity can be perceived. A community space emerges. In this coexistence of the private and public space-time, the 'hiroba' manifestly acquires form and meaning.

Physical staging of community activity seldom occupied a singular locational permanence. In the absence of the square, such activity process had to be temporal in nature. All supportive facilities, dispositions, forms and details for the event were portable, flexible, multi-use, instantaneous, improvisational and provisional. The resulting space-time was 'provisional' in nature.

In the city of Takayama, a community renowned for its festivals, this provisional phenomenon can best be observed. One visitor to this town on a typical day and another at the occasion of a festival will be struck by the difference: the atmosphere, texture, fabric — in fact, the whole sensate environment will have been transformed. The wooden lattice at the front of the houses lining the street are taken down completely, allowing exposure into these usually private spaces; festive paper lanterns are hung at every entryway; colours, textures, proportions, scale and volume are altered. The street literally erodes, revealing a 'hiroba'. A community space unveils itself.

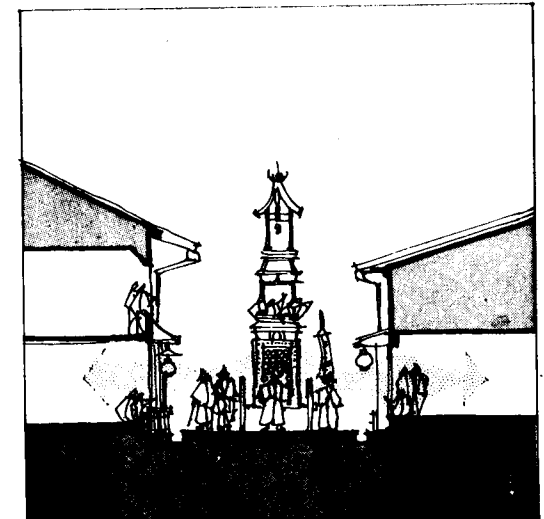
A place produced by activity is restricted in terms of time. The Gion Festival of Kyoto, held annually on July 17, gives new value to the streets for a specified limited duration. This temporary activity-space is in motion; rather than a physical space, it is a sort of linear 'happening'. The processional happening sustains a sense of place; but then the moment ends, the spell is broken.

This type of temporary design and spontaneous sense of place can also be evidenced at some temples

and shrines. Although religious in nature, these seasonal occasions held within the temple precinct are extremely popular and serve as exciting highlights of a community. By introducing special decorative elements and symbols, by the use of portable and non-permanent facilities, such as outdoor podiums, platforms, drinking and eating booths, canvas-sheltered display stands and shows, a 'hiroba' is achieved. The religious architecture remains merely a backdrop. The visual association with surrounding nature, the stone pavement, the stone lanterns, the special symbolic non-city aura of the environment, all contribute to the makings of a 'hiroba' — for those moments.

In the absence of a real square, the case has always been that the community life process had its occurrences in open areas (never designated 'hiroba'). Alleys, streets, street corners, religious precincts, vacant city lots, river-banks, frontage grounds at transportation nodes, etc., comprised these substitutive areas. They occur in the city fabric marked by specific functional labels. Interestingly enough, it is only when these assigned functions and uses are diverted that 'hiroba' life comes into being.

This nature of 'substitution' originates out of different circumstances and demands, as for example, climatic conditions. Because the summer sun is extremely brilliant and Japan lies in the monsoon



INTERIORIZING OF THE STREET

zone with abundant rainfall through much of the year, outdoor activity there often encounters inconvenience and impracticality. Thus, 'hiroba' occurrences at temple enclaves may be attributed to the shade and solace offered by its rich foliage. When we consider once more those factors that underlie the Japanese form of a 'hiroba': the coexistent nature of the events, the duality of street architecture, the transient and evanescent characteristic of public activities, or the provisional quality of supportive physical elements, the concept of 'substitution' appears to be more than an accident.

88

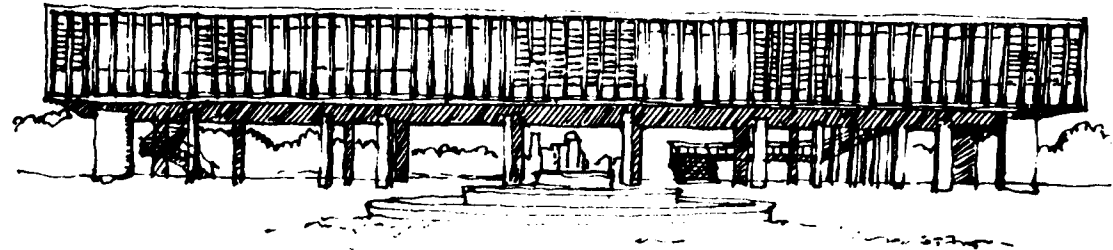
Japanese public spatial expression

At the root of community life process lies a 'need' for mutual contact and information exchange with fellow men. In maintaining 'hiroba' as an expression of this fundamental process, certain activity-elements may be seen to be present. The 'sense of hiroba' should sustain the following:

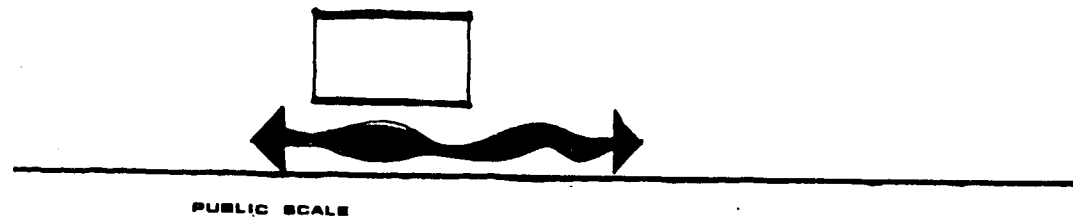
- (a) The motivation for coming together, generated by the pattern of daily community life process, such as the purchasing of food and clothing; obtaining and transmitting information of the community, etc.
- (b) The purpose of recreation, relaxation and amusement.
- (c) The scope for social pleasantries, such as neighbourliness, friendliness, spontaneous associations and encounter with members of the community.
- (d) The feeling for 'togetherness' as in all types of community activities, including festivals and religious rituals.
- (e) The need to profess or appeal, such as public oratory, political demonstration and mass riots.

The presence of these factors or a mixture of these forces constitute the variable inputs; however, the indispensable determinant relies on the fact that every individual be allowed free and unrestricted access, entry, and participation.

When we study Japan's city-planning and civic legislature, the lack of any references to this expression of community consciousness is noticed. 'Hiroba' as a city-design concept is missing. Streets, city parks and rivers have their appropriate 'ordinances', but there exists no comparable clause pertaining to 'hiroba'. If no form of ordinance is found, it can be inferred that neither the awareness, interest, nor financial appropriations be expected. Some potential and certainly unintended public open spaces have prevailed — but in the recent history of urbanizing expansion and density, they have disappeared.



PLAN



PUBLIC SCALE

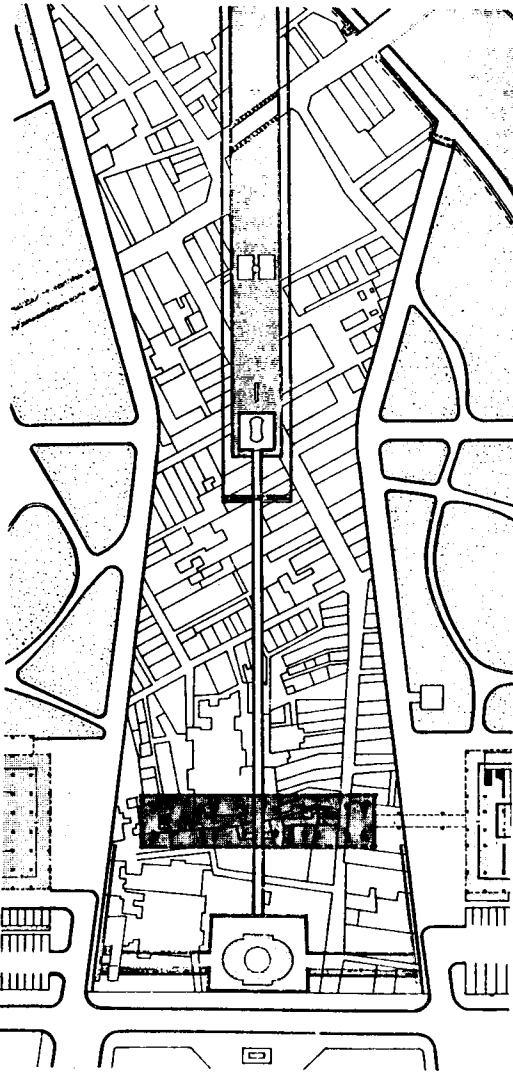
Tokyo's urban structure is patterned out on the criteria of 'ward organization' — that is, the city as a whole is put together piecemeal. (There are twenty-three wards, or sectors in Tokyo.) As a result, left-over gaps, especially where the parts come together, can be discerned in this type of planning. These breaks in the city fabric could have become relevant public open spaces, but they were quickly assigned specific functional uses or have totally disappeared.

We have noted that these areas sometimes demonstrated the advent of 'hiroba' by over-riding the intended use, inherently vulnerable in its vague 'boundary' or 'edge' delineation and in its invisible

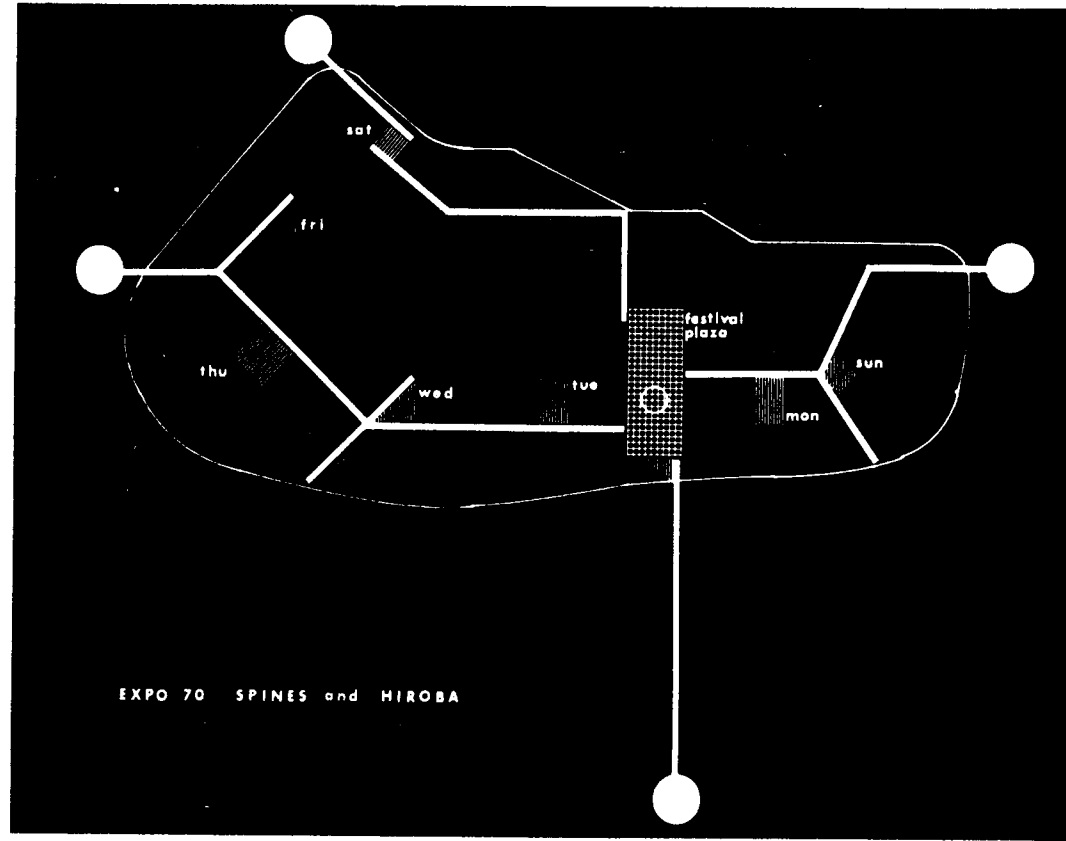
propriatorship.

The post-war years in Japan engendered efforts by many architects to recognize and restate socially cohesive architectural projects. It could be said that architecture turned toward urban design. Foremost among the architects who took this matter up is Kenzo Tange, with his Peace Memorial Centre at Hiroshima; his achievement here was marked by a careful treatment of all adjacent streets and parks as a totally planned unity; by his comprehension of the urban structure with the added advantage of a well located site; and by the opportunities inherent in a memorial dedicated to the 'peace movement' at a place to be the receptacle of world-wide communication and

interaction. In the hands of Tange the use of 'piloti' at once spatially connected the architecture and the city. The public domain and architecture filtered into each other at the ground level and the result established a scale of the 'masses' as opposed to that of isolated individuals.



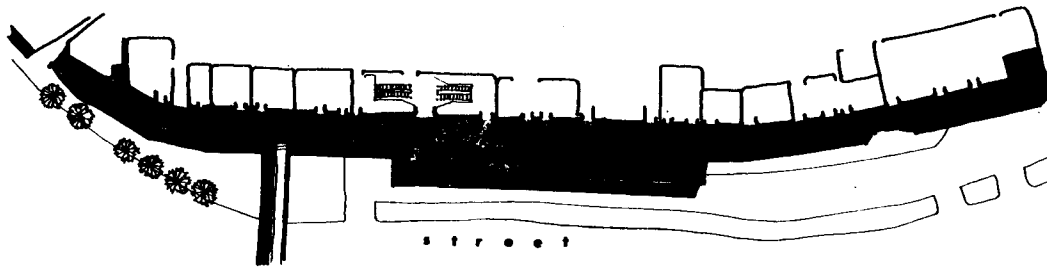
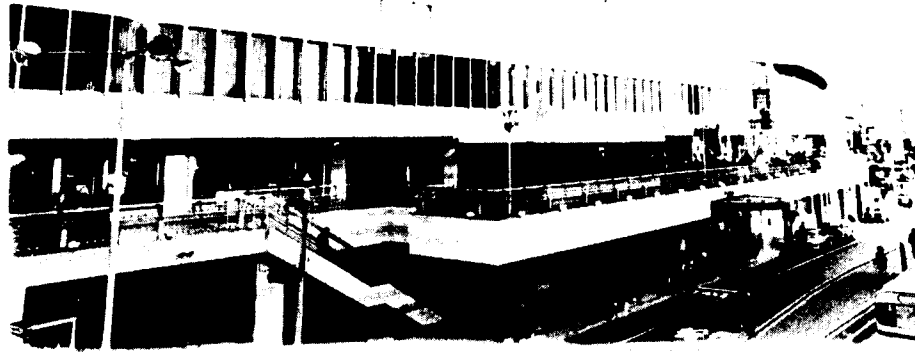
TANGE'S HIROBA CONCEPT



EXPO 70 SPINES and HIROBA

The 1951 CIAM (Conference International d'Architecture Moderne) conference had as its theme 'The City Core'. In Japan, under a new postwar Constitution and active rebuilding of the devastated city centres, architects were ever cognizant of community consciousness and social responsibility. With many of the city halls and other civic centres being rebuilt across the country, they envisioned vital 'community hiroba' at every feasible design opportunity. The CIAM theme had a uniquely significant influence on Japan. Despite such exertion of efforts, these designs often did not materialize. This was significantly due to the fact that the populace at large did not identify civic buildings as being part of their meaningful symbols of daily living. Feelings of affinity with these seats of government were hardly harboured in the citizens' hearts, especially for those who recalled the taste of

the country's political machinery in pre-war Japan. City halls were hardly the catalytic force for socializing. A 'hiroba' was doubtless unlikely here. Other limitations handicapped the architects: the governmental planning policy and attitude, for example. No urban blueprint existed, no city-design plan. Hence there was no framework enabling a designer to conceptualize a public centre within a total organizing fabric. In most cases, the architect was forced to take the problems independently including that of understanding and analysing, presumptuously interpreting the city structure, and thereby arbitrarily drawing up the grand plan. In trying to understand the factors underlying Japanese public spatial expression, I would like to dwell on several pieces of evidence from the existing Japanese consciousness and milieu.



AKASAKA TOKYU PLAZA PLAN

The most glaring physical example of recent creation comes to mind — that of EXPO '70 at Osaka. To its planners, architects and designers, EXPO '70 posed an opportune, exciting and serious experiment in contemporary urban scale and content, including that of the sense and form of public open spaces. We note that practically for the first time in Japan, the term 'hiroba' was employed integrally incorporated in the original concept and over-all physical design. But if these 'hiroba' were to be a new spatial expression of the public environment, if they were to emulate the Western concept of the square, they did not materialize. The 'Festival Hiroba' under the huge space-framed canopy at a central location within EXPO, and the necklace-chain 'Monday' through 'Sunday Hiroba' cannot be credited as such. Both were strictly based on functional nomenclatures; the former for programmed exhibitions of various festival performances, and the latter identified monorail

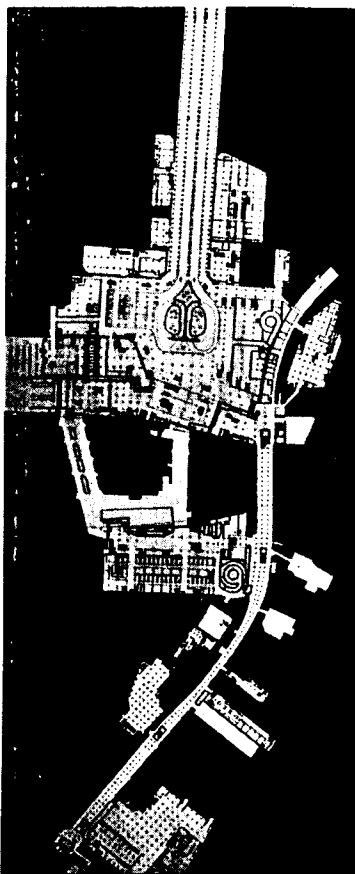
stops. The former was essentially an amphitheatre, normally closed off to the public and admitting a capacity number spectator participation only at designated show times. The latter was an elaborate version of our existing railroad station frontage, a traffic node focusing its void on the station gates. By careful observation, however, it becomes obvious that indeed there was a concerted form of activity in public, a continuous social interface, and above all, a 'place' for these occurrences — but that was to be found in the streets of the EXPO site. What we learn from this experiment is that on the one hand, the planners and designers have yet to understand the nature of their own Japanese spatial orientation in public life, but on the other hand that there is a significant reawakening to physical planning of the total fabric of public environments. In this endeavour, however, priority must rest in understanding not its counterpart forms in western society,

but in appreciating the dynamic, kinaesthetic and symbolic expression indigenous to the Japanese behaviour in public.

Another significant parallel is seen in the recent hotel commercial concourse, 'Akasaka Tokyu Plaza' — here again, the term 'plaza' being used intentionally and assumedly designed as such. As may be studied from the illustrations, the 'plaza' physically is one linear promenade deck disconnected from vehicular traffic. The main activity is in shopping and browsing, inherent in this strictly functional linear dimension. It is not a gathering place and any social interaction is at a minimum. It is a street: safe from traffic and congestion, extremely inviting and pleasant. Needless to say, the public did not create it — it originated as a private commercial venture. 'Akasaka Tokyu Plaza' is a misnomer.

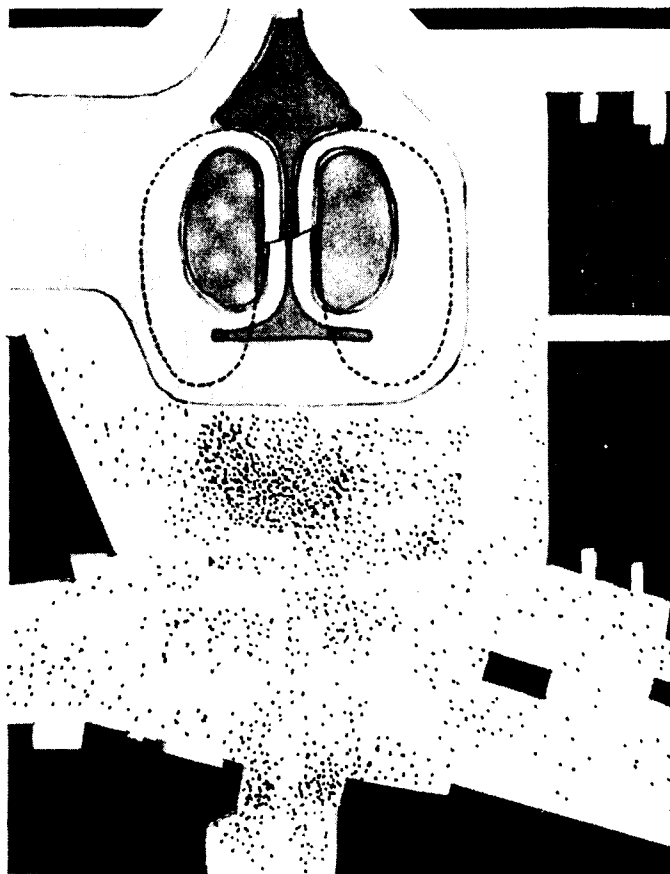
Much of Japanese public life takes place in semi-open spaces, often replacing its original and intended uses, such as at temple precincts, shopping arcades and transportation terminals. Shinjuku Terminal's West Concourse is such an example. An extensive underground circulation-spine blossoms open at the busy pedestrian intersection node of the West Concourse. The substitutive nature of space-time 'hiroba' manifests itself here: a spontaneous and candid intercourse born from among whoever happens to be present. Ironically, though, this particular area has very recently come under the scrutiny of the transportation authorities, who, of course, administer the premises. It has been pointed out that the mass of youth frequently coming together here for an impromptu event of singing *en masse* constitutes a violation of the traffic safety laws. The matter is now being deliberated in the judicial courts. It is unlikely that we will in the future see a sign proclaiming 'This is a hiroba' at this location.

Tokyo is a city of streets, narrow, twisting, wandering lanes that serve as the lifelines and playgrounds of the city's vibrant existence. Few streets have sidewalks, except in major shopping and business areas. Because homes and shops are so cramped, much of life is forced into the street, where children play, neighbours meet, vendors pass by, and shop-keepers carry on their day's work. The inescapable fact of life in Tokyo is life itself, for it is all around and ever-present. The resident of the city is never out of sight or hearing, not of one human being, but of tens and hundreds of fellow men. Yet the city's alleyways within a typical block, shielded from vehicular exposure and diverting suddenly from the main current of street flow, have often led to the establishment of an entirely intact, micro-scale en-



SHINJUKU TERMINAL

environment. A linear oasis at day and at night for those who recognize its existence and who seek a particularly intimate relish of city life. During the feudal ages, the governing edict discouraged the location of shops in the main streets. The odour from the fish-stores, for example, would not be considered a favourable amenity. Thus, merchants and vendors set up their business in the back-streets of these castle-towns. Some were permanently erected stores, while often stalls and temporary concessions under one roof along the alleys assumed the form of a linear market. The post-World War II phenomenon, as found in Shinjuku, typically represent eating and drinking concerns catering to the daily appetite of the masses. Unlike the modern restaurants behind



WEST CONCOURSE

glass walls in slick buildings, the unique character of these back-street diners breathe not so much with efficient business transactions and service, but carry on a direct, face-to-face communion between the customer and the proprietor, and among those present. In the anonymous fabric of the city, sensitive scale and meaningful activity have created an invaluable form of public spatial expression. The city needs only to be discovered!

In this intense urban living space, a 'hiroba' does exist: ironically enough again, not designated by name as such. One instance of such a place is 'Sukiyabashi Park' in central Tokyo.

The Japanese name intersections, rather than the streets leading into them. In fact, each separate corner of one

intersection sometimes has a different identification. 'Sukiyabashi', 'Yurakucho' and 'Sony Building Corner' are such examples. 'Sukiyabashi Park' is essentially an extension of the street, deriving its definition from the intersection. It exists as a legible physical form, announcing perhaps too humbly its sense of community gathering-place. Within the assumed city fabric of Tokyo, this place emerges as a totally unexpected discovery, an altogether unprecedented and foreign entity in public spatial expression. The meaning of 'hiroba' is quite unintended here, for it was planned by the metropolitan park bureau as a mini-public park — they did not employ the term 'hiroba'. Existing because of the park ordinances (as explained earlier, there is no 'hiroba' ordinance), it found its way into the heart of this city.

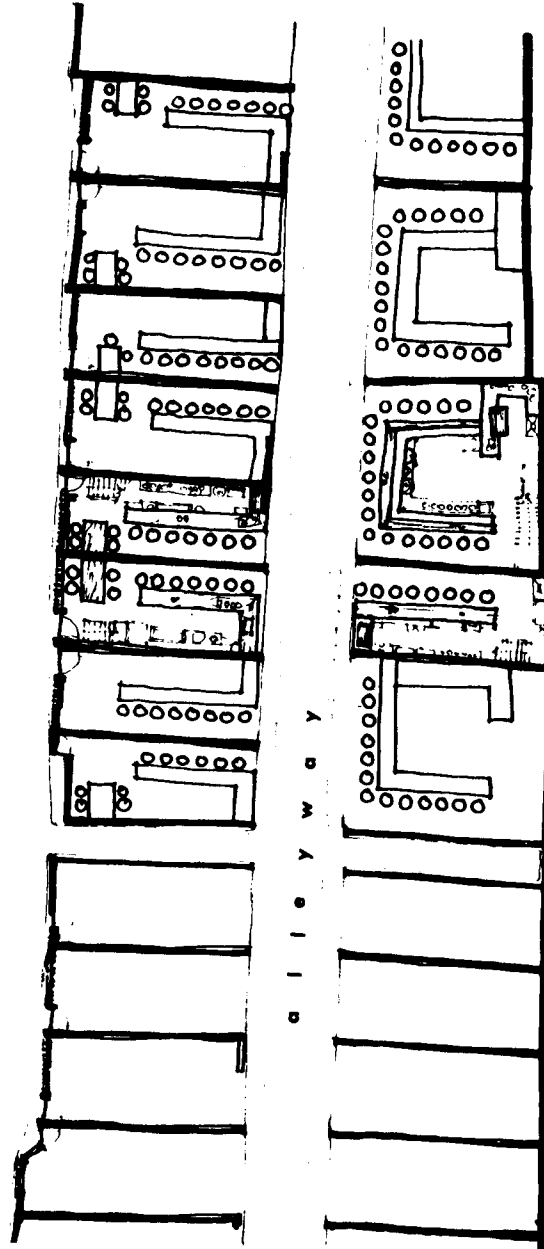
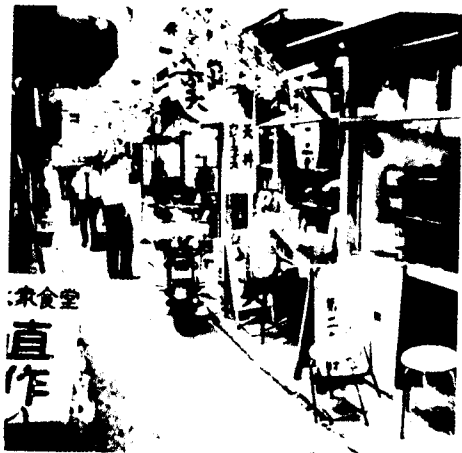
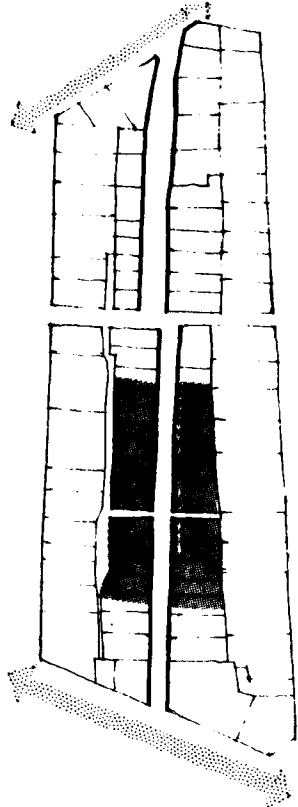
As a compromise forced by the climate and societal limitations, the phenomenal Japanese 'hiroba' has evolved its way indoors. Perhaps the most interesting and ultimate substitute for an outdoor public gathering-place in the city environment today is the 'kissa-ten', or tea-drinking parlours. It is indeed so ubiquitous and unexceptionally familiar to everyone that its significance and relevance to contemporary urban reality is taken for granted.

Factors listed below have generated this public 'living room':

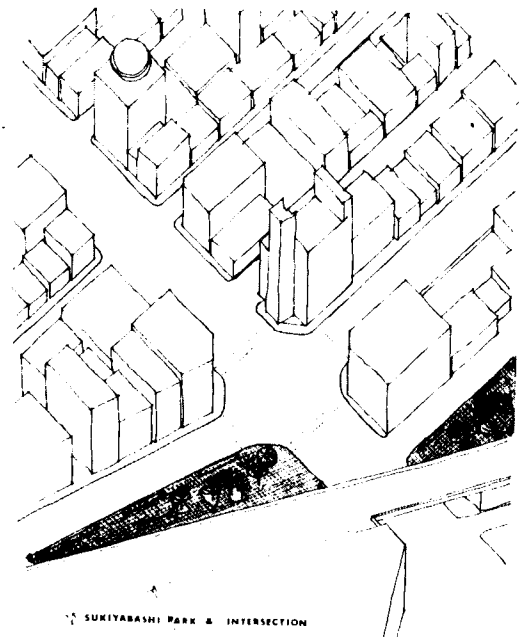
- (a) The absence or lack of public free space in the city environment.
- (b) Domestic life existing separately from social life in the typical household so that socializing process must take place elsewhere.
- (c) The highly uncomfortable condition of the city — congested traffic, crowding, noise, and polluted air.
- (d) The climatic inclemency discouraging social activities outdoors throughout much of the year.
- (e) The difficulty posed by an overcrowded city to shelter an oasis of quiet and semi-privacy.
- (f) The carry-over from the traditional habits of tea-drinking as a relaxing, social interaction catalyst.
- (g) An air of non-discriminatory and anonymous participation.
- (h) The reinforcement appropriate to the social and cultural *mores* and behaviour of the Japanese.
- (i) Sheer convenience.

Thus, the 'kissa-ten' as a visible form and appropriate meaning contribute to the making of a place in the community, a sense of 'hiroba'.

Public spatial expression is influenced by ethnic cultural patterns. In Japan, the concept of 'uchi' and 'soto' (literally, 'inner', and 'outer', respectively) have



traditionally been inherent in the mind. Based on the solidarity of the family as a fundamental unit in society a self-sufficient well-defined order inside the home, it established a simple principle in social relations. What is interior and private is sacrosanct, and what is exterior and public is a separate and non-personal entity altogether. The protection of this internal order becomes ever cognizant when the threshold separating the interior and the exterior is crossed at the entrance to the house. Sequential physical events, such as the removal of one's shoes, as well as sensory-awareness of textural, auditory, visual and spatial arrangements, heightens the sense of arrival or departure, the experience of transition between privacy and community. The 'soto' is out on the street — a strictly transitory and non-subjective environment, a part of the public domain. In a complicated milieu of patterned behaviour dictated by an external order, proper social custom discourages eye-to-eye contact between strangers: in the train, on the street, in the restaurants; the western pastime of standing on the street and of casual unexpected encounters in urban anonymity are rather unknown. However, these 'soto' and 'uchi' dispositions converge at certain times, as has been stated. The metamor-



phosis of the street at festivals occasions this fusion — the 'soto' and 'uchi' are literally indistinguishable. Only because of this peculiar architectural relationship between the street and the Japanese life could this threshold be crossed; for if, hypothetically, we were to substitute a town centre for the festival setting, 'soto' and 'uchi' may well persist.

The significance in looking at Japanese spatial expression lies in the recognition of its remarkable dissimilarity from the traditional western idea of space. To illustrate, it must be stated here that etymologically, 'space' as a term is non-existent; and 'space' as a physical entity practically does not exist. The Japanese sense of space does not describe a physical embodiment but rather an 'experiential' place. It involves a connotation of time in that an event may serve to define a place and that it is of a subjective nature, whether they be tangible forms and visibly defined spaces or those created by movement and happenings.

In this respect, it can be seen that Japanese architecture was the art of creating a particular 'place' in physical form. Just as 'hiroba' signified an 'experiential place', the Japanese concept of a town is not in the visible form of a physical entity. A town involves a sense of place; it is experienced as a synthesis of scattered and apparently unrelated symbols, usually in the form of its architectural content, but including other modes of expression. To the outsider, the town appears foreign, not simply because of the unfamiliar physical statements, but in his failure to grasp the indigenous sense of place.

The development of this thesis has been to propound that what I have been referring to as 'public spatial expression' constitutes the vital infrastructure — the matrix of life — in the structure of our modern communities. It is this human infrastructure that sets the tone of the cities, which establishes life styles, which is where the life of cities goes on, which, in fact, is important in founding the quality of our built environment.

It has been shown that the efforts in understanding and supporting this infrastructure have been largely ignored in contemporary life. That, in fact, much of the confusion in searching for an external order in our environment and in knowing how to prevent the city from degenerating into stagnation and inhumanity must be overcome by a serious and sensitive analysis of its underlying micro-structure.

That public spatial expression is indeed the occasion of public participation in creating the living environment — and this we desperately need today.

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