

Urban Japan: Considering Homelessness, Characterizing Shelter and Contemplating Culture

Dr. Brian R. Sinclair FRAIC AIA (Intl)
University of Calgary, Canada



*From the edge of death,
these chrysanthemums somehow
begin to blossom.
Matsuo Basho¹*

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Japan is a model of progressive design, effective business, efficient societal structures, and advanced technologies. Urban Japan, most notably captured in bustling metropolitan centers like Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka, push the limits of architectural gymnastics, urban complexities, infrastructure possibilities and civic amenities. Yet, despite the undeniable advances in scientific, economic and technological systems, urban Japan confronts significant dilemmas common to other nations of the world – namely social breakdown, poverty, and homelessness. Due to severe stigma surrounding homelessness and social agency in modern Japan, such thorny issues are often marginalized within internal

research, scholarly and professional circles. Over the past decade the author has studied incidence of homelessness in several of Japan's major cities, examining in particular occasions of homelessness and the provision of shelter to accommodate such populations. With an environmental design perspective the researcher has explored, considered and documented the primary types of temporary shelter designed, crafted and inhabited by Japan's urban homeless. Various types of housing can be distinctly characterized using such classification systems as materials, siting and composition. Ethnographic sensibilities are deployed to richly describe living conditions, psychological circumstances and material culture therein. The present paper thoughtfully examines Japan's homeless situation and analyzes the transient shelter through various lenses, including domestic, social and spiritual viewpoints. Buddhist notions, such as impermanence, influence the scholarly interpretation of homeless shelter, as do cultural norms, social pressures, design tactics and environmental concerns. The researcher has documented a plethora of transient housing conditions, often explicitly located in high traffic areas in and around rail and subway stations as well as those hidden from view in city parks and sprinkled along river pathways. Many of the housing types demonstrate intense care and concern by their builders, illuminating the overwhelming and mainly positive role of culture even in the most difficult and demanding of circumstances. Attention to cleanliness, blurring of inside-outside demarcation, concern about construction of view, mindfulness to materiality, and focus on composition, for example, all factor into the equation of spontaneous settlements and homeless shelter. An integrated environmental design and environmental psychology tactic to understanding the dilemma of homelessness and the production of temporary housing provides a novel and fresh vantage point from which to better understand, interpret, and address this growing problem in present-day urban Japan. The research navigates sensitive territory and considers serious dimensions of homelessness, rough sleeping, day laboring, and various approaches to shelter – topics conventionally marginalized, stigmatized and

basically off-limits given the unambiguous social order and middle class mindset of modern Japan.

PRELUDE + PROBLEM

*"Unlike westerners', the traditional Japanese mind-set does not regard space as empty."
Boye Layayette De Metne²*

Japan stands out globally as a model of prosperity, modernity and the realm of the middle class. Having realized significant progress through the latter half of the last century, Japan's major cities have experienced rapid development, unimaginable growth, and impressive technological innovation + escalation. It is well understood that the society overall enjoys high standards of living and enviable personal comfort. While images of towering buildings, outrageous fashion, rush hour crowds, and state-of-the-art electronics come to mind when Tokyo is mentioned, there is another aspect of the city that exists in the margins and spaces of the in-between. Homelessness.

While the homeless in Japan are arguably not as large in number nor as visible as is the case in many other global cities, there is a growing population of displaced persons who find shelter and solace in the interstitial leftover zones of the metropolis. From hidden canal edges to the prominence of Ueno Park, and from Sanya district to the train stations of Ikebukuro, Tokyo's subculture of homeless men live an existence largely hidden from the tourist's gaze and generally tolerated by mainstream Japan.

Outsiders looking at the cardboard boxes adjacent to the water, or the box cities that spring into temporary existence daily in rail stations after the evening exodus, might be quick to negatively judge the situation. However, there is far more to the situation than meets the eye. Japanese society lives with high density and crowding as a simple fact of coping with a large population on a limited land base. Psychological, cultural and social norms have developed that permit so many people to live in such close proximity. Architecture and design support the need to live in confined spaces and tight places. Moveable ethereal *Shoji* screens, views from inside to outside, carefully delineated spatial

transition, and inter-connection of rooms make the small feel large. Rituals and customs, such as removing shoes at the doorway, serve to clearly demarcate + separate zones of public versus private, dirty versus clean, and tightly defined realms of circulation versus habitation. Zen Buddhist principles of change, impermanence & *mujo* (ephemerality) factor into the equation, as does the consideration and pursuit of wabi-sabi. While such cultural, spiritual and spatial gestures are readily seen in the traditional Japanese house, similar design devices and deployment of customs can be witnessed in the tent cities of Ueno or the box cities of Ikebukuro Terminal. Shoes left at the threshold. Flimsy cardboard walls serving to symbolize inside from outside. The temporary and the transient. The illusion of permanence with the reality of impermanence. Orientation for privacy. Provision for dignity. *Mujo* not as pessimistic but rather life acknowledging.

It is interesting to contrast the modern, lavish steel + glass edifices of Ginza's elite streets, and the wooden post + beam upper-class housing of Yamanote, with the cardboard and nylon assemblies of Tokyo's homeless precincts. While there are obvious and dramatic differences in material, scale and construction, there exists many aspects that serve to unite the typologies. Japanese culture has mastered control and delineation of space, from the tight and orchestrated layout and presentation of a Bento box to the architectural interplay of Kenzo Tange's towers. Modern Japanese designs convey aspects of the transient and qualities of the impermanent. In such a vein, Japan's homeless housing is not simply a random collage of recycled parts but rather proves an intentional installation that provides shelter, privacy, space, place and a sense of dignity to its disempowered residents.

CONTEXT | CONDITIONS

*"Not to consider 'I am this', that is freedom."
[Buddha]*

Japan, one of the world's most industrialized nations, is comprised of a series of islands (approximately the same area in total as Germany), located off the east coast of the

Asian continent. With almost 127 million inhabitants, Japan has the ninth largest population on the planet. Due to remarkable industrial growth after the WWII, and undeniable leadership in the high technology sector over the past few decades, Japan's economy proves a global force. While spiritual (Buddhist and Shinto) underpinnings color much of the society, the nation is not overly religious. Japan is strongly family oriented, strongly collective, strongly bound to severe cultural norms and driven by commonly understood societal expectations. It is important to understand issues of homelessness, social systems, design and planning within such parameters.

An outsider's view of Japan paints a picture of a tightly-controlled, strongly-ordered, economically stable, and largely middle class society. Stereotypical aspects such as ethnic/cultural homogeneity, intense density, urban chaos, and the predominance of advanced technology, add to this picture of a modern, progressive Asian nation. While the facts bear out the claim of overall economic health at the individual and collective levels, the gap between Japan's rich and poor is growing as is homelessness. While many Western countries have elaborate and often effective social support systems, Japan has relied on other coping mechanisms to address such societal ills. Rather than looking to the government for assistance, Japanese citizens (largely the male population) are expected to look to work as the first choice of support followed closely by family networks. Downstream, when all options are depleted, is government aid. Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (1997 fiscal year) numbers indicate that approximately 7% of national social security expenditure is allocated to 'livelihood assistance' and 'social welfare'. Less than 1% of Japanese receive social assistance. In comparing social security expenditure to national income, Sweden stands at over 50%, Germany at over 30%, USA at approximately 20%, and Japan at 15%.

While homelessness is not new to Japanese culture, its somewhat dramatic increase in recent years presents unprecedented challenges. Compared with American statistics, which place the number of homeless in New York City alone at 50,000, Japan's problems seem modest. Tokyo, with one of the more significant homeless

populations, has by numerous estimates (e.g., Japan Times) approximately 5000-6000 people living on the streets. Current estimates put the number of homeless in Osaka at approximately 15,000. For many reasons the majority of the homeless are men, mostly put on the streets when they lost their jobs, saw their companies go bankrupt, or suffered a disastrous disgrace in the eyes of their families / communities. Despite living without a permanent address, many of the nation's homeless are law abiding, respectful of cultural norms, and regular (albeit modest) contributors to the Japanese economy and society.

Karan³ (2005), in his book Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy and Society, underscores some of the challenges pertaining to social welfare and homeless. He notes that, "The bad news is that more than a few people slip off the safety net, and there is often nothing to save them. To be eligible for welfare, Japanese must prove both that they are unable to work and that they have a fixed address – conditions the homeless cannot fulfill. For them there are no permanent shelters and little sympathy." On a positive note regarding the dilemma of 'no fixed address', a recent ruling by the Osaka District Court deemed that a homeless man's tent in a city park should have been accepted as his home address when submitted to a ward office. In judging that the tent should be considered a fixed address, the district court underlined the basic resident register law's definition of a person's address as the "...center of that individual's entire life and that which has the deepest relationship with that individual's life." The court deemed that "the plaintiff's tent provided substance as the base of his life." This ruling has profound significance in Japan, where a growing number of disadvantaged men are electing or forced to live: 1. in flop houses in unpopular districts; 2. in informal tent structures along river banks; and, 3. in small cardboard 'rooms' in train stations.

1. Sanya: In the infamous Sanya district in northeast Tokyo, day-laborers by the score live in flop-houses that line the narrow streets. Soup kitchen lineups wrap around buildings and construction workers' (*tobi shoku* | steeplejack) unique cloth shoes hang to dry on makeshift clothes lines. Many of the men of Sanya, while down on

their luck, continue to spend productive days on building sites throughout Tokyo. In a remarkable account of his personal experiences, American academic Edward Fowler⁴ (1996) noted in San'ya Blues: Laboring Life in Contemporary Tokyo: "Tokyo's distinguishing features – and there are many – become apparent to the long term resident. One place, however, is immediately recognizable as different from any other: San'ya, the day-laborer community straddling Taito and Arakawa wards where workers – mostly construction workers – get their jobs off the street. In contrast to the rest of the city, moreover, San'ya leaves a disquieting impression of neglect, poverty, and outright misery." Shiro Oyama⁵ (2005), in his book A Man with No Talents: Memoirs of a Tokyo Day Laborer, wrote: "One's true self is that which exists in the gaze of other people. Here in San'ya, I have continually practiced the technique of bringing my innermost self closer to the self that others have come to expect; for someone like me who must live out his days in San'ya, there is nothing more to do in life than refine this technique."



2. Tent districts: In addition to the more 'conventional' accommodation provided by the Sanya *doyagai* (rooming or flop-houses), a growing number of homeless people in Japan live in makeshift tent shelters. While these shelters vary in size, complexity and location, there are common features they share. Generally they are constructed of waterproof blue sheet nylon. In many cases the constructions rely on a wooden or metal frame. Where assembled on hard surfaces, such as roads and walkways, they are constrained grade level by bricks, rocks or other such ballast. Where located in parks, the base of the tent

is often affixed to the ground through ingenious deployment of umbrella handles as ties. Outside the tent are laundry lines, work tables and an area for shoes to be stored. Relationship of outside to inside is understood and at times celebrated (akin to more traditional architecture efforts to dissolve boundaries between building and landscape). As a sign of respect, as well as a marker of outside/inside, Japanese always remove footwear before entering a home. The situation proves no different for the homeless, whether living in a flop-house, a tent, or a cardboard box. Inside the tent space is also carefully delineated and often well kept. Societal norms, cultural pressure, and lifelong indoctrination ensure that space is well managed, well honored and well appreciated. Tents are located in a variety of places, most notably adjacent to railway stations (e.g., Tokyo Shinjuku), along rivers (e.g., Sumida), and in popular parks (e.g., Ueno and Yoyogi). It is most interesting to consider the relationship of tents to one another within such communities – while urban design is not a conscious pursuit of the homeless, there are informal rules and relationships that dictate tent placement, orientation and proximity.



3. Cardboard 'rooms' | box cities: The third type of shelter for the homeless comes in the form of cardboard boxes. Compared with the robust qualities of nylon sheeting, the paper houses provide scant protection from the elements. In some cases the large cardboard boxes, if located outside, are covered in clear plastic or positioned under shelter (such as a rail bridge). More often, however, the boxes are placed inside public buildings, often outside peak hours. For example, in Tokyo's Ikebukuro Station

one witnesses the rapid emergence of box cities as the hectic commuter rush subsides. Cardboard is often intentionally provided by department stores and government officials to use by the homeless. Cardboard rooms are carefully constructed for sleeping, with care and respect afforded to norms and traditions such as leaving shoes 'outside'. As these shelters are 'constructed' inside buildings, and therefore safe from the elements, they commonly have only walls and no roof. What is important and meaningful is that the short walls provide enclosure, privacy and dignity to homeless men who struggle for 'face' in a relatively judgmental society. In the morning, before the commuters arrive en masse on the first trains of the day, the homeless work to disassemble their temporary abodes. The entire enterprise, from construction of cardboard 'rooms' late in the evening and use overnight, to their rapid removal in the morning, is impressive and assuring.



In his article "Different with a Difference", Roman Cybriwsky⁶ (2000) portrays aspects of Tokyo's informal sector. He wrote: "About 200 of the homeless reside on Shinjuku Station's west side, amid heavy pedestrian traffic, in a tidy settlement made of cardboard boxes. Some of the dwellings have more than one 'room', are equipped with futons, a few basic kitchen items, and ropes for drying laundry. Calendars hang from cardboard walls, giving an added sense of permanence and domesticity." There have been, over the years, various attempts to remove or relocate such informal settlements. With the number of homeless on the rise in Japan, it is likely that any interventions that ignore the root causes of homeless will

fail. It seems that the Japanese will need to determine paths, approaches and solutions that preserve dignity, provide shelter, and work to alleviate sources of poverty, homelessness + social injustice.

All of these forms of shelter (*doyagai*, tents & paper houses) reflect temporary and impermanent qualities well understood within the spiritual practices of Japan, and most notably Buddhism. These forms of accommodation for the homeless represent fleeting, fragile & transient qualities – dimensions acknowledging cycles of life and underscoring the illusory nature of stability + permanence. Housing for the homeless has parallels within more conventional Japanese architecture (i.e., historical & contemporary).

IMPERMANENCE | EPHEMERALITY | DESIGN + PLANNING



"Stopping of becoming is nirvana."
[Buddha]

Japanese architecture, from both historical and contemporary perspectives, has encountered strong inspiration & influence from Buddhist thought. Spiritual notions of impermanence & ephemerality (*mujo*) impart a sensibility into design. Such impact is seen in the employment of cardboard and paper as building materials in the projects of contemporary architect Shigeru Ban. Concepts of layering, lightness, change, transience and the transitory can also be seen in the work of Arata Isozaki, Rei Kawakubo, and metabolist master Kisho Kurokawa (notably his Nakagin Capsule Tower in Ginza). Taro Igarashi⁷ (2005), in his article "Kisho Kurokawa: Buddhism and Metabolism", noted that the architect's "... global view

that creation and destruction run fluidly into one another has its roots in Buddhist doctrine.” He adds that, “In the original language of Buddhism, *samsara* means ‘to flow’, and also means the combination of various states, expressed through the process of reincarnation.” In a similar manner to the celebration of the temporary that we see in the work of numerous modern Japanese architects, the informal housing of Japan’s homeless acknowledges the inevitability of change, a lightness of being, and the cycle of suffering common to all sentient beings. Ongoing research, scholarly activity and creative endeavor of the author considers, delineates and develops connections & associations between Buddhism, design thinking, and built form (buildings, products, landscapes) in Japanese society. While housing solutions within the informal sector appear to be in stark contrast to mainstream Japanese design and building solutions, it is argued that there may be greater similarities than is commonly understood.

SPACE, FORM AND BEAUTY

Space in Japanese culture is fundamental to design and living, yet is very different in understanding and approach compared to the West. As an island society with limited resources and large population, space is particular precious and valued. Many families in Tokyo live in a fraction of the residential space that counterparts in North America might enjoy. Vehicles such as choreography of path and control of view (including the so-called ‘Zen view’) are vital in the quest for promoting comfort, pursuing beauty and seeking harmony (e.g., between people and environment; between the built and the natural, etc.).

Form and materials are important in Japanese design, interplaying in balance with the significance and meaning of space. On the material side, Japan is known as a ‘wood’ culture due to the historical access to timber as a primary building material. The structural qualities of wood, with its limited spans, gave way to a post and lintel construction system. The manner of building homes and temples, with complex joinery and regular grid layouts, fostered the rectilinear geometry that is so prevalent in historic Japanese architecture. From this building approach arose many aspects of Japanese design that are now well known

in the West, including perhaps most significantly the interconnection and mutability of spaces, the use of infill panels (most notably the *shoji* screens), and the creative control of perspective to shape perceptions. Nishi and Hozumi (1983) describe qualities of architecture arising through reliance on post and lintel construction: “There is, moreover, a fluidity in Japanese architecture between inside and out. Though fixed walls are frequently used, the distinction between wall and door is very elastic, and whole facades in both temples and residences can be opened to the elements at will by folding open or swinging up the panels between posts or by sliding open, or even removing entirely, the wooden or paper screens.”⁸

In Japan there is an important concept known as *shibumi*, which in essence translates as an unassuming elegance and conscious reserve. When *shibumi* is elevated it invokes what is called the beauty of *wabi sabi*. *Wabi* is about the wretched, forgotten and forlorn while *sabi* is about the ‘rust’ of age. It is arguably in the union of *wabi* and *sabi* where Japanese design becomes most compelling and aesthetics most remarkable – where the simple, the unaffected and the elegant coexist. We find this search for beauty, and the invocation of *wabi sabi*, deeply rooted in the traditional Japanese arts of *ikebana* (flower arranging), *bushido* (the way of the sword), and perhaps most notably *sado* (also referred to as *chado* or the way of tea). Certainly such concepts loom large in the efforts of Japanese architects and landscape architects, especially in their search to impart beauty, tranquillity and meaning in an ever-escalating modern milieu of technology, urbanity and uncertainty.

QUALITIES & CONCEPTS

Japanese design has many important dimensions and principles that guide the creation of landscapes, buildings and interiors. While there are too many to adequately review within the present paper, a series of key concepts is used for purposes of the analysis of informal housing in major Japanese metropolitan centres. The main points considered, from a design and analysis perspective, include: 1. Landscape & Nature; 2. Ritual & Routine; 3. Fluidity & Functionality; 4. Craft & Construction; 5. Identity

& Place-making; and, 6. Impermanence & Transience. While this list is less than exhaustive, it does introduce some initial considerations with which to better understand informal housing and to begin to draw comparisons with other, more conventional forms of Japanese architecture and design.

While it is certainly true that informal housing, that is, the shelter created by the homeless class in Japan, does not benefit through the engagement of environmental design professionals, it is held by the author that design approaches whether intentional (high art) or vernacular (low art) are influenced by values, beliefs and conditions that prove omnipotent in Japanese society. For example, the notion of clean versus dirty realms is pervasive, with the very youngest of children taught to respect and revere the sanctity and simplicity of dwelling space. Another example of an omnipresent value is honouring nature as part of one's journey through everyday life. Such honour is seen in the great attention afforded to the *sakura*, or cherry tree, as it comes into blossom. Whether emperor or day labourer, the pleasure of viewing the cherry blossoms is a shared pursuit and a common joy.

One critical aspect of Japan, that informs and inspires design, is the deeply rooted spiritual history that underpins the culture. Shintoism and Buddhism are inextricably intertwined in the society, with ramifications witnessed over a spectrum of endeavours from business and the arts to education and politics. The Zen notion of *mushin*, or 'no mind', is a good example. Without a mind one is rendered without a self. Without a self one is afforded great freedom from the many trappings and seductions of common existence – inching ever closer to escape from the vicious cycle of suffering Buddhists call *samsara*. Japanese design and architecture often seeks such release from trappings and clutter, electing instead for the simple, the austere and the unadorned. The Japanese term *kanso* acknowledges the importance of simplicity of design, akin perhaps to German modernist architect Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum "less is more".

1. LANDSCAPE & NATURE

Through history Japanese society has held a highly synergistic relationship with nature. Celebrated perhaps most clearly in the pre-eminence of the garden in their culture, the Japanese work hard to dissolve the boundaries between humans and nature, and blur distinctions between inside and outside. From the joy found in admiring a twisted tree trunk to the intentional control of views into nature, the Japanese strive to respect their place within a much larger cosmos. The importance of water, the acknowledgement of imperfection, the mystery of asymmetry, and the search for order, among other aspects, underscores a keen desire to reside as a part of rather than above the natural world.

We see in informal housing many dimensions of design and construction that resonate with aspects of landscape and nature. With siting of tents commonly in parks and along rivers, the homeless frequently seek a strong bond to place. In parks, for example Ueno or Yoyogi in Tokyo, one can witness an intentional placement of dwellings that take advantage of tree cover, access to light and avoidance of traffic. On the river edge one can notice dwellings located with attention to wind protection and views to the water. In both cases there is often a clear relationship between adjacent dwellings that, while often subtle, fosters sense of community and distinguishes private versus more public spheres.

2. RITUAL & ROUTINE

In Japan the power of the collective, and the pressures of social norms, are profound. When one departs mainstream life these forces are not left behind and abandoned but rather continue to exert influence in many aspects of daily life. We see in the design and function of informal housing many qualities that respect the rituals and routines pervasive in modern Japanese culture. People in the West are aware of the Japanese tradition of removing shoes before entering a home or a temple. The separation of spheres, inside vs outside, private vs public, sacred vs profane, and clean versus dirty, is demarcated through the

simple gesture of abandoning shoes at the threshold (*genkan*).

Although an individual may be displaced, destitute or in despair, the role of ritual in everyday life commonly remains intact. When a tent home is constructed the rules at play that serve to delineate space, for example to signal indoors versus outdoors, loom large. While in a formal residence the *genkan* may be clearly designed and strongly demarcated, for a homeless individual a collapsed cardboard box, standing only a few centimetres above the cold concrete walkway, proves a sufficient signifier of threshold and difference. While the gesture might seem minor and even unnoticeable to the foreigner, to the Japanese it is a clearly understood demonstration of respect, conformity and dignity.

3. FLUIDITY & FUNCTIONALITY

As noted previously, space in Japanese culture flows quite seamlessly within buildings and between buildings and the environment. Through the flexibility and mutability of space, and the mobility and transformation of objects (e.g., screens, walls, doors, etc.), the boundaries between rooms and the definitions of place shift with relative ease. A wall that is at one moment opaque is in an instant transformed into a richly lit translucent screen or a vast opening to the outdoors. The possibilities for dissolved borders translates into a possibility for greater harmony and unrestrained flow: harmony and flow between spaces; harmony and flow between container and contained; and harmony and flow between dweller and nature.

Within informal sector housing we witness similar concern with fluidity and functionality. Tent structures are designed in a manner that permits walls to shift, flaps to open, roofs to be rolled back, and the inside-outside delineation challenged. In many cases intricate and innovative use of building materials, often found objects, ensures flexibility and adaptability. The use of sheet nylon, often secured with ballast made of stones or more commonly spent automobile batteries, translates into a rapidly and easily adjusted collection of walls, roofs and doors. Temperature, ventilation, daylighting and views in/out can be readily

modified as needs dictate. It is interesting that security of persons and materials is often not a major concern in Japan, for many reasons including intense social pressures and a widely and strongly held sense of honour (even among the homeless & day-labourers). Informal housing security features, for example, most commonly assume the form of roped-down window flaps and doors held closed with concrete blocks jarred on the exterior while the occupant is away on construction sites during the daytime hours.

4. CRAFT & CONSTRUCTION

Japanese architects and builders are renowned for their spectacular attention to detail. In projects ranging from large scale museums of concrete and glass to small scale teahouses of wood and paper there is extraordinary focus on construction, assemblies and materiality. Craft is highly celebrated and perfection of both process and product deeply valued. In the case of wooden joinery, for example, the pursuit of tight tolerances, skilful execution, and enduring performance is well accepted. As noted previously in the paper, the pursuit of perfection in Japan is not akin to Western notions of perfection. In Japan a surface may be intentionally rendered uneven, or a piece of lumber incorporated specifically because of its wretched shape. What is most critical is to produce works of beauty that resonate with accepted notions of harmony, poetics and meaning.

While most observers of informal housing in Japan would on first glance see mess and confusion, the design and construction of tent structures is often a complex, long and thoughtful endeavour. Collection of materials, concern about space and form, determination of site and orientation, consideration of mobility, deconstruction and reconstruction all factor into the equation. Aspects of craft and assembly are seldom happen-stance; rather they tend to be activities that are conscious, cumulative and meaningful. In many instances the informal housing units are owned by day-labourers who work in the construction arena. They are inhabitants who are used to working with their hands and often those who take pride in their craftsmanship. Often great ingenuity is demonstrated as

an object intended for one use is redeployed in unexpected and interesting ways. A wonderful example of such ingenuity and creative reuse is umbrellas repurposed as tent pegs – a tactic seen throughout Japan and most notably in tent cities in major urban parks.

5. IDENTITY & PLACE-MAKING

While Japan is a culture that strongly encourages conformity, it is also the case that personal identity and connection to place remains important. At the level of residential dwelling, aspects of customization, expression of personality and attention to image are evident. This is true of both conventional housing as well as informal housing throughout the country. In many instances there are efforts to personalize space and form both on the interior and exterior of dwellings. On first encounter all the structures in a tent city, or along a river's edge, may look similar. However, on closer inspection, and through interactions with residents of informal settlements, it is abundantly clear that each dwelling bears unique features and enjoys a distinctive imprint of its designer/owner. While it is certainly the case that conventional houses in Japan operate within a fairly narrow range of ornamentation (*kanso* is a germane Zen concept underscoring the importance of restraint, simplicity and understatement), informal housing is arguably less constrained. Such housing often enjoys an unusual array of appliqué, including bird houses, paintings, stuffed animals and an assortment of anime characters. This need to express identity and to celebrate persona seems a common trait regardless of culture and country, albeit with curious nuances based on place, time and circumstance.

6. IMPERMANENCE & TRANSIENCE

In Buddhism there is strong awareness of the illusion of permanence – that is, we construct and perceive our lives in a manner that suggests solidity, stability and predictability. All of this understanding of permanence however is mere folly, for the world and our lives are in constant change. What we accept now as reality is merely our best interpretation based on available knowledge, stimuli, past experiences and guesswork. Japanese

culture accepts that life is ever-changing, and that a path that acknowledges the frailty of our journey and the uncertainty of our path is wise and reasonable. Zen teaches that in the midst of unpredictability, disorder and delusion one is well advised to make things as simple as possible. The goal of reducing one's environment down to its basics, to limit exuberance and seek the most minimal essence, is indeed noble.

While we see this search for simplicity, austerity and restraint in contemporary Japanese design, from Tadao Ando's awe-inspiring concrete churches to Kengo Kuma's masterful collages of glass, steel and wood, it is also clearly evident in the constructions of the homeless. With challenges of subsistence and the demands of day-labouring, Japan's underclasses are artful in their optimal use of scarce resources and their clear acceptance of the impermanence of their situations. With the constant threat of forced relocation, the understanding that they reside in 'borrowed' space, and the need to make due with scavenged building materials, the homeless prove remarkably resourceful, resilient and inventive as they create 'homes' in less than ideal circumstances. The results are unquestionably accepting of uncertainty, mutable in nature, light on the land, efficient in operations, and effective in the provision of shelter that protects, nurtures and provides a rightful sense of dignity.

SUMMARY & NEXT STEPS

*"Vacuum is all potent because it is all containing."
Lao-Tzu⁹*



Japan is a nation where design is firmly engrained in the culture. Informed by spiritual aspects and shaped through a rich history, Japanese society places much emphasis on beauty, harmony and connection with nature. Modern Japanese architecture looks to many vital principles, such as *mujo*, *shibumi* and *wabi sabi* for inspiration and guidance. The result is commonly landscapes, buildings and interiors that are remarkably powerful in their aesthetics, materiality and spatial composition. The informal sector, or underclass in Japan, while residing in the margins nonetheless respects and responds to a similar set of principles and values, albeit less formally and less explicitly. Informal housing is crafted and constructed based upon unwritten codes and norms that prove pervasive within Japanese culture. Shared awareness of the importance of space, of the impermanence of existence, of our undeniable place as part of nature, and of the need to respect each other, proves a powerful determinant of housing space, form, order and meaning.

The present paper sought to make some preliminary connections and considerations regarding design and construction within Japan's informal sector. In looking at a wealth of communities and cases in the major urban centres of Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka, the author observed and explored similarities and differences in informal housing and engaged in initial analysis of design and planning aspects. Ongoing research aims to further identify and illustrate relationships between Buddhism, design thinking, and built form (buildings, products, landscapes) in Japanese society. Also under study are the city-specific nuances in informal housing design, construction and inhabitation.

¹ Basho, Matsuo. (translated by Sam Hamill). Narrow Road to the Interior. Shambhala: Boston (2000)

² De Mente, Boye Lafayette. Elements of Japanese Design. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle. 2006.

³ Karan, P.P. Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy, and Society. University Press of Kentucky: Lexington (2005).

⁴ Fowler, E. San'ya Blues: Laboring Life in Contemporary Tokyo. Cornell U Press: Ithaca (1996)

⁵ Oyama, S. A Man with No Talents: Memoirs of a Tokyo Day Laborer. Cornell U Press: Ithaca (2005)

⁶ Biswas, R.K. (ed). Metropolis Now! Springer-Verlag: Vienna (2000)

⁷ Schmal, P.C., Ingeborg, F, & Jochen, V. (eds). Kisho Kurokawa: Metabolism and Symbiosis. Jovis: Berlin (2005).

⁸ Nishi, Kazuo and Hozumi, Kazou. What is Japanese Architecture: A Survey of Traditional Japanese Architecture. Tokyo: Kodansha International. 1983.

⁹ "Lao-Tzu. As quoted in: Okakura, Kakuzo. The Book of Tea. Boston & London: Shambhala. 2003.

Note: all photographs by the author | reproduction with permission only | copyright 2010 – brian r. sinclair