

Fieldwork in ritual reality: A qualitative method in architectural research

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ABSTRACT: Among the various means of architectural research, fieldwork has customarily been a valuable data collection technique, mainly applying the methods of anthropologists to the many interpretations on the meaning of built environment. But what distinguishes architectural fieldwork from that of other disciplines today? One can also ask whether fieldwork in the discipline of architecture has responded to the general paradigm shift from structuralism to post-structuralism in academia? Further, has the concept of "global village" in the virtual reality of the World Wide Web replaced the need of one's "own village" in physical reality, as the anthropologist used to call their own study context?

The objective of this paper is to re-examine the role of fieldwork in architectural research, particularly as it relates to the qualitative paradigm and phenomenological "thick" descriptions. It also reflects possibilities in the education of research methods in architecture schools by providing methodological basis for new interpretations. As fieldwork has often been a valuable method in culture-specific studies, the paper looks at innovative research in one specific cultural milieu as an example of its applications. Cases in point are research projects conducted in Japan in which context the location of sacred or secular objects and buildings (or lack of those), as well as the ritual procession of regular Shinto festivals, reveal interesting ways of analyzing the invisible features of these built environments – or the ritual reality. Since the examples deal with interdisciplinary research, these studies embody the definition of architectural fieldwork in comparison to other multi-, cross-, or trans-disciplinary views, thereby expanding the research resources of the discipline of architecture.

KEYWORDS: Japanese urban context, Shinto festival (*Matsuri*), Activity space (*Kaiwai*), Spirit of place (*Genius Loci*)

INTRODUCTION

For many visitors, the majority of Japanese cities appear as chaotic, not the least due to the lack of systematic layout patterns, clear zoning regulations and other ordinances, or even an inclusive address system. However, this paper maintains that there is a different type of order in which invisible features are more significant than the visible ones. As these indications of a hidden order are mainly articulated by the activities taking place in the Japanese urban context, we focus on the way people experience their built environment in terms of spatial participation. Of particular significance are the Shinto festivals, called *matsuri*, and their procession that often divulge the 'activity space,' or *kaiwai*, by the participants' perception of their context, as opposing to that of a visitor. Moreover, since there is a clear correspondence between *kaiwai* and the commonly discussed Japanese space-time concept *ma*, the examples included provide insights into the meaning of spatial perception in general.

The above views of the built environment also can be regarded as means of social order, as Augustin Berque has suggested in his studies on Korean cities. In these cases, the layout functions as the expression of the structure of the society in question as well as a means of social control due to the "labyrinth" in which an "outsider" gets lost and is immediately revealed as not being an "insider" (Berque 1995). The same applies to the lack of a center, or the concept "empty center" of Japanese cities, which is famous for Roland Barthes' descriptions on Tokyo (Barthes 1982). He regards the Tokyo Imperial Palace as the "sacred nothing" in the "empty center" of the city, while Berque calls it the "forbidden forest."

This semiotic paradox, or binary opposition in Derridean terms, exposes not only the noticeable difference in the appearance of "Western" and Japanese cities, but also the value-laden and ethnocentric categorization of signs in the structural interpretations of their meaning. Whereas the former cities are typically characterized by a center marked by the culture's symbols, such as a church, a town hall, a cluster of company headquarters, and so on, the absence of any-thing in the center of a Japanese city is often interpreted as "hollowness" which disregards the plurality of meanings in the cultural framework examined below.

1.0 COSMOS vs. CHAOS

In contrast to the current layout of most Japanese cities, which appears disordered at the first glance, clear organization was fundamental in the layout of East Asian capital cities ever since the Chinese Zhou Dynasty (1027-421 BCE). This kind of centralized, grid-patterned city structure, with three concentric parts (outer city, inner city, and imperial city), refers to the *mandala* configuration, while the north-south thoroughfare of the city and the central imperial palace on it stands for the *axis mundi*; in the Chinese case, it depicts the socio-political concept of the Mandate of Heaven based on which the emperor, the Son of Heaven, ruled his subordinates as the Heaven's representative on earth. Together with Buddhism, Confucianism, and other mainland-Asian phenomena, these principles were adopted in Japan by the Asuka period (ca. 550-710 CE) and were used in the layout of all Japanese capitals from Fujiwara-kyo till Heian-kyo (today's Kyoto); this is evident even in the axial layout of the Ise shrines of the Japanese indigenous belief system discussed below, which is visible in the shrine orientation toward north after the introduction of Chinese cosmology (Nitschke 1993).¹

From the perspective of this paper, it is noteworthy that the late Heian period (794-1185 CE) was characterized by the absence of official interaction with the mainland which led to the Japanization of many cultural features. Not only did Japanese residential architecture transform from the Chinese-type, axial *shinden-zukuri* to the asymmetric layout of *shoin-zukuri*, but city planning principles changed as well. Even the layout of Kyoto did not achieve its planned axial symmetry along a north-south oriented thoroughfare and, in fact, the western part of the city was never built. On the other hand, a number of daimyos' concentric castle cities were built mainly in the Muromachi-Momoyama period (1335-1603), in which the central fortress certainly was an imposing representation of power. This culminated in the Togukawa castle in Edo (today's Tokyo, though the castle donjon does not exist anymore in the Imperial Palace grounds) that was the real political center of the shogunate, while the imperial seat in Heian-kyo lost its factual power. Also, an impressive, fortified residence, Nijo-jo Castle, was built near the Kyoto Gosho imperial palace for the Tokugawas, representing shogunal control over the imperial rule in Kyoto (Coaldrake 2002).² In other words, Kyoto remained only as a symbol of the empire, just as the emperor was only a symbolic ruler till the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Furthermore, from the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868) a new closed doors policy prevented foreigners to enter Japan and the Japanese to travel abroad, which further contributed to the unique interpretations of the earlier transcultural influences in Japan.

As a result, typical Japanese cities do not have a perceivable center at all – neither "full" or "empty" – and even Kyoto eventually lost its intended Chinese-type orthogonal, grid-patterned, axial and symmetric layout with a centralized imperial palace. In many Japanese cases, only the location of certain religious edifices and the procession of local *matsuri* hint at specific places of significance, that is, where the festival events *take place*. Because this phenomenon can also be interpreted as *making place*, investigations on the structure of these placements and rituals reveal a hidden organization of the city or a building complex itself. Hence, the primary goal of this paper is to provide insights into new means of analysis and methods of fieldwork by looking at the spatial layering of Japanese architecture in terms of communal festival experiences and their interrelationship to the built environment. As will be shown below, these cities are far from chaotic and instead relatively ordered from the perspective of the local residents, contrary to the view of most foreigners visiting Japan. The order, and the centers, are just marked by the events, in other words, by a bricolage of temporal behavior of the community, rather than by any permanent structures.

Correspondingly, even if most visitors blame the lack of an address system for the "chaos" of Japanese urban environment as one reason, there actually is a system, just not based on street names (except for some biggest avenues). Rather than naming the lines separating the building blocks, this spatial organization is based on numbering each block in the order it was divided into plots, further sub-divided, sub-sub-divided, and so on – only a mailman, not even a taxi driver, fully comprehends it today. This is to say that the Japanese urban structure is defined by the building activity that has taken place in it, while this involvement is still depicted by various rituals meaningful for the local community.

2.0 BUILDING RITUALS

Of the innumerable Shinto festivals recurrently observed in Japan, the ones related to the ritual rebuilding of Ise Shrines every 20th year are undoubtedly the most significant in terms of a tradition that carries religious, communal and political meaning. As the main shrine is dedicated to the Sun Goddess, *Amaterasu Omikami*, the antecedent of the Japanese imperial line in the Shinto mythology, the continuation of this tradition clearly depicts national unity and communal renewal by the spatio-temporal activities of the participants. Its significance also is implied by the participation of citizens all over Japan as well as by the expenses poured into rebuilding shrines that are constructed of high-quality cypress and are still in good condition (the latest

rebuilding completed in 2013 totaled an estimate of US \$0.5 billion). This does not only include rebuilding the main shrine complexes on one of the two adjacent sites of both Naiku, the Inner Shrine, and Geku, the Outer Shrine, but also those of the ten auxiliary shrine precincts, in addition to remanufacturing the approximate two thousand artifacts and treasures housed in the shrine buildings (Bock 1974). Without delving into the many interesting phenomena of this vicennial custom, continued since the 690s, with some interruptions during wartimes, we look at the importance of social participation in these activities.

The 31 Shinto ceremonies preceding the completion of the rebuilding start seven years prior with three cutting festivals, followed by various rites, such as the log-pulling festival in which thousands of participants haul the lumber to Ise along the Isuzu River, and end by the donors from across the country bringing new white pebbles to cover the rebuilt site. Although these are all communal activities, some transfer ceremonies, in contrast, are carried out by the priests and seen only by very few privileged spectators. Among these are the rites related to the 'sacred middle pillar,' or *shin-no-mihashira*, performed by the priests in the darkness of the night. From the perspective of the meaning of invisible features of Japanese architecture, it is important to note that nobody else ever sees this pillar; in Naiku, it is buried underground, while in Geku part of it is above ground, and in both cases the pillar is covered under the floor of the main shrine building and has no structural function whatsoever. In other words, the pillar can be regarded as a representation of the *axis mundi* – invisible, yet, we know it is there (Sarvimäki 2000). Also, there is evidence that already originally some rituals were performed under the shrine hall (Nitschke 1993) and, according to Bock's account of the renewal rites in 1973, after the completion of construction "the Superintendent of the Shrines and sixty shrine priests congregated beneath the main sanctuary to perform the rite of strengthening the main central pillar" (Bock 1974, 61). Moreover, the *shin-no-mihashira* is the only part of the old shrine that is not demolished after the new shrine is completed and it stands in its shelter on the empty plot till the next rebuilding begins. There, it marks the center of the empty site even without the other structures and indicates the temporal duality of Shinto symbolism with two central pillars existing simultaneously.

Similar rituals, even if less elaborate, are involved in more mundane constructions as well, usually emphasizing the four corners and the center. Even today, most building projects start with the ground breaking ceremony (*jichinsai* or *chiniisa*), in which the area in the middle of the plot is depicted by a pole or a tree branch and a sand cone, while smaller poles or branches are located in the four corners of a square around it and connected with a *shimenawa* rope decked with *heishoku* paper-cuts. The symbolic ground breaking includes hoeing the sand cone with a ritual pick, among many other rites performed by the household head and the contractor around the altar in the enclosed area, directed by a Shinto priest. In the end, all participants visit the four corners of the site to offer rice and sake there.

The center and the four corners also are depicted in the ridge-raising ceremony (*muneageshiki*), which completes the main framework of a building. In it, the 'sacred middle pillar,' in houses called *daikoku-bashira*, is decorated with various Shinto symbols, such as white paper-cuts and a wooden plate including prayers to the *kami* (deity) who protect the family, while an altar containing offerings to the *kami* is placed on the foot of the post; in addition, the altar includes the carpenters' tools, signifying their art. Based on the fieldwork of this author, the carpenters are in an important role during the ceremony by assisting the Shinto priest in the various rites, ending in the transference of the 'corner rice cakes' (*sumi mochi*) from the altar to the four corners of the roof from where they are thrown diagonally towards the center of the house; in the ceremonies I attended, rice and sake was thrown from the ground level corners towards the center as well (Sarvimäki 2000, 199-200). Of importance, however, is that the sacred central pillar, contrary to its name, is usually not in the geometric center of a house. In most cases it is close to the hearth – in other words, the metaphorical center – regardless of its actual location in the house layout and merely indicated by elements and activities around it, not at it.

3.0 SPATIAL PARTICIPATION

In spite of the centralized feudal system of the Tokugawa shogunate with the Edo castle as its symbol, while the castle cities of local daimyo expressed their subservience to the outmost authority, most Japanese cities built in the Edo period lack visual signifiers of the government – at least in the center. Instead of a central monument or any kind of a symbol of power, the most significant buildings, such as Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and shogunal mausoleums, are in the perimeters of these towns. Among numerous examples, the small fishing village of Shingu in northern Kyushu sheds light onto this phenomenon. Unlike many Japanese villages and towns that grew almost organically, Shingu was planned by the feudal authorities in the 17th century, although its layout hardly appears planned from an outsider's perspective. In addition to anthropologist Arne Kalland's fieldwork descriptions on the geomantic practices in Shingu, he points out that the various Shinto festivals and location of certain objects of importance can be regarded as representing the life course of the villagers, and implicitly the structure of both the community and the town.

For instance, the Isozaki-jinja shrine in the northeast symbolizes birth with its fertility stones; this is also where the babies born in the previous year are brought for the *Hassaku* ritual in September, as well as three- and seven-year-old girls and three- and five-year-old boys for the *Shichi-go-san* ('7-5-3') festival in November. Further to the southeast there are other symbols associated with youth. Lastly, the Sainen-ji temple with the cemetery is in the west, which is the direction of Amida Buddha's paradise. Moving further clockwise around the center without anything notable there, we do not see any religious buildings in the north, until the *torii* gate leading to the Isozaki-jinja in the northeast, which starts the eternal lifecycle again (Kalland 1996).³

The both diametric and concentric structure of Shingu, evident also in the Ise shrines, is further expressed by the *Gosengu* festival that is arranged every eighteen years. It is the occasion when the center of Shingu at the crossing of a lane and Nakamachi ('middle town') Street is activated by the festival procession – otherwise there is nothing else there than an ordinary intersection (Kalland 1996).⁴ The same applies to the Kakunodate city's annual *Oyama-bayashi* festival every September of which Fred Thompson has published an elucidating fieldwork study that is particularly relevant to the argument of this paper. The procession takes place between the Shinmei-sha shrine and Yakushi-do temple, with a stop at the house of Satake, whose ancestors were the representatives of the central government in town during the Tokugawa shogunate; like Shingu, Kakunodate was replanned in the 17th century by the feudal authorities. The foci of the festivities, however, are the neighborhood altars, or *hariban*, which are constructed for every festival and demolished afterwards – in other occasions, these sites might be parking lots or other mundane spaces (Thompson 1984).

For the *Oyama-bayashi* festival in Kakunodate, one *hariban* is built in each of the distinct districts of the town called *cho-nai*, further divided into subunits. In the feudal period, the *cho-nai* system restricted mobility of the townspeople, as there were watch-gates at the boundaries of each district. Although there have been many changes in the physical and social structure of Kakunodate, and the watch-gates have long been gone, this invisible division is still preserved in people's minds, which becomes demonstrated in the *Oyama-bayashi* festival activities. Namely, every year the community re-organizes itself into the feudal teams for the festival, in which each team moves a portable shrine wagon along the streets. Their goal is to visit as many *hariban* as possible without being blocked by other teams. In this wild game of complicated rules, the teams change their status depending on whether they are approaching a *hariban* (*nobori*, 'going up') and having the way of right, or proceeding to the next *cho-nai* after having visited a *hariban* (*kudari*, 'going down') when other teams 'going up' have the way of right. After a team has crossed the invisible border between two *cho-nai*, it is in the state of *nobori* again and has the way of right. The most interesting moments happen when two teams meet at a borderline, where it is unclear who has the way of right. In other words, the invisible lines are visualized by the team members facing each other along an imaginary borderline. As both teams are halted, giving advantage to the other teams, solving the gridlock rapidly is the key to play the game successfully which requires negotiation skills and reflects social skills as well.

The whole procedure can be considered a representation of the social hierarchy and re-bonding of the communal relationships, which is also expressed by the communal eating and (excessive) drinking of sake, which are important elements of any *matsuri*. However, despite the conceptual dichotomy, it is important to note that in Shinto theology there is no separation between sacred life, known as *hare*, and secular life, or *ke*. As stated by Thompson, "*matsuri* is referred to as *hare-no-hi*, the days of *hare*. It is the time when *ke* is restored to its original state and the communion takes place through the ritual of renewal" (Thompson 1984, 15). He connects this spatial mode of social integration with the concepts *kaiwai* ('activity space') and *ma* ('space-time') by stating that "what was commonplace for the Japanese was a communal ordering of physical spaces through a variety of rituals, non-festive and festive, rather than conceptual formation of permanent monuments and civic spaces. Underlying this physical organization is the inherent quality of *ma*, which implies that, by themselves, the spaces are void, but with activity they take on forms which are meaningful to the participants" (Thompson 1984, 28).

CONCLUSION

These means of activities in the Japanese built environments represent the cyclic process of life of both the context and its people, defining cosmos from chaos by the various applications of the cosmologic conceptions. And in all of these cases, whether sacred or secular, the organization of a city or a building complex is indicated and regularly renewed by various rites and other activities. This also strengthens the communal memory, which, in turn, strengthens the meaning of the context. Usually it occurs by the concentric commotion of the partakers around the seemingly "empty" center, which bears close resemblance to the *mandala* diagram. From a phenomenological standpoint, it is apparent that rather than any built structures, the communal participation defines the *genius loci* of many Japanese urban settings.

As for methodology of the studies discussed above, all are examples of qualitative research with the researcher partaking in the activities as "a measuring instrument" (Groat and Wang 2013). Although few scholars have been as fortunate as Felicia Bock to attend the concluding Ise rites, which makes her records so valuable, the involvement of these researchers is fundamental in providing new interpretations and information on the context.

Also, because fieldwork is an integral part of these studies, including community involvement and indigenous/local cultural values and context, the studies serve as an example of a prospective non-Euro-America centralized perspective in architectural interpretations. The significance of personal experience of the context, moreover, accentuates the phenomenological thick descriptions of the spirit of place, and the role of subjectivist epistemology regarding the meaning of the built environment. Although space does not allow cross-cultural comparisons of this kind of fieldwork methodology, here, plausible is that it can be applied to other settings in analysing their meaning. Hence, while the online "global villages" might offer an interesting alternative, fieldwork in physical reality still is a valid data collection technique, although it should pursue toward new paradigms and diverse views, including the "non-verbal" features of the language of architecture.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the prime imperial shrines in Ise, this merge of thoughts is expressed by the "Chinese axis" and "Japanese details." For more on East Asian cosmology and its transformations in Japan, see Sarvimäki 2000.

² In addition to the many urban transformations in the layout of today's Kyoto, the original imperial palace, that would have been along the central axis had the western part of the city been realized, was abandoned after a few fires. One reason why it was not rebuilt after the last fire in the early thirteenth century might have been the lack of imperial authority. Hence, the former imperial side-palace (*Tsuchimikado-dono*) became the *de facto* imperial palace; now known as Kyoto Gosho in its mainly rebuilt condition. Coaldrake 2002: 81-93, 138-162.

³ Like in most cultures, east is associated with birth and west with death. In Japan, most weddings take place in a Shinto shrine, while funerals are arranged in a Buddhist temple and the deceased buried in its graveyard.

⁴ Here Kalland refers to Claude Lévi-Strauss' classification of two settlements patterns: (1) the diametric structure divided into two halves by an axis, and (2) the concentric structure with circles around a center.