

# The Street and Democracy, Japanese Style

Several glimpses into the processes of making and living Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô

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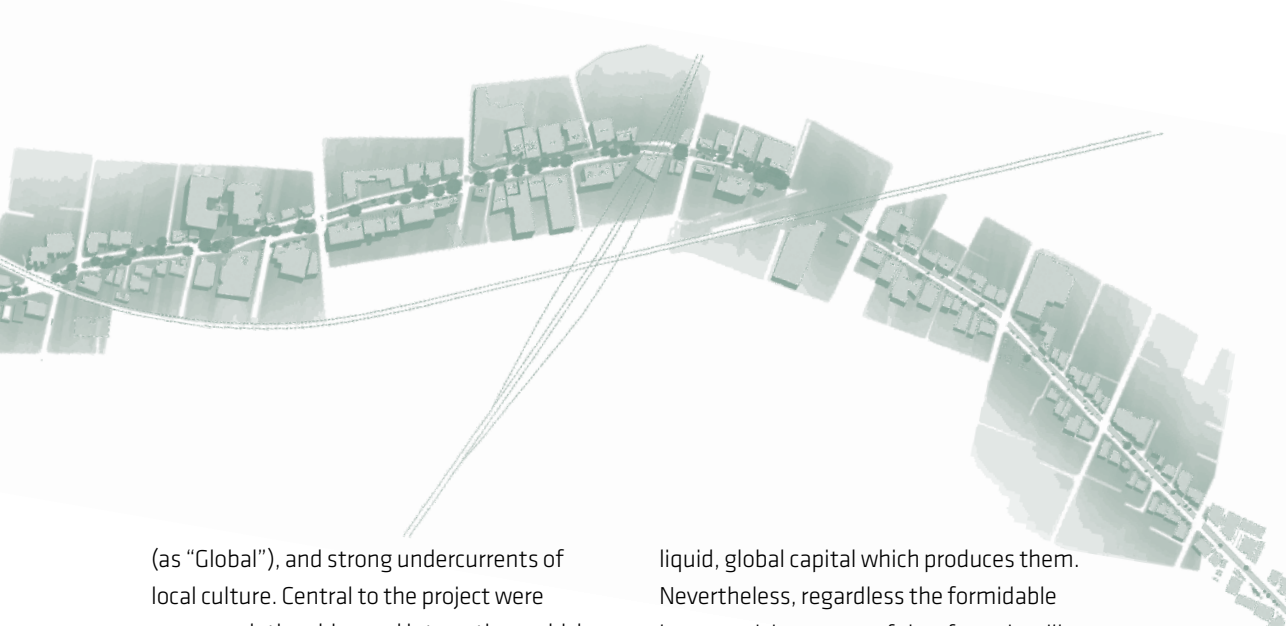
## Introduction

In this essay I intend to discuss some trends in (re)production of local urban quality within the frameworks of relentless globalisation. The focus will be on Japan and some peculiarities of Japanese (urban) culture exemplified by Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô, only one of many streets in Jiyūgaoka, a small precinct of Tokyo,

the largest city in the world.

The essay builds upon parts of *Measuring the non-Measurable* – Mn'M, the major research project conducted at Keio University in the period 2011-14. The task was to recognise, capture, analyse and open to discussion a set of evident existing and emergent qualities of that area and to locate them within broader cultural contexts and trends. The original emphasis was elements and gestures that have the capacity to make cities and urban life great, on various manifestations of everyday life and dialectics between the Japanese taste for modernity and the spectacular

*I concetti di spazio pubblico e di democrazia urbana nelle città giapponesi hanno un significato molto diverso da quello delle città occidentali. Nell'articolo vengono discusse alcune tendenze del processo di (ri)produzione della qualità urbana locale nel contesto della globalizzazione. Viene presa in considerazione una strada di Tokyo, Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô, e vengono analizzate le componenti sociali, anche minute, che creano la struttura collettiva di uno spazio urbano.*



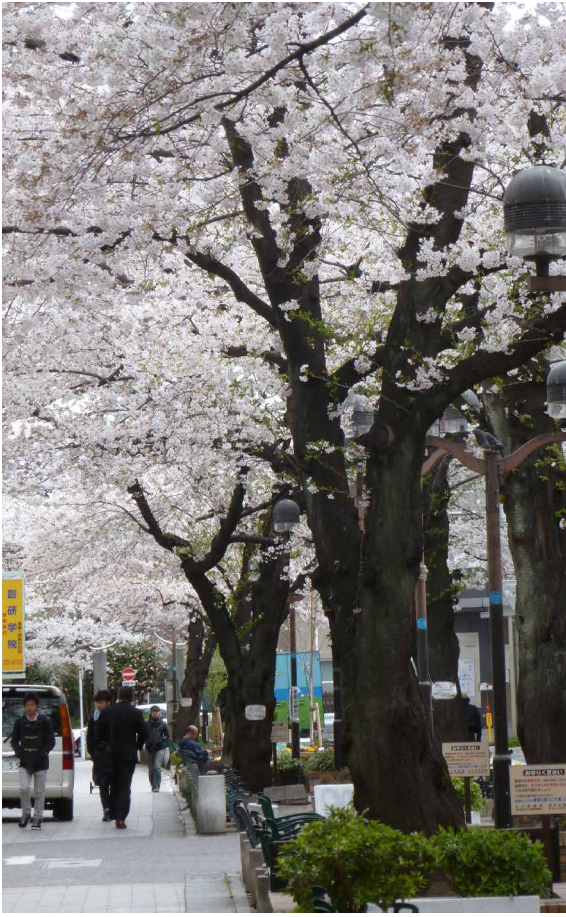
(as “Global”), and strong undercurrents of local culture. Central to the project were spaces, relationships and interactions which mediate between (or which, indeed, are the in-between) of the built-up and open, the sold and void, public and private (or, various Japanese variations on those themes).

According to David Harvey, globalisation is the process of geographical reorganisation of capitalism. It (re)produces particular conditions and modes of being within which people, economies and cultures are increasingly integrated and connected. He stresses that globalisation is also a political project, a strategy of global economic political expansion (of largely Western nations and corporations) to open up new markets and sources of labour and materials under the ideologies of free trade and neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2009).

As projections of society on the ground (Lefebvre, 1996), globalised cities conditioned by those ideologies are acquiring an increasing number of common features. We do not only drive same or similar cars, listen same or similar music and consume same or similar products, but we also live in the environments which are, in the name of efficiency of neo-liberal economy-cum-politics, rapidly losing cultural specificity and acquire the shapelessness of

liquid, global capital which produces them. Nevertheless, regardless the formidable homogenizing power of that force, it still gets projected onto the actual ground, upon specific local situations which should be understood as complex, layered milieus of intertwining physical and cultural topographies. The other two segments of Lefebvre’s tripartite definition (ibid.) of *the urban* celebrate precisely those qualities which arise from inevitable contextualisations. Understanding the city as projection of society on the ground indeed results from its dialecticisation with the second definition, which postulates that “the city is the ensemble of differences between cities” and yet “another definition, of plurality, coexistence and simultaneity in the urban of patterns, ways of living urban life” (ibid.). That phenomenon is at the core of resilience of established urban cultures.

Japanese culture is famous for its strong roots and an indisputable uniqueness which has evolved due to relative, and in some historic periods absolute, isolation, which was imposed by both geographic conditions of the archipelago and equally atypical historic circumstances. The milieu of Japan, the Lefebvrian ground upon which the globalised



## Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudo

times and rhythms get projected is very complex and, even in comparison with the neighbouring cultures, very peculiar. Since mid 19th century and its brutal opening to “the World” and, we can say, globalisation, Japan voraciously imports all things foreign. The modernising Meiji period (1868-1912) made Japan “a country of excessive importation”, making it the *kingdom of translation* (Tatsumi, 2006). That was the time when the measuring stick of success or failure started to be defined externally. The alien, imposed criteria, initially adopted by the Japanese elites keen to maintain and enhance their grip to power (Radović, 2010), started to filter downwards. The imposition has been only enhanced by the dramatic defeat in the World War and during the long post-war (Harootunian 2006) of subordination to foreign power and values. In the last quarter of 20th century, Japanese single-party democracy opened its doors wide to the rule of neo-liberal capitalism. The growth of the largest city in the world accommodates huge number of urban development practices. For the sake of clarity, I will here simplify that situation and say that the majority of production of space in Tokyo today takes form of two extreme, diametrically opposite paradigms. One of those gives shape to ambition and interests of the Japanese elites to keep Tokyo at the top of the Global City rankings (Institute for Urban Strategies, 2014), and the aspirational class. That is Tokyo

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of global flows of capital, which seeks and finds fitting spatial projections characterised by physical bigness, glitz and glamour of and for the society of the spectacle. That is the city made to impress and compete globally (Radović 2008). The power which that development paradigm projects onto the ground crushes local social and physical topographies to create new peaks aimed to be visible from where it matters to be seen. At the opposite end of the spectrum of urban development practices today is an ordinary and unselfconscious Tokyo, which is aware of the world and variously global(ised) itself, but produced in numerous small gestures and the ways which are largely continuous with, or respectful of those of the past. That is *Another Tokyo* (Radović, 2008), *small Tokyo* (Radović, Boontharm, 2011). Its urban fabric, regardless all architectural and engineering innovation making it and an excruciating pace of the metropolis, where the average life of buildings is only 26 years (Kitayama et al., 2010), manages to stay local and human-scaled. Both big Tokyo and small Tokyo are decidedly contemporary and, thus, global, but the ways in they get conceived, perceived and lived make them diametric opposites. One of those two models is imposed by the elites which follow the proven ways in which foreign influences have been introduced and implemented in Japan since 19th century. The other model coexists of diverse and variously (dis)connected practices of city-making

which flourish by absorbing, digesting and spontaneously (re)produced globalising influences. The first of those two coexisting Tokyos is produced top-down and its spatial consequences are the environments of architectural objects, sometimes of high building quality but predictable and lamentable sameness. The other Tokyo captures variously local, bottom-up creativities to reinvent its own spatial urban identities. At its best, this model has the capacity for symbiosis of global quality and local sensibility.

The focus of this essay will be only one of many local urbanities of Tokyo which possesses such capacity, Jiyūgaoka. Within that small precinct, we will look at just one street – Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudō (Kuhonbutsu River Green Street, or Kuhonbutsugawa Green Promenade). This relatively small space in the biggest metropolis has a distinct spatial character, the quality of which helped the precinct gain its considerable prestige. Successful practices of (re)inventing Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudō play an important role in that process and deserve careful examination. The latent potential and tensions which they contain provide valuable insights into the processes of production of that quality, which I see as simultaneously of this time (and thus global), and authentic, concrete (and thus local). That is the quality which I call *the New Local*.

2000s

1973

1945

1937

1909



# How to explore urbanities which are profoundly different from those of our own?

How to explore urbanities which are profoundly different from those of our own? For more than two decades now, I live and work in such places. While my focus passionately remains at the urban, my nomadic life keeps on offering a bewildering diversity of urbanities to explore, and enables insights into an inexhaustible richness of the ways in which we think, make and live our cities. Those are the encounters with the very otherness of the *Other*, and they question established ideas and standard research practices, sometimes shattering the very foundations of our learned, common urbanistic thought.

## Jiyūgaoka, Kuhonbutsugawa Street: urban space as an agent of social change

Jiyūgaoka was rural until the late 1920s when, just few years after the devastating Great Kanto Earthquake, a settlement started to emerge. The first major development in the rice fields was a high school, which brought new name Jiyugaoka to the area. Various

translated Liberal Hill or Freedom Hill, it referred to the new educational spirit of ambitious reforms

attempted by the short-lived Taishō democracy (1912-26). As in many other parts of Tokyo, true urbogenetic sparkle came with the newly established railway line. The opening of Kuhonbutsu-mae Station on 28 August 1927

triggered a predictable pattern of growth. Three years later, the name of the Station was changed to Jiyūgaoka and that name was formally adopted for the whole precinct in 1932. Following rapid development after the Second World War, central Jiyūgaoka took its present form around the 1970. The newly acquired status was confirmed by inauguration of the official spelling of the name as 自由が丘 in 1966. The subsequent growth was largely based on bottom-up energies, well articulated by local town-making, *machi-zukkuri* practices (Woodend, 2013) and, not insignificantly, made possible by the lax Japanese planning laws. Today, Jiyūgaoka ranks high among the sought-after residential precincts of Tokyo. Its fine-grained residential areas are within walking distance from the Station and an extremely commercialised centre. Although in demand, central Jiyugaoka still keeps its human scale and fine urban texture, and resists the onslaught of bigness, which seems to be the destiny of other railway hubs in Global Tokyo. The area is famed for its distinct charm, which reaches beyond comfortable lifestyle and fashionable shops. That multifaceted quality includes obvious attractiveness for young women, small children, presence of subtle local tourist spots, an evident passion for groomed dogs, a booming café culture, carefully organised and managed open-space programmes, pedestrian-friendly weekends, regular local festivals, several places of distinct environmental

## Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudo

Historic development



quality and one which combines the whole lot – Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudō. That is the street of particular interest to this essay.

The sinuous, 2.2 kilometres long leafy promenade connects two railway stations, Kuhonbutsu, to the West and Midorigaoka, to the East of Jiyūgaoka. Central segment of the Green Promenade is the spine of the popular shopping area, while the rest remains very quiet, predominantly or exclusively residential. The street was built on the top of Kuhonbutsu River, which has been tamed and turned into the culvert in 1974. The main justification of that move was to avoid hazards associated with the badly kept waterflow, while there are also the hints that the open stream was seen as the sign of backwardness and, as such, unacceptable in the times of Japan's post-Olympic resurgence at the world scene. The result of that drastic exercise was one of the arguably most successful promenades in Tokyo. Later management practices opted for softer measures in mitigating another perceived problem – excessive number of bicycles (also, seen as a bit “backward”) which plagued new and increasingly popular street. Community *machi zukkuri* leaders wisely decided not to fence off the central strip and its cherry trees, but to introduce two, almost uninterrupted lines of benches instead. The result, again, generated quality which went far beyond what was intended and expected. Very much due to that move, Kuhonbutsugawa Street became

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one of the most pedestrian-friendly spaces in Tokyo and the backbone of an interesting lifestyle, which is quite unusual in the rest of Tokyo.

In investigating the Green Promenade, we rely on that useful Lefebvre's tripartite definition invoked at the opening of this essay, which sees the city simultaneously as a projection of society on the ground, as the ensemble of differences between cities", and as an oeuvre of orchestrated plurality, coexistence and simultaneity of the finest patterns of *vécu*.

"(W)hat is inscribed and projected is not only a *far order*, a social whole, a mode of production, a general code, it is also time, or rather, times, rhythms" (ibid.). In Kuhonbutsugawa Street the times and rhythms of change in broader Japanese society in the last quarter of the 20th century have entered into various synchronic and asynchronic relationships with slower rhythms and subtle pulsations of local life.

They keep on producing an ensemble of differences between this and all other spaces of Tokyo, making this moment of Jiyugaoka both contemporary and profoundly local.

Urban space is always socially constructed.

Once conceived, it starts to live and can become an agent of social change. For all sorts of reasons, only a couple of which I have mentioned above, Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudō has acquired its present form. It now includes the fine-grained urban fabric, good quality of accessible spaces, an (over)abundance

of benches and lush greenery, with some of the most beautiful seasonal variations (eg. famous Japanese cherry-blossom). And more. Such qualities, and especially so many of them combined in a relatively small space, are extremely rare in Tokyo, where open spaces tend to be produced within larger engineering enterprises, or as parts of big urban projects. Such spaces tend to be predictably sterile. At the same time, bottom-up produced places enable and inspire the citizens to express themselves in often unpredictable ways. The spaces of the Green Promenade, thus, inspire slower walk, frequent stopping, they invite sitting and facilitate higher awareness about others in the street – which is a palpable difference even in the comparison with the immediate neighbouring spaces of Jiyūgaoka itself, where the majority of open spaces remain utilitarian, go-through, rather than go-to places.

### **The balance between continuity and change**

During our detailed observations of the Green Promenade over the last several years, we have recorded a number of interesting and profound behavioural changes, transformations of the ways in which people think, use and inhabit that space. We observe the street by immersion and, following Perce's advice, "[T]ry to observe the street, from time to time, perhaps in a slightly systematic fashion. Apply yourself. Take your time. Note down what you see. The noteworthy





## Appropriation

Use of the stairs at different times of the day

things going on" (Bellos, 1993). And, particularly noteworthy were the diversions from the ways of living in open space which consistently get described as Japanese or non-Japanese.

Drinking my regular double espresso in front of *La Manda* café and observing Kuhonbutsugawa Street, I notice three teenagers who, sitting on the bench, in the heat of discussion take their shoes off and fold their legs – obviously feeling at home, as if on their *tatami* mats. I see an elderly gentleman who, in discussion with his neighbour, takes full bench to lie down and stretch his back. People sit and read (a book, more often than mobile phone, the most common reading "material" in Tokyo these days). Mothers socialise. They hug, some feed their sleepy babies. Children play. There are pigeons, as opposed to the rest of Tokyo, where the ubiquitous crows rule. The spaces are starting to be used creatively, in a variety

of unplanned ways. Several vans serve coffee, crêpes, and stimulate senses other than sight. More and more restaurants offer alfresco service, which would, only a couple of years ago, be labeled as decidedly "non-Japanese", among those strange things that "only the foreigners do". We expand observations, multiply the number of observers, conduct research in our urban research pavilion, observe and interview the people in large numbers, across seasons on ordinary and festive days, speak to mazhi zukkuri activists and experts, collaborate with Gehl Architects and combine our explorations with their established urban observation techniques (Gehl, Svarre, 2014). The results confirm that the people, locals and visitors alike, the makers and the citizens love the change or, rather, the evolving balance between continuity and change.

A reader broadly familiar with Tokyo will be aware how uncommon the above-described behaviour patterns are in this city. These anecdotes illustrate one of the most interesting processes which seems to be spinning up the cycle of space-behaviour causation in Kuhonbutsugawa Street and showing how those spaces might, indeed, possess a significant transformative capacity. The embedded spatial and social potential and, importantly, an evident care for those urban environments stimulate desire for creative and free expression. The original meaning of the term *urbanity* explicitly referred to manners.





## Control

Control,  
surveillance and  
restrictions

*Being urban* originally meant the same as *being urbane*, well mannered, courteous, refined, being positively transformed by life in and of the city. New street culture of Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô bubbles amidst hostile (although *equally local*) mono-culture of extreme consumerism, surrounded by confronting Japanese superficiality and its seemingly insatiable appetite for fakeness (it should suffice to say that in Jiyūgaoka there is also a fake gondola, in an appropriately shallow canal, next to the fake piazza, in a scaled-down, ultra-fake “Venice”; or, one of the streets is *Marie Claire Dori*, whose name explicitly refers to the intended “French” flavour of Jiyugaoka - which is French as much that gondola is Venetian.) In Jiyūgaoka, the quality we are interested in this essay emerges from the intensity of diverse, both local and imported uses, which are encouraged and facilitated by all those benches, cherry trees, shops, and (I hate to say) - even by that awkward gondola.

## The relationship between control and freedom

The emphasis of this essay is on the undeniable and, for Tokyo uncommon quality of pedestrian environments along Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudo. It is important to avoid an illusion that we are portraying here some idyllic place of pure conviviality and pleasure. That street is as complex, and therefore as conflictual as any other urban situation, but in its own way. Here I put an emphasis on emerging qualities which exemplify the vitality of contemporary Japanese urban culture, which comes from vibrant interactions between various local patterns and global influences, which get digested, and the projected upon complex existing topographies of cultural landscape. The conflictual, and even the outright non-desirable dimensions in that process are equally “Japanese” as the positive and desirable ones are: “To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation”

**“To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation”.**

(Lefebvre, *ibid.*). For the purpose of illustration, I will briefly discuss those dialectical couples in the context of control, which is one of the defining concepts in Japanese culture and lives.

Nan Ellin has succinctly described how “the history of urban design (theory) is that of a continual search for the most harmonious balance between control and freedom, a search for the order which liberates rather than oppresses” (Ellin, 1996). The relationship between control and freedom in Japanese cities, as in Japanese culture at large, is decidedly in favour of control. The causes of an obsession with (social) control are many. Within the limitations of this essay it suffices to say that in Japan they combine geographic (eg. the need for organisation and discipline coming from catastrophic geology) and socio-political reasons (eg. long and uninterrupted history of hierarchical power). There are many ways in which control gets exercised in urban spaces, and they are, as everything else we are discussing here, of a particular, Japanese kind.

Sometimes the control explicit, but more often it is indirect, oblique or invisible, the level of hints rather than clear messages. For instance, the spontaneity and diversity in everyday life gets variously controlled and reduced by an emphasis on, “proper”, “Japanese” ways of doing practically everything, with ubiquitous “guidance” and “assistance”, practices designed to help and control at the same time.

As explained by Ellin, control is at the core of all planning systems. When it comes to Japanese planning system and legislation, in, the strictness of control of open urban spaces starts with by the rigidity of their definition. Open spaces are divided in only two use categories, roads and parks. The reasons for such reductionism reach back to the late 1960s, the times when Jiyugaoka as we know it today was only emerging, and the failed attempt by Japanese students to use a piazza-like space in West Shinjuku for anti-government demonstrations. After that incident, “the government rebuilt the west side into a multilevel driveway for controlled vehicular access that was pointedly unsuited for mass mobilization” (Fujii, 2004). That traffic interchange is still there. The plaza was successfully transformed into the system of roads, impossible to negotiate by foot. The harsh reaction to spontaneous demonstrations was in response to the emergence of a certain kind of social energy which was unknown in Japan, and thus illegal. While pushing his

# In everyday life of Jiyugaoka, the signs of top-down power are as ubiquitous as they are all over Japan. The rules are visibly displayed, but not forcefully imposed.

point to the limits, Tatsumi makes a very clear argument that in the system which has emerged from that incident there was no place for agora (Tatsumi, 2006). The transformation of the lawless gathering space into a perfectly legal *road* has brought power back where it historically belongs. Since then spontaneity in open spaces of Tokyo is welcome. But, not the spontaneity of any kind. There can be no buskers, no graffiti. The degree of internalised discipline and control of Japanese population was dramatically exposed in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. While the sense of solidarity with people of the affected regions was truly overwhelming, public antinuclear protests all over the world outnumbered those in Tokyo, the most populous city in close proximity to Tohoku. We might say that, among other reasons, that was so because there were public spaces available for that purpose. In Jiyūgaoka, the case of *hiroba*, the generous and finely shaped open space in front of the railway station, is particularly illustrative. The potential plaza was produced by political power which has learned its lessons from West Shinjuku. As it evidently was not appropriate for a park, the law said that it then must be – a road. As such, it was handed over to taxi car park and public buses stop, and thus used far below the potential which is implied by its location and shape. Most recently, a new generation of clever local practices started to usurp that space. During the locally managed car-free weekends,

in an act deserving the name of Debordian *détournement* (Situationist International 1995), *hiroba* gets regularly offered to the pedestrians. It is interesting to notice that the citizens, in order to take that opportunity and venture out to the asphalt, need an encouragement of staged events. Spontaneous appropriation has not reached this side of the Station. Not yet.

In everyday life of Jiyugaoka, the signs of top-down power are everywhere, as ubiquitous as they are all over Japan. The rules are visibly displayed, but not forcefully imposed. To illustrate the ways in which such power gets exercised, we will briefly look at one benign, even banal example – strict restrictions on bicycle parking along the central stretch of Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudō. The no-parking signs are literally all over the place – on the pavement, on the light posts, on permanent and improvised panels, innumerable purpose-made bollards. On occasions, polite street wardens gently communicate the rules of prohibition to those riding their *mama chari*. Both the overwhelming presence of signs and the softness of local micro-management of that issue are palpable. So are the numerous examples of disobeying the virtually non-implementable rules. In shortest, the rules are there, everyone understands that they are too blunt and impossible to follow, and bicycles get parked against the prohibition, in a very civilised, orderly Japanese way. But,

each now and then, without any obvious reason, in some small parts of the precinct, for a limited time, the ban gets enforced. That very unpredictability, the whimsical nature of implementation of the illogical rule, along with the necessity to trust in benevolence of those in power, makes control complete and successful. For a foreigner-researcher of urban life, such practices provide fantastic insights into broader customs and culture. Longer lived experience enables further comprehension and opens new questions. One experiences the process of getting used to prohibitions, seeks and discovers own and common ways and acceptable levels of disobedience, but also sees how self control and the sense of shame gradually creep in, get internalised and, thus, become total. Normalisation of soft control domesticates makes the rules and makes them feel harmless.

In the context of this essay, it is important to stress that these practices of control are traditional and very Japanese and, as such, they are the constitutive part of the mechanisms which are (re)producing the quality which we recognise and cherish as *Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô*.

### **Cities need prudent (self)organisation**

When exploring how *Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô* gets so successfully produced and reproduced, it becomes clear that such quality could not emerge spontaneously. The claims

that Tokyo, somehow, flourishes incrementally, by many uncoordinated additions are naïve. The cities are enormously complex, and true urban quality is never accidental. The most populous city in the world is possible only because of excellent infrastructure systems which support it and, in particular, due to its extraordinary mass-transport. It equally depends on numerous of social structures and civilised behaviour of the people which (among other factors, include the ubiquitous eyes on the street) make Tokyo practically crime-free. In addition to those formal and informal social structures, various regulation and governance practices further facilitate smooth functioning. The cities are projections of the order which composes such systems and practices, and is itself significantly shaped by them. That is why those systems and practices need constant maintenance, (re)invention and control.

At micro level, the emergence of our *Kuhonbutsugawa Green Street* was possible only within the basic rules which shape urban development and functioning of Tokyo.

But then, sometime in the late 1960s, local knowledge, energies and creativities kicked in and, strategically orchestrated, started to produce the above-described quality. *Cherry threes* were not native to the Promenade.

*Ryokudo* was imagined, conceived and constructed to be green. The benches were introduced through a number of small acts of local generosity. Walking is comfortable



because in these streets without sidewalks the vehicles are decidedly secondary to the people. In regular, small increments, fine paving steadily and predictably replaces the asphalt. Pedestrian-friendly spaces are all carefully managed, meticulously maintained and – controlled. Kuhonbutsugawa Street is the space of a former river, which is still there, symbolically and actually imprisoned under the pavement. That space remains *a gap*, if not in spatial, than in legal terms. The long, sinuous stretch of the former river is neither a park, nor a road. It is lawless, a street-like park, and a park-like street. Precisely that ambiguity enables it to be free; free from traffic – without becoming a park; furnished with benches, without being subjected to prohibitive safety regulations which exclude urban furniture from the sidewalks of Japanese streets. That

condition exists only there, in that particular location, a milieu formed in a dialogue between the violated topography and strong local community ethos. In Jiyugaoka, a number soft regulatory practices (which legally can not reach beyond informal recommendations), get wisely implemented, using the home-grown, time-honoured Japanese community practices (which include various overt and covert forms of pressure). They produce the ingredients of quality which we have discovered and documented there. Such subtle controls are essential ingredients *of the urban*. Urban condition is one of the expressions of being human, precisely as in Jean-Luc Nancy's *being-with* (Nancy, *ibid.*). As concentrations of people, cities need prudent (self)organisation, so that their knotted existences (un)tangle in desirable direction, towards conviviality,

orientating the intensity of *being-with* towards positive sides of Lefebvrian dialectical pairs – towards possibilities, rather than constraints; towards peacefulness, not violence; towards poetic, above mere functioning; towards freedom to chose between meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation. Jiyugaoka is small enough to be built, lived and loved by the people who know each other, and who are capable to define and uphold the rules based on the traditional ethos of Japanese community life. The key results include continuity with established, Japanese qualities of space. Such qualities are not expressed in physical forms, as much as they contribute the essence of urbanity which frames everyday lives of its residents.

This is where we will move to the second framing theme of this essay.

### **Democracy and public space, Japanese style: differences and misunderstandings**

A careful reader may have noticed that so far I have used term “public” only once, when describing the spaces which facilitated the post-Fukushima anti nuclear protests not in Japan, but elsewhere. So far, I have not used that term in discussion of open spaces of Jiyūgaoka. On a number of occasions I referred to Lefebvre and his profound understanding of how cities get (re)produced, but not referred to one of his key concepts, the right to the city. That was not accidental.

In cross-cultural investigations, we use certain terms in the ways which imply that we all *know* and *agree* exactly what we are speaking about. The linguists warn against such naivety. Within translation theory and practice that problem has been identified long ago, and “there has been a shift from an overall concern with equivalence between source and target texts to a recognition of the need for adaptation to the target situation and purpose. In most cases, equivalence can hardly be obtained in translation across cultures and languages, and it may not even be a desirable goal” (Trosborg, 1997). Some of the terms which are central to dominant urban theory belong to that category, and even the best-intended efforts to translate them only – mistranslate. Such is the case with two core key-words for investigations of streets and democracy – the term “public” and the closely associated notion of “rights” (as in the right to the city”).

When we utter word “public”, the assumed consensus about its meaning suspends the need for definition. That is so because we (are lead to) believe that the concept of public is universal, that it everywhere has to do with specific sets of *shared* knowledge, interests, or spaces. The unspoken agreement is also likely to include the position that, “although the interests people share are far from being exclusively political, it is through the idea of the public good served by political and



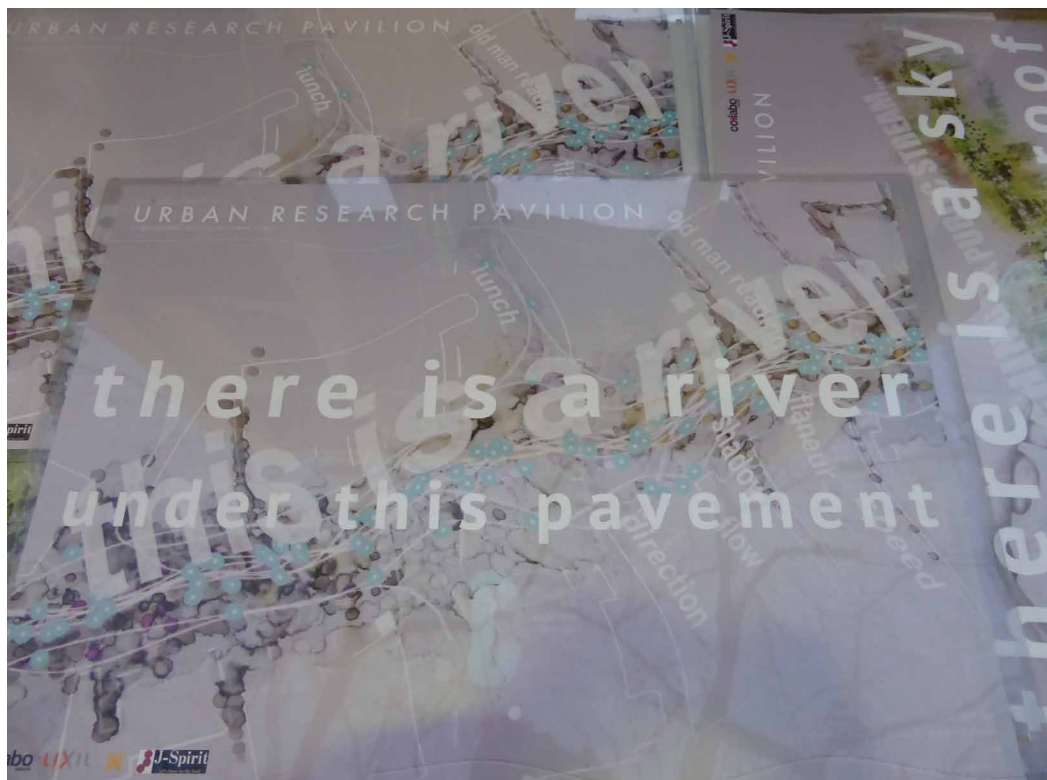
# Oeuvre, common, collective, appropriation and power underpin an informed understanding of what “public” should be about globally.

public life that a public space acquires its prime etymological right to the title ‘public’” (Hannay, 2005). *Public quality* of space is fundamentally about power, politics and ideology of a particular, democratic or bottom-up kind. Some of Lefebvre’s key-words, such as *oeuvre* (significantly – accepted in its original form, and often untranslated), *common*, *collective*, *appropriation* and *power* underpin an informed understanding of what “public” should be about globally. The concept of public also became pivotal in discussions about the essence of being modern, emancipated, civilised, free and urban(e), to the extent that it is hard to imagine any modern urban condition without public realm.

That is precisely where the main argument of this essay has to be brought in. Many languages, including Japanese, do not have a word equivalent to the term “public”. That fact certainly indicates the absence of, or at least an unusual situation with, the very concept of public in that culture. The situation is particularly interesting in the case of Japanese society, which is commonly described not only as highly civilised and urban(e), but also (*ultra*)*modern* and *democratic*. In the Japanese term 公共 *kōkyō*, which gets commonly (mis)translated as “public”, the key ideogram 公 refers to an official, governmental, even princely power, the power which is profoundly different from that of public. The fact

that the Japanese, in the process of their (both externally and internally) aggressive modernisation (Tatsumi, 2006; Radović, 2010), *had to* adopt, transcribe (ハブリック) and then, perhaps most significantly, *mispronounce* the “American” term as *paburiku*, seems to confirm an impossibility of modernity without any reference to *public*. Here, even an empty signifier served the purpose (which is not an uncommon practice in “kingdom of translation”, Tatsumi, *ibid.*).

Similar is the situation with the other key term in discussions about “publicness” of public spaces – that of the *right* (to the city). Lefebvre’s powerful call defines *the right to the city* exactly as the right to *that* quality of space which we “all”, somehow, feel, recognise and name “public”: “the right to the *oeuvre* (participation) and appropriation (not to be confused with property but use value) was implied in the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996; my italics). In western languages, we use the term “right” to describe the right to the city because the idea of rights is one of fundamental concepts of western cultural universe and, as such, considered universal. But, behold ... As Shen points out, international law was first translated into Chinese in the late 19th century following the Opium Wars, and “the translators could not find a proper Chinese term to render the original meaning



of 'right'. Out of necessity, they chose *quan li*. However, the noun *quan* has a broad spectrum of meanings associated with power, privilege and domination, and the word *li* [利] points to interest and profit. Therefore, the Chinese translation of human rights, *ren quan* conveys more meanings than just the privilege and entitlement of an individual" (Shen, s.a.). In the twentieth century, Chinese vocabulary has further expanded to include human right[s] as *renquan*, which literally translated means – human *power*. The choice of that word makes perfect sense because, as François Jullien explains, over its millennial lasting "China thinks in terms of power, not rights" (Jullien, 2004). He links that to the profound cultural importance which the concept of *situation* (*quan*) holds in Chinese culture, where "the

way in which reality never ceases to change in order to continue to deploy itself" (ibid.). Using his usual, dangerous but revealing binary oppositions, Jullien adds how, in contrast, "*we in the West* grant circumstances no more than the status of an accessory, relegating them in the final analysis, to morphology and limiting them to surrounding (*circum*) the hegemonic perspective of the case under consideration (ibid., my italics). That difference between two cultural systems is of profound importance. In its essence, the idea of rights aims precisely to transcend situations and imply an absolute recognition of the individual and autonomy of the subject. But, "in China, will is never explored. [...] Chinese thought no more expanded on will than it conceived of rights and liberty" (ibid.). Due



to historic cultural flows from China to Japan, which included an early adoption of the Chinese way of writing and Confucianism (both cca. 5th century), in this respect the situation in Japan is very similar to that of China. Japanese word for human rights, *jinken* (人権) was introduced in the late 19th century by famous intellectual and founder of Keio University Yukichi Fukuzawa, and it has resonances very similar to those of *renquen*.

Translations of the term *right to the city* to Japanese language (都市の権) do not convey the charge of Lefebvre's original, in the same way in which the transcribed and mispronounced *paburiku* can not communicate the sense of empowerment which is implied in the entitlement to appropriate and live *the urban* (despite ownership).

Intensely populated, richly and diversely used and lived, urban environments of Tokyo strive despite the linguistic and theoretical conundrum. Various practices of appropriation, despite non-traditional, modern spaces which make the physical fabric of the city, are decidedly culture specific, very Japanese (whatever that, much used adjective might mean; Isozaki, 2006). In West Shinjuku, the attempt to reach the *right to the city* in a burst of discontent was not acceptable to the ruling power. On the other hand, subversive micropolitics of Jiyugaoka, even as unselfconscious as they are, seem to

be producing niches of behaviour which open the possibility of non-violent appropriation of the kind implied the *right to the city*. What people seem to like in the catchment of Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô is *the sense* of public space. As discussed above, *public interest* has to be one of the key ingredients in defining urban quality in the globalised world. *Kookyo* and *public* are not synonymous, but the awakening desire for unorthodox and creative being in this street might, indeed, be *a desire for urbanity* – of that, other kind. Combined with favourable physical and social conditions for experimentation, this byproduct of globalisation might have the capacity to bypass or amend local controls.

## What people seem to like in the catchment of Kuhonbutsugawa Ryokudô is the sense of public space.

When it comes to such practices of cultural resistance, which have the capacity to evolve into resilience, time is of crucial importance. On the other hand, global capital can not afford “wasting” time. That is where top-down and bottom-up practices of globalisation of Tokyo collide. Top-down produced spaces look, and they are out of place everywhere, because they can not afford time even for a dialogue, let alone conversation or true dialectisation with the local milieu. The pace of insatiable money-making practices is extreme, and they are dramatically altering the very essence of Japanese, as any other rooted culture. Those practices were never intended to fit in. They are designed to do exactly the opposite, to alter local topographies of meaning to fit their own, usually short-term interests. Japanese history is all about letting in, digesting, transforming and variously appropriating incoming influences. The most profound example of that was accommodation of Buddhism. Over the centuries, Japanese culture has shown an amazing capability to swallow and process (even the most indigestible) global influences. The fundamental difference between those events in the past and challenges put forward by neoliberal globalisation today is in an unprecedented acceleration. If appropriations of Kuhonbutsugawa Street keep on evolving towards ambitious claims for the right to the city, that would mark the emergence of a truly amazing phenomenon,

an example of cultural hybridisation within the metropolis. Within current political climate both in Japan and globally, the probability of such development is not high. The times of aggressive globalisation-as-commercialisation seek *devolution of the urban* towards fragmented and consumable forms and practices, and a drive towards an ever-diminishing complexity. It is highly unlikely that globalised markets, which favour generic over contextual, can generate anything but sterility and efficiency akin to that of centrally managed shopping centres. True test for Tokyo will be the Olympic Games 2020. Japanese elites are keen and ready to use to impress the world, and that is reflected in the official Olympic Games projects. The bigness (of everything, even of the associated controversies) of the Olympic Stadium best encapsulates much of what happens there. The Games 2020 will further globalise Tokyo. The bigness will rule, and Tokyo is most likely get globalised. Translating “public” and “right to the city” to the language of neo-liberalism is less possible than to when it come to Chinese or Japanese languages. But, bottom up will have its chances. They flourish in the cracks of dominant power. Liberal Hill might live up to the promise in its name, and establish itself as one of the leader at the alternative path.



co+labo  
Urban  
Research  
Pavilions

### Post Scriptum

As Ferrarotti has once put it succinctly, sometimes “I decide that I prefer not to understand, rather than to colour and imprison the object of analysis with conceptions that are, in the final analysis, preconceptions” (Dale, 1986).

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