"From Dameisho to Meisho"

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FROM EDO TO TOKYO

Seen from abroad, Tokyo appears as a huge, vibrant metropolis where 21st-century Japan meets the traditional side of the country. Tokyo’s skyline is a diverse jumble of traditional houses and shrines, and modern architecture from skyscrapers of glass to 1970’s living capsules.

In Edo (Tokugawa) period (1603 – 1867), Tokyo was always described as a picturesque city. It was a city with well-planned hydrology, integration of nature and use of natural lands formation which had a significant impact on design of Tokyo. A drastic transformation started 150 years ago with the advent of Meiji period and its modernization (1868 – 1912). In the middle of 19th century traditional Japan opened the door to the West which mostly meant a rapid growth and an adaptation of new, European technologies. It also meant turning its back on history and natural setting which seems to be almost erased nowadays as if the city had no connection to the past. Not to forget, this was all also magnified by important events such as The Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and World War mostly during 1945. Today, however the growth of the city of more than 13 million people has almost come to a stop. Population is aging and shrinking. Demographically and socially, the city is maturing, new priorities are emerging. People have new priorities and want to change the quality of their lives which is possible thanks to re-appreciation of nature and history, thus tracing the fundamental layers.

Tokyo has not been cut off from its past completely. The new structures are based on the existing layer of spatial configuration. When searching for the traces, we have to look at the original development. To the left from the Imperial palace, there is Yamanote, a landscape of hills and valleys, to the right there is Shitamachi with its bay and shore. Shitamachi used to dominate by water and by a network of waterways. To the most of the people it is all forgotten, but back in the day, Tokyo with its canals full of water comparable to Venice, nowadays rather appears as a “city of land”.

WATERWAYS

Since the beginning, Tokyo has had great prerequisites for creating a city with amazing urban environment. Water was the first reason for people to settle down in Tokyo Bay. As the city grew, the new areas further from the Tokyo Bay had to be supplied with building supplies, fresh water and daily necessities thus first canals were built. During Tokugawa period when there were no railroads distribution relied almost entirely on water transport. Beside transportation, canals performed many other functions such as draining water from the streets during the major rainfalls, a source of water for small industries and a route for dumping the waste water. With the expansion of the city, the water system also had to be upgraded. This led to creating a complex network of waterways, a lifeblood of Tokyo. The rivers were part of a huge development project in which land was excavated the re-located, and where the port life of Tokyo extended all the way into the city, far from its fringes. The economic, social and cultural life of the city developed in close connection with the water. The waterways became the main threads and boundaries of different parts of the city where all the interaction and exchange (of goods, information etc.) took place.

The 19th century and its industrialization left many canals filthy and neglected thus not appropriate for the same use as during Tokugawa period. The unused canals suddenly became redundant, belonging to the ‘wrong’ side of the city, removed from the human view by hiding it within the housing blocks. By the 1980s, many of the waterways were so polluted that the government began filling them up or covering them with elevated highways in preparation for the 1965 Tokyo Olympics. Nowadays, a great amount of canals have disappeared. Those which survived are woven throughout the city’s fabric, unused and hidden. In the West, a feature of water and green spaces has been incorporated in the urban planning ever since. However, in Japan even though most of the cities are in a near proximity to the woodland or water, the idea of incorporating these features into urban fabric came only recently.
MEISHO REVIVAL

In Meiji period, Tokyo was full of famous places known as meisho and sakuriba representing the spatial representation in Japanese culture. Meisho means “a famous place” and used to mark a topographically or historically important landmark. Sakuriba usually stood for places of leisure and gathering such as markets, streets, theatres, entertainment districts, shrines where different seasonal events or celebrations were held.

Unlike in Western countries, where famous places were rather formal places such as plazas and squares. In Japan, Meisho and Sakuriba used to be linear open structures. Citizens equipped the public streets with arcades, which merged the private space with public. Thus the streetsriver shores, bridges became the major gathering space, space of exchange.” (Hidetoshi Ohno) Public spaces were full of history and hidden in urban fabric providing places for socializing and relax. The modernization has also brought new typologies such as market places (shoutengai) that have been generated by the train stations in form of commercial streets, expending from the station along the streets.

During the transformation of Tokyo into a modern capital, the city cut many ties with the past and most of the network of “Edo” meisho and sakuriba have disappeared or had been overlayed by a layer of Western meisho such as museums, monuments, amusement parks etc. To not loose completely the connection with the past, it is important to look back and learn from the history. Meisho and sakuriba should be revived and redesigned for the 21st century into new places providing requirements of new society.

FROM DAMEISHO TO MEISHO

“From dameisho to meisho” is inspired by series of woodblock prints “One Hundred Famous Views of Edo” (名所江戸百景, Meisho Edo Hyakkei) created by the Japanese artist Hiroshige Ando (1797–1858), depicting a matrix of famous public spaces in Tokyo.

My project examines the possibilities of recasting “meisho”, a spatial representation in Japanese culture, into a new, modern context via editing “dameisho” in different layers of the city and its fabric.

dameisho - DAME - is an expression in Japanese which means “no, bad, wrong”. Most of the dameisho are anonymous places, not beautiful and not accepted in architectural culture today. Some of the sites used to be “meisho - famous places” back in Edo period but due to the modernization they became forgotten.

The project explores linear, thread-like spaces very characteristic for Japan, such as Edo waterways, its transformations roads and streets as well as recently built elevated highways in order to search for contaminations and new collaborations, unexpected conditions and create new, green urban stitches.

As one of the tackling tools, the project also looks at demographic trends shaping Japan and benefits from it. Nowadays, Japan experiences very low fertility rate of 1.29 children per woman, which in the long term, together with one of the longest life expectancy causes an aging of society. In 40 years, senior citizens (over 65 y/o) create more than 40% of the whole Japanese population. The population of Japan expects to drop by 30 mil people causing changes in quality of life, surplus of houses and facilities, value loss of properties. I look at this problem as a new possibility of creating new green and public spaces on vacant and abandoned lots.

Last but not least I investigate ways of graphical reinterpretation of the series of woodblock prints using Tokyo and its new “meisho” spaces as a roemodel.
3D NETWORK

The waterways in Edo period created a fully two-dimensional network within the city connecting main parts of it. Waterways were based on the city's prerequisites such as topography, spatial layering etc. When designing a new network of meicho in 21st century it is inevitable apart from the historical underlay, to take into consideration also the new features of the city, such as its texture, new infrastructure, different city transformation, size etc. Tokyo has also for a long time been criticised for its lack of greenery. As a part of going back to the nature it is important to integrate a green layer withing the network.

21st century Tokyo offers us an exciting image to be used in the project such as various roofscape and streetscape, infrastructure, survived waterways, character of different neighbourhoods as well as various urban planning in Yamanote and Shitamachi and historical interesting places.

The proposed network is three-dimensional, thus more flexible, allowing the exchange and interaction also vertically.

Bibliography:


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One hundred famous views of Edo
(Meisho Edo Hyakkei)