

Making up the Plaza: An Urban Archive in Osaka '70

Marcela Aragüez

In December 1963, the Tokyo architectural magazine *Kenchiku bunka* (The Architectural Culture) published a substantial piece of urban research entitled “Nihon no toshi kūkan” [Japanese urban space], chiefly led by young architect Arata Isozaki and architectural historian Teiji Itō. The study was motivated by their shared interest in urban morphology, in an attempt to distance their work from the more technocratic approach adopted at the time by Isozaki’s mentor, Kenzo Tange, whose aim to reshape the existing city was informed by policy, regional economics and national demographics (Yatsuka 2011: 142). Isozaki and Itō’s urban investigations also differed from the proliferation of regional planning proposals and national population movement analysis taking place at the time in Japan.¹ Their focus was rather directed towards urban aspects and phenomena of a smaller scale, producing a kind of archive of urban forms that were categorized into three types: Principles, Methods and Activators.

The first type contains eight so-called Principles of Space Order, which are set forth making use of a combination of diagrams, pictures, plans and texts. These principles – such as Hierarchical Accessibility, Placement due to Circumstances and Process Design – refer to spatial qualities observed in cities, both in terms of the ways in



which such spaces would be experienced and how they are organized. The second type reflects on thirteen Methods of Spatial Composition, including the study of a series of spatial arrangements such as By-Chance System, Cluster System and Space-Time Value. The important point at issue among these methods is that none had been theoretically conceived for the purpose of future application, but rather all were already to be found in real Japanese cities. Isozaki and Itô thus proposed to collect and classify these unplanned spatial strategies that are commonly visible in everyday urban spaces and buildings, redefining them as methods for future use.

Finally, the third part contains Activators of Urban Space, focusing on the role of certain elements that when placed in space alter its perception. A series of seven elements were investigated from the point of view of the action that they produced in space (to divide, to enclose, to connect, etc.). Aside from its analytical value, and the production of a collection of morphologies in a sort of archive of forms, the research carried out by Itô and Isozaki for “Nihon no toshi kukan” was specifically based on addressing the role of spatial configuration and actual phenomena in the city. This implies two important features: that the results of such study could now be easily transposed to an architectural scale from an urban one, since they largely deal with scalable configurational aspects of urban space, and that such findings are also easily transposed even if the architectural language is changed.

It was only three years after the publication of “Nihon no toshi kukan” that Isozaki was made responsible for the performative concept to be integrated in the Festival Plaza

First page of the “Principle of Space Order” and “Placement due to Circumstance” in the special issue “Nihon no toshi kukan.”

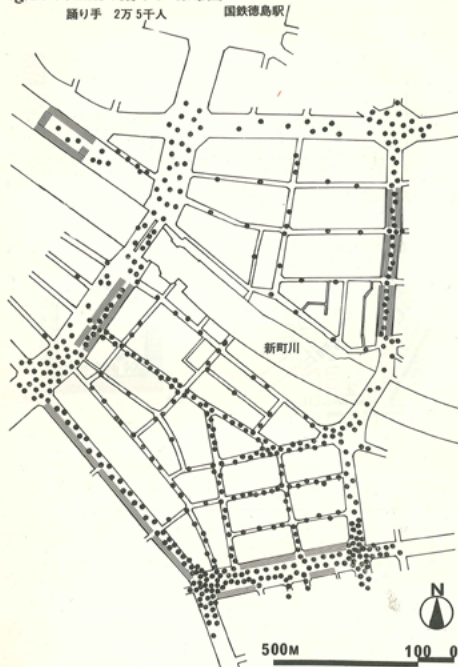
Source: Itô, Isozaki et al. 1963: 61, 63.

at Expo Osaka '70, the main space of the exposition (Schaad 2016). Expanding from his investigations on urban forms with Itō, Isozaki and a group of researchers further explored the possibilities of the city as a repository of architectural morphologies by studying the itineraries and flows of circulation at various traditional Japanese festivities. The idea was to extract, synthesize and apply these movement patterns into the changeable configuration of the Festival Plaza. In this research, a discursive analysis of historical street festivals in Japan was followed by the creation of a set of diagrams mapping the movement flows of its participants.² For instance, the study mapped the scope, density and movement directions of the dancers in the Awa Odori festival in Tokushima Prefecture – the largest dance festival in the country – to then apply such directions and movements to the layout of the Festival Plaza. In addition, the research included investigations on managing and controlling every element of the multiple performances that would be continually taking place within the parameters of this newly built environment by means of a central computer system. A series of schemes were presented to explain the communication settings between elements in the Plaza, the timeframe of each event and the cybernetic system that would theoretically regulate inputs and outputs between events and mechanisms.

Diagrams of density and movement direction extracted from the Awa Odori Festival, and their translation into the layout of the Festival Plaza.

Source: 'Red Book' 1967: 52–53.

Fig. 20 阿波踊り踊り手 分布図



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Fig. 21 阿波踊り 領域図

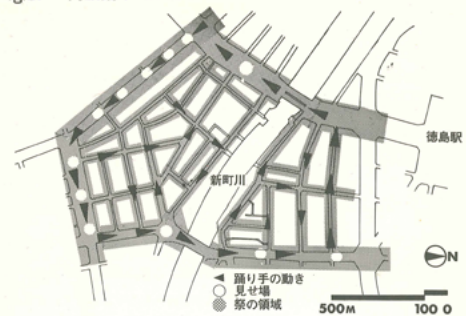
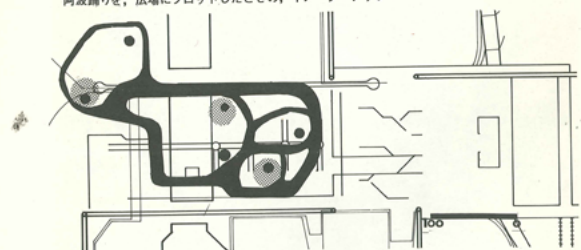


Fig. 22 〈お祭り広場〉でのスタディ

阿波踊りを、広場にプロットしたときの、イメージ・アップ



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The Plaza was then materialized as an open area delimited by a walkable space-frame structure 290 metres in length, 108 metres in width and thirty metres in height; this was held up by pillars concealing the elevators and service equipment. The structure was fiercely pierced by the so-called Tower of the Sun, a massive sculpture designed by artist Taro Okamoto. According to Isozaki, the Plaza was designed as a place that the public could potentially appropriate via a spirit of “collective excitement” (Isozaki 1970: 67). This would be possible thanks to the cybernetic system that would change the setting of the layout in response to people’s movements, and through the help of two performing robots moving around the space with sound, light and smoke effects. It turned out that the cybernetic system never worked as planned, but the layout of the space, configured as a combination of urban shapes and movement patterns, was indeed modified according to the different performances occurring throughout the day.³ However, far from generating an interactive atmosphere in which the public and the performers coexisted, the Festival Plaza remained much closer to a unidirectional, traditional, controlled events space.

Although the Festival Plaza failed to operate as interactively as promised, its design process represented an important attempt to formulate an innovative spatial configuration based on an archive of urban forms and movement patterns collected from the city. Drawing upon “Nihon no toshi kūkan” and the extended research elaborated for the

View of the Festival Plaza beneath the space frame, with Isozaki’s performative robots in the background.

Credit: L’architecture d’Aujourd’hui 152 (1970).

Expo Committee, the design sought to generate multiple urban experiences by means of dissolving boundaries and collapsing traditional notions of building functions and materiality. The Plaza was neither a building nor a square: it was first and foremost an infrastructure, embodying the result of a conversation between city form and architectural space, and encapsulating the vibrancy of street networks into an open urban void. This sort of space is, in fact, very uncommon in Japan. Indeed, public open spaces are scarce in Japanese cities, and the few historical examples, such as Okazaki Park in Kyoto and the acclaimed Hiroshima Peace Memorial, were laid out 'on demand'. They are open spaces initially conceived either to enhance a specific performance or to memorialize an important moment in history.

With no events to celebrate following its six-month duration, soon after the end of the Expo the entire site, and the Festival Plaza with it, was dismantled. But despite

View down onto Kyoto Station Main Hall. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20161027211105/http://www.panoramio.com/photo/92032500>



its ephemeral existence and ultimately controlled performance, the Plaza has been interpreted as a symbolic claim for change in the urban planning of Japanese cities at the time, one that would involve innovative morphologies while also adopting a close link with people's practices, as "a physical instrument to give voice to [the city's] living population" (Urushima 2006: 309). In its attempt to become a responsive environment whose layout was grounded in the morphology of the existing city, the Plaza aimed to take a step beyond the normative use of an urban space as the fixed theatre of choreographed festivities. Furthermore, it highlighted the question of whether more public squares were needed in Japanese cities. By translating urban patterns into the singular space of the Plaza, the site became the repository of an archive of urban forms, where multiple movements and potential activities were allowed. Within a single area, and helped by the movable performative objects designed by Isozaki, this urban infrastructure could certainly be understood as a Plaza but also as a cluster of streets or as a ceremonial promenade – ideally allowing people a certain freedom in the way they experienced an open space. Even today, the desire for more public squares in the city seems timely in Japan. Perhaps the closest examples to public squares can be found in the commercial halls of train stations in cities such as Kyoto and Kanazawa: huge, roofed spaces with shops, restaurants and amenities. Controlled, surveilled and covered by spatial structures, these seem to be the 'festival plazas' of the contemporary Japanese city, condensed archives of urban forms raising questions around the meaning of public space in Japan. Whether the citizen has the right to freely make use of such open spaces remains, as happened with the Festival Plaza, a contested territory.

Notes:

¹ As architect Naohiko Hino explains, large-scale urban projects proliferated in Japan in the 1960s as a result of a rapid industrialization and demographic growth in the country.

² The research was compiled in a so-called 'Red Book', a report presented to the Expo Committee for their approval. Its official title is "Research report of the integrated production mechanism using water, sound, light, etc. in the external space centered on the Japan World Exposition 'Festival Square'." The research was undertaken in 1967 by the Japan World Exposition Event Investigation Committee, comprising the main members Kuniharu Akiyama, Arata Isozaki, Nobuhiro Sato and Katsuhiro Yamaguchi. The report was issued by the Japan World Exposition Event Research Committee, Japan Science Foundation. This research report was found in the archive of Arata Isozaki, stored at the Misa Shin Gallery in Tokyo.

³ This was partly due to financial constraints, but most notably because of the lack of technological improvements to make such systems work properly.

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