



**How can
Architecture and Urbanism
Work in a Periphery?**





Abstract

In today's society urban liveliness has moved from the center of city to its periphery in a diluted manner. There exists the continuation of monotonous cityscape as by-product and leftover of architecture and urbanism. Herein lies the question: how to build a meaningful 'place' in a site where the sense of place is lost. This book is a record of the challenge in my belief that architecture is generous spatial entity which has both elaborated condition and quality orchestrated by the relationship to its site, structure, and material to enhance the quality of life through the human senses.



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How can Architecture and Urbanism Work in a Periphery?

through
Urban Proposal for Eisenhower Avenue West and
“The Bank”-a Convention Center for Alexandria

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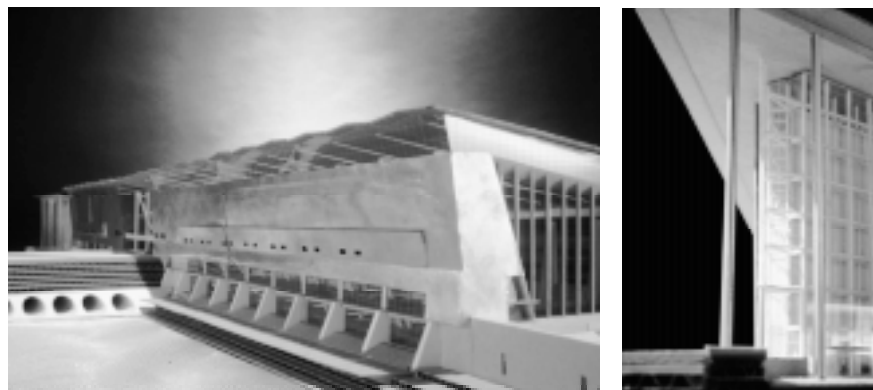
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Introduction





Introduction

This is a collection of on-going research on architecture to comprehend where I am standing and what I am looking at. This research starts with making clear my architectural starting point. The following are brief essays from the perspective of an outsider observing American society and city. It leads to the thesis project “How can Architecture and Urbanism work in a Periphery.” The thesis project reflects my idea that the task of architecture is to materialize its external demands and its internal demands in a concrete way. Therefore, the project consists of two design phases: the urban design phase and the architecture design phase. In the urban design phase I attempt to set the groundwork or the external demand for the later phase. The architecture design phase presents my intention to explore the possibility of architecture in the urban context, in other words, to challenge the mediation of those two demands.

My architectural perspective originates from my educational background: Yokohama National University in Japan and Virginia Tech in the United States. Both universities provided a different emphasis on the education; the former searches for a basis of architectural concepts outside of architecture, the latter searches inside of architecture. My architectural vision had oscillated between two poles, but now it is finding specific points to tackle. This book will show that my vision has changed during this research.

Tracing the current Japanese architectural trend, Yokohama National University's education is more interested in concept making rather than building making. In a way, it is approaching architecture by looking for its basis outside of architecture. I chose to become an architect when I was astonished by the passion contained in the expressive forms of Antonio Gaudi's work introduced on a TV program. Therefore, when I began my education at Yokohama National University, I expected to study architecture through the making of raw form with a dirty apron. But what I learned was to make architecture by translating linguistic terms through metaphor, icon, code, context, and institution. That was unexpected, but I, as well as my fellow classmates, was absorbed in fascination. The tendency of most students was to translate an abstract concept directly into a form through a linear process. We searched for NEW concept or hypothesis to build NEW architecture in the vast city of Tokyo for the sake of celebrating its so-called chaotic situation, accepting our nomadic being in transit, and regarding the temporary ever-changing urban condition as a must study field.

Virginia Tech has always been a comparable half in my education to develop my architectural idea. The educational emphasis lies not on how architecture can respond to its external demands, but rather how its internal demands are set and transformed into the physical entity through the understanding of materiality, structure, and poetics of space. Sometimes I became irritated with the students' naive attitude to regard architecture as a self-sufficient object that stands away from social and contextual reality.

Concept, Condition, and Quality

My first realization that great architecture evokes the human senses through experience which words alone can not achieve, did not manifest itself until I finished up my education in Yokohama. Alberto Pérez-Gómez states, "If architecture can be said to have a poetic meaning we must recognize that what it says is not independent of what it is. Architecture is not an experience that words translate later. Like the poem itself, it is its figure as presence, which constitutes the means and end of the experience."¹ At Yokohama, I was intimidated into creating form by literal translation of the concept, leaping from the words to form, and could not find a way to fill the gap. I started recognizing there was a sort of black box in the process of translation, which did not allow one to one relationships between a concept, an input and a form, an output. Although words can stimulate and direct design process, an architectural form is born from somewhere different because words and form do not belong to the same realm. In the words of Louis Kahn: "Form is what. Design is how. Form is impersonal, but design belongs to the designer. Design is prescribed by circumstances: How much money there is available, the site, the client, the extent of skill and knowledge. Form has nothing to do with such condition."²

Retrospective Criticism or Prospective Positioning

A good concept does not always achieve a good quality. A good condition does not always achieve a good quality. The concept and the condition can suggest a consideration of the quality of a room, but do not unfold the whole sensuous experience occurs in the room. I noticed the difference through my travel in the Western European countries. Historic towns, old churches, and most Modern architecture pleased me to my heart's content, but little of contemporary architecture gave me the same impression. While most contemporary architecture presented interesting concepts and interesting details, they lacked the rich quality of the space to encourage me to sketch. They gave me fragmented, superficial impressions, but not a complete experience.

I have discovered that design is not a linear process, but rather like a spiral process. An architectural solution is approached from many different angles by trial and error. Sometimes the condition we come across in drawing and making models will alternate our concept to improve the quality. If the primary role of an architect is place making, one needs to stand for providing the quality, sensuous experience to the space one creates. "The logocentrism of today's architecture also reflects a loss of innocence; the tacit practice of architecture within the continuum of architecture culture has turned into a conscious intellectual fabrication," analyzes Juhani Pallasmaa.³ But what architects contribute to the society is exuberant significance performed by architecture not superficial words. We must not abuse words and die in a ditch with only the play of words.

In his book *Thinking Architecture* Peter Zumthor remarks on teaching architecture, learning architecture:

Architecture is always concrete matter. Architecture is not abstract, but concrete. A plan, a project drawn on paper is not architecture but merely a more or less inadequate representation of architecture, comparable to sheet music. Music needs to be performed. Architecture needs to be executed. Then its body can come into being. And this body is always sensuous.

All design work starts from the premise of this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. To experience architecture in a concrete way means touch, see, hear, and smell it. To discover and consciously work with these qualities - these are the themes of our teaching.⁴

Historical View

Everything new was good and everything old was considered bad at architecture school in Yokohama National University. Making New architecture did not seem to require any retrospective knowledge because we were projecting towards the present not towards the past. We had the impression that observing society was the only way to discover the architecture of today. At that time, the influential figure group was a relatively young faculty from the Student Movement generation that emphasized the search for a conceptual foundation in separation from the previous generation, moreover, the history of

architecture. According to Hidetoshi Ono, the situation today in Japanese cities raises question to this attitude. He states, “A society extremely permissive with respect to architectural forms, economic development and the fact that architects saw opportunities for creation in discontinuity or rupture with history and the environment made the Japanese architectural world a laboratory for diverse architectural experiments, but it is surely not just the recession that followed the bursting of the bubble economy that gives that world for all its liveliness the appearance of fragility. The fact that architects have not made serious effort to address the issue of continuity in the above sense has robbed many works of contemporary architecture in Japan of any depth and has widened the rift between new works of architecture and the existing urban area.”⁵

If I can say those architects indulged themselves by making architecture just a commodity in the contemporary culture, Pallasmaa’s view hits the mark: “Architecture is nervously seeking its self-definition and autonomy in the embrace of the culture of consumption, which tends to turn it into a commodity and entertainment. . . . And the obsession for originality has eliminated the possibility of cumulative knowledge.”⁶

Only by examining the failed part of Modern architecture and labeling it as bad or not worth learning is shortsighted. “The abused Modernist architecture has not necessarily lost its communication capacity; perhaps we have become incapable of projecting meanings into it,” points out Pallasmaa.⁷ We owe to great pieces of Modern architecture, which considered the emerging programmatic demands and presented encouraged experimentation with newly available construction materials—steel, concrete, and glass. Nothing is as new as we think. There have been many problems as there are now. The history of architecture is not for our general knowledge of the past to sit on dusty shelves, but a vivid resource we can still learn from. Louis Kahn has said, “What will be has always been.” In Alvaro Siza’s aphorism: “Architects don’t invent anything, they transform reality.”⁸

Transforming Reality

Transforming reality does not mean to reflect characteristics of present society and culture into architecture without consideration. Especially in today’s situation, an architect needs to choose the level of reality to take in because architecture has its limit and task. Architecture is a product of critical examination of the environment in its slow process, and it can not escape from its physical presence. In other words, “In our media-saturated times it falls to architecture to have the direct esthetic experience of the real at the center of its concerns,” as Michael Benedikt writes in *For an Architecture of Reality*.⁹

In Yokohama, I was busy trying to follow the speed of change and the quantity of information available around me. I attempted to observe and let my project describe the on-going urban situation in Tokyo. We borrowed abstract ideas of contemporary theorists and philosophers without fully understanding them,

as well as made collage images of 'sexy' architecture to make random forms to conceive our ideas. We produced presentation 'posters' with minimal tectonic information and conceptual models that would be called abstract sculpture. At the presentation, we discussed only our indifferent concepts, not qualities, and we were evaluated on whether we had one to one relationships between a concept and a form. In retrospect, we seemed to have pretended that we understood the fashionable manifestoes introduced by the emerging architects and critics in order to stay in the circle. If I can assume that the premise of Post-modern architecture allows plurality in architectural thinking, the situation among us is a serious irony. Vittorio Gregotti warns, "No definite form: rather, total plasticity and interchangeability of solutions within this context. In other words no architecture."¹⁰

Like many young architects in Japan, we were all for temporal, de-materialized architecture to respond to the speed of social and cultural change. Mies van der Rohe's famous manifesto in 1923: "Architecture is the will of the epoch" encouraged us. We also drew from the character of Japanese traditional architecture in its temporality and flexibility as an appropriate example to invent an architectural idea of non-western origin. At the same time, we chose to omit the other important aspect of its character, especially the qualities of experience acquired in the room. We tried to bring the social and cultural diagram into architecture to regain the power of architecture, which has lost its significance in the modern society. As opposed to that, Pallasmaa suggests 'slowness' as one of his six themes to revive architecture for the next millennium: "We need an architecture that rejects momentariness, speed and fashion: instead of accelerating change and a sense of uncertainty architecture must slow down our experience of reality in order to create an experiential background for grasping and understanding change."¹¹

Zumthor calls for necessity of resistance: "architecture today needs to reflect on the task and possibilities which are inherently its own. Architecture is not a vehicle or a symbol for things that do not belong to its essence. In a society that celebrates the inessential, architecture can put up a resistance, counteract the waste of forms and meanings, and speak its own language."¹²

Here comes the real meaning of being radical, not in making architecture superficial and shallow like the current direction of our surroundings. In Pallasmaa's view: "The fault of the new architecture lies not in its extreme radicalism, but in the lack of a radicalism in questioning cultural reality."¹³



Americanness



Americanness

Memo 1: society

America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia, which has behaved from the very beginning, as though it was already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams, too. . . . They are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world. No more and no less in fact than were primitive societies in their day. The same mythical and analytic excitement that made us look towards those earlier societies today impels us to look in the direction of America. With the same passion and the same prejudices.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*¹

My intention to come to the United States was to see and explore “America” from inside. Prior to my study here, American culture had already seeped into my daily life in Japan. This country has presented twentieth-century way of life to the entire world, that is, mass-production, mass-consumption, dollar economy, motorization, skyscraper, shopping mall, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, rock music, jeans, Hollywood movies, personal computer, internet, American English, etc. This American system, in a sense, has been transplanted to some other culture as a modern standard. I saw this non-physical Americanness interpreted everywhere in Japan as well. Today, contemporary Japanese society would not exist without America’s presence.

This American system is so simple that anyone can understand it easily. People in other countries consciously or unconsciously adopt this system and transform it into their own culture. Wearing a pair of jeans is an obvious example. They can wear it in their own way with some interpretation, alteration, or misunderstanding. A pair of jeans has been a symbol and a standard of modernized society. It is like a personal computer, which allows you to use whatever application program as long as you have a world-standard operational system such as Windows 95 and Macintosh OS on your machine.

In the States, this generic system has also been valid and necessary to accommodate and naturalize a lot of immigrants from its beginning. The immigrants have arrived here with their own culture, language, and way of life. They have stayed here, raised children, and nourished this country. They have proved that they could make their own living in the relatively short time period. If rules to follow on this land were too demanding and complex to understand, they would have never stayed here. Therefore the rules have needed to be easy, simple, and visible.

On the other hand, some rules adopted here restrict people’s social behavior. Those rules are precisely prescribed to tell people what to do and what not to do. America is always thought of as the country of freedom, compared with the rigidity of Japanese society. But what is presented here betrays the image. Freedom is interpreted differently here. I enjoy certain freedoms in Japan that I

do not in America. In addition, American society has decided to protect children and even adults from everything “unhealthy.” This kind of censorship and extreme mothering does not exist in Japan. The purchase of alcohol, cigarettes, adult magazine and film is not regulated as strictly as here. School children are expected to learn common sense when crossing the street without having state laws enforcing cars to yield. Although you can maximize a degree of your freedom if you follow the rules, there are too many areas marked with yellow ‘CAUTION’ tape. This ‘freedom’ is confined in an enclosure, in other words, tamed American society. Baudrillard puts:

“Protect everything. Detect everything. Contain everything – obsessional society.
Save time. Save energy. Save money. Save our souls – phobic society.
Low tar. Low energy. Low calories. Low sex. Low speed – anorexic society.”²

What is arresting here is the absence of all these things- both the absence of architecture in the cities, which are nothing but long tracking shots of signals, and the dizzying absence of emotion and character in the faces and bodies. Handsome, fluid, supple, or cool, or grotesquely obese, probably less as a result of compulsive bulimia than a general incoherence, which results in a casualness about the body or language, food or the city: a loose network of individual, successive functions, a hypertrophied cell tissue proliferating in all directions.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*³

Memo 2: city

One of my first impressions traveling in the United States six years ago was that most American towns and cities were not as interesting as I expected. With the assumption that American people thrive with self-expression and individuality, I was surprised to find all the towns looked all the same then, except the downtown areas have geographical features such as river, lake, hill, and mountain or history developed through some time period. This situation was especially evident in the area where most people live, in suburbs. Nationwide chain stores creating strip malls around the exit from the highway and to the outskirts of town, which are supported by the highway system, providing customers with everything they want to possess. I could not wipe this monotonous impression of towns and cities when I drove coast to coast again two years ago.

This seems to result from the desire that people want security when they move or travel to another place. They may not need an exotic experience. Convenience comes first. Convenience is to be afforded to all Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville has remarked, “They readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding. Thus they fall to denying what they cannot comprehend; which

leaves them but little faith for whatever is extraordinary, and an almost insurmountable distaste for whatever is supernatural.”⁴ People unconsciously try to feel secured by making everywhere inside through making where anywhere: an indifferent land.

In many downtowns, there appeared to be so few layers of urban fabric that we were not as excited to wander around. Some individual buildings were designed with care, but a group of buildings along the same street lacked a sense of the whole. I have always considered downtown as a ‘stage’ for people not only to shop their goods, but also to show themselves and act themselves out, which I failed to observe. It should be the place of interaction, encouraging exploration that rewards curiosity.

Conclusive Thought

The social condition and the constitution of the Americans are democratic. . . . They arrived upon the soil they occupy in nearly the condition in which we see them at the present day; and this is of considerable importance.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*⁵

The great lesson of all this is that is that freedom and equality, like ease and grace, only exist where they are present from the outset. This is the surprise democracy had in store for us: equality is at the beginning, not at the end. . . . ‘Democracy demands that all of its citizens begin the race even. Egalitarianism insists that they all finish even.’ However, when obsession with judging others or with social prejudices has been left behind, there is greater tolerance, but greater indifference too.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*⁶

This country has been a great experiment field of freedom. What America has presented is an unavoidable result of advocating an ideal democratic society.

America’s freedom has been a great vehicle to provide a utopia for immigrants, the majority of its population. American democracy has taken equality of people for granted in the name of freedom. The immigrants have proved that the ‘American Dream’ is possible on this tolerant soil. The immigrants living in their ethnic community do not need to talk with people from outside in order to make their own life. They can still live as they did in their motherland to some degree. Freedom to create strong subcultures does not exist for immigrants in other foreign lands.

Quality has been reduced by equality. In the mass-production and mass-consumption society, speed and quantity is a key to satisfy customer’s endless desire. Surviving tactics is to provide less selection with more amounts. The market is full of reasonably priced goods arranged for customers. Convenience is sold to people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Every threshold is lowered for them to maximize their freedom.

The built environment is an accumulated record of society. Monotonous cityscape has reflected the society of global availability guaranteed by the equality.

The equality ensures accessibility in all directions. The automobile which can bring people anywhere anytime on this vast land have allowed people to keep their personal distance from one another. As well as on the way to the work, most people commute with their moving private rooms. A life with no disturbance is agreed on this soil.

Physical distance between people has taken away opportunity of interaction. Density of interaction is spread out evenly like butter on a piece of bread. What we enjoy in town is smell of food from neighboring restaurants, people's discussion over the price, or variety of signboards and buildings within the totality of the town. It is a product of negotiation between people who have different interests. There is no negotiation where there is no density. Periphery of cities, where is formed by equal accessibility shows reduced and diluted quality of experience. "When architecture dissociates itself from its metaphysical and existential basis, it becomes entertainment, amusement, and architectural muzak," Juhani Pallasmaa warns in his view of the architecture of the ultimate consumer society.⁸

Are we all going to be like this? Or is this the thing happening only in America?



**Thesis Project:
“How can Architecture and
Urbanism work in a Periphery?”**



Thesis Project: “How can Architecture and Urbanism Work in a Periphery?”

Project Intention

Among the American cityscapes, the periphery of cities reveals the predicament of American life most obviously: the reduced quality of place by maximized accessibility with less density of interaction. But this is also happening in the outskirts of European traditional cities and at the edges of Asian cities as well. This problem is applicable anywhere. This urged me to take advantage of being here in the United States where I could study the periphery of cities in its most advanced form. The challenge became an exploration into a possible strategy to create place of interaction through the manipulation of density. In other words, the method was to play both roles of an urbanist and an architect. This method was to simulate a condition set by the urban proposal in order to research on the possibility of architecture.

Looking back on this century, many architects seemed to have given up committing to urban design especially since the sixties when Team X's effort to succeed and improve the visions of CIAM ended up failing. “We have so long accustomed ourselves to conceiving of buildings as separate entities,” Fumihiko Maki remarks, “that today we suffer from an inadequacy of spatial language to make meaningful environments”¹ Urban designers and architects are supposed to collaborate to create built environments enhancing enjoyment of life for people by solving conflict between private interest and collective interest. But architects, following Le Corbusier's ‘Five Points of Modern Architecture,’ have been obsessed with making monumental shape, that is free-standing objects on city blocks. Until then, several buildings composed city blocks and individual buildings expressed being a part of the whole.

In Hidetoshi Ono's view: “One reason for this unfortunate situation for urban development and architecture can be traced to the way modern architecture was conceived. Underlying the modernist philosophy and technique with respect to the formation of the urban environment was a unified concept of city planning and architecture, and new architecture was premised on a new urban image. Modern architecture was premised, for example, on the new idea that every building was free to assume any outward shape . . . however, came at a price. The architects abandoned the city to the rationalistic viewpoint of transportation engineers and the judgement of urban administrators. Paradoxically, modernist logic at the same time unified and disengaged the city and architecture.”²

Based on this examination, I began my project by looking for an actual site or area, that would be appropriate to challenge my attempt to bring back the integrity of architecture and urbanism where it has been lost.

