

Urbanism and Urbanity as methodological and theoretical concepts

Michal (Miki) Daliot-Bul
The University of Haifa

Throughout civilization history, particularly since the industrialization era, the rhythm and dynamism of urban centers have revolutionized means of production, and have created the conditions for the emergence of innovative, experimental avant-gardism in art, culture and politics. Within urban centers multi-dimensional relations have emerged between physical built environments, ideological state apparatuses, economic structures, grass-root movements, fashions, aesthetics and new tastes. Hand in hand with these developments, "urbanism" has come to be a key word which seems self-evident, while in fact, it is a reference to a dynamic socio-cultural and economic construct characterized by heterogeneity, deep contradictions and incoherence. Urbanism as a reference to the mode of life developed in built environment and as constitutive cultural awareness (urban as opposed to backward rural culture), is the result of ongoing socio-cultural structuring, and hence, it bears the traces of dialectical processes. Thus, for example, because of the high concentration of population, urban spaces have always been closely associated with capital and government and therefore with education and socio-economic elites, but at the same time, they have always attracted also people from various less privileged socio-economic strata. From yet another perspective, processes of cultural production and planning, and the successful application of socio-political means of control, are clearly realized first and foremost in urban spaces. At the same time, urban spaces exhibit more than any other public arenas and often in dramatic ways the failure of these means as well as resistance to them. To paraphrase John Fiske's definition of culture (1992), Urbanism is not

aesthetic or humanistic, it is an arena of struggle over meanings; It is the stage for political struggles over the authority to determine social reality.

Japanese urbanity and within it its urban culture(s) were no exception. Here too, along with economic and industrial developments, urbanization (meaning the increase of population in cities and towns) and urbanism have become the locomotives of socio-cultural, political and economic developments. Entering the twentieth century, urbanization and urbanism both reflected and affected the development of capitalism and late-capitalism, consumer culture, mass leisure culture, transportation infrastructures, architecture, communication industries, information industries and cultural industries. These developments certainly had some exciting results, but they have had also darker (or at least ambiguous) ones on human relations, social classes, the organization of families, ecology and resource utilization.

As if all this is not complex enough, what is to me provokingly unsettling about urbanity and urbanism, is that today we can hardly approach them even as self explanatory theoretical concepts in the most general way. In the past two decades, the physical borders of urban spaces (in Japan and in other information societies) are redefined by overlapping virtual spaces that enhance and transform reality, the relationships among people, and the experience and awareness of urbanity and urbanism. Moreover, the production of knowledge and art, and the distribution of information no longer depend on the physical concentration of populations as was in the past; they are no longer tied with the densely built urban environment. We may do well to consider or at least allow ourselves a flight of imagination into possible futures of "post-urbanity", and "post urbanism".

Greatly inspired by the Japanese socio-cultural and technological landscapes, William Gibson imagined for a future, a darkish urban sprawl on the American East-coast; a "megacity" enclosed in geodesic domes that has become a separate world with its own climate with no real night/day cycle. In Gibson's "urban sprawl" advanced technology is ubiquitous and accessible to all, regardless of financial standing. Of course, in the megacity of an urban sprawl world, there is no urbanization or urbanism, because there are no alternatives to the urban sprawl, urbanization and urbanism. But the idea of a megacity does not have to be as dark as Gibson has imagined it. In fact some ecologists are alerting us today that in view of the growth of human population, living in megacities might be the only rational alternative if nature conservation is on our mind.

Happily for many, the urban sprawl vision is not the only future we can imagine. We may also imagine the future human civilization as fragmented, geographically wide spread and heterogeneous, with multiple centers of different sizes (some may be very small and even geographically isolated), all of which generate new ideas, new art, new alternative ways of living. A vision of a "flat world", to further develop Thomas Friedman's metaphor, in which affinity with major urban locations no longer predicts a person's chances of doing great things with great impact. The urban sprawl and the flat world, are not mere play with fantastic themes, architects and urban planners are considering today these different possibilities quite earnestly and practically as they dream of a brave new world.

During the first biennial conference of the Israeli Association of Japanese Studies, we had the opportunity to think about the history of Japanese urbanity and the on-going formation of urbanism in Japan as a dynamic and always changing mode of life. We were presented with original papers on the dialectical processes through which new concepts of urbanity were developed by the Japanese state in the past, and the ways in which they are developed today. Finally, we were also invited to dive into the imaginative worlds of artists and creators and the ways Japanese urbanity became for them the source of inspiration and the locus of cultural critic.

The papers collected for this conference proceedings will give the reader intriguing and hopefully inspiring ideas on how urbanity and urbanism can be used as theoretical and methodological terms in the research of Japanese society, culture and economy.

References:

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