A Role of Public Spaces/Places for Creating Livable Cities in Japan

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors aim to examine the role of public spaces and places in revitalization of local communities for creating livable cities in Japan. The Place-making and Social Actions based on a collection of quick, simple, temporary and sustainable changes in the spaces, intended to improve the local communities and cities consider as an alternative approach for the next generation of community revitalization in Japanese Cities. The paper includes five key sections including (i) an introduction, (ii) a literature review, (iii) methodology, (iv) results and (v) a conclusion. The paper is based on the literature review and case study analysis. Findings suggests that place making can create a vital cities and communities in Japan utilizing vacant space such as house, shops, facilities and parks through revocation and making these spaces into active places in the community.

Keywords: Public Spaces/Places, Place-making, community revitalization

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1. Introduction

Many Japanese cities and local communities have been facing serious challenges due to a striking and increasing aging population. Such challenges are not only limited to a severe economic crisis with a shrinking consumer market, labor shortage, exhausted local economies with medical and long-term care services, but also on how to establish and manage public utilities and spaces. While these challenges become more diverse and complex, it is clear that there are limitations on the traditional top-down way of public service providing mechanisms. Alternative measures are urgently needed recognizing a sense of diversity and social inclusion, to support each other and to establish organic ties among the diverse agents, rather than a one-sided relationship between service providers and receivers or dependence on others.

This paradigm shift also reflected in the long-term national development plans of the Government of Japan. The Declaration of New Public Commons (2010) of the Cabinet Office identified the importance of a vibrant civil society where people support one another rather than viewing public services as the sole responsibility of the public sector. People value the pleasure of helping each other and they allow economic activities to thrive by generating new markets and services (Cabinet Office, 2010). In addition, the Council for Promotion of the Society of Mutual Assistance (2015) recognized the essential to have a spirit of mutual assistance that supports each other, establish organic ties among the diverse agents to overcome the challenges together (Council for Promotion of the Society of Mutual Assistance, 2015). The Japan’s Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens (2016) also highlighted the significance of a society in which all citizens are dynamically engaged and participated in local revitalization activities (Cabinet Office, 2016).

According to all these national plans, creating new system and mechanisms for various actors to engage in activities in their familiar areas in the spirit of mutual assistance to create new ties among the people and promote the revitalization of the regional communities is identified as a priority of action. For example, it is significant that people such as youth who could not find their place in the community, the elderly who tend to be isolated, and women who could hardly raise their voice, all participate actively, not passively, in the promotion of the society of mutual assistance in their community. As they start to have opportunities or places to participate in the community, it is expected that the unheard voices of vulnerable people will be reflected in the local community (Council for promotion of the Society of Mutual Assistance, 2015).

Within this background, another wave of community planning and designing is being widely spread in Japan. They are widely focused on inspiring communities to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces and places as the heart of revitalization of the community. The simple actions are introduced to strengthen the connection between people and the spaces. Most of these activities are utilizing vacant spaces such as house, shop, public facilities and parks through revocation and turn these spaces into more active places in the community. This approach is characterised local management rather depending on the government subsidy. The public participation itself is covering not only in making plans but also in implementation and management.

Not only in Japan, but also in globally, it is now growing attention among cities on how to improve the quality of life for their citizens through such local innovations. The New Urban Agenda of the UN-Habitat (2016) which adopted at the Habitat III Conference in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016 gave a significant recognition of the importance of establishing a good
public spaces and places to achieve sustainable development (UN-Habitat, 2016). The Urban Agenda identifies that the place making, a process of developing public spaces and places, is a vital ingredient of successful cities. It helps build a sense of community, civic identity and culture. Public spaces facilitate social capital, economic development and community revitalisation. The liveliness and continuous use of public space as a public good leads to urban environments that are well maintained, healthy and safe, making the city an attractive place in which to live and work (Andersson, 2016). Therefore, it is important for local governments in Japan, not only in investing for physical infrastructure, but also in making public space and places.

2. Literature Review: Public Spaces, Places and Place Making

In the humanistic geography, spaces and places are important concepts. Space is something abstract, without any substantial meaning. While place refers to how people are aware of attracted to a certain piece of space. A place can be seen as space that has a meaning. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) searched for the meaning of space, place and environment. According to Tuan, the difference between space and place can be described in the extent to which human beings has given meaning to a specific area. Space can be described as a location, which has no social connections with a human being. No value has been added to this space. It is an open space, but may mark off and defended against intruders. It does not invite or encourage people to fill the space by being creative. No meaning has been described to it. It is more or less abstract (Tuan, 1977). However, place is in contrary more than just a location and can be described as a location created by human experiences. The size of this location does not matter and is unlimited. It can be a city, neighborhood, a region or even a classroom et cetera. In fact place exists of space that is filled with meanings and objectives by human experiences in this particular space. Places are centers where people can satisfy their biological needs such as food, water etc. (Tuan, 1977, p. 4).

According to Project for Public Space, great public spaces are where celebrations are held, social and economic exchanges take place, friends run into each other, and cultures mix (PPS, 2013). Public space relates to all those parts of the built and natural environment where the public have free access (Carmona et al 2004:10). Carmona understood that access to public space is free for all and it is related to a physical space. Similarly, Claudio (2010) defines public space as extended to communal and no-private arenas regardless of ownership including semi-public, luminal or third spaces. Norberg (2007) clarifies that space represents the physical container of activities and objects while the place is a point where physiological and psychological needs meet. Dear and Wolch (1989) argues that social relations can be constituted through space, constrained by space and mediated by space. They explained that site characteristics influences settlement form, physical environment facilitates or obstruct human activity and the frictions of distance facilitates or inhibit is the development of various social practices. This argument shows that physical factor is neither the exclusive nor dominating behaviour influence although one tends to follow what the environment offers them.

Place making is a community approached planning and managing public spaces. Building community, creating places, using existing spaces is the vision of place making (PPS, 2013). Places cannot be designed like landmarks, however, place making focuses on creating spaces that recognize landscapes as part of social constructions that promotes livability, health and wellbeing. Friedmann (2010) refers to physical spaces that evolve in their own pattern and
rhythms of life as a place. The state may control the physical context for activities within a certain time which permits certain public behaviour and which is not. Since the 1960s, the current-day movements in Place-making began to take root. In 1960, Kevin Lynch published *The Image of the City*, which influenced thinking on the importance of human-centered urban design. A year later, Jane Jacobs authored her seminal book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) in which she argued about designing cities for people, not just cars and shopping centers. In his book and companion film, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), William H. Whyte outlined key elements for creating vibrant social life in public spaces. Philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s work on Urbanism and the creation of space lays another key foundation for the Place-making movement today. He argued in 1968 that there is a fundamental “right to the city,” an assertion against the top-down management of space that he felt restricted social interactions and relationships in society. Public places, which are not our homes nor our work places, are what Ray Oldenburg calls “third places.” Place-making creates these “third places” that he describes as, “the places of social gathering where the community comes together in an informal way, to see familiar and unfamiliar faces, somewhere civic discourse and community connections can happen. The Place-making offers not just social friction, but social capital. Robert Putnam’s seminal 2001 book, *Bowling Alone*, defined social capital as “the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

3. Aims and Methodology

This paper aims to explore the new taxonomy of public space or place making and study its potential for enabling mutual relationships, dialogue, communication and interaction among different actors of the community to join for achieving the local development. The paper also aims to (i) identify the value or impacts of the place making activities for community revitalization and (ii) the key factors that make these activities successful. The relevant information collects from the consultation with professionals involved in the place making research and activities and feedback provided by community members and other stakeholders. This paper is organized into five sections. The section one gives a brief introduction and explains the issue of the paper. Subsequent section presents the literature review of the study. The third section provides the aims and methodology, followed by the results and discussion section. The final section offers the conclusion and implications of the results.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Case Study Presentation

*Case study 1: Minami Kasuya House, Chita City*

Minami Kasuya House is a Salon that residents of the Chita City, Aichi Prefecture voluntarily run and manage by themselves. It serves as a public place where anyone can freely visit, spend their leisure time and enjoy drinking and having a lunch. The district where the Salon is located is a residential area of the city where many people who have moved from other areas during the high economic growth of the 1970s. There are about 5,400 population live in this area with the aging rate of 40%. A sample survey carried out by the city officials identified that these elderly people spend their most of times at home and needed a space to meet and
spend a time with others that ultimately reduce the lonely life of the elderly people in the community. With the subsidy of 3.5 million JPY from the local government and the voluntary support of the community members, the abandoned liquor store was renovated and developed into the Salon in 2013. The Salon is opened from 10 AM to 3 PM on weekdays. In addition to drinks such as tea and coffee, snacks such as rice ball set, udon and soba are also served in a reasonable price. For the management of the Salon, there are 29 registered volunteers from the community. In addition, 14 staff perform events and shop repair. Further, some music, hula dance, shakugei are carried out on Tuesday and some events such as performing radio exercise and walking are enriched on Saturday. According to the officials, the average customer is 20-30 people a day.

Case study 2: The East Park in Kobe City

The history of this park started from the riverbed on the east side of the old settlements as a playground dedicated to foreigners in the city. It was the East Park, which experienced various ways of use during the past 150 years of history. However, the use of this park has been getting down in recent years, except for large events such as Luminaire and Kobe Festival. As a result, it was a growing need that the park should be upgraded as a citizen’s outdoor living, not only when holding a special event, but also can use it more pleasantly and more carefully for day by day. As a result, the private agency named the Design City Kobe creation meeting was established in 2014. Citizen volunteers organized the Kobe Park Management Social Experiment Executive Committee and the concept of social experiments began in order to ascertain the great possibilities of this park. Some of the key activities are:

East Park Management Social experiment: Connect Sannomiya terminal and waterfront and connect the former settlement to Isobo. Literally, in the East Park located in the center of Kobe, there is a big potential that can raise the value of the city center. The first social experiment held in June 2015 to explore this Heart of Kobe as a familiar and attractive citizen’s outdoor living and to explore the possibilities of leading to an increase in the value of the surrounding area.

Farmers Market: On Saturday and Sunday, June 13 and 14, a farmers market was held to explore the possibility of future continuation holding as a real event of the new local production site Eat Local Kobe in Kobe city. In the venue, there were sales booths for agricultural products
using light trucks, provided branches by collaborated restaurants and received farm visit program.

*Outdoor Library:* In the first outdoor library, public owners of 36 people was invited and ten books each was donated before the event in line with the theme set by each. Even during the exhibition, a donation of the book at the counter was received and book exchange meeting for each bookshelf owner was held.

4.2. Discussion:

The case study analysis shows that whether it is a restaurant/salon or neighborhood park, they are shared some common principles in transforming a public space into a vibrant public place in the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Minami Kasuya House, Chita City</th>
<th>The East Park in Kobe City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Challenges</td>
<td>The district where the Salon is located is one of the old residential areas of the city. Many people who have moved from other parts of the city to settle in here during the high economic growth of the 1970s. There</td>
<td>This is the East Amusement park, which experienced various ways of use in about 150 years of its history. However, in recent years, this park is not used much, except for large events such as Luminaire and Kobe Festival.</td>
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Figure 2: Organizing community activities in the East Park, Kobe City
Source (http://urbanpicnic.jp)
are about 5,400 population live in this area with the aging rate of 40%. The sample survey carried out by the city identified that these elderly people spend their times at home and needed a place to meet and spend a time with others to reduce their lonely life. In 2014, citizen volunteers organized the Kobe Park Management Social Experiment Executive Committee and the concept of social experiments began in order to ascertain the great possibilities of this park.

| (2) Development Process | With the subsidy of 3.5 million JPY from the government and the voluntary support of the community members, the abandoned liquor store was renovated into the Salon. | The development process of the park was started with the first social experiment held in June 2015 to exploited this Heart of Kobe as a familiar and attractive citizen’s outdoor living and to explore the possibilities of leading to an increase in the value of the surrounding area by the citizen volunteers. Currently, there are many activities are happening such as farmers market, outdoor library, and the exhibitions. |
| (3) Key Actors | Staff members are volunteers who lives near the salon. They renovated this house (originally liquor shop) with people’s voluntary action, partly using the government subsidy. The independent revenues are established such that tenant’s fees are covered by profit. | Citizen volunteers who are organized into Park Management Social Experiment Executive Committee is in charged the activities with support of the local government and other partners (public, private and volunteers) |

The community is the main actor in planning and implementation/management of spaces

The first starting point in developing a concept for any public space is to identify the available talents and assets within the community. According to the both case study areas, some people in the community can provide historical perspective, valuable insights into how the area functions, and an understanding of critical issues. Mobilizing and linking these internal talents and assets at the early stage of the process will help to create a sense of community ownership in the project that can be of great benefit to both the project sponsor and the community.

Developing a place, not a design and physical infrastructure/space

To make an abandoned or under-performing space into a vital place in the community, physical elements need to be introduced that would make people welcome and comfortable, such as seating and new landscaping, and also through management changes in the pedestrian circulation pattern and by developing more effective relationships between the surrounding retail and the activities going on in the public spaces. The goal is to create a place that has both a strong sense of community and a comfortable image, as well as a setting and activities and uses that collectively add up to something more than the sum of its often simple parts. This is easy to say, but difficult to accomplish.
**Develop a common vision**

The vision needs to come out of each individual community; however, essential to a vision for any public space is an idea of what kinds of activities might be happening in the space, a vision that the space should be comfortable and have a good image, and that it should be an important place where people want to be. It should instill a sense of pride in the people who live and work in the surrounding area.

**Triangulate**

In a public space, the choice and arrangement of different elements in relation to each other can put the triangulation process in motion. For example, if a bench, a wastebasket and a telephone are placed with no connection to each other, each may receive a very limited use, but when they are arranged together along with other amenities such as a coffee cart, they will naturally bring people together. On a broader level, if a children’s reading room in a new library is located so that it is next to a children’s playground in a park and a food kiosk is added, more activity will occur than if these facilities were located separately.

**Experiment: lighter, quicker, cheaper**

The nature of complexity of public spaces make it difficult to do everything right at initially. The best experiment can be started with short-term action/improvements that can be tested and refined over many years. The elements such as seating, outdoor cafes, public art, striping of crosswalks and pedestrian havens, community gardens and murals are examples of improvements that can be accomplished in a short time.

**Focused on process rather products**

Successful public spaces respond to the needs, the opinions and the ongoing changes of the community. Amenities wear out, needs change and other things happen in an urban environment. Being open to the need for change and having the management flexibility to enact that change is what builds great public spaces and great cities and towns.

**Creation of new partnership between public and private**

Both case studies highlighted the importance of involvement of public, private and community entities as makers, whether the sectors collaborate initially as instigators or whether private and community partners are primarily responsible for the ongoing maintenance and operations of a historically public place. The bottom line is, the place making sector has expanded the service provision solely from public sector to include the private sector, as well as citizen groups (non-profits, foundations, and individuals) to play a role in these important processes. Collaborations that a generation ago would be unheard of are now commonplace in Japan and the public and private sectors interact in new ways around the creation of places, lasting bonds form. The relationships that grow out of the “making” are equal to, if not more important than, the places that result.
5. Conclusion

The study identified that place making with a set of small, low-cost and temporary changes into the public spaces, intended to revitalize the cities and local neighborhoods in Japan. These activities are utilizing vacant space such as house, shops, facilities and parks through revocation and making these spaces into active places in the community. This transformative process is also focused on observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space in order to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for their community as a whole. Working with the community to create a vision around the places they view as important to community life and to their daily experience is key to building a strategy for implementation. Beginning with short-term, experimental improvements can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them and inform longer-term improvements/change over time. A low-cost, high-impact incremental framework for improving public spaces in short order that capitalizes on the creative energy of the community to efficiently generate new uses and revenue for places in transition. Currently, idea of Tactical Urbanism is widely recognized all around the world. Civic engagement in the community is a crucial factor to foster a sense of “Civic Pride”.

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