

## The Dilemma of Japan's Street and Square

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The embracing of the International Style brought Japan the concept of the 'square', a civic prototype alien to its authentic traditions. In the 1940's architects like Kenzo Tange<sup>1</sup> began to develop terminologies such as 'communication space', based on studies of the Greek 'agora', attempting to fill a void in the Japanese architectural vocabulary. The Western idea of the square, previously non-existent, now began to be formalized in ambitious projects such as Tange's 'Plan for Tokyo'<sup>2</sup> in 1960, in a changing post-war Japan that was being increasingly influenced by the West. Since then, the past few decades of Japanese urbanism have – like the West – witnessed the random proliferation of the square as a predominant feature of its urban scene<sup>3</sup>, from civic centers to commercial districts and even housing complexes.

However, contemporary Western urbanism is recognizing the redundancy of its scattered squares and showing an increasing tendency to resurrecting a civic prototype that for long was undermined if not ignored. From the twenty years separating the anti-street thesis of Le Corbusier - wherein he castigated the traditional street for being no more than a narrow cleft<sup>4</sup> - to the pro-street preoccupations by Alison and Peter Smithson in the early fifties, and from seminal writings by Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Leon Krier and Allan Jacobs in the seventies and eighties to the crystallization of the Charter of the New Urbanism in the nineties, the street has gradually made a comeback<sup>5</sup>. At the turn of the century, the street stands established as a contemporary civic place, a pedestrian-friendly public 'room' engendering sociability and interaction. For a post-modern Japan, the redundancy of its Modern squares coupled with the global re-

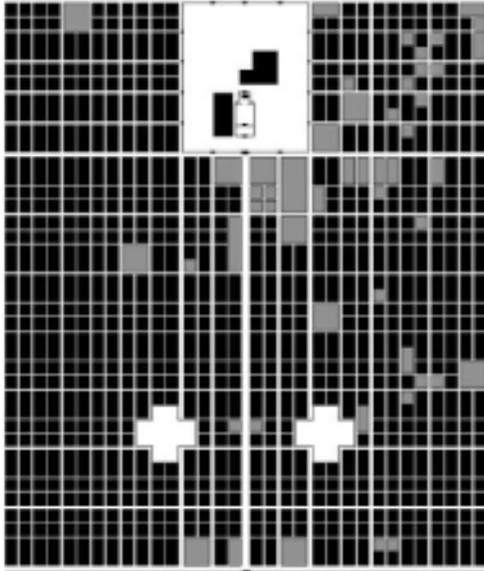
emergence of the street, begs a contemplation of its own forgotten traditions – ironically the street was the very civic prototype that half a century ago it had rejected as an antiquated concept.

### NOSTALGIA

In traditional Japan, it was the labyrinthine, tenuous street and not the square that was the center of civic life. Unlike the medieval Western fabric where squares overlaid the labyrinth of urban streets, in Japan squares were minimal in their presence, taking the form of semi-private shrine grounds or palace courts. In a stratified social structure with the emperor at its head there was no communion in any democratic sense. Looking at plans of traditional Japanese capital cities like Heian-kyo (Kyoto), there seems at once to be no conscious expression of formal community space, the only prominent definition being the main avenue running through the middle of the city and ending in the palace complex (image 1). The rest of the fabric was a grid of streets<sup>6</sup>, punctuated by temples and mansions. There were two distinct areas officially set aside for the East and West Markets, one in either half of the city, but with the economic decline of the city, and the Hogen and Heiji rebellions in the 1150's, the markets gradually died as places of commerce. Buying and selling concurrently expanded into the city itself, booming around intersections of various thoroughfares such as Machi Street (modern Shimmachi Street), which ran north-south near the middle of the Left Capital. The street thus became the place of work, buying and selling as well as the scene for secular and sacred ceremonies thus developing into the community prototype whether in

planned capitals such as Heian-kyo, castle-towns such as Edo, or provincial towns scattered across the country.

*Image 1 - Figure Field Diagram of original plan of Heian Kyo (Kyoto). The two planned markets (eventually absorbed into the street grid) are in white, with semi-private shrine and temple grounds in grey. Referenced from 'Nihon Kenchiku Shi Zushu' published by Shokokusha, 1988.*



As a prototype, the street evolved an ambiguous urbanism. In the dense townscapes though each 'cho' or neighborhood unit comprised a distinct number of streets, they were only as vaguely delineated as stated in obscure everyday terminologies such as 'kai-wai' (literally 'around that area'). Lined with 'nagaya'<sup>7</sup> or 'machiya' (townhouses) abutting each other with little or no individuality in design save the arrangement of openings and treatments along the façade, this was a frontage of simple timber architecture, with posts set into the ground and the wall spaces filled with flexible woodwork. (images 2,3,4) Over time, such streets developed concentrations of various trading activities – streets with carpenters, another with traders, blacksmiths and so on, living in their modest homes a life of minimal privacy where the sounds of a neighbor's household activity could easily be heard through the poorly insulated timber walls that separated one from another. But the accepted norms of such communities hardly encouraged delineations for privacy and publicness. Individual houses displayed a translucency, allowing the interiors to

interpenetrate the street through an elastic boundary. Unlike the stasis of the Western street wall, the Japanese one was flexible, composed of translucent 'shoji' (paper paneled lattice screens) and opaque 'amado'<sup>8</sup> (rain shutters) that in the absence of any permanent physical attachments such as hinges, could be slid or completely removed. The street became a malleable urban entity that could transform its physical edge to sustain the diurnal and seasonal rhythms of life.

During the day, the street was the buzzing hub of the community. The 'shoji' that defined the street were slid open to allow the street space to interpenetrate the private space of the households. The threshold that otherwise suggested the transition from the street to the house, diffused domestic and commercial space as part of an activity pattern from inside to out. By night the street transformed. The 'amado' were brought up and shut

*Image 2 - Traditional streetscape in the temple town of Hasedera, Nara (photo courtesy – authors)*



*Image 3 - Traditional streetscape in Gion district, Kyoto showing 'sudare' (reed blinds) hanging in the upper stories (photo courtesy – authors)*



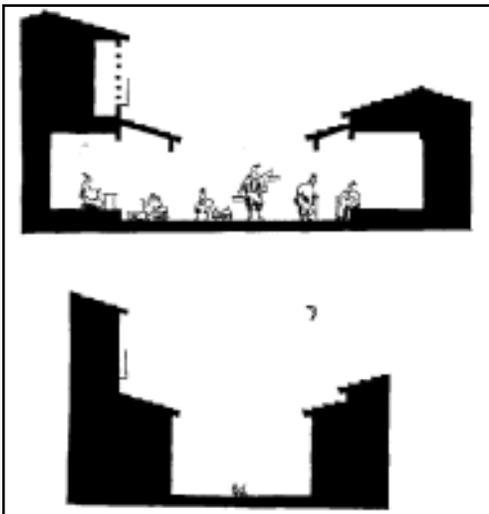
for a secure, private, interior night life. The street, now a silent spine would hold the community together till the next morning when it would be time to transform again. (image 5)

This diurnal beat formed part of a larger palette of seasonal rhythms that celebrated the changing cycles of nature. In the bright summers, the 'shoji' remained open, the spatial interpenetration working wonders not just as a comfort generator - facilitating cross ventilation for the homes - but also as a display tool for the various trades, by providing glimpses into the 'machiya' interiors. During the day a curtain or 'noren' would hang in the 'machiya' entrance. It marked the shop boundary and bore the family crest mark. (image 6) It was these curtains varying in size and color that distinguished one shop from another, marketed its trade and simultaneously added a soft kinetic element

*Image 4 – Street frontage details— the lattices can be slid open or covered with opaque 'amado' shutters*



*Image 5 – Day-Night / Summer-Winter Section*



to the otherwise dry streetscape. Such ambiguous delineations from inside to out enhanced the affinity for street life. Adults came outdoors to meet, trade and barter. Children sang street songs that changed as the seasons turned. The local fish vendor heralded a new season through the change in the fish he would bring to the households. Mosquito bites confirmed the peak of the hot humid summers, just as the sight of the red dragonfly signaled the coming of autumn and plum blossoms the beginning of spring. And when the storms would arrive, the street would transform again. The 'amado' would be brought up securing the home interiors from the harsh elements of the outside weather. The rhythms of the street would now assume a reposed, passive tone, until the seasons would become benign again.

Amidst such activity patterns, the urge for public communion refreshed during seasonal festivals and religious gatherings. Such gatherings were of a characteristic nature— they were hardly static with people gathering within a single space, rather kinetic, continuously meandering through the wide thoroughfares and narrow alleys of the community. It was here that the street became the behavioral counterpart to the absence of a defined gathering space. For on these occasions, the wooden lattices of the houses that made the street boundary were completely taken down extending the street space deep into the house interiors. The everyday private space of the household now became a semi-public viewing space, for sitting, dining and greeting the adults and children continually journeying through the streets with various floats. With this spatial transformation along with paper lanterns, myriad festive fetishes hanging at every

*Image 6 – Shop front in temple town of Hasedera, Nara showing 'noren' in entrance*



doorway, and the crowds, colors, floats and folies, the physical street gradually eroded. It became a large, amorphous public field sustaining a form of communal activity that was constantly changing in space and time. The street architecture, now dominant more as floating roofs than defining walls was merely a backdrop to the constantly pulsating spatial entity. This was the 'non-street'<sup>9</sup> of traditional Japan - a transient, communal 'place', ambiguous in form, yet defined by the activity within. Then gradually, the motion would dwindle, the spell would end, the wooden walls would be brought up, and the street would become physical again. (image 7)

To analyze such rhythms and transformations, it is less the few remaining traditional streets, and more the various medieval art sources that provide valuable information. The 'Picture Scroll of Annual Rites and Ceremonies' (Nenchu gyoji emaki,) originally painted in sixty scrolls about 1173, the 'Picture Scroll of the Monk Ippen' (Ippen Shonin eden) painted in 1299, and the pair of screens entitled 'Scenes in and around the Capital' (Rakuchu rakugai zu) dated between 1530-78, suggest two elemental and relational directions. The first is the street as a 'unified wall', the second, as an 'amoebic entity'. They are distinguished by the perception of their spatial voids and solids, both falling within the realm of conventional street experience. The traditional Japanese street during the private night hours represents the street as a 'unified wall'. Here, like the traditional Western Street the perceptual importance resides in physical street definition in the sense that the street seems to have been generated into a purposeful figural void by the building wall that flanks it. The building facades belong more to the street than to the buildings, and the street is perceived as a volume carved from the mass of buildings. During the day when the street wall is 'opened' the perceptual importance shifts from the street space. The street does not seem to be a void consciously produced by its buildings.

Image 7 – Festival Section



The street façade is perceived as a fragmented membrane, interpenetrating spatial osmosis from inside to out.

And this devaluing of the 'unified wall', reaches its extreme on the festive days when the 'non-street' is born. The street façade though porous, is now read less as a series of interpenetrations, and more as momentary chaotic spatial pulsations between inside and out, simultaneously creating and dissolving an ever-changing fluid space. It is about differences in the fetishes, artifacts and their relative placement, all resisting our perception of the street room as a defined spatial configuration in itself. The feeling is now of being within a larger amoebic space, than a coherent street room. This 'plasticity' of the street remains the most distinct characteristic of the traditional Japanese civic realm. It challenges the conventional physical and behavioral understandings of formal civic space. It is Japan's equivalent to the Western plaza.

#### ERASURE

One may get nostalgic in some of Japan's well-preserved traditional streets with 'sudare' (horizontal reed blinds) outside the upper windows fluttering in the wind and 'noren' displaying their crest marks in the soft light of paper lanterns hanging outside every doorstep. But such streetscapes represent a thin slice amidst the new dynamic streets of modern Japan. Today Japanese streets have other rhythms - the softness of the paper lanterns overlaid by the snarls of the neon lights, the simplicity of the crest marks displaced by ever competing store-signs of every possible nature to draw the attention of their customers. Today one no longer hears a fish vendor's beckon, rather, the lures of a political jeep lurking streets that are antithetical to their narrower, humane, predecessors - wide concrete thoroughfares, beating with a competitive, discontinuous, and fierce gusto amidst Japan's zesty modern environs. (image 8)

Obviously, new laws and ideas ushering Modernism transformed the meaning of the Japanese street in contrast to its traditional concepts. High inheritance taxes discouraged the preservation of traditional dwelling types and streetscapes, and with newer concepts of home ownership, houses resisting abutting, preferred to individualize themselves. The segregation of land uses encouraging exclusively residential zones and the reliance on

*Image 8 – Nightscape in Shinjuku, Kabukicho, Kyoto  
(photo courtesy – Jason Weill)*



the automobile coupled with the ever-increasing complexity of the urban realm, internalized the traditional row-house as the concept of privacy began to get more defined. A fragmented and opaque residential street gradually displaced the fluid and translucent traditional live-work concept, and by the sixties, the street as a 'place' was a forgotten prototype. With dwindling attitudes towards an architecture of urban and ecological consequences, the co-existence of the 'Torii' (shrine gateway) alongside the Neo-modern was marred no so much by random development and speculation as by the irreplaceable erasure of Japan's historic sceneries and natural surrounds. In new office districts, high-rise typologies with their fragmented, somber 'squares' further displaced the traditional street relationship, the corporate tower - like a modern 'Diamyo' (feudal lord) - exerting a new socio-behavioral influence on a new capitalistic Japan.

Thus along with the significant yet relatively remote preoccupations with 'group form' by architects such as Fumihiko Maki<sup>10</sup> – wherein he converted existing street frontage shopping into 'enclaves' set back from the street, the succeeding work of the 'Japanese New Wave'<sup>11</sup> consented that one could in the Japan of the seventies and eighties, hardly hope to achieve any meaningful relationship between the single building and the urban fabric as a whole. They accepted the place-less complexities of Japanese modern urbanism as the dramatic, intellectual context for newer architectural dialogues and directions. It was Toyo Ito that clarified a new cultural notion of introverted, closed domains to counteract the disorder of Japan's "Non-Place Urban Realm". Arguing in his

1978 essay 'Collage and Superficiality in Architecture', that richness in the Japanese city was perceived less through the historical accumulation of buildings, and more "out of a nostalgia for (a) lost architectural past which is indiscriminately mixed with the superficial icons of the present", he defined the goal of his architecture, not as the pursuit of that nostalgic satisfaction, but as the expressing of a certain "superficiality of expression in order to reveal the nature of the void hidden beneath".

Thus emerged the introverted enclave, a critical attitude most evident in Tadao Ando's austere concrete<sup>12</sup>. It was his recognition of the tension between universal modernism and the idiosyncrasy of rooted culture that prompted him towards a "closed modern architecture" in response to the loss of Japan's most persistent architectural tradition – the intimate connection with nature and openness to the natural world. His small courtyards, such as in the Koshino (1981) and Kidosaki (1986) Houses presented blank walls to the city, shutting out the public realm. They created private contemplative enclaves amidst Japan's chaotic urban context hoping to encourage a re-contemplation of its lost space-time perceptions and recover some vestige of that former intimacy. Thus amidst its eroding traditional urban patterns versus an evolving architecture that turned its back to the cacophonous city Japan seemed to recognize, even acknowledge the extent of its impoverished civic realm.

## DILEMMA

With the new millennium establishing the return of the street back into global urban consciousness<sup>13</sup>, Japan - with its past half a century dominated by High and High-Tech Modernism – seems poised to look back to its own traditional urbanism for newer directions<sup>14</sup>. Yet, in a development context where land prices and economics demand rigorous building densities and types at the qualitative price of its urban realm, what is the validity of the street as a prototype for contemporary Japan?

Firstly, the Japanese continue to use streets as central components of a polycentric urbanity. With an omni-present, sophisticated 'den-sha' (train) network shortening distances, transit nodes as activity magnets have flourished as mixed-use centers. Streets near transit nodes have thus survived

as active places of living, retail and commerce, some in response to their Modern competitors consciously retaining fragments of their traditional streetscapes. Yet the demands of high land prices resulting in mega-structures – while appropriating building density around the centers – also present the surest threat to the humane character of these transit streets. It is this conflict that needs to be resolved through development and preservation policies that encourage density without compromising the pedestrian-friendly nature of the streets. And with the digital revolution already witnessing the emergence of satellite office and live-work concepts in response to the diminished communication radii, concepts of walkability seem to be on the rise. Perhaps Japanese urbanites for several socio-cultural reasons are simply tired of those indoor 'generic streets' within their numerous mega-malls. Perhaps they are seeing the rampant impoverishment the last few decades have wrought

*Image 9 – Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo – new streets with old patterns (photo courtesy – Warren Au)*



*Image 10 – Streetscapes in Pontocho, Kyoto— old streets with new patterns (photo courtesy— authors)*



on their civic life and yearning their traditional ideas of livability, community and closeness to nature. (images 9, 10)

Secondly, during festivals— which form such an integral part of Japan's urbanity - the traditional parading of floats through streets has continued to this day. During Gion Matsuri<sup>15</sup>, on July 17, 32 tall wooden floats, each belonging to a different neighborhood are paraded through the streets of downtown Kyoto, pulled by hundreds of white-clad locals, with others perched precariously on the floats themselves providing encouragement, directions and musical accompaniment. Every float representing an ancient legend is decorated with rugs while textiles, armor and treasures are displayed in the windows and front rooms of the businesses and families who have lived for hundreds of years in those Muromachi and Shinmachi streets north of Shijo. The myriad such local festivals - in Tōkyō (Kanda matsuri), in Takayama (Takayama matsuri), in Aomori city (Nebuta matsuri) is evidence of their continuing vigor in the contemporary Japanese consciousness. The juxtaposition of such ancient, symbolically-charged constructs moving through the wide, asphalted, sealed off thoroughfares, against the backdrop of high-tech consumer-oriented stores may look out of place, yet the age-old expression that the festival is a 'moving museum' continues to be true. During those days the street as a community room takes prominence over any modern square or plaza. (images 11,12,13) – bearing testimony that while Japan may have embraced the Western square, it cannot do without the street.

If Japan can be seen as a cyclic culture of 'importing' a foreign entity and then 'refining' it<sup>16</sup> – down to its ancient Chinese influences - then the square can surely be seen as a community space Japan borrowed from the West. And so today, as Japan acknowledges the limitations of the square and once again looks at the street, it waits to be seen as to what new concepts of community prototype will emerge from that same Japanese consciousness where—'maiko' (traditional dancers) still greet the traveling businessman arriving on the 'Shinkansen' bullet train, and where the ancient 'Cha-no-yu' (Tea Ceremony) is performed in high-rise enclaves. Amidst such dualities, the street as a civic space will have substantially different meanings and manifestations in a post-mod-

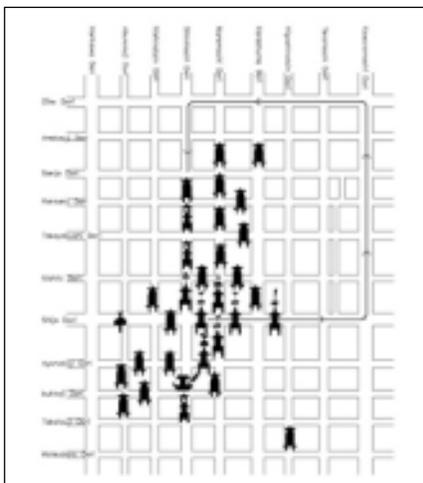
ern Japan - one that is no longer feudal but democratic in its political structure, and where post-Westernization, along with the ease to manifold global information has other cultural expectations.

Thus in speculating the resurrection of the street, can one afford to forget the forces behind the square? After all, many squares do exist in Japan today, some as evidence of their entry as that optimistic urban paradigm, and others - like some of those modern squares of the West - superficial, underused stereotypes.

*Image 11 – Detail from section of Rakuchu rakugai-zu, mid-sixteenth century showing Gion Matsuri floats parading along Shijo-dori (drawing by authors)*



*Image 12— Map of Gion Matsuri festival. Each of the 32 floats is indicated in its specific form within its particular neighborhood (drawing by authors)*



This then is the dilemma: how will a post-Western Japan mediate between the idea of community, democracy, and the desire for the symbols of globalization, without abandoning the meaning and use of its traditional gathering places? How will Japan adapt its affinity to the street with the continuing presence of its modern and post-modern squares and the expressions of global community ideas? The quest for the answer may represent for Japan yet another attempt to evaluate its urbanism, yet another search for newer policies, patterns and prototypes that may challenge the fundamentals of their earlier examples.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kenzo Tange worked for Kunio Maekawa the most influential architect of his generation for four years increasing his knowledge of Corbusier's ideas and of International Style concepts. In 1941 with the start of the Pacific War, he went back to Tokyo University to begin a life long study on urbanism. The 'communication space' idea was an outcome of this phase.

*Image 13— Gion Matsuri 'yama' and 'hoko' floats paraded every July through downtown Kyoto (photo courtesy Lucy Hornberger)*



<sup>2</sup> See Michael Franklin Ross, *Beyond Metabolism*, (McGraw Hill, 1978). The 'Plan for Tokyo' by Kenzo Tange & URTEC, 1960, was a visionary scheme for expanding Tokyo across the bay in a series of linear interlocking loops. It sought the introduction of urban communication spaces previously unknown in traditional Japanese cities. Tange explained that the Japanese people needed "more than just a street" to gather. This manifested in the form of large urban spaces under ten story high sloping roofs, bridging off the central spine.

<sup>3</sup> The increasing influence of the Western 'square' concept can be seen in projects such as Arata Izosaki's plaza in the new town of Tsukuba City built in 1983. A sunken central area combines the famous patterned paving of the Campidoglio in Rome with elements from Japanese gardens. It represents one of many experiments to use the 'square' as an element in Japanese urbanism.

<sup>4</sup> See 'La Rue' by Le Corbusier which appears in 'Le Corbusier at Pierre Jennerre't . *Ouevere Complete de 1910-1929* (Zurich: Girsberger, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1943).

<sup>5</sup> Peter and Alison Smithsons by the early fifties had become acutely aware of the socio-cultural significance of the street as an urban prototype particularly having experienced it in the still existing London bye-law housing from the turn of the century. The influential writings of the seventies and eighties from 'Architecture of the City' (Oppositions Books) by Aldo Rossi to 'Great Streets' (MIT Press) by Allan Jacobs nurtured the paradigm shift of focus from the building to the 'city' eventually crystallizing into the 'Charter of the New Urbanism' (McGraw Hill) that clarified the block, the street and the building as the three smallest components of city making.

<sup>6</sup> The Heian Capital (Kyoto) resembled that of its predecessor Heijo (Nara) in its basic grid layout, but was completely regular in plan. The blocks too were a uniform 120 metres on a side and were not affected by varying street widths as they had been at Heijo, where it was the distance from street centerlines that remained a constant 120 metres. The Heijo Capital was built at the height of a period of international commerce and exchange throughout Asia that centered on the Tang Court and the Silk Road. It was amidst these exchanges that Heijo was designed as a copy on a smaller scale of the Tang-dynasty capital of Chang'an. Heian was planned on an even larger scale than Heijo, and since its founding in 794, continued to be for most of Japan's history the center not only of government but of learning and the arts, and all other parts of the country bowed to its cultural ascendancy. It thus serves as one of the best precedents to understand traditional Japanese urbanism.

<sup>7</sup> 'Nagaya' implies a series of attached townhouse types that made smallest unit of community in a traditional Japanese town.

<sup>8</sup> 'Shoji' are sliding latticed doors with 'washi' rice paper panels that admit diffused light;

'Amado' are sliding or removable opaque wooden doors that are intended for security and weather protection.

<sup>9</sup> Shun Kanda has referred to this momentary place as 'Hiroba' (park), implying its parallel to a larger public space. See Shun Kanda, 'The Street and Hiroba of Japan', published in 'The Inner City', edited by Margrit and Declan Kennedy, Elek Books Ltd. Though there are several Japanese linguistic connotations to imply a hierarchy of street types such as 'Kaido', 'Michi' and 'Roji', we use the term 'Non-Street' to imply the ambiguous definition of this space.

<sup>10</sup> Fumihiko Maki was an important voice in the dialogue on Modern urbanism in the Japan of the sixties and seventies. His designs such as the Prototypical shopping enclave for Tokyo, 1962, converted existing street frontage shopping into 'enclaves' set back from the street, modeled after the Western nineteenth arcade. See Gyorgy Kepes ed., Vision and Value Series, 'Structure in Art and Science', New York 1965.

<sup>11</sup> With the decline of the Metabolist vision in Japan in 1970, the critical lead in Japanese architecture passed from older Metabolists to members of something called Japanese New Wave, whose work became largely known through the support of two architects of the middle generation, Arata Isozaki and Kazuo Shinohara. While Shinohara's work has remained exclusively domestic, Isozaki's work such as the Gunma Prefectural Museum (1974) has attracted international attention.

<sup>12</sup> Tadao Ando, one of Japan's most internationally known architects made the blank concrete walls the hallmark of his style. His most famous projects include the Chapel on the Water at Tomamu, Hokkaido (1985-88), and his Children's Museum at Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture (1990).

<sup>13</sup> With the increasing influence of the New Urbanism movement, the street has emerged back into global urban consciousness, most evident in city center and new town developments in the United States and Europe.

<sup>14</sup> While Japan has continued to derive inspiration from its traditional architecture since the 50's much of it has remained restricted to formal and semantic interpretation. Relatively, traditional Japanese urbanism has lacked the vigor, interest and scholarship that its architecture has enjoyed.

<sup>15</sup> Gion Matsuri is one of the largest festivals in Japan. The origins of the festival can be traced back more than 1100 years, to a procession led by a Shinto priest in 869AD to try and appease the gods and halt an outbreak of the plague that was devastating the city. The plague stopped soon after, but the procession remained a popular event and was repeated year after year. In 970AD it was institutionalized and became an official festival of the city. It is held from the 1st to the 31st of July and consists of various major and minor events. However, the highlight of the celebration takes place on the 17th,

with 32 colorful floats (Yamaboko in Japanese) forming a long procession are pulled through the main streets of the city.

<sup>16</sup> For example Japan 'imported' many of its cultural ideals in religion, art, and architecture from China, and

then 'refined' them through its own context to create a unique and specific cultural identity. So also in a more modern context, Japan 'imported' the automobile and electronic industry ideas from the West and revolutionized them in its own right.