Federico Farnè

University of Bologna, Italy; Ritsumeikan University Kyoto, Japan

From Edo to Post-metropolis: The Floating Space of *Sakariba* (盛り場)

Abstract: This paper will highlight suggestions and problems associated with representing Tokyo as the archetypical Far-East Asian post-metropolis, starting with the fascination of sci-fi and cyberpunk imagery. The two ideas operate differently within both European and Japanese urban space. This will be emphasized by the work of Deleuze and Guattarì, through their conceptions of tree and rhizome. The research will not limit itself to demonstrating the rhizomatic and fluid nature of Tokyo's urban space, which makes it a fully-fledged post-metropolis. It will also identify some of the rhizome's main nodes or junctions, thus highlighting its conformation in terms of efficient strength.

Keywords: post-metropolis; Tokyo; rhizome; space; *sakariba*; architecture.

"Tokyo has been my handiest prop shop for as long as I've been writing: sheer eye candy. You can see more chronological strata of futuristic design in a Tokyo streetscape than anywhere else in the world. Like successive layers of Tomorrowlands, older ones showing through when the newer ones start to peel."[1] These words by William Gibson, father of cyberpunk and author of Neuromancer evoke the imaginative charm that this Japanese post-metropolis has exercised since the beginning of the 1980s in the creation of an urban space archetype of the future, on the verge of dystopia and wonder.

Tangled architectural bundles give life to pulsating spatial choreographies in a continuous and chaotic succession of minimal and gargantuan dimensions that alternate without any break. Short-circuited Escherian modules settle on a liquefied and multidimensional space where gigantic electronic hyper-surfaces transmit non-stop

---

[1] William Gibson, "My Own Private Tokyo," *Wired*, January 9, 2001, https://www.wired.com/2001/09/gibson/, acc. June 15, 2020.

*Author contact information: federico.farne@hotmail.com

lysergic and dazzling images. This is almost a postmodern revisitation of the periegetic mirabilia literature. From an infinite and bewildering sprawl, an urban representation emerges to seduce us with its immeasurable indifference. Its meaning resists any constraint and logic because it goes beyond them by its very nature.

As analyzed by Livio Sacchi: "Tokyo, a hyper-modern megalopolis, whose modernity is ante litteram, abysmal, and vertiginous, seems to have always existed and, as Barthes observed, "it constitutes the specialty of Japan itself"."[2]

And so in the present day, the capital of Japan seems to offer a glimpse into the future of the cityscape, thanks to its intrinsic resistance to all kinds of holistic planning. According to Augustine Berque, Tokyo is a *transmodern* city: not only does it "embody […] a third path of history, that cannot be reduced to a simple contrast between modern and pre-modern", but it also serves as foreshadowing for an imminent global urban evolution. Such an event would render most of our Western urban planning concepts obsolete, along with the Western world itself.

Here, then, the edgy film stills and sci-fi literature fragments, combined with a new global dimension, have fueled a new path that is both cognitive and imaginative. They trace the lines of a third Grand Tour through the emergent area of the planet-spanning from China to Japan, and from Korea to Malaysia.[3] Tokyo is probably the most iconic and representative metropolis of this quadrant that emanates – as highlighted by the international relations specialist Parag Khanna in his latest essay "The Future is Asian" (2018) – a new global and multipolar economic and political power. However, we must not forget that competition from cities, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, Shanghai, and Bangkok is growing as intense as the influence (especially cultural) of their respective countries.

Furthermore, the sense of loss for the growth of information technology and the global economic emergence of first Japan, then followed by the Asian Tigers, has nourished a cyberpunk aesthetic through which Western iconographic imagery has given rise to a dystopian and noir archetypal post-metropolis mottled by fascinating and incomprehensible Oriental marks. How can we forget the shimmering kanji on the neon signs from Blade Runner or the fantastical Chiba City of Neuromancer?

We could easily say that sci-fi vision from the mid 20th century and onwards reverted and inverted the famous sentence from Lectures on the Philosophy of History by Hegel.[4] Circumnavigating the globe, the world's history has once again reached the Far East from where it is ready to start again through an inter-connectivity deployment.

Cyberpunk aesthetics and functional geography offer keys and suggestions for interpreting Tokyo as a contemporary post-metropolis. However, on the one hand, they risk flattening the complexity of urban phenomena in a utilitarian sense, whereas

---

[2] Livio Sacchi, *Tokyo-to* (Milan: Skira, 2004), 225.

[3] Franco Purini, "Introduzione", in *Tokyo-to*, ed. Livio Sacchi, (Milan: Skira, 2004), 7.

[4] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, trans. it G. Calogero e C. Fatta, *Lezioni di filosofia della storia* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia 1941), 273.

on the other, they keep us tangled among the knits of what new media scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has called "High-Tech Orientalism".[5]

The Deleuzian notion of rhizome can help us interpret the urban fabric of the immense Japanese megalopolis: "the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible to neither the One nor the multiple. […] It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills."[6] It contrasts with the tree, whose binary structure consists of a settled center that organizes and tightens the multiplicities. Its dual structure presupposes a logical order in which meanings are arranged according to pre-defined linearity. The imposition of an ontology, which is the metaphysical foundation of Western thought, is implicit in its paradigm.

Apart from any intrinsic axiological-political connotation inherent in these two systems, what is relevant here is the way these models act topologically in the organization of the urban fabric.

The European city features a forma urbis, which, however residual, refers to an ideal model rooted in a *Lebenswelt*. This is the result of a rational order at the base of which explicit logical processes lie. On the contrary, the Japanese megalopolis shows non-hierarchical fractal recursions that intertwine with a proliferating labyrinthine network. Here, the transport network nodes seem to generate hypertext connections capable of creating a loco-spatial continuum as undifferentiated as it is ambiguous. The European city reflects a transcendental order in opposition to contingency. It refers to a harmonic geometry aimed at recreating a metaphysical model where every detail recalls a wholeness that is organized and complete in itself. A common thread runs from Aristotle to Le Corbusier, and through the Renaissance and the epigones of modernity. It unfolds within the urban models of the Western European city and is visible in the Roman cardo as in Nevsky Prospect, Sunset Boulevard, and Broadway. It emerges in the Cartesian coordinate system as in St. Peter's Square.

True, "geometry is very present in Japan, from the countryside to the city, from the rural rice fields grid (条防制 *jōbōsei*) to the urban grid (条里制 *jōrisei*), and the variability of its application (fragmentation of the 下町 *shitamachi* grids) shows that Japan does not feel a need for general coherence."[7] Moreover, the axes, while remaining the foundation of both the cartographic and mnemonic map of a city, are often tinged by an evanescent ambiguity. In fact, except for those present in the *monzen machi* (門前町),[8] the axes are not designed for a destination: "routes are interrupted

---

[5] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press: 2006).

6 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 1980), 27–28.

[7] Manuel Tradits, Nobumasa Tkahashi, Stéphane Lagré, Hiroki Akita, *Tokyo. Portraits & Fictions*, trans. Federico Simonti, *Tokyo. Ritratto di una città* (Bologna: Odoya 2018), 109.

[8] Literally "the city in front of the door" – small towns and villages built around a large shopping street that ended before the heavy wooden door of a Buddhist temple or the tōri of a Shinto shrine.

(the chicanes of Ginza), obstacles stand in the way (the gates of the detached Akasa-ka palace), its end is crippled (the void prospective of Omotesandō […]).”[9] Probably also this lack of geometric coherence, which highlights the absence of a pre-designed fabric, contributes to creating a persistent feeling of proliferating but intrinsically de-terministic chaos in the Western visitor.

Add to this the absence of a square-shaped center to reinforce the estrangement that captures the misguided traveler. In fact, even though 広場 *hiroba* (the Japanese word suitable for translating 'square') exist in Tokyo, they are often shapeless and ste-reotyped, divorced from their context, if not even a mere road dilation. Japan lacks the monumentality and the socio-political functions of the Western square. Substantially the Japanese square is a shapeless spot, nothing but a passage or at most a meeting "non-place".

Roland Barthes, in the *L'Empire des signes* (1970), identifies the center of To-kyo in the Imperial Palace (皇居 *kōkyo*). While the center of the Western city is full, according to a metaphysical vision that makes it the seat of a truth and the place appointed to shelter the values of civilization, the Japanese capital's center is instead empty. "The whole city revolves around a place both forbidden and indifferent, re-maining hidden in the countryside, defended by water ditches, and inhabited by an emperor who can never be seen, i.e., literally, by someone nobody knows."[10] Although suggestive, this oxymoron of absent presence is not unproblematic. First of all, one wonders if it makes sense at all to speak of a center in a city that is rhizomatic by definition. Then though, as the French architect Manuel Tradits points out, while rec-ognizing the value of Barthes' analysis from a symbolic and semiotic spatial point of view, "this physical center exists, less void than it would appear, and the streets, turn-ing around it, underline its shape."[11]

From this place on the brink of the visible and the invisible, home of a "sacred nothingness", eight rings of homothetic avenues unfold but with an intricate and at times, uncertain path. Its eastern trajectory leads them to stop near the *Yamanote* (山手線) or to break against the bay, altering their concentric way. Such a system com-bines with the large radials. Although starting from the Imperial Palace and moving toward the periphery to turn into national roads, these converge on the *Nihonbashi* (日本橋), which have been the heart of Japanese transit since the dawn of the Edo period. This is another kind of center, but perhaps it would be better to call it a node, in agreement with a rhizomatic fabric that outlines the evanescent borders of a liminal urban spatiality. Its limits transcend the rigidity of political boundaries and tend to lead to a giga-city that appears to us as a natural and restless evolution of the post-me-tropolis. The ancient river routes and the crisscrossing highway network are installed on this dense fabric as links to hypertext connections.

---

[9] Ibid., 61.

[10] Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*, trans. it. Marco Vellora, *L'impero dei segni* (Torino: Einaudi 1984), 42.

[11] Tradits, Takahashi, Lagré, *Tokyo*, 161.

It is, however, in the sprawling Tokyo railway network, whose heart is the Ya-manote, that we witness the palingenesis of true independent cells. On the one hand, these configure a disharmonious continuum of places, whereas on the other, they constitute a malleable connective tissue. Through a wonderful infrastructure, this is able to give a coherent form to the whole. Nerve nodes are morphing into cloned urban centers spread from the six main stations (Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Ueno, Tokyo, and Shinagawa). It is the modern *sakariba* (盛り場).

These nodal junctions, which fully share the characteristics of interzones, had already begun to exist in the Edo period[12] when they served as gathering and shelter places in case of fire, earthquakes, or other calamities.[13] These uniquely Japanese urban entities were often found in broad streets (*hirokōji* 広小路), such as in the case of Ueno, or near the *kawara* (河原), the wide embankments of the river that skirt the Sumida in Tokyo, such as Ryōgokubashi. The space by this bridge, where roads and waterways converged and from which you could admire the fireworks, developed into Edo's greatest *sakariba*. In this noisy and flourishing hub, all kinds of entertainment, street performances, and crooked dealings blended together in a picturesque scene.

Two more spatial forms are at the origin of modern *sakariba*: the entertainment and trade districts developed along the main axis of the *monzen machi* and the red-light districts (遊郭 *yūkaku*).[14] Asakusa, built around Sensō-ji, represents the maximum example of the first typology. This includes leisure areas built near important temples or sanctuaries. This way people, who may even come from far away, might indulge in entertainment after praying and leaving offerings on religious sites. As for the *yūkaku*, on the other hand, it is noticeable how many modern *sakariba* developed from those areas that had once been used to house red-light districts. This turned into a spatial and behavioral continuity.[15]

In an urban context as tightly controlled as Edo's, comprised by enclosed and parceled units such as the fenced land lots of the Yamanote and of the Shimatachi grid, which was itself split into housing units sealed by doors, these open places at the outskirts of the city became something akin to public spaces. This highly compartmentalized partition of the city highlights a significant difference from most European urban realities: all political activity took place within the Tokugawa castle-palace, or behind the clay walls of the warrior aristocracy. This led to a *de-facto* exclusion of the *sakariba* from the exercise of power. "Even to this day, Tokyo remains the successor

---

[12] The first literary source where it is possible to find the use of this word, literally "place full of fun", seems to be the *Ukyoburo* (浮世風呂) novel, written at the beginning of the 19th century by Sanba Shiktei.

[13] The first literary source for the usage of this word, whose literal meaning is "place full of entertainment", seems to be the novel *Ukyoburo* (浮世風呂), written at the beginning of the 19th century by Sanba Shikitei.

[14] Sepp Linhart, "Sakariba: Zone of evaporation between work and home," in *Interpreting Japanese Society*, ed. Joy Hendry (New York: Routledge, 1998), 232–33.

[15] It's interesting to note how, according to sociologist Nozomu Ikei, the kinds of entertainment typical of the modern *sakariba* (alcohol, gambling, *pachinko* and *peep-shows*) never get associated with the word *rejā* (レジャー derived from *leisure*), which as a language loan only refers to pastimes that are commonly perceived as noble and refined, or at least morally righteous. [Nozomu Ikei, "Gendai to goraku," in *Gendai goraku no kōzō*, ed. Nakamura Shōichi (Tokyo: Bunwa Shōbo 1973)].

to that ancient Edo, despite being subject to European influences ever since the Meiji period."[16]

Like realms suspended in a constant state of evaporation, the *sakariba* showcase numerous traits typical of heterotopies: alien and alienated spaces, with an unstable equilibrium between the sacred and the profane and charged with a rebellious energy. Thus, they were – and still are – the perfect setting to subvert and neutralize the established social hierarchies. As locations where people met and spent time together as equals disregarding social classes, the *sakariba* were the spatial concretion of the *Floating World* (*ukyō* 浮世) from which they originated.

> The Floating World was really a space where the normal strictures of living dislodged or melted away. It was a profoundly important constituent of the mentality of the Edo-period urban classes – whether the disenfranchised merchants unable to buy into power, or the frustrated samurai brought up on a cult of arms but working as paper pushers. Far more of a forbidden fruit than sex was the opportunity to converse freely with people of another social level whose company one might enjoy, to float directives on cut and quality of dress, or to over-spend in defiance of sumptuary laws. The Floating World was where alternatives became, for a moment, possible.[17]

The catalyzing power of these places made them comparable to European squares. Notwithstanding, their fluid and informal nature, typical of interzones, where trade, distractions, and more or less legitimate occupations are mixed together, had caused these spaces to be relegated to the edge of Edo. Used as an escape from the rigid impositions of Shogun authority, the *sakariba* expose the depth of the historical roots of Tokyo's urban heterogeneity. Since the Tokugawa period this has been "the manifesto of a coexistence, of a [...] profound and precarious balance, between the organizing and arbitrary will and the adaptation to contingency, [...] always on the verge of degenerating into a dangerous 'laissez-faire."[18]

While maintaining those elements of transgression and marginality that characterize them from the beginning, modern *sakariba*, with the onset of urban explosion and political changes, are swallowed up in today's metropolitan fabric. They become fractal matrices whose proliferating pace not only strengthens the amorphous character of Tokyo but also emphasizes its plasticity, through the creation of a self-reproducing rhizome.

As already noted by Hidenobu Jinnai,[19] the development of the Yamamote

---

[16] Tradits, Takahashi, Lagré, *Tokyo*, 217.

[17] Timon Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Late Edo Japan: The Lens within the Heart* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

[18] Tradits, Takahashi, Lagré, *Tokyo*, 112.

[19] Hidenobu Jinnai, *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995).

railway line led to a change in the urban cells from which the modern *sakariba* originate. Ever since before the war these railway stations, often attached to department stores, became incubators of sorts for the development of teeming clusters of restaurants, stores, *pachinko* venues, arcades and cafés, in a colorful clash of styles.

Not far away, the district of pleasures came to life, superficially hidden behind a layer of deceptive facades and signs. This space was comprised by *kyabakura*, sexy-shops, *happening bars*,[20] love hotels and similar ambiguous locales.

The development of this kind of urban branch requires a complementary space to fuel it, which is usually a business district full of offices and ready to regurgitate hordes of fun-seeking consumers into it. Additionally, the establishment of such free zones (解放区 間 *kaihō kukan*) within the often gender-segregated Japanese society fulfills the function of revitalizing the male workforce, by allowing them to relieve stress and recharge for the next working day. "When a man is visiting a modern *sakariba*, he's travelling, and for the Japanese, shame can be thrown away while travelling!"[21]

Crucially, the rise of *sakariba* such as those of Ikebukuro, Shibuya or Shinjuku and their location is not linked to spontaneous or coordinated dynamics of urban planning. Instead, they are an organic response to the logistics of the transport system combined with market pressures: a sort of postmodern version of the Edo-period *sakariba*. But even though they also rose on top of important transit routes,[22] the main difference is that the latter were unshackled from the impositions of global capitalism that the former adhere to.

But while it's true that the evolution of the modern *sakariba* is tied to the post-industrial mechanisms typical of the global city, it is equally true that its unique features depend more on the heterogeneity of its population than on the homogeneity of mass culture.

> The *sakariba* consists of impersonal social relationships in terms of structure and function, but the actions are done in the personal relationships between a few people. Such personal relationships can create the sense of an "invisible territory" and "familiarity", substituting those existing in the local society.[23]

---

[20] *Happening bars* (ハプニングバー) or *couple kissa* (カップル喫茶) are the Japanese equivalent of Western swinger clubs or sex clubs. In both cases, entry involves passing a prior selection to obtain membership and requires paying both a membership and an entry fee. But while the former only allow access to male-female couples and single women, the latter also allow entry for men at a steeper price. These locales usually forbid access to foreigners.

[21] Linhart, "Sakariba: zone of evaporation between work and home," 116.

[22] The same post stations on the *Tōkaidō* (東海道) also hosted *sakariba* which attracted intense tourist activity and gave rise to flourishing commercial and leisure activities, not dissimilar from their urban counterparts, to the point of becoming popular artistic and literary subjects. A famous example is the *53 Stations of Tōkaidō* ((東海道五十三次 *Tōkaidō Gojūsan-tsugi*) by Utagawa Hiroshige.

[23] Eichi Isomura, "Daitoshi ni okeru chiiki no kōzō no bunseki," *Toshi Mondai* 46, 2 (1955): 254.

The *sakariba* configures itself as an interval, a space-time suspension between the home and the workplace, as well as an interstitial interspace, transfigured and dilated by the dizzying expansion of the sprawltown. And by emerging from the anthropological-cultural juxtaposition of gender difference, the aforementioned complex becomes an unprecedented, post-metropolitan and rhizomatic actualization of the *ma* (間).

References

Barthes, Roland. *L'Empire des signes*, trans. it. Marco Vellora, *L'impero dei segni*. Torino: Einaudi 1984.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge: Massachusetts: The MIT Press: 2006.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Mille plateau*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 1980.

Gibson, William. "My Own Private Tokyo", *Wired*, January 9, 2001. https://www.wired.com/2001/09/gibson/. Accessed on June 15, 2020.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, trans. it G. Calogero e C. Fatta *Lezioni di filosofia della storia*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia 1941.

Ikei, Nozomu. "Gendai to goraku." *Gendai goraku no kōzō*, edited by Nakamura Shōichi, 44–57. Tokyo: Bunwa Shōbo 1973. 44-57

Isomura, Eichi. "Daitoshi ni okeru chiiki no kōzō no bunseki." *Toshi Mondai* 46, 2 (1955): 21–39.

Jinnai, Hidenobu. *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1995.

Linhart, Sepp. "Sakariba: Zone of evaporation between work and home." In *Interpreting Japanese Society*, edited by Joy Hendry, 232–33. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Sacchi, Livio, ed. *Tokyo-to*. Milan: Skira, 2004.

Screech, Timon. *The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Late Edo Japan: The Lens within the Heart*. New York: Cambridge University Press 1996.

Tradits, Manuel, Nobumasa Tkahashi, Stéphane Lagré, Hiroki Akita. *Tokyo. Portraits & Fictions*, trans. Federico Simonti, *Tokyo. Ritratto di una città*. Bologna: Odoya 2018.