

[Research Note] Yokohama : Homeless, Artists and the New Urban

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Research Note

Yokohama – Homeless, Artists and the New Urban

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Abstract

This research note portrays the city Yokohama and its development, using the city as vantage point to understand the spatial and social transformation of this place and Japan as a whole. The research sheds light on vital issues in Japan's urban history, including the opening to the west, the treaty port city system in Japan and the importance of everyday life for the identity and urban development of a city. Centred on the evolution of the historical significant inner city area, the tale of Yokohama is especially the story of a unique place, as Yokohama turned almost overnight from a quiet village into the focal point for Japanese modernization, port for global trading and birth place for new, western lifestyles. Using historic snapshots, biographic techniques and personal storytelling, this urban portray is rich in detail, offering new insights into the urbanization and changing urban landscape of cities in Japan, an area which is geographically, socially and culturally underrepresented in the existing literature.

Keywords: Yokohama, homelessness, art, shared and contested city

Introduction

The city has always had many personas, from its working class districts, to its world-class sightseeing spots, from its crumbling industrial facilities, to its refurbished, now sparkling waterfront, port and passenger facilities, from shabby entertainment districts filled with prostitutes to shiny, first class skyscrapers and residences for expats.

Yokohama's history has been documented by different narrators, in form of poetry, essays, novels and short fiction, from Jule Verne and Simon Partner to Leslie Helm and Tom Gill. The narratives of Yokohama are interwoven with each other and emerge in film, media, art, photography, architecture, journalism, dance, theatre, food and beyond.

Yokohama is full of everyday life stories and is using story telling as a central tool to explore the dynamic history and paradoxical urban landscape of one of Japan's most dynamic

cities, its creators and ordinary residents. In a narrative way, the research will use a diversity of stories to mirror Yokohama's transformation from a tiny town to an international bustling city. Combining everyday storytelling with historical knowledge and modern insights into the contemporary context of the city, the research will paint a detailed picture of Yokohama and Japan as a whole, integrating cultural, political and economic aspects, aiming to enlighten the processes, risks and challenges the city was and is facing in the past, present and future.

And, here is the start to the Yokohama Stories.

Yokohama – Yokohama Stories

The great hustle and bustle of Yokohama, the second-largest city in Japan, is often neglected in favour of big brother Tokyo. This is not a surprise as the cities have merged and grown into each other, forming one continuous mega city in which a diversity of people intermingle. Yet, most people fail to discover Yokohama, even though the city is full of history, attractions, and with its vibrant atmosphere, a great alternative to Tokyo, for visitors, locals and returners alike. This new research will shed light on Yokohama, a city which is still standing in the shadow of Tokyo.

Yokohama became internationally known, when the little fishing town was in 1859 one of the three ports which had to open their doors to foreigners, after Japan was forced to end its isolation after almost three centuries and the Meiji government decided to rapidly modernize the country. Since then, Yokohama turned into the birthplace of modern Japan and developed a refined sense for east and western lifestyles, turning a quiet village into an international town with an expat community, western fashion trends and centre for foreign traders. In a short time, Yokohama residents could make use of a new railway line, streetlights and a daily newspaper, all novelties, soon appreciated by a rising number of newcomers settling in the city. Until today, Yokohama is internationally known as one of the most leading edge cities in Japan, also known as the San Francisco of Japan. This does not mean that the city was not able to preserve its rich history and unique heritage.

Discovering Yokohama

Some describe the Japanese urban landscape as a mix of old and new, tradition and modernity,

an industrial society with underlying untouched pattern of cultural traditions. To understand this palimpsest or ‘mille-feuille’ like urban texture, we should focus on the case of Yokohama, where the past and present mingle in a unique way, showcasing timely lessons for Japan’s urban future. One reason is the fact that Yokohama is forming together with Tokyo one big metropolis, which was already in the days of Phileas Fogg and Passepartout (Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*) the busiest port and most important focal point for international business in Japan.

Even though Yokohama was and is for most people just the port of entry, especially when arriving by cruise and maybe compared to cities as Kyoto, Nara or Kamakura not offering the same diversity of traditional customs and culture, the cities’ fascination lies in the mix it has to offer: a turbulent history, dynamic urban development situated between eastern practices and western ideas and a creative art scene which is attracting many new residents during the last decades, to just to name a few.

While walking along the waterfront, most urban strollers find their own version of Yokohama, including a vibrant pub and club scene, breathtaking city and port views, historical buildings and bustling streets. Some insiders argue that Yokohama’s urban landscape is the most expressive at night time, when historic inspired street lights illuminate the city; people visit bars and other establishments, found around each street corner, especially in places where the working class settled.

With the opening of the port of Yokohama for international commerce and as a gateway to Japan, the city soon became a melting pot for different cultures arriving from all over the world. One reason why we find today a mix of old, traditional Japanese architecture (e.g. *Isejima Shrine* which was relocated here to protect the city against foreign influences as christianity (Sabin, 2002) and modern, western architecture (e.g. the *Yokohama Landmark Tower* or *Osanabashi Pier*, designed by the British Foreign Architecture Office).

As such, it does not surprise that a sense of history can be found everywhere, behind every corner and under each railway track. Yokohama’s symbols are interwoven into the contemporary urban landscape, standing as high as on the Noge-yama hills or as low as near the harbour and new urban centre of Yokohama, Minato Mirai 21. Maybe this mix also explains why Yokohama people place a high value on engaging in new, creative and uplifting challenges

without forgetting to cultivate the past.

Taking a short tour around the port area, one cannot really imagine what changes the tiny fishing village was facing once the port opened in 1859, after following the examples of Shimoda and Hakodate which (had to) open their ports in 1853 and 1854 respectively. As such it does not surprise, that Yokohama became soon after the most important international port of Japan. But why was Yokohama chosen as opening port and starting point of a new era?

The reasons become clear if you consider its close location to Edo, now Tokyo. Similar to Nagasaki (the only city during the Edo period which allowed foreigners to live on an island called *Deijima* literally meaning exist island, located just in front of the city) the new Meiji government planned to use Yokohama as base for foreign settlement, which was mainly located in Kannai, nowadays mainly known as the birthplace and location of several “firsts in Japan”, including beer, gas lamps or icecream.

Near Kannai one can find Sakuragicho Station, which was already since 1870 connected via the country's first intercity railway with Shimbashi, a traditional neighbourhood located in central Tokyo. The construction of the railway was financed by the city of London and it was not until 1897 that the British entrusted the trains to Japanese train conductors and at first only during the daytime (Seidensticker, 1982).

Approaching Yokohama

Yokohama is the second largest city in Japan by population, after Tokyo, and the most populous municipality in Japan and the capital city of Kanagawa Prefecture. Yokohama rapidly developed after the end of Japans isolation in 1867 into Japan's most famous port city and is today one of the major harbours operating in Japan. Heavily destroyed during the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, the city was rebuilt using the rubble for new land reclamation work including the well known Yamashita Park near the harbour front near downtown Yokohama. Being again destroyed by air raids during World War II, the city had to be rebuilt once more and became an official ordinance in 1956.

With a new subway system in 1972 and the construction of the Minato Mirai 21, a major development including a large portion of reclaimed land, in 1983, the city developed into

international event and exhibition place. Other places like the largest Chinatown in Japan, Yokohama Landmark and Marine Tower are nowadays wellknown sightseeing spots and helped to increase the attraction of the city. Preparing for the 150th anniversary of the opening of the port in 2009, the city started to think about new strategies to upgrade run down urban areas including areas near the port and the historical downtown (City Yokohama 2009).

However, due to increasing globalization processes affected not just Tokyo, with Yokohama experiencing a decline in different forms and at different scales from that of the more frequently studied case of Tokyo. For example, the amount of rented office space decreased drastically around the year 2002/2003, as more office space become available in the Yokohama's Kannai district. Additionally, more and more historical buildings were replaced with modern apartment blocks, even though the city aimed to reuse these buildings and redevelop the downtown area (City Yokohama, 2009, 10).

As a solution and to brush up Yokohama's image, the city decided in 2002 to promote tourism, culture and art. As a first step a special commission was set up to study and come up with the most urgent problems and best approaches to solve them. As a result, the city decided to redevelop central areas like the historical port district, reusing historic buildings and existing facilities, commissioning public art work and organizing with the help of non profit organizations different events attracting more outsiders to visit the city. Thus, different measurements were set up and implemented to build up cultural and artistic legacies which in return would increase the number of tourist attractions.

All in all, we could say that Yokohama aimed to use different strategies including 1) increasing art related activities, 2) attracting more entertainment sectors and 3) using existing cultural resources to upgrade and revitalize different urban areas, to especially connect the historical downtown to new developed areas as Minato Mirai.

Yokohama – from creative clusters to sustainable communities?

It can be argued that Yokohama has utilized creative policies in different ways to encourage the economic development of different areas into creative clusters attracting a diverse number of new groups of residents, users, and customers. Yet, what happens to the districts whose economies fail to provide the expected outcomes or do not do so in the timeframe set by the

governors? Are these creative clusters continuing to strive, stagnate, or develop in a different direction instead?

The central purpose of this research is to analyze to what extent creativity is: 1) used as a strategic measurement to achieve economic revitalization; 2) seen as a starting point but not considered to be the only approach to solve the problem, or; 3) is it instead the original, historical potential and image of an area which should be used instead of creative policies to achieve the social and economical development of a neighbourhood as a whole?

The research

Understanding the different neighbourhoods of Yokohama as unique micro units of a big metropolis, the research will present an in-depth sociological portrait of contemporary Yokohama and specific neighbourhoods which mirror past and current tensions that emerge between old and new; low and high (rise); tradition and modernity; original and replica; decay and recovering; erosion and revitalisation; and personal and collective forms of inhabitation and occupation. Offering a microscopic, critical investigation of how different people, groups and stakeholder shape and have been shaped by each neighbourhood, the research will provide a multi-dimensional, multi-vocal and inclusive interpretation of a city, which is in the theoretical, spatial and social sense, a place situated 'in-between' different processes, trends and broader discourses focussing on culture and politics; local and global economy; and social attachment and alienation.

The research will set the scope to see the city as a cultural, social space and space of economic transactions (in providing narratives of hyper-traditional vendors, hyper-modern actors as social entrepreneurs to just to name a few). In asking questions about *the what? where?, when? and why?*, I explore seven contemporary neighbourhoods, first sketching the context and image of eachneighbourhood before discussing aspects and the changing everyday life in Yokohama – including globalization and modernization; upgrading and gentrification; decay and recovery; personalfailureand success; and forced or voluntary relocation, which are incorporatedand interwoven with the portrayals of the neighbourhoods presented.