

Tokyo is an endless field of low-lying, non-descript buildings shaped like puzzle pieces to fit into their respective spaces and outlined by unbelievably narrow streets -some only manoeuvrable on scooter or motorbike. During the daytime, cool shades of white and mint green accent the city's ubiquitous concrete floors and walls, which at night, become camouflaged in infinite masses of neon lights in every colour. The aesthetic is one of modesty and calm chaos. It is the aggregate of millions of individuals pragmatically making use of their respective miniature territories. The aesthetic intentions of each remain in large part independent from their neighbours, and the result is an organically-evolved visual landscape.

But rising above the clutter and compactness of Tokyo's more humble forms are the shining, space-age towers of Roppongi Hills, the city's mega-development par excellence. Within the complex's mixed-use space, constructed of curvy sheets of crystal-clear glass and massive, angular mountains of sandstone, there exists a highly orchestrated visual purity impossible in the rest of the city. The redistribution of control over space that enables this level of cohesion brings with it both new possibilities for artistic expression and experience, and numerous social and economic implications for users of the space.

Through an examination of the artistic and social values attributable to these two contrasting types of urban scenery, the following discussion attempts to illuminate the inevitable conflict between the longing for authenticity and the desire for artistic grandeur in the construction of shared visual space.

The distinct style of disorder that defines most of Tokyo's urban space is a consequence of the repeated periods of rapid growth and destruction that the city has experienced through its recent history. During the rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th century, and in the periods of massive reconstruction following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and World War II, government resources were in large part directed towards industrial infrastructure and national economic growth, leaving the city's growing number of residents to build their own

social and commercial spaces without guidance (Sorensen 2002, 333).

A lack of control over the subdivision of land plots has given form to an infinite system of illogical, haphazardly patterned city blocks, and height restrictions, originally with earthquakes in mind but now in place to ensure sunlight, have kept buildings low and lean (Sorensen 2002, 253-5, 265). The absence of planning has also resulted in a strong tradition of self-sufficiency on the part of urban residents, who have relied on neighbourhood organizations to maintain such basic public goods as parks and sidewalks. A tradition of mixed residential and commercial zoning has allowed for a continued abundance of family-owned, small businesses on the ground floors of residential buildings, which play an important role in the strong sense of community and high level of livability of even the city's most urban neighbourhoods (Sorensen 2002, 115, 221, 353).

The need to manoeuvre within undersized spaces has encouraged Tokyo's residents and workers to find creative design solutions and to develop an appreciation for the city's uncontrollable, maximalist aesthetic. Interesting innovations in the use of space include triangular houses wedged into forks in the road, the proliferation of miniature rooftop batting cages and tennis courts, and strange hybrids such as a cemetery sitting above a highway underpass. These quaint constructions have even been playfully coined "da-me architecture" ("no-good architecture") by a group of architects at Atelier Bow-Wow, a Tokyo firm that specializes in such designs (Tsukamoto et al. 2003). In their promotion of da-me architecture, the Atelier Bow-Wow architects attempt to illuminate the distinct aesthetic value that unintentionally emerges from its proliferation. For example, they insist that the neon signs advertising a pachinko parlour and several loan shark offices housed in three neighbouring buildings in Kabukicho, the city's red-light district, inadvertently fall into a symmetrical pattern that mirrors the highly ornamental façade of Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral (Tsukamoto et al. 2003, 47).

Sitting on 28 acres in the city centre, Roppongi Hills provides a striking contrast to da-me architecture. Opened in

Aesthetic Recent Evolution and Transformations Control: in Tokyo

by Momoko Allard

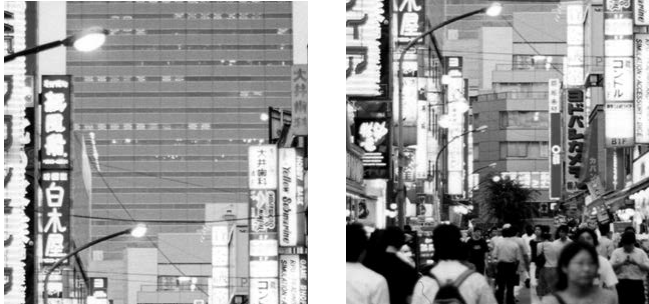
April 2003, the development is the product of 17 years of planning and construction that began in the bubble period, when fruitless visionary scheming proliferated in the private sector (Sorensen 2002, 285-6). Its dozen or so buildings, costing the yen equivalent of 5 billion dollars, aim to provide living, working and entertainment spaces that integrate art into every aspect of life, in what Minoru Mori, the high-profile developer at the helm of the project, ambitiously refers to as the "Artelligent City." The plans were created by a large team of international architecture and design firms headed by Kohn Pedersen Fox, who also designed the centrepiece 54-floor Mori Tower (Culham 2003, 112). The complex's amenities include two residential towers, the Grand Hyatt hotel, the headquarters of Asahi Television, luxury shopping centre, theatre for the performing arts, private membership club, continuing education facility, multiplex cinema and a traditional Japanese garden. The crowning jewel, however, is the Mori Art Museum and Tokyo City View observation deck that sit on the 52nd and 53rd floors of the Mori Tower

Roppongi Hills is a monolithic interruption in the city's more familiar scenery, but it does not present itself in the Tokyo landscape unexpectedly, nor does it set Tokyo apart from other cities of similar scale and class. Predecessors to Mori's mega-structure include Tokyo Teleport Town, a massive leisure development on land reclaimed from Tokyo Bay, and Yebisu Garden Place, a mixed-use complex on the former Yebisu Beer industrial site. One notable foreign counterpart is New York's Battery Park City (Cybriwsky 1999).

Because Roppongi Hills and its forerunners encompass not only buildings, but also streets, plazas and parks, the defining shift in each of these cases is the handover of traditionally public space into private ownership, and the concentration of control over an area covering several city blocks in the hands of a single private administrator, who gains the power not only to manipulate the accessibility and use of the space, but also to dictate the kind of visual culture the space will promote.

In relation to locality and place, the notion of aesthetic authenticity implies an organic evolution in form and appearance resulting from everyday activities of residents and employees in the space in question. As an environment slowly takes shape according to the needs and values of its users it, in turn, re-projects these values in a process that reinforces the shared cultural identity of the people and place (Knox 2005, 2-3; Soja 1980). The sensory aspects of a landscape, including the visual, consequently are inseparable from the process of place-making and social development (Hayden 1997). It is argued that social groups cannot constitute themselves without this process of self-representation through the creation of space and equally and that the manipulation of space can act as an exertion of power (Lefebvre 1991, 416-7).





Within the more conventional areas of Tokyo, such an evolution of self-representation can be maintained because the process of demolition and reconstruction occurs only in small increments. And as illustrated in examples of da-me architecture, the people in control of making changes are usually excessively limited by financial and spatial constraints. Consequently, their non-aesthetic needs and values are unavoidably more clearly expressed in the aesthetics of their constructions.

The desire for aesthetic authenticity can be observed in consumption choices. For example, many people in Tokyo will pay a premium to eat yakitori and ramen in cramped alley-way bars and vending carts, rather than eating in chain restaurants that serve cheaper, better-tasting versions of the same menu in cleaner, more spacious settings. The handwritten menus and mismatched, worn furniture of the tiny bars and vending carts can be interpreted as evidence of a shared history and a personal investment by the business owner.

Within the space of Roppongi Hills, organically evolved visual qualities are replaced by thoroughly planned ornamentation produced by professional cultural intermediaries—designers, architects and visual artists—working under the guidance of the developer. With more substantial resources available in the hands of fewer highly trained producers, an otherwise unattainable level of deliberate visual unification can be created within an area of extraordinary size.

Some artistic expressions given voice in this expanded arena are of questionable value in relation to the sense of lost authenticity they inflict. As with other large-scale private developments (Cybriwsky 1999, 228), the design elements within Roppongi Hills that echo theme park tactics are of particularly doubtful merit. One easily observed example is the happy-face flower motif created by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. Along with taking a key position in the Mori Art Museum's inaugural show, Happiness, and in the décor of spaces leading into the museum, the flower has been reproduced as branding throughout the complex, including on merchandise sold at several souvenir shops, much like Mickey Mouse goods in Disneyland. Theme park elements can also be found built into the development's architectural structures. Most notable is the four-story stone base of the Mori Tower, which seems to allude to an unidentifiable period of antiquity. The presence of such cultural pastiche is a stark reminder that Roppongi Hills carries forward virtually no evidence of the historical use of its own territory.

However, certain other aspects of the development's design present invaluable artistic innovations unfeasible within a less hegemonic space. The placement of the Mori Art Museum at the top of a skyscraper allows for a viewing and interpretation of artwork impossible in any other

setting. For example, in the inaugural Happiness exhibition, photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's North Pacific Ocean, Okurosaki was purposefully hung adjacent to a window to allow the perfectly horizontal, calm water surface depicted in the 10-meter-wide gelatine silver print to play off of the hazy, grey expanse of the city below. Such juxtaposition easily expanded the reading of the artwork to invoke existential notions attached to urban development.

Public artworks permanently installed throughout the complex's outdoor plazas and walkways also owe their artistic meaning to their surroundings. One work especially notable for its site specificity is Counter Void, Tatsuo Miyajima's row of six digital counters positioned to wrap around a street corner at the base of the Asahi TV building. The three-meter tall backlit counters each cycle through meaningless digits at varying speeds, in a vacant allusion to the transfer of information occurring within the broadcasting center.

Interestingly, developer Minoru Mori has explicitly stated that reshaping the city skyline itself is an expression of his own aesthetic desire. Although Tokyo has traditionally ranked as one of the top four 'world cities', along with New York, London and Paris (Clark 2003, 159), Mori perceives instability in Tokyo's position, in part due to the relative absence of grand architecture, which he believes visually symbolizes a lack of ambition (Jacobs 2004, 105). He has clearly expressed that he hopes Roppongi Hills will strengthen the city's 'world' status, and as part of the opening festivities of the complex, he even organized an exhibition titled The Global City, in which scale models of other world cities were presented in order to draw attention to Tokyo's vertical deficiency.

Although the lofty aspirations expressed through Roppongi Hills seem to clash with the modest aesthetic values favoured by the city's conventional forms of da-me architecture, the need to reconcile these opposing modes of place-making is perhaps well illustrated by Flea Market, an installation piece included in the Happiness exhibition. Artist Tadashi Kawamata invited several merchants from the area surrounding Roppongi Hills to set up vending stalls for one week at the beginning of the exhibition. One of the makeshift stalls, constructed out of wood and cloth, was then put on display for the remainder of the exhibition. Kawamata's appropriation of the stall's aesthetics into his art practice is representative of the continued importance of freedom, chance and imperfection at some point in the artistic process. It highlights the need for aesthetic

producers to find ways of balancing artistic control with permissiveness and tolerance for flights of unruly visual proliferation that may deviate from initial intentions, because, as exemplified in both Flea Market and da-me architecture, visual appearances that may at first seem trivial and unappealing often hold their own meaningful value.

Early attendance figures for Roppongi Hills - an estimated 26 millions visitors in the first six months (Pearson 2004, 106) - seem to indicate that Mori's aspirations have succeeded in capturing the imagination of Tokyoites. As a public facility, Roppongi Hills appears to have created the type of groomed, open leisure space that the public sector has largely failed to provide for the city. But whether the complex's space truly reflects the values and desires of people in Tokyo remains to be seen. The majority of the city's other mixed-use, private developments have quickly degraded into unused, 'planned wastelands' (Cybriwsky 1999, 229). The central test is perhaps whether Roppongi Hills possesses the necessary malleability to become a true social space, continuously transforming its landscape to meet the needs of its users.

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Above: Tatsua Miyajima, Photo by Momoko Allard