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Journal of Delta Urbanism
Delft University of Technology

Urbanism



Turning on the Lights in Tokyo. Strings of light emanate from the Imperial Palace in the city's center and follow the expressway system outward. Image by NASA, December, 2020.

Kanako Iuchi

Urbanism (noun) /ʊ..bʊn.l.zðm/ ¹

- the type of life that is typical of cities and towns
 - the process by which more and more people leave the countryside to live in *cities and towns*
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Louis Wirth's article in 1938 ² explained a symbiotic relationship of physical form, economic and societal structure, and cultural identity to the way people live in urban settings. This ultimately became a foundation of urbanism ideology for architects, planners, and practitioners in the modern age. Urbanism is often abstractly used to explain various styles of design, lifestyles, and activities in populated areas – and at this moment trending with ever more variations responding to increasingly diverse identities of place and people.

Urbanism is often perceived as an innovative and sophisticated urban style with state-of-the-art technologies to pursue both efficiency and attraction. However, the meaning of contemporary living has changed over the years, and is highly dependent on the social and cultural preference of the time and places. In the United States, urbanism post-1980s is generally represented by suburban development, where environmental and social amenities come with a modern twist. Towards and beyond the early 2000s, urbanism has returned to focus on inner cities, with principles of mixed land use and smart growth for more equitable development often called new urbanism.

In the East, or at least in Japan, the English term "urbanism" had less exposure until the 1980s when suburban development was propelled to accommodate the increasing urban population in more livable spaces. This philosophy of developing efficient and attractive urban space, however, was not new – and often enhanced after large-scale disasters historically. The Dojunkai apartment complexes (同潤会アパート existed 1924-2013), built between 1924 and 1933 after the 1923 Kanto earthquake in Tokyo (東京) and Yokohama (横浜)³, are one of the earliest urbanism residences in Japan, in an exploration of efficient and modern living. Architects and planners harmonized western and eastern culture, developing collective living with high-tech facilities and modern designs, and notably earthquake-resistant buildings. A sense of new urban community evolved to expand through this urbanism development.

Similar to the United States, urbanism in Japanese suburban regions trended throughout the 1980s, though it wasn't until the 1995 earthquake in Kobe (神戸) that retrofitting the inner-city was viewed as urbanism. While recovery was sensitive to being excessively elegant, efficient contemporary living in the city center was a key concern, as the inner city was facing severe deterioration pre-earthquake. The idea of compacting cities became one of the popular urbanism models in the 2000s, and intensified during the recovery from the 2011 Tohoku (東北) triple disaster. The idea of compact cities with cutting-edge technology and engineering was inevitable because such urban form could leverage efficiency and amenities in a region where population decline has already occurred.

While Japan's urbanism has a strong bond with urban recovery from disasters, history explains a reciprocal relationship of culture, social trends, and urbanism. Such interrelationship is also visible in other countries, similar to the case of American urbanism. Urbanism, therefore, is a pursuit of better living in urban space, influenced by local ideology, values, and wisdom.

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Kanako Iuchi is an Associate Professor, Tohoku University, in Sendai Japan. She researches post-disaster planning approaches and processes to achieve resiliency. Current research themes cover recovery governance, community relocation, and spatial re-development.

JDU is a project by Delta Urbanism Research Group and DIMI Delft Deltas, Infrastructure and Mobility Initiative Delft University of Technology

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Graphic Layout

bruno, Venice (Italy)

Typefaces

Union, Radim Peško, 2006
JJannon, François Rappo, 2019

Publisher

TU Delft OPEN
<https://www.tudelft.nl/library/openpublishing>

Subscription and Printing on Demand

Open access journal: available subscription on the journal website
For subscriptions and any further information: JDU-BK@tudelft.nl
Printing on demand will be available from January 2021

Frequency: 1 volume per year

Publication Funding

TU Delft Delta, Infrastructure and Mobility Initiative

Contacts

For any further information:
JDU-BK@tudelft.nl
<https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/jdu/>
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*N.2 | Longue Durée | Dictionary | 02
Fall | Winter 2021*

Authors

Kanako Iuchi, *Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan*

Citation

Iuchi, K., Dictionary 'Urbanism', *J. Delta Urbanism* 2(2021), doi.org/10.7480/jdu.2.2021.6230

Type of license

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All published contributions are submitted to a Blind Peer Review process except for the sections Dialogues and Dictionary.

ISSN: 2666-7851
p-ISSN 2667-3487