

Book Review: Jordan Sand (2013) *Tokyo Vernacular: Common space, local histories, found objects*, University of California Press (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London)

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As one of the world's most visible metropolises, Tokyo fascinates visitors and residents with its sprawling spatiality and an architectural history that has been constantly interrupted by several devastating disasters in the past century. Such frequent cycles of destruction and reconstruction contextualize Tokyo's spatial uniqueness and highlight the city's inability to trace its architectural and other material cultural heritage along trajectories of relatively unbroken historical continuity. Confronted with these challenges, Tokyo's preservation efforts demand a historicizing and localizing investigation when they are contextualized within a global trend of conserving and memorializing cities since the 1970s. These challenges, nevertheless, open up new possibilities for Tokyoites to rediscover, preserve, claim, celebrate, and ultimately vernacularize the streetscapes in its everydayness that is deeply embedded in how residents, organized around shared local spaces and communities, mobilize the city's usable past to create its cultural heritage.

Jordan Sand's *Tokyo Vernacular* adopts a populist approach in its attempts to understand a perceived shift in how Tokyoites engage with the city's history, urban locality, and memory in the post-1960s era, after the futile spontaneous mass movements to claim and appropriate public spaces such as the Shinjuku West Exit Underground Plaza. What lies at the center of this critical method is the concept of the "vernacular", an ingeniously employed metaphor that not only illuminates how the indigenous streetscapes of Tokyo serve as the physical and material components of the city's local history, but also emphasizes the singularity of a lived everydayness and experiential knowledge that underlies the city's cultural narratives. Defined as "a language of form, space, and sensation shaped by the local history of habitation" (Sand, 2013, p. 2), the vernacular connotes a cognitive intimacy that can only derive from the physical position of the local residents on the street level, whose direct encounters with the city's spatial configuration are necessarily composed of the trivial, the mundane, the irregular, and often the idiosyncratic. Therefore, the vernacular, as lived experience and localized encounters, gives preservation activists something that the grand and abstract monuments are not able to provide,

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as the latter connotes collectivism, civic society, and an (imagined) citizenship. While the national/public represented by monumental structures becomes an empty signifier that leads to a loss of meaning and public interests, the vernacular reinscribes the significance of human values and sensations in interpersonal activities and local communities within the materiality of the urban environment. The vernacular as a critical framework prioritizes direct human-city interaction unmediated by the abstraction of monumental structures, and legitimizes a making of space by claiming the right to remember and articulate the city as how each individual resident relates to the city and all its vestiges of the past, in a manner that is independent, if not resisting, the officially sanctioned memory underlying government and/or municipal use of space and place. This right to individual memory is fundamental to the vernacular of the city, and it is the non-uniformity and amorphous of the everyday that is both a powerful alternative to the regularizing ordinance of the state and an antidote to the normative urban planning monopolized by corporate capitalism.

Tokyo's vernacular past is examined through the lens of four sites that encompass a carefully orchestrated variety of urban spaces where the everyday and the local intersect with the public and the official: the public square, the neighborhood, the street, and the museum. Each site presents an alternative approach that differentiates itself from the dualistic dichotomy of the individual vs. the state, or the nostalgia for a simpler life vs. the hegemony of consumerism in postindustrial society; instead, each site exemplifies a discursive, inclusive, and organic use of public spaces with an acute awareness of the elasticity and flexibility of how meaning is made, claimed, and appropriated by individuals. What characterizes these four sites as localities of the vernacular is therefore an emerging distancing away from abstract interpretation and universalizing signification that is neither advocated by the government or cooperate companies or understood in globalizing terms, but a shared celebration of the grassroots and the inhabited empiricism.

The inscription of the vernacular takes shape in the debunking of the myths of the *hiroba*, or plaza or public square, as one of the most representative urban spatializations that connotes the community of citizens and a shared collective national consciousness. With extensive historical research from popular media, serious journalism, and academic writings in Japanese and English on the mass movements to claim the Shinjuku West Exit Plaza that ended with the repulsion of activist and local residents, the first chapter offers a compelling argument that the plaza and its spatial politics as a site of exchanges and activities that spontaneously happen among citizens is an illusory imagination. The *hiroba* is in fact a misnomer in the Japanese context, in the sense that it presupposes a shared understanding of the public's claim to a common space for civic activities and purposes, while in reality such understanding is clearly not endorsed by the municipal authorities. With the name change from *hiroba* to *tsūro* (route or passageway), the spatial definition of Shinjuku West Exit Underground Concourse signals the utopian nature of a democratic imagination of public square. Moving away from a Eurocentric architectural/sociological/political discussion on why the plaza loses its monumentality in Japan, or the absence of a unifying and collective public space, the chapter crystalizes the necessity to explore the "vernacular" as a much more meaningful and fruitful approach in the investigation of

more discursive and locality-centered ways through which the urban dwellers engage with their surroundings and its hidden traces of history. Such spontaneous, visceral, ground-level, and indigenous attitudes posit as a resistance against the universality of urban historical discourses based on homogenizing concepts of urban planning, municipal regulation, and cooperate capitalism, and become the central focus of the following three chapters.

The vernacular as micropolitics, a self-marginalizing gaze, and a privatization of history is illuminated in the next three chapters, each focusing on invented neighborhood, deviant properties, and museums of the everydayness, respectively. All three sites demonstrate a shared defiance against the paradigmatic, the standardized, and the authoritative, in the sense that they refuse to be contained and regulated in existing conceptualization of urban spaces and their designated uses. Contextualized within the framework of alternative, bottom-up, and spontaneous resistance against the grand narratives of the nation that are embodied in structures of monumentality in the city, these experimentations and expressions of subjective urban citizenship and their appropriations of public spaces are deeply rooted in the legitimacy of discursive and diverse individual experiences. As such, the vernacular is instrumental to the making of the city's streetscape and township through individualized efforts of reinventions, documentations, and memorialization revolving around relatable lived-experiences against Tokyo's real estate acquisitions and commercialization of urban spatiality.

Chapter 2 traces the creation of a previously non-existent neighborhood in the aftermath of the failed Shinjuku movements as a combined product of media, mediation, and the use of local history. Initiated by a group of young mothers as its principal editors, the *Yanesen (Chiiki zasshi: Yanaka, Nezu, Sendagi, Neighborhood magazine: Yanaka, Nezu, Sendagi)* magazine intentionally consolidates the previously unconnected neighborhoods of Yanaka, Nezu, and Sendagi into the Yanesen community through the magazine's dedicated focus on narratives of local memories, photographic documentations of local buildings that are aesthetically distinctive, and the rediscovery of a local past that are strategically employed to create a sense of solidarity and ownership. The vernacular understanding of the city, manifested through an interactive and organic relationship between the *Yanesen* magazine and its highly involved readers/subscribers, maintains a careful balance between the private and the public in the preservation of local history of the Yanesen community in an era of real estate bubble and over-development, neither defending state right to property nor advocating to preserve historical buildings. This apolitical attitude is therefore a conscious antidote to the cultural politics that focus on public space and monumentality underscoring the Shinjuku movements, and signals a re-orientation towards livable spaces and lived experiences and its narrations.

The mediated expressions of microresidential environment that are grounded in localness, based on selective employment of memorized history and undefined by predetermined political agenda in Chapter 2, take the form of an even closer look at the vernacular city from a pedestrian point of view in Chapter 3. Tokyo's hidden imprint of the past reviews itself under the gaze of a bystander, whose individualized, perhaps even idiosyncratic, and fragmented efforts to search for material objects that are characteristic of the everydayness take place on the street level, thereby providing another alternative as a site of resistance against the homogeny of consumer society

and urban consumerism. This chapter exemplifies the embodiment of the vernacular in a diverse and eclectic group of scholars, artists, and writers who self-identify as Street Observation Studies Group (Rojō Kansatsu Gakkai) in a playful and tongue-in-cheek manner, and highlights the participants' explicitly proclaimed marginalized and peripheral position as a critical vantage point as well as a point of departure that opens up even more discursive and private engagements with the city as a space of everyday life than *Yanesan's* mediated community formation. Searching for, photographing, labeling, and sharing "inexplicable protuberances and concavities connected to buildings and streets in the city, which while purposeless, have been beautifully preserved" (Suzuki 1986, as cited in Sand, 2013, p. 88) in a purely serendipitous way, these activities of the street observers continue the individuals' claim to the streetscape and the rejection against the managed and planned urbanscape that sought to define Tokyo for its residents, and, as such, are fundamentally about power and rights of the residents, even imagined, discursive, and minor. The search for seemingly "useless" objects as vestiges of a hidden past invites a comparison to an open invitation to a treasure-hunting game whose rewards are understood as a reaffirmation of the local residents' right to reappropriate these found objects and structures and reattach meaning and usefulness to them. Just as the treasure-hunting game presupposes the existence of a treasure, the activities of street observationists predicate upon the belief of the existence of hidden values to these useless objects, which has always already been there, overlooked and ignored, and waiting to be discovered, and employ them as alternatives to, if not contradicting, the state-imposed values/meanings. While the labeling of uselessness connotes the misfits, the irregular, the incongruity, and the incompatibility as spatial sutures, it mobilizes these fissures which urbanism cannot paint over, and lays claim to a virtual(photographed) streetscape as a site of resistance. Nevertheless, the game-like method and the street observationists' conscious avoidance of authorship to these photographic documentations of useless objects necessarily result in an endless cycle of meaning generation, in the sense that the reappropriation efforts of the street observationists are themselves reappropriated by others for various reasons and purposes, thereby creating an infinite mirroring effect, a Klein bottle of sorts, that harks back to the entropic nature of such activities.

If the vernacular expressions of the city provide diverse possibilities for alternative meaning making and place making through the lens of lived experience and the everydayness against the homogenizing monumentality of state property ownership and commercialized consumeristic urban planning, the Edo-Tokyo Museum and other museums of the everydayness of the lifeworld in recent Japanese history epitomize the shifting dynamics between the monumental and the vernacular. As exemplified by the author, the interactive exhibitions of domesticity and daily lives at the Showa Everyday Museum and later at the Edo-Tokyo Museum render history as externalized projections of a touchable experiential commodity, concretized to create a notion of continuum that normalizes/regulates how museum-goers conceptualize the connection between the past and the present, so that people are pre-conditioned to believe that the past is indeed experienceable and livable, and must be approached as such. In these reimagined interactions between the museums and the audience, the museum ceases to be a space defined by historical authority and collective memory mediated through disparate displays of antiquarian objects; instead, the audience, in their visceral engagement with the past that is

presented in a simulated reality that is not unlike a theme park in the Disneyland or a film set, experience a staged vignette that resembles a historical moment characterized by playfulness and spectacles. Thus, the museum ultimately relinquishes its regularizing and normative power, and its educational purposes, and retreats to the background in the same way as the street observationists who disclaim authorship and authority over their found objects.

It is arguable, however, whether this shift signals a total abandonment of public history and even a disappearance of a public, as the author concludes (Sand, 2013, p. 141), because the issues of power, agency, history, and memory intersect in far more complicated and intertwined patterns. On the one hand, in regularizing and prioritizing what is iconic and representative of such historical authenticity, museum exhibitions inevitably create a visualized grand national narrative of shared history and memory in their selection of objects and dioramas, in the sense that the monumental expressions of the nation in the form of authoritative and homogenizing/homogenized history via museum displays inscribe nostalgia as the sanctioned sentiments towards the past, and thereby making a dominant paradigm within whose framework the individuals must position their memory of the past and how it is narrated and visualized. The actuality of the everyday thus serves a normalizing gaze that blurs the lines between the everyday and the monumental. On the other hand, the museum only provides objects and their spatial arrangements (whose historical actuality is still open to discussion), and it is up to the museum-goers to make sense of, interpret, and narrate their own understanding of these materials. This mercurial and symbiotic relationship between the museum's intrinsic monumentality and the fragmented and discursive experience of individual museum-goers is highly reminiscent of the reader response theory, one of whose fundamental beliefs is that no literary creation is complete before a reader brings his/her responses to it. Similarly, therefore, no exhibition is meaningful until museum-goers fill the blanks for themselves.

Such interpretive openness is deeply rooted in the overarching themes of the book: how does a Tokyoite negotiate what is public and what is private and claim his/her individual agency in spatial, historical, and material terms in the urban environment? The last chapter returns to the book's point of departure, reiterating the significance of the everydayness and the vernacular as predating the existence of the modern nation state and the seemingly inescapable discourses of progress and consumerism. Magnified through the contemporary discussion over the preservation and restoration of Nihonbashi, traditionally the physical and cultural center of Tokyo, the synergies between history and memory, or rather, fragmented history and discursive memory, emerge as two constant variables in mapping the vernacular Tokyo. The elusiveness of history, the perpetual delay of memory, and the Tokyoites' discursive ritualistic evocation of a relatable and representable past synthesize in their attempt to triangulate the intersectionalities between the past and the present, while acutely aware that the present is always becoming the past, and the past alters through memory.

The most compelling and exciting features of *Tokyo Vernacular* are its relentless exploration of what is uniquely Tokyo in a deeply interdisciplinary and historicizing study of how the historical cityscape, the everyday streetscape, and the human experiential knowledge intersect and interact. In the process of rediscovering, preserving, claiming, and (re)presenting

the past, this book's examination of Tokyo in its spatial and temporal forms reveals a rhizomatic capacity that exponentially expands the studies of urban history and its field applications, simultaneously connecting and redefining such areas as architectural studies, civic movements, historical preservations, urban planning, museology, and cultural anthropology, to name just a few. Tokyo's architectural urban space is therefore "a way of thinking and philosophizing, of trying to solve philosophical or cognitive problems" (Jameson, 1991, p.125). The abstract nature of these problems and their everyday spatial correspondence in turn render history both textual and contextual, as each site employs textual (journalism, photography, and exhibition) strategies to locate a vernacular Tokyo within its architectural urban history.

While *Tokyo Vernacular* consciously rejects a dichotomous dynamic between the monumental and the vernacular, it sometimes positions Tokyo's urban spatiality, especially its perceived lack of monumentality, within a Eurocentric frame of reference. When European cities such as Paris or Rome are referred to as the default and the paradigm, Tokyo's "absence" of monumental space inevitably becomes its "lack" of civil rights and awareness of citizenry in its modern history. What is lurking beneath Tokyoites' search for alternative ways to claim urban properties and liminal spaces is an assumption of Japanese modernity, and subsequently how a postmodern and postindustrial Tokyo is situated within a global movement of preservation of material history. Furthermore, there is a conspicuous lack of references to other non-Western cities except in Chapter 4, where the Hong Kong Museum of History is used as an example of the use of the everyday in museums. When John Locke's theory is employed as the philosophical foundation of the street observationists' acts of reappropriation, one wonders if there are indigenous Japanese theories towards property ownership that may explain these activities. If the book succeeds in locating the vernacular of Tokyo's experiential and everyday urban space as a resistance against the utopian national monumental space, then the cause of the dichotomy between the vernacular and the monumental seems to be much more complicated than a result of a misplaced claim to a public space whose political connotation is entirely illusory in the first place.

The interconnectedness and carefully maintained focus on a Tokyo that is knowable as livable/lived space characterize this book's intellectual exploration and contribute to a wide variety of potential readership. In addition to scholars, researchers, and students of Japanese studies, architectural history, cultural anthropology, and urban studies, readers who are interested in Tokyo and its representative sites, museums, and local communities, and first-time international travelers to Japan who appreciate the concepts, ideas, and debates behind the preservation of traces of old Tokyo, will all benefit from *Tokyo Vernacular's* unique gaze at Tokyo and its contemplation on the city's layered urban spaces. Those who are already familiar with landmark architectures and tourists' frequents will still be entertained with the streetscapes of Tokyo's back alleys and walkways that only locals know, and thereby obtain a glimpse of the daily activities of Tokyoites and become more invested in the city's multiple dimensions.

References

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