The Museum of Modern Art

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SHINJUKU -- THE PHENOMENAL CITY
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WALL LABELS

This exhibition seeks to convey the structure and quality of a place called Shinjuku, a dense cluster of shopping and entertainment activity in the heart of Tokyo.

The dominant Western ideals of quality in the designed environment have been unity, consistency, and permanence. Such ideals are difficult to achieve in a modern bureaucratic democracy; they have proved almost impossible to achieve in societies which rely on winner/loser confrontation as a means of settling conflict. The failure has been most striking at the level of the city.

In Japan, by contrast, the traditional design process has stressed accommodation to change and flexibility of use as the most desirable qualities for a human environment. Doubtless related to a tradition of building in ephemeral materials, these ideals have been achieved through a basic respect for compromise rather than confrontation.

The Shinjuku area of Tokyo demonstrates the success of the Japanese way of urban design in a modern context. There are no large public projects, no planning authorities, no striving for permanent and unitary form. The Shinjuku environment is the outcome of a constant process of ad hoc solutions to particular problems by a vast number of participants, public and private. The result is an urban center that is at once vernacular and modern, offering a diversity of goods and services for every need and every taste.

What is offensive to modernist sensibilities is Shinjuku's reliance on a heavy appliqué of facade and decoration, with a cheerful acceptance of deception and artifice.

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The Shinjuku environment appears chaotic to eyes accustomed to the clarity of pure form, and unfamiliar with the symbolism of Japanese culture. But in fact it is a well-ordered environment. It is ordered at the most obvious level by economic constraints, and by the social constraints of a peculiarly self-disciplined society.

Far more importantly, Shinjuku is ordered by each of the hundreds of thousands of individuals who participate in it daily. In the end it is a city of personal experience: the phenomenal city.

Peter Gluck

Henry Smith

Koji Taki

SHINJUKU: THE PEOPLE

Of the three million people who pass through Shinjuku Station every day, at least half a million stop off to shop, eat, drink, and be entertained. For all of them, going to Shinjuku is a natural part of city life.

Japanese homes are cramped, ill-adapted for entertainment and a far weaker focus for personal identity than their American counterparts. The offices or classrooms to which most of those in Tokyo commute are similarly functional and impersonal. Shinjuku thus becomes a giant cluster of tiny living rooms from which one can choose at pleasure a place for sociable contact. This explains its private and personal character.

Shinjuku contains more than three thousand retail shops, bars, restaurants,

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night clubs, and theatres to accommodate the constantly shifting sub-cultures of Tokyo life. It has served and continues to serve as a center for the artistic avant-garde, as hangout of gangsters and low-life, as hotbed of student radicals, as entertainment area for white-collar workers, as fashion parade of middle-class youth, and as shopping mecca for suburban housewives.

SHINJUKU: THE PLACE

Beneath the ceaseless jumble of human activity which dominates the atmosphere of Shinjuku, beneath the forest of signs and lights which adorns its surface, lies a physical place: a place with a particular economic structure and particular patterns of historical evolution.

The Station

The essential business of Shinjuku has always been transportation. Originally a post station at the intersection of two highways, Shinjuku has grown during the past century into the largest train station in the world. Located four miles from the central business district of Tokyo, it lies at the intersection of nine urban train lines and serves as the terminal for several dozen bus routes.

Shinjuku Station handles over three million passengers each day, over ten times as many as New York's Grand Central Station. The press of crowds on the rush hour platforms is indescribable, as inhuman as the surrounding world of shopping and entertainment is human and appealing. Once a free-standing building, Shinjuku Station has evolved into the most complex megastructure in the world.

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Goods and Services

Dominating the Shinjuku market are five mammoth department stores, accounting for almost half of the commercial floorspace in the area and averaging daily sales of over two million dollars.

The remainder of the market is fragmented into over three thousand small retail establishments, including 1100 places to drink, 540 places to eat, 180 coffee shops, 240 food stores, 200 clothing stores, 50 drug and cosmetic stores, 50 pinball parlors, 40 go and mahjong clubs, 40 theatres, and 150 hotels serving couples at hourly rates.

Most of these Shinjuku shops are very small, accommodating no more than a few customers at a time. Rarely does a given establishment correspond to a "building": most are packaged into mixed-use buildings at diverse levels, or sandwiched along pedestrian ways above and below ground. All are highly decorated and exhibit every kind of taste.

The competition for space within this thriving market place is intense, resulting in a tight and efficient spatial composition. The automobile has been forced out of much of the area (it cannot pay its way), leaving Shinjuku for the most part to the pedestrian. Such competition has also made Shinjuku land the most expensive in the world -- now over $2,000 per square foot near the station -- and because of its high cost it is almost impossible to develop large-scale planned projects.

History

Since its founding as a "new post town" (shin-juku) at the intersection of the Ome and Koshu highways in 1698, Shinjuku has combined transportation and commerce. Closed down in 1718 by government officials distraught at its thriving pleasure trade, Shinjuku was reopened in 1772 and has prospered

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History (continued)

continuously ever since.

The modern growth of Shinjuku began in 1885 with the laying of the Nihon Railway just west of the highway intersection. More lines followed, most in response to the rapid suburbanization of Tokyo after 1905, and by 1930 Shinjuku Station had become the most heavily used passenger station in Japan. Around it had grown a thriving center of shops, restaurants, bars, and theatres, patronized largely by the suburban middle class.

Politically and administratively, the Shinjuku station-market complex has never had any distinct identity, coming under an assortment of often conflicting jurisdictions. Nor is there any local residential community which gives Shinjuku a separate cultural identity.

The Shinjuku area has been twice destroyed by fire in the twentieth century, first in the Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and again in the American firebombing of May 1945. Japanese cities have a history of periodic destruction and subsequent rapid rebuilding untouched by formal planning.

OVERLAY MAP

The map of the Shinjuku area indicates the relationship between the street level and the vast underground area which links the transport network to the major buildings. The juxtaposition of the two levels gives the area much of its distinctive spatial character.

The underground system began in 1959 with the opening of the Marunouchi subway line and the 400-meter underground pedestrian passage, extending east from Shinjuku Station to Isetan department store. This "Metropolitan Promenade" provided the basis for an amoeba-like pattern of expansion which has continued

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to the present.

Twisting and labyrinthine, the underground area is crowded with hundreds of public and commercial facilities. The confusion and disorientation produced enhances the sense of fantasy and release which is central to the Shinjuku ambience.

The Shinjuku area continues to grow through steady renovation and new building. Projects to expand the transport and commercial facilities are constantly being planned, but no one can predict which will be realized. The only certainty in Shinjuku's future is a state of perpetual change.

On the far left of the map may be seen the outline of a project which is an anomaly to the Shinjuku area. Known as the "Fukutoshin" (urban subcenter), this ten-acre complex of super-highrise office buildings (and one hotel) presents a striking contrast with the rest of the area. Planned as a unit on the site of a former water works plant, the Fukutoshin reflects urban design principles wholly imported from the West. Reminiscent of recent building along Sixth Avenue in New York, it is a lifeless contrast with the vitality and intimate scale of traditional Shinjuku.

The component parts of the environment can be purchased from catalogs. The signs, and the fake foods, flowers, and rocks shown are typical examples.

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