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Constructing the Commons  
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Common

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Masatake Shinohara  
New Town  
Commonalities

## Masatake Shinohara

### New Town Commonalities

New Towns are deliberately constructed artificial cities. When one considers them as form, they seem to be geometrically divided cities. When one considers them as things, they seem to be artificial constructs that are mainly composed of glass, steel, asphalt, plastics, and so on. These artificial constructs are built according to principles of efficiency and functionality. In a similar manner the daily lives, which go on in the New Towns, are assumed to be efficient and functional. One would start to wonder whether these artificial worlds are natural or not. However, I don't believe that it is possible to regard this condition as perfectly natural.

In post-war Japan, New Towns were constructed in suburban areas in accordance with the population growth and propelled by the post-war economic development. Most of them were located in the major metropolitan areas of the country, such as Tokyo and Osaka. The children, who were born in these New Towns and have grown up there, have become adults now. Some of them stayed, while others have moved to different areas and have begun new lives. For them, New Towns are self-evident and ordinary. It was, as it were, their natural environment. They may not think about New Towns as a case. Nevertheless, in order to explore New Towns from a philosophical point of view, we need to construct a theoretical supposition that understands New Towns as such.

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The American urban sociologist Robert Park once wrote: 'If the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city, man has remade himself.'<sup>1</sup> New Towns, which epitomize the systematically constructed artificial city, constitute real human lives. Hence, we can argue that New Towns involve the inter-relation of the spatial world and

human activities. New Towns are the city, we might claim. Some critics however, like Guy Debord, argue that life in the New Towns lacks humanity as well as other essential characteristics of urbanity. In their view, it is devoid of 'authentic life'. Contrary to this argument, I want to claim that it is possible to think about the specific features of New Towns without falling back upon the complex concepts of humanity and/or authenticity.

To put it plainly, New Towns are worlds of stasis. This state of stasis causes a paralysis of bodily movement and affects the interaction of human behavior. The stasis of behavior cannot only be attributed to human interiority (inwardness), but also to the spaces where this behavior happens. Hence, we need to think about commonality in accordance to the spatial and atmospheric qualities that are generated through the interaction and interconnection among multiple behaviors. Before I will discuss that point, I want to present two conceptual reflections concerning the spatial qualities of New Towns.

1. New Towns are physical assemblages that are composed of many material elements.
2. We can sense some intangible ambient qualities in New Towns. These qualities can provide us a clue for the question concerning the spaces of New Towns.

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First of all, New Towns are physical assemblages. They are material constructions. These assemblages are made of various components, such as housing complexes, pedestrian streets, parks, lawns and so on. The fact that there are many inhabitants indicates that there are actually many persons using these spaces, not to say, inhabiting them. Their lives seem to be ordinary. If you regard the New Town life as natural, you don't need to have any doubt about this way of life. As long as the primary functions create a comfortable atmosphere and allow for an efficient life, we can not only feel contentment with New Town life but also assume that this is a more general feeling. From this perspective New Towns cannot be conceived as problematic. New Towns

appear as a given state of things. From this point of view, we need to conclude that no profound philosophical and theoretical problem can be discovered in New Towns.

However, as I will argue later, the existence of the New Town is not ordinary at all. To state it differently, the existence of a habitat that is regulated and conducted by strict ideas about functionality and efficiency is not natural. We are urged to believe that we can feel satisfied with New Towns because they are the sites of comfortable life. I want to question the basis of this belief. Can we say with absolute certainty that this belief is objectively true? The philosopher Timothy Morton calls this ecological thinking. 'Ecological thought is difficult', he writes, 'because it brings to light aspects of our existence that have been remained unconscious for a long time.'<sup>2</sup> At this point we need to recall the shadowy aspects of the way of life that was constructed in benign connection with the New Towns. In this way, we can, like Morton argues, 'reframe our world, our problem, and ourselves'.<sup>3</sup> This offers, in other words, the opportunity to reframe New Towns as a part of our world, or rather as a world in itself. This world may be strange and different. Nevertheless, this strangeness cannot be perceived nor investigated yet.

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Kobo Abe's novel The Ruined Map is decisively important for the consideration of the problem that is typical to the New Town. In this novel, Abe tries to capture the hidden and ongoing worldly change that has been caused by the construction of New Towns. In the opening sentence, Abe writes:

'The city – a bounded infinity. A labyrinth where you are never lost. Your private map where every block bears exactly the same number. Even if you lose your way, you cannot go wrong.'<sup>4</sup>

New Towns are bounded worlds. They are fixated by the boundary lines, while these boundary lines also immediately separate them from the outside world. New Towns are

self-sufficient worlds. If we look closer, we see, in turn, that these worlds themselves are also divided into building complexes. A number identifies each of these complexes. In turn, these complexes are divided in apartment blocks, which also have numbers. And finally, these apartment blocks are composed of multiple dwellings, which are once again referred to by numbers. We can conceive the New Towns thus as numerically constructed worlds.

When we regard the New Town as a problem, we need to be conscious of the ways that New Towns have been geometrically divided. This, however, is only one premise. In addition, we need to ask what kind of life style is established and lived in these functionally compartmentalized and numbered worlds.

Takashi Nibuya, who is a scholar of western modern thought and literature, sees The Ruined Map as the novel that sets out 'a flat world that is nameless, equivalently numbered, and filled with many faceless persons.'<sup>5</sup> According to Nibuya, Kobo Abe does no longer belief in the recuperation of solid substance in a flat world and simply makes an effort to illuminate the very flatness of this world. Nibuya presents a similar image of the New Towns. Subject-less persons are passing through with some wavering traces of smiles, they have names, pasts, dreams and plans and buy flowers occasionally, order birthday cakes, write documents, get up on Sunday morning, say hello, walk around and talk about yesterday and tomorrow – these things make them feel confused. Their namelessness is not a problem. On the contrary, they cannot be sure that people continue to have their own names in places where names cannot exist at all.

Indeed, when we are walking around in New Towns, we sometimes lose the sense of reality. Even though I am buying flowers, writing documents, and stroll around, I cannot be sure that this is happening in this real world. It is possible to think that this sense of dilution has been caused by the flatness of New Towns. Nibuya considers the flatness of New Towns in relation to the non-existence of proper names. However, even though the spatial texture of New

Towns is not inhabited by names but by numbers, New Town dwellers still have their own proper names and lead their own lives. Nibuya considers this situation as strangely unnatural. On the other hand, someone may conclude that it today is more natural to live in the nameless and numerically conducted state of mind of the New Towns. Without making an effort to have names, we should accept to be nameless. It is the affirmation of the anonymous.

However, can we consider the flatness of New Towns as a problem of namelessness? I want to argue here that its flatness affects the quality of space. New Towns are the real world being transplanted onto the void space that came into being through the physical destruction, not to say evacuation, of forests and fields. Objects to which numbers and signs are attached create a world of things, which are meant to be buildings, streets, parks and so on. In this world, the formalization of a life style in accordance with the functionality, efficiency and rationality, has proceeded.

When we think about the spaces of New Towns, we need to suppose that they are built primarily to be at the service of a functional and rational lifestyle. They are functional and rational. That is to say, they have been produced on the basis of logical and consistent planning models. Since the planning models are universal, New Towns can exist in any place in the world. For that reason, New Towns are supposed to lack locality. When you are in New Towns, you would lose the sense of location. The typical spatial experience of New Towns can be summarized through notions as homogeneity, blandness, emptiness, and so on.

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Whenever we walk around urban spaces, the architect Yoshiharu Tsukamoto tells me that we need to pay more attention to behavior. What he means does not only refer to the human behavior, but also to that of many things. We can see that trees and bridges have their own behavior. This actually brings me to my second consideration. Urban spaces, I would stress, have their own ambient quality:

they are filled with many behaviors, which generate their own embodied atmosphere. Whenever we find ourselves in this atmosphere, we perceive a kind of ambient feeling. It can be stillness, or comfort, and so on. The specific commonalities of urban spaces are caused by these qualities. In addition, the atmospheric ambient qualities are generated by architectural design. So if we experience some urban spaces as lacking these qualities, this is caused by the poverty of architectural practice.

At this moment, some young Japanese architects pay attention to the situation of New Towns and try to recreate spacious commonalities through the reconstruction of New Town spaces. For example, Junpei Nosaku aims to renovate an old shopping center in Fujimidai, one of the New Towns in Tokyo, into an art space.<sup>6</sup> He takes the deterioration of old spaces as a chance for the recreation of an art space that would make lots of artistic activities possible. In this project, Nosaku conceives the old deteriorated spaces as multiple elements and decomposes them into the raw materials. He reuses those materials and composes them into new spaces. These spaces bear some curious ambient qualities, which are caused, I would like to stress, by the assemblage of materials and human activities.

For that reason, I want to suggest that we should not regard the New Town as an inhuman nor as a fictional city. It is a real and human city that is constructed out of various materials. These materials can be used for the construction of new spaces. It is possible and urgent to regard the spaces of New Towns as filled with multiple chances for the creation of commonality.

#### Notes

1. Robert Park, On Social Control and Collective Behavior (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967), p. 3.
2. Timothy Morton, The Ecological Thought (Cambridge

- Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 9
3. *ibid.*
4. Kobo Abe, The Ruined Map (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 3.
5. Takashi Nibuya, Shisha no aisatsu

- de yoru ga hajimaru [The night begins with greeting the dead] (Tokyo: Kawade shobo shinsha, 1999), p. 51-52.
6. <http://junpeinousaku.com/info/?p=185%5D>

## **Colophon**

This text is composed of fragments from the introductory Chapter to Masatake Shinohara, Ikirareta Nyu Taun: Mirai Kukan no Tetsugaku [On the Lived New Town: Philosophy of Future Space] (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2015). It is published at the occasion of the conference 'Constructing the Commons' at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the Delft University of Technology on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, where Masatake Shinohara is one of the keynote speakers.

## **Constructing the Commons**

The conference is part of the project 'Constructing the Commons', which is organized by the Chair of Methods and Analysis of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the TU Delft. This project is initiated at the occasion of the visiting professorship of Momoyo Kajjima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of the Tokyo based architectural office Atelier Bow-Wow. The project investigates the commons from an architectural point of view, first as tangible architectural and urban figures, and second as the rituals and politics of co-operation that articulate architectural projects.

## **Organization**

Visiting Professors Atelier Bow-Wow,  
Momoyo Kajjima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto  
Chair of Methods and Analysis, Tom Avermaete  
and Hans Teerds  
With the help of Soscha Monteiro de Jesus

## **Registration**

If you wish to attend the conference, register on [www.constructingthecommons.com](http://www.constructingthecommons.com)

## **Contact**

For more information on the project and conference 'Constructing the Commons', please visit our website: [www.constructingthecommons.com](http://www.constructingthecommons.com) or contact Hans Teerds: [p.j.teerds@tudelft.nl](mailto:p.j.teerds@tudelft.nl)

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