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A Study on Open Spaces in a Sapporo Neighborhood

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This short study aims to bring into attention a few examples of open spaces in the Sapporo neighborhood of Kita-ku, notably those narrow spaces bordering the houses and apartments seem merely void spaces among building arrangements. But they are in fact pleasant spaces with significant results on environment and character of the neighborhood. Some of these spaces are briefly examined as examples for their relationship with the buildings surrounding them, their orientation, privacy etc. explaining them as fully purposeful.

Introduction

Open Spaces in Japanese neighborhoods

Generally houses and apartments in a Japanese neighborhood are not attached. There are always spaces between them as opposed to many neighborhoods in Europe and e.g. in Iran. Even in large cities of Japan like Tokyo where land shortage is evident and there are often historical and sometimes complicated layouts in some neighborhoods, these spaces would still be present between houses and apartments but are rather shaped as voids between the high bulks of residential blocks which would still be providing natural light and ventilation for what is in many cases staircases and corridors as well as to the windows to either secondary or sometimes living spaces. Here, these ‘voids’ are widened by the gradual setback of the buildings as they rise up allowing for more natural light, also to contribute to a more intimate scale. These open voids and spaces have proved essential for the layout of the buildings and their internal arrangements as well as responding to the very humid climate of Tokyo and other Japanese cities in general.

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Fig.1. High masses of residential blocks in Hiroo, Tokyo, where there are yet open spaces in between.



Fig.2. While Tokyo houses and neighborhoods have more of a temporary garden in front of them; Sapporo plots could actually enjoy a more permanent open area surrounding them.

Sapporo

Sapporo is among the latest developed cities in modern Japan. The city has surely borrowed many of its urban vocabulary from those of Western precedents, namely its blocked layout and the open, green central axis of Odori and significantly wide straight streets throughout its districts compare to those of traditional cities. However a strong character of a Japanese city is yet evident throughout Sapporo neighborhoods where one could for instance notice the very intimate arrangement of buildings of various scales in the same block accommodating a range of activities and purposes.

Open spaces in Sapporo neighborhoods

Neighborhoods in Sapporo enjoy a fairly large and open layout compared to those in other metropolitan areas in Japan. Open areas for the

public mainly include parks and parking spaces, the latter can be noticed quite often which of course has to do with the relative driving nature of living in Sapporo where access is mostly by cars - and to less extend the bicycles for close destinations - as it is by the subway.

Private or semi-private open spaces and/or those of 'not built' mainly include small yards around the houses and apartments and parking spaces in front of the buildings.

Many of these spaces get their own definition and character after the constant procession and recession of the facades of the neighboring buildings in contrast to those in many other cities around the world which creates more distinction between the volumes of houses and apartments and avoids visual monotony throughout the neighborhood.

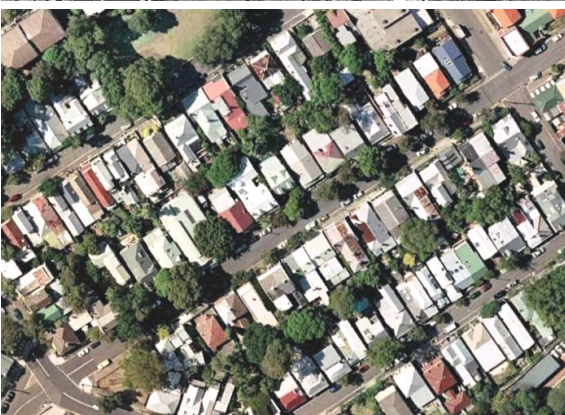


Fig.3. Looking at the two examples at right (top Tehran, bottom Sydney) and compare them with Sapporo, one could see the distinction between the layout of the three neighborhoods. In the two former examples, buildings are lined up to one side of the plot; the pattern which is being followed almost everywhere whereas the mixed pattern of plot coverage in the Japanese example is a rare and yet very interesting case.

There are buildings in between those on the sides of the plots, getting their access through the plots either in front or at the rear.

Aerial images from Google Earth.

Open spaces here would also include the open or ‘not built’ areas around and between the buildings. These spaces have a great advantage of providing the area with natural air circulation between the volumes of the buildings and also taking advantage of the day lighting in all the directions of the buildings to various extents. These spaces will also provide access to all sides of the buildings where in most cases service pipes are running or e.g. gas capsules are located.

neighborhoods chances are much more that spaces other than those secondary locate beside these open spaces. Houses and low apartments often have spaces laid around their plan and these open spaces contribute directly to these living spaces within the houses as well as acting as spatial boundaries between houses and their neighbors and at the same time being ‘incorporated’ by them. In such cases, which is noticed quite often, privacy of the neighbors is



Fig.4. *The yet very intimate scale of the neighborhoods despite their grid layout system and the very dense and what seems to look like random arrangement of the plots. The relative lower and more open character of a typical Sapporo neighborhood makes these spaces more noticeable in the midst of the buildings, where one could actually notice a character and/or function.*

Map from http://www.jamgis.jp/jam_sapporo

Given the relative low density and scale of the neighborhoods in Sapporo these spaces would bear another meaning and definition than just voids however they constantly change between the diverse placement of the buildings and the constant setbacks and projections. In these



Fig.5. *The very narrow open spaces between the houses would still provide daylight and access to some services.*

ensured by the careful selection of the window positions so that direct sight is avoided.

The orientation of these open spaces mainly follows the general layout of the whole block and the buildings around each one of them in particular. However the patterns do not necessarily follow each other where one could notice the character of each of these spaces determined as a direct result of what looks like a random disposition of the housing blocks throughout the neighborhood plots.

Meanwhile as previously mentioned, the more wide nature of these spaces has actually contributed to their independence and character as well as their purpose e.g. as house yards or gardens rather than merely void spaces. Yet as previously mentioned, the casual location of the buildings among the plots make them to be not only viewed from their own plot but also by their neighboring plots and in many cases well beyond. This makes it possible to picture all these open and in many cases green areas collectively as one towards different directions which contributes to the visual delight of the neighborhood while it gives each house or apartment a relative 'free standing' character separating them since they do not



Fig.6. The setback of the house in this plot provides an ideal place for a small front garden for growing vegetables.

line up into a single pattern. The casual layout of the houses can also be regarded as a contribution to the Japanese appreciation of living in detached housing as much as possible despite the compacted nature of typical Japanese neighborhoods and in our case Sapporo.



Fig.7. The informal way of access to a plot behind what is now a public parking space.

Another point to notice is the common feature in not just Sapporo but in a general Japanese neighborhood where plots or houses and apartments are situated in the middle of blocks and get their access by narrow secondary roads through the neighboring blocks which join the street.



Fig.8. The intimate scale between the volumes of housing inside a residential block; the open space here is being used as a common parking area for cars and bicycles.

Here, not just the scale of the neighborhood is changed but also the scale of the open spaces are broken; and more to notice it makes many of the backyards accessible and in sight not just by their neighbors but also by passersby however it is unlikely for the strangers to cross quiet neighborhood blocks. Therefore backyards are no longer mere backyards even in plots bordering main streets.



Fig.9. (above) *secondary ways of access to the plots behind, providing direct access to some of the backyards.*

Fig.10. (bottom) *open spaces create volumes in a neighborhood, not just facades.*

Conclusion

Generally the open spaces around and between the buildings have great advantages, not just for the plot but also for the whole neighborhood i.e. the visual sophistication, services and as small gardens, etc. not to mention their great benefit to the houses and apartments in spite of the probable more exposure to the winter cold of Sapporo.

These open or not built spaces, even very small compare to those in many neighborhoods elsewhere, are great assets to Japanese, and in our case, Sapporo neighborhoods and certainly contribute to the visual diversity of their built environment. While they provide a sense of independency and privacy to the houses and apartment blocks despite their jammed arrangement, they provide houses and apartments with the possibility of more plan arrangements as well as taking full advantage of their environment.

Images taken by Amir Shojai.