

Ruins and creativity: Focusing on environmental development and cultural policies in Japan since the 1980s

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Introduction

What comes to mind when you hear the word “ruins”? What do you feel when you see images of ruins? What do you think when you see real ruins?

In the 2000s and 2010s, there was a movement in Japan to utilize “abandoned” buildings scattered throughout the country, and there is an interesting reason for utilizing these ruins. For example, Masayuki Sasaki, who has championed the creative city theory in Japan and around the world since the 1990s, argues that following the 20th century, which developed through an industrial economy centered on manufacturing, the 21st century will be the era of a creative economy centered on creative industries.¹⁾ He also notes that “spaces that retain historical flavor” such as former factories and schools, as well as the natural environment, are being utilized as places to stimulate such creativity.²⁾

Kunihiro Noda, who specializes in cultural policy and the creative city theory, also discusses ruins as a place for “creating art” in his book published in 2013.

As to why ruins “produce art,” Noda places emphasis on their locality. He notes that ruins are places that possess the *genius loci* (earth spirits) and function as “places of communal memory for local residents.”³⁾ Noda also cites architect Arata Isozaki’s 1988 essay on ruins, which states that ruins are “places that slip through the net of contemporary social control and act as social ‘cracks,’ encouraging people to free themselves from the codes of society and to think more freely.”⁴⁾

In this way, Noda suggests that ruins are creative places that evoke collective memories in visitors and, simultaneously, bring about new ideas that differ from conventional ones. Furthermore, as examples (in Japan) where ruins have been utilized, he cites the Creative Center Osaka at the former Namura Shipyard, Inujima Seirenscho Art Museum, Chikko Red Brick Warehouse (Osaka), Kyoto Art Center, 3331 Arts Chiyoda (closed in 2023), and others.⁵⁾

As described above, researchers and architects pay attention to and utilize abandoned places such as abandoned factories and schools because ruins are closely connected to creativity.

The questions here are twofold: First, when exactly did ruins begin to attract interest and from

what kind of interest? Second, what is the background behind the perception of ruins as places that stimulate creativity?

We would like to point out that the way of dealing with ruins has been changing since the turn of the century, as indicated by Sasaki, and that discussions on *genius loci* and ruins as indicated by Noda became active in the 1980s. The concept of *genius loci* was introduced in Japan by architectural historian Hiroyuki Suzuki in his 1984 book⁶⁾ and his 1987 article for the literary magazine *Eureka*.⁷⁾ Arata Isozaki's essay on ruins is also a contribution to photographer Ryuji Miyamoto's photo book.⁸⁾ Miyamoto first held an exhibition in 1986 and later published a book of his photographs in 1988, capturing the moment when famous buildings of the past lost their functionality, became ruins, and were demolished. Both the exhibition and the photo book are characterized by the fact that not only Isozaki but also various contemporaneous intellectuals were involved in critiquing the exhibition and the photo book.⁹⁾

Therefore, subsequently, we would like to examine these two questions, examining the above discussion for clues and relying primarily on the contemporaneous discourse.

1. Ruins in the image – the development of interest in ruins

1.1. Ruins as motifs of paintings

First, it should be noted that interest in ruins began in Japan in the recent past. If we go back in history, it is thought that interest in ruins began when Western art motifs of ruins were brought into the realm of Japanese art during the Meiji era period of modernization (late nineteenth century), and Japanese painters turned their attention to what they saw as ruins.¹⁰⁾ However, the ruins that the painters gazed upon were not the ruins of Japan, but those of ancient Greece and Rome. The aesthete Atsushi Tanigawa cites Japan's architectural culture, which traditionally has no stone buildings, as a reason for this.¹¹⁾

1.2. Ruins as photographic subjects

From the mid-1970s to the 1980s, however, ruins came into the spotlight, particularly in photographic expressions.¹²⁾

Yuji Saiga and Miyamoto were among the first photographers to focus on ruins. Saiga took the opportunity of Gunkanjima's closure in Nagasaki in 1974 to visit the island and photograph its ruins. Miyamoto photographed the demolition process of famous buildings in Japan and around the world, held an exhibition in 1986 and published a photo book in 1988.

From the 1990s onward, photographers such as Shozo Maruta and Shinichiro Kobayashi began to push ruins to the forefront and vigorously publish collections of their work. Maruta photographed abandoned railroad facilities in various parts of Japan, whereas Kobayashi photographed large-scale mine sites and related facilities. Incidentally, Maruta's interest in ruins began in the 1970s. In the 2000s and later, ruins were explored and photographed not only by

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photographers but also by ruin explorers and enthusiasts. Among them, Toru Kurihara and Kaoru Nakata, who published a guidebook on ruins, continuously explored ruins and published their findings.

1.3. Subcultures and ruins

In addition, in the 1980s, ruins appeared one after another not only in photography but also in other media of expression—theater, animation, manga, video games, and music—and were featured in a 1986 newspaper article.¹³⁾ The best-known examples are Katsuhiro Otomo's manga and anime *AKIRA*, and Hayao Miyazaki's animes *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*.

2. Interest in ruins

The above discussion confirms that, in Japan, attention to ruins increased from the mid-1970s to the 1980s, primarily in visual culture, and continued thereafter.

Then, what interest did such ruins attract at the time? The aesthete Tanigawa states:

'Japan, which has traditionally had no stone buildings, began constructing concrete buildings in the modern era, and as they deteriorated or were abandoned after the "bubble burst," they began to take on the appearance of ruins without being rebuilt. These stone ruins, which have begun to appear in abundance throughout Japan, arouse photographers' desires. The photographs of ruins do not take us back to the distant past or to the primitive times, nor do they evoke a dark premonition of apocalypse. We only see in them the result of Japan's modernization.'¹⁴⁾

Considering Tanigawa's argument, we will now examine where the interest in ruins lies, relying primarily on experts who have critiqued photo books, mangas, and animes.

2.1. Inorganic ruins

First, we can point out that Miyamoto's photographs and Otomo's criticisms of mangas such as *AKIRA* show a focus on inorganic ruins.

For example, art critic Shunji Ito states:

'In the past, ruins were richly imbued with human testimony, and thus incorporated the "mechanism of ruins" of remembering things that are no longer there. However, the current ruins have brought to the fore inorganic elements that do not allow such imagination to intervene (···) However, it is also true that such inorganic ruins strongly attract our senses. Our own senses react sensitively and minutely to these immediate ruins, which have rejected

human testimony from the start. It is as if each of the exposed thin steel frames and twisted pipes are our optic nerves.¹⁵⁾

'In other words, if the manga up to now have been centered on human beings, in *AKIRA*, the characteristics of the urban and architectural space are completely the main characters. Of course, because it is a spectacle, human mobility is speedily and rhythmically developed, but I had a strong impression of the mechanism of the large field that moves the humans behind the spectacle.¹⁶⁾

Literary critic Saburo Kawamoto described Miyamoto's book as capturing "architecture as ruins" that asserts itself within the city. Moreover, the following is a description of *AKIRA*.

'One of the interesting things about the spatiality of *AKIRA* is that it is both a high-rise building and an underworld, or rather, an underground space. (···) The image of an underground city is like entering the earth's internal organs. (···) The visceral feeling of the underground is, for example, when you think of a computer machine, if you open it up, you will see that it has a huge number of lines. I think it's a metaphor for the visceral. The technological city, which appears inorganic, is in fact a metaphor for the human body. (···) A truly cyberpunk world.¹⁷⁾

Both Ito and Kawamoto refer to the ruins of architecture and cities as "inorganic" while simultaneously expressing an interest in their "lifelike" aspect. Such "cyberpunk" ruins are also common to such science fiction films as *Blade Runner* and *Future Century Brazil* from the early 1980s.

Furthermore, architect Kisho Kurokawa, who has been advocating a change from the age of machines to the age of life since the late 1950s and has proposed organic development of cities and architecture, evaluated *AKIRA* under the title *Ruins are the City of the Future* as follows.

'The ruins of the old city as depicted in *AKIRA* are reversed into the city of the future for the boys living in Neo-Tokyo. All future events are about to begin in the ruins. /Interesting cities always resemble ruins somehow. They lack a unified context, are full of signs and symbols that bear witness to history, and reek of secrecy and danger.¹⁸⁾

2.2. The forgotten and vanishing ruins

However, Kawamoto points out that, in the 1980s, Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, and *My Neighbor Totoro* were accepted along with *AKIRA*.

'In terms of animation, there is *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, and the current *My Neighbor Totoro*, and Hayao Miyazaki's world is the opposite of Otomo's. There

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are forests and rural greenery reminiscent of the old Osamu Tezuka, and it is a heart-warming world reminiscent of the Middle Ages. *AKIRA* is a complete contrast, a story of a city completely dominated by technology, but both are enjoyed and coexist in Japanese society today, and (···) *Dragon Quest III*, as far as I can tell from just looking at the images, is quite heartwarming, with the forests and all.¹⁹⁾

Kawamoto also compares Shozo Maruta's photo collection to that of Ryuji Miyamoto, stating:

'Shozo Maruta's Abandoned Landscape captures things that do not assert themselves, which are left in forgotten places that do not seem to attract attention. It is not a landscape that asserts itself as a ruin and tries to emerge in the present age, but, on the contrary, a pale landscape that is about to erase its self-assertion and run out to the other side of the meadow.'²⁰⁾

Critics, thus far, suggest that while the focus has been on urban ruins that show their presence through their exposed steel and concrete, simultaneously, ruins that have been forgotten or returned to nature have also been attracting attention.

3. Ruins and urban design

3.1. "Invisible cities" and ruins

As a result of the above examination of how interest in ruins in Japan came into existence, it became clear that in contemporaneous Japan, on the one hand, inorganic ruins paradoxically attracted attention for their sense of life; on the other hand, ruins full of nature and nostalgia also began to attract attention.

These interests seem to be opposing in nature, but they are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. In other words, these interests have been created in response to the current state of the urban environment and cannot be confined to the narrow field of visual culture. In considering this point, we should not forget the discussion by architect Arata Isozaki.

In 1967, Isozaki published his Invisible City theory, in which he argued that modern cities have become extremely bloated without any physical order and that we cannot see them.

'The city was supposed to have a form, a physical and three-dimensional continuity, and a coherent activity, but in Los Angeles, no such appearance can be found. The city has disappeared. (···) The concept of the city that we have been using, the concept of urban space in which the physical composition of the city can be grasped in a single view with a sense of tension, has collapsed here. This becomes even clearer when we get down to the ground. In this city, everything is moving around. (···) I have said too much about the American city, but

in fact, it is better to say that it is the everyday space of Tokyo that is in the vortex of the proliferation of advertisements and noise, which swirls around, diffuses ceaselessly and never forms a solid image.²¹⁾

Mikio Wakabayashi, an urban theorist, points out that Isozaki's Invisible City theory triggered a major change in the way cities were discussed in Japan, giving birth to various urban and Tokyo theories in the 1970s and 1980s.²²⁾ Moreover, Isozaki, based on his own invisible city theory, submitted his theory of the now invisible city in 1985. Three years later, in 1988, Isozaki contributed his ruins theory to Miyamoto's book of photographs.

Considering Isozaki's argument, it could be said that the desire for ruins—the search for a sense of life in inorganic ruins and for forgotten and vanishing ruins—consists of the desire of people to see the invisible city. In other words, the sense of seeing the seemingly inorganic ruins as if they were inside the human body may be analogous to the sense of giving form to a fluid city. The search for the forgotten and disappearing ruins may also be a search for a time when the city was once accompanied by a form. In this sense, ruins can be seen as a creative necessity to remake the city.

3.2. The power of cities and culture

Similar to Isozaki, architect Hiroyuki Suzuki is also a leading figure in introducing the concept of *genius loci* to Japan; Suzuki's discussion is also based on his understanding of the transformation of contemporary urban spaces.

‘What makes a city exempt from the accumulation of abstract space and makes it an entity with the body of a concrete place is its historicity and culture. By placing culture in space, space becomes place. This is the problem of the city and the problem of culture. Therein lies the place of the contemporary city and culture.’²³⁾

‘A city reveals its true nature when we look at it from a place where the sun does not shine, a place that is about to be forgotten. The historical and cultural nature of a space does not need to be an epoch in Japanese history or a representative of Japanese culture. It is in the history of the unknown, in the culture that has never seen the light of day, that I believe the truth of today's cities lies.’²⁴⁾

‘The process of identifying space through *genius loci* will tie the fragile thread between the “land value first” principle that clings inexorably to the “grade of the land” and the “taste for antiquity” that looks only at history and will link the places and lands within the city from the past to the present. This is the key to rescuing urban space from the accumulation of economic space and transforming it into a collection of places where people can interact with each other

at the margins.”²⁵⁾

Suzuki argues that a city should be a place, not just a space, which requires culture and that *genius loci* are the forces that foster the culture that makes the city a place. From a perspective different from that of Isozaki, Suzuki’s argument can be read as indicating a background that leads to the preservation and utilization of ruins. In other words, it seeks to understand and develop the city from a cultural perspective.

One matter related to this point is the gradual revision of the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties and its associated practices.

In Japan, the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties was enacted in 1950; in its second revision in 1975, the system of preservation districts for groups of traditional buildings was added. In addition, on December 25, 1996, the Director General of the Cultural Properties Protection Department of the Agency for Cultural Affairs issued a notice On the Utilization of Important Cultural Properties (Buildings), indicating a trend from the protection of cultural properties to their utilization, which led to active renovation in the private sector.²⁶⁾

Architect Taro Igarashi, who has been actively involved in such renovations, describes the growing interest in renovation in the field of architecture and urban development from the late 1990s to the 2000s, in contrast to the 1980s, as follows:

Renovation began to attract attention rapidly in the late 1990s. Considering that until then the dichotomy between development by architects and preservation by historians had often been discussed, renovation is truly a third method that mediates between the two. Recent examples include the Red Brick Warehouse and the Marunouchi Building in Yokohama, both of which were renovated in 2002. In Tokyo, huge developments continue to take place, but this has led to the creation of many vacant buildings and an increased focus on renovation. (…)
This was unthinkable in the 1980s.²⁷⁾

The renovation method described by Igarashi is the same one that Suzuki described earlier, that is, “tying the fragile thread between the ‘land price first’ principle that clings inexorably to the ‘grade of land’ and the ‘taste for antiquity’ that looks only at history” and connecting places and land in the city from the past to the present. This is precisely the method of “tying the past to the present.”

The introduction of the concept of the creative city in Japan after the 1990s is another matter related to understanding and developing the city from a cultural perspective. Sasaki, introduced at the beginning of this paper, defines a creative city as “a city that is rich in creativity in culture and industry based on the free expression of creative activities by its citizens, and at the same time has an innovative and flexible urban economic system that is free from mass production, and is rich in ‘creative places’ where creative problem solving is possible in response to global environmental

issues and local community issues.”

In addition, while several elements shape these creative places, I would like to mention the following points raised in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) by American urbanist Jane Jacobs,²⁸⁾ which is one of the genealogies of the creative city theory:

- (1) As many places as possible in the district must serve more than just one basic function each.
- (2) Most blocks must be short.
- (3) There must be a mixture of buildings of different ages and conditions built in the district.
- (4) Whatever the purpose, the population must be dense enough.

These points shape creative places, and the need for old buildings as well as new ones should be noted.

Finally, it should be noted that since the 2000s, the Act on Protection of Cultural Heritage, as well as institutions related to culture and the environment, has been put in place.

In 2001, the Basic Act on Promotion of Culture and the Arts was passed, followed three years later by the Landscape Act of 2004. Furthermore, in 2005, the fourth revision of the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties stipulated that those so-called cultural landscapes should be added to the list of protected areas.

Conclusion

In this report, we have analyzed and discussed the relationship between ruins and creativity, based on the question of when exactly ruins began to attract interest, from what kind of interest, and what is the background behind the perception of ruins as a place that stimulates creativity.

Ruins began to attract attention in Japan in the 1970s and the 1980s, first in the form of visual culture—that is, ruins as images. These images were accepted as inorganic, forgotten, and disappearing ruins, but they were not merely images; they were reflections of the present state of the city. It has become clear that culture is desired as something that completes a transforming city, which has been connected to urban and cultural policies since the 1990s, which promote the renovation and protection of ruins.

In the past, ruins invited our imaginations. Today's ruins, however, invite our creativity. Will creative ruins shape the cities of our future?

N.B. This paper is a revised version of an oral report given at the 17th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies held on August 2023.

Notes

- 1) Itosoken ed., 2018, *Haiko Saisei Stories*, Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 150–151.
- 2) Ibid.

- 3) Noda, Kunihiro, 2018, *Bunkaseisaku no tenkai: Arts management to Sozo-toshi*, Kyoto: Gakugei Shuppansha, 128–129.
- 4) Ibid, 133.
- 5) Ibid, 133–138.
- 6) Suzuki, Hiroyuki, 1984, *Kenchiku no nanatsu no chikara*, Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing Co., Ltd.
- 7) Suzuki, Hiroyuki, 1987, “Toshi to Kino, Soushoku, Genius Loc,” *Eureka*, 19(13):127–139.
- 8) Miyamoto, Ryuji, 1988, *Kenchiku no Mokujiroku*, Tokyo: Heibonsha.
- 9) The author discusses Miyamoto’s critique of the exhibition and photographs considering the social conditions of the time. See the following: Sumida, Shoko, 2020, “Toshi eno Nostalgia: 1980 nendai iko no Haikyo-shasin wo megutte”, Nakama, Yuko and Takenaka, Yumi eds, *An Anthropology of Landscape – On Representations of Nature, Cities and Memories*, Tokyo: Sangensha, 275–295.
- 10) Hiraizumi, Chie, 2018, “Nihon ni Haikyo-ga wa attanoka: Edo kara Gendai made”, *Owari no Muko e: Haikyo no Bijutsu-shi*, Tokyo: The Shoto Museum of Art, 112–116.
- 11) Tanigawa, Atsushi, 2003, *Haikyo no Bigaku*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 203.
- 12) The author examines the rise of ruin photography in Japan considering the social conditions of the time. See the following: Sumida, Shoko, 2016, “Fu-kei-ka suru Haikyo: 1980 nendai iko no Nihon ni okeru Haikyo eno manazashi ni kansuru kosatsu”, *Ethno-Arts*, 32, 129–137.
- 13) “Bunka no Henyo: dai San-bu Haikyo no Kage”, *Asahi Shimbun*, evening edition, June 5, 1986, 7.
- 14) Tanigawa, ibid, 206.
- 15) Ito, Shunji, 1986, “Haikyo-shashin no Genzai: Lewis Baltz to Miyamoto Ryuji”, *Commercial Photo*, 272, 248.
- 16) Ito, Shuji and Kawamoto Saburo, 1988, “AKIRA: Mirai-Toshi no Archives”, *Eureka*, 20(10), 80.
- 17) Ibid, 81.
- 18) Kurokawa, Kisho, 1988, Haikyo koso Mirai-toshi, *Eureka*, 20(10), 14–15.
- 19) Ito and Kawamoto, ibid, 76.
- 20) Kawamoto, Saburo, 1993, “Fu no Object ga arawa ni suru Natsukasisa to Utsukushisa: Maruta Shozo’s Kikei”, *Bungakukai*, 47(9), 284.
- 21) Isozaki, Arata, 1997, *Kukan e*, Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing Co., Ltd.
- 22) Wakabayashi, Mikio, *Toshi eno/karano Shisen*, Tokyo: Sikyusha, 44–49.
- 23) Suzuki, ibid, 134.
- 24) Ibid, 138.
- 25) Ibid, 139.
- 26) Noda, ibid, 15.
- 27) Igarashi, Taro, 2003, “Renovation Studies towa nanika”, Igarashi, Taro and Renovation Studies eds, *Renovation Studies*, Tokyo: INAX Shuppan, 5.
- 28) Jacobs, Jane, 2016, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (English Edition), Vintage.

