

The Japanese Way of Urban Planning: the Machizukuri Approach.

by Martina Rotolo | Nov 7, 2019 | The Urban Media Lab

There is no exact translation for the Japanese approach to urban planning, called *Machizukuri*. Literally, it means town planning but it is generally associated with a soft way of planning which contrasts with the traditional highly centralized model, conventionally defined as *Toshi-keikaku*. According to the Professor Masato Kamawamukai, the term *Machizukuri* combines the building activity with the community-based process aimed at improving the local environment (Ono 2017).^[1] In particular, it refers to a variety of actions which involves local residents and local governments working together to make the place where they live and work more livable (Evans 2002: 447).^[2]

Historically, the Japanese method of urban planning has relied on a highly centralized top-down process. In 1919, the *City Planning Act* and the *Building Act* respectively established a legal basis for land readjustment and controlled the construction of new buildings. The final result of this legislation was that planning became a completely centralized activity, led by the Home Ministry. It was only after the Second World War, between 1950s and 1960s, that Japan experienced a new wave of urbanization and those pieces of legislation resulted outdated. Therefore, the responsibility for planning was transferred to the new Ministry of Construction and waves of unplanned urbanization replaced the highly centralized approach of the previous decade. However, during the 20th century, Japan's main planning technique relied on land readjustment, through which the Government assembled the various privately-owned land parcels in a given area to provide new land use plans.

In this same period, environmental and political oppositions to neoliberal policies endorsed by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) at the Government, determined the replacement of the then outdated legislation on planning with the 1968 *New City Planning Act*. The main innovation was the devolution of powers from central authority to prefectural and municipal levels, through the establishment of City Planning Areas divided in Urbanization Promotion Areas. Moreover, for the very first-

time public participation procedures were introduced, such as public hearings and plan inspections. However, they remained a mere exercise of public relations without leaving decision-making powers to local residents. In 1992, the *City Planning Act* was amended and introduced the municipal master plan system where all cities within designated City Planning Areas were required to create their own plans in accordance with citizens' opinions (Evans 2002: 446). From this point onward, urban planning cannot be considered a mere administrative task in Japan anymore. Decentralisation towards local authorities increasingly deepened.

Only in 1960s, the term *Machizukuri* started to be employed in the field of urban planning. It gained its momentum in the last twenty years, given the increase of territorially defined protest movements in defence of the environment, the rising decentralisation of planning powers, the strengthening of progressive local governments and the slowdown of urbanisation after the 1973 Oil Crisis (Evans 2002: 448), welcoming a new planning era for Japan.

It was in the southern-eastern corner of Kobe, in the Mano district, where local residents constituted an anti-pollution campaign in 1960s, given the dreadful levels of pollution in the area. In 1982, the campaign, following the constitution of a strong residents' movement including academics and planners, led to the agreement between the City and Mano community over the plan for making the district more livable and sustainable, in accordance with Kobe's *Machizukuri* ordinances. The plan, depicted as the residents' plan, followed a *Machizukuri* way of proceeding, employing a gradual and joint approach to include residents, local businesses, the City and establish the Mano *Machizukuri* Promotion Association (Evans 2002: 451).

However, it is worth noting that no comprehensive model of *Machizukuri* exists and the enormous diversity in its application in Japan is evident. Its empirical heterogeneity highly depends on the role of local governments and residents, the openness of local and regional governance regimes and developers' capability to bargain for their economic interests at the local and national level. *Machizukuri* community engagement is not ubiquitous, often residents have no power to influence planning outcomes and, to a greater extent, the old top-down city planning system remains intact in those contexts (Sorensen and Funck 2007: 273).^[3] Nonetheless, *Machizukuri* contributed to the growth and maturation of Japanese civil society. In the last years in Japan a huge number of Neighborhood Associations and organizations has been constituted. Moreover, the active participation of citizens in community engagement processes and their willingness

to spend enormous amounts of time in organizing local collective institutions have tremendously increased.

Japanese urban planners and planning scholars consider, without any doubt, the *Machizukuri* method a paradigm shift from the top-down urban planning model to a more shared management of urban spaces (Sorensen and Funck 2007: 277).

For example, in Ishinomaki, a coastal Japanese city beaten by the terrible tsunami of March 2011, the *Machizukuri* planning tradition strongly influenced the project of alternative reconstruction under the sign of solidarity design and local participation. In December 2011, a community-based redevelopment program, called *Ishinomaki 2.0* started. *Ishinomaki 2.0* created a community organization by cooperating with local residents and local government to collectively rebuild the city. Then, architects and urban planners created the *Ishinomaki Lab* to provide a place for locals to join the city's rebuilding process. Finally, *Ishinomaki Lab* inaugurated an activity and animation center called *Irori*, which means *interaction room of revitalization and innovation*, where everyone can work and meet to discuss the re-development of the city.^[4]

FOOTNOTES

1 Ono Takashi (2017), *The Method and Practices of 'Machizukuri' movement in Japan based on the idea 'Linkages' theorized by Fumihiko Maki*, International Research Journal of Engineering and Technology (IRJET), Vol. 04, Issue 11, pp. 392-399.

2 Neil Evans (2002), *Machi-zukuri as a new paradigm in Japanese urban planning: reality or myth?*, Japan Forum, 14:3, 443-464.

3 Sorensen, A. and Funck C. (2007), *Conclusions: a diversity of machizukuri processes and outcomes*. In Sorensen, A. and Funck C., eds. *Living Cities in Japan 2007*, New York, Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series, pp. 269- 279.

4 Mesmer, P. (2019), *A Ishinomaki au Japon, le design panse les plaies du tsunami* (In Ishinomaki, Japan, the design groom the wounds of the tsunami), Le Monde. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2JRuwdl>

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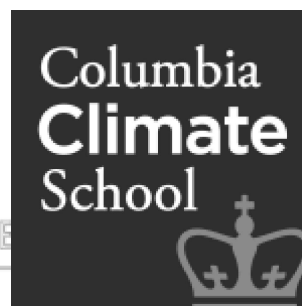
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