

Tokyo: Globalization and the Postmodern Experience

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Abstract

Greater Tokyo is the largest metropolitan area in the world and has a population of over 35 million people. This enormous city sprawl has numerous city centers and some of these city centers have independently created city spaces within them. The creation of these city spaces all within a larger metropolitan environment help to stimulate postmodern arguments and/or perceptions. This paper specifically focusses on the newly constructed city space within the Greater Tokyo Area called Makuhari New City and describes why it could be considered a postmodern setting. It then attempts to outline the parallels between the developments of postmodern settings and the emergence of multinational capitalism and/or globalization.

Key words: globalization, multinational capitalism, postmodernism, postmodern settings

In the epilogue of *In Search of Authority: An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory*, Stephen Bonnycastle asks “What does postmodernism feel like?” He then attempts to “evoke the feeling of postmodernism in three different ways, first by describing a setting, secondly with a fable, and finally with an image” (p. 232). In his somewhat oversimplified description of a postmodern setting, Bonnycastle emphasizes the physical aspects of a large metropolis and writes, “To begin with, imagine you are in the city center of a large metropolis. Various ethnic communities border on an area dominated by towering skyscrapers” (p. 232). He then describes a “friendly labyrinth offering endless possibilities and strange new combinations of experiences” (p. 233). Unfortunately, Bonnycastle does not explain how or why this “friendly labyrinth” came into being and leaves his readers with a somewhat limited depiction of a postmodern setting. Like Fredric Jameson, I believe “that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism,” (p. 20) and thus any detailed description of a postmodern setting should include some sort of reference to multinational capitalism and/or globalization. In this essay, I will build upon Bonnycastle’s cursory ideas and present a more in depth analysis of a postmodern setting. I will first discuss a newly constructed environment within the Greater Tokyo Area called Makuhari New City and indicate why it could be considered a postmodern setting. I will then outline why such environments evoke both positive and negative responses in various socio-political circles.

Defining Tokyo

Tokyo is technically not a city it is a prefecture. In order to fully understand this urban sprawl, one must think of it as a collection of cities all connected by the Japan Railway system. Tokyo consists of twenty-three city wards, twenty-six cities, five towns and eight villages. It has a population of 13.491 million. Tokyo is also part of the Greater Tokyo Area, which includes the prefectures of Chiba, Kanagawa, and Saitama. Greater Tokyo is the largest metropolitan area in the world and has a population of over 35 million. This vast city sprawl inspires many different feelings and definitions and those that have spent a great deal of time

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in Tokyo are in many respects the best people to characterize the city. For this reason, I have chosen three passages from three contemporary journalists to help the reader get a better sense of what Tokyo feels and looks like. In the *Time* magazine article, “Japan Is On The Go,” Kurt Anderson describes Tokyo as “a shrill, Blade Runner mess of traffic, shabby office buildings and meretricious Architectural Statements.” In the *Metropolis*’ “Blueprint for Living,” Stephen Mansfield describes Tokyo in the following:

Despite its indiscreet wealth, Tokyo has been aptly described as a “high-tech slum,” a cluttered urban mass that appears to evolve organically, layer upon squeezed layer. Like giant third-world cities, its exact perimeters are sometimes hard to define, the ribbon development of its crowded suburbs melting into an anonymous sprawl, a vigorous anti-beauty.

Finally, in the article “Tokyo Tomorrow,” again from the *Metropolis*, Kiely Ramos states:

Tokyo continues to redefine itself and with it the whole notion of the modern city. The city has no center, no master plan and is not segregated according to class or economies of scale. And while extravagant fits of modernist architecture left a distinct mark on the Tokyo of the 20th century, the Tokyo of the future is fated to become a postmodern cyberspace beyond spatial definition.

According to Bonnycastle’s description of a postmodern setting, “People who are obviously wealthy and sophisticated encounter others who are extremely poor” (232). Ramos states that Tokyo is not “segregated according to class” and thus, using Bonnycastle’s description, we could say, in this manner, Tokyo does indeed represent a postmodern environment. Of course, any critical reader will need more information before definitively concluding that Tokyo is in fact a postmodern city. After living in Tokyo for twenty years, I will argue that it is a chaotic metropolis unlike any other in the world. One never feels disoriented in Tokyo because one was never oriented in the first place. Traveling through the Greater Tokyo Area is like traveling through distinct and defined spaces, only to end up in separate and independently defined spaces. These independently created spaces all within larger spatial environments is where my own conceptions of postmodern settings have originally emerged.

Cities Within Cities and the Creation of Postmodern Space

In the late 20th and early 21st century, thanks to new architectural designs and progressive urban planning, Tokyo has seen the development of unique cityscapes within the cities that make up the Greater Tokyo Area. Developments like Makuhari New City are newly created city spaces within smaller cities themselves. If, for example, a person enters the created urban space of Makuhari New City, he or she is actually entering Makuhari New City, Chiba City, Chiba prefecture, which, in turn, is part of the Greater Tokyo Area. In 2017, there are an abundance of these newly created city spaces within the Greater Tokyo Area. Developments like Tokyo Teleport Town, Odaiba, and Roppongi Hills are very similar to Makuhari New City. I will argue that these cityscapes can be classified as cities within cities within yet even a greater city sprawl. This concept can be quite confusing for anyone who has not visited Tokyo. International cities like London, Paris and Toronto have one major city center. The Greater Tokyo Area, however, has numerous city centers and some of these city centers have independently created cities within them. For the sake of brevity, I will limit my focus to Makuhari New City.

Makuhari New City was built on reclaimed land and has a total surface area of 522 hectares. Developers like the online fabric structure company called FStructures.com describe the city in the following:

Urban development in Makuhari New City focuses on preserving a pleasant urban environment through a variety of modern amenities: zoned climate control powered by gas and electricity; pneumatic trash collection; a water recycling system in which waste water is treated and then reused in the flush toilets of park restrooms; buried electrical cables; sky-



Clear view of Tokyo from the top of the SkyTree



View of Makuhari-New-City, Business Area



Makuhari Exhibit halls and the World Business Garden

ways; and underground parking garages that make efficient use of the space beneath parks. Tokyo has been described as a “high tech slum,” a city consisting of “shabby office buildings,” and even a “vigorous anti-beauty.” These are arguably valid descriptions until one enters the aesthetically designed Makuhari New City. It is essentially a created or built space that lies within the Greater Tokyo area and offers a significant change of scenery and/or feeling from its surrounding environment. The pictures below help one visually identify the spatial differences created by the overwhelming city sprawl of Tokyo and the Makuhari New City area.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson describes a postmodern building and states, “I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself” (40). Of course, Jameson is describing postmodern architecture, but I will argue that his ideas can be applied to urban developments like Makuhari New City. This new cityscape, a place that was underwater just thirty years ago, represents a new feeling or a new concept of space and if a person happens into this space, he or she will not “possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace” (p. 40). Traveling through the Greater Tokyo Area is like traveling through a space of high modernism, however, upon entering an area like Makuhari New City, one suddenly enters into a new dimension of space and this space expands “our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (p. 40). Walking into this new dimension of space and not fully being aware of how to comprehend it, “in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space” (p. 40) is an example of what a postmodern setting feels like.

Makuhari New City and Globalization

In the German text entitled *Internationales Marketing - Neue Märkte erschließen*, Jeffrey Curry describes globalization as “the worldwide phenomenon of technological, economic, political and cultural exchanges among nations, organizations and private individuals.” Curry’s words have been translated and repeatedly used by academic scholars when defining globalization. The Chiba Prefectural Government’s official English website describes Makuhari New City in the following:

Makuhari New City centers around Makuhari Messe, one of Japan’s leading convention facilities, and spreads out with offices, academic facilities, housing, parks, shopping, and

entertainment facilities. It is a city of diverse potentials that sees many people from all over Japan and the world every day.

This entire “city” was developed around the international exhibition hall and conference center, Makuhari Messe. Messe, as it is commonly called, is one of the largest convention centers in Asia and is well known for staging international events such as car and motor shows, amusement expos, as well as various other technological fairs. It is located on one side of the Japan Railway station, Kaihin Makuhari, but, on the other side of the station, one can visit numerous multinational corporations such as Cannon, IBM, Fujitsu and Sharp. All of these companies have their own displays and events welcoming and encouraging the public to participate in the “worldwide phenomenon of technological, economic, political and cultural exchanges,” all in the name of international consumerism.

Makuhari New City is an urban development built around an international convention center, a building specifically designed to support and encourage multinational capitalism. It represents the postmodern phenomenon of urban development and has materialized due to globalization and international consumerism. In the *New Left Review* article entitled “Future City,” Fredric Jameson states, “The Depato, or Japanese department store, flings us, if not into the future, then at least into an extraordinary cultural mutation, intimately connected with the logic of Tokyo’s growth.” I will argue that Makuhari New City is not just a department store flinging us into the future of consumerism, it is an entire city built around these same mass consumption ideals. Makuhari New City is a positively refreshing postmodern landscape built in the middle of a chaotic urban sprawl, but it only exists thanks to the new world of global capitalism. In fact, without the global business platform of Makuhari Messe, the Makuhari New City project would probably not exist, which indicates how the development of postmodern settings are interlinked with the development of multinational capitalism and/or consumerism. Thus, unlike Bonnycastle, I have attempted to describe a postmodern setting, but I have also tried to outline how such a setting comes into being.

Postmodern Settings: The Benefits

There are numerous benefits that come with living in, or simply experiencing a postmodern setting. According to Bonnycastle, a postmodern city can be “a friendly labyrinth, offering endless possibilities and strange new combinations of experiences” (233). He then explains that if one felt secure in such an environment, he or she “might also feel enormously exhilarated by the variety and the energy in this urban streetscape” (233). In “My Own Private Tokyo,” notable postmodern writer, William Gibson states, “You can see more chronological strata of futuristic design in a Tokyo streetscape than anywhere else in the world.” Gibson is correct, in Tokyo an individual can visit traditional sites like the Meiji Shrine and experience the serenity of walking in the 700 000 square-meter forest, and yet, just a three-minute train ride away, that same individual could be walking amongst the sixty-story skyscrapers in the Shinjuku business district. Makuhari New City is just a one-hour train ride away and it provides individuals with an entirely different spatial experience. Travelling through the Greater Tokyo area inspires incredible feelings of awe and/or bewilderment, and allows one to experience the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern all within a few hours. It really can be “a friendly labyrinth, offering endless possibilities and strange new combinations of experiences.”

Postmodern settings not only can provide individuals with a variety of exhilarating experiences, they can also be economically beneficial and environmentally friendly environments. Places like Makuhari New City are built around international trade and encourage multinational corporations to invest in further city developments. The multinationals involved with Makuhari Messe have a vested economic interest in keeping the community viable and thus continually reinvest in the city. Additional investment, increases the amount of visitors and/or tourists that visit the international convention center and these individuals spend additional money in the nearby hotels and shopping malls. Makuhari New City also boasts some of the most modern

recycling techniques for water, sewage and garbage. Residents are able to live, work, and conveniently shop in the area which limits the need for automobiles. These economically sound and environmentally friendly environments undoubtedly reveal some of the benefits of postmodernism and postmodern settings.

Postmodern Settings: The Drawbacks

Indeed, there are definite and serious negative issues surrounding newly created postmodern cities like Makuhari New City. According to Bonnycastle, “The maze of differences might also help you feel protected from the dominating authority of the state. That too would feel liberating, especially for someone who had lived under a totalitarian regime” (233). A critical reader, however, may ask just how Bonnycastle defines a “totalitarian regime?” According to Herbert Marcuse, “By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian” (p. 5). Marcuse states, “For ‘totalitarian’ is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests” (5). Bonnycastle does not mention what he considers to be a totalitarian regime and subsequently leaves his readers, yet again, with an undefined comment.

In *One Dimensional Man*, “Marcuse argued that ‘advanced industrial society’ created false needs which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption” (Kellner, p. 5). Places like Makuhari New City have been created around the ideals of multinational capitalism and globalization. The city, although environmentally friendly, and aesthetically pleasing, essentially reinforces the ideals of mass consumption. Those living in Makuhari New City can experience the excitement of living in a future city and can lead “a good way of life - much better than before - and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change” (Marcuse, p. 9). Instead of seeing the department store as the quintessential representative for mass consumption, we now see that an entire city has been built around the ideals of consumerism. Because this city inspires an exciting new feeling and appears to be environmentally sound, it becomes the “very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests - to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible” (p. 8). Using Marcuse’s theories, it is possible to argue that a postmodern setting created by an industrially advanced society like Japan, might just be the actual embodiment of a totalitarian ideology. In fact, Makuhari New City is quite possibly the most convenient way to fulfill “false needs” and live forever after in the “euphoria of unhappiness” and mass consumption (p 6).

Conclusion

Are the creations of postmodern city settings within larger urban sprawls a benefit to society or are they merely a means of encouraging over consumption? Entering these worlds of built space is incredibly exhilarating, but, like Jameson writes, “We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic” (p. 21). This is a serious question and deserves serious consideration, and therefore discussions regarding postmodernism and postmodern settings should not be oversimplified. If, authors like Bonnycastle do provide their readers with cursory explanations, they might just be reinforcing multinational capitalist ideologies without even knowing it. Critical readers and researchers of postmodern settings like Makuhari New City should be aware of the potential benefits as well as the negative drawbacks that these areas may inspire.

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