

Tsukiji Micro Urbanism

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Abstract

Tsukiji Market occupies fifty-six acres of reclaimed land in Tokyo and processes over five million pounds of seafood every day, the flagship within an extensive metropolitan and national market network. Independently, Tsukiji operates through a clear, vertical organization comprised of producers, brokers and consumers - each with its own unique and complex substructure. But despite the rigid institutional and regulatory framework of Tsukiji, the culture of the marketplace is more perceptibly defined by informal, self-organizing processes and provisional spatial arrangements. In this way Tsukiji exemplifies a form of micro-urbanism defined simultaneously by “upstream” global demands and “downstream” networks of emergent, ad hoc exchange.

The relationship between informal and institutional structures in the market will be presented in terms of their spatial and urban implications. This form of urbanism indicates a particular attitude towards urban public space in Tokyo, and is contrasted to recent, largely internalized forms of urbanism proliferating throughout the city.

1 Introduction



Figure 1: map of Tsukiji Market in Tokyo

The poverty of much urbanist thought can be reduced to a central fallacy: that the city, or Metropolis, expresses itself fully in its physical form, that as a finite concrete object alone it is amenable to analysis and intervention. The city however, is not this, but rather a perpetually organizing field of forces in movement, each city a specific and unique combination of historical modalities in dynamic composition. (Kwinter, 2001)

Conceiving of the city as “perpetually organizing” suggests a form of urbanism predicated less on stability of form or use and more on qualities of provisionality, transformation, and systems of flow and exchange. These systems include people and products as well as less tangible flows of information, identity and visual culture, implying a city that is not fixed but continually regenerating. Further, as the status of cities continues to respond to changing patterns of mobility, technology and global trade an urbanism predicated on flexibility, instability and improvisation is increasingly relevant if not already underway.

The Tsukiji Wholesale Market in Tokyo, Japan is defined by mutually interdependent relationships between urban streams and architectural space. The Tsukiji market operates along (at least) three axes: economically it negotiates between “upstream” global supply and “downstream” local demands, organizationally it oscillates between institutional hierarchies and informal social networks, and spatially it accommodates highly-orchestrated efficiencies in the face of unremitting flow and

exchange. The space of the Tsukiji market complex will be presented as case study of micro-urbanism which “operates at the cusp between control and disorganization.” (Sherman, 2005)

1.1 Tsukiji Micro-Urbanism: Modes of Exchange

Occupying fifty-six acres of reclaimed land in Tokyo, the Tsukiji Central Wholesale Market processes over five million pounds of seafood every day; the flagship within an extensive metropolitan and national market network. Within that system (and worldwide) Tsukiji is the largest market of its kind, handling almost all seafood consumed in Tokyo. Marine life of all forms - over 450 different kinds imported from local and international waters - establishes the common link between fishers, distributors, government officials, wholesalers, merchants, restaurants, consumers and even tourists. It is a highly regarded institution in Tokyo for several reasons, not the least of which include its prominent position within Japanese food culture, its role as an indicator of national economic stability and its direct ties to broader networks of international exchange. (Bestor, 2004)

Because of its prominent position at the intersection of social, economic and institutional exchanges, the relevance of Tsukiji’s organization extends beyond its function as an urban market. The unique relationship between “perpetually organizing” intensive systems (formal and informal networks of exchange) and extensive spatial limits (the collection of buildings and their relationship to the city), allows one to study Tsukiji as a form of micro-urbanism. Unlike more recent city-within-a-city mega-developments such as Shiodome or Roppongi Hills, the micro-urbanism of Tsukiji is defined by flexible systems that emerge continuously over time. The space of the market materializes in response to the systems moving through it (people, products, carts, fish, tools, supplies, etc), and the boundaries are as flexible as they are complex.

1.2 Organizational Exchange: formal and informal systems

The organization of the market’s daily operations can be very broadly outlined as a chain of exchanges which diminish in scale: producers (local and international fishing companies) supply fish to the seven Tsukiji auction houses, who sell the fish to the wholesales, who process the fish for sale to trade buyers (restaurateurs, chefs, fishmongers, etc), who prepare the fish for resale (at a grocery or convenience stores) or for immediate consumption (at a sushi shop or local restaurant). A series of regulations and licensing requirements govern exchanges at each level of transaction in order to maintain efficiency and neutralize conflicts up and down the chain (Bestor, 2004).

In addition to this formal, institutional framework, the space of the market is also directly characterized by innumerable informal relationships. This layer of the market does not follow the linear, hierarchical model described above but comprises a network of social and familial connections perpetually forming across the various wholesale businesses. These relationships are based on any number of commonalities among the trades including educational background, geographical roots, family, or food specialty (Bestor, 2004). Like a city, the social landscape of Tsukiji is dynamic and directly influences the space, program and culture of the market.

The formal systems and informal systems do not operate independently, but are interwoven such that top-down policies are continuously held in check by bottom-up demands (Bestor, 2004). As such the boundaries between institutions, families and businesses become blurred. This produces a unique culture to the place and is reinforced by its distinct pace and daily schedule, which operates independent from the rest of the city. But what ultimately defines the micro-urbanism of Tsukiji are the products and people which animate it.



Figure 2: frozen tuna displayed for auction



Figure 3. Market space for inner wholesalers

1.3 Spatial Exchange: products and people

Perhaps, rather than assuming stability and explaining change, one needs to assume change and explain stability. Elastic planning strategies are needed to facilitate surfing the highly unstable and unpredictable evolution of the contemporary city without, at the same time, merely accommodating this evolution. It is precisely this question – how to provide sufficient looseness with regard to future scenarios- that constitutes the principal paradox of urban development today. Overcoming this paradox hinges on learning the ability to operate at the cusp between control and disorganization. (Sherman, 2005)

The market is a facilitator of processes occurring simultaneously across thousands of products and people and through a dense network of space, time and forms of movement. Understood through these boundaries of exchange and intensities of production, the Tsukiji Fish Market suggests a form of urbanism wherein organizational systems and products of exchange continually shape and are shaped by the spaces they contain. For this reason the urbanism of Tsukiji is anything but stable. Rather, it is a case study for those planning strategies Sherman (2005) describes above – it is a space which “assumes change and explains stability.”

Entry into Tsukiji from the street does not suggest a highly formalized sequence (if not utterly ambiguous), but the spatial organization of the buildings on the site is in fact perfectly aligned with the micro-commodity chain streaming through the market. Auction pits for producers and suppliers are located near the river edge; wholesaler stalls are located in the main C-shaped building in a series of concentric rows; distribution sheds and loading docks are adjacent to this wholesale market; and a series of outer-market buildings containing retail suppliers and small restaurants connect the market to the rest of the city physically and economically. In short, the complex is organized in order to streamline the process through which seafood commodities (input) are transformed into retail delicacies (output).

The interior spaces are characterized by innumerable forms of exchange and therefore remain in a perpetual state of transformation. This is demonstrated by the dizzying pace of people, carts, seafood, ice, styrofoam, and water continually circulating. Indeed these are the elements which comprise the “architecture“ of the market, and all are only temporarily fixed in place. It is also demonstrated by in the market’s ritual of perpetual reconstruction - an event that occurs approximately once every four years. On a designated weekend the market shuts down and all wholesale stalls must move their equipment out while an overnight crew completely dismantles the interior architecture (Bestor, 2004). Once the space is reconstructed, the wholesalers move back in to the market (in newly-assigned locations) and are open for business the next day.

Because economic advantage in the wholesale business is directly tied to location, this reorganization and re-allocation of real estate neutralizes economic disparities between wholesalers by not letting spatial advantages (or disadvantages) permeate individual business prospects for the long term. It is an attempt to realign the organizational systems which govern the market (both social and institutional) with the idiosyncrasies of the space itself by recalibrating the intensive limits of the market (economic, social and institutional patterns) with extensive limits (the space of the market including infrastructure, lighting, proximity, scale, size, location, etc). In short, it continually restructures relationships between power and space.

1.4 Marcroubanism (sustainability)

Micro-urbanism is concerned with the relationship between informal exchanges and spatial limits. It investigates the agency of tactics embedded within strategies, or the means by which local connections network into global systems. In this sense the Tsukiji market is not an analog for the city or a microcosm to larger metropolitan structures. For example, the concept of “perpetual reorganization” of an entire city is impossible if not environmentally unsound. Rather, the lessons embedded within “Tsukiji urbanism” are predicated on *qualities* of flexibility and regeneration within systems as well as space.

Ecology is perhaps a more apt analog than morphology to consider this form of micro-urbanism; just as a controlled burn renews prairie ecosystems, stimulates growth and ultimately perpetuates a lifecycle (paradoxically through destruction), the continual cycle of un-building and re-building of the Tsukiji complex sustains the market in the face of economic shifts up and downstream from it. As cities depopulate, de-centralize, de-industrialize or otherwise renew and reinvent themselves in the face of similar, albeit increasingly complex, shifts, practices predicated on perpetual re-organization, reciprocity between order and disorder and “assumed change” will not be limited to Tsukiji but appropriate to a broader urban discourse.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has planned to move the Tsukiji Fish Market to a new location across Tokyo bay by the year 2012. The new site is the former Tokyo Gas Company site and will provide twice as much space and technologically-upgraded facilities. Hotly contested and highly resisted by many Tsukiji wholesalers, this move raises many questions about the culture of the market and about the future of the Tsukiji site itself. The new market purportedly has a very clear spatial organization, both spatially and programmatically, and is to operate through clearer levels of access. In so far as the current market is defined by mutual strength of both informal and formal systems, will what will be the status of informal systems within the newly-planned and highly-organized Toyosu market? What is the spatial implication of this shift?

In the relatively near future the existing Tsukiji site is planned to host to the Media Center for the 2016 Olympic Games (decided in 2009). Wholesalers within the market and retailers in the outer market are beginning to self-organize and strategize for their economic future in light of these plans. There are obvious fears about the viability of the outer retailers once the wholesale market is gone; will the small, independent business endure spectacular, internationally-scaled visions of the Tsukiji site? Will future development plans allow sufficient openness for informal systems to sustain, or proliferate? As near and far future plans for this prominent site unfold in Tokyo, the Tsukiji complex will prove an important case study in urban transformation.

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Image List

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