

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *PRAISE OF SHADOWS* IN UNDERSTANDING URBAN TACTILITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the reading of the flattened surfaces of our urban spaces in the globalizing media societies, inquiring what has been lost from these surfaces and their shadows by making reference to the experimental sensual fieldwork *Sensing Citeis* in Tokyo and London, and to Junichiro Tanizaki's work on aesthetics entitled *Praise of Shadows*, which insightfully describes about our sensory experiences and creative imagination relating to an idea of shadow. I will explain how the notion of shadow relates to the potential and role of tactility in discovering the invisible, and in unifying various spatial ideas and senses with our physiological imagination to situate ourselves in the world, and how it suggests alternative understanding of the meaning of the new urban culture.

KEYWORDS: shadow, urban culture, sensual fieldwork, tactility, surface

1 FLATTENED SURFACES

In our cities, newly constructed buildings tend to have abstract, transparent and rather anonymous surfaces. The acceleration of building construction cycles, the recognition of the brand value of architectural design based on economical efficiency, and the hesitant attitude of architects against the noisy urban landscape might be responsible for the lack of distinctive, regional and historical characteristics embodied in structural forms. Moreover, the increase in advertisement and media information presented in urban spaces has been so distinct that the physical presence of architecture has become increasingly superfluous. As Thomas Friedman argues in his *The World is Flat*,¹ these phenomena exist not only in Japan but also in our globalizing media societies as a whole. This paper presents an examination of the reading of the flattened surfaces of our urban spaces—inquiring into what has been lost from these surfaces and their shadows—by making reference to Junichiro Tanizaki's work on esthetics, entitled *Praise of Shadows* (1933).²

2 JUNICHIRO TANIZAKI (1886-1965)

Tanizaki might be the first Japanese novelist to caution against the loss of 'beautiful gloom' through the use of excessive and pervasive lighting. He criticizes the problem of modernization from his perspective of Japanese esthetics; aside from his nationalistic tones in describing the loss of Japan's cultural identity, he produces insightful descriptions about our sensory experiences and creative imagination relating to his notion of shadow.

The historical background of Tanizaki's work has demonstrated the fact that different intentions exist in his criticism against the modernization of Japanese society. The European Surrealism movement and Dadaism movement, which were brought to Japan by virtue of cultural advancement occurring after World War I in Europe, influenced the art society after Japan's earthquake disaster of 1923.

The Japanese literature of the 1920s also acknowledges the European Avant Garde Art movement. A group of novelists named Shin-kankaku-ha (New Feeling Group) actualized the release from naturalism realism with the reorganization of feelings as a clue. Tanizaki was not sheltered from the influences of such circumstances on literary society. Taking a second look from such a viewpoint, one can infer features that are not mere estheticism principles and reminiscence principles in his work. In other words, we should infer that

his work *Praise of Shadows*—which attempts to analyze the effect of light and shadow—is based on his literal experiment of the modern art theory to represent the appearance of the new recognition and sensation of the space in Japan of that period. Tanizaki considered the effect and quality of light based on the relation between the environment and human beings, and on the relation between vision and other feelings such as smell and tactual senses, and carefully regarded the mechanism by which these factors' psychological effect produces spatial recognition. Even though no record of his interest exists in psychological theories, his writing expresses similar approaches with those developed in Europe: Tanizaki meticulously and scientifically describes and analyzes the relation between the sensual effects and psychological reactions created from light and shadow, which critically expresses the change of the special perceptions in the modern period. As for the present research, this study examines results of students' urban spatial investigation in Tokyo in 2008 in reference to Tanizaki's perspective in his *Praise of Shadows* with the viewpoint presented above to examine the meaning of the loss of shadows in our city environment of today.

3 TACTILE VISION

As Tanizaki explains in his book, shadows consist not only of darkness but also its twilled effect, suggesting something hidden in its depth. He also suggests that the magic of shadows is derived from their differences in color created by slight contrasts of density in the dim light. The essential beauty discovered in Japanese houses is embodied in the ambiguity and mysterious darkness and calmness of the shadows created in the gaps and the shelves in the tokonoma (a traditional built-in recessed space in a room). After a general criticism of the westernization of Japanese houses, Tanizaki discusses the charm of the Japanese toilet meticulously. He argues that in the modern unification of lightness and cleanliness, the Japanese toilet has lost its advantageousness for us in providing enjoyable sensory experiences. Tanizaki characterizes the Japanese toilet by its dimness, cleanliness and calmness, where the dimness enables us to look at greenery outside through the window, to listen to the sound of rain penetrating the ground, to appreciate the Japanese aesthetic sensation of monono awareness (acute appreciation of the ephemeral nature of humanity), and to enjoy the physiological pleasures of such sensations as much as one likes. This integration of the human senses with the environment and concatenation of different sensuous experiences is the salient feature of Tanizaki's mode of writing. His explanation of *yokan* (a Japanese sweet bean paste dessert) is the following:

"When you eat yokan, which sucks the sunlight in deep and has a dim lightness, you would feel the taste of a sweet block of the darkness in the room and its resolution on your tongue (...) to know such a feeling gives you its unusual depth of taste."

The interaction of the senses, where they imply and evoke each other, is termed synesthesia in psychological science. It is explained by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a fundamental facet of how we engage the world and its objects in our everyday lives with counterintuitive faculties.

"One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when with a tinkling sound it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel and the ductility of red hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings. (...) We see the depth, speed, softness and hardness of objects – Cezanne says we even see their odor."³³

Merleau-Ponty also explains that such overlapping and transgression of touch with our other senses gives a feeling of the depth into and the extension over the body. Through their unification through the body, a man can recognize his *being* in the world.

4 WORDS FOR SPATIAL IMAGINATION

Tanizaki even describes shadow with illusions. Regarding the beauty of the dim light created in a room with candles and fire lamps, by referring to the effect of gold lacquer, he explains:

"it aims to show various parts with a quiet sheen, (...) reflects the flare of candles and shows the flow of wind in the room (...) The light of candles mirrors the pulse of the night as if there were many water streams and ponds on the tatami mat in the room (...) The light and shadow create twill lines of lacquer paintings on the surface of the night."

The spatiality of Tanizaki's sensuous images is expanded by his wording, which leads the reader further into internal contemplation and to the nonexistent dream world. Indeed, in his writings, Tanizaki

denied the divisions between vision and other senses, as well as divisions separating the literal and imagination. As Adrian Forty describes in his *Words and Buildings*, the words alongside the concepts of architecture and space have developed inseparably; the unification of the words, senses, and spatial imagination in Tanizaki's writing represents his challenge in creating a modern literature of spatial art in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴

5 TIMES AND CREATIVITY IN ARCHITECTURAL SURFACES AND DETAILS

Among the architectural discussions of shadow, in addition to the usual ones particularly addressing light and volume, two other important themes exist: the notion of the time of objects perceived through its tactile sensation, and the notion of the creativity of the hands. In the former case, the time since the formulation of the materials and in man's ongoing relation with the objects is related not only to the aging beauty of the materials that are used but also to the habits and the memory of the people who used them. Tanizaki names such a sense of time in tactile sensation as *nare* (familiarization), and points out its connection with the sense of dirt. In the latter case, the American architect Louis I. Kahn observed that "the joint is the beginning of ornament," which means that the combination of different textural characteristics of materials suggests the method of construction and the symbolic meaning of architectural forms. Marco Frascari elaborates on Kahn's statement to explain how architectural detail signifies both the historical and sensual knowledge and the creative process of constructing architecture.⁵ Immanuel Kant states that the hand is the second brain; as such, the hand not only works to make physical objects but also leads human cognition to visualize invisible ideas in sketching. Such a role of sketching and tactile understanding of the objects in the making of art works is generally connected to the implicit knowledge and the creative work habits of craft workers and artists.

6 TEXTURE AND AFFORDANCE

Tanizaki extends his textural sense of objects to his surrounding environment. By referring to the idea of the *kime* (texture) of Japanese paper, he explains:

"When you see the texture of Japanese paper, you feel its warmth and find yourself calmed (...) it softly soaks the light as does the soft surface of first snow (...) its texture is so supple that you feel the calm and moist surface of the leaves of trees."

This integration of the various senses and extension of the texture to images of the exterior environment is similar to James J. Gibson's notion of Affordance. Gibson holds that the surface of the world comprises continuous layers of texture, which overlap and transform according to the quest of the people. In other words, the intrinsic possibility of the environment is offered and realized in the active interrelation between the environment and the people.⁶

7 SENSING CITIES AND READING URBAN SURFACES

As explained above, Tanizaki explores in his notion of shadow not only visual beauty, but also sensations of indebtedness, dirt, physiological pleasure, familiarity with aging, unification with nature, and illusions. Specifically, the sensual integrations in synesthesia and other forms of imagination relating to the concept of surface in his writing show us the potential and role of tactility in discovering the invisible, and in unifying ideas and senses with our physiological imagination to situate ourselves in the world. This process of discovering the world and the self through sensual fieldwork is exactly the same as that presented in the works of our students in the project "Sensing Cities."

"Sensing Cities" is a workshop of students both in Tokyo and London to inspect the respective cities' historical accumulation of cultural significance and influence of the social primary factor, which are expressed in the city space and the activity of the people. Instead of following usual urban research procedures and theories, students were encouraged to feel the feature phenomena and the oddities in the respective places through their body and everyday sensitivity to clues, and to re-express those feelings by themselves.

8 THEMES AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDENTS' FIELDWORK

With a general understanding the structural organizations and historical background of both cities, the students were mostly interested in how the various elements are piled up and connected to form the surface of the space. For example, the students found the mixture of different materials used to repair buildings and to finish the surface of the embankment resulting from continuous urban development, as a beautiful bri-collage expression of history “**Fig. 1**”. They also were interested in the narrow passages between buildings, gaps between land levels, and abandoned open spaces. As writing on the wall, several students made frottage of institutional signs, descriptions of historical events, and weathered materials. Two students expressed themselves by standing between walls and by being reflected on the fragments in urban space “**Fig. 2**”. One student traced his passage as the marks made on a ball by bouncing it on the ground “**Fig. 3**”.

Some students, through their bodily senses, noticed and expressed the hidden effect of the topographical features of land surfaces with rolling balls, and the flow of air between buildings with bubbles “**Fig. 4**”. One group of students intentionally wore boxes on their heads to study how the atmosphere of area is created in the exchange of the gazes of people “**Fig. 5**”. One student recorded the sound of construction work to explain how people interact with various materials of the urban surface, and traced the noises in the space to observe who, when, why, and what has been occurring there. And another group of students examined peoples’ creative appropriation of forms and spaces in the city as the examples of affordance. “**Fig.6**”

In observing these students’ works, two characteristics of attitudes of students observing the urban space became readily apparent. First, they were very much interested in the functionally meaningless details and objects—the dirt and the detritus—to investigate interrelationships and gaps between the different periods of time, users, and other social components. In other words, distinct from the generally explained historical and social process of development, students wanted to discover the hidden factors and contradiction between logics from those elements..

Secondly, students were able to read the effects of time and the characteristics of social conditions appearing on the surface of objects by referring to their surrounding environment. Students’ were anxious about how people enacted and initiated the environment. To do such reading, students physically experienced the environment not only through their eyes, but also through their ears, nose, feet, hands, and other senses to feel the overall state of the environment.

In these processes of understanding the invisible phenomena and the miscellaneous and indiscernible details, students used and integrated all faculties of their imaginative power, such as speculation, perception and sympathy. Furthermore, their understanding of phenomena was widened and deepened through communication with other members, particularly in their discussion about how to represent their findings in words, visual and other communicative expressions. Results clarified that when private sensitivity contributes to an understanding of social environment variously and simultaneously, the communication with others and the environment accelerate students’ consciousness about their existence.

9 TANIZAKI AND OUR CITIES

The problems of light and shadow in our living sphere as esthetic issues, which Tanizaki expresses in the *Praise of Shadows*, are transferred to the critical analysis of the Japanese modern sensitivity by referring to his contemporary artistic and psychological theories. His explanations of the effects of light and shadow with ideas of the tactile vision, the role of the literal imagination, the effect of time, and the interrelationship between sensuous and social factors underscore the extensive and creative potentials of the imagination in our reading of living phenomena. In the Sensing Cities project, students clearly showed similar viewpoints and interests with Tanizaki’s interpretation of the dirt and various transformations on the surface as the shadow or the shade, and discovered the change of time and the approach to the environment of the people. Of course, the students did not pay that much interest in the idea of “Japanese” aesthetics as Tanizaki, nor they expressed critical consciousness against the lost of the cultural identity in the forms of buildings and objects in cities. However, as explained above, students found “cultural identity” and “beauty”

in the ways of peoples' enactment and weather's effect on the surface of the space, and proposed synesthesia images in combining different sensual perceptions and represented dreamy images of invisible factors of the scene. Furthermore, in students' conceptual development of the analysis and representation of the urban phenomena, we notice that not only the characteristics of the surface are created from the interrelationship between the space and the people but also that the meaning and interpretation of the surface is based on the interrelationship between society, human bodies, and humans' senses and sympathies.

As Tanizaki suggests, the artificial and historical enactment by the people transforms the senses and understandings of spatial phenomena. In this process, we can continue to uncover new ideas of creativity in the relation between the environment and the people. In our complicated and flattened urban circumstance, it is becoming difficult to understand the direct and clear meanings of the phenomena. However, we can command multiple dimensions of imaginative sensuous powers and communications in re-expressing our inquiries, interests and surprises in our everyday experience in the city to obtain clues to self-recognition. Returning finally to the initial problem related to the reading of the now flattened surfaces of our urban spaces, we can read only the enacted traces of people and the environment. At the time that Anthony Vidler's book *Writing of the Walls* (1989) was first published, a New Jersey TV program examining graffiti called *Writing on the Wall* was broadcast. Probably, reading the shadow on the surface of such "writing on the wall" will provide insights into the inevitable future of our cities based on the different idea of communication.⁷



Figure 1 Graffiti's bri-collage on various surfaces in our city



Figure 2 A student's presentation of the Texture of London surface with fragments of newspapers, mirrors and a figure of herself



Figure 3 A student's presentation of the Texture of London by creating traces on a cricket ball

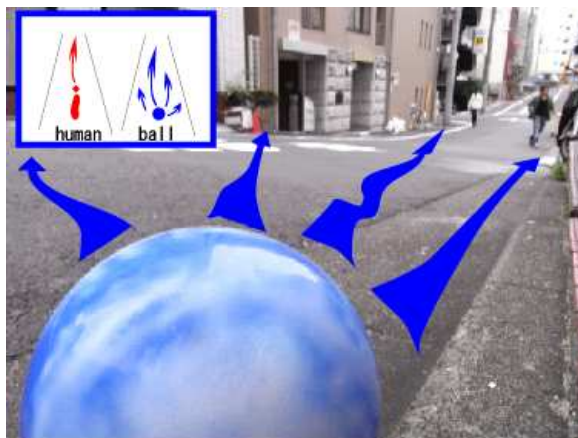


Figure 4 One group's experiment of rolling balls to examine the slope of the roads



Figure 5 One group's experiment of wearing boxes in streets to examine people's exchange of gazes in the space



Figure 6 One group's observation of the affordance in people's appropriation of space

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