

The Crisis of Successful Places – Shibuya’s Case

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Abstract: Successful places in cities are difficult to find. Usually, they result from spontaneous appropriations by multiple publics. The essential characteristics of those places can be augmented by urban design techniques. Once deemed successful or promising, they may attract additional investment, which can also strengthen their endogenous essence. They might acquire new identities and become rebranded during requalification processes. However, the question remains regarding the appropriate levels of intervention and the extent of regulation and management, including design, maintenance, safety, funding and promotion. The Shibuya district in Tokyo, Japan, is perceived and portrayed as a successful place by the media. Its economic functions comprise a mix of shopping and entertainment. It is also a relatively central place in close proximity to major rail, bus and subway lines, and a critical location for retail, employment, restaurants, museums and hotels. The purpose of this article is threefold: (i) to examine the characteristics that make Shibuya seemingly a very successful place, (ii) to identify strategic investments and their eventual correlation with changes in patronage, and (iii) to understand and review recent public space interventions and management practices. The research methods included visits to Shibuya, *in loco* built environment inventories, scrutiny of public space improvements, interviews with management personnel of the Center-Gai association, and bibliographic reviews. The key finding reveals a certain emphasis on creating a highly energetic iconography and postmodern identity, which has contributed to making Shibuya a distinct urban landscape in a very cosmopolitan Asian global city.

Keywords: Japan, Tokyo, Shibuya, *Sakariba*, Shopping, Entertainment, Downtown Improvement District.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shopping is critical to the livability of urban areas. Shopping occurs in a variety of places and retail formats. Each one of these places and retail formats serves distinct purposes and is patronized by different individuals. Socio-economic, cultural, historical and legal specificities influence the distribution sector and the number of layers that goods have to go through before reaching consumers. On one hand socio-economic, cultural and behaviors determine preferences and influence the frequency, quantity and amount of purchases.

In contemporary cities, the variety of retail formats means that shoppers have the option of choosing where to acquire goods and services. Price range, distance to the shopping venue, comfort of the retail outlet, and overall attractiveness tend to influence shopping behavior. Feelings of uncertainty about where to acquire, for how much and with what implications are inherent in unfamiliar settings. Psychological reactions of ambivalence may increase due to physical constraints of accessibility, portability and capacity to haul away and store.

The main premise of this research is that successful places in cities have an exceptional nature and that many of their redevelopments depend on multiple variables, many of which are beyond the control of

policy makers and urban planning professionals. Given this realization, it is important to research the appropriate levels of intervention and the extent of regulation and management, including design, maintenance, safety, funding and promotion to incentivize and nurture incipient but potentially successful places. Shibuya is one of the most well-known *sakariba* areas in Tokyo. Its apparent vibrant commercial area in the vicinity of a major transportation hub is paradigmatic and serves to illustrate the challenges and opportunities of similar areas in other large Japanese cities. Figures 1 and 2 show Shibuya’s identity augmented by images of neon signs, digital billboards, commercial streets with fashionable entertainment establishments and design brand stores, and a swarm of individuals going about their own business [1].

Tokyo’s history was made over many centuries on the basis of trade and more recently also territorial administration [2]. Its strategic bay location, and development on the margins of the Sumida River, has allowed an easy movement of merchandize and consumption goods from production hinterlands to the city [3]. Successful marketplaces in multiple neighborhoods have guaranteed the existence of exchanges between producers and consumers. Prior research has analyzed Shibuya’s urban evolution and societal practices [4]. The contribution of consumption habits and routines in urban settings throughout Japan as well as changes in Shibuya’s land use and associated built environment due to major commercial real estate interventions have been identified [5] and

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Figure 1: Shibuya's most paradigmatic intersection.

[6], respectively. Actor-network theory has been utilized to examine the role of Shibuya not only as a place of consumption but also as a center of youth culture [7]. Kazuo has documented the evolution of different shopping formats throughout Japan [8]. More recently, I reviewed the evolution of commercial urbanism practices in Japan [9]. With the exception of [10] who reviewed Japan's attempts at improving their own city center commercial areas, mostly in medium-size cities, I could not find any published literature on the specific contributions of downtown improvement districts (DID)

to the maintenance of vibrant commercial and entertainment areas in large Japanese cities.

When I started researching Shibuya more than ten years ago, I was very interested in how public policies and multiple stakeholders were creating strategies to manage city centers more efficiently and with higher gains for their locales. I was aware of the international trend towards the creation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and Town Center Management (TCM) schemes with the sole purpose of streamlining



Figure 2: Shibuya's inner streetscape dominated by neon signs.

centralize retail management practices [11]. The private shopping center philosophy was extensively utilized to structure interventions on multiple fronts, ranging from physical improvements to promotional campaigns and the identification of funding sources to pay for complementary services to those already being provided by municipalities.

When I first visited Japan in the mid-2000s; similarly to [12], I wanted to understand not only Japanese cities but also Japanese society, and especially whether similar regeneration and management efforts were taking place in large and popular sub-centers in Tokyo [13]. In the case of Shibuya, I wanted to know whether the high concentration of retail stores and entertainment establishments [14], together with a dedicated core of organized volunteers, would be able to properly deal with issues of scale, coordination, funding and leadership in order to maintain and or increase the vibrancy and livability of those areas. This article attempts to synthesize some of my research findings with a necessary time lag, which allowed me to also study the role of Japanese commercial streets, changes in the regulatory environments of commercial districts, and recent socio-economic transformations leading to ever more globalized built environments and consumption behaviors [15].

The purposes of this article are to examine the characteristics that make Shibuya seemingly a very recognizable successful place, to identify strategic investments and their eventual correlation with changes in patronage, and to understand and review recent public space interventions and management practices.

The research methods included visits to Shibuya, *in loco* built environment inventories, scrutiny of public space improvements, interviews with management personnel of the Center-Gai association, and bibliographic reviews. In order to understand changes in the neighborhood and the engagement of associative leaders, I conducted multiple visits on my own and as a part of the Center-Gai patrol. I documented urban environments with an extensive array of stills and detailed written notes of my observations and meetings. More recently and as part of a broader research project on shopping and urban regeneration in Japan, I conducted extensive searches and analysis of public policies, management practices and territorial development strategies of a myriad of non-profit organizations engaged in commercial

revitalization [9, 16]. The key finding reveals a certain emphasis on creating a highly energetic iconography and postmodern identity, which has contributed to making Shibuya a distinct urbanscape in a very cosmopolitan Asian global city.

This article is structured into six parts:

- The introduction;
- A theoretical conceptualization of successful places, with particular considerations for Japanese cities;
- The case study as a seemingly successful place;
- Recent changes in investment and patronage in Shibuya;
- The discussion of some of the most recent public space interventions and management practices;
- Synthesis of a set of concluding lessons learned from studying this commercial district.

2. SUCCESSFUL URBAN PLACES

There is an important dilemma in professional practice of whether successful places in cities are the outcome of spontaneous forces by many stakeholders over a considerable period of time or the result of planned and well-coordinated design strategies by a limited number of public policy actors in key locations of urban governance processes during focused interventions.

There have been also considerable attempts at developing categorizations of urban places according to a duality of place and placelessness [7, 17]. Central to these distinctions are endowments of innate characteristics and the creation of new characteristics due to specific occurrences. In the context of this research, places are known to have characteristics that support many individuals to fulfil their multiple needs over time. Placelessness is a characteristic utilized to designate an incapacity to either recoup place characteristics or to eliminate and or reduce the negative perceptions of existing locales. Also, central to this discussion are notions of place vitality and viability with the former standing for present abilities to fulfil current needs and the latter associated with capacities utilized to influence future actions. When applied together, these two concepts illustrate attempts at augmenting place livability.

Place vibrancy is influenced by a high concentration of people and activities and an extensive utilization of those elements at multiple times during a certain period of time. Around the clock activities contribute toward the maximization of existing infrastructure and the elimination of down times. Many cities, especially those with relatively high population densities have utilized time strategies (i.e. the concepts of a “24-hour” or of an “18-hour” city) to incentivize the full utilization of neighborhood assets in cities. Vibrant neighborhoods also have some of the highest footfall in cities.

A slight variation of this approach, known as the “entertainment machine” [18, 19], emphasizes a specific economic sector: The entertainment and leisure industry. Certain cities are endowed with a centuries-old and rich built heritage, which helps to attract large numbers of visitors; other cities have flourished because of the development of particular industries.

Unique to Japan’s urbanism is the concept of “*sakariba*”, which refers to popular and flourishing neighborhoods [20]. Six characteristics of successful commercial districts have been proposed: Centrality as intersection of flows, intricate space with open access, fuzzy boundaries, dispersion of large-scale buildings, hidden public space, and inclusive order [21]. *Sakariba* neighborhoods allow multiple publics to socialize outside of home and work. They are relatively similar to the “third place” concept, which has been utilized to describe locales where individuals spend the most time after regular home and work [22]. Examples of these places include public and private places where leisure and entertainment activities occur almost spontaneously.

In small- and medium-size cities without autonomous entertainment districts, commercial arcades, or *shotengai* in Japanese, occupied a special role in fulfilling many of the services found in *sakariba*. However, their recent weakening represents a story of unplanned obsolescence relatively similar to what has occurred in a multitude of western cities and towns. The specific nuances of the Japanese shopping street at the beginning of the 21st century, including the extensiveness, liveliness and vibrancy of the Japanese shopping street have been demonstrated [16].

Sakariba neighborhoods have flourished in the context of dynamic entrepreneurial activities, which are able not only to attract people, but also to guarantee an adequate quality of life for all those who make

entertainment activities possible. Urban planning’s ultimate goal is to facilitate the creation of livable cities with a whole array of neighborhood types, including mixed-use, residential, industrial, commercial and services.

3. SHIBUYA AS AN APPARENT SUCCESSFUL PLACE

Shibuya city (i.e. *Shibuya-Ku*) is an autonomous ward in Tokyo’s 35 million people metropolis. According to Shibuya city’s website, the ward’s population was 219 thousand inhabitants in September 2015. In the context of this research, the designation of Shibuya is restricted to a central area in the proximity to the ward’s main railroad station. The station is boarded by a landscaped public square with public art, a transit station off the main thoroughfare and several major arterial roads. The neighborhood diagonally across from the public square has narrow streets bordered by diverse retail, restaurants, coffee-shops and bars in underground, at ground and on the first few floors of buildings. Many of these narrow local streets were interdicted to vehicular traffic during my multiple visits to the area.

The Shibuya scramble crossing identifies a protected intersection between the train station and the surrounding neighborhood streets (see Figure 3). Time lapse images of this intersection reveal the changes in concentration of passers-by from slim gatherings and nascent crowd formation when priority is given to vehicles, to crowd dissipation and dispersion through the adjacent neighborhood streets when priority is given to pedestrians. The public square outside of the railroad and subway station is a visible gathering place, usually utilized by visitors to wait for fellow friends and colleagues. The public statue is part of the local iconography and popular culture of the neighborhood.

Shibuya’s sub-centrality in Tokyo has evolved over many decades. Its high concentration of buildings and activities has contributed to its mostly urban destination character, strong iconic imagery and high concentration of visitors. Many neon signs and billboards on the façades of low- and medium-rise buildings definitely contribute to its visual appeal. Although not as tall as the mostly office towers in Shinjuku’s sub-centrality, and not as billboard intensive as many of the buildings in Akiabara, the digital advertisement signs in Shibuya demonstrate its high visibility and potential from a place marketing perspective [23].



Figure 3: Shibuya's scramble crossing with pedestrian phase on.

The pedestrianized neighborhood streets allow shoppers to utilize the full width of those streets for their own convenience without the danger of being run-over by moving vehicles and or delivery trucks. As in other cities, the non-existence of moving vehicles enables visitors to conveniently access the establishments to make purchases or only for window shopping, alone or in groups.

The retail and entertainment industry in the area comprises a whole array of shopping malls, department stores, specialized retail, cafes, restaurants, fast food, entertainment ranging from movie theaters to pachinko parlors and hotels. These commercial activities are patronized at different times of the day by different and variegated individuals of all ages and professional occupations. Given their centrality, the combination of store types and the mix of prices, youth and middle-class professional workers have a special propensity visit this neighborhood quite frequently.

A final characteristic that also contributes to Shibuya's apparent success is its active management provided by Center-Gai. This organization is responsible for providing management leadership in the area, in the tradition of many other special interest organizations in Japan and abroad, such as chambers of commerce, business improvement districts, town center management schemes, and other similar types of organizations, whose mission is to help preserve the vibrancy of mostly commercial areas by implementing safety, cleanliness, attractiveness, and promotional programs.

4. CHANGES IN INVESTMENT AND PATRONAGE

Perhaps the best way to think about Shibuya's role in metropolitan Tokyo is to utilize Christaller's central place theory. Tokyo is known not to possess a traditional CBD in the usual conceptualization of Western cities. *Shibuya-Ku* is an autonomous ward on the southwestern corner of the metropolis. Its compactness has been accomplished with relatively tall buildings within the proximity of a mostly suburban node of public transport. One wonders whether it is a perfect Transit Oriented Development's (TOD) growth machine in the western sense of the term, since it has also been referred to as "Transit Urban Center – TUC" [21] and "Rail Integrated Community – RIC" [24].

In spite of the designation one chooses to utilize, the genesis of the neighborhood goes back to land development practices by privatized railroad corporations before WWII. Tokyu Corporation was one of the first private railways to have utilized the *para*-corporate system to influence urban development. In the typical scenario, railroad corporations would not only build the railroad lines but they would also build the stations and develop the land in the proximity of those same stations.

Given the high degree of centrality and the high number of passengers who utilized the stations on a regular basis, retail development in the form of shopping centers, department stores and office towers became viable real estate investments for those companies. The business strategy behind these land

development operations became known as *keirestu*, which basically stands for conglomerates of firms with complementary clusters of business activity. This has resulted in an extremely high variety of offerings and, in most cases, a high return on investment.

In fact, much of the Japanese postwar economic miracle was accomplished due to very extensive collaborations between central and metropolitan governments and powerful business conglomerates, which invested in railway lines, construction companies, land development programs, advertising agencies, and other commercial ventures with major built environment impacts. It seemed that the centralization of development under one major corporate venture has helped to streamline the design, planning, permitting, construction, and operation of very profitable businesses under an almost cloaked-like monopoly over the territory where it happened to occur.

In the case of Shibuya there were two main retail conglomerates bidding for very scarce land and redevelopment opportunities in the area: *Tokyu Hands* and *Seibu* Department Stores [25]. In fact, these companies have acquired and developed properties in the neighborhood with the ultimate goal of reaching a critical mass of businesses capable of influencing consumer's shopping behavior [6]. These companies constitute some of the largest urban growth machine stakeholders in the area. In fact, it has been argued that what the Seibu Group accomplished in Shibuya during the 1970s was to utilize a specific neighborhood area almost as a theater, "through an accumulation of sequences", quite similar to what had been done in theme-parks elsewhere [26].

Real estate construction was very important during the late 1980s and early 1990s, however it slowed down due to the Asian financial crisis and Japan's post-bubble depression. Considerable redevelopment interest in the area only picked again in the late 2000s and first half of 2010's decade with important regeneration plans for the station area under the umbrella of the Special Urban Renaissance District legislation [27].

These recent redevelopment initiatives are attempts at remaining competitive with increased competition by other sub-centralities in Tokyo [28], such as Roppongi, Shinjuku, Akiabara, Harajuku, Ikebukuro, and Odaiba. Many of these locations have seen the construction of alternative development projects, which tend to include corporate centers (for example: Roppongi Hills, Yebisu

Garden Place, and Ark Hills) without the strong traditional connection to the transportation hubs. These new corporate centers are characterized by urban open space with controlled access, an island character, a high concentration of large buildings, a high visibility of public space, and an exclusive order [21].

Shibuya's response to this development pressures has included renovations to the train station itself and major plans to construct an office tower aimed at hosting mostly cultural activities by the creative class in its immediate vicinity. These plans have resulted from partnerships between several railroad operators and Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG). The most recent redevelopment plan is dated January 2013 and it complements earlier plans from 2005 and 2011, respectively. A peculiar aspect of the most recent station plans pertains to the revitalization of Shibuya's river margins as new leisure and promenading waterfront public spaces [28].

5. PUBLIC SPACE INTERVENTIONS AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The pedestrianization and inherent walkability of Shibuya contributes to its character as a happening and cool place among the youth segments of the population. The *SentaGai* Street, Shibuya's central pedestrian street, is the most direct street from the train station to the core of Shibuya's shopping district. This street's main function has been accomplished with urban design treatments and even with the installation of a semi-open archway to create the impression of entering a special district separate from the hustling and bustling of the busy and noisy vehicular arterial roads in the immediate vicinity of the railway station.

The urban morphology of the district, with its narrow and winding streets and public squares, has been a common asset of the neighborhood even before the most recent international emphasis on tactical and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) urbanism practices in cities aimed at reclaiming public spaces that have been mainly utilized by vehicular traffic [29].

Many shopping streets have been subjected to considerable improvements over the years, consisting mainly of new pavements, buried utility lines and new street furniture. It is also important to note that at certain times of the year, many of these shopping streets get enlivened with banners and other festive arrangements and displays to create feelings of surprise and excitement, in order to celebrate sales

events and to attract additional customers. Entertainment related changes are also occurring with pachinko parlors, cyber-cafes and karaoke bars opening in these traditional shopping streets [16].

The physicality and identity of the neighborhood has been augmented by design interventions and management practices aimed at ensuring conformity, cleanliness, safety and security. Adherence to conformity is observed in two main areas: Firstly, enforcement of existing rules and regulations regarding the prevention of outside loitering and advertising in public spaces, and secondly the removal of merchandize displayed outside of retail establishments to create a greater awareness of the type of goods sold in those stores. The logic of differentiating one’s own stock of goods on the public right of way from that of one’s neighbors’ and in the process grabbing shoppers’ attention has been highly discouraged by the Center-Gai patrol.

Lack of cleansing is a major problem in places with high footfall. Complementary services are usually needed in these areas to ensure that they remain free of rubbish and debris and can contribute to the viability and continuous patronage of existing customers. Finally, safety and security pertain to neighborhood surveillance practices aimed at reducing the eventuality of crimes. Shibuya’s own CCTV network, multiple police boxes, which in Japanese are called *kōban*, and

the regular patrolling of streets by the police and by Center-Gai’s group of volunteers also help to keep Shibuya’s streets practically free of major security incidences.

The organization Shibuya Center-Gai has been responsible for providing and or coordinating many of the services needed to keep the area commercially vibrant since its creation in 2003. The logic of the private shopping center and the emphasis on centralized retail management have contributed to the up-keeping of the area and to its dynamism. The organization is constituted by property and business owners with establishments in the area and representatives from other administrative and non-profit entities. The organization’s operations are relatively similar to those conducted by most north-American BIDs, although they are not formalized nor professionalized to the same extent as they tend to rely mostly on the volunteering actions of their members for setting strategic directions.

Their regular monthly meetings serve to coordinate actions, review land use changes, articulate joint promotional strategies, define priorities, and monitor the evolution of retail developments through commercial health audits. A group of about fifteen to eighteen representatives also patrols the area on a regular basis, especially in the evening, to ensure compliance with public space regulations and to verify



Figure 4: Center-Gai volunteers during one of their regular neighborhood patrols.

cleanliness and safety patterns. The ultimate aim is to maintain and or increase the vibrancy of the area by straightforward and easily implementable retail district management practices.

The spirit of community and camaraderie among the Center-Gai volunteers who participated in the neighborhood patrol, which I was allowed to be a part of during my research and professional networking activities, was quite strong. This was easily observable in traditional Japanese corporate team-building efforts ranging from wearing a corporate uniform and singing an organizational hymn at the beginning of the neighborhood rounds (see Figure 4).

More recently, concerns about alleged rude behavior and strong adherence to behavior rules in public spaces by certain volunteers during their regular patrols have surfaced [7]. I observed strict imposition of regulations pertaining to the display of private merchandize in the public right-of-way. Furthermore, I also witnessed the prompt compliance with those rules by those alleged of having committed the infractions. I am aware of similar accusations in large U.S. cities, where BID ambassadors and safety crews literately “shoved” homeless individuals from popular public spots due to concerns that their present would possibly

discourage others from patronizing the stores within the district’s boundaries. The Shibuya leaders whom I met and interviewed seemed very eager to learn from other shopping districts elsewhere and also to share their own successes and mishaps.

6. CONCLUSION

It has been argued that Japan has “some of the most distinctive and vibrant cityscapes in the world” [30]. In my research I have attempted to understand the veracity and extent of this type of bold claims. Therefore, the purpose of this article was threefold: (i) To examine the characteristics that make Shibuya seemingly a very successful place, (ii) to identify strategic investments and their eventual correlation with changes in patronage, and (iii) to understand and review recent public space interventions and management practices.

In response to the first goal, the conclusion is that Shibuya is apparently very successful due to its own morphological evolution, combination of accessibility and mix of activities, high number of visitors and integrated management practices. The main finding is that shopping district improvement practices resembling international management initiatives, but



Figure 5: Shibuya’s central pedestrian street: *SentaGai*.

with local Japanese nuances have been partially responsible for the district's contemporary evolution.

The second goal uncovered the centrality of the *keiretsu* system and the channeling of investments to centrally located investment opportunity areas by major conglomerates under a logic of capital accumulation and reinvestment. The creation of strong shopping and entertainment areas has contributed to increased patronage by multiple publics with a particular tendency for entertainment and leisure-oriented customers and visitors.

Finally, private real estate redevelopment strategies constitute the most critical aspect of the entertainment growth machine. Figure 5 shows that the public space interventions aimed at enhancing the walkability, character and identity of the commercial district have also been critical to maintaining its long-term viability. This has resulted in the creation of a highly energetic iconography and postmodern identity, which also contributes to making it a very distinct urban landscape in a cosmopolitan Asian global city.

To conclude, these are the lessons that I was able to uncover; others may approach Shibuya differently and are welcome to offer their own findings to either oppose or corroborate these findings. Shibuya has similarities with other entertainment districts around the globe. Shibuya's recent evolution, unique context and powerful interplay of socio-economic and governance forces are likely to allow it to remain an important sub-centrality in Tokyo, and in Asia, for that matter.

Shibuya has always been a place of experimentation and as such, it has suffered major urban transformations over the last fifty years. Now it is already thinking ahead of the future in anticipation of the 2020 Olympics, which will guarantee a substantially higher number of visitors, even if for a short period of time.

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