

Marieluise Jonas & Heike Rahmann (2014). *Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence*. Berlin: Jovis. 192 pp., 100 col. € 29.80 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-86859-272-6

In *Tokyo Void*, Jonas and Rahmann place focus on the phenomenon of urban voids, which have received the attention of urban theorists and practitioners for over three decades. They approach it from perspectives gained during their extensive field research in Tokyo, proposing a contrasting Asian context for a typically Western concern. For this they choose a culture that embraces imported urban models whilst preserving a radically particular sensitivity towards the empty, the unfinished, the transitional and the imperfect. The result is an appealing collection of entry points both to vacant spaces as spaces of possibility and to the urban at large; one that conjugates a disciplinary and a scholarly concern for these spaces, with which this work reveals engagement as much as dedicated study.

The book employs an understanding of urban voids grounded in authors like Solá-Morales, Overmeyer, and Jorgensen and Keenan, bringing out the characteristic confluence of urban and anti-urban features in vacant spaces and *terrain vagues*. The wild, the unsafe, and the marginal meet a variety of informal uses, alternative socialising modes, and the aesthetic appreciation of transience and authenticity. Thus, the authors depart from the understanding that in voids temporary appropriations function as catalysts for urban regeneration, and in the process they become spaces of creativity and ecological value. Tokyo poses a particularly interesting backdrop for these dynamics due to its frantic urban rhythms causing in-between spaces to abound and to be incessantly renewed; giving form to a 'continuous landscape'. The authors take on a characterisation of Tokyo's vacant spaces in terms of morphology and typology, largely based on the city's own singularities, recurrent urban process, and historical evolution. They basically rely on their own periodic documentation of a selection of sites, providing abundant graphic information, as well as on official statistics and policy, on which they ground their engagement with sites, actors, media and academic literature. They ultimately present voids as both foil and trope of the urban, underlining their capacity for encasing potential, and prompting creative processes.

Part 1 provides an account of the opportunities that arise in vacant spaces, propped on several examples of sites and their 'performance'. Chapter 1 presents cases of intervention, transgression and appropriation, which the authors classify as 'new approaches', 'formalised strategies', and 'everyday landscapes'. Within these categories instances are carefully portrayed, respectively, of small-scale initiatives that are otherwise excluded from formal spaces; of officially-sanctioned reclamation projects of large abandoned sites; and of quotidian use of small plots and left-over street spaces, in the guise of parking spaces and flower-pot arrangements. A final reflection dwells on the contrast between lively and engaging bottom-up appropriations and the waning use of formal urban parks. Chapter 2 delves into the material qualities of vacant spaces, elaborating on the characteristics of the ground, atmosphere, and vegetation found in the gaps within built space. It is particularly interesting

how the authors explore Tokyo's history through the layers of materials that become exposed in these sites. Further, their focus on the ecology of airflows, water, sunlight, and wildlife also reveals endogenous species otherwise displaced by the dense urban fabric.

Part 2 moves on from the usual concerns on cultural and environmental dynamics, to attend to the understanding of voids as spatial capital in terms of two main factors, dimension and process. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the distribution of vacant spaces in relation to policy, demographics, and Tokyo's characteristic reconstruction cycles and land use dynamics, which are richly detailed. Chapter 4 analyses the temporal dynamics of vacant spaces, along which the research process itself is opportunely discussed. Again, specific features are identified, adding to the characterisation of Tokyo's voids in terms of categories and shapes.

A concluding section emphasises the possibilities of empty spaces to alleviate the increasing isolation and alienation within modern societies, much conspicuous in Japan. The combination of availability and sensorial stimulation in these spaces is perceived as a vehicle for self-realisation, giving shape to engaging and open-ended environments with a capacity to bracket everyday formal spaces. From the standpoint of planning practice, voids reveal the importance of implementing flexibility in public space, be it for encouraging participation and social interaction, or as an element of resilience in disaster response. Finally, voids are posed as an outstanding opportunity to give Tokyo an ecosystem rationale, producing a landscape able to couple environmental benefits with the Japanese characteristic sensitivity towards transience, change and continuity.

Tokyo Void is a comprehensive, engaging, neatly presented and very informative book, which necessarily makes trade-offs in order to effectively cover a wide and variegated phenomenon. Oriented towards a relatively broad audience, some of the themes that it addresses may be argued in passing, but it is no small merit that the authors successfully combine and illustrate different relevant approaches and dimensions of urban vacancy, which they rightly recognise as a gateway into the urban phenomenon at large. On the other hand, and in spite of the book's avowed aims, the specific characteristics of Japanese sensitivity towards undetermined spaces do not reappear throughout the argument with the expected depth and consistency. It is nevertheless this discussion which represents the volume's main contribution, along with the interesting collection of cases, to the literature on urban vacancy.

Notwithstanding its main focus on vacant spaces, this book is of undoubted interest to urban island studies, and not only for dealing with one of the most outstanding conurbations belonging to an archipelago. Several specific passages make an interesting contribution to the field, especially the contextualisation of land reclamation in Tokyo Bay in terms of processes of urban development, deindustrialisation and waste management, under tight spatial constraints and in conditions of economic stagnation. Furthermore, it represents an

effort towards placing the research lens within the local cultural frame and combines a host of approaches, which will appeal to interdisciplinary scholars.

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