

**Co-creating Civic space:
Ultra Machi-zukuri Project of Soshigaya, Tokyo**

Yurika Mori

University of Hawaii at Manoa
Department of Urban and Regional Planning

Prof. Mike Douglass

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Introduction

With the strong drive to catch up with Western economy, urban planning in Japan in 1950s and 60s, as seen in many other parts of Asia, focused on economic efficiency to prioritize industrial land use, jeopardizing the livability of citizens and environmental well-being. Reacting to the various negative social externalities yielded from the top-down planning, the decades of 1960s and 70s saw a rise of citizens' movement to voice out their claims. The movement eventually led to the amendment of urban planning policy and building codes, and the new regional planning policy was enacted as a sign of shift toward decentralized planning which is sensitive to quality of living environment (Gifu, 1999: 1). However, at the same time the pervasion of corporate economy has been profoundly affecting the civil society by the commodification of social relations and the rapid intrusion of global franchises into cities (Douglass, 2007: 3). These contradictory forces of the rise of civil society and the influence of global corporate capitalism are affecting each society in different way depending on their own histories, culture, and forms of governance (Douglass, 2007: 1).

The objective of this paper is to examine how a civil society or community of Soshigaya in Tokyo reacted to the influence of globalization to co-create their civic space in their neighborhood shopping district. In this paper, I will take a look at the Machi-zukuri project of Soshigaya Okura shopping districts (*Shotengai*) as a case study and analyze the external and internal factors which affected their project. In Japan, neighborhood shopping districts, where public streets lined with small locally owned shops, have been vital places in offering vibrant social life, and considered to be one of civic space categories (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi, 2002: 4). The premise is that civic space is essential for creating opportunity for diversifying citizens to have interaction and nurture healthy understanding and relationship for comfortable and environmentally sustainable living. The first section of paper, I will discuss the concept of Machi-zukuri, that is vital for a discourse of civic space in Japan. Next, I will describe historical and demographic context of Soshigaya as well as the issues and concerns faced by community members. The third section examines the Ultraman Machi-zukuri project as a community-involved civic space planning, followed by the forth section of reflective description of steps and process taken in the project, linking to policy tools that helped community actors to co-create their civic space. In the concluding section, I will discuss the usefulness of civic space, which can be appreciated by civil society through the process of co-creating their life space in cooperation with local government.

Machi-zukuri (Community Planning) as a Way to Co-create Civic Space

A civic space is defined as “spaces in which people of different origins and walks of life can co-mingle without overt control by government, commercial or other private interests, or *de facto* dominance by one group by another (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi, 2002: 2).” Accordingly, the characteristics of civic spaces are explained as: “a sense of shared bonds; a comfortable physical, social, and cultural setting; a social network, engaging debate and dialogue; a participatory environment; and a potential for forming larger public networks and vision.” Similarly, Putnam (2003) defines a civic space as “the spaces for the production and reproduction of practices of social cooperation, problem solving, and social capital formation (as cited in Douglass, 2007: 3).” These definitions provide good framework to direct discussion of civic space in Japan. Here, it is important to note that civic space is a vital element for human livelihood to sustain good social relationship for cultural, economic and political aspects of life.

As mentioned earlier, the dynamics of civic space depends on constellation of local culture, history, and governance with global power. In the case of Japan, the term “machi-zukuri,” literally means “town-making,” was coined around 1980s through the process of seeking for livability and quality of living in reaction to the traditional planning paradigm (Gifu, 1999: 1; Evans, 2002: 444). The term “machi-zukuri” is equivalent of community planning, also referring to a comprehensive planning, which promotes both soft and hard aspects of living environment (Sato, 1999: 13). It has become widely used in recent years by government organizations, civil organizations, and private companies, seen as a form of decentralization and as the most significant keyword within the contemporary discourse of local community (Evans, 2002: 444). In a dictionary of urban planning terminology, the term is defined as follows:

It refers to a variety of activities where local residents, working together or in cooperation with the local government, make the place where they live and conduct their day-to-day business into one that is attractive, pleasant to live in, and appropriate for the area. (Toshikeikaku Yogo Kenkyu-kai 1998 as cited in Evans, 2002: 410)

This definition implies a civil society to be in the equally powered actor of planning, who works with a local government for creation of their comfortable and appropriate civic space. I think the concept of machi-zukuri and creation of civic space is intertwined ideas and processes because both concepts imply initiatives or inputs by civil society, who exist in relation with government and private sector.

Let's take a look at how Machi-zukuri is processed to co-create civic space in the case of an urban town, Soshigaya.

Testimony from Soshigaya

Community

Located in the outer core of Tokyo, Soshigaya is a residential town of 45,000 populations in the area of 58 km². The town is one of 27 community districts in the city of Setagaya. Each community districts have several voluntary neighborhood associations called *jichikai-chonaikai*, whether the bond is strong or not. In Soshigaya, the average participation rate of neighborhood association is about 60% with monthly fee of 200 to 300 yen.

Since the rapid economic growth and urbanization in 1950s, the town has changed from mainly farmhouses with rice fields and farmland to resident houses and boarding houses for big companies, along with schools and recreational facilities for those residents. It was evident from the eyes of original residents that the community is losing vitality with less space to mingle. Sensing the need of interaction and unity in the community, since 1997, the alliance of neighborhood associations have started to organize the Soshigaya Furusato Festival with cooperation of residents, shop owners, other private companies, and the local government.

The demography of Soshigaya, as it is a national phenomenon, is facing the aging society, where about 20% of residents are 65 years and older. The area is appointed as the traffic inconvenient area since roads are narrow due to the rapid housing development. As the main local transportation is done by walking or bicycle, the elders find more difficulty in getting out to town to go shopping, run errands, or meet friends. Accessibility to town is vital to keep their social life. On December 19, 2005, as a result of strong demand and petition of 6,000 local residents, the community saw for the first time their local mini-bus to circulate the town, going through the Soshigaya-Okura station and the shopping districts. Everyday, the bus accommodates more than 600 people, and more than half of them are 65 years and older.



Figure 1: Location of Soshigaya



Figure 2: Community Mini-bus

Shopping Districts

The shopping district of Soshigaya developed since Odakyu Train Line and Soshigaya Okura station was established in 1920s. As Soshigaya housing complex (about 1.5 km north of station) and Okura housing complex (about 2 km south of station) were built in 1950s, the neighborhood shopping districts got longer. Currently, there are three shopping districts around the station, each forming shopping district promotion associations. With the total length of 5 km, it is one of the eminent shopping districts in Tokyo.

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are needed to see this picture.

Soshigaya Okura Station

Figure 3: Map of Soshigaya

Aging of residents affected consumption in local stores, and the sales of neighborhood shops have decreased. In addition, due to the aging of storeowners and the absence of successors, many shops loosen the vitality and are replaced afterward for eating and drinking chain stores. Moreover, the advancement of supermarkets and franchise stores makes difficult for fresh food small stores to continue business. With the renovation of the Soshigaya Okura station, the ten-story building is redeveloped near the station, and the major chain stores, which mainly market young people, replaced old local stores. Corporate economy, in replacing traditional neighborhood fresh stores, have also replaced places of daily social interaction and community encounters (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi, 2002).

Currently, large-scale apartment and housing development project are flocking to the community as more agricultural land is converted into residential land with the drop in price of land after bubble economy. The unity of residents is weakening as more people moved into apartments and mansions. In the shopping district, the distinction between stores for old residents and new residents become clear. Consensus of shop owners can no longer be gained within the shopping district association by a conventional method (Ultra, 2005).

Concerns faced by the shopping district association

As a result of rapid urbanization, many divergences and problems are identified by the community members. The following descriptions are cited from the community proposal and interview with a community member. Problems are divided into hard and soft issues.

Hardware Issues

Traffic congestion: There is only one 6m-wide road in the shopping districts. The traffic on holidays and evenings is chronic problems where walkers, bicyclers, and drivers constantly travel. In addition, exhibition of sales items, road signboards, and a lack of a bicycle parking lot accelerate traffic congestion.

Illegally parked bicycle: Since there is only one bicycle parking lot set by the train station, there are many illegally parked bicycle on the streets.

Lack of new management technique: The method of sales is growing using new technologies, however, the small shops lack skills and infrastructure. Also, conventional face-to-face style requires innovation as young customers increase, such as by improving interior, exhibition, menu and so on.

Crime prevention, disaster management: The rate of burglary and thief is increasing in the community. Also, with a consideration of great earthquake in Kanto area, the disaster management must be strengthened at community level.



Figure 4: Traffic Congestion of the Main Street

Software Issues

Advancement of non-local stores: As mentioned in the above section, the supermarkets and franchise stores in community is displacing small stores.

Aging of shopkeepers and lack of successors: As many stores close, mental support for shop owners to keep dream and will is not being felt. Friends and partners who can share those concerns are decreasing.

Absence of connection between community and stores: Because nowadays shop owners and new residents grew up in different areas and went different schools, the connection within local community is fragile. The situation of recent shopping district cannot be solved and advanced without solidarity with local community members.

Lack of leadership in the shopping district: There are members who have the quality to become a leader in the shopping district, but there is no opportunity for them to play an active part.

Ultra Machi-zukuri Project: Community-involved Shopping District Model Project

For more than 40 years, the members of shopping district association have been friends with Eiji Tsuburaya, the producer of Ultraman who resides and had the former main office in the community. (Ultraman is a national hero character in Japan since 40 years ago, who not only attract kids, but also older generation, giving dream and hope.)

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Occasionally, the production company collaborated for community activities such as Ultraman handshake event for the Soshigaya Furusato Festival and the shopping district events. Along a way, an idea to strengthen network between neighbors has emerged in the light of disaster management. Thus, the idea to use an Ultraman

Figure 5: Ultraman



Figure 6: Ultraman Handshake Event

character as a common item in community to spark communication was pursued as well as for a promotion of shopping district. It was earnest wish of local shop owners and residents for this idea to be realized. Finally, the idea to collaborate with Ultraman was set into action by the local government promotion team in 2004. The local government and the shopping district association negotiated to use Ultraman as a character to revitalize the community, and the production agreed

for free offer of a character as long as it is used for the benefit of community.

At the administrative level, the Tokyo metropolitan government recognized that the city requires neighborhood shopping district where community life can flourish and has inaugurated “the Community-involved Shopping District Model Project” since 2004. By this project, a selected shopping district association receives monetary and technical support for its project to work with community residents, university, private companies, and NPOs to revitalize the shopping districts for environmental, social and tourism need of community (Tokyo, 2005). The three shopping district associations around the Soshigaya Okura station applied for the project together. They were selected for the 2005 model shopping district project, and the local government supported the four fifth of the total business expense of the first year shopping district project.

Since the qualification of the model project requires the involvement of local community, the shopping district associations have established “Ultra Machi-zukuri Association” in February 2005. The purpose of the project was stated as the realization toward attractive community, which is safe and vibrant for people who live, work and visit community, appreciating Ultraman, the national hero from the community, as an icon to encourage community participation (Ultra, 2005). The shopping district association has taken hands with the diverse people in the community to achieve the purpose. The executive director of the association is the Chair of Department of Commercial Science at Japan University, which is located near the shopping districts. The presidents of three shopping districts association, Japan University office manager, the neighborhood association chair, and the president of Tsuburaya production are board members. There are 43 members in the association; 17 members are from the shopping district associations and others are from neighborhood associations (co-organize community event, disaster management and crime prevention seminars), university (cooperates for project event, community mart operation, and development of new education model), public schools (volunteer for security patrol, community services, and job experience), community non-profit organizations (support “how-to” of Machi-zukuri and Ultraman event) and Odakyu bus/train company (cooperates clean-up and illegally parked bicycle campaign and display advertisement in the bus). Monthly meetings with Tsuburaya production and Odakyu train and bus companies are held as well as community study group for “how to” Machi-zukuri. It can be seen that the main actors of this project is the stakeholders in community who work collaboratively among themselves with political and monetary support from local government.

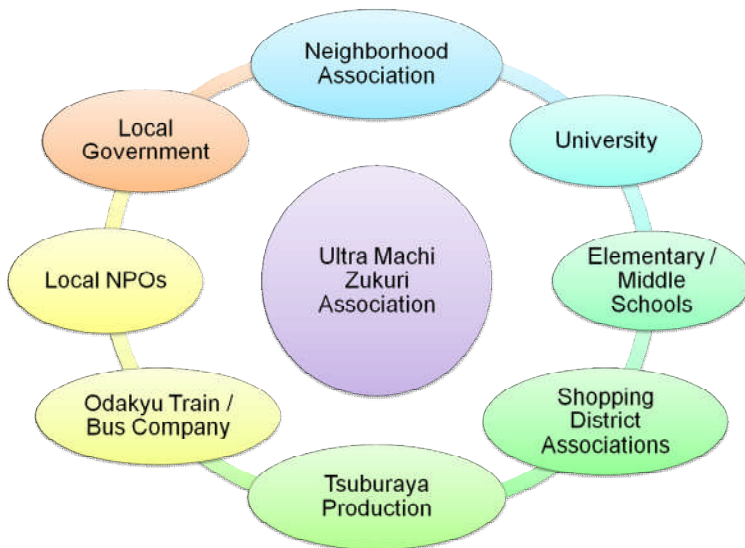


Figure 7: Stakeholders of Ultra Machi Zukuri Association

The Ultraman Shopping District has officially inaugurated since April 3, 2005. Three shopping districts around Soshigaya Okura Station are now called Ultraman shopping districts with Ultraman banner and symbols representing unity and identity of “compassion and sense of justice”. The Ultraman statue stood in front of the station as a symbol for local identity and ideal. Ultraman jackets are made for event, patrol, clean-up, and traffic control. More than 450 shops are participating in the association, which is over 90% of shops in the districts. Monthly fee is around 3,500 yen (\$30). Ultraman sign is set in the participating shops to promote further participation and enhance sense of community. For new members, Ultraman is easy entrance to community and shopping districts. Although the use of Ultraman is tend to be treated exaggeratedly in mass media, the association is reminded that the base of revitalization of shopping district stays at the local community (Ultra, 2005). Participation of residents to shopping district meetings and events is vital in measuring success of the project. In other words, carrying out the project itself is opportunity for the shopping districts and residents to think and act for the community from their viewpoint. The process of revitalizing the shopping district encourages people to understand each other’s viewpoint and explore and carry out ways to solve issues by community as a whole.



Figure 8: Inauguration Ceremony of Ultraman Shopping District



Figure 9: Ultraman Banner and Arch



Figure 10: Ultraman Statue



Figure 11: Ultraman Shopping District Main Street

As a measure for unoccupied store in the shopping district, the government of Tokyo subsidized the two third of the 3-year rent for one store space, which has used as Community Mart since October 2005. Community Mart is used as a place for encounter for people who lives, works, and visits the area. Some of usages include community meeting, disaster management workshop, tax seminar, flower arrangement class and demonstration, English conversation class, PC class, Yoga

class, neighborhood free market, comedy show, and world cup game spectating. Currently, there is no empty store in the shopping district.

At the ceremony of "The Second Tokyo Shopping District Grand Award" held in November 7, 2006, the Ultraman shopping district received the excellence prize for "Ultra Machi-zukuri project." This award commends the shopping district for connecting close to the local community to revitalize civic space. From December 2006 to February 2007, students from Japan university conducted the evaluation of the Ultraman Machi-zukuri project, and the result is forthcoming.

Collaborative Process and Relationship

The vitality of local economy is important for keeping and enhancing civic space facing the ever encroaching affect of globalized corporate economy. The shopping district comprised of small locally owned shops are not only the source of reproduction for itself but also the source of empowerment for the local community. Analysis of measures and steps taken at the Ultraman shopping district reveals that the support from local government is vital for realization of the project. The monetary/technical support and award recognitions are some of policy measures that local government can provide in supporting revitalization of community projects. The society needs provision of government to keep and enhance civic space in urbanized space. At the same time, the responsibility has to be felt by citizens, rather than just complaining governments, which cannot response and be flexible to detail problems occurring at neighborhood level. What is essential for successful civic space creation, at least in Japan, is passion and the will of community members. It is my position that community members need to solidify and spent energy and effort on realizing their wish to Co-create civic space by working with local government. Without such motivation and attempt from community members, civic space would keep disappearing by the power of corporate capitalism.

From the case study, some of factors essential for enhancing the civic space can be identified. First, it is important for a community to have cohesion and momentum to solve issues. The participation rate of voluntary neighborhood associations was 60%, which considered being fairly high in urban Tokyo. The community had annual festivals where interaction between different sectors was necessitated. In the end of 2005, the community also succeeded in proposing minibus, through which community was empowered that they can improve their living environment. It is also considered that the diverse population in community needs a key actor to be a bridge between the

divides. In this case, the chair of the neighborhood community association played a vital role in connecting the university, commercial associations, and local government. In a community project, it is relationship that determines the endurance and prosperity of the project. In Soshigaya, the Ultraman producer and members of shopping districts association had long term friendship. The university students and teachers commute to the university from the station going through and stopping by at the shopping districts every day. The neighborhood association chair and the chair of Department of Commercial Science at the University had previously acquainted for another project, which made the community chair to recommend the university chair to be the executive director of the Ultraman Association.

Through process, participated community members started to identify assets of individuals and organization already existed in community. With “give & take” consciousness, members started to learn from each other and work together, building stronger relationship. People were motivated to learn from themselves because not only the shopping districts members, but every members associated in this project had responsibility for the success of the project. As a result, young leadership was nurtured through the process, giving future prospective for the community. Most of all, the commitment of elders to revitalize their own town was critical factors, which brought their wisdom, experience, and networking into the project. It is my belief that retired people, rather than being burden of society, should be respected for their great assets, knowledge, and skills for community work. Many retired people are now volunteering because they want to contribute back to society. I believe that the aging of society is not burden for the future of Japan, but a chance to grow for a country with more care and respect. I hope that the perspective of younger generation in Japan will widen from many of inspiring accomplishments such as seen in the revitalization of Ultraman shopping districts in Soshigaya.

Conclusion: Usefulness of Civic Space

From the case study, it is seen that Machi-zukuri as a participatory planning is one of the ways to co-create civic space for community members. While many, increasingly globalized forces are at play that seems to jeopardize civic spaces, the local efforts in Soshigaya shows that opportunities to create and sustain such inclusive spaces do exist and are being pursued. Traditionally considered as a place to encounter, a neighborhood shopping district is different from malls and other shopping centers managed by corporate economy since the economy of

neighborhood is based on locality. The locally based economy creates self-sufficiency, as shop owners and consumers reside in closer vicinity and circulate economy. Moreover, local shop owners are also engaged in civic life in the community engaging dialogue in their small shops and having connected with other shops and community. It is suffice to say that small shop owners' interests are not dominating or controlling community, rather it is a part of community by sharing living space. Referring the characteristics of civic space that defined at the beginning of this paper, "a sense of shared bonds; a comfortable physical, social, and cultural setting; a social network, engaging debate and dialogue; a participatory environment; and a potential for forming larger public networks and vision (Douglass, Ho, Ooi, 2002)," and comparing them with the described outcomes and process in the Soshigaya Ultraman shopping district, it can be concluded that the shopping area is a civic space.

The community reached the dream that it seemed impossible with financial difficulties. Ultra Machi-zukuri is the result of collaboration of community members, private owners, and local governments, and without any of efforts from each entity, the project would not have realized. I believe that local project have much more profound intake and effect since stakeholders including government workers tend to reside in the community and get direct impact from consequences. The usefulness of civic space depends on appreciation of community. What is clear is that the involvement of civil society in co-creation of civic space is the vital process to have deeper appreciation of the space. In the case of Japan, civil society is becoming more prominent and taking a leading role in improving the livability of city. The case study from Soshigaya is a testimony that civil society can build capacities for problem solving and innovative idea for providing vital space for association and sharing for harmonious society.

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