

# H-Net Reviews

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Marieluise Jonas, Heike Rahmann. *Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence*. Berlin: Jovis, 2014. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86859-272-6.

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In recent decades, processes of urbanization and future projections of people living in cities have led to increased discussions about regeneration, reuse, and revitalization of existing built environments. Within these discussions, urban voids have been recognized as potentially functional spaces, providing opportunities for transformation and regeneration. The perception of urban voids is changing from negative forgotten spaces to prospective spaces. Marieluise Jonas and Heike Rahmann's *Tokyo Void*, focusing on Tokyo's urban voids, contributes significantly to this growing field of research.

The book adds a new and complementary angle to a limited number of English-language books and research work on the topic of Tokyo (for example, Jinnai Hide-nobou's *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* [1995], Darko Radovic's *Another Tokyo* [2008], André Sorensen's *The Making of Urban Japan: Cities and Planning from Edo to the Twenty-First Century* [2002], Barrie Shelton's *Learning from the Japanese City: West Meets East in Urban Design* [2012]; and Paul Waley's *Tokyo: City of Stories* [1991]). With a good balance between evidence based on quantitative aspects of the built environment and legislative as well as political and social issues on the one hand, and qualitative (to a certain extent) speculative aspects of Japanese uniqueness, on the other, the book offers analysis that will lead to greater understanding of the city of Tokyo.

According to the authors, only 4 percent of the land in Tokyo is unbuilt and undeveloped. These small spaces are presented as the framework for the book. These spaces, Jonas and Rahmann argue, can be used for future sustainable development of the city and are already performing as spaces for ephemeral emerging activities. The uniqueness of the built environment in Tokyo is presented within the performing characteristics of its void spaces. Unlike in many other contexts, where urban voids represent disruptions in built environment, Tokyo's voids

are "inconspicuous, subtle breaks in a continuous urban tissue" (p. 20). The book tackles an important question on how the contextualization of the urban void provides new knowledge. Which aspects are profoundly local and which of those can be of a broader reference?

To provide contextualization for Tokyo's voids, in the introduction, Jonas and Rahmann begin their discussion with a short description of the meanings and general importance of urban voids. They point to the multilayered aspects of voids and avoid ontological definitions, demonstrating the complexity of the roles and definitions of these spaces. The book, then, carefully guides readers through various examples of voids in Tokyo to expose the layers of meanings of those spaces in the local context as well as to generalize their importance. Jonas and Rahmann offer examples on cultural, performative, and functional aspects of Tokyo voids as well as the processes of their creations.

The book is divided into two parts that cover performative aspects of the voids and contextual processes that produce and maintain those voids. All aspects of void spaces are supported with well-documented examples that vary in size, function, and position within the city. The first part of the book describes the ways in which void spaces are used and examines their culturally specific meanings. The second part deals with voids as resources, their behavior over time, and processes that produce various void spaces. It focuses on the potential that voids offer from sociocultural and environmental aspects.

The first chapter discusses the meaning of voids through the Japanese concept of "harappa," defined as "playgrounds for exploration and games," which reflects "cultural nostalgia" (p. 37). Examples the authors provide range from popular culture, such as movies, to explorations of the city. The chapter outlines and describes various uses of void spaces from bottom-up emerging spontaneous uses to organized and government-led

projects. Using examples from the Tokyo neighborhoods of Ginza and Yanaka, Jonas and Rahmann argue that Tokyo voids offer opportunities for challenging concepts of public space. The activities described in this chapter are those that are typically forbidden in public spaces, such as displaying potted plants or hanging up laundry outside. There is a common argument, particularly among Japanese scholars, that public space represents a foreign concept in Japanese cities (for a recent study, see, for example, the edited collection by Koh Kitayama, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, and Ryue Nishisawa, *Tokyo Metabolizing* [2010]) and thus that Japanese citizens do not make use of them. *Tokyo Void*, in contrast, offers examples of void spaces that operate as public spaces for spontaneous bottom-up events. These spaces offer new possibilities for urban life in Tokyo and at the same time could be read as a critique of widely accepted notions of Japanese uniqueness, which recognize public space as a foreign concept. Jonas and Rahmann also note that due to Japanese culture these “informal practices” are “much subtler ... than in many other places around the world” (p. 62).

In the second chapter, Jonas and Rahmann examine the tactile and experiential aspects of voids in densely built neighborhoods. Examples presented here focus on the ground, vegetation, and atmosphere, thus describing the voids as live spaces. Descriptions range from quantitative aspects of soil and air to intangible and almost poetic traces that could be found in these spaces. The chapter concludes with a view of voids as “unplanned” sites offering “momentary experiences.” The authors argue, “Voids can be read as poetic transmitters of the ephemeral; as transient atmospheres, vegetated wastelands, containers of existence” (p. 104).

In the third chapter, Jonas and Rahmann expose the main processes that produce voids in Tokyo. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, political regime change, and a shrinking population are some of the processes that are producing various void spaces. An aging population and migrations across city wards affect demographic trends. The authors show the dynamics of urban form in Tokyo through examples of rebuilding and readjustments of streets. Subdivisions of land and postindustrial cycles are also important processes that lead to voids and they are tightly linked with law and governmental decisions.

The fourth chapter deals with the time and speed of

change in Tokyo’s built environment. Besides pointing to the perception of constant change and rebuilding for which Tokyo is very famous, the authors reveal numerous examples of voids showing the tendency of persistence. The persistence over time is illustrated through a number of descriptions of places and photographs taken from 2009 to 2012. The examples range from small to large scale.

Jonas and Rahmann summarize their work through “possibilities in absence,” the subtitle of the book. They present voids as “catalyst[s] for social interaction and creative experiments” (p. 175). They conclude that Tokyo’s urban voids, as “small, dispersed, and yet interconnected spaces,” have great capacity to support regeneration of the city and meet the challenges of sustainability (p. 180). On a broader level, Jonas and Rahmann open a question on the possibility of Tokyo serving as a model for “dynamic hybrid urbanism” (p. 181). *Tokyo Void* supports the idea of small developments and balance between bottom-up and top-down developments in the city. It positions Tokyo’s urbanism (and perhaps even all of Southeast Asian urbanism) within recognized urban-planning theories of the Anglo-Saxon world. The book ends with the authors questioning whether Tokyo’s urban voids have the potential to develop new typologies for public spaces that are rooted in culture and context.

It is also noticeable, although not directly communicated, among the examples presented in the book that voids performing spontaneously (bottom-up) as communal and interactive spaces were always small spaces located in densely built neighborhoods. The activities that sometimes take place in those small spaces are challenging the use of Tokyo’s public spaces. The examples that Jonas and Rahmann include vary in their locations as well as functions. Large urban voids, they show, contribute to the nation as a whole and are part of the government’s strategies and projects (top-down). The book offers possibilities for further explorations of the definition and meaning of public spaces within contemporary cities, not only in the Asian context but also on a broader theoretical level.

The book will be useful for architects, designers, and planners who are interested in the city of Tokyo. *Tokyo Void*, a well-structured and well-illustrated publication, will lead readers to a greater understanding of this great city.

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