

# The Tokyo Sanctuary

Tokyo University of Science, Winter Workshop

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The focus of this workshop will be the Sanctuary. The word “Sanctuary” in English comes from the Latin *Santuarium*, *-arium* meaning a place or container for something and *Santi-* meaning sacred or holy.

Today we use the word “sanctuary” to describe a wide range of spaces that go beyond this original use in the context of religious or metaphysical fixation. In particular, we understand that there are two additional forms of sanctuary in our societies today, which we denote as human sanctuaries and non-human sanctuaries.

In both of these non-religious forms, it is interesting to consider how the meaning of the form has evolved and grown, what of the original meaning remains, and what is new.

Specificity of place remains a core concept. Human sanctuaries and non-human sanctuaries are understood to be places where people, animals or ecosystems are protected, where they are free from persecution, where they are safe. Where in a shrine it is the holiness that is given a specific *locus*, in the modern non-religious sanctuary it is nothing less than life itself and the freedom to live that life as the being would do in a natural way that is given a place.

The architectural investment in the Greek temple, the construction of an elaborate structure of columns and walls, platforms and roofs, has at its heart the valuation and protection of the icon, safeguarded in the central or deepest chamber, the Naos. By the layering on of these artifices, elements of architectural construction of the highest order, reification is achieved, and the sanctity of the space defined.

This workshop will address the question of the sanctuary in modern day Tokyo. In the first few days we will be making a rapid study of existing sanctuaries in order to set the context and develop a working vocabulary for our discussions. In the second part students will develop proposals for new sanctuaries in Tokyo.

In a human sanctuary the threats that pursue individuals are blocked, and safety and peace are the operating qualities. What interests us here is the social and ecological value that well-conceived modern sanctuaries can provide, and what I hope we can achieve as a group is an understanding of the various formulae for success in their creation.

The idea of protection requires an understanding of an imminent threat. The means of establishing the sanctuary is a matter of blocking these threats or reversing the processes leading to the threats.

The specific forms of protection, safety and peace offered in a sanctuary are often complex, involving not just physical protections but spiritual comfort and psychological support. What is interesting is the way in which these different spheres begin to interrelate; when physical nourishment buoys the spirit and when psychological easing allows the intellect to flourish.

In order to understand some of these dynamics, I would like to look at a few examples.

The spatial and structural qualities of places that are deemed safe and protected surely vary between cultures, but fundamental to all must be some idea of the control of access and hardness and permanence. The cave is an archetypal “safe space” and one that we can make reference to later on to a limited degree, but we are here more interested in the kinds of human activity and interaction that take place in modern-day sanctuaries, and what these examples might show us.

As I am sure most of you have seen on the news, in Europe we are seeing an influx of refugees from the African Continent and the Middle East, recently at a peak with the ongoing war in Syria. To the extent that the countries of Western Europe receive these refugees, they can be said to be sanctuary countries. The nature of the refugees’ reception and the amenities to which they are given access when they arrive can vary greatly. At the most basic level, refugees are given a place to be free of mortal danger, safe from persecution and death. The camps that they occupy on first arriving in their host country are usually temporary. The process of moving on to a more permanent and integrated place in their new societies is fraught with complications. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome or managed, and in many countries in Europe we have seen a rise in nationalist sentiments, a sector of the country’s citizenry that rejects the newcomers as invaders. Integration is not easy.

In Europe Germany has taken the lion’s share of refugees from the crisis in Syria, and in Berlin efforts have been made to ease the integration of the newcomers. The example here is called Die Gaertneri (The Nursery) and was brought to my attention by Mio Tsuneyama. The home page of their website contains the following text:

Artists and architects have moved into the abandoned long building together with young refugees, have repaired the workshop space and set up a small garden school. German lessons, professional customer, gardening and landscaping are on the timetable.

Everywhere garden tools, flower bulbs and other seeds ... everything indicates that here begins something...a creative place of encounter with Berliners ... a think tank and place for social transformations, which allows relaxation for the charged theme of "refugees".

In this example we can see how what begins as the most desperate need for shelter and safety, that of a war refugee, is recognized as a broad panorama of difficulties when integration in the host country is taken into consideration. The Nursery proposes a way to ameliorate these difficulties through socializing activities, gardening, cooking, language learning and conversational interaction, all made possible because this safe space was made and enhanced.

This modern sanctuary is ephemeral. Unlike the temples built long ago and that stand today, visited by few if any “believers,” this collection of structures are purpose-built to address a highly specific social need of our times.

Another Example that I would like to show is in San Francisco, California. It is called 826 Valencia, and it was founded in 2002 by author Dave Eggers and educator Ninive Calegari. The introductory text from their website reads as follows:

826 Valencia is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting under-resourced students ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. Our

services are structured around the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success.

... With this in mind, we offer a range of programs, all free of charge, for students, classrooms, and schools in the Bay Area. Our project-based approach allows students ownership over the writing process and strengthens their ability to express themselves clearly and in their own voice.

By making writing fun, by demystifying the process, and by creating gorgeous books, magazines, and newspapers that honor their work, we can inspire young people to gain critical skills and write with confidence.

Of particular interest is a quirk of its physical structure. In order to obtain a license to operate in the space that had been rented for commercial purposes, it was necessary that it be a shop selling stuff, which seemed like a problem, as the idea was to offer the tutoring for free. The solution was to locate the place of tutoring in the back of the shop behind a store that was not really intended to be a serious commercial enterprise, but a front. They decided that this front space should be a pirate supply store. They had a lot of fun thinking up silly things to sell to supposed pirate customers, eye patches and wooden legs, treasure maps and so on. Of course, the silliness of the pirate shop had the wonderful effect of disarming the students who eventually came for tutoring, contributing to a spirit of fun and making 826 Valencia a safe space for learning, completely unlike school. This has been a great success, and has spread to other centers and other cities. Where it all began with a just a few dozen tutors, there are now thousands employed.

Torolab is another example of young, creative people addressing social issues in their immediate surroundings with imagination and good will, transforming the life experience of the neediest among them, and many more people along the way for the inspirational nature of their work.

Raul Cardenas and the rest of the interdisciplinary group known as Torolab founded in 2011 what they call "La Granja Transfronteriza" or The Transborder Farm in the area known as Camino Verde in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. This is a densely populated and very poor area with high rates of violence. It is a place where young people grow up with little hope. Nutritious food is scarce and the population lives at the margins.

Torolab's activities aim to fight poverty in Camino Verde through educational and work projects fusing art, science and the various skills and ideas that the group and invited contributors bring to the scene.

Quoting from the online arts, architecture and design magazine CODIGO:

... Torolab initiated La Granja as a participatory project based on the theories of social practice in the arts, developed by Ted Purves and Grant Kester, as well as the notion of "socially committed art" by the Mexican artist Pablo Helguera... Its application in Camino Verde was conceived as a continuous process divided into four stages... diagnosis, products, laboratory and urban intervention. [Its] practice is characterized by involving professionals from different areas, from artists, engineers, urban planners, architects, gastronomes, writers, etc., according to the needs of each intervention.

Generally associated with art, Torolab is a group of creators who have

recognized the potential of art and creativity to create models of social, economic and cultural exchanges, within specific areas. ... [They] have developed projects whose main objective is to improve the quality of life of people.

The Torolab projects involve the community residents in artistic productions and projects that focus on specific issues relating to their day-to-day existence. In the images we can see kids performing, a food truck, and what looks like an anniversary celebration. Torolab invited a filmmaker to work with the local population. The work was based on *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's most violent play represented abysmal cycles of revenge, eerily parallel to the residents' own experience with drug wars. The finished work, the film, is not only moving, but its making was evidently a cathartic and empowering experience for the locals.

Here in Tokyo there are places that address issues of poverty through collective voluntary actions, places that I would qualify as sanctuaries of sorts. Again, Mio Tsuneyama drew my attention to the existence of Tokyo soup kitchens for children, which bring together professionals and neighbors to provide nutritious meals to school-aged children.

Quoting The Japan Agri News 06.12.2015:

According to the survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, in 2012, one out of six children live in poverty, a growing number of children eat dinner alone, and there are many children who are in need for food assistance.

I have spent now some time presenting a number of modern-day human sanctuaries that all address particular social issues afflicting particular communities with actions that have proven highly successful, thanks to the spontaneous and creative input from volunteers.

In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that all modern-day human sanctuaries require this kind of volunteer effort; rather, there are many forms that exist as businesses in their own right. These are businesses that offer services to clients that can be classified as a kind of relief, offering, as it were, a safe space where everyday pressures are dissipated, where expectations are reversed, where fantasies are indulged, where the body is rejuvenated.

Where the volunteer activities are in general providing assistance to marginalized populations who have few, if any, resources of their own, in the sanctuary as business model, people in advanced societies such as Japan's are given the opportunity to buy a moment's respite from busy, demanding lives in which most of the hours of any given day are filled with work in a job or at home under pressure to succeed, to perform as expected, to conform to models of behavior or appearance.

These modern urban sanctuaries can have ancient or modern roots; they can be part of a venerable tradition or can have arisen in our generation as a response to contemporary social conditions. An obvious example of the latter would be the Love Hotels of Tokyo, where space limitations, time constraints and various other social pressures have laid the ground for this niche business providing a safe space for libidinous outlets.

A classic case of the former type would be bathhouses, here called Onsen, but existing in many societies and having ancient roots. It's hard to imagine taking a bath not being

a moment of relaxation and renewal, and indeed there are many who might consider their bathrooms their personal sanctuaries. Although this is interesting, we are interested here in the question of sanctuary as it might apply to the public realm, in the Tokyo of today.

The question of temporality and geographic specificity is not one that should remain unaddressed. Greek temples do not perform as sanctuaries in their original sense, but could perhaps be considered sanctuaries for what remains of the architecture of the ancients. The stones are being kept safe from further destruction, but for their human visitors, the space is more akin to a park, and their religious iconography has long lost its grip on the public.

The Ise shrine may be a unique exception. In the preface to his collection of essays Japan-ness in Architecture, Arata Isozaki writes:

It is said that the ritual of rebuilding/relocation reiterates the primary installation of the sacred within the shrine...(Isozaki, xi)

This suggests that the holiness for which the shrine is built is reintroduced by means of this ritualistic rebuilding, where that of other shrines perhaps dissipates. Through this example Isozaki is able to draw in the distinction made by Ryūichi Hamaguchi that the "...architectonic will of the West [is] 'constructive and objective' [where] that of Japan [is] 'spatial and performative'" (Isozaki, 24).

When considering the nature of public space in Japanese cities, he remarks on the absence of the plaza form, which in European cities is the place of encounter, the space of discourse. In Japanese cities, he remarks, forms that fulfill a similar function are the crossroads (*tsuji*) and the riverbanks (*kawara*), the latter providing "...a place of asylum for various social outcasts". What is interesting for our consideration is that the communal events such as street markets occurring at the *tsuji* are "...never fixed, but [are] instead temporary and amorphous", giving us the concept of *Kawai*, the ambiguous demarcation of space. (Isozaki, 65-66)

Even the Sanctuary in Japan has an ephemeral quality. The Kami "...normally exist outside architectural appurtenances" (Isozaki, 66). It is the ritualistic device that draws them in. I would like us to be able to think of our modern Tokyo sanctuaries in this fashion, as dependent on those activities to gain and maintain their meaning.

## The Workshop Assignment

### Part 1

The first part of the exercise is to identify a sanctuary in Tokyo and to visit it, documenting its architectural features and recording a discursive description.

By means of on-site measurements, generate a plan, a section and an elevation of the structure. In the case that there is open space surrounding the structure, as is the case for many shrines and temples, the plan should include a rendition of this open space, up to and including adjacent structures.

The description should primarily address the architectural qualities for the sanctuary. Feel free to include subjective descriptions of the space, atmospheric observations or sensory perceptions. Also, feel free to suggest whether the sanctuary is in active use, and if so by whom and in what capacity.

Results should be presented on 2 DinA3 sheets, landscape format

### Part 2

The second part of the assignment is to design a sanctuary for Tokyo. The sanctuary may take any form (religious, human and non-human), and may combine forms. It is understood that a simple animal sanctuary is not however an acceptable proposal as the proposal must feature an architectural design.

The site should be located within a short walking distance from either the Kagurazaka or the Kanamachi campuses of the TUS.

The format for the presentation is to be 2 DIN A1 sheets showing plan(s), section(s) and perspective(s), and at least one scale model

## Commentary on the Results

There is no question that in bringing this assignment to the workshop I was full of trepidation, not knowing if my ideas were to be understood, and whether the demands on the students were too much. Neither the program nor the building site were fixed: the students were instead asked to present an interpretation and accommodation to Tokyo society of my idea of Sanctuary, to develop their own sanctuary program, and to find within two general neighborhoods a site appropriate for the implantation of the sanctuary of their own design.

In almost all cases, my concerns were entirely unfounded. The students reflected on the meaning of sanctuary in Tokyo today, and brought to the studio ideas and concerns that were uniquely their own, pertinent to contemporary life in Tokyo in ways that I would not have guessed existed.

In one short week, the possibilities for Tokyo sanctuaries I had suggested were absorbed, the focus of the individual and, in a few cases, group work was identified, sites were selected and the projects were developed to completion. In our many discussions, we were able to look at the very real possibilities of building new sanctuaries in Tokyo, focused on specific social situations and perceived deficits in the city's infrastructure.

The variety of concepts was truly astounding. We saw proposals developed for the provision of services to individuals and we saw proposals that accommodated large collectives; we were introduced to themes ranging from the sacred rites of death to the profane questions around smoking and drinking in public; and we were shown building sites chosen in the tightest of spaces – in the fire-stop gaps between building lot line walls -- or in the most expansive – in the middle of parks or afloat in the center of the Kanda River. This great range of considerations and concerns was brought to the workshop by the students themselves, and all with the simple idea of bringing shelter and comfort to people of Tokyo in their various predicaments. In retrospect, I can see that it was precisely the open-endedness of the project brief that encouraged this individuation of interpretation. Finally, it is clear that all projects met the challenges put forth by the workshop.

### The White Book Project

This proposal may appear strikingly small. As a design for furniture to be placed inside Tokyo's subway tunnels, at first glance one might think it insignificant. Let me attempt to explain why it is not. The project was selected because the student recognized the strength of the generative idea, and as she developed her proposal she carefully considered the real implications of its implantation.

It is not a case where the ideas are numerous and complexly interrelated but quite the contrary. The idea, to provide a way for people to not feel lonely even as they are alone (in a city where they are in general never alone but feeling lonely), has terrific poetic force precisely for its conceptual succinctness, its direct recognition of a tragic situation in Japanese society and its uplifting proposition to break down loneliness.

The mechanism chosen, a system by which personal messages are incorporated into a book-sharing program, is both delicate and pointedly direct in its approach and, in my view, highly appropriate. The details of the book and message display configuration and the incorporation of a space for message writing -- a space of calm reflection and personal communication inside the frenetic environment of a Tokyo subway tunnel -- has all the aspects I would hope for in a modern-day sanctuary.