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Searching for Green Patterns within Tokyo's Urban Fabric

Claudia Cassatella
Associate Professor of Regional and Landscape Planning, Politecnico di Torino

Tokyo is particularly lacking in public green spaces, when compared to cities such as London, Paris or New York: only 3 m² per capita, against 26, 11 or 18 m², respectively¹. Some big public parks, created during the Meiji Era, such as Ueno Park, stand like islands in the urban fabric. What about the rest of the city? Where are green areas in Tokyo? When looking for natural features, such as hills, rivers, and the seaside, somehow concrete retaining walls, channeled rivers and streams, and artificial islands are found instead.

A jump in the scale of observation is needed. At the human scale, the eye catches several green items in the urban landscape: vases on the sidewalks, rampant plants, green screens. Rarely, roadside greenery or a tree lined avenue (but branches are cut in such a way that one could wonder why planting a tree and then reducing it to a wood pole).

Then, suddenly, a wood comes into the eye. It's a shrine, its garden and a sacred tree, rocks, and even spring water. And, there are sacred woods scattered in the urban fabric, just around the corner. And you can go in and have some rest (be aware there are no benches, and it closes after 5 pm). So, finally, nature is there, in the Shinto territory, beyond the Torii gate.

Or, (for affluent people) it's in private gardens beyond the walls in residential neighborhoods. Or, for those who don't have a garden plot, nature is present in the semi-public space in front of their house. A corner, a narrow strip, or a vase right in front of the door. It's not worth counting in children's playgrounds as nature, because they are sandy squares for the most part.

Coming to the contemporary districts made by offices and multipurpose blocks, open spaces are offered as a sort of icon of modernity and generosity by the developer. Corporate style, something to be seen, not to be used. Open spaces are valuable as "evacuation areas" or fire disaster prevention buffer zones. Nature is not required, sporting fields appreciated. Recent legislation encourages business activities inside existing parks, a possible premise for further artificialization.

These are the types of greenery that create patterns into the city fabric at the district and urban scales. A Western eye, an Italian one, is at the same time staggered by the lack of green spaces and delighted by the sensorial stimuli provided by sudden revelations of plants, flowers, and lush

¹ Tokyo 23 wards (Data source: MILT & TMG, elaboration by A. Iilda (The Tokyo University). The total area of urban parks and "parks other than urban parks" is 5.70 square meters per capita, according to Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Construction, Parks in Tokyo (<http://www.kensetsu.metro.tokyo.jp/english/jigyoku/park/01.html>, accessed September 2018).

vegetation. Then, it heavily rains, and she searches for a shelter. A moment later, it's sunny again, and hot, and she searches for a shelter again, and for air conditioning. And then she realizes.

But... what about environment sustainability? Tokyo green patterns are unlikely to be functional according to well-known indicators, such as Tree canopy, Park land per person, or Number of species. Some of the green features cannot even be on the map, so they cannot be assessed at the urban scale, and their ecological value is questionable (in terms of Landscape connectivity, Heterogeneity, etc.).

The concept of green infrastructure, when applied to a city region such as Tokyo, takes a peculiar shade. Tokyo is naturally open, and ready to test and invent hi-tech solutions, such as green walls, green roofs, or rainwater gardens. Ecosystems made of natural processes (permeable soil, natural streams, spontaneous vegetation) cannot find a home. Nature dwells in a sacred precinct or in a vase. This is the great lesson learnt from Tokyo. But, is it really so far and so exotic?



(Photo: Claudia Cassatella, 2018)