Urban Space and Cyberspace: Urban Environment in the Age of Media and Information Technology

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Abstract: Today, the many innovations and the spread of new media and information technologies are bringing new realities to contemporary society. In Japanese sociology, this social transformation is called johoka, or information-oriented transformation. The present study examines two aspects of today’s urban environment, concerning this social transformation. One is the phenomenon of “Disneylandization” of the urban environment and the other is the emergence of “cyberspace” or the “cybercity”. The former is the proliferation of areas and buildings filled with signs and designs that are quoted from other historical or geographical contexts, and arranged under some “theme” or “concept”, such as theme parks. The latter is the emergence of “virtual spaces” and the “virtual city” in computer networks, especially on the Internet. The former is a change in the physical urban environment and the latter is a phenomenon of the non-physical environment, inside computers. However, in spite of this contrast, these phenomena can be considered to result from the same social transformation—that is, the new relationship between space and society. The semantic emptiness, and expectations and desires for a sense of “placeness” in contemporary society are the preconditions of both phenomena. Often these elements are regarded as postmodern phenomena, yet it is of interest to explore Disneylandization and the emergence of the cybercity as the latest versions of the modern urban transformation and the modern urbanism.

Keywords: urban environment, medium, sociospatial transformation

Disneyland and the computer network

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the urban environment in many developed capitalistic countries has acquired some new aspects or characteristics that are different from those of the urban environment before the 1970s. In the present study, we examine two of these new phenomena, which represent the social change or transformation of the city in the information-oriented society. One of these two phenomena may be called “Disneylandization”. Since the last half of the 1970s, private and public urban developers and local governments have begun to plan buildings and urban complexes under “themes” or “concepts” such as “British country style”, “medieval Italian city”, “urban resort”, and so on. These buildings and complexes have been designed so as to quote architectural and spatial designs or signs from the past, from exotic countries or from futuristic images, and to form a kind of...
collage out of them. As a result, many public spaces, shopping malls, housing facilities, and suburban residential areas, have come to look like theme parks, simulating idealized or commercialized images of various cultures and societies. This phenomenon, which is found in western Europe, the USA, and Japan, may be termed Disneylandization.

The other phenomenon of the contemporary urban environment, which is examined in the present study, is the emergence of “cyberspace” or the “cybercity”. Today, computer networks, especially the Internet, are part of the basic infrastructure of contemporary cities and societies. In the pre-modern society, before the invention of electronic communication media such as the telephone, radio or television, communication activities were carried out by people themselves as physical corpora, occupying physical spaces, or were mediated through material media such as letters, documents, books, and so on. Since the invention of the telephone and the radio, significant amounts of communication activities have come to be carried out through these electronic media. This transition, which has occurred since the end of the nineteenth century, has gradually transformed the modern communicative environment and society. While in the past communication activities were based mainly in the physical world, now they are based in both the physical and non-physical environments. Since the last two decades, as the computer network has become a popular communication medium, the non-physical cyberspace environment has attracted the attention of students and engineers because of its ability to create a “virtual reality” in the social world. The emergence of cyberspace is the latest phase of the pervasion of electronic mediated communication, such as the telephone, radio and television. Websites on the Internet cover almost all fields of social life. We can go shopping at the “virtual shopping mall”, visit the “virtual government office”, go to the “virtual school” and “virtual library”, and play games at the “virtual arcade”. There are also many otaku sites and underground markets. These websites may be regarded as comprising a virtual city, because they constitute functional space equal to the real “physical city”, and they simulate the actual location of buildings on the computer display, owing to remarkable innovations in computerized image processing technology. These new non-physical environments of contemporary cities and societies are called virtual cities or cybercities.

These two phenomena, Disneylandization and the cybercity, appear to constitute two completely different aspects of contemporary society. While Disneylandization is a phenomenon in the physical and material world, the cybercity is a non-physical phenomenon, forming an “atopical” communicational environment. While Disneylandization concerns the field of architectural or urban design, the cybercity concerns the fields of electronic engineering and media informatics. While the former is cultural and aesthetic, the latter is technological and of engineering.

However, although many contrasts can be found, these two phenomena can be analyzed within the same social and sociospatial context: the urban environment in the information-oriented society. As will be shown in subsequent sections, both Disneylandization and the cybercity are concerned with “placeness” (or “sense of place”) and the transformation of the city and urban environment in the age of media and information technology.

To appreciate these two phenomena, the relationship between city, communication and medium will be examined, illustrating that the city is a social medium or a multimedia system. Next, the Disneylandization of the urban environment will be demonstrated as a new formation of the urban space as a social medium in the information-oriented society. In addition, an attempt will be made to explore the common sociospatial preconditions and structures in Disneylandization and cybercitification. In the last section,
images and information will be examined as elements of the contemporary urban environment.

**The city as a medium**

Kittler (1995) argues that if we try today to construct a “node” where the emanation of energy and information concentrates within an interchange of a highway or computer network, a “capital city” will emerge. Kittler regards the “capital” as a functional node on nationwide networks of social communications; thus, today it is not necessary to have geographical objectivity or built environments. In this statement, Kittler argues that the capital is a kind of social medium or multimedia system. Elsewhere, Kittler (1996) argues that the Internet is not yet a multimedia system in the strict sense of the word, while cities are multimedia systems in the literal sense.

The statement that the city is a medium or that the city is a multimedia system is not mere metaphor or rhetoric. Indeed, the city can be regarded as a medium or a multimedia system in the strict sociological sense.

What is the city in the sociological sense? There have been many attempts to define the city from a sociological point of view and also many objections to such attempts. From the point of view of the sociospatial construction of regions and social networks, the city can be regarded as a settlement that is situated between other communities and/or societies, which integrates them into a wider and highly united social realm. The city is a focus or node of social transportation and communication, which mediates the relationships between other societies, communities, nations and/or social groups. In this sense, the city can be regarded as a “medium” in the networks of social transportation and communication (Wakabayashi, 1992; Wakabayashi, 1999; Wakabayashi, 2000). To represent the status of the city in the social network, the term “secondary settlement” has been used (Wakabayashi, 1992). From an ontological point of view, the existence of a city is always behind (in time) the existence of communities that are integrated into the wide social realm mediated by the city. At first there are communities and societies, then the city emerges and integrates the communities into a social network. In other words, the city is a medium that mediates social communications and integrates communities into a social network of a higher order.

Redfield and Singer (1954) indicate the cultural role of the city, which is the transformation of local cultures into more universal and highly integrated moral or technical orders that can maintain the co-existence of people from different communities, different societies, and different cultures. The cultural role of a city results from the fact that the city is a medium. It is a place governed by norms, rules and cultures, enabling heterogeneous people to live together.

The nature of the city as a medium is maintained by the multiple cooperation of various kinds of social media. The social medium does not only mediate social communication and transportation; it also transforms and molds social actions, organizations, consciousness and regimes (McLuhan, 1964; Debray, 1991). For example, built environment elements, such as streets, houses and squares, are social media because they mediate transportation and communication, and structure the spatial forms of social actions. They mold the forms of communicative relations. In traditional cities, built elements of the urban environment often represent cultural meanings, or the cosmological or normative understanding of the structure of the world. In such cases, built elements are information and communication media, which represent and transmit symbolic meanings. There are many social media that constitute and maintain the urban social environment, including oral communication, letters and writing, tablets,
newspapers, radio, television, telephones, computer networks, roads, railways, trains, cars, and buildings. From this point of view, as Kittler (1996) pointed out, the city is a complex of social media that constitute a multimedia system in the social network of communication and transportation.

The spatial order of an urban settlement is not only a geographical order, but also an order of communication and representation. The city exists as a complex of the social medium, which is spatial, communicative and representative. To dwell in such a milieu is, on the one hand, to live in the corporeality of the spatial world, and, on the other hand, to live in the world of meanings that are transmitted by the social media, which construct the urban environment. In this sense, the city matches perfectly the term “media”, as the plural of “medium”.

For this discussion, it is worthwhile mentioning Régis Debray’s concepts of “medium in a strong sense” and the “media-sphere” (Debray, 1994). Medium in a strong sense consists of: (i) a general process of symbolization, through speech, letters, analogue images, digital photography, and so on; (ii) “material media” of coding and keeping, such as tablets, papyrus, parchment, paper, magnetic tape, and screen; and (iii) recording apparatuses, which pair with the distribution system, such as handwriting, printing, photographs, and television. The media-sphere is the communication and transportation environment of messages and people, which is composed of various media. Therefore, a city is a multimedia system—the city itself and the wider sphere surrounding it are organized as a media-sphere, which consists of many kinds of media in a strong sense.

For example, in the case of many pre-modern cities, such as Rome, Changan and Kyoto, we can find what is called “sacred geography” (Redfield and Singer, 1954: 67). The sacred geography is a sociospatial structure that represents the cosmology or the normative world-view of a certain society. Here, the word “sociospatial” means that the spatial structures of those cities are not merely material constructions but also social, symbolic and meaningful organizations. Sacred geography is a collective representation that makes the organization of the city understandable, it authorizes the orders of the city and it integrates people into a sociospatial organization. In traditional cities, oral traditions, myths, sacred books, drawings of cityscape, and maps function as matrices of interpretation that can decode the material structure of the city as a symbolic and meaningful order. Such representations, as well as the discourses that emanate from them, are schemata to interpret the sacred geography. Without these schemata, inhabitants could not understand the urban environment as a symbolic and meaningful organization, and would fail to orient themselves in the social world. Although these discourses and representations do not in themselves constitute the physical environment of a city, they are elements of the urban environment in the sociospatial sense. Although they are atypical, they are concerned with the construction of the spatial, in other words “topical”, structure of the city. These discourses and representations are also the media that integrate inhabitants into social cooperative relations in a city. They are the collective representations that do not occupy the physical space, but maintain the sociospatial unity of a city. Lefebvre (1970) refers to such an instance (of not occupying a physical space, but still maintaining the unity of the city) using the concept “u-topia”. In this case, we can regard the sociospatial structure of cities, and the discourses and representations surrounding them, as media in a strong sense, and we may also regard the urban environments of those cities as media-spheres.

However, sociospatial structures do not always represent sacred or religious orders. We can also find “secular geography” in many traditional cities. The urban spaces in ancient Chinese capitals not only represent the sacred geography of the Chinese world,
but also the secular geography of the Chinese Empire (Omuro, 1981). Their spatial structures are the matrices of political governance, which control the arrangements and circulation of people, objects and information. Capitals played a central part in the sociospatial structuring of the whole empire. The arrangements and circulation of people, objects and information, all over the empire were formulated around the central city. In Chinese cosmology, the capital occupies the central part in the empire, and the whole order of governance of the empire constitutes a set of sociospatial structures. Therefore, the sociospatial arrangement of the Chinese Empire was the formation of a media-sphere. In the ancient era, the peripheral regions of the Chinese Empire, such as Japan, imported this sociospatial set of symbols and signs as the order of governance (Ueda, 1976; Wheatley & See, 1978). In the case of the Roman Empire, too, the sociospatial structure of the city was a sociospatial medium (Rykwert, 1976). The famous proverb “all roads lead to Rome” implies that the Roman Empire was a media-sphere in which roads were basic media conveying people, objects and information. In this respect, roads are information media that are connected to the administrative system and to the intellectual system.

In short, as Choay (1969) argued, in most pre-modern (pre-industrial) cities, elements of the urban environment were interrelated in the context of normative codes and rules, which in turn were acknowledged by inhabitants and planners, and were also connected with all other social systems, such as political power, knowledge, economy, and religion. It seems, then, that cities may be regarded as systems of communication and information, in other words as “semiotic systems”.

That the city is a multimedia and semiotic system implies three suppositions. First, the city has always been an inherently information-oriented social organization. All societies are information-oriented to a certain extent, because all societies are media-spheres organized by their own media technologies. Thus, both Disneylandization and cybercitification are merely the latest versions of the urban environment as an information and communication system. Second, in the city as a multimedia system and media-sphere, signs and images are important elements of the urban environment that integrate people into the urban organization and regulate their actions and relations. Thus, both Disneylandization and cybercitification should be analyzed with this view. Third, and most important, is the suggestion that Disneylandization and cybercitification are not isolated phenomena, but interrelated and interdependent ones, which are generated through the contemporary process of transformation of the information-oriented society.  

City of images, imagery of cities

The phenomenon of Disneylandization may be seen as related to the postmodernism wave found in architectural design. Postmodernism in architectural design is characterized by free quotation of styles or signs from other historical or regional contexts. David Harvey describes postmodernism in architecture and urban design as follows (Harvey, 1989):

Postmodernism cultivates … a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a “palimpsest” of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a “collage” of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. Since the metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces, urban design (and note that postmodernists design rather than plan) simply aims to be sensitive to vernacular traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies, thus generating specialized, even highly customized architectural forms that may range from intimate,
personalized spaces, through traditional monumentality, to the gaiety of spectacle. All of this can flourish by appeal to a remarkable eclecticism of architectural styles (Harvey, 1989: 66).

Indeed, we can regard Disneylandization as a popular and commercial version of the postmodernism in architecture. The fact that Venturi et al. (1977) find the origin of the postmodern architectural design in the landscape of Las Vegas shows us the relationship between postmodernism in architecture and the Disneylandization of the contemporary urban environment. Both are related to the emergence of the consumer society in developed countries.

While modern architecture and urban design operate buildings and urban space so as to functionally suit human activities and social organizations, postmodernism treats their outer layers as fields for the operations of signs and designs cited from other historical and social contexts. In the former, buildings and urban spaces are looked upon as media of action and organization, in the latter they are looked upon as media of representation and communication.

In the case of pre-modern cities, buildings and urban environments were communicative media. Venturi et al. (1977) appreciate “commercial vernacular” architecture, such as hotels and casinos along the Strip in Las Vegas as, “the forgotten symbolism of architectural form” in contemporary society. Yet, postmodern architecture and urban design are very different in essence from the symbolism of traditional architecture and urban forms.

In pre-modern cities and societies, signs and designs on the surface of buildings and constructions were based on the total structure or system of the symbol as sacred geography. De Mann (1983) points out that symbolic expressions are based on the intimate integration of sensuous images with the transcendental totality. In other words, the symbolism of traditional architectural and urban forms correlate to the media-sphere, which was based on the sense of totality and eternity of collective images, such as acknowledged cosmology concepts. In such societies, architecture and urban spaces served to mediate the integration and identification of people and social organizations with the transcendental symbolic systems that made the world totally meaningful.

In the case of postmodern architecture and urban design, signs and designs cited from different historical or social contexts are added as a collage to the surface of buildings and constructions without any symbolic totality or eternity. There is no unity with the local and contemporary transcendental totality. Signs and designs cited from other periods and societies generate the temporal and fragmented imageries and meanings, which never constitute any kind of totality. Therefore, an architectural language of postmodern architecture and urban design is not “symbolic”, but “allegorical”. Benjamin (1928) and De Man (1983) point out that allegory is a way of representation that loses the sense of totality or eternity of society at the expense of people’s integration and identification.

The same can be said of Disneyland and Disneylandized urban environments. As a typical theme park, Disneyland seems to be based on a total view of the world. In ordinary amusement parks, various kinds of attractions are juxtaposed without any unity of theme or concept; however, in Disneyland, there are themes (e.g. adventure, future, fantasy), and, above all, there is the world where Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and other Disney creatures live. We can find some aspects of Americanism or the “American myth” in Disneyland too (Notoji, 1990; Yoshimi, 1992). However, although such themes are an attempt to organize a meaningful world, Disneyland is basically a mixture of historical materials, myths, folk tales, cartoons, and fantasies, all of which are transfigured as childishly attractive and charming, and suitable for the diversion and temporary pleasure of consumption.
example, Tokyo Disneyland consists of seven sections, the World Bazaar, Tomorrow Land, Fantasy Land, Western Land, Adventure Land, Critter Country, and Toon Town, but there are no symbolic contexts that combine and integrate these sections into a totally organized cosmology or world view, apart from a fascination with the cute and lovely. The semantics of Disneyland are not symbolic, but are allegorical. Therefore, Disneyland is not a media-sphere, which integrates people’s action and relations into the total and eternal cosmology or normative world. It merely leads them into the world of temporal diversion and consumption, and its semantics is not shared by the world outside Disneyland.

The Disneylandization of the contemporary urban environment disperses this phenomenon outside of theme parks; however, the semantics of Disneyland are not shared by the world outside of the theme park. A proliferation of shopping malls, business complexes, and housing facilities are all totally designed with an attempt to represent some cultural meaning, but there are no connections that integrate them into any kind of totality (Relph, 1976). In a similar way to Disneyland, signs and designs in such places simply make them more attractive to investors of real estate, companies that are looking for new offices, customers of shopping malls, and people who are looking for new houses.

As mentioned previously (Wakabayashi, 1994; Wakabayashi, 1998), the Disneylandization of the urban environment is an effective way of marketing consumer products by manipulating architectural signs and designs. In such cases, the manipulation of signs and designs is not only an aesthetic practice, but also a practice of political economy that is made to enhance the value of places as real estate. The arrangement of signs and designs on the surfaces of urban space is the process of the social production of places as commodities. Therefore, Disneylandization is an information-oriented production of space.

Producing commodities through the manipulation of signs and designs is an important part of the production of consumer goods in the consumer society (Baudrillard, 1970). Disneylandization is an application of this principle of the consumer society to the field of urban development and the real estate industry. Mita (1996) argues that the production of goods through the manipulation of signs and designs is a result of information-oriented change in the capitalistic production of goods. Therefore, Disneylandization can be regarded as an information-oriented form of social production of urban space. Disneyland and post-modernism in architectural thought are the models and references for Disneylandization.

So, while it is not wrong to say that the sociocultural meanings of the urban environment, which have been pushed away by modern architecture and urban planning, have now come to life again under post-modern architecture and the commercial vernacular, they still lack the connections that would have formed a totality out of these meanings, which is the essential characteristic of the symbolic semantics of traditional cities and architectures. In order to understand how it is possible to manipulate signs and designs without relying on a solid historical and sociocultural context, one has to bear in mind that the urban environment never had a total sociocultural meaning. As long as there is no normative scheme of collective meaning, one can manipulate signs and designs easily, without being limited by historical or sociocultural restrictions. In fact, there is a semantic emptiness beneath the proliferation of Disneylandized spaces covered with various kinds of signs and designs. The revival of “symbolism” in architectural and urban form actually signifies that there is no real symbolism nor collective meaning any more (Wakabayashi, 1999). Although there is a variety of signs and designs in the Disneylandized landscape, the propagation of such places indicates the semantic emptiness of our city and society. In other words,
it is a social production of “placelessness” through the social production of places. As media-spheres, Disneylandized urban environments integrate people into the placeless world where many meaningful places are juxtaposed without any sociocultural connection to bind them into a totality. There, people flirt with allegorical imageries. The Disneylandized landscape and its semantic emptiness is a component of the contemporary urban environment.

Common sociospatial conditions

Charles Jencks, one of the advocates of postmodern architecture, points out that there are two kinds of technological changes underpinning the emergence of postmodern architecture (Jencks, 1977): (i) as modern transportation and communication technologies have broken up the old borders of time and space, new distinct differences within cities and societies concerning places, functions and social interests have appeared; and (ii) new technologies, such as computer modeling, have made it possible to materialize almost any idea created by architects and designers, a thing which was impossible in the age of standardized mass production (Harvey, 1989). Jencks suggests that the Disneylandization of urban environments is related to information-oriented trends, not only because its process of planning is an information process manipulating signs and designs, but also because the trend is firmly related to the new social reality, which is based on new information and media technologies.

As a media-sphere, contemporary society is so dependent on high-speed transportation and communication systems that sociospatial experiences become fragmented through the traffic of people, goods and information across traditional sociospatial units and structures (such as districts, local regions and cultural areas). As Isozaki (1971) and Hara (1987) argue, modern transportation and communication systems annihilate the traditional sociospatial structures and transform them into a dynamic process of transportation and communication flow. This transformation makes it possible to manipulate the land and urban space as a *tabula rasa*, which has no fixed structure nor social meaning. Here, city and society come to appear as if they are a homogeneous space, which has no fixed sociospatial structures, in contrast to the static structures of traditional cities; therefore, they are open to any kind of operation. As Hara (1987) argues, the homogenization of contemporary space is deeply related to the sociocultural consciousness and political economic process, but it also has much to do with technological developments. While old sociospatial organizations were based on geographical orders of space, modern transportation and communication systems break out of those orders. Boyer (1996) describes this aspect of the contemporary urban environment using the term “disfigured city”. The disfigured city lacks the distinct figures that make a city easily imaginable or memorable. Nowadays, the media-sphere depends on modern transportation and on the communication media, while the sociospatial structure that organized social orders in the past has lost its power.

This suggests that the semantic emptiness essential to the Disneylandization of the urban environment correlates to the arrival of the age of modern technology and media. The homogenization of space makes the flow of people, material goods, information and capital easier and more frequent than before, and opens the field for a new kind of differentiation of space, based on the movement of people, companies, capital and money. Adding to this, the homogenization of space also generates a need for new semantics and designs concerning new sociospatial orders. This is the social and sociospatial state enabling the emergence of the Disneylandized landscape of contemporary urban and suburban regions.
While new technologies and media erase the traditional frames and meanings of sociospatial organizations, they also contribute to the creation of a kind of social production of urban spaces. As Jencks points out, the new information technologies connect the processes of production and design so firmly that it becomes possible to produce materials as easily as figures can be drawn on the computer display (Jencks, 1977). Through these processes, free and arbitrary quotations and collages that are characteristic of postmodernism and the Disneylandization in architecture and urban design, have become possible both in the material and non-material sense. Here, the process of the social production of space becomes as much an information process as a material process of building. This technological innovation allows architects, planners and developers to manipulate and materialize signs and designs easily.

However, innovations in information technology may also be seen as a precondition for the development of cyberspace and the cybercity. The evaporation of geographical order in the modern city and society generates a need for the revival of a sense of place and spatial order. The remarkable innovations in computer technology today, especially in regard to processing images and sounds, make it possible to construct “virtual sites” that are not only functional, but also sensuous substitutes for “real sites”. Cyberspace is a space where many (limitless in principle) virtual sites exist, which are not really “sites” or “spaces” in the physical sense, and the cybercity is an imaginary city found in cyberspace. Although cyberspace is not a physical space, and the cybercity is not a city in the usual sense, we can regard them as a space and a city because of other characteristics they have. First, they substitute functionally for real space and real cities. The more people communicate through electronic media, the more cyberspace acquires its urban characteristics, and its social reality becomes equivalent to a virtual city. Second, with remarkable innovations in computer network processing of images and sounds, numerous sites now create an almost realistic sense of place. Letters, signs, images and sounds constitute a virtual reality of the website as a place in cyberspace and the cybercity. Third, and most important, is that cyberspace and the cybercity now constitute a social milieu that refers to the physical space or urban environment and supplements them. Cyberspace and the cybercity are a “mirror” that projects the negatives of the physical or real city, because they are created as a result of needs and desires that have grown from a lack or dissatisfaction regarding physical or real cities and society.

Here, virtual sites that exist only on the computer display are, in a sense, images of various physical places, and they act as fields for social interaction and organization. For entrepreneurs, cyberspace and the cybercity are spaces that are essentially infinite, so they may build any place they wish to by simply using a mouse and a keyboard. As for consumers in cyberspace and the cybercity, they may visit any place they wish to without moving away from their desk and without any physical or geographical obstruction. So it seems that cyberspace and the cybercity are created on the one hand as a result of a desire to escape from the social reality of interaction and organization in the physical and geographical world, but on the other hand, they also revive a certain sense of place in the virtual world mediated by the computer network. In this context, we can understand cyberspace and the cybercity as supplements of placelessness in the real physical world. Growing out of such needs and expectations, cyberspace and the cybercity have come to take on features that allow them to be called the “imaginary real” space or city (Boyer, 1996).

Mita (1996) argues that information in the information-oriented society has three fundamental aspects or functions: (i) cognitive information, or information as knowledge for the understanding of facts about the
world and societies, such as scientific knowledge and research data; (ii) behavioral information, or information as a manual for conduct, which is essential for social planning, such as computer programs and computer simulation; and (iii) consumption-oriented information, or aesthetic information serving to stimulate the senses, such as movies, music, novels and various kinds of cultural commodities.

In the johoka era of change or transformation, the social flow and stock of cognitive information and behavioral information organized by the computer network, becomes the infrastructure of society, and information-oriented industries become the chief industries. Here consumption-oriented information, as well as cognitive and behavioral information, become industrial products and commodities. Product design and spin-off merchandising businesses are these kinds of information-oriented industries that add a commercial value to commodities by operating signs and designs.

The Disneylandization of the urban environment is a social transformation of architectural and urban space into a medium of consumption-oriented information. On the one hand, it is based on innovations in the information technologies dealing with behavioral information, and on the other hand, it is interrelated with the emergence of a consumer society into a state where it is increasingly oriented towards the enjoyment of aesthetic information. Of course, cyber-space and the cybercity are also based on programming information into the computer, and their appeal comes not only from the convenience they offer as media of cognitive and behavioral information, but also from their ability to create a sensuous virtual reality with consumption-oriented information, which has become possible with new technologies featuring visual images and sounds on computer networks.

Disneylandization and the cybercity are two ways of supplementing the emptiness or the lack of sociocultural meanings and structures in the city and society, both in the physical and the virtual world. In both cases, the evaporation of sociospatial meaning and structure, which results from innovations and diffusion of new transportation and communication technologies, is a precondition for their appearance. Furthermore, innovations in information technologies are a precondition in another respect—for the materialization of designs in the physical environment and for the visualization of designs in cyberspace. Here, media technologies break up the old meanings and structures of the sociospatial order and generate new sociospatial places with new semantics, both in the material and non-material worlds. From the media aspect, this is the contemporary transformation and reconstruction of the urban environment as a media-sphere.

**Urban space and cyberspace**

As occurs in the sacred geography of traditional cities, the allegorical meanings and imageries represented by the Disneylandized urban environment are inherent elements of the contemporary urban environment. Cyberspace and the cybercity are also elements of the contemporary city and society.

In the case of Disneylandization, imageries represented by signs and designs on the surface of the urban environment become real and corporeal with the integration of people into urban landscapes as social media. It is not that cyberspace and the cybercity are “real” in the ordinary sense, but as more social actions and relations are integrated with them, their consequences become more real and corporeal. Here exists the inter-penetration of urban space, cyber-space and social imageries. The imageries, signs and information featuring in cyberspace mirror the social expectations and desires generated by the real physical city. Here exists an information-oriented change of the urban environment, or urbanization.
of imageries and information through the organization of the urban environment as a media-sphere. This is the sociospatial state of the urban environment in the age of media and information technology.

This is one of the aspects of the information/consumption-oriented society in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Therefore, some might say that it is actually the postmodern aspect of the urban environment, or the phases of postmodern urbanization, yet we can find the origins of these phenomena in the transformation of the urban environment that was already occurring in the nineteenth century. In Das Passagen-Werk and other writings, Walter Benjamin paid attention to the emergence of passages (arcades) in nineteenth century Paris (Benjamin, 1928; Benjamin, 1984). Passages were Parisian shopping arcades with glass roofs and steel frames, show windows and gaslights. Benjamin argued that passages were phantasmagoric places where many kinds of signs and designs constituted the imageries of consumer goods and the urban environment as a visual spectacle. The passages were, on the one hand, physically built, but, on the other hand, as spaces of communication, they also represented the imaginary of the world of commodities.

The construction of passages was an attempt to produce new social spaces with allegorical semantics of signs and designs, to accompany rising capitalism and through the use of the latest industrial technologies. Schivelbusch (1977) argues that there was a sociospatial transformation of the urban environment and nation states, generated by the development of railways and other modern transportation and communication systems, and that these were actually a precondition for the emergence of such passages. The new transportation and communication systems, which generated the flux of people, goods and information across the traditional sociospatial orders, erased the traditional forms and figures of the city. This “annihilation of space” in the nineteenth century produced the need and the desire for new forms or figures of the urban environment. As in other architectural and urban planning of the nineteenth century, the building of passages was one amongst many attempts to retain forms and figures, which were lost with the emergence of the modern cities. In these attempts, many kinds of signs and designs were borrowed from other periods or societies, and were arranged in various ways. There we may find the prototype of the contemporary urban environment. Modern urbanization and urbanism have been inherently conditioned by technological changes and by the organization of the city and society as a media-sphere.

Disneylandization and the cybercity are the contemporary phases of modern urbanization and urbanism. They construct space using imageries of urban space, as if the imageries could supplement the semantic emptiness of the modern urban environment. The semantic emptiness of our society grows through this inter-penetration of space and imageries. This semantic emptiness is the very production of our city and society as a media-sphere.

Notes

1 “Information-oriented society” is an English translation of the Japanese sociological term johoka shakai, which suggests the social change and transformation generated by the innovation and spread of new information technologies as well as the media. Concerning this concept, see a critical assessment in Kawasaki (1994).
2 The term “Disneylandization” appears in several articles and books on urban studies and cultural studies of Japan. See Yoshimi (1992) and Nakagawa (1996). Relph (1976) also uses the term “Disnification”.
3 Here, the term “virtual reality” is not used in the optical sense, rather it implies the social reality that is given to the virtual images displayed on the computer, in the context of social actions and relations. This kind of virtual reality sometimes means virtual
corporeality, because it involves bodies of actual people who communicate through the virtual reality created by the computers.

4 In Japan, people deeply absorbed in a certain field of interest such as computers, comics, animation, and so on, are called otaku.

5 The term “atypical” is borrowed from J. H. Miller’s work, which deals with topographies in the literature (Miller, 1995). He describes the atypical as follows:

This is a place that is everywhere and nowhere, a place you cannot get to from here. Sooner or later, in a different way in each case, the effort of mapping is interrupted by an encounter with the unmappable place. It was the locus of an event that never “took place” as a phenomenal happening located in some identifiable spot and therefore open to knowledge. This strange event that took place without taking place cannot be the object of a cognition because it was a unique performative event. This strange locus is another name for the ground of things, the preoriginal ground of the ground, something other to any activity of mapping (Miller, 1995: 7).

6 According to Debray (1994), the term “medium” signifies (i) a general process of symbolization; (ii) natural languages as “social codes of communication”; (iii) “material media”; and (iv) “recording apparatuses”. Thus, “medium in a strong sense” to him suggests a medium comprising (i), (ii) and (iii).

7 Theoretically, this is a matter concerning the relationship between the information-oriented society and the consumer society, or urbanization in the age of information and consumption. Mita (1996) proposes the concept johoka/shohika shakai (information/consumption-oriented society), and suggests that the emergence of the information-oriented society and the rise of the consumer society are twin phenomena emanating from the same process of social transformation.

8 For the concepts “symbol” and “allegory”, also see Wakabayashi (1999).

9 To represent this aspect characteristic of Disneyland, Yoshimi (1992) uses the term “cutification”.

10 The spin-off merchandising business, which produces various kinds of commodities featuring cartoon characters such as Mickey Mouse or Kitty, is commonly called the “character-business” in Japan.

11 Needless to say, the “annihilation of city” is also conditioned by the modern capitalism and nation state. See Wakabayashi (1992, 1999, 2000).

12 With respect to this, see Choay (1969), Olsen (1986), Boyer (1983) and Boyer (1996).

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