Exploring Shopping Malls and Shopping Arcades in and around Japan's Provincial Cities:
Problems, Policies and Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper is based on preliminary research that I conducted during a one-year sabbatical in Japan in 2008. Based on an initial interest in the rapid increase in the number of shopping malls in Japan, I visited a number of shopping malls many of them located in and around Japan's provincial cities. However, shopping mall development needs to be seen within the overall development of cities. Inner city shopping arcades were in a very poor state; with many vacant stores and very few shoppers; they were showing clear signs of aging and neglect. Some initiatives for revitalization can be observed, but considering that these initiatives are in a situation where populations are shrinking and aging, their success is not assured. This paper introduces this situation by presenting several short case studies and a brief overview of relevant policies. The main purpose of this paper is to frame the topic so that questions can be developed to drive further research.

1. Introduction

Foreign visitors to Japan are often amazed by the lively shopping scenes that await them in the metropolitan centers of Osaka and Tokyo. Different shopping areas scattered around the cities create succinct atmospheres by catering to certain needs or distinctive age groups. People roaming the streets prove themselves to be as much creators of fashions and trends as they are consumers.

Yet, what visitors seldom see is the situation in Japan's lesser cities on the fringes or far away from the large metropolitan centers. Here, much of the shopping no longer takes place in the central shopping arcades but is instead done in the home centers, discount stores, diners, pachinko parlors, karaoke establishments or fast food restaurants that line the long stretches of arterial roads in the city outskirts. More recently, these stores have been complemented by large-scale shopping malls that offer most and more of the above under one roof.

The construction of large, centrally-managed and enclosed shopping malls in green field locations outside of cities, and also on more centrally-located brown field sites within cities, has been the trend dominating Japanese retailing and consumption over the last decade. I thus made it the focus of my research during a one-year sabbatical in Japan in 2008, where I visited as many shopping malls as I could. My visits often took me to the cities that they were located in or close by. While shopping malls were all new and shiny, the inner cities were often in a state of disarray with many shops in the inner city shopping arcades standing vacant, and the remaining stores seeing few shoppers. At first sight, the two

developments seem to be connected, and it is easy to blame one for the other, which is what happens with Japanese policy makers who have recently put tighter regulations in place to make the opening of new shopping malls much more difficult.

With this paper, I want to take a first look at recent developments. Based on impressions during relatively short visits, as well as available materials such as newspaper articles or development plans published by the cities, my aim is not to provide a full and proper analysis. Rather, it is to show what needs to be taken into account to provide such a comprehensive analysis. It will be shown that a multifaceted approach to the topic is necessary; how this approach can lead to significant findings about the state of society and political economy in contemporary Japan will be explored. In the following, I will first provide short sketches of the situation in certain cities that I have visited (problems), followed by an outline of how the situation has led to some responses by policy makers (policies). Finally, I will discuss the various points that need to be taken into account before proceeding to a proper analysis (perspectives).

2. Sketching the Situation

In this section, I introduce the situation of shopping mall development and inner city problems through sketches of several cities. By purposefully not developing the sketches along a uniform pattern, I offer a collage that will be structured by the discussion in the section that follows.

2.1. Niihama

Niihama is an industrial town on the northern coast of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. With a population of about 123,000 people, the town is known for its copper mining as well as for a huge, wild and colorful annual harvest festival where, for three days, tribes of men move 50 huge festival floats around town, shaking them wildly and competing over who can lift the several tons heavy floats into the air longest. The event involves the whole town and, during one evening, the large parking lot in front of the Niihama Aeon Shopping Mall becomes the main meeting point for several of the floats and a large crowd of onlookers. At this time of the year, the inside of the center is decorated for the festival, the main inner atrium displaying a large hanging arrangement composed of distinctive traditional over-jackets worn by the participants from the different neighborhoods. This setting is notably different to other Aeon shopping malls that, at this time of the year, display a generic Halloween theme, a custom alien to Japan. It was extremely busy inside the Niihama mall where groups of young people sporting similar gangly looks use the food court as a meeting point, and gather in and near the large entertainment and cinema spaces. Niihama Aeon, while being similar in size, design or store portfolio to the usual Aeon shopping center, seems to have established itself as the new center of the community, something that other shopping centers are still striving for.

photo 1. Festival Float in front of Aeon Niihama Shopping Mall

The mall operators achieved this through the mall's central location in the city that makes it easily reachable not only by car but also on foot or by bicycle. The original center of the city in terms of shopping is only about 1.5 kilometers away. What remains of it today is a 350 meter long roofed arcade that has lost nearly all of its liveliness, with some of the buildings demolished to make way for a parking garage; a large gaming hall has become its main source of attraction.

photo 2. Niihama Shopping Arcade

Niihama shopping mall was opened in June 2001 with a sales space of about 50,000 square meters. The initiative for opening a large-scale shopping center in the central location of Niihama did not come from the developer, Aeon, but from the local chamber of trade and industry and in the face of opposition from existing retailers. In 1998, the chamber had diagnosed a general decline in the economic vitality

of Niihama, with manufacturers downsizing, the branch of a major self-service department store closing down, and over 80 of the existing 240 retail store buildings in the city center standing vacant. Any attempt to revive the existing shopping district was deemed to be a costly and uncertain endeavor. The shopping mall sits on the site that formerly housed an amusement park and is, despite its inner city location, very suburban in appearance, surrounded by car parking and not linked up with the traditional shopping district at all. Yet, the development seems to be successful, with sales exceeding expectations ("Ehime Niihama, shōgyō shisetsu yūchi meguri hibana";"Niihama shōtengai ga kasseika-saku").

2.2. Kurashiki

Kurashiki is a major tourist destination in western Japan and, as such, it is somewhat surprising that its substantial shopping arcades are struggling to survive. Arriving late in the evening and taking a first stroll through the shopping arcades left me with a rather eerie feeling. Seeing how all the shops had their shutters down and the streets were merely dark windy narrow tunnels, it was hard to imagine how this gloomy and desolated place could possibly be the major shopping area of Kurashiki. Devoid of people and only used by the rare cyclist to race home, I wondered why in a supposedly safe country like Japan every shop needed a massive steel shutter that prevented window shopping and made the arcades a very uninviting place outside opening hours. While the shutters were already down in the main street, the nearby Aeon shopping center, that was a mere two kilometers to the back of Kurashiki station, was still in business. The mall was opened in 1999 with parking for 4,500 cars, and is supposedly one of the operator's most profitable malls. More than 100 tenants, among them a major superstore, a large sports goods discounter, a toy discounter, a mega book store and a multi-screen cinema complex, draw a constant flow of visitors (Kyōgoku 2006).

photo 3. Kurashiki Shopping Arcade at Night

When I visited the shopping street again during the day, it was livelier than at night-time but not all the store shutters were up. This was partly due to some shop-keepers not opening their stores on certain days of the week, while other shops simply stood vacant. The stores that were operating in the arcades showed a mishmash of products and different levels of sophistication in terms of store decoration and architecture. While some store-owners had restored traditional shop houses and were selling fashion or souvenirs with the intention to appeal to tourists, other shop owners were operating basic fruit or vegetable stalls out of rather makeshift premises. A number of shop buildings had already been torn down with the gaps in store frontage boarded up; some of these gaps were somewhat concealed by art displays put up by the merchant associations. Gauging from the length of these empty boarded up store fronts, they seemed to be former locations of larger supermarkets or general merchandising stores that had relocated to suburban roadside locations or to the shopping centers on the fringes of the city, leaving the city arcades without anchor stores. The last remaining large store in the shopping arcades, a regional department store, was holding a closing down sale at the time of my visit, raising concerns about the future of a substantial section of the arcades that appeared to be still relatively lively at the time of my visit.

photo 4. Tearing down a Section of the Arcade in Kurashiki

However, some attempts at revitalization could be observed. In one section closer to the touristy part of Kurashiki, the roofing was taken down, not to be restored but to be completely done away with, thus restoring the street to its original state before the arcades were constructed. Indeed, while at the time of my visit, the work was not fully completed, the whole atmosphere of that section had already changed, with natural light allowing buildings to show their mercantile heritage, proper structural dimensions and also how they had once interacted with their immediate environment.

2.3. Takamatsu

Looking at a satellite picture of the city of Takamatsu in the north-eastern part of the island of Shikoku, what stands out are several long white axes that span the whole breath and length of the city center. The two longest axes constitute a T-shaped structure of 850 and 1,200 meters respectively in length. These are the roofs of the arcaded shopping streets of Takamatsu that, with several side extensions stretching to 4 kilometers in total, are said to be the longest in Japan. These shopping arcades house a wide array of shops and restaurants in terms of size and products. However, increasingly vacant stores can be seen not only on the fringes but also in more central locations, often in clusters. Store vacancy seems to be carrying the characteristics of a contagious disease that spreads rapidly across the shopping arcades.

photo 5. Vacant Stores in Takamatsu Arcades

Once having been the place to shop for a population of over 670,000 people, the role of the central arcades has become increasingly challenged by regional shopping centers, and long stretches of freestanding stores and restaurants along the arterial roads. Between 1995 and 2004, 100,000 square meters of shopping center space were constructed. The largest development was You Me Town that was opened in 1998 as a regional 38,000 square meter shopping center just 3 kilometers south of the center of the city. In 2007, the dominating position of this mall was challenged by the Aeon group with a 61,000 square meter regional mall 4 kilometers to the east of the city in a former industrial waterfront location. To strengthen further its position, Aeon opened another shopping mall at the end of 2008, just 10 km to the southeast of the city with a floor space of over 60,000 square meters (Aeon Kabushiki Kaisha 2008). As a result, the inner city shopping arcades experienced a dramatic drop in visitors, from over 10.2 million annually in 1996 to just 5.8 million people in 2004, and this was even before the two Aeon shopping malls had opened (Takamatsu Marugamemachi Shōtengai).

photo 6. You Me Town Takamatsu

Faced with this situation, the city of Takamatsu and retailers in the affected shopping district came up with a comprehensive plan to revitalize the central shopping arcades. The first step was to set up a town management organization with the task of redeveloping the existing shopping streets. This involved new infrastructure such as parking for cars and bicycles and renovating the arcades. However, the plan for revitalization went further than this. The central square where the two main axes of the arcades meet was redeveloped into a multilevel shopping center with a floor space of about 5,000 square meters under a newly constructed glass dome. This attracted retailers who until then had preferred to open stores in shopping centers ("Dōmu wa saisei no shōchō"). Furthermore, by employing shopping center principles, the town management cooperation also assumed responsibility for reorganizing the 470 meters of arcades that link up to the square. This includes the reorganization and relocation of the still active shops into seven distinctive zones based on the merchandise that they carry. The plan also aims for the reintroduction of shops that offer everyday goods or services; such shops having been driven away from the arcades by escalating rents and land prices during the bubble economy. The whole initiative was made possible by a drastic drop in land prices. The value of land stood in 2004 at just 10% of what it had been in 1992 at the height of Japan's bubble economy (Takamatsu Marugamemachi).

photo 7. New Central Square in Takamatsu Arcades

Takamatsu has become a much-studied case among town planners in Japan. However, it remains to be seen whether Takamatsu's inner city will really be able to withstand the still increasing competition from shopping centers.

2.4. Yao

Located close to Osaka, Yao city differs from the other cities chosen for consideration in this paper. Many of its 270,000 people work or go to school in Osaka, and Osaka is also within easy reach for shopping and entertainment.

Ario Yao is the first major shopping center in western Japan by Aeon's main competitor, Seven & I Holdings. The shopping mall opened in December 2006; it has a sales floor size of about 41,000 square meters and stretches over four levels. The mall is connected by an elevated walkway to Yao station and also to a Seibu department store that was opened in 1981. Seibu Department Stores became a part of Seven & I Holdings in 2006. The anchor tenant of the mall is a general merchandising store by group company, Itō Yōkadō. It occupies a significant portion of the mall and stretches over three levels. It is complemented by 168 tenant stores, among them the largest cinema complex in the Kansai region and an automobile mall where five branches of Toyota and Daihatsu dealers display cars on the ground floor. Housing various educational facilities, branches of financial institutions, a large play zone for children, entertainment spaces and health care providers, the mall developer wants the mall to be a self-contained city, and is cited as having allocated 53% of space to service tenants (Kotani 2007). Compared to other malls, the center stands out for its clear zoning, even having names for the different areas of the mall such as Kids, Sweets, Ladies, Beauty, or Cute Avenue. Following a pattern that is consistent with what can be found in other large shopping centers by Seven & I Holdings, the large food court is located on the ground floor and provides something of an easily accessible meeting place for people in the

neighborhood, which is quite different from other developers that usually use food courts to bring traffic to the upper levels ("Osaka Yao ni SC yokka kaigyō";"Yōkadō sōzai senmon ten o honkaku dōnyū").

photo 8. Yao Ario Shopping Mall

Yao's inner city shopping arcades are only a few steps away from the shopping center but do not seem to interact at all with the busy shopping malls around the station. Compared to the brightly-lit mall, the aged roofs of the arcade allow only limited daylight and the tiled pattern that covers the pavement speaks of a distant period. Many shops are empty with some of the buildings already torn down. Shops that might once have seen good business are mostly in a poor state, with many displaying merchandise that is clearly outdated. Some shop owners have not updated their window displays for several years, if not for more than a decade. Signs advertising the area as Family Road point to some initiative to keep the streets lively, but are contradicted by the mostly elderly people that make up the few shoppers. Most people seem to see the arcades only as a thoroughfare to cycle to the railway station or the adjacent shopping malls. The decline of the shopping arcade clearly began well before the Aeon mall opened in 2006. The inhabitants of Yao were drawn to the abundant and growing places of shopping in the Osaka area. Thus, the new mall serves to encourage more people to shop in their own city again and, in addition, even draws people from neighboring cities.

photo 9. Neglected Shop Window in Yao Shopping Arcade

3. Policy Responses

Japan has a long history of regulating activities in the wholesale and retail sector. It has done so by pursuing various objectives and with varying levels of success. The origin of many current policies is in the Department Store Law that was introduced in the 1920s and has gone through a series of adaptations since then. It was abolished after the war by the Occupation forces and reintroduced in the 1950s. After which, it was renamed the Large Store Law to include general merchandising stores in the 1970s. The minimum size limit was reduced to include discount stores in the 1980s. At that time, its application was also toughened to bring all opening activities of large stores to a halt. Later, in the 1990s, its application was eased as a response to demands by Japan's trade partners, and it was replaced by a law concerned with the environmental consequences of large stores and promoting the revitalization of inner city shopping districts. Finally, it was reintroduced in 2008 with a law that regulated the opening of shopping malls.

Yet, looking at the current state of shopping streets, these policies were not successful in general. The reasons are complex and can only be indicated here (e.g. Meyer-Ohle 2003)

- Large retail companies always found ways to work around regulations that normally should have limited their development.
- Small retailers did not use the breathing spaces that the law provided them with to become more competitive and to come up with concepts that were attractive to consumers.
- Social changes led to a lack of successors. However, owners often regarded family identity as being closely linked to their retail business, and thus they were reluctant to close unprofitable businesses. A tax regime that favored business ownership also played into the decision to keep businesses running.
- High real estate prices that developed during the bubble economy led to unrealistic expectations of land owners, and this stood in the way of swift and effective city renewal by making spaces available

to retail entrepreneurs with more attractive concepts.

- Japanese consumers fully embraced modern retailers, especially the convenience of using the car for shopping, and seemed to attach relatively little sentimental value to city centers.
- Cities realized that the lack of attractive shopping spaces affected their own attractiveness and began to collaborate with large retailers and developers to build shopping malls.

Yet, Japanese policy makers have not given up, and have engaged in ambitious projects to revive the inner city spaces of provincial cities. Current measures include the creation of event spaces, the relocation and concentration of stores and the systematic shrinking of the size of the shopping districts; the refurbishment of buildings that formerly housed department or general merchandising stores into small shopping centers; attempts to increase the residential population of inner cities by rezoning store sites for residential use; the provision of parking spaces; and the improvement of public transport. The current measures are still underway, and it remains to be seen whether they will really develop inner city districts that are economically sustainable and can contribute in terms of civic vitality.

4. Perspectives

The above collage of the situation of shopping malls and shopping arcades, as well as the short overview of policy responses, has demonstrated the potential that the study of this topic has for an understanding of the economic and social development of contemporary Japan outside of the metropolitan areas. Inner city shopping streets are not only places for shopping but also provide employment, nurture local entrepreneurship, provide places and resources for social, political and cultural activities, and define the physical appearance of cities. Policies for revitalization are framed on the central level but need to be implemented locally.

Considering the complexities involved, any assessment of the situation clearly needs to go beyond classical academic disciplinary boundaries. Even more importantly, it needs to start from an investigation of the values and positions that underlie the discourse on shopping centers and city development. With much of the academic discourse being based on western experience, it is interesting to see whether it is possible to go beyond this. Indeed, there are approaches that define the Japanese city differently. Yet, even within Japan itself, the discussion about the decline of Japanese inner city districts and possible solutions seems to reference itself closely to European concepts of cities and city revitalization.

4.1. Concepts of the City

When I tried to order my thoughts after hours of walking around the shopping arcades and shopping malls in Japan, I realized how deeply my understanding of, and expectations towards, cities were shaped by my own experience. From a very young age onwards, people are socialized into certain environments and styles of consumption. These not only concern the choice of certain products, but also a preference for certain shopping hours or days, buying certain products at certain places or activities, and experiences that are combined with the act of shopping and make the act of shopping more meaningful.

Having grown up in a German city that is comparable in terms of size and position to those that I looked at in Japan, I expect a city to have a clearly defined center, part of which is a pedestrian-only

shopping district that features stores with some individuality. Here, people not only come to shop but also to just stroll, to meet in outdoor coffee shops or listen to street musicians. This is also the place where political parties and non-governmental groups set up their stalls and hand out flyers. Activities and access are not tightly regulated, so some beggars or groups of truant students are part of the open experience. The shopping area is complemented by a historically old quarter, a town hall and several churches with market squares that house open-air fresh produce markets on certain days of the week. Away from the center along the arterial roads are a few hypermarkets that people use for weekly big shopping trips by car, as well as furniture discounters and home centers, but there are no large integrated, enclosed and climate-controlled shopping malls.

photo 10. German Pedestrian Shopping Zone in Osnabrück

The layout of the city is a result of people's shopping preferences, but just as much is due to regulations. For example, Germany largely does not allow the operation of large shopping malls outside of the city centre as the comprehensive choice they offer would threaten the existence of downtown areas. Though liberated to a certain extent over the last few years, Germany still regulates the opening hours of stores.

Yet, even my image of a town and its consumption spaces is that of a certain generation and might well involve some sense of nostalgia. My parents' generation grew up with shops much closer to their homes that have since closed down. The pedestrian shopping zones are largely an innovation of the 1970s, and are today drawing some criticism for their uniformity. More and more, family-owned shops are being replaced by those run by chains, and some stretches of shopping streets seem to have problems attracting quality tenants.

I am of course not the first to notice the differences between the Japanese and the "Western" city.

Shelton (1999: 9) has stated that:

> *"To most Westerners Japanese cities remain cluttered, garish, unfathomable and, seemingly, without trace of urban planning. At best, there may be a delight in the vibrancy and intensity of city life but an unease and distaste with the form, without the grace of Morris who acknowledges that the wearing of cultural spectacles may have severely skewed her view. To most Western eyes, Japanese cities lack civic spaces, sidewalks, squares, parks, vistas, etc; in other words, they lack those physical components that have come to be viewed as hall marks of a civilized Western city. The reaction reflects an underlying attitude in the West that Japanese cities are somehow inferior—that in spite of their densities and liveliness, they are somehow less than 'urban.' Further, and sadly, these are notions that many Japanese architects and planners have themselves taken on board."*

Later in his book, he singles out the level of activity that holds Japanese cities together and gives them their characteristic feel.

> *"It is the intensity of activities, the colour of events and the profusion of signs which collectively leave the lasting and livelier though far-fuzzier impressions. The power of content (people, activity and signs) over context or setting in Japan cannot be underestimated and has long surprised Westerners whose urban experience is generally rather different."* (Shelton 1999: 87)

Even as my perspective might be leaning towards a certain ideal, I can also sense something similar in the current discussion on the development of shopping malls and the state of inner city shopping arcades in Japan. Shopping mall design is clearly following the foreign—mostly US examples—and city planners have been conducting visits to European cities. Although the following points take this discussion further, they are at this point just illustrative and need further discussion and substantiation before becoming part of a larger framework for analysis.

4.2. Quality of Spaces and Stores

In the Japanese shopping street, most of the space is taken up by shops. Merchandise overflows into the street in front of shops, creating a lively atmosphere but also occupying most of the available space. The shopping arcades are molded onto existing street patterns, and there are usually no squares or wider sections. Space has to be shared by both pedestrians and cyclists, and thus is usually not sufficient to cater for events or for people to hang out and meet. In contrast, many shopping malls provide open spaces just to meet and rest, as developers realized that this convenience makes shoppers spend longer hours in the mall and increases the probability of more people spending money. Based on my observations, malls have become meeting points for young mothers, pupils, and also the elderly. The large food courts in the malls that allow people to get their own food through self-service and to stay as long as they please (in contrast to most proper restaurants that seem to have made it their policy to move through as many people and as quickly as possible) have become informal places for people to meet. Such informal places were not previously available in Japanese cities.

The same is true for the quality of stores and shopping experiences. While the onlooker who has been to several shopping malls may easily dismiss the stores and restaurants as all the same, shops can still be a novelty to the residents of a certain city. In terms of design and merchandise, they may also be more exciting than the stores in the arcades. Many stores and restaurants in the mall bring fashion or food that was previously only available in the metropolitan centers to the periphery. Some mall owners or management companies have even come up with policies to renew their store base systematically. For example, through a policy of not renewing 20% of tenant contracts every year regardless of the results achieved by store tenants.

The western literature largely describes the mall as a sterile, centrally-managed place that is exclusive rather than inclusive, and largely inferior to the city. Yet, some researchers have pointed out that it is necessary to take a closer look:

> *"In their search for global influences, postmodern scholars have emphasized structural similarities of malls while deemphasizing locality and human agency. ..., however, malls are geographically bound expressions of a negotiation between mall developers as representatives of a global logic of capitalist accumulation, on the one hand, and local characteristics, on the other. In the context of the United States, the ideological construction of the mall and the tendency toward a preoccupation with surveillance and social exclusion may merely reflect particular aspects of U.S. culture and politics. When malls in other countries are examined, it becomes clear that they are the outcome of 'glocalization' processes that combine the post-Fordist capitalist logic of mass production and consumption with local political, social, and cultural influences that introduce significant variation."* (Salcedo 2003: 1084–1085)

Thus, a careful study of the Japanese mall in terms of what it offers and how it is used and seen by its visitors, is required before passing any judgment.

4.3. Vitality of Communities

Japan's local store-owners have been described as playing a vital role in their local communities:

> *"In addition to tending to business matters, merchants form the backbone of local community activities, participating in everything from political clubs to volunteer fire brigades, from shrine parish boards to Little League teams. The self-employed entrepreneurs, working according to their own schedules, are always present in their communities—something factory or office workers can never be. Merchants clearly have ulterior motives behind their good works, but as Adam Smith suggested, it is not the butcher's benevolence but his self-interest that makes the world go around, in Tokyo as elsewhere."* (Bestor 1990: 31)

The above engagement is an important reason for policies to promote small and medium sized businesses, not only in Japan but also elsewhere. It is difficult to imagine how any corporate social responsibility initiative by a large retailer or shopping center developer could, in a meaningful way,

replace the multitude of initiatives on the local level that individual retail store owners and their families were engaged in or supported.

Yet, Ishii's (1994) careful study of small retailers in Japan shows that the lifestyle and ambitions of retail store-owners have changed, and that their lives are far less intertwined with the local community than previously. Today, many store-owners and their families reside away from their stores, and their lives and ambitions largely resemble those of salaried employees. This inclues their ambition for children to have a secure career in a large corporation or in public administration, instead of taking over the store.

It thus needs to be asked and investigated whether the restoration of shopping streets through the renewal and addition of facilities and infrastructure will bring back more than vitality in economic terms. This may happen if the new environment can nurture a new class of independent retailers who are able to build strong ties with their customers and fellow retailers in the neighborhood. However, this will not be the case if the new environment is populated by only branches of chain stores that are managed by salaried store managers and run by part-timers paid by the hour. Japanese chain retailers have by themselves developed a model of customer interaction that, at first, seems cheerful and highly reliable, but on second sight is highly standardized through the use of manuals and sometimes lacks the individual touch and flexibility. In British high streets or German pedestrian shopping districts, the number of stores under individual ownership has dramatically declined, a fact that Japanese city planners and retailers on study tours to Europe might easily overlook.

4.4. Diversity of City Life

> *"The highly managed character of these spaces is reflected in regulations which govern tenancy, permissible activities and environmental design. Thus, the character of these spaces is as much defined by what is excluded as by what is included."* (Christopherson on shopping centers. 1994: 414)

In their aim to revive shopping streets, many city planners seem to be applying principles of shopping center management. This includes the relocation of stores by arranging them based on the products that they are selling, the creation of event spaces and the organization of events, or the introduction of a professional management team that takes charge of the overall development of city centers. Yet, this seems to go against the view of Shelton introduced earlier that sees the Japanese city as more defined by its vibrancy in terms of people, activities and signs than by its outer form. Turning the inner cities into just another planned shopping mall would take much of this away. If there is agreement that the Japanese city is different, this means that the grocery store next to the jeweler, the garishly lit and oversized store signs, the drug store appropriating most of the public space in front of the store to display its merchandise, the Pachinko parlor, the ever repeating, loud store jingle, or the red light and entertainment district should not be banned or regulated as has already happened in the mall.

4.5. Constant Change of Consumer Geographies

A close look at Japanese cities shows that, historically, the location of the main centers of retail activity has not been static in many cities. Traces of an early commercial center can often still be found near a river or a former land trade route. Activities might have shifted away following the decision of a merchant to open a department store in a new location and other retailers following this move. Another shift might also have occurred with the opening of general merchandising stores close to train stations. From this perspective, the move to the fringes and to shopping malls is just another shift of retail activities, as such activities are viewed by companies and consumers as being only relatively loosely anchored in the city. Different from European cities, Japanese inner city shopping districts are often not flanked by heritage sites and architecture. Thus, protection of the inner cities seems to have no inherent benefit that can easily be communicated to residents. Not only has retail activity been shifting, other urban institutions such as town halls, hospitals or schools have done the same. It can thus be asked whether it is appropriate to arrest or turn back this development. Having lived in Asia for more than 16 years now, and comparing the fast changes in cities like Tokyo, Singapore or even Kyoto with the arrested development of many cities in Europe, I wonder what state of city development should be regarded as the more natural one.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to bring forward some of the key issues that a proper analysis of shopping malls and shopping arcades in Japanese city development needs to address. It is clear that a treatment of this issue needs to ask questions that go beyond the pure study of retail institutions as businesses. Instead, by recognizing the key importance that retail institutions play in city development in economic and civic terms, larger questions need to be addressed. They include these: Who defines the city and in which way? What do Japanese city planners, retail consultants, politicians, ministry officials and, most importantly, the Japanese people expect from the city in terms of its retail landscape? How do they see places of shopping and consumption within the overall development of cities?

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