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Making Public Space in Japan: Jizo Sanctuaries in Neighborhoods

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The street is a key part of the public realm and fundamental in place-making. In this article, William Siembieda discusses how the Japanese tradition of placing small Buddhist sanctuaries with statues in public and shared spaces plays a fundamental role in cultural, religious, and social practices while contributing to safety and place identity.

The process of creating, maintaining, and understanding the public realm is of interest to a wide range of city design professionals and social analysts. A good starting point for any discussion about the public realm is sociologist/urbanist Richard Sennet's position that the public realm is a place where strangers meet (2015). Sennet's interest is in what happens in the place where the people meet, more specifically the street.

This essay is about both the street and the sidewalk as key parts of the public realm. Jane Jacobs, the renowned urbanist, also addressed the public realm through the street's function. She argued that streets and sidewalks are "the main public places of a city... its most vital organs" (1993: 37). Indeed, for Jacobs a fundamental task of city streets and sidewalks is to keep a city safe. That is, the more people on the street (a combination of local people and visitors) the safer it becomes. Premises such as this have spawned sub-specialties within the design field such as the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) method that combines physical and behavioral factors to achieve safety (Jeffrey, 1971; Newman, 1996). CPTED utilizes formal institutional systems as primary means to achieve their goals and relies on a regulated system of design and administration in the building process.

Little has been put forth, however, that examines culturally based systems to achieve similar aims as those connected to the CPTED method. This essay explores how the street and the sidewalk contribute to the quality of life in a neighborhood, and how they support not just its urban form, but its cultural and social coherence as well. Specifically, the interest here is the Japanese practice of placing small statues and the sanctuaries that generally house them on streets, sidewalks, and open spaces. The statues function as public spaces and contribute to safety while serving as a mechanism for transmission of cultural beliefs, perceptions, and practices. In the cities of Kyoto and Tokyo, for instance, there are many neighborhoods, new and old, where these types of sanctuaries can be found. In Kyoto alone more than 5,000 sanctuaries are on display throughout the metropolitan area.

These small sanctuaries, usually placed where neighborhood people walk, contain a stone statue called Jizo Bosatsu (Figure 1). In Buddhism the Jizo is generally enclosed in a small sanctuary, or sacred site. In various ways, each Jizo statue becomes differentiated from others through distinctly local rituals and practices. Note that the swastika as seen in carved in the base of the sanctuary in Figure 1 is found on many instances in Japan. It is an ancient Asian symbol of eternity, dating back at least fifteen centuries. It is a counter clockwise figure, not associated with the Nazi use of the swastika, which is clockwise and tilted to the right. In Kyoto the swastika-like symbol denotes the location of Buddhist temples on city maps.

Jizo (also known as Ojizō-san) is the protector of children, expectant mothers, and travellers (Chozen Bays, 2002). In India, the divinity is known as Ksitigarbha, in China as Dizang,

Figure 1: Small Jizo in a street. Note the Asian ancient symbol for eternity carved on the base; the swastika as used by the Nazis is a clockwise figure tilted to the right.





Figure 2: Jizo located on a individual house lot .



Figure 3: Jizo clothed statues.

Figure 4: Open Jizon in a street.



and in Korea as Jijang Bosa. The modern addition of children to the Jizo deity actually is an extension of the earlier, 18th century Jizo role as patron of expectant mothers. Jizo have been in Japan for many centuries, prior the Edo period (1603-1868). In Japanese folklore, Jizo hides deceased children in his robes to protect them from demons and guide them to salvation. Presently, Jizo bosatsu is the protector of deceased children, including miscarried, aborted, and stillborn infants. It is believed that such children cannot cross the famous Sanzu River in the afterlife journey because they did not have enough time to accumulate good deeds on earth (Figures 2 and 3).

Jizo are especially important to pregnant women and to those whose children have died. The Jizo sanctuary is thought of as a means for parents and other family members both to assist with a child's journey between life and death and to ease the family's grief. Inside the sanctuary, generally protected by a wooden lattice frame, is the statue(s)—a sanctuary can house one or more statues. In fact, statues of Jizo can, at times, be seen wearing tiny children's clothing or bibs to honor the deceased child (see Images 3 and 4). Grieving parents may also place toys and other offerings beside the Jizo statue to invoke his protection of their deceased or unborn child (Smith, 2013). At times offerings may be made by parents to thank Jizo for saving their children from a serious illness (Chozen Bays, 2002). Parents may even place small pebbles by the statue to help the soul of a lost child.

As Jizo is a protector of travelers too, roadside locations allow for the passerby to stop and maybe ask for some wish to be granted. Roadside Jizo images are often found alone or in groupings of six. The number six represents the six realms of reincarnation that encompass all beings trapped within the wheel of life (Japan Jizo Blog, 2012). Graveyard locations are places where souls suffer, and Jizo is there to help relieve the suffering and associated grief. Roadside and graveyard sanctuaries usually contain groups, or clusters, of statues and are used for more complex rituals that are beyond the scope of this essay. While Jizo can also be found in formal Buddhist temple complexes, the focus here is on the Jizo temples and statues located in urban neighborhood locations.

Design and Installation

The design and installation of a Jizo statue and sanctuary in a particular neighborhood is an organic expression of culture, space availability, and, of course, remembrance. A person or a family in a particular neighborhood decides to install the sanctuary. It is neither something that government does, nor is it part of a fixed "urban design plan" created by professionals for the neighborhood. Reasons for installing a Jizo vary but most are linked to either a pregnant woman whose child has died, or parents thanking Jizo for saving a child from a serious illness. On the roadside, Jizo is constructed by families praying for the souls of traffic accident victims and to maintain safety on trips.

Traditionally, stone masons, including those who make tombstones, design and carve a Jizo statue at the request of a client. The client selects one of the basic designs offered by the mason. Or, sometimes a client designs, carves and paints the statue him/herself. Jizo statues always take the form of a shaved headed monk. Sometimes the deity holds a staff that warns insects and small creatures that he is coming. Recently, art sculptors have begun to carve Jizo in a more contemporary expression (Figure 5). The small sanctuaries that encase the statue(s) are made of wood to resemble those of larger Buddhist structures (Figures 6 & 7). When the sanctuaries get old, they are replaced with the same design.

A location on private property is selected for a Jizo and a sanctuary, and the owner gives permission for its installation. In most urban neighborhoods, Jizo are located as close to the sidewalk or street as possible, thus allowing maximum access for the pedestrian (see Figures 1 and 2). Generally, because they are small in scale, Jizo temples can be situated almost anywhere in the neighborhood where people will pass by and stop for a moment to pay their respects. The locations are most often adjacent to the street or the sidewalk. This placement establishes a transition place between the public and the private realm. This transition is illustrated by a Jizo located next to a cold drink vending machine outside of a small store on a secondary street in northeast Kyoto (Figure 8). Residents and visitors can stand on a public street, buy a cold drink, and share the Jizo spirit all at once. There is no need to cross a barrier, as the temple itself is a signal that it is okay to engage in devotional ritual in that particular place.

Jizo promote quiet interactions with the pedestrian and connections with the subject matter. Pedestrians slow down and look at the clothing on the statues as well the offerings of the day, which can include a cup of tea and flowers (see Figures 3 & 9). Such an engagement with the sanctuaries and statues forms a relationship of sharing and caring among the local residents and pedestrians passing through the area.

Most Japanese neighborhoods have very little “extra” space available, so Jizo sanctuaries tend to be of modest size. Exceptions can be found along special walking places such as the “Philosopher’s Path” in the Kyoto eastern foothills where one will encounter a grouping of Jizo (Figure 10). There also can be a number of Jizo in a single neighborhood, each serving a different purpose. In this way, sanctuaries are accessible to many people in the neighborhood. There are, as well, many emulations of Jizo, each with its own name and salvation function (Figure 11). Thus, in a single neighborhood a variety of Jizo can exist on different streets, or even on the same street. Whatever the differences among the sanctuary designs, placement of Jizo most often can be found on neighborhood streets with high pedestrian traffic counts.

It is customary to place Jizo sanctuaries at the intersections of roads and streets or entranceways to the neighborhood interior paths. They appear in both newer neighborhoods as

Figure 5: Jizo niche in a modern office building.



Figure 6: Jizo in a street corner.



Figure 7: Open Jizo in a new residential lot.



Figure 8: Jizo and a vending machine.



Figure 9: Jizo with two images at a store front.

Figure 10: Jizo in an open group on the street.



well established areas, and at times are located in a niche of an office building on a commercial street. In areas rebuilt in Kobe, Japan, after the earthquake, for example, Jizo can be found close to newer shopping malls, and this indicates a continuance of traditional practice in modern times. It's important to note that private funds build these sanctuaries.

What's more, people in the neighborhood, sometimes the property owners themselves, maintain Jizo. Just as it is customary to make sure the sidewalk in front of one's house is clean, the adjacent Jizo receives similar care. The sanctuaries are well cared for, usually by older women of the neighborhood. When maintenance cannot be done by local people, Jizo sanctuaries may be donated to a local Buddhist monastery where they are cared for and returned to the neighborhood during annual festival days.

There appears to be no pattern of locating Jizo on the street, except that a sanctuary does face the sidewalk and therefore establishes a direct relationship with pedestrians. Coming in contact with Jizo enhances the experiential space. Nitschke (1993) writing about space in Japan notes that space is most appreciated by people living in a small country with a relatively large population. Therefore, he states, "the size of the experiential space is not so much determined by its physical dimensions, but our concrete experience with the quantity and quality of the events contained in it" (1993: 35). As people slow down at the Jizo, they are creating space through obstruction of the sidewalk, and this causes others to adjust their pedestrian gait and focus on the devotional artifact. Also, as one gathers around a small Jizo it is easy to become very close to the others sharing the space. Personal space limits, then, seem to give way to sharing a collective view and moment with the Jizo.

Figure 11: Jizo outdoor garden.



Despite their modest sizes, the sanctuaries create a blurred demarcation between what is public and what is private space, and time is slowed as one engages with the Jizo. The sanctuaries' placement allows people to look at the statues, think about the offerings and their meaning, and then share in their meaning and intent. While Jizo is situated on private property, it shares space with those on the street or sidewalk; the sanctuaries, then, become communal, especially when a person engages with them through simple observation, curiosity, or ritual. This sharing of space is linked to the social relations of society, a collective linkage. Jizo sanctuaries remind the onlooker that they are part of broader society, always connected together with other humans and their experiences (Nitschke: 58).

Unless a Jizo sanctuary is donated to a Buddhist monastery, its placement on the street or sidewalk is permanent. Yet, while the sanctuary itself is permanent, the contents of the sanctuary may change throughout time, which influences the fluid experiential dynamics of onlookers. For example, a Jizo's clothing changes from time to time, as do the offerings within it. A red bib or cap, for instance, is common on Jizo statues (Glassman, 2012), because red is associated with Jizo, and its hue thanks the Jizo for taking care of the child. During the week there might be a few flowers placed in the sanctuary, a cup of sake, and the statue(s) may be clothed differently at times. Small stones appear at times, as well, and these are both for the building of stupas for Jizo and to assist the deceased in the crossing of the river. On the 24th of the month, something special is offered up to Jizo, as this is one of the deity's sacred days. The fact that the offerings change on a regular basis demonstrates that the temple is an active, vibrant part of local life.

Interestingly, while Jizo sanctuaries are active parts of local life, they are not subject to graffiti or abuse. Instead, they are respected by Japanese people as a positive part of daily life and are therefore not subject to random damage. The group of Jizo depicted in Figure 10, for example, has no protection at all, yet is devoid of vandalism and disarray. This is a sign of respect and of safety. Jacobs (1993) might argue that Jizo is there to protect, so reverence replaces territorial tagging. People also know that Jizo sanctuaries are watched over by neighbors and thus avoid disrespecting the sanctuaries. Being located along pedestrian paths in neighborhood gives the sanctuaries further protection because they are observable, and of course their presence is thought to protect those people traveling through the neighborhood (Figure 12).

In neighborhoods with high tourism traffic some extra accommodation to strangers not understanding cultural norms may be seen. This is illustrated in an occasional cage being built around a sanctuary (Figure 13). In all, though, Jizo sanctuaries offer mutually beneficial experiences for those who create them and those who engage in them, and most residents and visitors honor their presence.



Figure 12: Large Jizo in a neighborhood.



Figure 13: Jizo protected inside a cage.

Neighborhood Safety

Research shows that the presence of Jizo sanctuaries in neighborhoods does indeed increase the safety of the area. Matsukawa, Takaie and Tatsuki (2009) studied the location and density of Jizo in a sample of neighborhoods in Kyoto, Japan. They calculated "Jizo buffers" based on the number of installations per block. They found a reduction in burglaries in neighborhoods with more Jizo clusters. In their analysis, Jizo attracted more attention of people on the streets, slowing the pedestrian flow and increasing the natural surveillance. This supports Jacob's view that there must be eyes on the street; residents and build-

ings must be oriented to street safety, and the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously in order to add to the number of effective eyes on the street. It also supports Jacob's premise that "a well-used street is apt to be a safe street" (1993: 44).

Most Japanese narrow streets also have several shops, stores, and restaurants directly fronting the street, creating a supportive density of activities and people flowing in and out of the street. In other words, Jizo is but one means of slowing pedestrian traffic. With Jizo, however, people fix their gaze and establish a link with broader social norms while connecting to the community in a spiritual way. This is quite different from stopping at a restaurant window to read the menu. It is not unusual, as well, to find a Jizo next to a street facing a vending machine located outside of a small store (see Figures 8 & 9). While the Jizo is on private property, it is used in a public way with the pedestrian not having to cross any entrance or gateway in order to participate with it. Again, while this increases residents' and visitors' connections to the community, the placement of Jizo as a component the public realm also decreases the likelihood of crime in that area.

Annual Festival

On August 23rd and 24th, the memorial days of Jizo Bosatsu, a festival for children is held in many parts of Japan, especially Western Japan. These festivals create social spaces within the neighborhoods and remind the people why Jizo is important to them. The deity's statues are washed, and they are clothed in red hats and bibs to help expel the demons. During the festival, local elders share with young people the meaning and work of Jizo. Small stalls or tents are placed in front of the statues, where children sit and recite a long rosary with many large beads. Children participate in this ritual since Jizo is the protector of children, especially those that have passed on (Figure 14). After the

recital of the rosary, the children play in the stalls and tents. Red lanterns also are hung with the inscription, "Hail to Jizo Bosatsu." Children eat red-colored foods, and there is dancing by special groups. The festival experience reinforces the Japanese concept of merging the individual with the group, with local residents and visitors alike becoming part of the same wholeness—a collective (Nute 2004). The festival also reinforces interest in Jizo during the year and strengthens the bonds of people in the neighborhood both with the statues' intent and with the linking of the residents to a larger spiritual state.

Jizo Outside of Japan

The concept of deity in the streets is not confined to Japan. In Nepal, for example, ritual statues in the street are quite common. Takeuchi, Funo, and Pant (2000) in their study of Patan in the Kathmandu Valley made observations on the use of devotion as one of the systems to regulate community. They find a broad range of ritual statues exist in the streets; some Buddhist, some Hindu, and some indigenous are formed as deity figures or aniconic natural stones. Takeuchi et al (2000) sees parallels between the Nepalese and Japanese practices in terms of mixing the spiritual aspects of life with the daily use of the street. In Japan, however, Jizo as a distinct figure dominates. That is, in Patan there are a wide range of deities represented, as people wish to ask for many things to assist in daily life, whereas Jizo is more specific to honoring expectant mothers and deceased children. As well, in Patan there is a clear separation between public and private space, with a mother goddess (Pritivi-mata) placed inside the doorway of a sanctuary. Takeuchi et al. (2000) makes an association with the mother stone and that of Jizo, as Jizo also is thought to protect women and to promote ritual.

Discussion: Cultural Influence on the Public Realm

In Sennet's (2015) view, the public realm is a place, and the most important fact of interest is what happens in that place; that is, the social experience. Jizo create small public realms by connecting an individual with a spiritual idea that is linked to family and to the concept that the individual is somehow related with the statue(s), albeit not directly. As well, Jizo create sociable spaces in that people can gather together at a small temple and share their thoughts and feelings. Not only do Jizo create social spaces, but also the sanctuaries validate Jacobs' (1993) criteria for making streets function as providers of neighborhood safety. The annual festival further reinforces sociable spaces in that it fortifies the community's spiritual beliefs and provides a means to linking generations together in collective activities. Because Jizo establish a spiritual space where ritual can occur, even on a crowded street, their existence slows pedestrian and, at times, automobile traffic; and such a shift adds to the "eyes on the street" count. Finally, Jizo function as a way for people to share their grieving and as a protector of people in times of need.

Figure 14: Jizo-bon festival with children.
(source: <http://www.psy.ritsumei.ac.jp/~akitaoka/jizobone.html>)



Their presence on a street or sidewalk is a way to connect people with some part of the past at a very local and personal level. And, what's perhaps most significant is that these statues and temples are culturally driven, without regulations, design guidelines, and/or administrative review requirements. That is, just as no one tells the local resident how to construct Jizo, no one tells the pedestrian when or why to stop and look at Jizo. Doing so is a personal activity, simple to engage in because of direct proximity to the sidewalk or the street.

The small scale and organic public space encounters that Jizo creates do contribute to a neighborhood's sense of character and positive function. The fact that Jizo continues to be valued in Japan, after many centuries, is a tribute to its social utility. People still find it of use as part of their daily lives. Jizo offers a means to be in the present through linking with the past. Jizo also suggests that the public realm does not have to be regulated, nor managed by a government entity. The power of the people in the neighborhood, taking actions on their own behalf, appears to work well in this instance. This Japanese practice is a lesson to city design professionals and social analysts that the informal does have a place in the public realm.

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