Traditional Japanese perceptions of urban space are, argues Fred Thompson, completely different from those of the West. Space in Japan is defined by time and ritual, and festive rites involve elaborate symbolic temporary constructions.

Japanese mountain deities

During a visit to Japan in 1969, I began to ponder the questions of civic unity and why the Japanese seemed to lack civic spaces in the form I was used to seeing in the West. Professor Itoh Teiji had drawn my attention to the fact that a public place in Japan is rarely conceived of as hard bordered, but rather as kaisen, or an activity space. Professor Kojo Yuichiro further suggested a theoretical basis for a new form of research into public spaces in his study of village communities of 2000 inhabitants. He suggested that the centre of a Japanese village does not lie in a clearly bounded space, but rather in a linear time-oriented axis stretching from the mountain shrine, through the village shrine to the field shrine. Public space was, it appeared, intimately bound up with sacred festivals.

After retiring in 1981, Professor Kojo made it possible for me to join in the festival of Kakunodate, a planned town of about 8000 inhabitants. Up to that time, I had searched in vain for the Japanese equivalent of monumental public squares so familiar in the West. In Japan, as I was soon to discover, public spaces exist in the arrangement of the city as a whole, and enter collective memory of the citizens as a function of the festival.

A case in point is the obon festival in Shiraiwa, a village not far from Kakunodate, and an example of the type of indigenous community of 2000 inhabitants that Kojo had studied. While the main economic axis of Shiraiwa runs north-south, another, running east-west, has been marked from the beginning of the sixteenth century by six large cedar trees. The two remaining trees act as a gate through which one passes in order to approach the mountains that are believed to be the abode of the gods, the Shinto yama-no-kami.

This axial organisation of the village with no visually apparent endpoints would appear to signify the lack of importance of spatial limits to the village. To the Japanese, however, spatial discovery is one of sequence from the part to the whole, the parts being united into a whole by the festival. The idea of sequence in a spatial context derives from the practice of purification, in which one progresses by degrees from one stage to the next. This sequence occurs in time as well as in space, from the time of everyday activities to the time of festivities, when through an act of purification, life energy is restored for the working days ahead and the
space of the village is unified, so that it can again work in its individual parts.

The east-west axis in Shiraiwa is brought into high profile on the eve of the Buddhist festival of All Souls in mid-August, when a procession approaches the town from the centre of the rice fields to the west, the land of the Dead, and passes by the two remaining cedars en route to the village. As soon as the villagers hear the sound of the sassara, the bamboo rattles played by the musicians leading the procession, they light wood fires in front of their houses so that the ghosts of the ancestors can return to their former homes. The procession stops in front of Uganji, the Buddhist temple at the southern entry to the town and shishi odori, or lion dances, take place over the following days. These lion dances are also held on the south side of every house where Shinto and Buddhist altars are erected so that the gods of the house can find pleasure in the dance.

The presence of both Buddhist and Shinto altars signals simultaneous embrace of both traditions. Buddhist rites span the time from 7 to 20 August, but the last performance, coming as it does at the Shinto shrine, reveals the symbiosis of the two traditions. In this way a typically Japanese expression of religious cohesion lives on.

On 8 April, a Shinto fertility festival starts from the opposite direction to the Buddhist festival of oboe. It starts with kami-nukae, receiving the kami, from the mountain in the east, and ends on December 12 with kami-okuri, returning of the kami, to the mountain in the east. Again, the east-west axis predominates, but this time in reverse order to the summer festival.

In the kami-nukae, or receiving of the deities, a shaman, having purified himself for a certain period by eating only special foods, goes to the mountains to receive the kami and bring them back to the mountain shrine, after which they are transferred to a portable shrine and carried down the mountain to the village shrine to be celebrated by the villagers. The portable shrine is then carried through the village to entertain the gods, and brought to rest in the fields at the temporary field shrine to spread the energy of the kami and encourage a bountiful harvest. After the harvest in the autumn, the gods are thanked at the festival of kami-okuri and returned to their abode in the mountains. Both Buddhist and Shinto festivals in Shiraiwa, then, enliven space by reinvesting it with sacred significance.
space and time become one and the same through participation in the festival. As time is suspended, public space adopts its own form irrespective of its workaday uses.

The September festival of oyama hayashi in the neighbouring town of Kakunodate shows this even more clearly. Kakunodate, after its creation in 1620 by Lord Ashina as a samurai or fortress town, has hardly changed in size since the eighteenth century. The town's festival organisation, separating Samurai from citizens and organising citizens into districts (chonai) and neighbourhoods (kami) lives on in the administration of the town by its division into population densities, though movement between districts is now much freer.

At the time of festival, the entire town re-organises itself into the chonai/kami system of the feudal period for the preparation and performance of a grand three-day religious festival. Through this festival, the entire community renews its feudal roots in a way that appears mythical to the modern Western mind.

Matsuri, or festival, according to Harada Toshiaka, is essentially a matter of purification. Through a matsuri one is restored to the state of kles, or filled with divine life energy, dispelling the state of kles-gare, the accumulation of impurities through exhaustion. The notion is also related by Yoshino Hiroko to the original Japanese creation myth involving the descent of the gods to the profane world and their subsequent return to the sacred world after death. Matsuri is also a process of political integration, incorporating the Yakushi-do original shrine and the Shinme-sha subsequent clan shrine erected by Ashina, as well as a state visit to the house of Satake, whose ancestors were the local representatives of the central government during the Tokugawa Shogunate before the advent of the Meiji Restoration.

During a matsuri in Kakunodate, professional priests perform ritual acts, prayers and dances, after which there
a three-day procession of huge wooden six-ton festival wagons, called hiki-yama, complete with model holy mountain and other sacred elements, all constructed and directed by the neighbourhoods of the town. Ritual dancers and musicians inhabit the open space on the wagons in front of and under the model mountain.

In addition to the festival wagons, each chaya quarter builds a hariban, a neighbourhood altar, in the street. This orrery stands to the temporary field shrine where the gods reside for a short time during festivals in farming communities. This is one of the ways in which the myths, cons, and rites of agricultural settlements have been transformed by larger commercial Japanese towns and cities.

In contrast to the route of the gods in Shiraiwa, a route that ran from the mountain shrine past the village shrine to the field shrine, the route of the gods in Kakunodate runs from the mountain to the festival wagon and comes to rest in the hariban. From the hariban the gods are carried about in the festival wagons for the duration of the festival.

This neighbourhood shrine serves as the headquarters of the older men, nen-ban-gumi, who transmit the knowledge of the rituals and the social customs of the festival to the young men of the community and who vigilantly watch the playing out of the ceremonies. The festival stitches a bond between the older and the younger generation, reconstituting a communal spirit that was part of the agricultural tradition.

The hariban's space is contiguous with the street. Its position dominates the entire procession of the festival wagons and controls all the rules of conduct for wagons entering its neighbourhood. Thus, although it is a temporary structure, it still maintains an aura of dominance in the minds of the participants who, by ritual re-enactment of the procession through the neighbourhood, understand a hierarchical relationship of the spaces of the town, which is a product of the collective memory of the participants in the festival.

On the third day, 9 September, the Dionysian struggle of the festival reaches its highest point, at which time the young people, hoarse from shouting, exhausted from pulling their wagons and inebriated with rice wine, let the wagons collide into each other in the middle of the night. When these monsters of six tons, propelled by 50 to 100 people, collide, a tremendous energy is released over the entire town. This is preceded by many hours of manoeuvring and negotiations, and often a lengthy period of waiting, of tremendous anticipation (reminding me of the words matsuri and matsu, 'to wait'). This ritual wagon fight allows each participant, as a holy fighter, to transcend his limited existence in an ecstatic union with the street.
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Each community assembles its wagon and places a miniature mountain on top of the platform, under which the musicians sit.

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The hiri-ban or checkpoint in each neighborhood is often part of a shop or a reclaimed garage "voted for the festival to be the seat for the neighbourhood."

the gods and his comrades. In the grey of the morning, as the wagons are returned to their neighbourhoods, a tremendous silence falls over the town and with the first rays of the morning sun the gods return to their mountain residence. The festival has come to an end, the energy of the town has been recovered and renewed.

Kaiwai
Through the examples of Shiraiva and Kakunodate I began to see how the Japanese might think of physical spaces, through the way of everyday activity and the way of the festival as a fluctuation of spaces which are defined by their activities rather than their visual order.

Kaiwai, or 'activity space', unlike the visually defined spaces of the West, is an amorphous sense of space which changes with the activities of its users and their intentions. Kaiwai which takes one form during the day, might take on another form at night. The change in pattern, however, is most noticeable through the recovery of Shinto myths and rituals in the form of linear movements through the streets of towns and villages at the time of matsuri.

The street is the locus of the matsuri experience on the day of matsuri and gains its form from the memory imprinted on it by the people of the community. The street is not seen simply as a corridor of vehicular or pedestrian traffic, but as the connector of private and social space. It is a spatial mode of social integration, characterised by layering function and experience, the basis and culmination of which is the 'magical' experience of matsuri during which the environment is charged and infused with the mystical kami energy. The public spaces are the streets rather than a central square because the Japanese perception of street and private spaces is a part of an integral space-time continuum or ma. Life is seen as a process of ebb and flow, rather than as a series of events; it changes metamorphically just as nature does from season to season, age to age, birth to death, in endless rhythms of renewal.

Ma
The notion of a continuum, therefore, is ultimately the key to our understanding of Japanese space. Japanese ma, or space time, is not fragmented, labelled and contained like space in the West, but is rather an emptiness or void that gains its form only in relation to unseen boundaries created by the activities performed in it.

We can therefore think of the ma referred to by architects as a sort of spatial current, a combination of spacing and timing as a constant flow of possibilities, a tension between things allowing for different patterns of interpretation. A Japanese room, for instance, can be used simultaneously for living, sleeping and eating, and is called an eight mat ma. Or, the context of a space might change from a study to one for a tea ceremony by the addition of a flower arrangement. These artifacts are, to use the etymology of the word ‘symbol’, a ‘bringing together’ of
the space with the utensils, giving the spatial current its temporary form. Like the form of a stream, the form of spaces in a house is the result of process patterns. In fact, Kikutake Kiyonori has said that form is not merely the visible delineation of a space but is rather the total consideration of space with its function. *Ma* is constantly awaiting or undergoing transformation by the availability of physical components and potential uses. Kikutake, like Itoh Teiji, is recognizing process patterns rather than objects.

The interval of Shinto is therefore closely bound to the intervals of nature which cause fields to yield the harvest and then to lie in fallow. The Shinto deities are invited for the season of fertility, production and harvest to an *permament* resting place in the fields. This temporary resting place for the deities might be symbolized by a straw rope hung between four bamboo saplings set up in a rice field. While the deities are invisible, the way of formalising and experiencing their presence is postulated by the temporary preparation of a space for the gods to visit. The void in the rice field created by these four saplings (or symbols) is then filled with the spiritual form of the deities called *ki* . The presence of this spiritual force spreads out and transforms the fields, temporarily, from a profane place for growing rice to a sacred place for the deities to rest. The sense of *ma* here, too, is therefore indefinite and temporary, like that of the eight-mat room which can be transformed by sliding doors and the addition of various accoutrements to take on one form after another.

More difficult to understand, however, is the lack of Japanese civic spaces with a monumental character typical of the West. Japan does have great temples and shrines which are, in many ways, equal in scale and grandeur to Western architecture. There are also great open spaces in front of and around buildings; yet, as Itoh Teiji points out, these spaces were to be experienced by moving through them rather than by viewing them from a fixed vantage point: 'Sequential spaces', he says, 'may be understood as a distribution of memories of the experience, noting that the content of memory includes not only the beauty of physical space, but also the story, or legend concerning the elements along the path.'

The procession’s route can, as in Shiraiwa, lie at a right angle to the everyday route and in this way the path of the gods is an interruption to the normal activities of the village and therefore lends itself better to a remembrance of the mythical past; the shift to accommodate the gods signal the cleansing of the village from all blemishes and the recovery of the life energy necessary for the period of fertility and growth in the fields. During the festival, workaday time is suspended to renew its original meaning. The Japanese do not experience space and time as objective detached observers, but are fully involved in them. Like medieval man’s pilgrimage through that great repository of spiritual memory the cathedral, the Japanese, in experiencing their village spaces sequentially, are renewed and invigorated by the healing actions of the parts as they are magically and mystically subsumed into the human psyche at festival time. FRED THOMPSON

References
5 Arkáde, 1981, Unity of Time and Space, Fred and Barbro Thompson, pp65-70.