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# Reconsideration of Urban Design from a Perspective of Coordinative Mechanism in Local Administration: A Case Study of Yokohama's Urban Design Section

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## **Abstract**

*This study is a combined scientific and subjective analysis of the history of the Urban Design Office (UDO) of the Yokohama city administration. The UDO celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022. It is a rare example of a governmental organisation that has survived with the vague institutional objective of doing something for urban design. The UDO began in 1971 as part of the Planning and Coordination Department (PCD) led by Akira Tamura, an eminent urban planner. The goal of the PCD was to introduce new values into city management and development through collaboration with institutions inside and outside local government. In accordance with PCD policies, the UDO achieved several outcomes, such as pedestrian space improvements in the 1970s and the preservation of historical buildings in the 1980s. However, since the 1990s, the role of the UDO has shifted from practitioner to advisor because of policy changes enacted by new mayors. It may be that the UDO has gradually lost the basis for its existence in this process. Today, new urban issues, such as population, environment and gender, are emerging. In these times, if local governments uncritically accept the logic of capital and majority values, they cannot create better cities. The implication of this case study is to re-evaluate urban design in the contemporary context as a practitioner of coordinative mechanisms by local governments as it used to be.*

## **Reconsidering “Urban Design” at Present**

As people acknowledge, classical urban design was represented by three eminent figures: Kevin Lynch (1918-1984), Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) and Gordon Cullen (1914-1994). In 1960, Lynch published *The Image of the City*, and Jacobs published

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961.<sup>1</sup> Gordon Cullen, in the book *Townscape*, kept a slight distance from these two American scholars, showing an English style of sequential vistas in town and countryside.<sup>2</sup> Cullen's townscape is always composed of a walking person and their perceived sense of place and identity.<sup>3</sup> These three supported such minor values as those esteemed by vulnerable pedestrians or old communities to enjoy the urban environment of an ordinary city. This is why classical urban design started as a new planning and design tool for pedestrian spaces and community improvements. However, we assume that urban design should have a broader prospect, such as enhancing interactions between people and urban culture.

People have argued that globalisation and gentrification would lead to losing local authenticity. This discussion is not limited to the physical environment but rather to various human relationships. As stated, we believe that classical urban design has been created by defending minor values at the initial stage. In this context, we focus on the interactions between urban design and its values. From the viewpoint of urban sociology, the question is, who will coordinate these various values? As Ray Pahl asked in his book *Whose City?*, it is important to examine how values are visioned and coordinated.<sup>4</sup>

While scholars have studied this topic in the theory of urban managers, Pahl's notion has come to be regarded as more important in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Because diverse actors are involved in forming contemporary urban space, it has become unclear "who decides how urban space should be." We see local governments as mediators of diversified actors who contribute to creating contemporary urban spaces. It must be noted that the concept of urban design is difficult to define unambiguously, as it may involve a variety of interpretations. Therefore, it is important for this research that the critical role of urban design lies in how local governments, as mediators, can take advantage of this multiplicity.

Since we have these assumptions, we have chosen the city of Yokohama and its Urban Design Section (UDS) as a model case to examine our ideas. Yokohama's UDS was set up in 1971 as part of the Planning and Coordination Office (PCO) in the city administration and has maintained its mediator's status for the last 50 years until now. Although Yokohama's urban design started as a mediator of concerned bodies within

and outside the city, it has gradually become a classical urban design with limited prospects influenced by the policies of successive mayors.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Inception of Mayor Ichio Asukata’s Municipal Reform**

As previously stated, after the war, a democratic governmental system, which was free from interference from army generals, was born for the first time in Japan. The administrative structure is three-tiered: the national government (state or central government), the 47 prefectures (regional governments) and the 1,741 municipalities (local governments) as of 31 December 2020. Each municipality has an executive head and a legislature. The head of the municipality is directly elected by the citizens, and the citizens also elect the councillors of the legislature.

However, as time passed, conservative politicians and bureaucrats of the pre-war era gradually returned to the forefront and promoted sharp economic growth at an annual rate of over 10% by establishing a highly centralised governmental system. Local governments were relegated to subordinate positions under national ministries and agencies and were required to abide by legislation and subsidisation systems. This structure, which was referred to as “vertically-divided local governments,” was almost beyond the local mayor’s chain of command. The municipality’s primary sources of revenue were and are the citizens’ tax (both resident and corporate) and property tax, though more than half of the revenue was subsidised by the national government as it was impossible to provide local services with these taxes alone.



**Figure 1.** Yokohama in the Tokyo Metropolitan Region  
(Drawing by Toshio Taguchi).

Given this social background, Yokohama emerged as the nucleus of a paradigm shift in the socio-political field of the 1960s. Yokohama is now the second largest city in

Japan, with a population of 3.78 million and 437 square kilometres in the Tokyo Metropolitan Region. It is a port city that was first opened to foreign countries in 1859 at the end of the feudal Samurai era. Since then, Yokohama has developed as an industrial and housing city, neighbouring the bustling national centre of Tokyo. Among the cities in the Tokyo Region, Yokohama possesses a cosmopolitan character, transmitted from its early era, while conserving its natural and urban landscapes.



**Figure 2.** Early Yokohama in 1866  
(Courtesy of the Yokohama Archives of History).



**Figure 3.** Skyview of Yokohama 2021  
(Courtesy of Yokohama Harbour Bureau).

In 1963, Ichio Asukata (1915-90; mayoralty term 1963-78), an attorney and member of the National Parliament of the Japanese Socialist Party, narrowly won the election against his conservative counterparts to become the mayor of the Yokohama City Government.<sup>7</sup> He proclaimed the idea of direct democracy by citizens and was determined to create a citizen-centred local administration, later named the Liberal

Local Governmental Movement. Asukata intended to hinder the central government from interfering with local administration without consent. The challenges initiated by Yokohama, followed by other liberal local governments, would ultimately reform the centralised governmental system due to their initiatives.<sup>8</sup> The first term of the Asukata Administration was an era of sprawl from Tokyo caused by population expansion (1.5 million in 1963 and 2.7 million in 1978), with an annual population increase of 100,000 yearly due to high economic growth. Exhaust fumes from factories and cars polluted the air, and the water was contaminated by factory effluent and domestic sewage. The huge population expansion demanded new municipal schools, which required a big investment in terms of building costs and site acquisition. The previous city administrations did not respond to these effectively. Citizens' participation and local government involvement were seen as indispensable in tackling these issues. Therefore, in addition to the political slogans, Asukata needed to establish a system to make the city administration move forward.

### **Reform of Municipal Administration**

The vertically divided system of public administration is a common phenomenon globally. A centralised power structure of national agencies is found in a relatively large number of countries. Both vertically divided systems and centralisation were seen as inevitable when ensuring administrative organisations' efficient and fair functioning aligned with policymakers. However, from around the 1960s in Japan, regional values gradually emerged, mainly in local governments, opposing the national values that formed the background to centralisation. This study hypothesises that cross-organisational coordination is necessary as the engine to eliminate conflicts within municipal administrative structures and to respect regional values. It is also assumed that the vision of the independent and proactive management of the local government, which consists of the mayor's administration and councillors' assembly, for the welfare of citizens, is imperative.

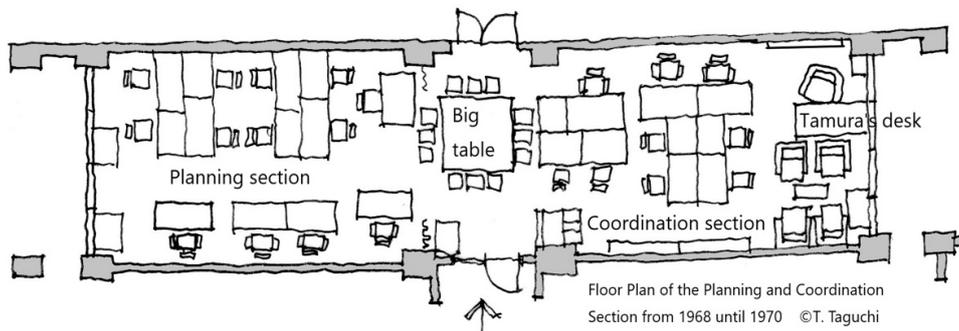
Local administrative systems are expected to address regional issues efficiently and fairly. Regional issues occur locally and often require immediate action. Increasingly, these issues arise in the boundary areas of fixed national ministerial structures owing to changes in the social and global environment. This demands coordination beyond the framework of existing national administrative organisations. As national ministries represent the interests of industries and act in their interests first and foremost, the responses to regional issues are either ignored or significantly delayed. As a result,

municipal organisations are likely to fail to act in line with the mayor’s policies. We presume the “coordinative mechanism (municipal planning and coordination function)” to be a solution to the above-mentioned organisational problems in its system.

### **Akira Tamura’s Concept of Urban Design as Planning and Coordination Function**

Yokohama’s urban design was initiated by Akira Tamura (1926-2010), a renowned urban planner who became the Director of the PCO in 1968. Tamura studied architecture at the University of Tokyo under the architect Kenzo Tange and worked for government ministries and the real estate division of a life insurance company. In 1963, he moved to the Environmental Development Centre established by Takashi Asada, an urban planning visionary in post-war Japan. In preparation for moving to the Centre, Tamura wrote a paper, “The Management of Regional Planning Institutions,” that summarised the structure of the institution and the direction of business development for the strong regional planning board visioned by Asada. Tamura describes the need to hire urban designers.<sup>9</sup>

At that time, urban design in Japan was generally accepted, such as superstructures envisaged by the Metabolism Group formed at the World Design Conference held in Tokyo in 1960. Cutting-edge Japanese architects, such as Kiyonori Kikutake and Kisho Kurokawa and their advisor Tange, who had just published the “Tokyo Bay Plan, 1961,” attended.<sup>10</sup> Contrarily, new urban space movements for a minority of urban dwellers and pedestrians started in the US. Fumihiko Maki, Tange’s old student, became an associate professor at Harvard University in 1962 and taught urban design at graduate school. In his book, *Investigation in Collective Form* (1964), Maki described his new theory of group form with the sense of place formulated by diversified builders over time. Maki’s urban design differed significantly from that of the Metabolism Group. Maki’s theory resonated with Tamura’s urban design philosophy: different entities compose a harmonious urban space over a long period. However, Maki’s practice of urban design ended with this book, and he became known worldwide exclusively as an architect.<sup>11</sup>



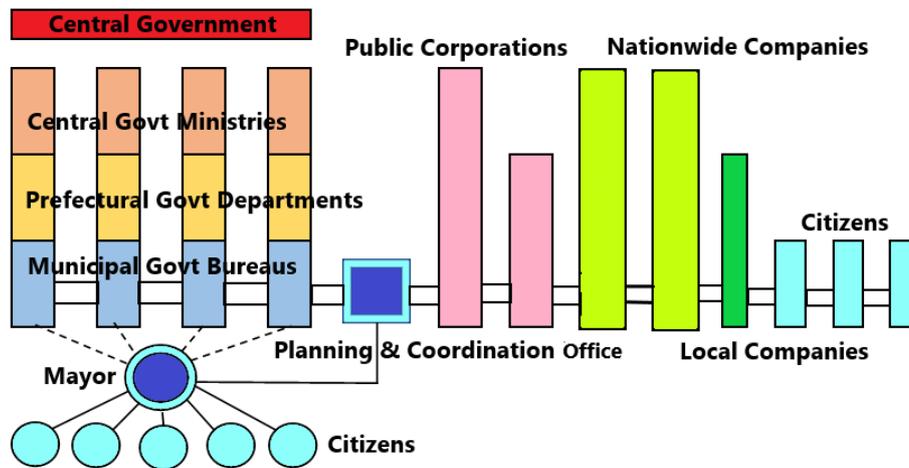
**Figure 4.** The small unit of the PCO in a small room in 1968  
(Drawing by Atsuhiko Aoki and Toshio Taguchi).

Using Maki, who had returned from the US and opened a design firm in Tokyo, Tamura began his urban design activities in Yokohama.<sup>12</sup> However, experts outside the city office could not be expected to respond promptly and flexibly to the city's needs. Urban design is a "coordinative mechanism" and cannot be done without being on-site. Tamura began to feel the limitations of relying on external experts. Therefore, he began searching for an in-house urban designer. Shunsuke Iwasaki, who had finished the urban design course at Harvard Graduate School, returned to Japan to meet Asukata and Tamura in December 1970. In the 1960s, young people were hungry for "something new," as was the case with the student movement. Like Iwasaki, the PCO attracted young people from all over the country and abroad. In 1971, Naoyuki Kuniyoshi, who had completed his postgraduate course, joined PCO. Both Iwasaki and Kuniyoshi worked part-time initially. A little later, in 1976, Toshio Nishiwaki, with an architect's career, was seconded from an architect's office to draw up an urban design development plan for Kohoku New Town as a counterproposal to the New Town Corporation. At that time, he saw the cosy pedestrian square being completed beside the city hall.<sup>13</sup> Iwasaki and his colleagues designed it, and Nishiwaki felt that the public sector could do this by designing it independently. Due to the economic recession, urban designers were not recruited the following year. However, a young graduate from the University of Tokyo was specially recruited. It was Takeru Kitazawa, who later moved to the University of Tokyo as an associate professor and returned as a special advisor to Mayor Hiroshi Nakata (mayoralty term 2002-09), and started the reform of the urban design movement in Yokohama. Another young man, Toshio Taguchi, was offered the job by Tamura but turned it down. Taguchi had just returned from studying urban design in the UK. In 1978, he passed the examination and entered city administration.



**Figure 5.** Kusunoki Plaza on the corner of the city hall  
(Photograph by Toshio Taguchi).

The PCO assisted the mayor in setting goals for the city management and worked to achieve these goals by integrating all the concerned bodies inside and outside the administration. The UDS was within the PCO. Tamura believed urban design should be integral to planning and coordination rather than a stand-alone entity. The PCO did not have fixed administrative duties, and all the staff were expected to become able mediators in projects and issues assigned to them. Urban designers were special mediators with design abilities, and they had to coordinate projects based on their outstanding design proposals.<sup>14</sup> At that time, and even today, planning departments in Japanese municipalities were mainly composed of clerical staff. It is rare to find a case like Yokohama City, where the majority of the staff are architects, engineers and urban designers. These staff members would use their expertise and experience to examine and respond to issues. As we have seen, Tamura's ethos of planning and coordination was built around human resources, not organisational structures. His style was intended to galvanise human resources into action.



**Figure 6.** The concept of the PCO by Akira Tamura (Redrawn by Toshio Taguchi, based on Tamura's PhD dissertation).

### Urban Design Section Toward Conservation of Historic Landscapes

Asukata was succeeded in 1978 by Michikazu Saigo as a new mayor who had served as the vice-minister of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The MHA was in a leading position to assess public subsidies from the national budget to the local governments. Therefore, Saigo sceptically viewed Asukata's budgetary management since Asukata was a socialist. In reality, Yokohama's budget had been tightly and well managed without a public deficit. However, Saigo introduced a fiscal-led management system in which local administration was to be conducted within a restriction of a predetermined fiscal framework. This system was recommended by the MHA and followed by other local governments for decades, except Yokohama, where they found a wide range of financial resources for private and public bodies. In July 1978, Tamura relinquished his post as the Director General of the PCO and was due to leave the city in 1981.

In 1982, when the PCO was abolished, the UDS was transferred to the City Planning Bureau. The UDS inherited the secretariat of the Urban Beautification Council (established in 1965 by city by-law) from another section. As Tamura mentioned, the PCO never accepted any formal council to become a secretariat. Nevertheless, the UDS became a position using such a formality in city administration as the Urban Beautification Council. It was required to respond at the mayor's request and issue the necessary deliberations with regard to specific matters of urban landscapes. However, its deliberation was and still is not binding for the mayor to execute. The existence of the Council is highly respected but can be easily ignored. As all urban issues are

related to the mayor's politics, the use of the Council is often political. It implies the need for a robust coordinative mechanism on the side of the secretariat.

The Minato Mirai Project is a redevelopment of Yokohama's central waterfront area, which aims to create an integrated central business district (CBD) spanning a total area of 186 hectares (110 hectares of existing land and 76 hectares of reclaimed land). This new CBD was designed to connect two existing CBDs: the old Kannai District and the new Yokohama Station District. Originally, a major part of the project site was a shipyard (20 hectares) founded in 1891 and owned by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. Planner Tamura proposed this project to Mayor Asukata in 1964 as part of the Six Spine Projects. On-site project implementation began in 1983. In February 1988, the UDS set up a special committee chaired by Professor Teijiro Muramatsu, a renowned architectural historian, to hastily investigate the shipyard's former dock regarding its historical values. The unused old dock owned by Mitsubishi Estate, bought from Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, was to be demolished because of a super high-rise tower construction on the site. After a chain of negotiations at the committee and outside it, Mitsubishi Estate agreed to preserve the dock on the site by utilising it as an event space<sup>15</sup>.

The person who initiated this action was Kitazawa, an urban city designer who Tamura assigned to research work on city development history in 1977. In 1988, Kitazawa forged a new public method named "Guidelines for Community Development that Embraces History" to promote the conservation of historical landscapes. This method was, in due course, authorised by the mayor and laid under the jurisdiction of the urban design section. The urban design section now possesses two tools authorised by the mayor and acknowledged as part of local administration with a legal background.<sup>16</sup>

The Cultural Properties Preservation Law 1950 rigidly requires a kind of frozen preservation. Still, the guidelines emphasise the active use of interior and exterior preservation according to the street townscape or surrounding communities. Kitazawa was supported by Takeyoshi Hori, an able colleague in the Yokohama Archives of History, which opened in 1981. Hori was a member of the University Laboratory of Professor Muramatsu. Hori recognised all the historical assets important for urban design activities in Yokohama. They functioned as the nuclei of the coordinative mechanism in terms of historical movements.

### **Urban Design to “Creative Experimental City”**

The conservation of historical landscapes has developed mainly in the old Kannai district. In contrast, at the end of the 1980s, the Minato Mirai district had the potential to develop into a variety of new urban forms.<sup>17</sup> The Minato Mirai district was acknowledged as the leading project for the new mayor, Saigo. Therefore, it was to be understood among people concerned with its redevelopment project to become the “Creative Experimental City” and was to be positioned as a place to exhibit new roles in urban design activities. It seemed at this point that classical urban design would transform itself into a new type of urban design. The “Yokohama Design City Declaration, 1988,” formulated by the UDS and endorsed by Mayor Saigo, refers to the Minato Mirai district as follows:

In order to enhance the attractiveness of Yokohama, we have practiced urban design that coordinates the various actors that make up the city and creates spaces that are identical to Yokohama. We believe that it is essential that in the future Yokohama apply the cumulative effects of its urban design activities to create design as lifestyle and culture that responds to and leads the times. It should be promoted through exchanges between a wide range of design and related fields, together with interior design and fashion, with the city and architecture at the core. Now Yokohama, as a city of creative experimentation, takes “Minato Mirai” as the new urban center of the 21st century and hopes to gather the wisdom of designers from around the world to create a place where comprehensive design for lifestyle and culture can be proposed, discussed, and studied<sup>18</sup>.

Following this declaration, a series of avant-garde activities were to be planned and executed in the district of Minato Mirai to show the new roles of urban design to the public. It is true that this declaration intended to expand the meaning of urban design activities and position Minato Mirai as a place where “collaborative design as lifestyle and culture” could be realised. This could become an evolution of classical urban design by opening up to the lifestyle and culture as a whole and, consequently, would induce lifestyle and cultural industries to come to Minato Mirai.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 7.** High-rise buildings in Minato Mirai  
(Photograph by Toshio Taguchi).

As the first leading project based on this declaration, the Barcelona and Yokohama City Creation (BAY'90) was held in Minato Mirai in 1990. It was intended to show the public a model design city by providing comprehensive information on Barcelona, Spain, which had an integrated design network among urban engineering, architecture, industrial design, fashion and comics. It was positioned as a prelude to the Yokohama Urban Design Forum, to be held in 1992. After this exhibition, a new mayor, Hidenobu Takahide (mayoralty term 1990-2002), was elected.

Following BAY'90, the Yokohama Urban Design Forum was held in 1992. At this time, an international competition was held for a development proposal in Minato Mirai for the future urban vision of the central area of Yokohama City. In this forum, several topics were discussed regarding the future of Yokohama as a design city. Regrettably, no specific details for implementation were presented, nor was there any mention of the prospects of realising proposals in Minato Mirai. The lack of a new urban design vision led to various expectations and gratuitous opinions among discussants. These discussions were limited to proposals and did not have practical meaning. Although Minato Mirai, with a slogan of the “creative experimental city,” was to provide the possibility of expanding urban design, in the end, no new elements were added to the urban design, and it stayed in a limited field of the preservation of historic landscapes.<sup>20</sup>

During the mayoralty term of Takahide in the 1990s, Minato Mira progressed smoothly in terms of urban development. Mayor Takahide, although once a top bureaucrat in the Ministry of Construction, supported urban design activities and citizen participation. However, at this time, the UDS could not encourage all actors concerned with the Minato Mirai to start a new movement as part of the Creative Experimental City. Instead, these actors seemed busy with their short-sighted business activities. Gradually, the term “Creative Experimental City” was no longer used to describe Minato Mirai.

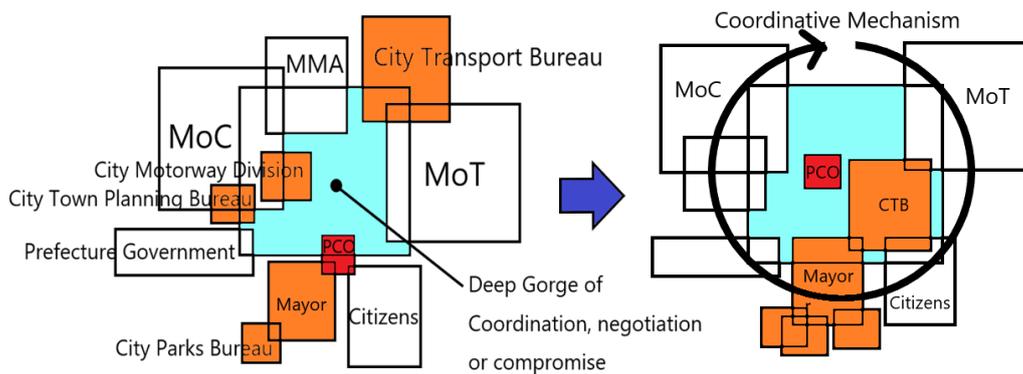
### **Conclusion**

Since the UDS in the 1970s was characterised by its atypical fluidity, it coordinated the various actors concerned when planning pedestrian spaces. Although the UDS survived as part of the administration, it gradually resorted to preserving historical buildings and landscapes amid institutional modifications created by the conservative mayors.

Concentrating on preserving historic landscapes and operating the Urban Beautification Council was one possible choice to strengthen the urban design section as part of its administration. The various events held in the Minato Mirai district between the end of the 1980s and the 1990s provided possibilities for the UDS to transform itself from its old style to a new one. The district was named “Creative Experimental City” and positioned as a place to propose and practice new roles for urban design. Unfortunately, such proposals were never implemented.

The implication of this case study is to re-evaluate urban design in the contemporary context as a practitioner of coordinative mechanisms by local governments. An overview diagram of the planning and coordination functions of local government is shown in Figure 8. In order to coordinate policies that have been divided among different ministries and agencies, it is essential to have human resources capable of making comprehensive decisions and a top management organisation to coordinate such human resources. Urban design is thought to have meant gathering unique human resources to flexibly absorb the opinions of diverse urban actors and actively propose urban policies. In the past, the City of Yokohama’s Urban Design Office did not necessarily hold only the majority viewpoint but also put forward many radical proposals ahead of their time, as seen in the development of pedestrian spaces that

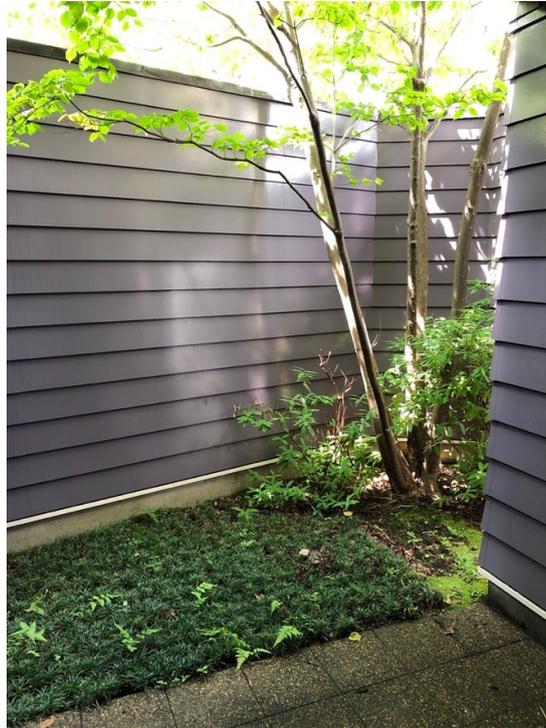
went against economic rationality. Today, urban problems of a kind never seen before are emerging. When considering urban design in these times, it is essential to have a perspective that goes back and forth between multiple departments to conceive of a comprehensive urban space. The planning and coordination functions may play a significant role in this regard, but there has not yet been a sufficient accumulation of research on this function. Further study on this function is an issue to be addressed.



**Figure 8.** Urban Design is part of the Coordinative Mechanism (Diagram by Atsuhiko Aoki and Toshio Taguchi).



**Figure 9.** A thanks letter from Elementary School pupils in Yokohama for a lecture given by an old urban designer. Urban design exists for future generations (Photograph by Toshio Taguchi).



**Figure 10.** Planting a tree in a tiny garden can produce a cool breeze during heat waves. Environmentally conscious house design is part of urban design that starts from a small consideration (Photograph by Toshio Taguchi).

## Endnotes

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