



Study Tour of Japan for European Youth 2010

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December 2010: snow, icy wind and freezing temperatures; me and 36 other young people got to swap our European bleak mid winters for the temperate climes and sunny blue skies of Japan. We got lucky with the unseasonably warm weather. We got even luckier with an action-packed trip that took us from the tranquillity of tea house gardens and ancient shrines to Bladerunner style metropolis landscapes. All along the way we were nourished by often magical food and knowledge about Japanese culture and the underlying values, interests and structures that shape this charismatic country and its people.

Reflecting on the diverse experiences and rich learning from the trip, three distinct themes stand out. *Making*; *Spacing*; and *Innovating*. The rest of this report shares some of the stories, delights and insights that encompass these themes.

1. Making

It is through making things that people engage with the world, make their mark and create connections with each other. Sociologist Richard Sennett explains what this process of making material things reveals about ourselves, "Learning from things requires us to care about the qualities of cloth or the right way to poach fish; fine cloth or food cooked well enables us to imagine larger categories of 'good'."

The most powerful example during the Study Tour of how the ability to make things can connect people and help us think about sometimes difficult things, came in Hiroshima. An annual memorial day has developed following the death in 1955 of 12 year old Sadako Sasaki, who died of Lukiemia following the dropping of the A-Bomb. After becoming ill Sadako set herself the goal of making 1000 paper cranes as they are believed to bring good health and a long life. Each year children from Hiroshima, and now around the world, make origami paper cranes, create a procession and display them around the Children's Peace Momument in the centre of

the rebuilt city. Asahi, the little girl from the family I stayed with in Hiroshima, made me a paper crane, and also gave an exuberant, bird-chasing, cart-wheeling tour of the ground zero site where the A-bomb fell. Her little paper crane gave me a very tactile connection with her nine-year old joyfulness, the wider experience of the city, and the powerful and harrowing talk given to our study group from a now nearly 80 year old survivor from the A-bomb.



The UK and other European countries have witnessed a recent boom in craft and 'Do It Yourself' culture, with a vast array of people making and sharing their own ideas, film, and other material online, as well as participating in real-world creative initiatives from growing their own food to community knitting projects. This has been seen very much as a revival of lost skills. In Japan it seems that these kinds of making skills have far from been lost and regained, but instead have been retained, nurtured and revered.

Through the tour we had the opportunity to get intimately hands-on with some of the iconic symbols of Japanese culture. We visited the Taishe-Food Company outside Tokyo with its mesmerizing production lines and Willie Wonka style tofu laboratories- the tofu cheesecake was delicious. We learnt, with the aid of some expert instruction, a microwave and a sprinkle of magic powder, how to make tofu.



In Tokyo, held within a fittingly striking frame of a building designed by the world renowned architect Kenzo Tange, we visited the headquarters of the Sogetsu Foundation. Here we learnt from the masters of Ikebana (flower arrangement) beauty, balance and form. Never again will I be able to just casually stick a bunch of flowers in a vase.



Before



After

In Kyoto, we visited a textile centre where we learnt the art of Nishijin weaving, a 1200 year old practice that is revered as Japan's finest. Industrious with heads down and feet pumping, each member of the study tour was entrusted with the worn wooden hand-loom to make their very own version.

By far my favourite 'make' was that hosted by the Nagisa Taiko drumming group. Hosted in a neighbourhood community centre, we were given a deafening and dramatic display of drumming, with some drums bigger than the performers. Our group was then given the sticks and drums, and after a patient lesson, Europe gave a surprisingly passable performance. The community centre then opened up into a party with a wonderful feast made by the women of the local community. The party was animated by a festival of crafty activities that embraced all the generations, including being taught origami by the older women; shown how to perform a tea ceremony by the younger girls; and how to sing Beatles songs by the older men.





This warm and active 'making' party, created a really conducive atmosphere for making personal connections with people and sharing common problems and potential responses. For example, when talking with the chairman of the Neighbourhood Association (*Chonaikai*) I discovered the similarities between Japan and the UK in terms of the difficulties of engaging people in local community life. He told me that though there were 1000 households in the estate, only 70 were members of the Chonaikai. They had a target to reach 100 members in the next year.

2. Spacing

With over half the world's population now living in urban areas, and the proportion expected to rise to 80%, it is becoming increasingly vital to learn how to live well with extreme density. Since Japan has been living with high urban density since the Edo period, as expected the tour yielded a number of insights into the art of high-density city living.

But first, to get a sense of the scale and intensity of urban Japan, I recommend you take the 55 story high elevator ride to the top of Tokyo's Mori Tower. Looking out from the giddy 360 degree viewing decks, stretched out before you is the most incredible carpet of high octane urban development. Not normally a fan of tall towers, Mori won me over, with its spectacular views and top deck art gallery that teemed with art fans and young professionals on Friday night dates. Built by Minoru Miro a development magnate, the tower was designed as an integrated high-rise urban community where people could live, work, play and shop in proximity to eliminate commuting time and increase quality of life. Miro also thought this kind of development would benefit Japan's national competitiveness.

Lessons for high-density living

1. Create your own mobile personal space

With modern technologies, privacy and escape are accessible anywhere, even in a deep underground tunnel. The commuter pictured above had games console, music player and mobile phone all simultaneously on the go. This 'opt out' tactic is also popular in Europe, but perhaps not done with as much style.



2. Keep flexible

Flexibility means you can get multiple uses from one space or building. My wonderful host family who I stayed with in Hiroshima had this down to a fine art. The mother, who is a cram school teacher, had divided the space on their upper floor so it was half school/ half sleeping quarters.



3. Create breathing spaces

Tokyo in particular is adept at managing civility and the pace of urban living by establishing a number of open green spaces that are virtually commerce and retail free zones. The Imperial Palace Gardens and the Meiji Shrine offered a wonderful shift of pace, a sense of space and a restoration from everyday city life.



4. Don't lose what makes a place special

Japan seems very good at squeezing delightful places from the smallest and most unlikely spaces. One of my favourite evenings was exploring the bustling back streets of Osaka, a resurgent and energetic industrial city that sees itself as a rival to Tokyo, and a place I would love to spend more time in.

One place we discovered ran along a single-file alleyway between two buildings. Peeping behind the tarpaulin that hung from the eaves revealed a series of tiny, super skinny but beautifully home-crafted bars, sushi restaurants and the warmest of welcomes. We enjoyed saki and sushi long into the night- a very fitting end to our last night in Japan.

These kinds of spaces possess a character of place that is an important urban asset for building identity. Speaking with people it is clear that, just as in Europe, these kinds of independent spaces are under constant threat from redevelopment and are being pushed out by speculative office and big-brand retail urban development. The perils of this narrow economic model have been made clear by the recession in both Japan and Europe. It is clear that new measures of value are needed to help guide urban development that better integrate and promote a diversity of economic, social and environmental goods, and is perhaps something that cities in Japan and Europe could collaborate on.



3. Innovating

As part of the study tour, the group visited the Panasonic Centre and was able to play with a dazzling array of new technological toys, from 3D TV to home energy storage systems. Alongside these high-tech inventions, the broader theme of innovation ran through the study tour, starting with a particularly entertaining lecture from Professor Seiichi Fujita from Waseda University. He set out the concept of 'Kaizen' and how it could increase workplace productivity through encouraging workers to suggest ideas as

to how their working methods could be improved or made more efficient. This was complemented by the lecture by the priest at Meiji-jingu shrine, who explained Shintoism partly in terms of self-generating growth and creativity.

Inspired by my understanding of these ideas I used the Study Tour to collect any notable social innovations that I thought might be beneficial to bring back home. My three favourite social innovations that I collected are set out below.

1. The heated coffee table

At the family home in Hiroshima I had the delight of staying in, I fell in love with their heated, duveted coffee table that was the centre of family life. Most Japanese homes do not have central heating, but key nodes in the family home are heated. The warm and cosy coffee table encourages everyone to huddle round, talk and share activities. A great invention.



2. The baby loo-chair:

As a mother of young children, I have often encountered the problem of what to do with your baby when you need to use a public convenience. Well I am pleased to report that Japan has solved that problem.



3. The neighbourhood clear-up gang



The mother in my home stay family is a member of her neighbourhood association. As part of this she does regular neighbourhood cleaning activities. The day before I came, she and a group of neighbours had cleared their local park of litter and leaves. As the pile of bags witness, the park was spotless. She very much saw it as a chance to catch up with neighbours and friends and do something useful (exercise and cleaning) at the same time. The UK Government's Big Society plans could learn a lot from this.

It was a privilege to take part in the 2010 Study Tour. And I would like to extend a huge and sincere thank you to all involved. I look forward to building on the friendships I made and learning more from Japan and play my part in developing the relationship between Japan and Europe.