

Making Public Space in Japan: *Jizo* shrines in neighborhoods

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Abstract: The process of creating and maintaining citizen serving public space is interest to a wide range of city design professionals and public officials. *The Project for Public Space* has found that successful projects possess four qualities: they are accessible; people are engaged in activities there; the space is comfortable; and it is a sociable place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit (www.pps.org). Using these qualities as a framework this article explores the Japanese practice of placing small Buddhist shrines in neighborhoods, and examining how the shrines function as public spaces.

Keywords: Jizo, Tokyo, Japan, neighborhoods, Making Public Space.

Introduction

In the cities of Kyoto and Tokyo there are many neighborhoods, new and old where, where a particular type of shrine can be found. These small shrines, usually placed where neighborhood people walk are called: *Jizo*. Jizo is the protector of children, expectant mothers and travelers. Most of all, Jizo bosatstu (divinity), is the protector of deceased children, including miscarried, aborted or stillborn infants. The modern focus on children is an extension of an earlier role as patron of expectant mothers. S/he is known in India as *Ksitigarbha*, in China as *Dizang*, in Korea as *Jijang Bosa*. Mention of Jizo bosatsu dates back to the 6th century.² Inside closed shrines, protected by a wooden lattice frame, is the statue. In Japanese folklore, Jizo hides the children in his robes to protect them from demons and guide them to salvation. While Jizo can also be found on roadside and graveyards, the focus in this article is on neighborhood locations in urban areas.

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2. CHOZEN BAYS 2002.



1. Small Jizo in a street. Note the Asian ancient symbol for eternity carved on the base, the swastika as used by the Nazi's is clockwise figure tilted to the right. 2. Jizo located on a individual house lot. 3. Jizo clothed statues. 4. Open Jizo in a street.

In Kyoto there are more than 5,000 Jizo found throughout the metropolitan area. Jizo is special to pregnant women and to those whose children have died. Statues of Jizo can sometimes be seen wearing tiny children's clothing or bibs. Grieving parents place toys and other offerings beside the Jizo statue to invoke his protection of their dead child.³ Offerings are also made by parents to thank Jizo for saving their children from a serious illness.⁴ Parents often place small pebbles by the statue to help soul of a lost child. In various ways each Jizo becomes differentiated from another through the local rituals. People in the neighborhood decide to install a shrine. It is not something that government does, nor is it part of a fixed "urban design plan" for

3. SMITH 2012.

4. Chozen Bays 2002.



5. Jizo niche in a modern office building; 6. Jizo in a street corner; 7. Open Jizo in a new residential lot; 8. Jizo and a vending machine; 9. Jizo with two images at a store front.

the neighborhood. Thus it is an organic expression of culture. A location is found and the owner gives permission for the shrine, if not built by owner. Being small in scale allows a Jizo shrine to locate almost anywhere in the neighborhood where people pass by and stop for a moment to pay their respects. Most Japanese neighborhoods have very little “extra” space, so Jizo shrines tend to be of modest size. Exceptions can be found along special walking places such as the “Philosophers Path” in the Kyoto eastern foothills. There can be a number of Jizo in a single neighborhood, each serving a different purpose. In this way, they are accessible to people in the neighborhood. There are many emulations of Jizo, each with its own name and salvation function. Thus, in a single neighborhood a variety of Jizo can exist on different streets. It is customary to place statues of Jizo at the intersections of roads and paths so the correct way will be chosen. Private funds build the



10. Jizo in a open group on the street; 11. Jizo outdoor garden; 12. Large Jizo in a neighborhood; Jizo protected inside a cage; 13. Jizo-bon festival with children.

shrines. Once built they are maintained by people in the neighborhood; sometimes the landowners themselves. Just as it is customary to make sure the sidewalk in front of your house is clean, the adjacent Jizo receives similar care. A red bib or cap is common on Jizo statues.⁵ During the week there might be a few flowers placed in the shrine, a cup of sake, and maybe the statue(s) are clothed differently. On the 24th of the month, something special will be offered up, as this a scared day. The fact that the offerings change on a regular basis demonstrates that the shrine is an active part of local life. Jizo appears in newer neighborhoods as well established areas, and at times is located in a niche of an office building on a commercial street. In areas rebuilt in Kobe, Japan after the earthquake Jizo can be found close to newer shopping malls. The Jizo shrine is not subject to graffiti or abuse. It is something respected by Japanese people as a positive part of daily life and therefore not subject to random damage. People also know that Jizo is

5. GLASSMAN 2012.

being watched over by neighbors. Being located along pedestrian paths in neighborhood gives it protection through being observed, and of course, it is thought to protect those traveling through the neighborhood. On August 24, the memorial day of Jizo Bosatsu, a festival for children is held in many parts of Japan, especially Western Japan. The deities' statues are washed and they are clothed in red hats and bids to help expel the demons. During the festival, elders share with young people the meaning and work of Jizo. These festivals create social spaces within the neighborhoods and remind the people of the why Jizo is important to them. Small stalls or tents are placed in front of the statues, where children sit and recite a long rosary with many large beads, since Jizo is the protector deity of children, especially those that have past on. After the recital, they can play in the stalls and tents. Red lanterns are hung with the inscription of "Hail to Jizo Bosatsu". Children eat food of red auspicious colors, and there is dancing by special groups.

Summary

In many ways Jizo shrines do meet the Project for Public Space tests for a successful project. They are accessible to all, being located along the public pathways. The annual festival provides activity, albeit once a year. Jizo create sociable spaces in that people can gather together at the shrine and silently share their thoughts. The quality of being "comfortable" does not suit Jizo well. While it is comforting to know the deity is there and you can relate to it as a person, especially its function as helping children's spirits journey to a final place, Jizo is meant more as a spiritual space, even on a crowded street. Maybe "comfortable" is simply too much a Western criteria to apply in this case. Jizo functions as a way for people to share their grieving and as a protector of people in times of need. It is a way to connect with some part of the past, a very local and personal level. What we learn from Jizo is that small scale and organic public space can contribute to a neighborhood's sense of character and positive function. The fact that Jizo continues to be valued, especially in Western Japan, after many centuries is a tribute to its cultural value and as a means to be in the present through linking with the past. It is a good example that tells us that "public spaces" do not have been regulated, nor managed by

a nonlocal entity. The power of the people in the neighborhood, taking actions on their own behalf appears to work well in this instance. All city design professionals and public officials can learn something from this Japanese practice.

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

Images are by author, except as noted.