Layers of Place:
Using art to convey multiple perspectives

Jessica Martin

No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city
Must never be confused with the words that describe it. Invisible Cities, p.61

As I navigated my way through Tokyo for the first time, I was continually struck by how different my perception of the city was from how it was depicted in books, in films, in the stories friends told after their own travels to Japan. Through these sources of information, I learned to imagine Tokyo as a seething, boiling metropolis, a cacophony of sound and light and people hurrying down crowded boulevards. Indeed, I encountered this image of stereotypical Tokyo, but only in specific areas and contexts (i.e. Shinjuku at rush hour). As I explored the city, I discovered that the neighborhoods are extremely varied in appearance and spirit; the architecture can be human-scaled and intimate; there are narrow streets that wind past rows of small houses and boutique storefronts. If one strays away from the crowded boulevards and commute times, one can actually find a place of hushed solace, almost like entering a sleepy town.

My experience of Tokyo (as with most of my travels) has underlined my conviction that a place cannot be defined in static, generalized, a-historic terms. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that places (cities, regions, neighborhoods) are fluid, deeply layered, and ever changing. When we describe a place, we are not only speaking of a physical environment—we are also describing the people, cultures, and histories that inhabit that place. Perhaps the most important aspect of the process of evoking place is that we are ultimately describing ourselves—for what we see and experience can only be described through the filter of our personal perspective. In fact, the self and other are in a constant
state of mutual exchange and influence. As Fumio Nanjo wrote in his essay for the exhibition *TransCulture:*

_The self can only exist in a reciprocal relationship between its own identity of the other...In reality, neither the identity of the self nor the other can be clear and unified, but we go on positing the existence of a definite self and continue to use this assumption in all our mental processing. This kind of thinking conceals all sorts of cultural, political, and economic illusions._

So how can one begin to describe a place and, in doing so, evoke its complexity?
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