

Title	My favorite books
Sub Title	
Author	
Publisher	Faculty of Science and Technology, Keio University
Publication year	2019
Jtitle	New Kyurizukai No.31 (2019. 10) ,p.7- 7
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=KO50001003-00000031-0007

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My favorite books

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● The Death and Life of Great American Cities

In the 1950s, many urban renewal projects in the US were already showing their negative impact on the city. Jacobs criticizes these renewals for oversimplifying the complexity of urban life, and famously advocated for mixtures of uses, short blocks, diversity of building ages, and a relatively high population density. Almost 60 years have passed since its publication, but even today, this book helps us to understand why so many of Tokyo's new urban redevelopments end up creating a "dead" city. I hope that all future developers, planners, and architects read this book to learn how our lives are affected by urban design, and how to keep our cities "alive."

● A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity

When we try to understand societies, we tend to oversimplify them, either thinking of particular individuals or thinking of abstract and broad entities like "the nation" or "the culture." This book helps us to look beyond these oversimplifications by explaining different social entities, from small communities to large nation-states, as the result of interactions and networks of multiple elements, such as people, buildings, or institutions. The author connects philosophy and science and offers conceptual tools to grapple with social complexity.

● Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand Tokyo. In a city where historical buildings have almost disappeared, Jinnai shows us the continuities of Edo to Tokyo, teaching how to find remnants of the past in today's Tokyo. Instead of trying to transplant European-style orderly plazas and boulevards, Jinnai argues that we should restore "Japanese urban spaces" by enhancing their historical character based on contact with water, topography, and the small scale. I feel that the urban qualities defended by Jinnai, a historian of Italian cities and an enthusiast of the lively public spaces found in Mediterranean cities, apply to more than just Japanese cities. They are, in fact, qualities that any city in the world, East or West, should aim to develop – namely, vibrant, human-scale urbanism.

● A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction

This book is a design manual and a critique of Modern architecture. From towns and buildings to construction details, the authors offer a comprehensive catalog of spatial configurations or "patterns" that afford visual pleasure and enhance social encounters and psychological well-being. However, their insistence on explaining these patterns as the true and objective ways to build "good" architecture, seems inflexible and somewhat authoritarian. Therefore, I recommend using the book as a rich catalog of possibilities open to reinterpretation. More than forty years after its publication, this book is still a powerful guide for inspiration and helps us to think beyond the design ideologies inherited from Modernism that are still dominant today.

● Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo

Every urban scholar needs to understand not only urban forms, but also the societies that produce those forms. In my attempts to understand aspects of Japanese society, I am often confronted with explanations of how "Japanese culture" differs from "Western culture." Conflicts in Western societies are explained as a result of Western individualism and tendency to protest, while Japanese society is often presented as less conflictive because their residents naturally tend to achieve consensus and group harmony. However, this book suggests that many aspects of current Japanese society do not originate from ancient cultural traditions, nor natural ethnic proclivities. They originate instead from struggles around 1960, a year that saw the largest protests in modern Japanese history, with millions participating in protest activities of some kind. This book explains many of the current social, artistic, and urban patterns in Japan, resulting from the 1960 demonstrations, which culminated in a series of social compromises that are still active in Japan today.

● Learning from Las Vegas

Las Vegas is the last city architects would visit for inspiration. However, this book presents late 1960s Las Vegas as a place from which architects can extract design principles. The book praises the richness, liveliness, and inclusiveness of Las Vegas' urban landscape, and criticizes the empty monumentality of the Modern architecture of the 1960s. Short, fun, and easy to read, this book is a must for all architects to learn how to observe the city in a nonjudgemental way to appreciate the everyday sceneries of cities.