The Impact of Homeless Issues on the Mode of Urban Governance:
the Situation in Osaka and Hong Kong

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1: Japanese System on Homeless Issues

In industrialized parts of East Asia, the homeless issue was not regarded as an urban policy issue until the late 1990s. In particular, in Japan, it was only in 2002 that the law to support the self-reliance of homeless people was enacted although only with a limited period of validity. Subsequently, a self-sufficiency support system was introduced principally in large cities with between 1,000 and several thousand rough sleepers, and governments started working with non-profit organizations (NPOs). However, no new policies have actually been developed, and existing policies have been manipulated, restored, or modified in response to requests and protests from NPOs and other groups. Only temporary solutions within the welfare policy framework have been sought, such as providing financial assistance (public assistance), and real solutions have been postponed. Housing administrations and employment policies have had little to say about the homeless issue. Characteristic of the homeless issue in Japan is the lack of measures by housing administrations concerning interim housing facilities (transit housing) for the homeless, much of which has ceased to exist or fails to function (in contrast to Hong Kong, as mentioned below) and that hospitals and many other social welfare facilities are involved in Japan.

2: Hong Kong System on Homeless Issues

In Hong Kong, a gradual transfer of administrative responsibilities from governments to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started around the time when Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997, and these NGOs had substantial expertise in supporting homeless people compared to Japanese NGOs. In addition, various types of interim housing facilities (transit housing) were fully utilized including cheap urban hostels provided by the Home Affairs Department, interim housing provided by the Housing Authority, and emergency or temporary shelters provided by the Social Welfare Department. The Social Welfare Department is implementing an interim action plan in order to coordinate these systems. In both Japan and Hong Kong, however, most of the homeless measures currently in force are restricted to helping rough sleepers, and little political effort has been expended to address the homeless issue in its full complexity.

3: Visible and Invisible Homeless

First, people become aware of the homeless issue through visible tent sleepers, but there is no civil consensus to support measures to address the worsening condition of the invisible homeless. There is a discrepancy between the actual condition of homeless people and the image of the homeless held by society and policy administrators. Urban policies such as making urban areas more attractive, enhancing economic activities, and increasing tourism are readily accepted and adopted, and shortsighted solutions such as enforcing the eviction of visible rough sleepers in return for services tend to supersede other measures.

4: Support Group

Meanwhile, homeless support groups often claim housing rights when it comes to the occupation of public space. Such movements, calling for an end to social exclusion as the root problem of rough sleepers, often make the headlines. However, in Japan, these support groups and local governments tend to end up fighting, the first representing rough sleepers and the latter local residents. In Hong Kong, support groups have moved from the fighting to negotiating to working together, whereas in Japan their relationship with the government depends on the city.

5: Location Conflict

There is also location conflict over interim housing facilities (transit housing), where ex-homeless people stay, and it is a bottleneck in implementing measures for the homeless. In communities with interim housing facilities (transit housing), the negative image of rough sleepers is associated even with housing where ex-homeless-people who could not afford housing or had family conflicts stay, and such housing ends up being labeled a nuisance. In such cases, the administrators, who established the housing, and city councilors or community associations end up being the principal actors, and there is hardly any involvement of the support groups referred to above, let alone the ex-homeless people who stay in the housing. Even though homeless people are spatially included in the interim housing facilities (transit housing), the housing itself is still socially excluded from the community.

6: From Transit Housing to Community Life

The existing interim housing facilities (transit housing) consist of those which Governments have managed to build after negotiating with local communities and those which NGOs and other groups established, quietly choosing a site in a local community. The next step for ex-homeless people is to leave the interim housing facilities (transit housing) and start living in local communities. Ex-homeless people move from sleeping rough (space of rough sleeping) to community life (place of community life). However, many ex-homeless people have a hard time living independently after entering the community and getting their own places, and some go back to sleeping rough.

7: Small Government, Self-Reliance

In recent years, the argument for small government and neo-liberal self-reliance has been emphasized within the framework of urban governance. Urban governments are responsible for maintaining residential living and intervening to help the homeless as they return to work and life. Hong Kong and Japan have emphasized providing housing and welfare services, respectively. Small government (the argument for small government) aims to minimize the financial burden by transferring some responsibilities to the private sector. One of the ideologies to support this scheme places emphasis on the nurturing of self-reliance. However, the wide variety of homeless people, including mother-child families, are the most likely to be hurt by (vulnerable) this approach.

8: For Various Types of Self-Reliance

Urban politics tends to argue about how much urban governments should be responsible for the maintenance and management of facilities or financial assistance (public assistance) to support homeless people. However, in recent years, homeless people have started becoming self-reliant in various ways, particularly in large cities. Based on the premise that the above-mentioned self-sufficiency support system is functioning, various types of self-sufficiency can be seen including: 1) self-reliance based on regular employment, 2) self-reliance based on public employment, 3) self-reliance based equally on employment and financial assistance (public assistance), 4) self-reliance while participating in volunteer welfare work, 5) self-reliance in maintaining a minimal daily lifestyle, and 6) self-reliance while sleeping rough. However, public policies to promote self-reliance types 3) to 5) have not been fully developed, and it has become apparent that public policies are deficient in these areas. NPOs and private groups need to take the lead in these areas, working actively and flexibly as the new public.

9: Intervention as the New Public

Urban governments will be responsible for providing backup support for these activities and building a system for cooperation. It will be a perfect opportunity to eliminate the long-term negative effects of urban governance where governments or residents worked in isolation. Now that it has become clear that urban governments cannot take the initiative in everything as they make policies to support the self-reliance of homeless people, it can be said that governments, NPOs, and civic organizations have started working together in forming urban policies. In Hong Kong, where the development of social

welfare and pension systems has been relatively delayed, NGOs have taken the initiative in this arena.

10: Civic Consensus, Self-Determination

Urban governments should be responsible for creating an environment where governments, NPOs, and civic organizations can promote work sharing and also for building a civic consensus for creating an environment where society is accepting of homeless people and homeless people can start afresh. Of course, at the individual level, homeless people must be guaranteed an environment where they can think about, independently and with support, rebuilding their lives, taking steps towards self-determination or reciprocal decision-making, being involved, and retrieving or acquiring status in the social system. At the same time, for homeless people who choose to be self-reliance as rough sleepers, there needs to be people who can watch over them for the time being, and also a civic consensus needs to be built that accepts their choice.

11: Concept of Self-reliance for Homeless People in a Broader Sense

Young people's issues and the homeless issue are becoming borderless. NEET (young people Not in Education, Employment or Training) and "freeters" or part-time jobbers can be related to the homeless issue. The concept of self-reliance for homeless people in a broader sense should be reexamined in industrialized capitalist cities. These cities, in collaboration with the new public, will definitely need to implement suitable policies necessary to support the wide variety of homeless people, while considering the various forms that their self-reliance can take. A challenge that arises from the implementation of these support policies is that homeless people suffering from alcohol or drug addiction become increasingly dependent on such policies, as can already be seen in the U.S. and Europe.

12: Reexamination of Urban Spatial Configuration

This can lead to changes in urban governance for people who are socially excluded and consequently to a reexamination of the form society should take. Industrialized capitalist cities are responsible for placing greater importance, as a new mode of urban governance, on such measures as creating an urban environment that is well disposed towards homeless people and preparing urban societal resources to support them. Reexamining redevelopment, eviction, and reorganization of urban space including housing in poorer areas and low-income inner cities is also an important theme for urban governance.

13: Inner City Needs to be Rebuilt in Various Ways

It seems that there often exists a societal division between the light and dark sides of a city, as at the border of the inner city. In order to create a society that enables various types of independence for homeless people, this inner city needs to be rebuilt in various ways. This does not mean making the splits or faults in the landscape invisible, for example by constructing large buildings in an effort at redevelopment, but rather it means changing the spatiality that conditions social living into spatiality that allows a diversity of social life, with due consideration for the historical and geographical context. Exclusion is more severe in the cities of the U.S. and Europe, and we fully understand that urban governance has been struggling in this context. Is this perhaps a utopian project?

14: Space of Hope, Space of Exile

If we get into a discussion about self-realization through acquiring one's own space or home and realizing one's dreams, we have to admit that measures to aid the homeless might be, in a sense, a denial of such space. However, some spaces in a city function as shelters including unnoticed public spaces, riverbeds, and waterfront areas. These spaces are where exiles of all ages and countries have been ending up under various circumstances. If they are evicted from these places, the entire city will go off the rail.