

Engineering the Global Stage: A Comparative Study of “Street-Level Fairness” in Times Square and Asakusa

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Abstract This article investigates the social conflicts which implemented today's streets through two distinct urban models in polarizing characters: the secular-commercial evolution of Times Square, New York, and the religious-traditional revival of Asakusa, Tokyo. This study analyzes how historical upheavals, the 1929 Great Depression and the 1945 Tokyo air raids, triggered severe social conflict, and what efforts society made to mediate with the government during periods of cultural and economic turmoil, utilizing the ‘Inceptive Point (IP)’ framework. While the Asakusa area has cultivated a ‘religious identity’ centered around Senso-Ji Temple, Times Square has modernized the city’s character through mixed-use development that attracts cultural visitors using diverse ground transportation. Both areas have revitalized their local economies while respecting the spiritual values cherished by residents. Analysis of these streets revealed that several factors in the area’s development reflect broader global issues and solutions that bring significant changes to society. Thus, this article argues that “Street-Level Fairness” achieved in these local districts through social conflict is a fundamental prerequisite for securing the dignity of human activity, and also presents an expandable blueprint for navigating the global “poly-crisis” of the 21st century, such as wars, migrations, and the amplification of Artificial Intelligence.

Introduction: The Global Crisis and the Local Street

As we approach the mid-2020s, the global community is besieged by a “crisis of civilization” that transcends national borders. As noted in the volume’s preface, the convergence of the post-pandemic recovery, the protracted conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine, and the instability in Myanmar has created a climate of systemic uncertainty. In advanced economies like Japan, these macro-pressure are exacerbated by a declining birthrate, an aging population, and a volatile currency, all of which threaten the “Social Fairness” that underpins democratic stability. As artificial intelligence permeates every industry rapidly, the concept of “Fairness” has already significantly faded. In post-singularity scenarios, only a minority among the world’s population of over 8 billion holds the reigns, while the majority will accept the changes of business and livelihoods effortlessly.

How can we achieve “Fairness” that harmonizes the extensive changes in our streets with humanity? “Fairness” is not an abstract concept; it is a lived experience that is contested and negotiated on the street level. Urban design is the physical manifestation of these negotiations, offering solutions to conflicts within the local area. When we design streets, we are not merely laying down asphalt and steel. We forge irreversible change by redistributing power, memory, and opportunity, and by impacting existing local residents. Social balance, such as ‘Fairness’, requires communication even amidst conflict.

National territory, tools for reconciliation among people, and such changes in major industries have a profound impact on human society. Moreover, streets absorb the changes into physicality

and implement the social narratives. This chapter posits that by studying how “Social Conflicts” were resolved in iconic urban districts after catastrophic IPs, we can identify the principles of “Mediated Peace” necessary to address our current global crisis and massive changes. From the nation to the local community, current social tensions can serve as the Inceptive Point (IP) for urban experts and economists to seek solutions.

Theoretical Framework: The Key Factors in Urban Conflicts

To analyze these case studies, we must understand the “Socio-Environmental Setting (SES)”. Every district operates within a delicate balance between three forces:

- (1) The Agents of Development: They are the prominent agents who introduced social changes consolidated by regional development. These are the entities (government, companies, or institutions) that lead social change and propose solutions to problems raised from the IP. In the cases of Times Square and Asakusa, these stakeholders generate “Amplified Benefits” by concretizing the social context of conflict through modernization and capital-intensive projects.
- (2) The Residents and Local Stakeholders: These are the social respondents most impacted by the problems arising from regional development. These individuals and small organizations yearn for the continuity of a place’s “local character”, the livelihoods that existed before the IP, the inheritance of streets and social values, heritage, and regional distinctiveness. These also serve as a source for urban intellectuality responding to social conflicts.
- (3) The Inceptive Point (IP): A transformative event that destabilizes the SES, forcing a renegotiation of social contracts. The architects and prominent social agents take the problem-solving activities at this point, where the prominent local changes triggers. The conflict arises when the agent’s vision for “De-localization of Times Square” (standardizing space for global consumption) clashes with the Resident’s need for “Place-making respecting traditionality of Asakusa” (preserving local identity).
- (4) Mediator :The scale of conflict determines the scale of development. Mediators assess the degree of conflict among actors participating in development, communicate social challenges, and engage in intellectual activities and proactive responses to realize “fairness” in the future. This category includes communities with shared purposes that accept or reject proposals from key actors; proactive individuals who express their views on social challenges through forms such as art, publishing, and broadcasting; and social institutions that organize discussion and action.

Case Study I: Times Square – The Secular Conflict of “Middletown”

Times Square’s IP was the 1929 Great Depression. Before the IP, the light industries, commercials, and theaters occupied the area with various on-ground transportation for local visitors. This project necessitated a substantial social framework, including New Deal policies, varied business trends, and community regulations. As a result, the area transformed into a “Middletown”, a destination for holding business elites’ investments and a hub for communication and culture, featuring an efficient street for the public.

1. The Conflict of Representation

According to Le Corbusier, the modern city is characterized by skyscrapers, efficient streets, and ample open space. However, in the decades following his design, Times Square demolished theaters and filled the area with skyscrapers, an attempt to reject Le Corbusier’s urban planning and maximize buildable area for investors’ profit. The politics, as the mediator between the urban

ideology and business benefits, involved the zoning changes approved by the business groups for urban development in support of urban progress and Pluralism. The rise of subcultures, including the strip show business and marginalized urban groups, created a diverse but “blighted” environment in the eyes of the city’s political elite. The “42nd Street Development Project (42DP)” of the 1980s was an attempt by the “Agents” to regain control through “Disneyfication”.

2. Resolution through Civic Activism

The resolution in Times Square was achieved not through total suppression, but through “Negotiated Fairness”. Civil organizations and preservationist groups (e.g., Save the Theaters) acted as secondary agents, forcing the primary developers to incorporate cultural preservation into their economic models. This demonstrates that in a secular context, fairness is achieved through the participation of diverse actors, and no single actor can exert influence over the region based solely on their own social ideology or monopolize the region's future.

Case Study II: Asakusa – Deepening the Analysis of Religious Agency

Asakusa presents a radically different model of conflict resolution. Its IP was the 1945 Tokyo Air Raids, which reduced the district to rubble. Here, the primary “Agent” was not a corporation or a state body, but a religious institution: Senso-Ji Temple. The government, which held ownership of the Asakusa district prior to the IP, where maximized the district’s value by thoroughly restoring the streets destroyed in the air raids and respecting the memories of local residents, the streetscape, and the historical significance of Tokyo’s oldest Buddhist temple.

1. The Temple as an Ontological Mediator

Unlike the secular agents in New York, Senso-Ji’s agency is rooted in a “Non-Materialistic Logic”. Senso-Ji Temple, belonging to the Shō Kannon sect, worked to revitalize the local commercial district of Rokku 六区 Street and cared for street vendors facing government sanctions and accepted the marginalized business after the war. As a Buddhist institution, the area was a special zone where vertical construction was regulated based on the height of the Pagoda. In the post-war chaos, the temple faced a profound social conflict: how to fund the reconstruction of its sacred halls without selling its soul to the “profane” interests of predatory developers.

Religious Agency in Asakusa functioned through three key mechanisms:

- (1) Protective Land Stewardship: The ownership of the Asakusa area was complexly entangled between government and Senso-Ji since the Meiji. After the IP, the Tokyo government retained the right to restore the area through re-planning, but it was restored to its original state. Buddhism agency and the memories of local residents were respected with far greater value than the “De-localization” caused by private development or government rezoning.
- (2) The Sacred-Profane Synergy: The temple allowed for "Entertainment Streets, the Rokku 六区 (the profane)" to flourish around it, recognizing that the “Human Psyche” requires both spiritual solace and communal joy. This was not a compromise of faith, but a religious embrace of the human condition based on the Six Books of Philosophy.
- (3) The Conflict of the “Hyoutan-ike ひょうたん池 (Gourd Pond)”: A critical moment of social conflict occurred in 1951 when the temple faced pressure to fill in the historic pond for commercial use. The resolution involved a complex negotiation between the temple’s need for reconstruction funds and the community’s need for public “Water Scenery”. The eventual sale of the pond area was a “Sacrifice” made to ensure the greater survival of the temple’s core, the Kannon Hall.

2. Religious Fairness vs. Economic Fairness

In Asakusa, “Fairness” was defined through Reciprocity. The temple provided the spiritual “Anchor”, while the merchants of the Nakamise-dori provided the economic “Engine”. Because the temple’s ultimate loyalty was to the Kannon (Goddess of Mercy) rather than a board of directors, it could act as a “Buffer” against the extreme volatility of the market. This religious agency provided a sense of “Ontological Security” to the residents, which is often missing in secular urban development. Senso-Ji, as a spiritual Author and stakeholder in local development, demonstrated a successful case of tradition-based development by empowering local businesses on the foundation of residents’ firm popularity.

Synthesis: Street-Level Lessons for Global Peace

The problem with development today is that it has lost its balance with humanity’s inherent identity, history, indigenous habitats, and spiritual precedents. It promotes Fairness, contributing to peaceful mediation between existing entities and urban changes. The comparison between Times Square and Asakusa reveals a fundamental truth for our era of global crisis: Fairness is the result of a “Humanistic Perspective” on conflict.

1. Mediated Agency as a Global Model

In both case studies, the “Success” of the district was not measured by the absence of conflict, but by the presence of a Mediator. In New York, these were politics and the civil movements; in Asakusa, it was the Senso-Ji, the prime religious institution of the precinct.

For the Ukraine/Palestine Conflicts: The lesson is that peace requires “Intermediary Organizations” that are respected by both the state (Agent) and the people (Residents). These states struggle to make them independent states from surroundings and assure the residents safe due to the wars by the government decisions. The scale of its magnitude is incomparable to regional scope and seeking “Political and Institutional Leadership” is essential. NATO, the United States, the UN, and the EU are peace policy stakeholders engaged in negotiations to end the conflict.

During the Great Depression, the IP of Times Square, the U.S. government implemented large-scale administrative measures, including lowering interest rates (to 2.25% in 1933) to support nationwide infrastructure construction projects, prohibiting gold privatization through Executive Order 6102, and allowing regional banks under the Federal Reserve System to set interest rates. This demonstrates that Times Square’s development was influenced by infrastructure projects, namely the construction of LaGuardia Airport and the Lincoln Tunnel, which increased inbound visitors from outside the area. Furthermore, these developments altered investor preferences, boosting urban value and leading to changes in Times Square ownership. Consequently, rising prices and soaring rents made it difficult for small businesses to operate in Times Square during the 1950s. This case illustrates how macro-level crises impact street life and business patterns. In times of national crisis, individuals inevitably become dependent on the unilateral macro-level policies, unable to manage their local lives but merely subject to the effects of those policies. The recent crisis in Ukraine/Palestine will substantially change urban lives; this crisis event becomes the IP of any social and street changes. There has to be a “Bridge Mediator” connecting the gap between the peace Agents and Residents like Senso-Ji of Asakusa.

For the Global South: The Asakusa model suggests that “Indigenous/Traditional Agency” can be a powerful shield against the “De-localization” of global capital. Tradition and indigenous identity can be championed by authoritative institutions with strong local backing. Social contributions to address people’s hardships are essential. Sensō-Ji has secured the steadfast support of local residents

and the community in the face of Tokyo's progressive currents.

Southern hemisphere countries, namely Latin America, South Africa, and developing Asian nations, generally have relatively lower GDP compared to Northern countries such as North America and Europe. Despite possessing mineral resources and natural resources preserved from development, these countries suffer from fiscal deficits, have unstable social systems, and struggle to provide even basic sources of livelihood. Moreover, the people of these nations have long relied on indigenous and historical religions for spiritual stability. The Times Square case raised suspicions that religious institutions had neglected their social contributions to local development. Senso-Ji contributed as a stakeholder in the local community by welcoming local merchants and street vendors to the Asakusa area. These activities not only helped strengthen the role of religious institutions as entities caring for the community in the postwar period, but also secured the financial support necessary to rebuild destroyed Buddhist structures and revitalize the local economy. This contrasts with the case of Times Square, where religious institutions have declined amid social change alongside secular urban growth. The Asakusa case demonstrates that religious institutions can still function as social stakeholders and regulators participating in conservative development. The popularity of "Religious Institutions" through social contributions is a key factor in fostering affection among local residents of the Global South.

For Rapid Change Led by the AI: Yuval Harari, the prominent author of the humanities publication 'Sapience', presented a serious scenario at the World Economic Forum (WEF) held in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2026, warning of the world societies; AI (Artificial Intelligence) agent's inconsistency would be challenged by the strategic deception.

“...Four billion years of evolution have demonstrated that anything that wants to survive learns to lie and manipulate. The last four years have demonstrated that AI agents can acquire the will to survive and that AIs have already learned how to lie...”

Elon Musk, founder of Tesla and SpaceX, mentioned in an interview with BlackRock CEO Larry Fink at the World Economic Forum (WEF) that robots armed with artificial intelligence will become deeply embedded in human life at home and everywhere. He expressed confidence that there is no barrier to resisting these changes that artificial intelligence is forcing upon human society. Today, the giants of the artificial intelligence industry are rapidly transforming our lives using technology that remains unfamiliar to the vast majority worldwide. However, addressing social issues concerning the consistency, inconsistency, and complexity of judgment must necessarily include the process of social reasoning.

In response to this, we can learn lessons from the Times Square case. "Politics" can serve as a mediator, representing citizens and acting as a check on such massive social change. The advent of artificial intelligence has contributed to enhancing mass production in efficiency by simplifying problem-solving approaches. Businesses are now moving beyond the conventional approach, where workforce size dictates productivity and profit potential. This enables "putting less to produce more" across all industries. Furthermore, it physically transforms not just the visualization of ideas, but also social activities, leisure pursuits, and culture on the streets. Humanoids assert an imposing presence as part of street occupancy. The speed of deep learning processes is so rapid that there is scarce opportunity to analyze their pros and cons through social oversight. In general, no barriers are expected to provoke a social backlash against such a large-scale change in humanity. Analysis of these changes is predominantly conducted by AI company stakeholders and AI researchers. In 1900s, the development of Times Square confronted conflicts from the outset between the cultural

and commercial changes driven by the growth of the film industry and the existing theaters in the area. During the 1980s 42nd Street Redevelopment Plan, cultural facilities were demolished, prompting social activists to strive to preserve the existing theaters and protect the community's unique identity by halting extensive changes. These efforts secured political approval, successfully mediating the conflict between social change, business interests, and the community. Despite the benefits touted by industry stakeholders, the need for social movements to address serious societal changes, such as job losses, shifts in lifestyle, and alterations in social activities, is equally urgent. "Politics" as the mediator is the last line before this huge change threatens the "Human Psyche".

2. The Role of the "Human Psyche"

The "Human Psyche" is the starting point that endows human beings in society with dignity. From the Paleolithic era, the human psyche could be glimpsed through architectural elements like huts and burial grounds, which served as tools to protect kinship and emotional bonds from external threats and to form communities. By the Neolithic era, cities were built through agriculture, technology, the role of women within the family, and the development of language for socialization. As time progressed, the "Human Psyche" contributed to community formation centered around social hierarchy, musical and military instruments, and the pursuit of shared interests. Today's urban development pursues materialistic outcomes such as the economic growth, population influx, and the formation of physical hierarchies. Yet it fails to consider residents as human beings with souls and memories, entities whose emotions, wills, and behaviors shape their experiences. As the preface to this volume emphasizes, the restoration of justice requires us to reflect on the principles of the "Human Psyche". This expands social activities to cultivate social consensus until it is prohibited by law, and fuels passion for the mischief of social change.

Architectural projects that nurtured individual spirituality and shared community interests have recast the value of the city center in terms of secularism and conservatism during the process of reimagining urban character. In the process of shaping the urban character, social activities were implemented to address changes in physical elements, enhance intellectual standards, and implement policy changes to solve the problems confronting cities; This was the process of finding "Fairness" of Society in Times Square and Asakusa.

The anxiety individuals felt about rapid change and internal community conflicts manifested in the form of clashes at Asakusa and Times Square. Through these changes, we realized that human psyche plays a crucial role in responding to societal shifts, and that it must be respected in the process of public discourse and exploration through art, online/offline discussions, and spiritual activities. In Asakusa, the religious agency addressed the "Soul" of the city. Senso-Ji has long been respected for the contributions of Buddhists who have served the local community since the IP. Soul of Buddhists in supports of local residents achieved social balance by regulating the urban character of streets even amid the surrounding urbanization, it has contributed to the development of the local economy. In Times Square, the preservation of theaters addressed the "Memory" of the city. The memory of the streets awakened people to the significance of urbanization respecting long-time residents, and despite the fact that all development in a metropolis carries "amplified benefits", it reaffirmed that importance. Asakusa and Times Square are the exemplary districts that attempted the social balance in planning, well-depicted the Karl Polanyi's "Dual Movement".

Today's urban development tends to pursue amplified benefits by perceiving people as development tools while advancing in a materialistic direction. However, when considering humanistic "Fairness" that respects the diversity of residents with different souls and memories, a

social balance between economic growth and the local characteristics rooted in religion and tradition is essential. Human psyche is not merely a nervous system for perceiving emotions or temporary feelings, but a control mechanism that either rejects or commands the perception of tangible reality sensed through the five senses, and a moral right to resist imposed change. True “Social Fairness” can only be realized when urban design takes into account these non-material needs that cultivate human dignity.

Conclusion: Engineering a “Just Peace”

From the perspective of engineering design, the “Street” is the most complex machine we have ever built. It is a machine for social interaction, economic exchange, and spiritual expression. To resolve the “Social Conflicts” of our time, from the streets of Manhattan to the war-torn avenues of the Middle East, we must move beyond the “Agent-centric” model of development. Politics wields the last card in regulating the impact of AI disruption. Even if change yields positive results, fairness cannot be secured without a fierce debate and discussion. This study demonstrates the potential to contribute to peacebuilding by comparing and analyzing the social activities of internationally recognized entertainment districts, reflecting social actors in constructing urban consequences and recognizing issues in even global model.

Universities are home to potential “Mediators”, engineers, scientists, educators, architects, and social scientists, who are mindful about humanity. We must empower “Mediators” who can bridge the gap between the sacred and the profane, the global and the local. The “Some Case Studies” presented here show that even in the wake of total destruction or economic collapse, a “Just Peace” is possible if we prioritize humanistic values over profit-intensive metrics. The streets of the future must not be sites of exclusion, but “Stages of Fairness” where the diverse voices of humanity can coexist in a mediated, sustainable peace.

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