

The Transformative Nature of *Shotengai* Shopping Areas

—A case study of Osu Cinema—

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The cinema is a pleasure that became an impossibility during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. With social distancing and open ventilation regulations, most movie theaters closed for a period of time. Contemporary theaters are constructed with hundreds of seats and giant screens but this has not always been the case. In the early days of the cinema, theaters were often much smaller. In Japan, theaters halls began to be built in the early 1900s and in Nagoya many were constructed in the popular *shotengai* shopping district of Osu Kannon. Following recent research conducted by the author dealing with the potential vibrancy of *shotengai* shopping areas, the case of the cinema in this environment is poignant.

In recent years, Osu Kannon has not been known as a center for movie theaters. It is popular with residents as a shopping destination for youth and older fashion. Under non-pandemic conditions, the area is bustles with activity and a variety of eateries – from traditional to trendy. The intersection of electronics and anime shops with the historical assembly of religious temples and shrines demonstrates how this *shotengai* shopping district possesses a unique flare.

The appearance of Osu Kannon has changed tremendously over the years. In the early 1900s the *shotengai* boasted dozens of theaters, however, by the bubble period of the 1980's they had all

closed their doors. Currently, 'Osu Cinema' is the sole theater operating in the area. This article focuses on the establishment's experience during the pandemic, and the greater role of the cinema in the transitory nature of *shotengai* as the heart of a community.

***Shotengai* and Osu Kannon**

Shotengai are the traditional shopping areas in Japan. Usually they are located in the center of a town or village, otherwise they emerged on a route towards another business center; these small business locales take many forms. According to 'The Report on Current Situation of *Shotengai* Shopping Districts: Fiscal Year 2018' from the National Federation of Shopping Center Promotion Associations, a *shotengai* is considered an area 1) consisting predominantly of small businesses or service style shops and 2) possessing some form of a business association to which stores can belong to if they so choose (2019, p.2). *Shotengai* are ubiquitous around the nation but with pressure from convenience stores, large shopping malls, and a shrinking population, there has been great consternation regarding the survivability of such traditional social centers (Fujioka, 2016, p. 39; Tsuji, 2013, p. 20).

Osu Kannon is the premier *shotengai* in the Nagoya area. Many others such as Endoji and Jingumae exist, however none maintain the 400-year history, nor the scale of Osu (Nagoya Times Organization, 2014, p. 42). With nearly 1200

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shops in the area, Osu Kannon experienced great expansion during the Meiji Period when the Bansho-ji temple was ordered by the government to sell a large portion of its grounds for an expanded market area (Yamamura, p.50). The notoriety of the district was recognized to the extent that in the early 1900s Osu Kannon was known as one of the ‘three great business centers’ behind Asakusa in Tokyo and Sennichimae in Osaka (Kieta Eigakan No Kioku, n.d.).

In interviews with the head of the Osu Kannon *Shotengai* District Association, Shoji Hotta, he mentioned the changing nature of the business district over time. Particularly with the Covid-19 pandemic, stores were under great pressure in continuing their business activities (January, 2021). This flexible aspect of the *shotengai* is not only visible with recent changes, but over a greater temporal period as seen in the case of movie theaters.

The Theaters of Osu Kannon

The first dedicated movie theater in Japan was Denki-kan built in 1903 in Asakusa, Tokyo. Bunmei-kan was the first cinema in Nagoya built in 1908 (Ito, 1984, p. 118). It was the 3rd to be built in Japan and was located in the Osu Kannon *shotengai* area, which at the time was recognized as one of the largest business centers in Japan (AyC, 2020). Sekai-kan followed nearby with an opening in 1913 and Yuraku-kan opened in 1916 as the first cinema to open within the area provided by the Bansho-ji Temple in to create the Osu Kannon shopping district (Ito, 1984, p. 126). By the 1920s there were 23 different theaters that had sprung up in the area, demonstrating the booming popularity of the media (AyC, 2020).

In the period between World War 1 and World War 2 there was a flurry of development in the industry. Early on, silent movies from Hollywood featuring Charlie Chaplin or films such as ‘The Sheik’ (1921) featuring Rudolph Valentino

premiered in the theaters of Osu Kannon (Ito, 1980, pp. 20-44).

As movies do today, these motion pictures showed a fantastical world of scenery, peoples, buildings, and cultures during a time with no television and international travel was near impossible for many.

Quickly Japanese directors began creating more works on themes familiar to their audiences. *Jidaigeki* stories (period pieces) by early directors such as Numata Koroku and Masao Inoue became available in the late 1910s and into the 1920s (pp. 18-45). As the Pacific War drew on through the 30s, the movie theaters of Osu began to feature more military related subjects. *Mud and Soldiers* by Tomotaka Tasaka (1939) and *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya* by Kajiro Yamamoto (1942) were two works which played in Nagoya theaters and have received international notoriety (pp. 73-75).



Figure 1: Taiyo-kan, est. 1921 (Ito, 1980, p. 13)

Osu Kannon continued to be a center for film in the post-war years. In the 1950s, there still

remained a great number of theaters in the Osu Kannon area as can be seen in Figure 2. Some had closed down and new ones had opened but Osu maintained its position as the most popular place to open a theater in the city, with some streets hosting multiple theaters in a line beside each other. By 1988 however, the last movie theater in the area, Meiga-za, closed its doors bringing a denouement to a vibrant period of Osu Kannon's past (Kieta Eigakan no Kioku, n.d.).



Figure 2: 1958 map of existing theaters in Osu Kannon (AyC, 2020)

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Bunmei-kan | 2 Meiga-za |
| 3 Minato-za | 4 Kinema Kaikan |
| 5 Taiyo-kan | 6 OS Gekijo |
| 7 Toyo Gekijo | 8 Akamon Gekijo |
| 9 Nikkatsu Cinema | 10 Osu Daiei Gekijo |
| 11 Nagoya Gekijo | 12 Banshoji Nikkatsu |
| 13 Osu Cinema (currently active) | |

The Return of Osu Cinema

As a nostalgic look to the history of Osu Kannon, Osu Cinema opened its doors as the only movie theater that is currently active in the shopping area. Similar to the theaters of the past in the *shotengai*, it is a small venue with a single screen and a maximum of 42 seats. An interview with one of the managers of the theater, Kaoru Sugiyama, shed light on the difficulties involved in maintaining the business. The theater was

founded in March 2019 as a Non-Profit Organization by a group who grew up knowing the venerated Osu Kannon as “an area that was once known for its cinemas” (Sugiyama, September 2022). With the Covid-19 pandemic on the horizon, they were not able to sustain the business venture and closed the venue after a year of activity. Some of the members were committed to continuing the enterprise and reformed the organization as a company, re-opening the theater in July, 2020.

The period during the pandemic was particularly rough. Similar to many countries around the world, in Japan April through June of 2020 was a period where most activity besides essential services came to a halt. Sugiyama stated “with people not leaving their homes at all for a period and then concerns for social distancing, it was hard to imagine how we would get by”. Financial support measures provided by the government helped in getting the cinema through the rough times and as Japan is currently coming to terms with post-pandemic changes, small businesses like the Osu Cinema are attempting to reinvigorate activities as best they can.



Figure 3: Osu Cinema (living.jp, 2019)

The organization running the theater remains dedicated to establishing Osu Cinema in the community. Sugiyama asserted, “we want to provide a space where people can really enjoy a movie”. With rental space available, the theater also offers a venue for e-sports or v-tubers, as well as smaller social gatherings which could be

augmented with a large video screen (Osu Cinema, 2022). In this way, Osu Cinema aims at attracting customers who could not possibly afford the costs of renting a larger venue. This flexibility is a merit to the organization which with proper promotion can be easily accessed by a wide range of members of the community.

Conclusion

Osu Kannon is a cherished location in Nagoya and as a *shotengai* shopping district it acts as a mirror to the current state of the city. The regularly changing nature of more prosperous shopping areas is not limited to recent years. Reflecting on their composition in the past demonstrates fundamental shifts in how people spend their free time and act as consumers. Sugiyama's expression of Osu Kannon as a region "where cinemas have disappeared" is a testimonial to the mercurial nature of *shotengai*. In a part of the city that had possessed dozens of cinemas in the past to none at all, Osu Cinema is a reflection of a rich history. Unlike large scale shopping malls and movie theaters which exhibit a more static nature, *shotengai* shopping districts provide a space in which ambitious minded individuals can create a service at a small scale with relatively little overhead cost.

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