
 PAPERS

Elements of Credible Cultural Diplomacy: “Landmarks of New York” in Tokyo

MARK J. DAVIDSON

Alan Henrikson, Professor of Diplomacy at The Fletcher School, has identified an incisive architectural paradigm for credible—and successful—cultural diplomacy. He convincingly argues that

Cultural diplomacy, to be most effective, should be structured. It is helpful if there is a framework for it, an overarching structural image (not necessarily a formal organization), to which all participants in a dialogue or exchange can refer. This can give some of the detailed work of cultural diplomacy context, a larger frame of reference, beyond individual transactions or even programs. It can serve as a scaffolding, useful in building something more solid, longer-lasting.¹

In 2006, as Cultural Attaché at the United States Embassy in Tokyo, I oversaw a major cultural diplomacy project that bore out the utility of this metaphor. The project serves as a case study of the structural elements—or building blocks—for credible cultural diplomacy in this age of social

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networking, Al Jazeera, and the Starbucks-ization of the planet. The indispensable role of public diplomacy officers in the field is today, as it always has been, the keystone of our edifice of engagement with foreign publics.

The context for my work in Tokyo from 2002 to 2006 was the maturing of the U.S.–Japan relationship. State Department polling conducted post-9/11 showed that Japanese public sentiment toward the U.S. was

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slowly but steadily worsening.² We were particularly concerned that the decline was greatest among younger, well-educated Japanese—the emerging opinion leaders—too many of whom displayed a kind of cultural disdain, a belief that American culture itself was decadent and even harmful to the world.

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 Thus my mission was to repair the crumbling Japanese opinion of American culture and to reinforce the structure of respect and affection that had maintained a friendship and alliance between our nations for so many decades.

Why would we focus on the dry and technical field of urban planning and historic preservation? The seeds were planted in early 2003 during a grassroots campaign to save the Shin Banraisha, a uniquely beautiful and significant building in Tokyo. Built in 1951–1952, it was the collaborative result of architect Yoshiro Taniguchi, designer Isamu Kenmochi, and Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi. The structure was a powerful symbol of Japan's postwar reconstruction and of the remarkable results of and possibilities for U.S.–Japan cultural exchange.

In the end, no one could dissuade Keio University from its plans to pave over paradise and put up a parking lot—or, in this case, a law school. But in the effort, I discovered that there were significant numbers of Japanese worried that their country was covering itself in concrete from sea to polluted sea—and losing its soul in the process. It was becoming more like America—the America they scorned.

This was not the America I knew. Americans by and large value our architectural heritage, and work hard to preserve it, for the sense of place and historic connection it gives us, and not incidentally, for the tourist dollars it produces. I saw an opening to use this field to show the Japanese a positive face of America, to bring Americans and Japanese together through structured exchanges, and to create a sense of shared interest and interest in sharing.

BRINGING NEW YORK TO TOKYO

Working with a modest photography exhibit called “Landmarks of New York,” organized by the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the New York–Tokyo Sister City relationship in 2006, the U.S. Embassy’s Cultural Section built a comprehensive, multifaceted, multi-media cultural diplomacy campaign around the theme of historic preservation. Our goals were threefold:

- To sensitize Japanese elite and public opinion to the loss of their own architectural patrimony, while fostering the sense that Americans value our cultural heritage and that we have cultural values and policy models worthy of consideration;
- To reach key Japanese decision makers face-to-face with the key messages above and to engage them in fruitful partnerships with the United States; and
- To foster continuing links between American and Japanese institutions and individuals.

Our overarching strategic objective was to construct what Professor Henrikson would call the “cultural diplomacy context” or “scaffolding” for our project to renovate and renew the bonds of mutual understanding and affection holding the U.S.-Japan relationship together.

Structure for Success

Capitalizing on new techniques and technologies, relying on tried-and-true public diplomacy programs, and blessed by a bit of fortuitous good timing, we built our year-long campaign around eight structural elements.

First, we built the foundation by establishing a powerful public-private partnership; you need money to do anything, and you need more of it in Tokyo than in most places. I reached out through my network of local contacts and helped Morgan Stanley Japan understand that it was in their company’s interest to be perceived as a “Landmark of New York.” They signed on and provided support ultimately totaling some \$160,000. We then were able to recruit other big-name partners, including the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, Tokyo’s leading photography museum, Google Earth Japan, and, not least, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. These were not just operating partners but actual institutional influencers in their own right.

Second, the physical centerpiece of the campaign—the actual photo exhibit—provided a venue for personal, face-to-face interaction. The

chosen space was the observation floor of Tokyo's Metropolitan Government Building, or City Hall, one of the most recognized modern landmarks of Tokyo. In addition, the exhibit was enhanced substantially by interactive displays provided by our partners at Google Earth. During the five weeks it was on display, some 60,000 Japanese visited the exhibit—a record for any U.S. Embassy exhibit in Japan.

Almost as important as the 60,000 members of the general public who saw the exhibit were the 300 power brokers who attended the gala opening. Of course, no self-respecting cultural diplomacy event is complete without a party, but in the context of our goals, this event was not fun and games but rather pure business. It physically brought to the exhibit, and to Embassy officers and American experts in attendance, some of the most influential people determining land-use issues in Japan today. Among them were Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, Architect Yoshio Taniguchi (son of the Taniguchi who had designed the Shin Banraisha), and developer Minoru Mori, Japan's self-styled social philosopher-builder who has changed the face of Tokyo and is now doing the same in Shanghai.

Third, the message was spread through a national media campaign, harnessing the power of our media partners, the *Asahi Shimbun* and their affiliated TBS TV network. Articles, reports, and interviews with key

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Fourth, we hit the road, spreading our message through direct interaction with regional audiences and through regional media. We put on a series of seminars at our American Centers in Japan's provincial capitals. As the star attraction, we brought to Japan—with funding from the State

Department's Bureau of International Information Programs—Barbara Lee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, exhibition curator and former Chair of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. We teamed her with Alex Kerr, a well-known American cultural critic and preservationist resident in Kyoto, who we recruited ourselves. In each city, we matched them on stage with local experts and activists. In this way, we connected with local audiences by discussing local issues and getting local media coverage, ty-

ing in the overarching themes with the everyday lives and concerns of the audience.

Fifth, we aimed to “get ’em while they’re young,” building in a youth outreach component. We set up a kids’ photo contest, publicized by the *Asahi* newspaper. Elementary and middle school students throughout the country were invited to take photos of “landmarks” of their community and write an accompanying essay to stimulate classroom and family discussion of what makes a livable community, of the importance of preserving it, and of the American experience. There were hundreds of entries from across Japan and a formal awards ceremony and exhibit was held at Tokyo’s most prestigious photography museum—creating a second preservation exhibit and stimulating more media coverage.

Traditional people-to-people exchanges remain perhaps the single most powerful element of any cultural diplomacy initiative. Technology has not changed human nature. The most compelling exhibit and the most engaging interactive computer program can never replicate the impact of traveling to a foreign country and seeing and experiencing that society firsthand. Therefore, sixth, we set up an International Visitor Program for officials from Japanese port cities, to show them how similar American communities have promoted economic and tourist development through creating arts districts in preserved historic areas. They visited several American cities to explore for themselves our success stories and to establish institutional linkages with U.S. counterparts.

Seventh, we incorporated a scholarly element and an entertainment element by supporting the production of a feature-length documentary film, “Magnificent Obsession,” on the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan.³ Perhaps even more than in the United States, Wright’s name is remembered and honored in the popular culture of Japan. Ironically, it was the near-complete destruction of his Imperial Hotel in Tokyo in a 1970 remodeling project (after surviving the 1923 Kanto earthquake and World War II bombing) that gave birth to the nascent historic preservation movement in Japan. The film, produced by an American and Japanese husband-and-wife team, is a true binational effort and is the first in-depth film assessment of Wright’s impact and legacies in Japan. It stresses that Japan must make greater efforts to preserve its architectural gems, as the United States has done. Following its Embassy-supported premiere (at the Myonichikan, a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed school in Shunjuku, Tokyo), the film was a critical success and has been shown dozens of times in Japan and the U.S. since 2006.

Eighth, and finally, fortune smiled on us in the form of a big-name

celebrity endorsement. President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush visited Japan in November 2005, just as our campaign was getting underway. This was not part of our original plan, but fortune favors the prepared, and we were poised to take advantage of this surprise visit by America's number one power couple. As luck would have it, I was asked to coordinate Mrs. Bush's activities. I built a schedule for her in Kyoto to highlight, in a very public way, historic preservation issues.



An eternal message. (White House photo)

I brought Mrs. Bush to a restored old Kyoto *machiya*—townhouses characteristic of Kyoto—that are being razed to build characterless concrete apartments. Here, she toured the jewel of a house, learned about traditional Kyoto neighborhood life, and participated in a Japanese calligraphy lesson—all, of course, with the news media in tow. The character

she drew—“Eternity”—underscored the importance of preserving what is good. Her visit was broadcast on nationwide TV and replayed constantly on the morning talk shows the next day. Photos appeared in every newspaper nationwide. Even the *Kyoto Shimbun*, a daily usually harshly critical of the U.S. and its values, was impressed, spotlighting Mrs. Bush’s cultural adventure in old Kyoto under the banner headline “Mrs. Bush’s Smile Diplomacy.”⁴ This kind of publicity can’t be bought and this “celebrity endorsement” naturally generated a buzz. In subsequent months, the issue of preserving Kyoto’s *machiya*—and the role of Americans in leading the movement to do so—became a focus of continuing coverage in both national mass media and specialized architectural publications in Japan.

Frameworks of Common Interest and the Last Three Feet

This nearly year-long cultural diplomacy campaign brought thousands of Americans and Japanese into direct personal contact, established new institutional linkages between our societies, and through the media, provided tens of millions of Japanese a new and positive perspective on American culture. It established a framework of common interests between Japanese and Americans.

As then-Director of the United States Information Agency, Edward R. Murrow famously observed in 1963
 that “to be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful.”⁵ In this case, we were credible because we did not insist on our “message,” but we said to our audience,
 in effect: “We have a common challenge here. Let’s talk about it and see if we can’t learn from each other.” And then we built, piece by piece, an architecture and a structure for dialogue.

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The ultimate conclusion, though, is that in this century, as in any other, Murrow’s “last three feet”⁶ remains the operative distance in public diplomacy. Today, as always, effective communication requires real, live people talking face-to-face about issues and ideas. In these days of media overload, it is important to remember that minds cannot be persuaded, hearts cannot be opened, and people cannot be brought together only by spiffy websites or Washington-designed, one-size-fits-all cultural productions—no matter how well-funded.

Effective and credible cultural diplomacy requires the presence of

language-fluent and culturally-sensitive Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) in the field, who—working with skilled locally-engaged staff (LES)—forge partnerships, engage in face-to-face interaction, and translate Washington’s programs and products into terms that are attractive, comprehensible, and persuasive for local audiences.

Today, the credibility and effectiveness of our cultural diplomacy is undercut by the increasing centralization of public diplomacy planning in Washington, a fascination with technological quick-fixes, and blithe assumptions about the power of English-language communications to move foreign hearts and change foreign minds. These problems are symbolized—and exacerbated—by a dearth of FSOs in the Washington-based public diplomacy program bureaus, the chronic and worsening underfunding of our field posts, and continuing reductions in FSOs and LES alike at too many posts.

Congress should support the Administration’s requests for increased resources to address these structural problems. In addition, both branches should heed the recommendations of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, whose June 2008 report on “Getting the People Part Right” proposed a seven-part action plan for enhancing the training, integration, and role of public diplomacy foreign service officers in the Department of State.⁷

Without skilled craftsmen and women on site, even the most majestic architectural plans will never be realized. Adequately trained and funded FSOs in the field are the best builders of our bridges of understanding with the rest of the world, three feet at a time. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Professor Alan Henrikson delivered this commentary at the Edward R. Murrow Conference on April 15, 2008.
- 2 “Favorable” ratings of the U.S. in Japan declined from 77 percent in 2000 to 63 percent in 2006. Figures provided by the Office of Research, U.S. Department of State.
- 3 See *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Buildings and Legacies in Japan*, a film directed by Karen Severns and Kiochi Mori (2005).
- 4 “Bushu fujin no sumaeu gaikoo”, *Kyoto Shimbun*, centerfold, November 17, 1995.
- 5 Edward R. Murrow, Director, United States Information Agency, May 1963. See Public Diplomacy Alumni Association, What is Public Diplomacy. <<http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm>>.
- 6 “It has always seemed to me the real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face to face conversation.” Edward R. Murrow, Director, U.S. Information Agency, ABC TV’s “Issues and Answers,” August 4, 1963.
- 7 *Getting the People Part Right: A Report on the Human Resources Dimension of U.S. Public Diplomacy*, The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, June 25, 2008. <<http://www.state.gov/r/adcompd/>> (accessed October 8, 2008).