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Feminizing Space: Envisioning the future of Pink Cinemas in Japan

As Japan declared the state of emergency due to the spread of COVID-19 and requested its citizens to refrain from going outside starting April 2020, Japan's independent cinemas acted quickly on the imposing crisis that has already inflicted heavy losses on the film industries elsewhere in the world. In response to the financial crisis faced by small independent theaters in danger of being closed down for an extended period of time, two leading film directors Koji Fukada and Ryusuke Hamaguchi as well as Motion Gallery representative Takeshi Otaka initiated an emergency relief crowdfund the Mini-Theater Aid Fund. Those who donate over a certain amount of money would in return receive tickets to future screenings among their chosen mini theaters that take part in this project. Among the 87 mini theaters that joined the project and the 36 still existing pink cinemas across Japan, Cine Roman Ikebukuro stands out as the only pink cinema on the list.¹

Pink cinema refers to cinemas that screen films belong to the Japanese pink film genre which involve nudity or explicit sexual content. "Unlike later hardcore video adult films, these films are soft-core and made to screen in theaters in Cinemascope. They were directed by professionals, and had structured plots and quality images" (Shima, 2009). The popularity of pink films reached its height during the 1980s and gradually dwindled as worries about sexual harassment and hygienic issues take over the frenzied fascination with public screenings. Women in particular are advised to stay away from those cinemas for the sake of

¹ "日本全国成人映画館リスト." PG Pink Film. Accessed April 28, 2020. <http://www.pg-pinkfilm.com/theater/theatertop.htm>.

safety as pink cinemas become the grey zone for (un)solicited sex. The only two remaining pink cinemas in Tokyo today, Okura Theatre Ueno and Cine Roman Ikebukuro, struggle to survive in an age calling for equality, openness and cleanliness as they fail to meet those expected standards. Metropolis Japan journalist Dan Asenlund vividly recalls his visit to Okura Theatre is filled with “raunchy, damp stench”, sexual advancements, and that he buys tickets from a vending machine like the ones in ramen shops. Cine Roman is almost no different from Okura Theatre where transgressions are committed under dimly lit environments. Reading closely Mini-Theatre Aid’s petition, it is not difficult for one to spot the contrast between pink film cinemas’ reality and the ideal of mini theaters as proposed in the petition:

Not to mention the unique selection of screenings, the pamphlets and merchandise lined up at the ticket booths and concessions, the snacks on the merchandise, and the articles about the films being shown posted in the lobby; Fliers and posters of past screenings, among which many masterpieces, as well as staff-made displays in the gallery; of course, there are also the screen, the feel of the chair, and the staff who create and engage visitors with the environment. All of the elements above make up a mini theatre’s unique personality.²

While the Mini-Theatre Aid envisioned mini theaters to induce open communications among filmgoers, pink film cinemas seem to operate strictly upon a code of discretion: The ticket vending machine, for example, is installed to exempt pink filmgoers from unnecessary socializing (the exception might be of the gestural ones made with sex workers inside the

² “未来へつなごう！！多様な映画文化を育んできた全国のミニシアターをみんなで応援 ミニシアター・エイド（Mini-Theater AID）基金,” Motion Gallery, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://motion-gallery.net/projects/minitheateraid>

dark screening rooms). The pink film industry operated for the past several decades catering to the needs of men while systematically excluding female audiences through the social and moral constraints that tend to stop “decent women” from entering. Akira Mori, Sales Manager of Shintocho, says in an interview that “if pink films are screened in appropriate cinemas, female audiences would find it easier to go to these screenings” (Fujii, 2004). Pink film director and actress Yumi Yoshiyuki also admits that even she would find it scary to go to pink cinemas even though she has been in the industry for decades. However, in 2003, more than 200 audiences showed up at a female only pink film screening held at an independent theatre in Shibuya. Laputa Theatre’s *Shintocho Pink Film: Last Film Show*, a pink film program showing films produced by Shintocho Productions is initiated in 2017 has met with great success. If it were not for the pandemic, this annual program will be celebrating its 4th birthday this May. As showcased above, the problem is not that female audiences show no interest in pink films, but rather that their access to pink cinemas is often not met with. Under the backdrop of the complicated politics of mobility and access associated with urbanization and city planning, pink cinemas’ ignorance to the imminent call for gender equality and open access to all poses the greatest threat. As the number of pink cinemas dwindled drastically in recent years, the stark reality pink cinemas face asks for various approaches to feminize the space in order to make them marketable again and to survive.

Cine Roman Ikebukuro’s appearance on the list of Mini-Theater Aid’s list signals a change that has long been called for since the early 2000s. As pink films become a dying phenomenon, they now belong more to the underground movie scene where cinephiles watch them for their rarity, artistic achievement, and their unique historical value just like other obscure experimental shorts or masterpieces. What causes pink cinema’s decline is probably its inability to house the new relationship between pink films and their spectators within its

enclosure, which has already shifted away from the sexually explicit goal of pleasure-seeking. Doreen Massey outlines that “what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constituted out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (1994). Just as what is outlined in the Mini-Theatre Aid petition, the fliers, posters, ticket booth and staff members unique to each mini theatre all contribute to the establishment of interconnections among the cinema and its visitors by retain the audiences for a longer period before and after the screenings. These aspects help weaving together a particular web of connections within and beyond the cinema. In other words, a mini theatre is precious and subsequently irreplaceable because it extends its influence on the interpersonal social relations beyond the enclosure of its space and the settled duration of its films.

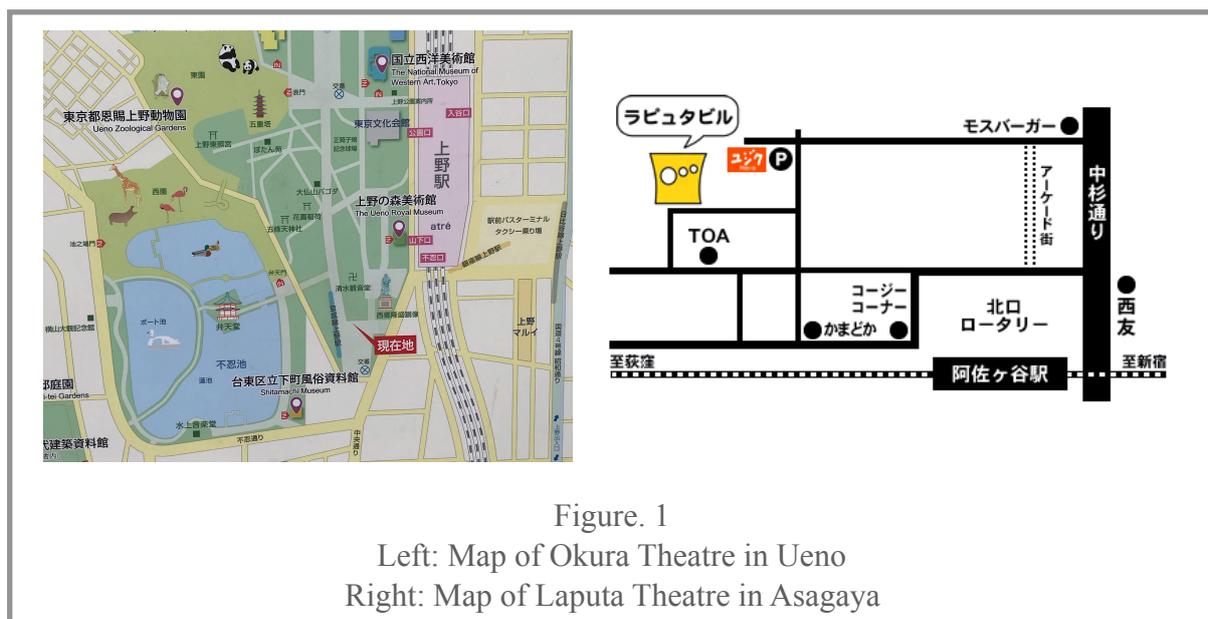
While Cine Roman Ikebukuro and many other pink cinemas have tried to attract more youngsters and especially female audiences, their effort often comes in vain—Sales manager of Shintocho Akira Mori cites several pink cinemas’ failed attempt to single out female only zones or market the cinema as the best place for a date (Fujii, 2004). A possible reason for the failure is that pink cinemas continue to operate on “the old order of preceptive and exclusive places and meaning-endowed durations” (Emberley, 1989). Instead of adjusting pink cinemas to be places housing “particular constellations of social relations” (Massey, 1994) revolving around the appreciation and preservation of pink films, these cinemas remain fixated on what it has been like since their establishment five decades ago. While it is undeniable that Cine Roman Ikebukuro’s participation in the Mini-Theatre Aid (a sign of its belated realization to ally with other mini theaters in order to survive the crisis) is worth celebrating, one cannot help but wonder how long after the pandemic can pink cinemas sustain themselves if at least half of the population do not have access to them? In other words, what can be done to

preserve pink cinema's specificity while change it for the better?

A close examination on two cinemas, Okura Theatre Ueno and Laputa Theatre Asagaya, may provide insights on such questions. The reopening of Okura Theatre Ueno in 2010, one of two still-standing pink cinemas in Tokyo, marks the beginning of its ambitious plan to “put ladies on seats, not just screens” (Bull, 2010). This half-century old cinema has been the guilty pleasure for almost exclusively men despite its un-pleasurable environment permeated with raunchy smell. Just two years before Okura's renovation in 2008, mini theatre Laputa Theatre Asagaya, which is known for the building's resemblance to the fairytale-like castle in Miyazaki's film *Castle in the Sky* (1986), started to screen pink films on a daily basis in its late show program under the direction of cinema manager Yukari Ishii, who is a lover of Toei and Nikkatsu pink films herself (Asenlund, 2017). The two mini theaters, with Okura Theatre also being a pink cinema, represent two different types of reactions to the call for more female audiences at pink film screenings. While both of them aim at feminize the sexually segregated and hyper-masculine space Japanese pink cinemas or films are often associated with, the two cinemas arrived at completely different results—Okura Theatre's renovation turned out to be a change on the surface level (the cinema simply renovated its interior to imitate modern theatre chains' generic decoration); Laputa Theatre, on the other hand, successfully doubled the attendance rate among which a fair share of them are female audiences.

Under the backdrop of Cine Roman Ikebukuro being enlisted in the Mini-Theatre Aid and the dire need for pink cinemas to transform before they step down from Japan's culture scene, it is fruitful to discuss the pros and cons of the respective approaches these two cinemas undertook to accommodate and modify the oftentimes negative social and cultural undertone attached to pink films and pink cinemas. Drawing from the discourse on feminist

urbanism, further examination on how Okura Theatre's reform has affected the reality of the desired outcome—more women in pink cinema—is made possible. Locality and the entangled relationship between these two cinemas and their social and spatial relations contribute to the making of the reality. Instead of juxtaposing the two cinemas in favor of one over the other, it would be fruitful to draw upon specific approaches each reform took and their individual responses that have affected the performance of each cinema after the reformations. Through contextualizing specific approaches and outcomes to the discourse on feminist urban studies, this paper looks to compare and contrast the various approaches and their social implications so as to propose a direction for envisioning the future of pink cinemas in Japan as a special kind of mini theater.



It is necessary to first examine the public sphere and the local communities the two cinemas are embedded in since the economic and social status of the viewership is largely determined by a cinema's locality. Both Okura Theatre and Laputa Theatre are located in close proximity to public transportation hubs and are situated in prominent locations among sectors of different social functions such as dining and shopping centers. [Figure. 1]

However, the public spheres of the two cinemas vary significantly. Within five-minute walking distance from Okura Theatre is the Ueno Park, the largest park in Tokyo and a tourist destination that attracts visitors from a diverse range of social and economical backgrounds all across Japan and the world. Ueno not only is the hub of public museums but it is also where many homeless people in Tokyo assemble. As the area is largely constituted of floating population, Ueno has a relative fragile network of social relations among inhabitants in close proximity to Okura Theatre. Quite contrarily, Asagaya is a residential area with close-knitted communities whose members share a relatively more homogenous social and economic status.³

For Okura Theatre, pedestrians walking pass its entrance showcase a higher degree of diversity than those who are likely to walk pass Laputa Theatre Asagaya. As a multi-functional urban center, Ueno can easily and conveniently accommodate pink filmgoers' desire to be "unrecognizable" from the other so as to be temporarily liberated from moral constraints and legal enforcement measures. In Ueno, without a persistent local community where members watch over each other the streets, the public sphere do not generate what Jane Jacobs describes as "[...] eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street" (Jacobs, 1999). Thus, in Okura Theatre's specific environment, individuals are less likely to be penalized for minor wrongdoings since concerns over reputation is temporary suspended. It is not surprising that such effect substantiates a code of discretion that is abided by both within and beyond the enclosure of Okura Theatre to ensure each visitor's anonymity as they visit. Together they seem to provide

³ The conclusion is arrived at after sorting through data on the flea market guide website fmfm.jp and visits to flea markets held in Asagaya and Ueno. Flea markets in Ueno spread out posters addressing events happening all over Tokyo while flea markets held in Asagaya are generally community-based and target its residents.

a hotbed of the unspoken sexual solicitation that one would not be surprised to see from pink cinemas. To some extent, Ueno's crowded cityscape serves as one of the most persistent camouflage for Okura's visitors even today.

Ethnographer Lakshmi Srinivas notes that “locality is important for the framing and embedding of cinema, for the meanings associated with any particular film or genre” (Srinivas, 2010: 189). The question then arises as how, if at all, Okura Theatre took into consideration its specific locality when making reform decisions. What does the cinema think of itself in relation to the curious tourists passing by soon after exiting the subway station? How about families taking kids to the playground right around the corner at the end of the alley way it is located? [Figure.2] These questions become more and more pressing as “the social relations which constitute a locality increasingly stretch beyond its borders; less and less of these relations are contained within the place itself” (Massey, 1994). For cinemas that are invested in screening pink films on a daily basis, the way they choose to market these films involve negotiating the intricate social and spatial relations within and beyond the cinema.



Figure.2 Outside of Okura Theatre (2019)

While anonymity sustained by Ueno's public sphere seems to be an inalterable situation for Okura Theatre to deal with or take advantage of, viewing the relationship between the cinema and its locality from a different angle generates new insights on the degree of anonymity enjoyed by Okura Theatre visitors. One way to approach this issue is to examine how Okura Theatre's frontage (the intermediate zone between the cinema and the street) is transformed by its way of arranging pink film posters. Okura Theatre puts up a large number of pink film posters with clear denotations of sex and sometimes violence at its entrance. [Figure. 3] It is worth noticing that pink cinemas do have relative freedom modifying and deciding which posters to put on display as Pink film posters are left with a little leeway in regards to censorship and are more open to cinema managers' interpretations. For example, in order to attract more audiences, a local cinema manager once modified and put on the posters of director Kōji Wakamatsu's 1964 film *Akai Hanko* its original title, which failed to pass the censorship because it contains the word *rape*. That is to say that Okura Theatre's stance towards pink films is implicated in the cinema manager's treatment of what posters are put up and how they occupy the frontage.



Figure. 3 Frontage View of Okura Theatre Ueno (2019)

In the case of Okura Theatre, selected pink film posters cover up the entire glass sliding doors at the entrance, blocking the view of the interior from the pedestrians. There are

also bulletin boards pasted with film posters standing right by the street near the pavement. In the open parking space in front of the cinema stand magazine racks with screening schedule booklets designed to look like cheap adult magazines where the covers feature female models posing in solicitous manner. These posters transform the frontage of Okura Theatre, a supposedly neutral public area into one that is charged with lewd, sexist, and improper denotations. The entirety of the frontage forms a frontal and assertive statement showcasing passersby the cinema's own definition of whom the visitors of the pink cinema are—those who are unnerved by showing explicit interest in the salacious content on the posters in public.

Moreover, a look at the different approaches Okura Theatre and Laputa Theatre undertook to highlight erotic elements and the leading actresses in the pink films screened alludes to the potential for Okura Theatre to adopt a less frontal marketing strategy. Even though Okura Theatre has endeavored to invite pink film actresses to attend openings in the hope of shortening the distance between the actress and the audiences, such effort is nonetheless overshadowed by the crassly made posters pasted both in and outside of the cinema. [Figure. 4]



Figure. 4

Left: Poster Arrangement inside Okura Theatre (2019)

Right: The Poster for Laputa Theatre's Annual *Shintosho Pink Film: Last Film Show* (2020)

Although the organization of the posters is part of the marketing strategies the cinema adopted in order to maximize exposure, its effect is counterproductive: whoever exits or enters the cinema has to engage with these posters in a way that the bodily act of moving from the relative neutral public sphere to the sexually charged intermediate zone signals a form of acknowledgement; the bodily engagement translates into the notion that after having interacted with the posters, a person is attracted by their sexually explicit content. Such situation leads to the likely association between Okura Theatre visitors and stereotypes often attributed to red light district frequenters. In other word, even though the public sphere allows visitors to be temporally anonymous from their social and moral constraints, it is important to discern the nuance here—what visitors gain from the specific local sphere is not quite the absolute anonymity where one could completely disown any social label. Contrarily, all visitors are nonetheless indiscriminately stamped with the distinctively derogatory label as “pink filmgoers”.

What the spatial organization of the frontage of Okura Theatre results in is the filtering away of potential visitors who cannot afford to be implicated in the sexist marketing campaign. As “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1990), the act of going to Okura Theatre is a bodily experience that constitutes the act of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1991). Visiting Okura Theatre, especially considering its ostensible display of lecherous posters, is an act that adheres to and is tolerated by the conventional definition of masculinity in Japanese society. For women, however, such spatial organization enacts a form of exclusion based on gender binary coded with unspoken rules that would ultimately prohibit them from entering. In this case, since the cost of being labeled as pink filmgoer is much higher for women, “not going” constitutes the “doing” of gender. The welcoming note the cinema tries to send out deviates

from its original intention and ultimately becomes a rejection note that denies access for many who are vulnerable to being labeled as improper or indecent. On a larger scale, the spatial consequence as shown in the case of Okura Theatre is that the cinematic space ultimately becomes one that “is produced for more affluent users” (Hackworth, 2002). Despite efforts made to publicize the pink films screened, the cinema perpetuates “the subordination of women into the private, reproductive and suburban realm and granting men access into the public, productive and urban realm” (Berg, 2017).



Figure. 5 Frontage View of Laputa Theatre (2019.11)

As “people typically frequent theaters they are accustomed to in parts of the city they are comfortable with” (Srinivas, 2010), the question can be raised next is what kind of place-making would undo the sense of uneasiness when passing by a pink cinema or a mini theatre that people know is screening pink films? Laputa Theatre has its own answer to the question. It presents a way of constructing a more gender neutral space: the only entrance to the building is hidden behind a small garden of sakura tree, bushes, and decorative lights. [Figure. 5] While the whole building is named after Laputa the cinema, the top floor is currently occupied by a French restaurant and in the basement there is a small theatre for live performances that opens its booking to amateur bands and theatre associations. In other words, the three-story building where Laputa Theatre is located is not only a cinema but rather a multifunctional complex that combines public facilities of various social functions.

What visitors choose to do in the building, whether it is to attend a film screening or to dine in at the restaurant, remains ambiguous for the passersby. Through diversifying the experience one can get inside of the building, Laputa Theatre offers a different form of anonymity from that Okura Theatre: instead of sheltering all who enter the place under the guise of a nondescript whole, Laputa Theatre organizes its frontage in a way that blurs one's intended destination rather than one's social identity. In other words, Laputa Theatre manages to deny the association of its visitors with specific labels that might lead to discrimination, judgement, or speculation.

Another key feature of Laputa Theatre is that filmgoers are asked to be present at the scene after purchasing movie tickets and wait for their numbers to be called before they can enter the screening room. It means that people who attend the pink film screenings are inevitably exposed to each other's scrutiny in the common area located on the first floor of the building. In contrast to Okura Theatre's waiting room arrangement where chairs are lined up facing the same direction like the ones in hospital waiting rooms, Laputa Theatre scatters benches and coffee tables across the room for people to rest on and initiate face-to-face conversations. [Figure. 6] Under such circumstances, visitors are propelled to reconsider the social implications of their behaviors as they are constantly under the exposure to the eyes of others. A mutual, autonomous form of supervision generates the far-reaching effect as to filter away people who watch pink films in a theatre only to enjoy its dubious benefits. Echoing Berg's idea that "certain spatial organizations structure certain ways of performing gender and certain ways of performing gender structure certain spatial organizations" (2017), the beneficial circle of interpersonal relationships facilitated by the cinema's spatial organization in turn inform the characteristics of the place. Laputa Theatre retains its reputation as a mini theatre with a unique taste in film and avoids being associated with the heavy sexual

undertone often attributed to pink films and pink cinemas. As Laputa Theatre filters its visitors based on their shared interest in pink films, the visitor's gender differences and their diverse social identities do not hamper their access to the cinema. The cinema's constellation of social relations thus expands beyond its physical enclosure.



Figure. 6

Left: Interior View of Laputa Theatre (2009)

Right: Interior View of Okura Theatre in Preparation for COVID-19 (2020)

The spatial organization of Laputa Theatre also reflects the production of “space for changed gender relations [that] includes femininity [and] women in daily city life” (Berg, 2017). The forming of communities, on the other hand, allows the space that is transformed (masculinized) by common association with the pink film genre to be de-masculinized through ways that operates on the ideas of inclusion and spontaneity.

The idea of inclusion also links to concerns over safety, which is one of the reasons why pink cinemas are facing a dwindling attendance rate. According to Huning, “the insecurity of women in public spaces, especially at night, was found to be related to their socialization and to their traditional position as ‘outsiders’ in public space” (2014). After the renovation, Okura Theatre replaced the front door with a modern automatic glass entrance emulating the typical design of a regular cinema. However, the cinema puts up posters all over the glass entrance, covering sights coming both from within and outside. Although the

cinema initially aimed at enhancing the accessibility to the cinema and create a more open and safer zone, the invisible interior poses an inhospitable attitude towards the outsiders and shuts out eyes on the street that potentially contributes to the safety of the street. According to Jane Jacobs, to make a safe environment “out of the presence of strangers, [...] the buildings cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind” (1992). In the gender criteria formulated in the Berlin gender planning handbook, “avoiding blind facades” is also listed as one of the guidelines facilitating the creation of gender neutral urban spaces (2011).

Melissa Gilbert also points out that “the diversity of women’s experience in urban areas [...] are constructed both in and through place and space” (Gilbert, 1997). As Okura Theatre recapitulates the disparity between inside and outside and sets up barriers for entering, it is hard to consider the place as welcoming with the little transparency given. In the case of Laputa Theatre, while the entrance is hidden behind the woods, pedestrians can easily see the interior of the first floor through the glass window that opens directly at the street. The usage of glass window initiates a renegotiation of social and spatial relations between the interior and exterior space by subtly infiltrating an awareness of others to affect social activities happening within the space. Through acknowledging easy accessibility and transparency, one would more likely to feel invited and safe. For pink cinemas such as Okura Theatre that strives to welcome more female audiences, their space needs to be constructed in a way that prioritizes safety due to the sensitivity of the film screened. In other words, it is necessary to construct a space that can invoke people to be self-aware and self-disciplined.

Deriving from the analysis above, the reformation of a place should not only take into account influences from the entangled socioeconomic relations between a place and its inhabitant but reformers should also be aware of the fact that the place is at the same time the

curator and facilitator of social relations. It is important to acknowledge the mutually influential social and spatial relations as proposed by Van den Berg—“space as socially produced and as producing social relations” (Berg, 2017). In the case of Okura Theatre, albeit aiming at a higher attendance rate from women, the cinema failed to create a space that would reversely influence the people inside of it. Even though facilities are upgraded and events such as fan meetings are held, the social relations among visitors of the cinema and the cinema itself did not move up from the original relationship built upon anonymity: the cinema infiltrates the social relations without necessarily allowing social relations to change the space itself. Laputa Theatre, on the other hand, takes advantage of its locality and manages to produce a form of viewership that does not merely view the cinema as a content provider but as a space for communication as well as active participation.

Another aspect worth pondering over is that with more and more reformations being conducted under the campaign of gender neutrality, one potential pitfall may result from gender-specific propaganda slogans is that increasingly “gender becomes a repertoire of contemporary imagineering” (Berg, 2017). Under such circumstances, “urban experience is commodified into marketable symbolic items by urban entrepreneurs” (Berg, 2017). Reforms aiming at welcoming more female audiences in pink film screenings are, regardless of how they transform the space, an effective marketing trope branded as gender specific to attract public attention. While it is important to discuss how modern urban spaces are constructed based on notions like gender-neutrality and spontaneity proposed by feminist urbanists, it is also necessary to look outside of the reformations themselves and comment on the motivations for initiating them. It is easy for reformers to make decisions following a rigid gender binary that would seem to be appealing for the general public, yet would reversely accentuate the othering of women in a public space. Designating female only seats in

screening rooms, for example, deepens the gender binary and accentuates how male audiences constitute the ground zero in terms of pink film viewing. While it is necessary to recognize that the running of a cinema is also imbedded in discourses on urban reform and trending marketing strategies, one should not overlook evaluating the practical results and their social implications beyond merely slogans.

As “gender becomes a way of denoting ‘cultural constructions’—the entire social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men” (Scott 1988), Pink cinemas’ struggle to look up to regular cinemas and to align with mini theaters stands at frontline of opening up the once sexually segregated public domain to all and everyone. The manager of Okura Theatre openly states that the reformation the cinema undertook aims at making the cinema more akin to a regular cinema (Bull, 2010). This goal, regardless of its practical implication, together with the enlistment of Cine Roman Ikebukuro in the Mini Theater Aid Fund, are preludes to the increased awareness of how spatial organization affects accessibility, and of place as knots of a web of social relations stretching beyond its enclosure. While Okura Theatre’s reform turned out to be a failed attempt as discussed above, what is reassuring is that not only are pink cinemas endeavoring to transform, mini theaters such as Laputa Theatre have already experimented with possible means to renew public opinions on what pink films are and most importantly, who pink filmgoers can be. It is, to some extent, already a bold move to strive to be connected to the wider span of social relations of mini theaters since along with more exposure there comes more discussion and criticism. With Mini Theatre Fund grossing about two million dollars in less than two weeks and the resurgence of public attention to the current conditions of mini theaters, the future of Cine Roman Ikebukuro after the pandemic is at least a hopeful one as more and more people will come to engage with it not only as a pink cinema but also as a mini theatre.

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