

Beyond Infrastructure: The Naha Port Freeway Airport Route Ventilation Towers as Landmarks of Continuous History and Collective Memory

Xiaolong Wu, Yu Nakai

University of Tokyo, Department of Civil Engineering

Keywords

Okinawa; Landscape Identity; Continuous History; Civil Engineering Structures

Background. Modern infrastructure often prioritize functional efficiency at the expense of cultural resonance, engendering urban “non-places.” However, the Naha Port Ventilation Towers (2012) represent a critical counter-narrative to this technocratic standard. Situated at Naha’s historic gateway—a liminal space where contemporary transit intersects with the memory of the Ryukyu Kingdom—these structures occupy the sites once guarded by the Miegusuku and Yarazamori-gusuku fortresses. Historically significant as defensive bastions, their contemporary counterparts adopt Gusuku-inspired (the Ryukyuan term for castle or fortress) circular plinths and Ryukyuan limestone textures. This intentional spatial continuity suggests that massive civil engineering works can transcend utilitarianism to become cultural landmarks that anchor urban identity in an era of hyper-mobility.

Methodology and Critical Reflection. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, first analyzing historical iconography and the cultural significance of the original fortresses as benchmarks for spatial continuity. This is synthesized with architectural analysis and interviews with the lead architects (Kannari Architects), tracing the project’s 15-year conceptual evolution (1997–2012). Furthermore, through media discourse analysis, the paper offers a critical reflection on the “Architecture of the Fitting.” It interrogates how these “para-architectural” objects translate the cultural essence of lost landmarks into modern public landscapes, thereby revitalizing infrastructure’s capacity to maintain collective memory and foster a sense of belonging.

Contribution to “Continuous History.” This research demonstrates that infrastructure can bridge the rift between historical heritage and future development. By re-embedding vernacular symbols into a modern logistics hub, the towers counteract the dynamics of exclusion inherent in large-scale engineering. This study posits that “fitting” a historical context requires activating the site’s stratified vitality rather than mere formal replication. Ultimately, the Naha Port Ventilation Towers serve as a sustainable model for transforming dormant historical coordinates into visible contemporary vessels of memory, enriching the city’s “identity.”