

# Musashino Place and the Concept of Responsible Flexibility: The Public Organization of the Future for Local Government?

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## I. Introduction

Societies cannot prosper politically, economically or socially without effective, public-regarding public institutions. They reflect and sustain democracy, channel the forces of market economies into societally beneficial directions, and offer the best opportunity to balance the human need to be simultaneously individuals and members of communities.

Near the Musashi-Sakai JR Station in Musashino City<sup>(1)</sup> about 20 kilometers from central Tokyo is a building with large, oval windows. From a distance it looks like a contemporary office building — perhaps an information technology business. However, taking a closer look reveals not only a library, but also a public library with a café near its entrance. It is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. except for Wednesdays. Clearly something is unusual and interesting about this place.

Called Musashino Place, we argue it is an innovation that is important for the future of Musashino City, as well as an experiment that may offer lessons for other public organizations in Japan. This paper first reviews the challenges facing public organizations globally. Some historical and background information is provided and it describes the mission of Musashino Place in terms of its four

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(1) Musashino City is located almost in the center of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area and occupies an area of 10.7 square kilometers with a population of 140,000(June, 2013).

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integrated functions. This is followed by an interpretation of it as a new kind of public organization. Musashino Place's significant features, both physically and organizationally, are described along with the factors that came together in its creation. The next sections reflect on challenges and measures of success. The conclusion introduces the concept of "responsible flexibility" and asks questions about Musashino Place in the future. Information about Musashino Place is derived from resource materials as well as visits to the library and interviews with its director and his staff. Questions used to interview the director are found in the appendix.

## **II. The Challenges Faced by Public Organization**

Public organizations globally have faced a number of challenges over the last 20 or 30 years. These have come from several directions. One has been from the advocates for market solutions who have argued forcefully that public organizations need to be reshaped to embody private sector practices. Building on historic criticisms of bureaucratic organizations, they have urged re-thinking, in a business-oriented way, the rules that govern key areas such as personnel, budgets and purchasing. For example, managers would be given more authority to hire, promote and fire than is allowed by traditional civil service systems.<sup>(2)</sup>

Another challenge to public organizations has come from the repeated economic crises that have simultaneously increased the need for critical public services and produced deficits in national and local government budgets. The budgetary dilemma has been amplified by an ideological position that stridently questions the value of most government activities and promotes tax reductions as a means of shrinking it.<sup>(3)</sup>

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(2) Proposals of this kind have been referred to as "New Public Management." George Jones summarizes the characteristics of NPM, in contrast to "Old Public Administration," that (a) governing is like running a business, (b) public functions should ideally be privatized, (c) fragmentation to facilitate competition rather than coordination is preferred, and (d) the public and private sectors should be closely intertwined in collaborative activities (Jones, 2001, p.66).

(3) In the United States this ideological position is found within the current "Tea Party" movement.

These challenges, though not new, are distinguished by their global reach, and in how they have energized questions about the way public organizations should operate in the future. One of the more intriguing of these questions asks how they will balance the demand to be more responsive and adaptive against the need to be publicly responsible and accountable. Greater responsiveness may make it possible for public organizations to perform with more agility, but this risks weakening rules that protect equity and guard against various forms of corruption. An emphasis on accountability can help ensure services are provided equitably and reduce the misuse of public resources, but it could hobble the organization's performance and under-utilize its employees. These opposing priorities present a dilemma that public organizations increasingly have had to address: what is the optimum balance between an emphasis on "order" (clear lines of authority, defined roles, and respect for rules) and "flexibility" (more distributed authority, loosely defined roles, and discretionary rules).

Another dilemma is found between expectations for policy innovation and avoiding risks. Since the decentralization reforms of Japanese governance started in the mid 1990s there has been an emphasis on at least three values: local integration, local initiative, and local uniqueness. Integration of functions at the local level is expected to mitigate the "compartmentalism" or lack of coordination at the central level. Initiative by local government is encouraged in order to cope with new policy issues since the central ministries don't have enough information and experience to innovate national policies. For example, the increasing need for child care facilities, especially in urban areas, can be met by careful relaxation of the facility standards or by changing underused kindergartens into nursery schools at the local level, but the central ministries have little knowledge of how to do so.<sup>(4)</sup> Uniqueness of locality is now respected

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(4) As nursery schools are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and kindergartens are under those of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, it used to be nearly impossible to coordinate between those two closely related facilities at both the central and local level. It is now possible because of the decentralization reforms.

so that people can enjoy the more diverse cultural or historical resources of each community. In enhancing these three values, discretionary policy innovation is what is most expected for local government staff.

At the same time, however, people's desire for safety and security has become another important factor at the local level since around 2000. Risks are not always accurately shown in statistics, but have subjective dimensions. Risks such as terrorism, pandemics, unemployment or information leakage may not be much higher than before, but people are beginning to feel them more acutely. Local civil servants in turn become more defensive and conservative. In addition, they are required to be more accountable for their innovations and judgments because they can no longer argue that they just followed the rules and regulations of the central government. For these reasons the dilemma between meeting the need for change and innovation and the need to avoid risks has grown in local government organizations.

Public libraries epitomize the challenges facing public organizations. The function they have performed has been accepted historically as an important resource for communities and democracy. From a contemporary perspective however the explosion of information resources has gone far beyond the books and magazines, and now Internet, that librarians carefully organized, watched over and provided wide access to. That change, coupled with how quickly local libraries become a target for cuts when public budgets are stressed, has raised doubts about their future. It is worthwhile to ask, then, whether it is possible for libraries, as public organizations, to adapt to their new environment in ways that balance order and flexibility as well as innovation and risk, and if they can, what lessons other public organizations can learn from them.

### **III. The Context For Local Innovation**

Musashino Place's historical and institutional background is tied directly to its uniqueness as a public organization. It is not just a new public facility, but also the realization of historical community development processes, the City's long-term comprehensive planning, and public participation. In addition, in its

story are many signs of local experimentation, decentralization and a spirit of challenge to centralized regulations.

The site Musashino Place occupies today was once state owned land used for food warehouses. In 1973 Musashino City submitted to the Food Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry a request to purchase the land, the last large public space in front of the railway station. After repeated requests, submission of a land use plan in 1996 and negotiations with the Food Agency and the Ministry of Finance, the City finally purchased the land in 1998. Musashino City, one of the wealthiest cities in Japan, was able to buy the scarce property with support of the City Council and citizens despite skyrocketing land values, especially land near railway stations.<sup>(5)</sup>

Musashino City has been a pioneering local government in terms of long-term comprehensive planning and policy innovation. The Municipal Government Comprehensive Planning System was introduced in 1969 by the initiative of the Ministry of Home Affairs when there were only a few municipal governments that had “planned thinking”<sup>(6)</sup> or a planning mind. Although rather paternalistic, the Ministry tried to implant a culture of planning in the local government organizations, without which the development of local communities could be sustained under existing centralized economic growth policies. In 1970 Musashino City was one of a few local governments that spontaneously started long-term comprehensive planning. It was faced with serious urban problems, including overpopulation, uncontrolled development, and a weakening sense of community. When the new planning system was added to the Local Government Law in 1969, Musashino City was already preparing the first long-term planning

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(5) Musashino City estimated that purchasing the whole parcel, including privately owned lands, would cost 12 billion yen, which was the largest in all the nine priority projects (the actual payment to the state government was 5.75 billion yen). While the mayor has the formal authority to decide the priority projects finally, even the directly elected mayor could not have decided such an expensive contract by himself without a consensus of the Council and the citizens which was expressed in the Plan.

(6) Karl Mannheim pointed out the importance of “planned thinking” and “planned activities” in urbanized society (Mannheim, 1935, pp. 152 ff.) .

processes through future casting and coordination of various public services.

The City's first long-term plan covered the period from 1971 to 1980, with the priority given to six projects (Musashino City, 1972, pp. 18-20): (1) green network<sup>(7)</sup>, (2) public facilities network of local roads, primary and secondary public schools and the City Hall, (3) completion of the sewage system, (4) development of and around Kichijoji Station, (5) development of the civic center around the City Hall, which is located north of Mitaka Station and (6) development of and around Musashi-Sakai Station. The word Musashino Place didn't appear in the plan, but its basic idea was contained in projects (2) and (6).<sup>(8)</sup>

The second Long-term Plan was published in 1981, covering the period from 1981 to 1992. Musashi-Sakai area development was selected again as one of five priority projects. The first Plan suggested that this area be more culture-oriented and be clearly distinguished from nearby Kichijoji, which was highly commercialized. However, it was in the third Long-term Plan (1993-2004) that the idea of establishing a new multi-purpose cultural facility through a public library was stipulated clearly.

Concrete planning and designing started after the land purchase was completed in 1998. The first step was the "Competition of Ideas" events in 2000 through which the City learned citizens' preferences. The Planning Committee for the New Public Facility was established in 2001, most members of which were university professors. After 14 meetings and citizen hearings it submitted a final report in 2003.<sup>(9)</sup>

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(7) This refers to protection of small scale agriculture, roadside trees, and park space.

(8) The plan also clarified five planning principles: (1) honoring citizens' autonomy, (2) empowering local government, (3) respecting people's life, (4) having a scientific foundation, and (5) regional coordination with neighboring cities. Based on these priorities and principles, the City implemented a number of distinctive programs, including a tree-planting campaign, community development through establishment of community centers and a concert hall, and the introduction of a community bus. What became Musashino Place developed in the context of these long-term comprehensive planning processes.

(9) The title of the report was *Report of the Planning Committee for the Basic Design of the New Public Facility* (2003).

Using the key word “Place” (*Ba*), it proposed a place for (1) knowledge and information, (2) creativity, (3) expression, (4) experience, and (5) gathering. It also proposed six principles for building the facility: (1) organic integration of functions and openness<sup>(10)</sup>, (2) flexibility to meet various needs, (3) leaving open space and rooms (*Yutori*) inside the facility (4) universal design, (5) green environment<sup>(11)</sup>, and (6) considering the global environment.<sup>(12)</sup> The report was concrete and specific, detailing the functions of each room and how to manage them.

Based on the plan, the City invited design proposals in 2004, and Ms. Yasuko Kawarada was selected as the architect from among 202 applicants. The City established the Construction Planning Committee in 2000 that worked with the Kawarada team on the final design. The name “Musashino Place” was used for the first time in the final report in 2005. When the mayor of Musashino City changed from Mr. Masatada Tsuchiya to Mr. Morimasa Murakami in 2005, the scale of the building was reduced but major concepts and the basic design remained unchanged.

Construction took place from early 2009, with Musashino Place opening in July 2011. The full title of the facility at the entrance is “Musashino Place — a House for People, Town, Information and Creation.” For most people, it was a sudden, surprising appearance of a new public facility, but for those involved in the planning processes, it was the realization of a long-cherished community vision.

## **VI. Mushashino Place: Multiple Functions**

The library is named Musashino Place, not Musashino City Library. “Place” is intentional and points to its mission as a physical space where several

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(10) As for openness, the report proposed physically low and fewer walls in the building to demonstrate a more open, seamless space so that each function cannot be separated.

(11) “Green environment” meant not cutting down but keeping surrounding trees (mainly ginkgo trees), planting lawns around the Place, and letting them be seen from inside.

(12) “Considering the global environment” meant energy saving measures, energy footprint or related issues.

functions are brought together on behalf of individuals and community. In this place *individuals* are expected to have support for learning across the life cycle, and the *community* to find a resource for what it wants to be today and what it hopes to become tomorrow.

To achieve this, Musashino Place is attempting to seamlessly integrate four functions — that is, to bring them together without the divisions, boundaries and subtle competitions that seem inevitable when functions are the exclusive responsibility of individual programs. The overarching goal is to integrate these functions in a manner that affords equal access to diverse interests, and is feasible for the staff to support. The four functions being integrated are lifelong learning, citizen group activities, engaging children and youth, and being a rich source of information.

## **1. Providing Diverse Lifelong Learning Opportunities**

This function is intended to meet the needs of individuals across the life cycle. Its importance is a consequence of changes that are likely to continue in Japan, primarily because of the multitude of effects of globalization. Japanese today have a greater diversity of values, interests and opinions than was true historically. Throughout their life they must be able to make decisions that reflect who they are. This creates a need for a place that can support individuals to gain enough autonomy, self-confidence and relevant information to make those decisions.

There also is present in Japan, like other places, an ocean of individually accessible information through the constantly expanding digital revolution. This instant availability can be exhilarating, but also overwhelming and isolating. A side effect is the desire for a place where people can connect around shared interests and concerns, the very kind of community environment that is shrinking in urban and suburban Japan.

Musashino Place, in its lifelong learning function, seeks to reframe two contemporary issues normally seen as in conflict — increasing individual diversity and the desire for community — into issues that can be addressed

together.<sup>(13)</sup>

## **2. Citizen Group Activities**

Musashino Place offers itself to individuals and community groups as a place for organizing. This function is served in two primary ways. The first is, by means of physical design and library policy, making easy access to spaces in which diverse groups can form and meet. “Space” in this case includes recognition that active groups will produce noise not accepted in a traditional library. It also includes larger community gatherings for special events, such as speakers, forums and films.

The second way citizen groups are supported is through a deliberate focus on networking. The staff cultivates an awareness of the interests of individuals and groups. They then can look for opportunities to cross-fertilize those interests if it appears the parties involved would benefit. For example, a staff member may know several individuals or small groups that are interested in introducing into Musashino City similar kinds of culture learning activities for young adults. Since they are working independently of one another she may facilitate an informal get acquainted meeting to explore possibilities for cooperation.

## **3. Engaging Children and Youth**

Parts of Musashino Place are set-aside for children and their parents, and some for older youth. Children and parents have access to a play area as well as a library. The 2<sup>nd</sup> level basement belongs to youth no older than 18. Other library users are not allowed into this space. It contains workstations for individuals and small groups, a game room, music and dance rooms, and room for cooking and crafts. There is also an easily accessible library with materials likely to be of interest to this age cohort. It is, in short, a place that offers youth a variety of ways to get together on an informal basis, with the understanding that they can

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(13) After the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, some scholars call the citizens’ new need for community “weak ties,” referring to an old concept in sociology (Granovetter, 1973, pp. 1373-1378).

use it however they like as long as they respect others following their interests.

Making connections is also a critical element of this dimension of Musashino Place. In the early days most of the youth came to study using the desks available. Over the first year more began to connect in study groups, games and skill activities. The staff promoted these connections. For example, staff facilitated the development of a mentor program in which older students help those younger with schoolwork.

The activities of children and youth also can generate noise at a level not permitted by a traditional library. This is accepted as part of what Musashino Place is; something that, with some care, not only can co-exist but also enrich the library's other functions.

#### **4. A Rich Source of Information**

This function comes closest to what libraries traditionally focused on. Musashino Place contains book collections for children and youth as well as general and specialized books for adults. In 2012 it had about 560 periodicals for adults, 20 for youth, and 20 for children, substantially more overall than the other two libraries in nearby communities. Like other libraries, it maintains hardcopy resources so that users are better equipped to interpret information from television, radio and the Internet. It provides general introductions to topical areas, with the option of exploring in greater depth specific subject matter. Staff let users know what resources are available, as well as being sensitive to what level of information is most appropriate for a specific person.

A library attempting to serve these four functions is unusual, but not unique. What is rare, and possibly not duplicated today in Japan, is the way in which these functions are interwoven. They may occur in the same physical facility in a few other libraries, but within separately staffed programs. Musashino Place intends lifelong learning, support for community organizations, engaging children and youth and the provision of rich information to be a single package of mutually complementary resources easily accessed by diverse segments of the community. This means that each function must be something for which every

staff member feels a responsibility.

## **V. Mushashino Place as an Organization**

*What* Musashino Place is attempting is significant and interesting, but *how* it goes about meeting its mission is of equal significance. What is required to provide as well as integrate these four functions? This section first interprets Musashino Place as a physical setting that has similarities to a village, then as a new kind of public organization.

### **1. A New Kind of Village**

Musashino Place is located not far from Musashi-Sakai JR station, fronted on its northern main entrance by a round grassy area. The building's appearance is interesting because of its large, oval windows. Once inside it is easy to recognize the care taken so that the physical setting is integrated with and supportive of the library's mission as a community place. Each of the four floors above ground benefits from windows that let in natural light while simultaneously encouraging an outward perspective that symbolizes the library's connection to its community. All of the floors are visually open; there are few interior walls. This promotes ease of movement through the facility. It also communicates that each section is open for exploration, and, moreover, that there are no barriers between sections. Where doors and walls divide a space, such as the collection of books for youth on B-2 or the large room for forums and community meetings, they are of translucent glass so a passerby can view, and perhaps get interested in, what is taking place.

Another feature of the physical environment is the absence of corners and edges. Everything curves: the outer walls, passageways, book shelves. There is even a circular staircase. Curves convey a feeling of continuity and continuation, while corners suggest endings and separation.

Finally, unlike most libraries where books in similar topical categories are placed together, at Musashino Place books for adults and youth are deliberately spread throughout the library. This ensures that a person has to pass through the

open, curved spaces in search of what he or she wants. While not an arrangement an efficiency expert would endorse, it supports the priority given to making connections by increasing the chance users will be exposed to staff, other users and unexpected, inviting subjects.

Viewed in historical and cultural terms the physical features of Musashino Place share the characteristics of a small village. In a village setting a person makes his or her rounds through different shops to get what is needed. In the process there is contact with shopkeepers and neighbors, as well as encounters with interesting items that he or she wasn't even looking for.

## **2. As a New Public Organization**

Musashino Place is the newest of three libraries in Musashino City, opened in July 2011. The three libraries — Musashino Place, Kichijoji Library and Chuo Library — are staffed by City employees and operate within the same broad set of rules and regulations. The City provides funding, but in the case of Musashino Place it comes in two ways. This difference gives Musashino Place a degree of independence, and is the basis of its experiment as a public organization.

Chuo Library organizes a budget through discussion with all three libraries. Each library proposes what it wants and requests that it be included in the budget. Chuo Library then applies to Musashino City government for the funding. It administers the City purchases made from the allocations once the budget is approved.

The budget covers the operating costs for the Chuo and Kichijoji libraries. For Musashino Place however the budget includes such things as purchasing books and periodicals and holding events that involve the three libraries, but excludes personnel expenses. This points to an important difference with the two other City libraries, and with public organizations in general, in control over personnel. It can be seen in the fact that when the library opened in July 2011 it was only partially staffed by City civil service employees.<sup>(14)</sup> Funding for

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(14) They remain with the library today. Depending on the direction this experiment takes, their numbers may shrink proportionally if not replaced when transferred to other City positions or retiring.

the remaining non civil service staff also was from Musashino City, but came to the library through a designated administrative organization, “Musashino Place Lifelong Learning Foundation.”<sup>(15)</sup> The Foundation, which has its own administrator, holds funds for one other public organization in Musashino City, a community recreational center not far from Mitaka Station.

These non civil service library employees are not subject to the same employment rules that apply to their civil service counterparts because their funding comes through the Foundation. This in turn gives the head of Musashino Place, Mr. Yoichi Maeda, himself a civil service employee, broader decision-making authority over personnel matters. In particular it means he is able to make hiring decisions and define job responsibilities, both of which are fundamental for any organization. For example, he can prioritize hiring a specialist in a particular field; someone with less, or more, experience; or someone who is a good team member and fits well with the mission regardless of his or her specific knowledge. For current employees he can decide what work responsibilities are detailed in a job description that dictates what to do, and not do. Alternately, he can be less precise, emphasizing instead that work must support the library’s mission of integration across its four functions. Given this degree of independence for this critical function, what choices have been made?

The designers and leaders of Musashino Place chose to establish a more flexible, mission focused organization rather than one more traditionally bureaucratic (i.e., centralized, top-down, specialized). This reflects a distinctively different orientation to both the structure and the culture of public organizations. It can be seen in the following areas.

(1) *Openness*. Bureaucratic organizations are well known for the ways in which the hierarchy of authority and the functional statements that define

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(15) In 2012, in a new legal framework, the Foundation became a public interest incorporated foundation, but the substantial structure and functions remain the same, fully funded by Musashino City as before.

units stifles communication.<sup>(16)</sup> Musashino Place is relying on an organizational structure that is flatter and less centered around individual programs. This openness is consistent with and reinforced by the curving, edgeless architecture and the unobstructed sightlines on each floor.

In practical terms it means any staff member has permission to talk to any other staff member, regardless of his or her position. This orientation may seem obvious, but in bureaucratic organizations it commonly is not possible because of the emphasis on role specialization and hierarchy. Japanese bureaucratic organizations give particular emphasis to sectional boundaries. It is “normal” for an employee seeking the help of a counterpart in another area to have to make a request through his or her boss. That boss in turn communicates with the individual’s boss for approval.

(2) *Mission focused*. An open structure is complemented by a focus on mission rather than on role responsibilities. When roles are rigidly defined it is harder to adapt and respond quickly to what has to be done to meet the mission. Lead-time, planning and negotiations are needed. Role flexibility, on the other hand, means staff is expected to use their own discretion about the best way to use time and energy on behalf of shared goals.

In practical terms this means that a staff member can take time to look for connections between users or groups, or join with colleagues from other parts of the library on a special project or event planning. It also sets up an expectation that this mission focused orientation will be supported by training that helps employees to manage basic library functions while at the same time not seeing themselves as traditional “librarians”.

(3) *Sensitive Rule Enforcement*. Every organization has rules whose purpose is to reward, channel or restrain certain kinds of behavior so it is in line with broader organizational policies. In a traditional library, for example, rules are used to maintain an environment in which people can concentrate on reading or

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(16) In English these invisible but powerful boundaries often are referred as a “silos”, which refers to the towers built on farms to store crops and protect them from the outside environment.

writing without continuous disturbances. Staff enforces these rules against noise and food without much need for judgment, even if occasions arise in which such judgment is called for.

The issue of judgment points to the fact that rules, although needed, also can be problems.<sup>(17)</sup> This happens when their enforcement is used as a source of power, when the conditions change that led to the rules, when the organizational setting presents conflicting messages about which rules have priority, and when the staff is not given the discretion to make judgments in specific situations.<sup>(18)</sup>

Musashino Place's integrated multiple functions will at times, by their very nature, be in tension with one another. The library accepts food and drink, even alcoholic drinks, in the café, which is in the center of the first floor. It also accepts noise as what comes with the "noisy connections" of children, youth, community groups and special events. Noise and quiet at times will be at odds with one another, presenting a potential dilemma. Avoiding that dilemma requires "sensitive enforcement" in which staff exercises discretion and judgment. Being too rigid will turn away users whose activities include noise, while being too lax will drive off users looking for a quiet place. Either of those outcomes would undermine the goal of the four functions being synergistically integrated. For this integration to be successful the staff must be able to exercise discretion and use their judgment in relation to shared organizational priorities. This continuous exercise of discretion and judgment in a more flexible rule environment is unusual in a public organization.

(4) *Integrating sub-contractors.* Today for a variety of reasons it is common for public organizations to contract out services to the private or not-for-

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(17) For an interesting analysis of functional and dysfunctional rules in organizations, see Bozeman and Feeney.

(18) One of the authors, Richard Pratt, and his wife experienced a frustrating instance of unwillingness or inability to exercise judgment about rules. They missed the bus on a cold and rainy winter night and, already late and hungry after exercising faced a long wait. The health club had a rule against bringing in food and, despite the special conditions their predicament presented, refused to bend it and allow them to eat their food in an out-of-the-way corner. They resigned themselves to huddling outside the club's window.

profit sectors. Sometimes it is for cost savings; other times it is a service the organization would like to offer but for which it does not have, and perhaps does not wish to develop, the expertise. Sub-contracting becomes more attractive if the service can generate a revenue stream that partially or entirely supports it. Of course from a budgetary standpoint, the most desirable situation is if the service produces revenue for the larger organization.<sup>(19)</sup>

Musashino Place's sub-contracting appears to be a service it wanted to provide, but for which it did not have or wish to have the expertise. The service offered — a café whose menu ranges from coffee and tea to complete meals, and includes beer and wine after sunset — is quite unusual for a public library. In order to make the café part of this library, and consistent with the priority given to the integration of functions, a provision stipulates that the café sponsor activities supportive of the Musashino Place mission. The café staff does this by participating in book readings, author forums and through a program called “Talking About” that invites dialogues on a wide range of general interest topics.

## **VI. Musashino Place: Hard Work, and Good Timing**

The preceding description depicts a different kind of government organization, certainly so in Japan. It is worthwhile to ask what came together for this to happen. Further, what can we learn from the factors that contributed to its creation?

### **1. Vision and Persistence**

Organizational innovation depends on openness to an alternative to what

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(19) Sub-contracting presents complex issues for public organizations that are relevant to but beyond the scope of this paper. Local governments in Japan have turned to sub-contracting in recent years as a cost-saving measure. Critics have pointed out that an important negative consequence of the reduced pay and benefits that enables the lower overall costs is a widening of inequality in Japanese society. This in turn may lead to its well-known side effects, including higher crime rates and more stress on families. It is possible that some of these issues may arise in relation to the funding of personnel through the Foundation for Lifelong Learning, and these are referred to in the conclusion.

currently exists — that is, to what is “normal”. There are no alternatives without images that show how things might be different. This is as true for organizations as it is for other areas.

The vision statement for what Musashino Place eventually became was written 15 years before it became a reality. Its history shows that some people were moved by an image of something new. That vision was so compelling that it fueled what was needed next: persistence. Unfortunately, very few good ideas become realities based simply on their merit. One reason is that innovations, no matter their promise, are almost assured to be threats to the way things are being done, despite the shortcomings of what currently exists. Whether the threats are to many or just a small, powerful group, the benefits they derive from, or just the familiarity with, what exists provide strong incentives to protect the status quo. This is the reason it is easier to start a new organization, like Musashino Place, than to re-make one. Even then the need for the kind of persistence shown by the champions of Musashino Place is critical.

## **2. Community Environment**

It is hard to try something new in a setting that is nervous about, unfamiliar with or perhaps even hostile to innovation. Communities differ in their openness to change, and this may vary over the life of a particular community. For example, a community might be more open if it is facing a crisis and there is a shared feeling of threat. On the other hand, being fiscally well-off may make support for new ideas more comfortable. For whatever historic and contemporary reasons, Musashino City appears open to innovation, even to the point of prizing the identity of innovator in comparison to its neighboring communities. That self-perception was fertile ground for an experiment like Musashino Place.

## **3. Clearly Better Than Some Alternatives**

It is easier to promote an innovation if it can be shown to deliver something of agreed upon value, and in a better way. The four functions that are

incorporated into Musashino Place are each valuable additions to Musashino City. However where it would make the most sense to locate individual programs pursuing these functions land is scarce and therefore expensive. This reality contributed to agreement that it would be the more cost-effective to merge the four functions in one place rather than constructing three or four separate buildings. Another alternative, potentially more cost effective, was a public-private partnership that joined the library with a shopping center or some other retail activities. This approach, which would necessarily involve combining public and private goals, was seen as dampening the strong commitment to community building that Musashino Place was intended to embody.

#### **4. Good Timing**

Doors of opportunity open and close, generally beyond anyone's control. Closed doors may foretell the end of a project. Open doors may signify that something, until now problematic at best, now is possible. Planning to elevate the Musashi-Sakai JR Station occurred during the same period as that for Musashino Place. This was significant because the rail line was raised in part to help re-join the north and south of the community that it had divided. The library's parallel goal of community building resulted in it receiving additional public funding. This is a nice example of how preparation and persistence, together with being alert to when circumstances open doors, can connect to good timing.

#### **5. Organizational Leadership**

A new organization requires, in addition to good day-to-day management, leadership that is appropriate for the particular challenges that accompany beginnings. Leadership has to do at least two things in this environment. The first is to embody in practice the values of the new organization. "Role modeling" is one way to refer to this. Another is the contemporary American English phrase "walk the talk".

If an organization is trying to adopt new ways of doing things its employees

will be helped enormously by being able to observe someone who embodies what is expected in this new setting. That may be especially true in a public organization that must push aside strongly encoded, traditional bureaucratic practices. Aligning talk and action is critical because, however exciting, a new organization is fragile in its early days when a culture is being invented, shaped and tested. The behavior of a leader who is saying one thing and doing something else will be especially destructive, potentially undermining the credibility of the whole experiment.

The second thing a leader needs to do is communicate a compelling vision of the new organization to its various constituencies. This can be challenging because there are many constituencies — different types of users, taxpayers and elected officials, to name a few — that need to be addressed in ways that respond to their interests and concerns. Moreover, they have to be communicated with over and over again. The leader’s work is to know which message is appropriate, and be willing and able to offer it repeatedly and with passion.

## **VII. Challenges**

Musashino Place faces a number of challenges. This is an expensive operation that comes into existence when the prospects for national and local economies are uncertain. Most of its services are without charge to the residents of Musashino City.<sup>(20)</sup> Even though it may provide services its constituents value, it has to compete with other community needs. For an as-yet unknown number of residents “community building” will not be the highest priority.

Ironically, the positive response to Musashino Place during its first year creates its own issue. Some of those who are attracted to the library are from outside of the City — that is, from outside of the tax base. This raises questions about fairness to the taxpayers of Musashino City, and about the desirability, political and administrative feasibility, timing and overall wisdom of charging non-residents, and perhaps eventually residents, for services.

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(20) One exception to this policy is the computer room, where users pay to have differing amounts of time.

As noted above, leadership is important and continuity in leadership also matters. Mr. Yoichi Maeda and others are civil service employees of the city who may be transferred at any time. He and his colleagues have been important in shaping Musashino Place's culture, but will that culture be passed on in understandable and compelling ways to future leaders? What if, for example, the next leader is a civil servant with more traditional views? In anticipation of this Mr. Maeda has begun a "concept book" to convey the spirit and practice of Musashino Place. This book will have to go beyond a description of policies and procedures for it to incorporate, as much as possible, the living essence of the library as an evolving organization.<sup>(21)</sup>

At the current time in Japan it appears there are no other libraries like Musashino Place.<sup>(22)</sup> A few offer multiple functions, but none have taken the steps to go from separate programs within an umbrella organization to a seamlessly integrated set of services. It will take time to learn if any of the many curious visitors now coming for tours will go back home to create something like what they've seen. If none do, what will be the result, in the longer run, of Musashino Place remaining unique? Will the community, reflecting its fondness for being innovative, view this as a positive development? Or will some, especially the elected officials who must deal with taxes and budgets, decide it is too expensive an experiment to support?

Perhaps there is something to be learned from a well-known Brazilian company named SEMCO that for decades has successfully incorporated highly unusual levels of employee participation (Semler, 1989). Thousands of executives from private sector firms worldwide have visited, hoping to learn its secrets and duplicate its successes. They leave impressed, and yet no company

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(21) For an example of this effort in another organization see the description of the "Storybook" in Chandler and Pratt.

(22) One of the recent popular topics concerning public facilities is that Takeo City in Saga Prefecture renewed its main library in April 2013 adopting the publicly-owned privately-run system, and Tsutaya, a video rental company, has been designated to run the organization. The citizens can rent or buy, as well as borrow, books or videos at the library.

has formed that looks like SEMCO.

SEMCO continues to thrive because it is a financial success for its owner, Ricardo Semler, and its hundreds of employees. Perhaps then the biggest challenge, and opportunity, revolves around the degree of success. For a public organization like this one, what is that?

### **VIII. Measures of Success**

It is still too new to have gathered information that sheds much light on whether Musashino Place justifies the public investment in it. Over time library staff as well as an evaluation committee within the Board of Education will monitor the library. At this point it is possible only to make note of current indicators, and think about the issues related to measuring success.

According to data provided by the library, Musashino Place is doing very well on a conventional measure: the number of people who visit it. Over 4000 users come in on weekdays, and about 7000 on each weekend day. This is 1.5 times above projections, and, taking into account days it is closed, translates into around 1.3 million visitors annually.

This measure can be coupled with other things quantifiable, such as the time it takes to check out a book or video, the waiting time for other services, and user responses to survey questions about the library experience.

These measurements are meaningful, quantifiable, and relatively inexpensive. They also are less than what is needed to determine if Musashino Place is having a significant impact relative to its mission. They only indirectly indicate whether it is performing its four functions, seamlessly integrating them while creating synergies, and meeting its overarching purpose of helping the community become whatever it wants to be. Measures that do this, referred to as mission-related “outcomes”, are ultimately what is needed to decide whether a public organization is deserving of more, less or no public support. These outcome measures also present their own challenges.

The first is that they almost always are much more difficult to measure than “outputs”, such as number of users or time waiting for a service.

“Difficult” refers to the challenge of inventing a measurement of, to take an example relevant to Musashino Place, the affect on community identity or the vitality of community culture. It also points to the fact that outcome measures generally are expensive to design and use. These expenses, of time and money, are consequential for any organization, and especially significant for public organizations that are vulnerable to criticism for engaging in costly endeavors not directly related to the services users want.

The second issue presented by outcomes is that, no matter how well designed and applied, they will not be equally relevant or convincing to every constituent. What is an important measure of success to an elected official who is accountable to taxpayers is very unlikely to be the same for the mother of a three year-old or members of a community group. It is necessary therefore to first ask what “success” looks like from diverse perspectives, and then find the right combination of output and outcome measures. The challenge for Musashino Place will be to design something that is optimal, not perfect, in speaking to different communities of interest while weighing each measure’s cost against the significance of what it reveals.

## **IX. Reflections on Musashino Place: A New Kind of Public Organization?**

In *The Future of Governing* B. Guy Peters presents four models of public organizations proposed as replacements for the traditional public bureaucracy. The models he describes along with their strengths and weaknesses represent a global conversation about the best way for public organizations to do their work and meet their public responsibilities. He labels these four alternatives as “Market Models”, “The Participatory State”, “Flexible Government”, and “Deregulated Government.”

The way each model approaches serving the public interest is quite distinct, even though there is overlap between them. “Deregulated Government” comes closest to capturing what is being attempted at Musashino Place. Deregulated Government emphasizes a relaxation of rules in order to free employees from

being tyrannized by them. The goal is to more fully utilize employees as resources and to encourage a greater degree of risk taking and experimentation. Deregulation is expected to be especially valuable to local governments because their staffs typically are smaller, less specialization is possible, and more role flexibility is desirable.

Each alternative to a traditional public bureaucracy brings potential concerns, and there are several for the deregulation model. The possibility of mistakes is increased in an environment where fewer rules constrain behavior and more individual discretion is required. It also is possible that deregulation will foster corruption as some take advantage of fewer rules with which to comply. For example, normally there are strict rules about when funds can be moved between budget categories. If these rules are relaxed it will be easier to disguise using monies for unapproved purposes. A strong public service ethic is likely to be the best means for ensuring that greater discretion will be exercised in public-regarding ways. In the absence of such an ethic, concerns about mistakes and corruption may, oddly, lead to the creation of more, rather than fewer, rules.

Another concern raised by the deregulated model is in the balance between flexibility, consistency and fairness. A de-regulated environment may emphasize the efficiency gains of fewer rules to the point that public services are unpredictable or uneven. The organization may benefit from the ability to redefine roles and employee relationships, but there is a risk the staff will be treated unfairly in the form of increased responsibilities, difficult working hours, or reduced compensation. To take one small example, Musashino Place has instituted a rotating shift system for non civil service staff. This means that shifts will change from day to day. This is an efficient way to provide coverage across the hours the library is open, but is it reasonable to ask this of employees and their families?

The same kind of question will be raised with other rules and regulations. In *The Moral Commonwealth* Philip Selznick argued for conditions of flexibility in the context of integrity and the responsibility of public institutions. He wrote:

The need for flexibility is strongest when a process is meant to sustain long-term relationships, subtle practices and fragile forms of institutional life. Friends and family members do not ignore their own and others' right, but they accept, as necessary and desirable, uneven reciprocity and rough justice. If the relationship is important, trust will emerge as a salient value, if there is trust. There also must be forbearance, adaptation, and sacrifice. Obligations are open-ended, not fixed and predetermined. (Selznick, 1992, p. 332)

The choice between flexibility and order presents a dilemma; that is, something that cannot be solved but must continuously be addressed. At its core the issue is one of balance. Musashino Place is an experiment in re-balancing a Japanese public organization in the direction of greater flexibility. The goal of the re-balancing can be understood as an effort to achieve "responsible flexibility". If a public organization is responsibly flexible it means that it has found a way to avoid too much rigidity and too much openness while gaining the public-regarding benefits of having some of each. Finding the right balance will be challenging, and the balance point will vary from organization to organization. The mission of some public organizations will be better served by greater flexibility; others will require greater order. In addition, the balance is likely to change over time for an organization as its mission and external environment evolve. Because it is a dilemma, no final "solution" is possible.

Given that Musashino Place is just beginning its experiment, how will we know if it is succeeding in achieving responsible flexibility? What should we look for in five years? Here are some suggestions:

- *Conditions of employment of non civil service staff.* Is non civil service staff being treated fairly in terms of job responsibilities and job security? In what ways do their working conditions and job benefits vary from civil service employees? What is the working relationship between civil service

and non civil service employees? Is there high turnover? Is Musashino Place regarded as a desirable place to work?

- *Leadership Tenure and Style.* Has there been consistency in the orientation of leadership, or have there been swings between more traditional and more adaptive styles? How has this affected the organization's culture? What mechanisms have been developed to help make appropriate leadership transitions?
- *Workplace Integration.* Do staff feel that they are able to cover responsibilities in their functional areas as well as participate across the four areas? To what extent is this a cause of stress and dissatisfaction? What training programs are in place to facilitate balancing area focus and integration?
- *Organizational Integrity and Ethics.* Has there been misuse of the flexibility that staff enjoys, such as treating users differently? Have library resources been appropriated for personal benefit? Do the public and elected officials view Musashino Place as a publicly responsible organization?
- *Public Understanding.* Do residents of Musashino City understand Musashino Place's synergistic mission of serving individuals and building community? Is that mission valued?
- *Measuring Outcomes.* Are outcome measures being used that capture Musashino Place's mission? Are the measures affordable and sustainable, and do they address the concerns and interests of different constituencies?
- *Role Model.* Have other communities adopted some or all of the Musashino Place experiment? What directions has the adaptation taken?

These and other indicators will be worth paying attention to over the next years. They will show how things are going with Musashino Place, but also suggest what is possible for other public organizations in Japan. It is possible that what libraries do is sufficiently different from other services that there is not much transference, but that is not clear. It seems equally possible that with creative thinking Musashino Place may offer lessons in the ways that innovation

can take place at the local level. This could take us beyond recent preoccupations with efficiency and cost-cutting to both improve broadly the quality of life and the satisfactions of community while making public organizations attractive places to work.

### **Appendix A:**

Questions asked of the Musashino Place Director, Mr. Yoichi Maeda and staff member in spring 2012.

How much autonomy does this have as a public organization?

What rules had to be changed for this to work?

Given this degree of flexibility, how do you show you are accountable?

What was the process for getting to this degree of flexibility?

Where are you still experimenting (i.e., most important areas)?

The style and vision of Mr. Maeda and other leaders has been crucial. Can it be passed on?

What advice do you have for others who would like to do something like this?

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## **Musashino Place and the Concept of Responsible Flexibility: The Public Organization of the Future for Local Government?**

<Summary>

Richard Pratt  
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This paper contends that Musashino Place is significant as an addition to its community and an important example of innovation. This innovation promises to improve the responsiveness of local governments in Japan and elsewhere, while protecting accountability. The organizing concept is responsible flexibility.

The paper first summarizes the challenges that public organizations have faced from advocates of market-based solutions and from cycles of fiscal crisis. These challenges create dilemmas in balancing (1) order and flexibility and (2) policy innovation and risk avoidance. Community libraries epitomize this challenge for public organizations.

Musashino Place's development is traced from the 1970s. Planning began with land purchase in 1998. A 2003 report used the key word "Place" (Ba), which continued as a key concept. When it opened in July 2011 the goal was to address changes in contemporary Japanese society by seamlessly integrating four functions to strengthen both individuals and community. This degree of integration has not occurred anywhere in Japan.

The four functions are:

Providing diverse lifelong learning opportunities

Supporting and integrating citizen group activities

Engaging children and youth

Being a rich information source

Successfully integrating these has required innovation in both physical and administrative design. We suggest that physically Musashino Place is like a small village where someone makes rounds while having unplanned encounters with interesting items and other community members.

Administrative innovation makes it possible to avoid the “compartmentalism” common to similar organizations. This is accomplished by dividing its funding stream. Some operating costs are covered like the Chuo and Kichijoji libraries, but some personnel costs are funneled through the “Musashino Place Lifelong Learning Foundation.” Those hired through the Foundation are not subject to the rules applying to civil service employees. This additional flexibility is used to support the core value of integration. It supports:

Greater cooperation across roles.

More discretion to support mission-related activities.

Staff discretion in rule enforcement to balance traditional and nontraditional library activities.

Inclusion of sub-contractors to support the mission.

We contend that several factors support the creation of Musashino Place:

Vision and persistence by a core group.

Community openness to new ideas.

Clear advantages over other options.

Good timing.

Appropriate leadership.

Challenges face this experiment in responsible flexibility. These include whether to introduce a fee system; maintaining a continuity of leadership; and sustaining community support for an innovation that may not be adopted

elsewhere.

We conclude by suggesting measures of success. These include the work conditions of non civil service employees; continuity of leadership; the degree of workplace integration; misuses of flexibility; public support for Musashino Place's mission; measuring important outcomes; and whether this has been a model for others. In the end we ask: Can this kind of innovation take us beyond pre-occupations with efficiency and cost-cutting to improve the quality of life and the satisfactions of community while making public organizations attractive places to work?