

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders

...One bite at a time”

It was only a week before the Arctic Circle 2016 Assembly that I was asked whether I could attend the Assembly to make a presentation. I answered yes. The one thing which troubled me was that the venue for the Assembly was a place I had never expected to go. The Mercator projection world map, which I had learned during my school days, had blurred my mind. On that map, Japan was at the world’s center, while Iceland was on the edge of the map in its upper left hand corner. Of course I later understood that the actual world is different from that represented on the map, but the impression given by that image of the world stuck stubbornly in my mind. It was still incredible to me that I would go to the “edge of the world”, even as I was flying on board a plane to Iceland.



Over Shared Pauses: Impressions of Arctic Circle 2016 in Reykjavik

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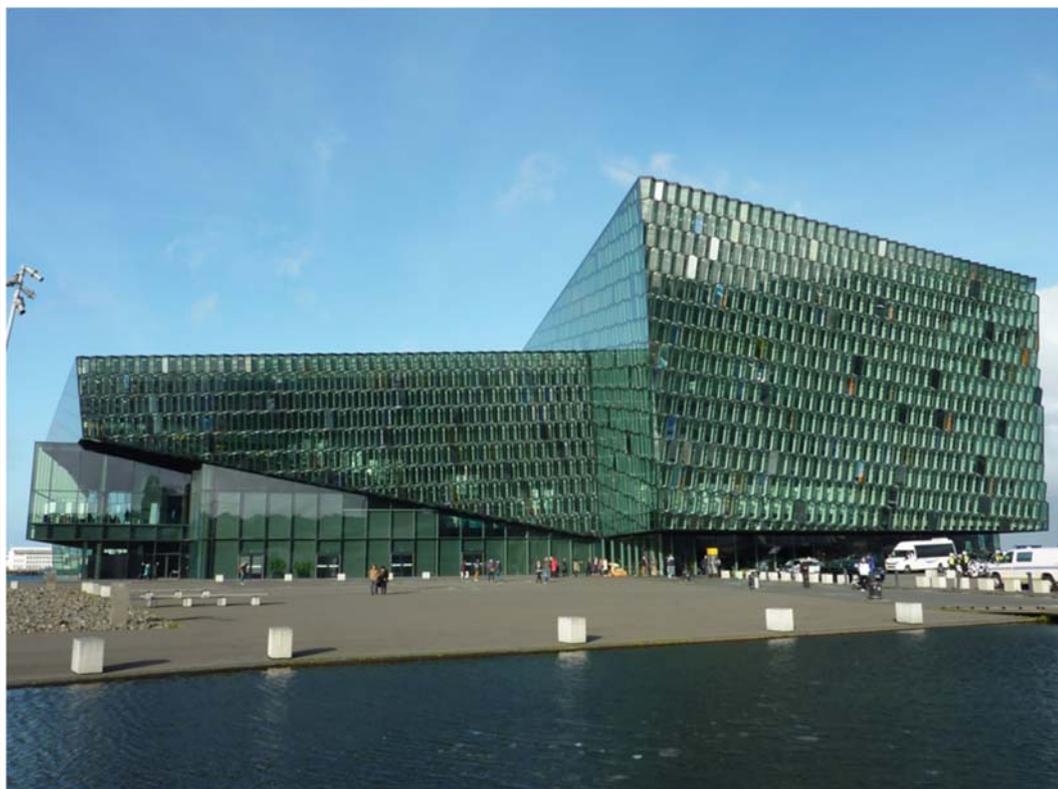


Figure 1: Harpa Concert Hall & Conference Center (author’s photo)

Fourth Course

BORDER BITES

Over Shared Pauses

Masanori Goto

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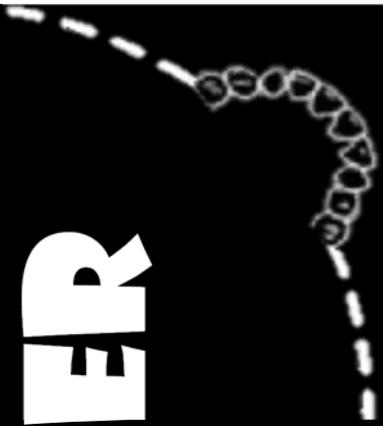
The conference hall *Harpa*, venue for the Assembly, was more brilliant than any other modern architecture I have ever seen. It was constructed in a corner of Reykjavik harbor and was opened in 2011, a few years after the financial crisis of the country. The huge glassed-in walls are covered by numberless cell-like frames. The long stairs along a wall look as if they reach out into the sky. I was overwhelmed by the sense of freedom the building emitted. So many participants were gathered that some of them were not able to find seats in the main hall.

The program of plenary sessions consisted of keynote speeches by eminent guests and various panel discussions. The likes of Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, and Dmitry Kobylkin, Governor of Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug in Russia, were entered in the program. The most impressive speaker for me was the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon. She gave her speech immediately following the opening session on the first day of the program. Wittily evading questions about Brexit thrown from the floor, she affirmed Scottish cooperation with the environmental policy of the EU (her keynote speech and discussion are available on the website: <https://vimeo.com/187190681>). The session was chaired by Ólafur Grímsson, Arctic Circle Chairman and former President of Iceland.



Figure 2: Ólafur Grímsson & Nicola Sturgeon (Arctic Circle 2016 Assembly website)

During the break after the session, I talked with a secretary of



BORDER BITES

Over Shared Pauses

Masanori Goto

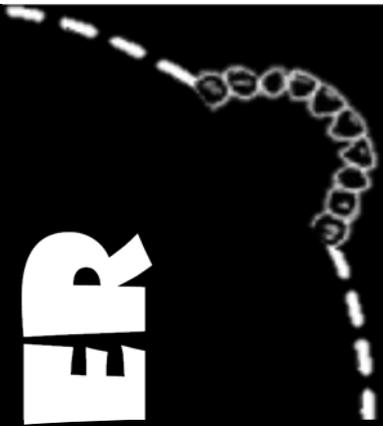
Fourth Course

Japanese Embassy in Iceland, and expressed my surprise at the importance being accorded to Scotland at a conference such as this. He suggested two factors of significance for this were renewable energy and the Cod Wars. When I investigated these two issues later, my understanding of time and space in this region of the world was completely transformed, and my old Mercator map gone.

Green is Hot

Iceland enjoys the cheapest electricity in Europe. Almost all electric power in the country is generated from renewable energy, which is possible because of the country's natural environment. Hydroelectric power generation had long accounted for almost all of the nation's electricity. In recent years, the amount of power generated was greatly expanded through the construction of a power station at a glacial meltwater. A geothermal energy industry is also developing. This "volcano power" is used to provide the majority of heating in cities. When I turned the hot water tap in the hotel room on, it smelled of sulfurous hot springs. In Iceland today, 70 percent of electric power is generated through hydroelectricity, and 30 percent using geothermal energy. The total amount generated is about five times that demanded by Iceland's 325,000 population. This surplus electricity had been exploited for aluminium smelters, but the cheapness of aluminium has made the market in exporting electricity more attractive.

Expectations for renewable energy in Europe have been recently enhanced. The Paris agreement was adopted at COP21 in December 2015, and entered into force the other day, on 4 November 2016. All countries are now challenged to boost levels of green energy in order to bring down carbon emissions. Under these circumstances, a project to construct a submarine power cable between Iceland and Scotland, called "IceLink", has been put forward. It would extend as far as 1000 kilometers, and deliver a volume of more than 5 TWh electricity per annum. Iceland and the UK government agreed to create an energy task force to look at the benefits of this interconnector, which came to a positive conclusion. The construction of this interconnector promised to be profitable, while serving to facilitate renewables integration, and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. It would have provided Iceland with a steady source of income alongside that from fish and tourism. The IceLink Project was included in the



BORDER BITES

Over Shared Pauses

Masanori Goto

Fourth Course

Projects of Common Interest (PCI) declared by the European Commission in 2015. The interconnection had become a pillar of the EU's energy strategy to diversify energy sources and integrate the energy market. It was at this moment that the referendum to decide whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU was conducted. The result shook the basis of energy security in the region.

Is Cod Cold?

The relation between Iceland and the UK had not always been warm, and has sometimes fallen into rather desperate straits. Disputes over the rich marine products of the seas between the countries have frequently occurred since the Middle Ages. Even during the last century, critical situations developed no less than three times, and on each occasion ultimately ended with Iceland's victory. Iceland would unilaterally declare an extension to its fishing limits, and subsequently received recognition from the UK. Although no military actions were ever taken, this series of conflicts are called the Cod Wars, after the main catch from the seas in question. The 200 nautical mile fishing limit which Iceland won in 1976 at the conclusion of the third Cod War set a precedent for the development of the notion of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), enshrined today in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Iceland could take advantage of its geopolitical position by threatening that it would withdraw from NATO. At that time, during the the Cold War, Iceland's withdrawal from NATO would have created a corridor through the "GIUK gap" (Greenland – Iceland – UK) and allowed the USSR's ships to freely access the Atlantic Ocean. To a great extent, Iceland's geography has made its history so complicated.

Just over 30 years ago, in October 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan had a meeting at a guest house in Reykjavik (We passed in front of this guest house every day on the shuttle bus from our hotel to the venue during the Assembly). That summit meeting laid the groundwork for the conclusion of the Cold War. On 27 June of this year, four days after the UK referendum vote, the Iceland football team beat England by 2 goals to 1 at the European Championship. Icelandic supporters celebrated their victory with a Viking War Chant. It consists of a repetitive pattern; mighty clap with shouting "huh", then a silent pause. At first the pauses are long, before becoming shorter little by little. It is said that this chant actually by no means of Viking origin, but was

BORDER BITES

Over Shared Pauses

Masanori Goto

Fourth Course

taken from Scottish football supporters. Nicola Sturgeon referred to this episode in her keynote speech to explain the close relationship between Iceland and Scotland. New histories for relations are constantly being created.

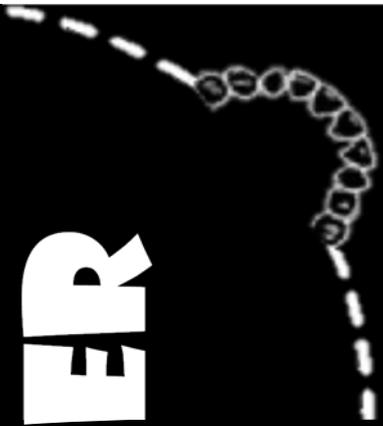
Silent Saga

On the last day of my stay in Iceland, I visited the Saga Museum, which is located in the same area as the venue. The small museum contains reproductions of various scenes from the Icelandic Saga. The Saga is an historical prose story written in the Middle Ages in Iceland, which describes various episodes of Vikings from Norway who settled in Iceland. As the word “saga” in Icelandic has the same etymology as “say” in English, it is believed that they were originally handed down orally. I was amazed that the ancestors of Icelanders voyaged to settle not only in Iceland but also in Greenland and even in North America. What struck me is their vitality to sail freely across the North Atlantic despite the harsh natural conditions.



Figure 3: Saga Museum (author's photo)

That brought home to me the idea that it may be quite natural that the Viking War Chant was taken up by Icelanders, irrespective of whether it is of Viking origin or not. Because the silent pauses following the mighty clap and shouting conjure up for me the long and dark winters in Iceland. After a long voyage,



BORDER BITES

Over Shared Pauses

Masanori Goto

Fourth Course

their ancestors anchored their ships at fjords, and waited patiently for winters to go past. Was it not their custom to share pauses together with own close companions? Would it not be that their hearts beat faster when they hear the silent pauses become shorter and shorter, as when the dark nights become shorter and shorter as spring is approaching?