

An investigation into the significance of space in Tokyo

*"Where do meaningful interactions take place in public spaces in Tokyo,
and what predictions can be made for the future of these spaces?"*

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPACE IN TOKYO

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INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the questions, “Where do meaningful interactions take place in public spaces in Tokyo, and what predictions can be made for the future of these spaces?” This essay begins by introducing Tokyo as a case study, and reflecting on the recent history of the city. Here, “loose space” is introduced, and is set as a recurring theme for many spaces in Tokyo. This essay then explores several types of categories of space within the city, such as the Privatised City, the Shared City, and finally the Hybrid City. The significance of this essay is to investigate how public space is used by people in the city of Tokyo, and to predict the future of these spaces.

The *Privatised City* illustrates the inauthenticity of some public spaces due to the city being entrenched with capitalism and consumerism. Commercial spaces are contrived and hinder the likelihood of spontaneous actions taking place, due to the presence of many large corporations and franchises in Tokyo. In contrast, the *Shared City* explores community spaces, such as art gallery spaces, free markets and parks. Finally, the *Hybrid City* might determine the potential future of public spaces in Tokyo, by introducing more genuine public spaces, while preserving consumerist practises. This section is a mix between the commercial space and the community space; a hybrid.

Franck and Stevens, authors of 'Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life' (2007), are a major influence on my essay, as their concept of 'loose space' has helped to analyse the various types of activity that occurs in urban spaces. Jonas and Rahmann, authors of 'Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence' (2014), have given me the insight of how to interrogate public spaces in the specific context of Tokyo. Thirdly, I draw heavily on my own experience of living in Tokyo, and the spaces which I personally feel are significant.

Throughout, I strive to answer where meaningful interactions happen, yet "meaningful" needs to be defined. I see public space as an opportunity to mingle, chat, and acclimatise oneself with unfamiliarity and diversity. Firstly, I believe that in order for meaningful interactions to take place, it has to be a non-corporate space; a purely free public space, with no charges. Secondly, the space should enable a range of activities other than commercial to allow for non-consumerist connections to occur. Thirdly, the space has to benefit the community by providing an appropriate environment for communities to intermingle, and creating bonds of care. **Table 1** outlines the criteria previously described.

Table 1:

<i>"Meaningful Interactions" Criteria</i>
1. It has to be a non-corporate space
2. It enables a range of activities other than just commercial
3. It has to benefit and better the community

To understand this criteria better, several urban spaces in Tokyo will be investigated. **Table 2** categorises the spaces explored in the essay into each city type mentioned previously. **Figure 1** gives a visual presentation of this, by showing how the different categories are spread out across the city.

Table 2:

Spaces in Tokyo	Privatised City	Shared City	Hybrid City
<i>Den-en-chōfu station plaza</i>			●
<i>Komazawa Olympic Park</i>		●	
<i>Miyashita Park</i>			●
<i>Nakameguro/ Meguro River</i>			●
<i>Omotesando Shopping Street</i>	●		
<i>ONDI in Yanaka</i>		●	
<i>Roppongi Hills Shopping Area</i>	●		
<i>Shibuya</i>	●		
<i>Shinjuku Central Road</i>	●		
<i>T-Site in Daikanyama</i>			●
<i>0 yen shop in Kunitachi</i>		●	

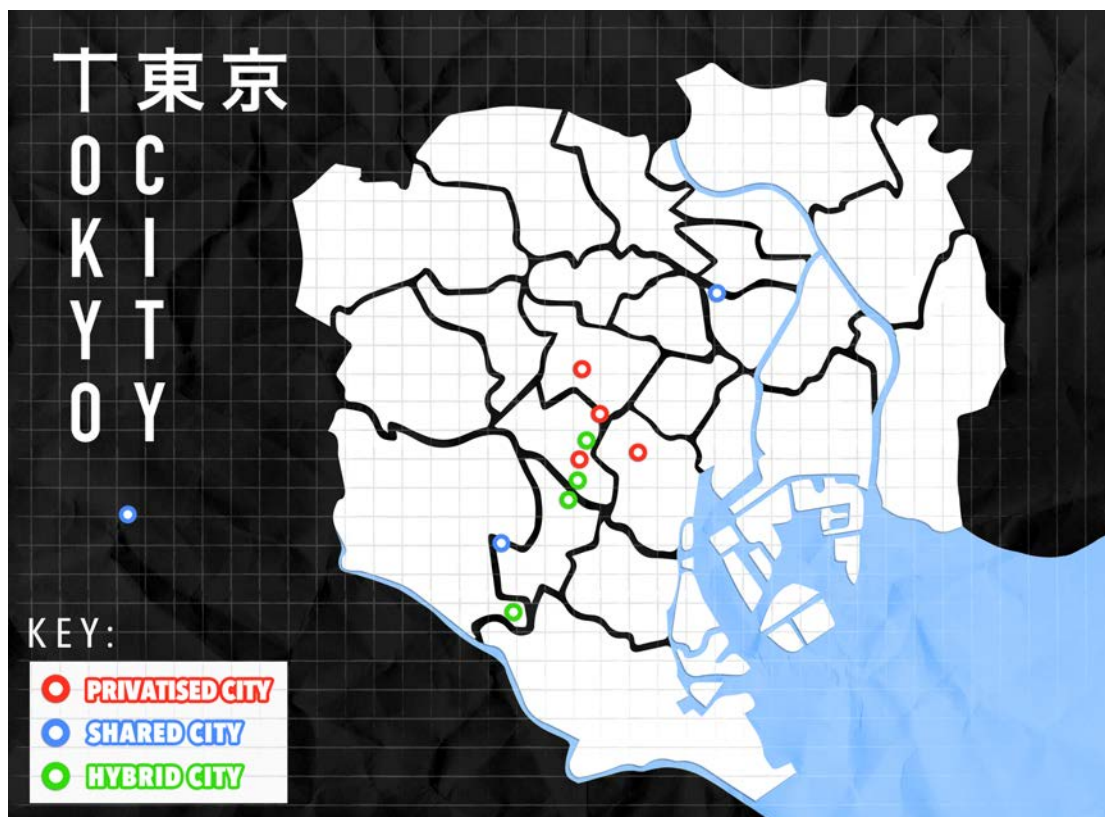


Figure 1: Map of Tokyo, and the locations of the different types of space explored in the essay.

TOKYO CITY

Tokyo might be described as the ultimate futuristic city, with overwhelming neon lights, bustling crowds, and an endless sea of concrete buildings. To me, the densely packed neighbourhoods with black electric wires hanging over, or the convenience stores situated next to temples; these are some of the things that I consider strangely beautiful. Growing up in Tokyo, you get used to the “strangeness” of its architectural laws, and you simply ignore the often frowned upon buildings that are stacked on top of another. Livio Sacchi describes how when one views the city that ‘you can “feel” its noise, its power, its infinite vitality.’ (Sacchi, 2004:28) What is it about the design of Tokyo city that makes it so powerful? How did it become the way it is today?

Sacchi (2004: 58) described the Postwar Years of Japan as being:

‘...a new time, a time in which tradition was rejected, and in which, with surprising naturalness, Japanese society and architectural culture seemed to thrive in modernity, through an unconditioned and uncritical assimilation of the American model.’

Because of extensive damage from air raids during World War II, Tokyo underwent a unique transformation. International events like the 1960 World Design Conference and the 1964 Olympic Games, both held in Tokyo, also affected its transformation. The Olympics was the perfect opportunity to showcase Tokyo to the world, and to redeem itself from its tainted reputation from World War II. Thus a series of urban planning frameworks were established to support the upcoming Games which led to successful developments within the urban landscape, such as the high speed inter-city railway system (Saachi, 2004).

However, with the increase of modernisation and Americanisation of Japan, students in the late 1960s and 1970s protested against the government and police. In 1969, thousands of young people took part in sit-in demonstrations in the West Exit Underground Plaza inside Shinjuku station, today the busiest train station in the world. These rallies took place weekly for several months as anti-war protests, with “folk guerrillas” performing live gigs within the plaza. (Andrews, 2014). The plaza itself was newly built for the Olympic Games, and such large spaces were relatively rare at the time. People were debating, chatting, flirting; it was a free space for discussions to take place. ‘Posters were put up, political slogans splashed on the walls and pillars. It became a de facto demo; people sold things, did fundraising, gave out pamphlets.’ (Andrews, 2014:online). That was until the final rally, when the plaza was stormed by 2,200 riot police. From that day, the space was officially renamed the West Exit Underground Passageway, and its stated purpose from then on was only a passageway.



Figure 2: Bustling crowds in Shinjuku station

Why was this event so significant to the renewal process of Tokyo? It has been argued that ‘1969 was a turning point – the moment Japan’s idea of space was twisted into something for shopping, not for social activity.’ (Michael, 2019:online). Travelling through Shinjuku station today (**Figure 2**), it is difficult to comprehend that such a large protest took place within the underground networks of streets that make the station. Even in the city above, it is hard to imagine today’s generation of young people organising such demonstrations. It is as if this generation, having grown up in a capitalist society, no longer have any issues with it. They enjoy

going to their nearby shopping district, buying the newest Frappuccino with friends at Starbucks and going window-shopping. Even buying lunch and dinner within the same day is a fairly normal activity that many Japanese people do. These activities would be categorised as being consumeristic – the sole motivation is to buy. The reason being is that these spaces only allow for such activities to take place. However, this is not how it has to be. If we look at other contexts of urban cities in the world, then we can start to see that public spaces in Tokyo can be used in a myriad of ways. This can be explained through the concept of “loose space”, which challenges this consumeristic notion of public spaces.

Franck and Stevens (2007:02) explain that people in public spaces around the world

‘...pursue a very rich variety of activities not originally intended for those locations. Sometimes these activities occur along with the primary, intended uses, as on the sidewalk, in the street or in the plaza. [...] In all such cases, through people’s activities, spaces become “loose”’

These loose spaces allow for the unexpected to happen; the possibility to express oneself, whether picnicking or protesting. It is the people who determine when the space becomes loose, through their own actions, and their own ingenuity. How impactful the activity is to the surroundings or community is dependent on the type of activity presented. This can be anything, ranging from relaxing, eating, playing, dancing, singing, socialising, to protesting, rallying, or petitioning (Franck, Stevens, 2007). In contrast, several of these activities may seem controversial in a lot of spaces in Tokyo, especially as many are privately owned. Furthermore, in streets, squares, and parks, intended use may even seem predictable, and certain other actions are deemed far too alien to even attempt. This can be anything outside of the social norm in contemporary Japanese culture—which I argue is primarily caused by consumerism. Instead of the act of consuming, can meaningful interactions take place within public spaces in Tokyo, and where do these interactions take place?

PRIVATISED CITY

Tokyo is the ultimate city for shopping. The possibilities for shopping are remarkably endless, as one has the chance to buy something anywhere, whenever you want. On every corner, there will most definitely be a vending machine selling the latest popular drinks, or down the street a convenience store awaits your arrival. Large shopping streets such as Omotesando may represent how the action of walking is now associated with shopping. Kevin Lynch (1960:96) argues that, 'A street is perceived, in fact, as a thing which goes towards something.' This means that streets are designed with a single focal point in mind, which one travels towards as one walks along. However, this is quite difficult in the streets of Tokyo as one gets distracted with the abundance of shops and businesses that exist within a single street. One almost feels disoriented due to the never-ending path, as there is no "something" to go towards. Nonetheless, for years areas like Shinjuku or Shibuya, which are within the heart of Tokyo, have been recognised as remarkable and highly innovative shopping areas. (Sacchi, 2004)

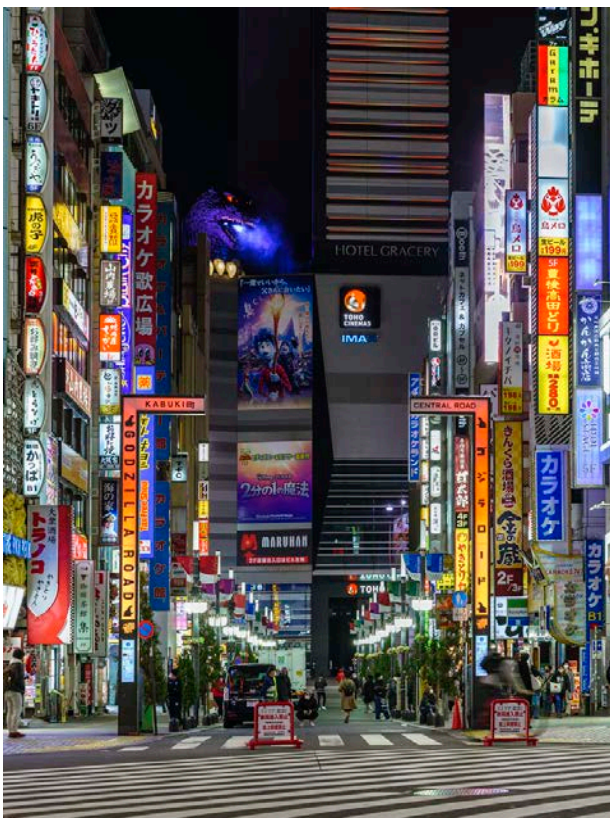


Figure 3: Empty Kabukicho Night (Lucava,2020)

Shinjuku may be best recognised from its "Central Road" – or now more commonly known as Godzilla Road. This street is surrounded by restaurants, karaoke bars, love hotels, sex shops, bars, and many *izakaya* restaurants (traditional Japanese-style pubs). All these businesses are stacked on one another, forming multi-purpose towers where one can engage in a range of consumption activities. Neon signs lure tourists and drunken *salarymen* (white-collar workers) into each place. Most importantly at the end of the street, there is a large life-size structure of

Godzilla placed on top of a cinema building ruling this district of Shinjuku. As seen in **Figure 3**, walking through this street, one has the extraordinary impression of being on a blockbuster film set.

While this spectacle of a street might be awe-inspiring, it does not lend itself to authentic interactions and experiences. Instead it only allows for the further commercialisation of public spaces. David Harvey (2008:31) states that the 'Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy.' The magnitude of choice in today's cities is limitless, as these spaces have been designed to cater for people's diverse tastes, as well as creating new markets for capitalism. This can be seen in all of the main shopping areas around Tokyo as these areas attract investment due to the demand of consumption, subsequently allowing large corporations to ruthlessly privatise public spaces.



Figure 4: Roppongi Hills, 66 Plaza, with the Mori Tower entrance seen on the right.

These Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) dictate the way people use urban spaces, primarily for shopping. Dimmer (2013) states that as of 2011, the number of these spaces amounted to almost 700, totalling to 1.9 million m². He continues to explain that, 'The majority of design and management innovations were introduced by the private side and are attributable to the fact that, to put it simply, better public spaces make more money.' (Dimmer, 2013:47). The standard and quality of these POPS is very high, as developers recognise that more money can be made when these areas are

desirable and impressive. Despite their attractiveness, these spaces are not necessarily functional or *meaningful*. With the example of Roppongi Hills, a large building called the “Mori Tower” (labelled in yellow in **Figure 5**) which is connected to a shopping mall, is at the centre of this shopping area. This public space, specifically the ‘66 Plaza’, is seemingly bare, with only a few available benches forming a semi circle, seen in **Figure 4** with the blue lines. These benches face directly towards the building and mall.

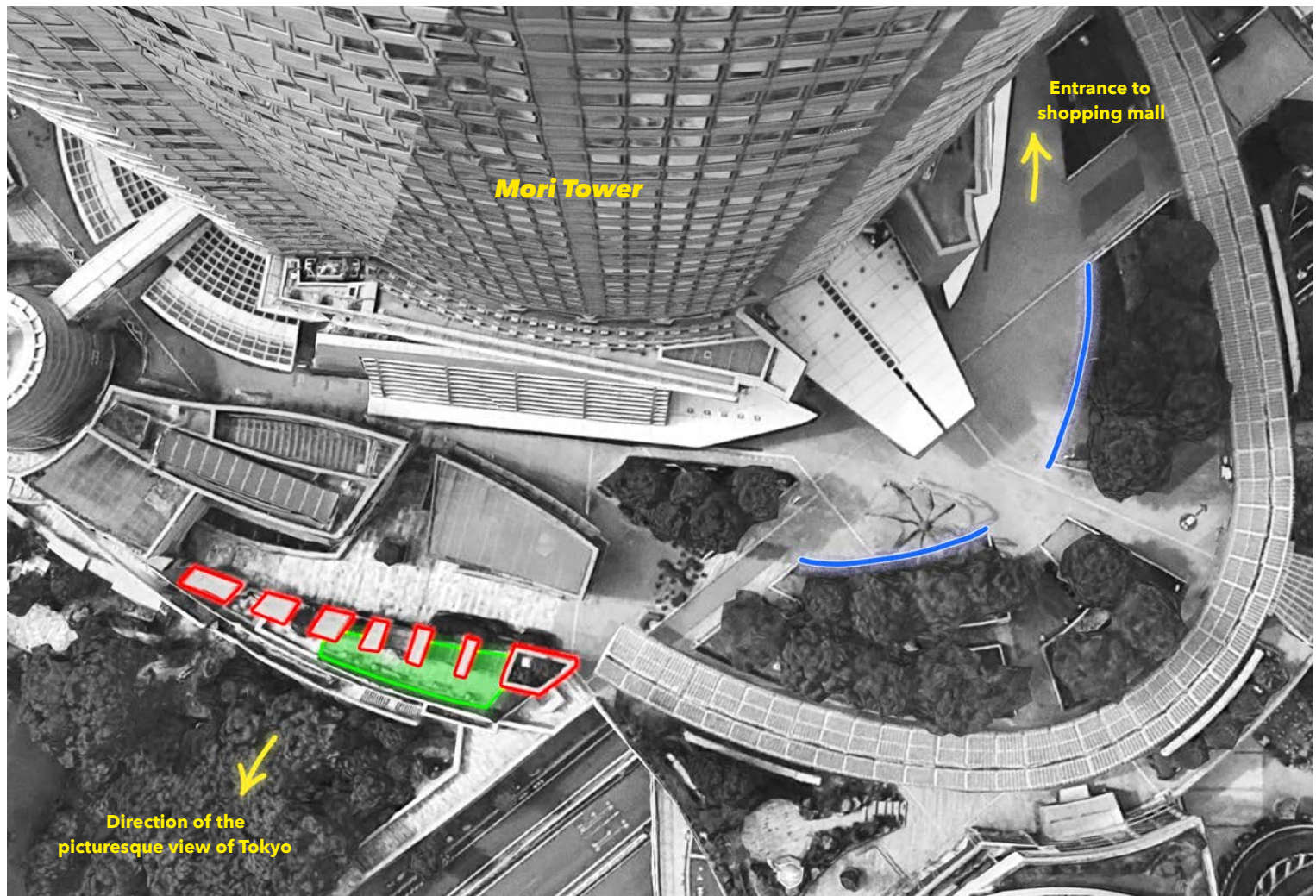


Figure 5: Satellite Image of Roppongi Hills ‘66 Plaza’ (Google Maps, 2021)

Blue lines represent the seating area, the red lines outline the walls, and the green area shows where the public smoking area is located.

Interestingly, this open space has a picturesque panoramic view of the city, but with most of it hidden with walls and trees, which can be seen in **Figure 5** and **6**, with the walls outlined in red. Instead, the view of Tokyo can only properly be seen in the public “smoking area”, which is highlighted in green in **Figure 5** and **7**. This hidden area is in front of the red walls. Not many people use this hidden smoking area. Instead, on the



Figure 5: The walls outlined in red, which blocks the picturesque view of Tokyo.

top floor of the Mori Tower, there is the opportunity to gaze upon the cityscape, as long as you are able to pay the 1,500 yen entrance fee (approximately 11 pounds). It is almost as if the developers of Roppongi Hills, Mori, purposely planned for this view in the smoking area to be hidden, in order to ensure that the public would purchase a ticket first before being able to see the city view. This highlights how privatised public spaces are exclusive, as they shut out people who can not afford to pay.



Figure 6: Google Street View of the smoking area in Roppongi Hills (Google Maps, 2013)

In contrast to the boisterous and hectic shopping areas, several small communities in neighbourhoods gather in peculiar spaces, further away from the centre of Tokyo. These spaces, such as parking lots and pavements, offer a unique experience to these communities, despite their original purpose. These spaces, which are often regarded as insignificant compared to the obnoxiously bright neon shopping streets, allow for more genuine and significant activities to take place. This section will examine how communities around Tokyo have taken the initiative in creating more meaningful spaces, and look at alternative ways of occupying public space.

Kasu Harappa Onda (**Figure 8**) is an example of how an empty space within the urban landscape of Tokyo can be used in an unconventional manner. This special space in the neighbourhood of Yanaka could have become a *koinpākingu* spot (coin-operated car park), but instead the owners deliberately changed it into an outdoor gallery space. Here, local creatives can rent the open gallery for only a small price for unique events and exhibitions, such as performances, art exhibitions, workshops and markets (Jonas, Rahmann, 2014). The creation of Onda was an act of resistance against the normalised individualistic mindset of



Figure 8: 貸はらっぱ音地会場 (Yoshida, 2007)

(Translated: Kasu Harappa Onda Venue)

Japan. 'The idea behind Onda is to provide a space that supports conversations and invites everyone to participate' (Jonas, Rahmann, 2014:47). This specific attitude of the space perfectly represents all of the definitions in my "Meaningful Interactions" Criteria. Additionally, being located on a main road, allows for strangers passing by to be exposed to this alternative way of occupying space and whilst only observing, they are also participating.

While Ondi is an inspiring example of a public space in Tokyo being used for community-led initiatives, it is still not entirely a free space, as creatives must first pay to use it. In Kunitachi, west of Tokyo, a 0 Yen shop was established by local activists who attempt to challenge the general public on their preconceived notions concerning money (Tokyowa, 2017). The market is set-up on a pavement in front of bushes next to a train station where people display their unwanted items, and where anyone can take anything for free; no swapping necessary. This concept of a free market was inspired by the “Really Really Free Markets” events that were first developed by anarchist activists in the USA, in 2004 (Albisson, Perera, 2012). These markets, just like the 0 Yen shop, seek to engage with communities by prompting an alternative approach to consumption. By challenging socially accepted capitalist ideas of profit and value, they encourage conversations about the possibility of different ways of interacting and using space. Additionally, the emphasis on sharing and cooperation at these events helps to build unity in local communities, as relationships are formed and strengthened between friends, neighbours, and strangers alike. (Albisson, Perera, 2012). In a city like Tokyo, where capitalism is so entrenched in everyday life, the existence of free shops and markets is highly unusual. However the 0 Yen shop, as well as Ondi, prove that alternative approaches to community building are possible. While they are small, these community spaces are persevering, and can be seen as effective pockets of resistance in Tokyo’s urban landscape.



Figure 9: *Komazawa Park in a Weekend*
(ykanazawa1999, 2009)

In comparison to these free market spaces, parks in Tokyo are more commonly used for personal and leisure purposes. These spaces are free, as they are almost all owned by the local government, and therefore can be enjoyed by everyone. As of today, there are currently 8,203 municipal urban parks in Tokyo, which offer locals the opportunity to meet in spaces

that were not designed for consumeristic purposes (Bureau of Construction, 2020). Komazawa Olympic Park is an example where public space has been designed specifically



Figure 10: Basketball at Komazawa Olympic Park (Fujii, 2008)

for recreational purposes. The park has a large bicycle and jogging track that circles around the grounds, as seen in **Figure 9**. These designated lanes are colour-coded to distinguish the type of activity taking place within each lane. The blue lane is for cyclists, and the yellow lane for joggers. There are also several more facilities free to use, such as the children's park, a dog zone, a splash pond, and an area to play basketball. (**Figure 10**).



Figure 11: Omikoshi festival in September

Additionally, the ideas of the Shared City are enacted during Japanese cultural festivals, as community led activities take place which promote social collaboration. Tokyo's streets are transformed during the late summer period when *matsuri* (festivals) happen. These *matsuri* are organised by members of Shinto shrines. *Mikoshi* (portable shrines) are carried around entire neighbourhoods, to please deities and gods that are bound to these shrines (**Figure 11**). Community members are seen dancing, singing, bouncing the shrine up and down, and after

a long, hard days work, eat and drink with neighbours and friends. At *Obon*, a major summer festival, the normally empty grounds of Buddhist temples are transformed into carnival-like spaces, with music, food, and games taking place.

HYBRID CITY

By looking at the Private City and the Shared City, I have come to the conclusion that certain spaces in Tokyo are a mix of the two; a hybrid. Some hybrids have existed in the city for some time, while others are new. *Accidental Hybrids* is a term I define as pre-existing spaces that have developed over time into hybrid spaces, where their original purpose has become intertwined with loose activities taking place within it. These spaces have community-oriented intentions, while also preserving consumeristic goals, and are found throughout the landscape of Tokyo, especially in commonly used areas like streets and stations.

Den-en-chōfu station plaza (**Figure 12 and 13**) is an example of where a public space is used for various purposes. This *Accidental Hybrid* is surrounded by businesses, such as a small convenience store, a bakery, and a Starbucks. In the plaza, I have seen festival celebrations, local school children performing, politicians and nonprofit organisations campaigning. It is through these events and actions that the space becomes loose, by allowing locals to intermingle and genuinely engage with each other.



Figure 12: Denenchofu Station (Taka, 2006)



Figure 13: Den-en-chōfu Plaza in December



Figure 14: Printemps de Denenchofu (Hayashi, 2008)

Above the plaza, there is a drop-off and pick-up area which is in a semi-circle design (**Figure 14**). In the centre of the semi-circle roundabout, a water fountain pond and benches make a distinctive meeting point for locals and visitors of the area. Den-en-chōfu was the first planned suburban development in Japan using combined influences of Western and Japanese urbanism (Oshima, 1996). Businesses surround the space as well, such as a KFC, a pâtisserie, a café, a hairdressers, and a clothing store. Like the plaza, this space reflects the ideas of an *Accidental Hybrid*, where meaningful activities can be surrounded by consumerism.

A similar *Accidental Hybrid* space can also be observed along the Meguro River in Nakameguro during the *sakura* season (cherry blossoms). Cherry trees line both sides of the river, with several types of businesses and shops on both streets. Throughout the year, these streets may seem unassuming, however these spaces are transformed into a bustling and thriving tourist attraction during the cherry blossoms season (**Figure 15**).

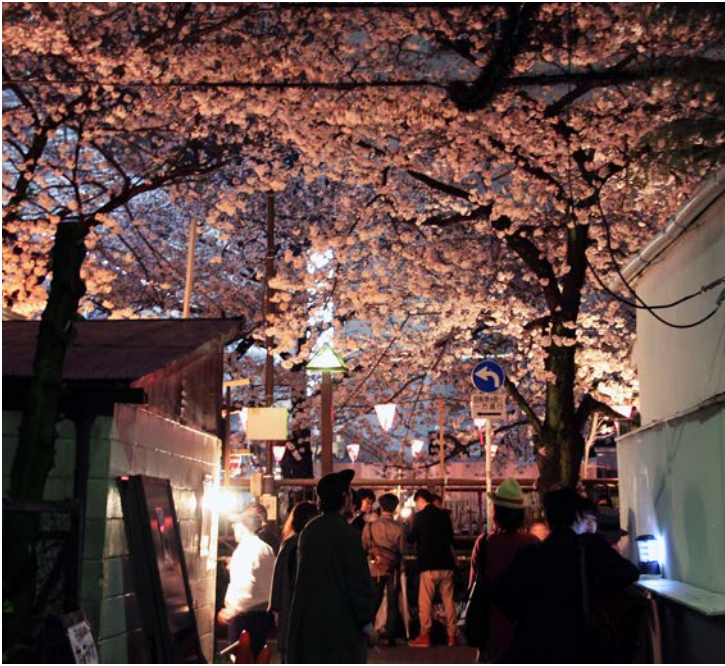


Figure 15: *From the back street* (OiMax, 2014)



Figure 16: *Nakameguro Food Stalls* (Marillet, 2013)

Interestingly, most of these businesses extend their commercial activity directly onto the streets, only when the festival occurs. Often, these establishments will sell items that have nothing to do with their normal business, and the opportunity to make profit is their primary motive. Tourists and locals purchase street food and beverages whilst viewing the cherry blossoms (**Figure 16**).

New Hybrids is a term I define as new development projects of public space that are purposely designed for multi-purpose use; a hybrid of commercial and free public use. These spaces have been designed within the last 10 years, and have been created for people to shop, while considering other activities other than just consuming. These spaces are in turn allowing for more meaningful interactions to take place. Projects such as the T-Site in Daikanyama, a unique bookstore-coffee shop campus-like space, or Miyashita Park in Shibuya, have shown that this type of “City” is possible. (Klein Dytham Architecture)



Figure 17: Miyashita Park (江戸村のとくぞう, 2020a)

Miyashita Park (**Figure 17**) is an unparalleled case study of a *New Hybrid* space in Tokyo. In 2010, the once neglected park on top of a 1960s car parking structure, was bought by internationally renowned sports company, Nike. (Tsukamoto, Goodwin, 2012). Shortly after, hundreds of homeless people were forcefully removed from the park by city officials. (Cayer, Bender, 2019).

A second redevelopment project was completed just in time for the 2020 Olympic Games; this space is over 330 metres long, with a hotel, and shopping mall with 60 shops on three floors. The rooftop space (**Figure 18**) has several sports facilities, including a new skatepark, a new bouldering wall, a beach-volleyball court, as well as an open green field. (Brown, 2020). The sports facilities are not free to use, with a fee of 250 yen (£1.80) per hour. Considering how expensive Tokyo is, this price is quite affordable. This demonstrates that while the park does allow locals to engage in activities which are meaningful, this still comes at a cost.

In the redesigned park, there are many new *izakaya* restaurants that line the entire ground floor nicknamed Shibuya Yokocho. Ironically, the original street opposite Miyashita Park named Nonbei Yokocho (Drunkard's Alley), already has an assortment of traditional *izakaya* restaurants, which have existed since the 1960s. Now, both streets compete as rivals, the old and the new, making tourists and locals have to choose between the two. (Thomas, 2020). This form of gentrification poses a threat to the local businesses standing 50 metres away, as their space is encroached upon and their customers lost. In a city that is staunchly capitalist, Miyashita Park recognises the importance of public space for people to use, yet it demonstrates how commerce is prioritised over community. While beautifully designed, the park is ultimately made possible through the destruction of a refuge space for the city's homeless, which signals that the "future" of public spaces means leaving the most vulnerable behind. (Brown, 2020).



Figure 18: Miyashita Park (江戸村のとくぞう, 2020b)

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay I investigated several types of public areas of Tokyo, in order to discover where meaningful interactions take place. This was done by creating a criteria categorising what I believe “meaningful” meant. These interactions take place in a non-corporate space, which enables a range of activities other than just commercial, which benefits and betters the community. This can be seen in areas like Ondi in Yanaka, the 0 Yen shop in Kunitachi, and Komazawa Olympic Park. However, *Accidental Hybrids*, such as Nakameguro, or Den-en-chōfu, prove that while surrounded by shops, meaningful interactions can take place as well. Following this investigation of the spaces which currently exist in Tokyo, predictions must be made to understand the potential future of these spaces.

The Future of the Shared City

The Shared City is a hopeful symbol of a potential future of Tokyo, but is also an unrealistic one. The existence of shared spaces indicate that resistance to capitalism does exist in Tokyo. This resistance has created new opportunities for conversations around money to happen, and to discuss the exclusiveness of the “Privatised City”. Despite that, capitalism is far too ingrained in the structure of Tokyo’s economy and principles that I do not see the Shared City overtaking the Privatised City. Nonetheless, the resilience of these spaces proves that they can survive.

The Future of the Privatised City

The Privatised City can be seen throughout Tokyo, with its shopping malls and shopping streets. However the creation of hybrid spaces, like Miyashita Park, indicates that a new type of City will take over, one where designers and architects must consider that public space be used for people as well, and not just for shopping.

The Future of the Hybrid City

The Hybrid City is the most likely future of Tokyo's public spaces. It represents the upcoming transformation of future city spaces, by being for people to use, while preserving shopping within these spaces. These are spaces where multiple types of activities will be allowed to take place, in order for meaningful interactions to happen. The danger of this could be that these public spaces, still owned and funded by large corporations, could choose to take away, or restrict activities occurring in these open spaces. For example, Nike could choose to increase the costs of using the sports facilities in Miyashita Park, and it is with such power, that the Privatised City can still thrive. The Hybrid City must allow people to also have a voice, and the freedom to choose their own activities in loose public spaces.

While the Hybrid City appears to be the most likely contender of the future of Tokyo's public spaces, how can designers and planners ensure that these spaces successfully function as free public spaces? Advocates for a city based around my 'meaningful interactions' criteria will need to come up with creative solutions for how these ideas can be implemented in a city as overtly consumerist as Tokyo. While looking to the future, it may actually be useful to look at traditional Japanese customs to get an idea of how this may work in practice, as discussed earlier with the examples of the *Matsuri* and *Obon* festivals. Alternatively, it could mean creating entirely new models for how urban public space is designed and used. In this future, urban spaces are unlike those that were created in Tokyo during the 1960s. Instead, this new transformation will consist of hybrid spaces, where loose activity, self expression and social interaction will become the central priorities for the designers of a new Tokyo.



Figure 19: Tokyo City

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