User-generated Tokyo

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Introduction

There is something about the sheer size of Tokyo that stimulates imagination. Tokyo has a special place in urban fiction. By far the largest urban agglomeration in the world, it is built "atop the junction of three tectonic plates" (Lovgren, 2005) and therefore destined to be destroyed (again) in the future.1 The Fukushima disaster has reawakened the trauma of devastation and Japan's ambiguous relationship to technology and progress. Technological advances, particularly in construction and planning, are seen as the only way to secure the city against earthquake and and other natural disasters. Yet, technology has also demonstrated its extreme destructive potential when it gets out of control. Tokyo fictions have often played with the dystopic fantasies of a high-tech future, ultimate disaster and post-apocalyptic anarchy.2

A related sci-fi scenario is that of Tokyo as a cybernetic organism, which merges seamlessly nature and technology, tradition and the future, in a ubiquitous mediascape that connects everyone and everything. The cyborg city is a recurrent theme in Japanese architecture and urbanism since perhaps the nineteenth century, when Fukuzawa Yukichi first introduce the idea that information technology was at the "very essence of modern civilization" (Yoshimi: 2006: 273). Academics and architects have embraced the idea of the 'information society' since the 1960s. In Japan, it was initially associated with a tremendous enthusiasm for the future and a blind faith in technology.

The post-bubble area, from the 1990s to our days, is characterised by economic and ecological insecurity, mistrust of political authorities and the bureaucracy, and the advent of decentralized technologies of communication. The Internet in particular became a source of inspiration for those who saw it as both a tool and a model of more participatory and inclusive society – where communities of interest could come together and produce their own plans and visions for the future. Architect Toyo Ito once imagined a city where information flows were merged to the built

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1 It was already destroyed twice in the past century Once by the great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and then by firebombs during World War II.
2 Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982) is famously inspired by Tokyo's small, crowded and neo-lit streets of Tokyo. Although the movie is located in 2019 LA, many scenes are said to have been inspired by Tokyo, a city that fascinated him. The animation "Akira" (1988) also set in 2019 (perhaps as a reference to Blade Runner) is the best known post-apocalyptic Tokyo movie. It has triggered many derivatives and is itself part of a cinematic tradition that includes Akira Kurosawa 1990's "Dreams", which show Tokyo at the time of a nuclear disaster.

environment, blurring the line between the virtual/simulation and the real, but also between people and their habitats: "A great barrier exists between the administrator of a building and its users … electronic media may invalidate these barriers." (Toyo Ito: 2000)[3]

Imagine a city that is shaped and transformed by its users? Where the distance between urban aspiration and actualization is so short that virtually everyone can participate in planning and developing the city? That city would be, so to say, 'open source', 'peer to peer' and 'user-generated'.

This chapter looks firstly describes Tokyo as city that was produced spontaneously and incrementally by its users. It suggests that there is a Tokyo Model of urban development, which is a model 'by default' and not 'by design'. That model is based on the active participation of users in the production of urban space. It then describes how political and economic interests have taken over the user-generated city. The rise of a participatory society is indeed contingent not only on the penetration of new technology, forms of socialization and urban praxis, but also on the vested interests and ideologies of dominant groups. The chapter then explores the contradiction in the so-called information society between claims for more participation at the grassroots level and the increased control over planning and over development exercised by governments and corporate actors. The case of Shimokitazawa is briefly presented. The last section provides a conceptual framework based on the concept of 'information' that could be used to recognize and legitimize user's participation in urban development.

Homegrown Tokyo

Tokyo has a planned historical core but as the city expended beyond the historical limits of Edo, it sprawled onto its hinterlands with little or no central control. Planning happened in retrospect in the form of long-term development plans and large-scale urban projects. Many parts of Tokyo were also retroactively planned through the retrofitting of infrastructure. It took a few decades for postwar Tokyo to service its neighbourhoods. Nearly up to the 1980s some central neighbourhoods such as Shimokitazawa still had open drains and unpaved roads.[4]

Tokyo developed rapidly from the Edo period onwards. While the historical heart of Tokyo was planned, the periphery largely grew unplanned. Villages surrounding the city were swallowed up by the sprawling city and small plots of farmland were gradually converted to residential, commercial and industrial uses. Greater Tokyo grew over small patches of farmland surrounding the ancient capital of Edo. This

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[3] Toyo Ito's Mediatheque in Sendai and the Tower of Wind in Yokohama were architectural expression of that thinking – and, one could say, of its limit.

[4] Oral history of Shimokitazawa, recorded during the Urban Typhoon workshop (2006) by Taro Taguchi, a young faculty member in the architecture department of Waseda University and his team. www.urbantyphoon.com/2006

"pattern gives continuity with the past, [it is a] kind of patchwork [that] is the main urban replacement of an agricultural … landscape" (Shelton, 1999).

The flexibility of the land use of Tokyo is attested by the fact that some suburban plots that were once converted from agricultural to residential or commercial use are now being converted back to farming (Yokohari, 2010) with the support of the planning department. The blurred boundary between rural and urban is one of the ambivalence that along with others –such as the urban village and mixed-use neighbourhoods– have contributed to making Tokyo's unique fabric.

During the Pacific War, firebombs dropped by Allied warplanes flattened most of Tokyo. In many parts of the city the only things left besides ruins were street layout and the memory of the residents. These provided a template for their reconstruction. Tokyo was rebuilt neighbourhood by neighbourhood, with little or no support of the government, which was bankrupt. People were going back to the city faster than the city could absorb them).

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the government focused on essential needs, such as the reconstruction of schools and disaster relief programs. During the Occupation Years (1945-1952), the Ministry of City Planning produced the "War Damage Revival Plan", which was based on modern city planning theories. The plan included a metropolitan-wide road network plan that was gradually implemented. Parts of the master plan are still being implemented today, more than six decades after it was produced (Road 54 in Shimokitazawa for instance). However, in the early post-war period, in the absence of financial resources and legal mechanisms for land acquisition by the state, the most ambitious parts of this plan were left aside. Housing and commercial development was left to local actors. Thus, Tokyo's reconstruction, especially at the neighbourhood level, was largely driven by local effort and self-reliance (Sorenson, 2002: 149). The housing challenge was immense:

Limited construction of housing after 1937 and destruction during the war had created a horrendous backlog of demand… People did need a place to live, however, and most got something, even if it was not all they hoped for. Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, Japan built more than 11 million new dwelling units, increasing its housing stock by about 65 percent. Private companies and public entities provided a small share of the total. The remainder was divided equally between owner-occupied single-family homes and small rental units built and operated by private parties (Allinson, 1998: 114).

This meant that a local construction industry, relying heavily on homeowner's involvement and traditional construction practices dominated the redevelopment of neighbourhoods in residential parts of Tokyo immediately after the war. The city was quickly repopulated by people coming back from the war or migrating from an impoverished countryside. By 1955, Tokyo had a population of seven million (Wegener, 1994: 95). People relied on their vernacular knowledge of construction, often building houses in wood, many of which can still be seen in Tokyo's neighbourhoods today. Most houses however, were not built to last. They were seen as transitory shelters. Gradually, entire neighbourhoods were rebuilt one house after the other by local carpenters, labourers and in some cases the residents themselves.

"In spite of some deliberate planning attempts to widen major streets and introduce reinforced concrete buildings, the majority of neighbourhoods were characterized by flimsy wooden constructions, and slum-type housing which dominated many areas until the 1960s." (Hein, 2003: 26)

The government used all available resources to develop infrastructure such as roads and highways projects. It also supported industrial development, and in the process it neglected "needed improvement in areas related to the citizens' living environment."[5] It is hard to imagine Tokyo as a vast incrementally developing slum in the post-war period all the way to the 1970s and onwards. Yet, this period of the city's history has largely influenced its present form (Hein, 2006: 26). What happened in the reconstruction period is piecemeal development, heavy reliance on community networks, family-own and home-based factories, and locally operated civic services for waste collection and sewage systems. To date, one can find shops selling construction material in most residential neighbourhoods of Tokyo. It is also common to find shack-like structures made of tin sheets, wood or prefabricated materials standing next to ultra-modern houses made of steel, glass and concrete.
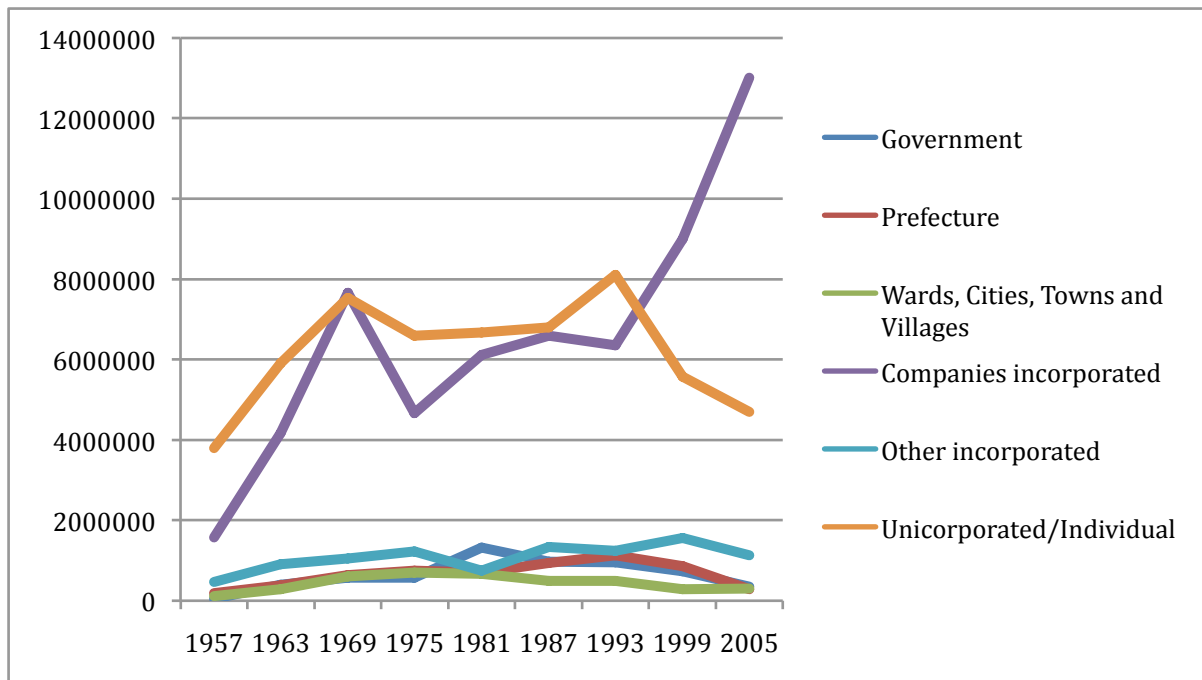

Figure: Number of housing constructions started by owners to-be from 1957 to 2005. This chart shows a clear dominance of unincorporated or individual constructors in the housing market all the way to the mid-1990s. Source: Graph produced with data from the Bureau of General Affairs, Tokyo Metropolitan Government

The village that many neighbourhoods of Tokyo have retained is partly due to the fact that developed locally and incrementally. They did this by slowly taking over farmland and by respecting the topography of the land and the grain of earlier settlements. It is certainly because the city was already structured as a collection of

close knit communities before the war that it could redevelop so fast and so well, even with minimum help from the government. This reconstruction process and the subdivision of plots produced small houses and a low-rise, high-density typology.

As Tokyo resurrected from its ashes, the urban population kept increasing. The urbanization of the economy meant that homes, shops and small factories replaced rice fields and forests. As space became scarcer, every inch had to be utilised as productively as possible. Green spaces and pathways were slowly eaten up by new construction and extensions of older ones. Lots were subdivided many times as families expanded or sold/rented space to newcomers. Houses doubled up as workspaces during the day. This produced tiny plots and a distributed land ownership pattern, which made large-scale redevelopment difficult. The process of buying a cluster of plots large enough to construct a large building is long and paved with local resistance to selling out. Architecturally, this stimulated innovation in spatial optimization. Japan is now famous for its "pet architecture" that does the most with the least (see for instance: Atelier Bow Wow, 2001; Kuroda and Kaijima, 2001).

This pattern of development is not unique to Japan, it can be found throughout Asia and in particular in settlements that have developed without the support of the government. What is particular to Japan however, is the attitude of the government, which let local agents develop housing with little oversight. These neighbourhoods were not called 'slums' nor were they discriminated against. They were, and still are treated as legitimate upwardly mobile middle-class settlements – in stark contrast with the way incrementally developing settlements are treated in other parts of the world.

Technocratic and speculative takeover of the user-generated city

Historian Ann Waswo describes how changes in the technocratic discourse on safety have affected Tokyo's urban fabric from the 1970s onwards. Till then, most people believed that a house was "safer than any other form of accommodation in the event of a major earthquake… If the structure itself collapsed, there was a chance that some of its occupants would escape unscathed." (Waswo, 2002: 119, 114). To a large extent, common sense still makes people feel safer in light low-rise structures that in high-rise buildings. By and large, construction codes in postwar Tokyo did not contradict this instinct, letting homeowners relatively free to build small houses in the way they wanted, but controlling building heights instead.

In the 1960s and 1970s, land prices kept getting higher, and the transportation networks expanded. As a result, aspiring homeowners moved to the suburbs, forcing the city to extend infrastructure and services to new areas. Meanwhile low-rise densification of the centre meant that many neighbourhoods became crowded and hard to access. As a result, the authorities adopted a new stance on safety, which, from the mid-1970s onwards, privileged high-tech high-rise construction over low-tech low-rise ones. A mix of regulations and incentives transformed the city.

A predominantly low-rise city in the late 1960s, with a building stock said to average 1.6 stories in height. Tokyo had become a rather untidy conglomeration of low-, mid- and high-rise structures by the late 1980s, its building stock now averaging 2.7 stories in height in the city as a whole, but two or three times that in its central wards. (Waswo, 2002: 119)

Waswo shows how unconcerned the authorities were with the opinion of the residents in matters of planning. Justifying the new codes on safety grounds allowed the restructuration of the city to be presented as a purely technical issue out of the purview of politics. Those resisting the change found little support in the courts. Mobilization and protest did not help the residents cause either:

The courts did find in favour of the plaintiffs in some cases, but on the grounds that the new structures at issue in those cases had violated the existing building code in one specific way or another, not that existing residents had any inalienable right to maintenance of a low density environment which, however satisfying to them personally, impeded essential improvements to life and work in the city as a whole. Nor was a campaign launched by existing residents to give them a direct voice in future decisions about new, taller buildings in their neighborhoods successful. Instead, a committee of experts determined objective standards… and a fairly automatic - albeit complicated - process for planning permission without any input from nearby residents approved by the Metropolitan Assembly. (*Idem,* 119)

This marks the end of a period of relative laxity in neighbourhood development, which was characterised by loose zoning regulations, and intense housing and commercial development in neighbourhoods by local actors; and the beginning of a period marked by a booming real estate market and increasingly, large urban projects led by speculators and the state.

Radical authors such as Ivan Illich and John Turner have from the 1970s onwards criticized the way in which building codes in industrial nations prevented people from shaping their habitats. They describe the deep ties that exist in unplanned neighbourhoods between the practice of building, local economic activities and the social fabric. Urban theorists and activists such as Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, who successfully opposed several redevelopment projects, criticized the notion that incrementally gown neighbourhoods could (and should) be redeveloped and 'rationalized'. At a landmark conference on urban design at Harvard in 1956, Mumford famously stated: "If this conference does nothing else, it can at least [lead its participants to] go home and report on the absolute folly of creating a physical structure at the price of destroying the intimate social structure of a community's life." (Mumford, 1956: 108)

This "folly" was denounced throughout the history of modern urban planning, starting with the fifteenth century architect Leon Battista Alberti who described the demolition of existing settlements as an act of extraordinary violence, which he called a crime and violation of fundamental rights. According to him the actual reason for most demolitions is the incapacity of architects to build without eliminating everything that occupies the site to start with. Demolitions, he believed, show disrespect the efforts of previous human generations. For Alberti, the preservation of the built environment permits the collective development of a humane world.[9]

One of the most eloquent advocate of the incremental improvement of existing neighbourhoods as an alternative to their wholesale redevelopment was the biologist and urbanist Patrick Geedes (1854-1932), who believed that deep surveying of habitats and settlements were essential before any intervention could be made. At the early hours of his career, him and his wife purchased a row of slum tenements in Edinburg and converted it a single dwelling. Around it he operated "conservative " and "constructive surgery" that improved buildings that needed repair while preserving those who were in good shape. He thought that this approach was both more humane and more economical. Geddes method was echoed a million times, spontaneously in postwar Tokyo, where small houses in hyper-dense residential neighbourhoods were repaired and rebuilt overtime, without fundamentally affecting the city's fabric.

People naturally develop strong emotional ties with the places where they live and that become part of their identity over time. Residents are often willing and able to mobilize and produce plans to preserve and improve their neighbourhoods.

Heavy-handed 'top-down' approaches to planning have been criticized for being profoundly undemocratic and destructive. Of late, the municipal authorities of many cities, including Tokyo seem to agree, at least in theory, that the participation of residents in urban development projects is indispensable. Civic participation complements the right to vote and the freedom of expression. It also adds another dimension to the principle of political representation, as it allows people to share their opinions and preferences about projects that directly affect them. Because of its impact on everyday life, urban planning generates passionate responses from the public, which demands more access to decision-making processes.

Neighbourhood activism in the information society

The ongoing revolution in information and communication systems, which some are calling a "paradigm shift"[6] is posing new challenges to centralized planning. It is now possible for local interest groups to navigate and understand the complexity of construction, including building codes, design norms and urban planning. The advent of user-generated data and information sharing platforms, such as the World Wide Web, allow activists and concerned residents to voice their view publicly on any urban project. The web has become a fantastic forum for the exchange of technical information and for debate on public policies. This is giving new strength to groups opposing redevelopment projects locally, which were previously isolated.

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[6] Web 2.0 guru Tim O'Reilly defines paradigm shifts as "revolutionary processes in science [which] are often hard fought". The ideas underlying them, he says, are "not widely accepted until long after they were first introduced. What's more, they often have implications that go far beyond the insights of their creators" (O'Reilly, 2004) Indeed the implications of the current paradigm shift in knowledge and information systems have not yet been fully comprehended. While some fields such as computer science have been at the forefront of this cultural, social, economic, and ultimately political revolution, other fields such as urban planning are lagging far behind.

Particularistic concerns can now be federated through web pages that give network power to just about anyone with basic computer literacy and a willingness to invest time and energy. The web is becoming a major source of inspiration for participatory practices in planning. "Open-sourcing" and "crowdsourcing" for instance, which are behind the development of some of the most powerful software and applications could provide useful models. The absence of central control was, according to web pioneer Tim Berners Lee what allowed the emergence of the Web:

The reason that I could just design the Web by myself and set it running on a couple of computers without asking anyone, was that the Internet … had been designed to be used for anything, constraining its users as little as possible. So this is one of the qualities of an open platform: it is built to enable, not to control, and it does not try to second-guess the things, which will be built using it. The Web is designed, in turn, to be universal: to include anything and anyone … It can't censor: it must allow scribbled ideas and learned journals, and leave it to others to distinguish these. (Berners Lee, 2007)

The spread of the Internet, as a technology but also as a system of knowledge and information sharing, has resurrected claims for more open decision-making processes that have been dormant since the 1970s. Governments have generally understood that the shift would affect their functioning as well. Municipal authorities around the world are multiplying statements, reports and projects that express a will to open up governance.

The 'information society' of the 1990s and 2000s is based on a fundamental shift in knowledge systems and hierarchies. The traditional roles of layman and experts have been questioned and often reversed. When it comes to urban planning in particular, the idea that inhabitants are experts on their own neighbourhoods and know what works best at the scale of everyday life, is now well accepted (Healey, 2006; Booher and Innes, 2002). This has led to growing demand from the population for more direct forms of participation in issues that concerns them most directly. A few cities have operated radical shifts towards participatory governance. The case of participatory budgets in Curitiba, Brazil is well known. Urban planning departments in cities throughout the world, from Tokyo to London to New York to Mumbai, are all acknowledging the need for more inclusion in the planning and decision-making process. This is reflected in a change of rhetoric and the frequent use of words such as "inclusion" and "participation" in their strategic long-term and local plans. Sadly however, this shift has not been felt at the neighbourhood level, where planning and decision-making remains firmly in the hand of bureaucrats and large private actors. This has led to a growing frustration among the population, which is regularly expressed on the web and in street protests.

Municipalities have a strong incentive to try and obtain the legitimization that comes with participation. Even when laws and ordinances force authorities to be more inclusive, the government may manipulate the participatory process in such a way that it gains the legitimacy it needs without effectively conceding any decision-making power. This is what Vodoz, Thevoz and Pfister Giauque (2006) refer to as "participulation." Unfortunately, "participulative" practices are common in organisation-led participatory planning processes.

In its 2025 Urban Development Plan, the Metropolitan Government of Tokyo set as a goal "Greater transparency of the process by which decisions are made by having the administration be more accountable from the initial planning stage, employing PI [Public Involvement] –type methods, strengthening resident participation, and so on." (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Department of City Planning, 2002) The idea is to promote "Attractive urban development through resident participation." (*Ibid.*) At the municipal level, the rhetoric is again one of inclusion of the residents in planning and decision-making. The Municipality of Setagaya, to which the neighbourhood of Shimokitazawa belongs, states as one of its five main goals for its 10 year plan a "community that the city's residents create", through "cooperative community development." (City of Setagaya, 2005).

The municipality of Setagaya was also the site of an influential experiment in participatory planning in the 1970s known as the "Taishido Machizukuri Ordinance," (passed in 1978) which required that "developers negotiate directly with the local people affected by their plans." Sorensen (2002) explains how this ordinance was not legally enforceable but was "backed by the moral authority of the local government and its power to make life difficult for developers who do not cooperate." Another ordinance known as the "Setagaya Machizukuri Ordinance" (passed in 1982) became a model for more inclusive urban planning practices. It allowed local councils to represent their neighbourhoods. Representatives were either elected or self-appointed depending on the case. The formation of these councils was based on the model of the traditional councils that existed in most Japanese villages and neighbourhoods known as Chonaikai. These councils were entitled to review any private development project for their areas and give their recommendations, although there was again no legal requirement for the developers to follow these recommendations (Sorensen 2002). The consultative status of machizukuri means that its authority totally depends on the government's willingness to listen to it.

According to city engineer Yukio Nishimura, series of new laws in the 1990s and 2000s gave much greater authority to local governments, such as the Setagaya Ward, to make their own planning decisions. And in 2003 the Local Autonomy Act gave the possibility to community organisations such as the machizukuri to manage public facilities. Nishimura notes that in the past decade or so, "local community in Machizukuri has emerged as one of the key players for decisions marking, implementation, collaboration and management issues in planning." (Nishimura, 2005)

However, the case of Road 54 in Shimokitazawa seems to attest that the rhetoric is not always met with action at the neighbourhood level (Echanove 2006). The decentralization of planning at ward level does not necessarily translate in more transparency or more residents' participation in the decision-making process. Local governments enjoy in fact near total discretionary power as to how they interpret the machizukuri ordinance, who they recognize as representatives, and how much

they are willing to include local councils recommendations. Government-led projects such as Route 54 do not need to be reviewed by local councils to be passed.

While the emergence of the machizukuri as an actor of the planning process is certainly a move towards more participatory approaches, it should not become the only venue for the production and expression of planning recommendations. Non-institutional spontaneous initiatives could provide an alternative form of participation that could complement the machizukuri system and provide other channels to reach decision-makers. The following section describes one such initiative.

The Urban Typhoon Workshop in Shimokitazawa

Located minutes away by train from two of Tokyo's major centres, Shibuya and Shinjuku, Shimokitazwa is a cultural destination and residential neighbourhood cherished by residents and visitors alike. Part of the Setagaya Ward, Shimokitazawa has about 20,000 residents, the larger share of which are in their 20s and 30s. The population of Shimokitazwa is rather diverse, with a mix of older long-term residents and a floating youthful population. The area attracts visitors from all over the city and beyond.

Shimokitazawa, is a vibrant neighbourhood, home to many bars, restaurants, and speciality stores. It is probably one of the first places that musicians, designers, artists, DJs, architects or activists visiting Tokyo are taken to by their Japanese counterparts. The area is known for its narrow and crowded streets, which get particularly animated in the evenings. In Shimokitazawa counter-culture meets politics. The neighbourhood as an aura of freedom and anti-conformism. Everyday, hundreds of thousands of people commute through Shimokitazawa.

The typology of Shimokitazawa is predominantly high-density with low-rise structures and narrow streets largely dominated by pedestrian traffic flow. Most commercial buildings are mixed-use, with residents living on top. This fine balance between street activity, diversity of built forms and population makes Shimokitazawa so attractive. Its peace was challenged by a master plan of the Municipality of Setagaya for a wide road that would cut through the neighbourhood.

In 2006, two local groups Save The Shimokitazawa and Shimokitazawa Forum along with students from University of Tokyo and Meiji University and many volunteers decided to organize a global design workshop called "the Urban Typhoon", which was linked to another event organized by the University of Tokyo and curated by Shunya Yoshimi called Cultural Typhoon. Urban Typhoon aimed at linking the issue of Shimokitazawa with a similar situation in other parts of the world and unleashing global creativity onto the neighbourhood for a few days. The workshop was not narrowly focused on the production of an alternative physical urban plan, but rather sought to produce multimedia narratives about Shimokitazawa that would open up more planning possibilities. The intention was also to bring more visibility to the action of local groups, in Tokyo and globally, so the authorities would be forced to pay attention.

Rather that defining a specific methodology for participatory action, the workshop relied on the imagination and experience of the participants to find ways to connect with the neighbourhood and its residents.

Participants were organized in 13 different teams according to their skills and interests. This description focuses on the output produced by one of the teams on the Oral History of Shimokitazawa, which was led by Taro Taguchi, a young faculty member in the architecture department of Waseda University who developed a methodology for the investigation of urban and rural settlements based on oral history recollection.[7]

The oral history team drew a contrasted and intimate portrait of Shimokitazawa from within people's homes and lives, which "allows us to imagine the real Shimokitazawa from people's memory." A bookstore owner, a gentleman in his 70's, a hair designer in her 20's, a real-estate owner, a high school student, a record store vendor, are some of the characters who told their stories and the history of the neighbourhood.[8]

The interviews depict a neighbourhood that changed drastically over the years, while preserving some of its character. Residents in their 60's and 70's remembered how not so long back, much of Shimokitazawa was underdeveloped and even sometimes frankly insalubrious. A liquor storeowner recalls: "I used to walk there but it was just a gutter… Before the sewer was built we had the flood in here every year." Another 59 year old resident, who works as a real estate dealer describes the Shimokitazawa of his youth in even harsher terms: "I would say it was trash. The road was bumpy. It was not paved." Two of them remember the area being tough and describe kids fighting in the street. Another woman in her 60s has fonder memories of the time she first moved to Shimokitazawa in the 1970s: "When I married here, I thought it was pretty rural." And a gentleman in his 70s remembers that back in the old days

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[7] Members of the Oral History team included Astrid Edlinger, Irugi Cheong, Aumi Shida, Ayako Muneki
[8] The name of the interviewees was not recorded by the workshop participants who conducted these interviews. A PowerPoint presentation and audio recordings are available on the Urban Typhoon Tokyo website: www.urbantyphoon.com/2006

"the place in front of the station was still a field." Memories of the street being "crowded with people going to the Sento [public bath]" were also evoked. Public baths can still be found in Shimokitazawa and virtually every neighbourhood in Tokyo, but nowadays very few people use them out of necessity as all neighbourhoods have been retrofitted with water infrastructure.

Residents interviewed by the Oral History team

Like many other suburbs of Tokyo that were urbanized in the post-war period, Shimokitazawa was not rigidly zoned and residents and incomers converted farmland into housing and commercial spaces to serve the needs of the local population. When people moved to Shimokitazawa in great numbers in the 1950s and 1960s the area was hyper-crowded and underserviced, and according to the people interviewed by the Oral History team only, became significantly better much later, in the 1980s.

Life was tough in Shimokitazawa in the decades after the war. People were largely left to develop the area and their businesses on their own. Shimokitazawa was apparently already full of commerce and retails. The real estate dealer recalls, "The space in front of the shop was actually the extension of the house." This typology, mixing income-generating activities with housing, is typical of low-income incrementally developed neighbourhoods and can certainly be witnessed today in many parts of Mumbai. Minhara observed that the small shops are still an important part of the texture of Shimokitazawa: "If the area was left as is with merchants paying little or no building and land costs, the area would consist of independent and family businesses." But he also recognizes that these small establishments won't stand for long in the face of real estate speculation: "Granted, the lack of large scale development may serve to suppress housing and land costs, and the masses of extremely small buildings most likely contributes to a deflated housing market, but there are probably forces at work in the minds of landlords and building owners than purely economic motives. Most likely, local stakeholders are influenced by the cultural incentives and pride of owning or managing land in this area." (Minhara, 2004)

Yet, this older generation doesn't seem to be nostalgic about the old days and is quite accepting of change. A café owner in his 70s says, "I don't think Shimokitazawa has changed so much. This café too is still the way it was." And when he is prompted about the new kind of stores and chain restaurants that have come up in the past decades, he responds, "Well, it's kind of sad – but on the other hand it's convenient to have a supermarket and so on. It's noisy but easy to live. That's life. Things change."

The generation of shop owners and residents in the 40's and 50's is much more nostalgic of the days when they first experienced Shimokitazawa. Some of the interviewees in this age group mourned the loss of the authentic Shimokitazawa. They recall a less commercial time, and a rougher and more "real" period. A bookshop owner in his 50's complains, "There are no more weirdoes in this neighbourhood…. The grey zones have all disappeared… Everybody becomes the same." A record store owner in his 40s echoes the preceding statement "I heard that there used to be cool bars, they have gone... There used to be many nice houses, but all of them closed down… There used to be many adult shops in the narrow streets." To them it seemed that Shimokitazawa had lost its edge. It is still a place they are attached to, but the counter-culture they were part of is no longer here. The bookshop owner stated, "I would like everybody to participate in Shimokitazawa." They seemed to view the new generation as more individualistic and indifferent.

And indeed, the people in their 20's who were interviewed by the Oral History team seemed rather unconcerned about neighbourhood politics. A hair designer was surprised to hear that people actually lived in Shimokitazawa "I was not expecting that people would actually live there!" She finds "Shimokita" pretty cool, "already the word has a ring to it!… It's a good place to hang out." A high school student likes to come after school and relax, "usually at Starbucks." She doesn't think much of the alternative style of Shimokitazawa: "There are many second-hand clothes shops. But you can't wear that!"

However, the presence of groups such as STSK and Shimokitazawa Forum seems to attest that some of the residents of the neighbourhood feel strongly about the neighbourhood and don't think that it is already lost. This constituency is perhaps more middle-class, better educated and more willing to express itself politically and creatively.

A team lead by members of STSK[9] produced a 10-minute video portrait called "I Love Shimokitazawa"[10] with interviews of local and foreign people in the neighbourhood. An African souvenir shop owner praised the enduring presence of "old Japan" in Shimokitazawa. The words that kept coming throughout the interviews from young people when they were asked what they liked about Shimokitazawa were: "Laid Back", "Relaxed", "Comfortable", "Mellow", "Open", "Artistic", "Beautiful", "Natural." The last person interviewed in the movie, Ayumi Ishida, who is a musician and a member of STSK explains, "Places like this are hard to find." According to him Shimokitazawa is special because it is a traditional small community where people have strong connections with each other. "Everybody knows each other," he says. Here there is "no social hierarchy."

To be sure, for many youth Shimokitazawa still represents an alternative lifestyle. It is a place where they feel free to create their own identity: bohemian certainly, counter-cultural perhaps, but not really anti-capitalist. Shimokitazawa manages to embrace both, its "alternative" status and its commercial, mercantile culture. This is perhaps one of the particularities of the "Shimokitazawa brand." What youth groups such as STSK demand is greater participation. They reject the paternalism and authoritarianism of the municipal government. In that they echo youth groups around the world, which demand real participatory democracy and are fed up with a political system that doesn't represent them.

(For an overview of the work produced by the 12 other teams, please visit www.urbantyphoon.com/2006. A few teams proposed or performed urban interventions that were both highly innovative and sensible.)

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[9] Team members included Gu Peiwei, Irene Avetyan, Chiu Po-Jui, Yang Tzu-Hsin, Sugie Satoshi, Yamamoto Hiroshi, Ishikawa Yasuhiko, Morimoto Ayako, Kitaya Sadaji, Shida Ayumi, Segawa Kazuko, Nagamine Yuko

[10] The movie is available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8g4xadLLHs

Conclusion: Neighbourhoods in-formation

Of central importance for architects, planners and policy-makers is the question of how to reconnect with neighbourhoods that have followed their own development logic. Too often the approach seems to be based on ignoring the validity of the forms that have emerged outside of formal planning and architectural practices. This typically leads to wholesale redevelopment and rehabilitation schemes in the name of bringing in infrastructure and amenities. These are often highly destructive as they wipe away years of painful incremental investment by local users in shaping their habitats. Complex habitats merging housing, economic activities and cultural fabric are replaced by monolithic residential structures, which often degrade at high speed.

It is thus crucial that professionals and authorities start recognition existing form giving processes in the neighbourhood where they intervene. This act of recognition, as stated earlier, is a mutual one implying back and forth communication and information sharing. Sociologist Laurent Thénevot (2007: 3) reminds us that the word "information" comes from the Old French "enforme", which means to give form. Thénevot uses the word "form" in the sense of code forms, used to capture and share data among multiple actors. Form therefore doesn't necessarily imply a physical object. It is an arrangement that allows communication and can therefore frame collective planning and action.

The difficulty of investigating, recognizing and engaging with existing and emergent urban forms should not be an excuse to dismiss them altogether. The incapacity of urban planners and policy makers to recognize existing forms of participation in urban development causes much suffering and political tension as local actors resist plans that dismiss them. This is an issue affecting planning in cities as varied as Tokyo, Mumbai, New York or Sao Paulo.

However, shedding light and giving form may not be quite enough. For one, urban planners and the government alone cannot be trusted to produce satisfactory information on neighbourhoods. The information they produce typically may their ideologies and interests first. Information must thus circulate both ways, through open communication channels. These communication channels should be co-designed by planners and local actors. They could be based on existing local information systems (local councils or machizukuri, schools, art, public expression). In that sense, recognition must be an exchange, a participatory process, and not simply a mapping exercise or a powerpoint presentation.

The case of postwar Tokyo illustrates the fact that urban forms emerging under lax planning regime are not necessarily irrational devoid of logic – on the contrary they embody processes that must be understood by planners interesting in developing locally sensitive approaches. They reflect a multifaceted context as well as the best effort of local actors to respond to it. Far from curtailing the creative freedom of designers, they provide the most amazing sources of inspiration.

As emerging urban forms respond to the context, they also hold evolutionary potential. Neighbourhoods that keep on evolving and reinventing themselves, such as Shimikitazawa, are truly metabolic. They are in constant formation. The notion of incremental development is a well established one in urban studies, but it is usually dismissed in planning and architectural practice. Planning for incremental development seems to contradict the common-sense notion of the professional execution of a project – which is supposed to go from start to finish. But this is largely an illusion, as an urban or architectural project that has not yet been appropriated by end-users is necessarily unfinished. This appropriation often implies a transformation of the project originally framed by the architect, the planner, the client or the regulator. In existing neighbourhoods it simply means accepting that users will continue to alter and adapt their habitat in all kinds of ways, as they have always done. How a project evolves over time is unpredictable and planning for such unpredictability is probably the toughest challenge facing cities and planners. However, far from meeting this challenge, municipal authorities routinely deprive users of the right to intervene on their environment.

The problem is not with planning per se. The intervention of the authorities is professional bodies is clearly needed to support the local implementation infrastructure and encourage safe construction practice. The issue comes from the inability of policy-makers, planners and architects to recognize and engage with residents and their efforts at improving the neighbourhood from within. A hands-on practice grounded in an understanding of local morphologies and users' participation is the necessary paradigm shift that one is arguing for. That approach doesn't see the end-user merely as a participant in government led participatory planning scheme. Users are rather seen as creators of forms through the collective exercise of their agency. In concrete terms it means that planning regulations should be as lax as possible and generally geared towards helping the users in fulfil their visions and initiatives, rather than controlling and limiting them.

If we really want to describe the cities of today, especially the parts that fall out of the grid or creep through it, we need to invent new terms that express not so much their typology but rather their morphology, or the way they evolve. Habitats 'in-formation' keep changing over time. The term echoes Kevin Lynch's description of cities as "evolving learning ecologies" (Lynch, 1981: 115) and seeks to capture the capacity of certain spaces to evolve continuously and adapt to the context. The hyphen between 'in and 'formation' is there to emphasize the dynamic production of urban forms and their continuous incremental improvement. The terms in-formation also invokes the word 'information' in its system-theory sense as a pattern that emerges as a relationship between other patterns or systems.

Michele de Certeau in the *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) showed how users give form ("enform") and thus meaning to the places they inhabit. Participatory planning could be redefined along these lines as a methodology to turn participants into "enformers", meaning, producers of forms –in some cases, it would suffice to recognize how people are already active participants in urban development and validate their intervention.

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Web Resources

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