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# Situated Urban Rituals - Rethinking the Meaning and Practice of Micro Culture in Cities in East Asia

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## Abstract

Contemporary cities, especially in Japan, have reach an indescribable complexity and excessive, global investments blur formal, rooted structures. Modern urban agglomerations blindly trust a macro-understanding, whereas everyday activities which portray the human degree of living space are being suppressed and erased. The paper will draw upon the 'Micro-Urbanism' approach that focuses on the sensitive and indigenous side of contemporary cities, which in fact can hold the authentic qualities of a city. Related to this approach is the term 'Micro-Culture' which is used to clarify the inner realities of the everyday living space on the example of the Japanese urban backstreet. The paper identifies an example of a 'micro-zone' in terms of 'street space', originally embedded in the landscape of the Japanese city. And although the 'Micro-Urbanism' approach is more complex, the understanding of the term can be tackled by a social analysis of the street. This is exemplified through the backstreets called *roji* and closely linked examples of 'situated' urban rituals like (1) urban festivities, (2) local markets/ street vendors and (3) artistic, intellectual tactics. Likewise, the paper offers insights into a 'community of streets' which boundaries are especially shaped by cultural activity and social networks.

Keywords: micro-urbanism; urban rituals; community of streets as micro-zone; everyday space,

## Introduction

Contemporary cities, especially in Japan, have reach an indescribable complexity, with rapid developments causing uncontrolled destruction and excessive, global investments blurring formal, underlying structures. Modern urban agglomerations blindly trust a macro-level

understanding, while everyday activities that portray the human degree of living space are being suppressed and erased. In this context, the paper will argue that planned urbanism can be stated as nearly disperse, as it lost its meaning of steering cities which are economically-driven and coincide with traditional urban forms and micro-scale anchored street systems.

To understand cities from a macro-perspective, planners and architects can utilize in the 21<sup>st</sup> century various models which visualize urban settings, growth etc. But urban spaces comprise not only physical settings like buildings and streets but especially have individual persons who are navigating and living in them. The use of space is a complicated phenomenon with an always changing and dynamic characteristic. This was recognized by Jane Jacobs (1989), who suggested to study the inner qualities and realities of urban life as a complex system, in which all the parts act in reciprocal ways evoked by complex human behavior. It is therefore an important question of how to study the close and constant interrelations between people and the built environment as a fundamental feature of urban space.

Accordingly, it is argued that the attempts to simulate the varied complexity - whether through techniques such as the collage-like *montage* (e.g. Bernhard Tschumi) or diverse computer models (e.g. Michael Batty, Bill Hillier) - remain too reductive to be of direct value and to make clear what is actually happening inside the structures. Therefore the paper takes the view that concerns about urban form cannot be excluded from daily activities in urban space, and instead give us better insights into our own physical creations.



Figure 1: High Urban Complexity, Example Tokyo

### **Background: Micro-Urbanism**

Different scholars like William Lim (2005), Ti-Nan Chi (2003) and Ali Madanipour (2003) utilize the term ‘Micro-Urbanism’, which is based on the philosophy and processes within the city itself. This approach is based on the investigation of the inner qualities of everyday living space and aims to develop an understanding of how places and people interact at a micro level. This way of thinking is focusing on the sensitive and indigenous side of contemporary cities, which it claims can hold the authentic qualities of a city. Additionally, Jane Jacobs (2001) suggested a way of analyzing the interaction of different factors through developing a detailed view, focusing on the ‘process’ rather than the ‘result’, working from the ‘inside out’, and developing conclusions from the ‘specific’ to the ‘general’ through looking for clues emerging in a ‘small part’, which refer then back to the ‘broader picture’ of the urban system.

However, it is argued that architects could therefore utilize not a macro-approach, from top-down, but a micro-approach, from the bottom up and inside. This can for example be done in identifying ‘**micro-zones**’ in which ordinary people may share direct encounters with each other, common appreciation and problems (Chi, 2003). Similarly, Lim (2005) offers a study of Bangkok that looks at mega-structures like the new sky train, which facilitate ‘*micro-structures*’ and generate ‘*micro-situations*’ (Lim, 2005). And Madanipour (2003) goes even further in saying that “*micro-urbanism promotes small-scale urban environments that can generate a sense of togetherness in the midst of threats of ecological degradation, social fragmentation and spatial segregation.*”(Madanipour, 2003, pp.140)



Figure 2: Macro - Micro: *Sky train*, Example Bangkok

Whereas architects as Ti-Nan Chi (2003) and Yung-Ho Chang (1999) present examples of temporal ‘micro-structures’ within urban space in an artistic and intellectual way, it is in the framework of Madanipour (2003), who gets further to the heart of the question in arguing that it is possible to define a public zone at micro-scale level which functions as a basis for human interaction beyond the private sphere.

In a practical and direct understanding, the paper would argue that ‘*street space*’ with its different forms of cultivation can be recognized as such public zone at micro-level, a zone which originally was embedded in the landscape of the Japanese city (Imai, 2008). In contrast to the Western city, which emphasize the public square and the grand diagonal axis, Japanese cities traditionally emphasize, like other Asian cases, a hierarchy of streets. This hierarchy is composed of streets of different degrees, from main street, side street to the backstreet, which in Japanese is called *roji*. Traditionally, an ordinary way of life linked to the street has been developed among these alleys, based on the social connections, urban rituals and direct communication between the urban dwellers. Although the approach ‘**Micro-Urbanism**’ is more complex, I would argue that the understanding of the term can be tackled by a social analysis of the street which the paper will demonstrate examples of ‘**situated**’ urban rituals to rethink the meaning and practice of ‘**micro-culture**’ within the urban backstreet.



Figure 3: Street Space – *Roji*

However, the urban structure at the scale of traditional rooted streets is clearly disappearing in the contemporary city in Japan and other cities in Asia (such as '*kampong*', '*hutong*', '*soi*' etc.). Therefore, the initial proposition of the paper is to argue that there is an urgent need to explore how to achieve an appropriate social density and greater diversity of street types, thus enabling an urban structure that will support everyday urban life. Daily life functions beyond the traditional ideas of urban order, proving that the synergy of formal and informal structures can become an interesting terrain to improve concepts of urbanism. Consequently, the paper formulates an intellectual framework to introduce the concept of urbanism from inside, and to examine the potential of how urban backstreets can form such '*micro-zones*', in contrast to the macro-structures of the '*global city*'.

### **Background: 'Micro' Culture, Situations and (Urban) Rituals**

In relation to the theory of 'Micro-Urbanism' the paper aims to include thoughts on the meaning and practice of 'micro culture', as a detailed clarification of this term can actually offer better insights into the inner realities of ordinary living space. Firstly, in thinking about what 'culture' means and how to apply it practically, the researcher has been captured by how general concepts of knowledge shape the definition of 'culture'. In anthropology most commonly the term 'culture' is used to refer to the universal human ability to categorize, determine and convey their experiences symbolically, in form of manners, language, religion, rituals, behavior etc. However, whatever culture is, it is shared and it is just as valid and useful to talk about the culture at the *macro- level*, here the city, as well as on the *micro level*, speaking of the direct public street unit. The paper will use the term '**micro-culture**' because it

functions in this framework as a more descriptive viewpoint, without neglecting that every culture is always ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ according to its reciprocal evolution.

Accordingly, Hernandez (1989) argues that ‘culture’ is never static, but always changing. It is affected by the individuals who share/ communicate it, and who in the same moment influence it by their interest and interaction in and outside their group and built environment. Understanding these interactions in a detailed view, we refer secondly to the ‘**situation**’ itself, or Hall’s term of the ‘*situational frame*’, which “*is the smallest viable unit of a culture that can be analyzed, taught, transmitted, and handed down as a complete entity.*” (Hall, 1989, pp.129) Additionally we can include his term ‘*situational dialects*’, which is part of the situational frame and used as a linguistic expression. But the term draws especially upon the ability of human kind to simply utilize adaptable ‘**situational rituals**’ to form a part of community. In this sense, the situational behavior is a form of communication, needed to orientate in the physical context.

Referring back to the discussion about the problematic of contemporary urbanism, it is appropriate to utilize the thinking of Akira Suzuki, who says “*It is difficult to describe [a Japanese city like] Tokyo in terms of traditional urbanism. Its population is extremely fluid and capricious. It has no tradition of architectural culture, its infrastructure is quite haphazard, and its local communities - recently even the family unit - have begun to disintegrate*” (Metropolis, 2006).



Figure 4: Micro-Macro: Ameyayokocho, Tokyo

This evokes the question can we ‘rediscover’ an approach of urbanism that recognizes how buildings, public space and communities are created, used and situated within its direct culture? Concepts such as *New Urbanism*, *Everyday Urbanism* and *Post-Urbanism* follow all different pattern. But in whatever they differ or result, I would argue, that the role the architect should basically serve one need: to secure or maintain an authentic urban realm with a direct face-to-face interaction. Therefore the paper utilizes ‘micro-culture’ also as an emphatic term to direct the attention back to the small-scale urban communities whose destruction has been permitted by local governments in the sake of global progress. Accordingly, it is argued that every neighborhood has its own culture, traditions and urban rituals. Living nowadays in a complex city like Tokyo, we should rely on their sense of a ‘micro-culture’ and on their skills in making the fabric of the neighborhood meaningful.

### **Meaning of ‘Micro Culture’ – A Dualistic Understanding**

Firstly, if we want to talk about the **meaning** of ‘micro culture’ we have to clarify its dualistic understanding in an age in which traditional spatial patterns are transformed by global trends. Furthermore, contemporary Asian cities are, in comparison to the Western cities, a complex of overlapping traditional patterns, modern planning layers and recent global transformations. This is due the fact that in cities, like in Japan, Western models were implemented in the age of modernization as an anonymous instrument, rather than as a real way of life. Accordingly, we get nowadays a mix of different standards that actually follow neither a typical European or Japanese example. Additionally, it is an undisputable fact that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century modern forms of communication have changed our everyday life in different ways. Modern telecommunication, digital networks and electric gadgets are altering the preference of different urban conditions and become an integrated part of our everyday life. However, the paper would strongly argue that they have not reduced our need for a physical home and community. Even more, we could say that the constant presence of mobile phones, iPods and flashing monitor screens increases our wish to be part of a physical community or settled neighborhood. And this for several reasons: Giddens (1992) states the argument that in an age of increasing expansion of social relationships - virtually, global and even regionally - we need to rely on a mechanism of ‘re-embedding’ in our physical environment, and this in a dialectical sense. And Snyder gets even further to the heart of the problem, in saying that the Internet is not such



'community' because 'you cannot give somebody a hug' (1996). Furthermore, Akira Suzuki (1996) presents an approach to the multi-layering of the city in seeing different modern layers, e.g. Virtual Communities in the form of mobile telephones as a ubiquitous, virtual 'micro-culture'. In summary, he points out that we have to realize that already spatial typologies are taking completely different forms and that we need to integrate these processes in the modern discourse of urban design.

However, it is argued that also in times of virtual communities, real places have not lost their importance. Accordingly, the paper will further elaborate the 'micro-culture' of a typical community of streets. In looking closely at situated urban rituals like (1) urban festivities as local practice, (2) street vendors and 'micro-markets' and (3) (new) artistic/ intellectual rituals, it offers a study of the cultural geography of a typical, local community whose boundaries are especially created and shaped by cultural activity and social networks.



Figure 5: Local Markets

### Practice of 'Micro Culture' - Situated Urban Rituals

Secondly, in this context understanding of the term 'micro culture' should reflect the fact that it is the individual as part of the local community who maintains the **practice** of typical urban rituals. In their recent publication *Bow Wow from Post Bubble City*, Tsukamoto and Kajima include in their analysis of the contemporary city next to terms as 'DEPTH', 'SMALLNESS'

and ‘COMBINED ORIENTATION’ the expression of ‘MICRO PUBLIC SPACE’ (Bow-Wow, 2006). They refer this term directly to the presence and activities of people in public space. They experimented therefore with public space in form of a *Public Kitchen Operation* or the *Kotatsu Pavilion* to generate diverse places for the community and to show that such internally steered public spaces are regulated by behavior according to the ritual and social context, not the materialized one. (Bow-Wow, 2006) Furthermore in the documentation *ROJIHON* we find the example of Kanda, Tokyo in which the community celebrates activities like a *barbecue party* or *artistic performances*. The authors go even so far to say that “*we don’t see those scenes much recently ...so we think there are much more possibilities...to create a better community by using those alleys.*”(Tokyo Metropolitan University, 2005, pp.15). In this context, the paper will draw now upon examples that should offer insights in the complex nature of the community, characterized by its multi-functional street-network.

### **Inside Out and Outside In: Situated Urban Rituals – Tradition, Re-Discovering and Innovation**

#### **Example 1: Seasonal Urban Festivities and Events**

Firstly, it is a custom in Japan to celebrate different seasonal festivities, like the cherry blossom in spring and firework in summer. Furthermore there are different festivals, so-called *matsuri*, which can include events around the carrying of the *mikoshi*, the portable shrine, and other spring/fall rituals. One example of such an urban ritual, typical to single alleys in the neighborhood is the so-called *Jizo-Bon* festival, an event to pray for the health of children. The festival starts with an official prayer of a Buddhist priest for the neighborhood *Ojizo-san*, a mini-Buddha placed in an altar. Observation has shown that every *roji* can have its own *Ojizo-san*, mostly situated as ‘*symbolic eye stop*’ in the alley, and being preserved/ decorated according to local customs. (Jäger, 2006) However, during this festivity, locals set up a temporary pavilion, hang up lanterns and put tables with sweets and drinks outside in the alley. During the day children get sweets and make plays, whereas the most important event might be ‘*juzo-mawashi*’, at which children sit in a circle, giving around some prayers. At the end of the day small fireworks will be displayed, adults gather in the street, drinking and chatting while children wander through the alleys taking part in the *Jizo-Bon* events in nearby *rojis*. A similar, but maybe more vivid event can be the carrying of the *mikoshi*, whereas male members of the neighborhood-organization carry this portable shrine around the local streets.



Figure 6: *Mikoshi* Event

In Bestor's book *Neighborhood Tokyo*, we find a detailed description of the diverse ritual events taking place throughout the year. But interestingly he refers to a term of Soeda (1973) called 'an-architecture', combining *anarchy* and *architecture* (Bestor, 1989, pp.254). This term states that the urban festivals can function as a kind of temporary relief in the otherwise regulated life within the community, as these rituals allow the participants to take part in an exuberant event which satisfies the individual and communal needs. But Bestor emphasizes as well, that it is the vitality of the community and the voluntary nature of the individual to maintain such 'micro-culture'. In the contemporary context, in which individual buildings have introverted façades and modern fencing, it seems if people do not rely as such on the life in the alley, and it is a question of how the built environment can maintain such situated urban rituals, which actually formed the authentic and lively face of the vicinity.

#### Example 2: Local 'Micro'- Markets and Street Vendors

One of the most fascinating aspects of the temporary activities within the street is their ephemeral quality. The street can suddenly become alive on the weekend through the setting of a street stall, neighborhood activity or local micro-sale market. Street vendors like the local tofu-seller or the typical *Yatai* cars moving their goods into small streets, can immediately transform quiet and little used streets into places of eventful activities. Such immediate and temporary transformations can add to the vitality of a place in continuously unfolding and converting in a different rhythm, untypical of more fixed and settled structures. Being suddenly unclaimed again, the space may seem amazingly different, vacant and may take a completely,

even opposite use. In the case of the Japanese city, street vendors and *Yatai* food stalls have formed a diverse and lively urban street life in different streets, but especially with pedestrian activities (Celik, 1994). Street traders and local markets are bringing together the local people evoking different situated rituals and forms of communication. But because of the decline of local, residential areas downtown and in the city center, it might be useful to think about the revival of local street markets and diverse street vendors from the perspective of city planning (Kuo, Minami and Deguchi 2004).

Taking the example of the *Yatai*: This is a street vendor, set up as temporal structure, combining activities of eating, drinking and chatting, bringing together aspects of public and private spaces. Accordingly, also architects like Bow-Wow developed this typical Japanese feature further in designing a new type of *Yatai*, they called the *White Yatai Limousine* which should serve as meeting place and attract the local community to ‘re-discover’ their forms of ‘micro-practice’. (Bow-Wow, 2006, pp.179)



Figure 7: Street Vendors like *Yatai*

However, it is an interesting fact how to maintain in a ‘society of abundance’ a need for such ties and social interactions just outside your door? Do we forget to include such urban rituals in our daily life, as we prefer to shop/eat anonymously at the nowadays-ubiquitous convenient store and fast food chains? This kind of temporal construction could function as “micro-structure and generate micro-situations to negotiate the urban condition of high density and complexity.” (Lim, 2005, pp.52)

### Example 3: (New) Artistic and Intellectual Tactics

It might be not a new phenomenon, as already in the Edo-time one could find small scale, ‘intellectual network’ in for example *Nihonbashi*, Tokyo, in which cultural activities among writers and artists were brought together. This kind of ‘micro-culture’ was based on an informal layer of communication that tied intellectual and traders’ interests up. The ‘salons’ utilized a physical small-scale network within the neighborhood (Nishiyama, 1997). Comparatively, it is interesting to question how nowadays such artistic/ intellectual networks exist within the city? Personal experience showed that for example in *Miyagawacho*, Kyoto, a new network of artist and modern craftsmen rediscovered an area with old *machiya* (‘townhouse’) and small *rojis*, which they use now for their own space of living, networking and exhibition. And surprisingly this case included the presence of foreign artists, who started to make use of the existing structures, which already attract more small businesses that serve the alternative customer (Jäger, 2006).

Similar movements and networks can be discovered in *Kagurazaka*, Tokyo, where the ‘French influence’ evoked a small boom of new eateries, potteries, craft shops, etc. which add to the already existing layer of traditional Japanese rituals. This kind of overlapping practices are maintained not only because of mutual community bounds, but especially the availability of integrated public space, like that of the *roji*.

But we also have to include cases like of *Shimokitazawa*, Tokyo, where a whole scene of independent artists and musicians has settled in a small-scale neighborhood, but which is recently under threat. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government plans new, large-scale infrastructures in this area, and it is only a question of time and power, to see what will remain of this lively and distinctive scene. And here we are referring back to the fact that we should aim to achieve an appropriate density and diversity of street types, thus enabling an urban structure that will support ordinary, daily life. This (new) artistic and informal movements only show, that even in times of virtual reality, the community looks for a public ‘micro-zone’ to express its urban rituals in art to add as such to the vitality and alternativeness of space.



Figure 8: *Roji* used by Artists

## Conclusion

*Roji* as 'Community of Streets' or Sassen's 'Micro-Sites'

In high-density cities of Japan like Tokyo, macro-scale arterial roads coexist nowadays side-by-side with inner, small scale alleyways. But because of ongoing conflicts about central office space versus community structures (Sorensen, 2003), inner city dwellers are forced to migrate to the suburbs, and inner-city areas lose their typical characteristics like people-orientated networks and micro-scale business patterns.

Therefore the paper firstly drew upon the term 'micro-urbanism', although I would argue the need to understand the term 'micro-urbanism' more as an intellectual attempt rather than an ingenious approach. It is an understanding of architecture as an open-end process of inquiry or practice which teaches us how to act always again in temporary situations. And this is maybe what architects and planners have to think about: how to deal with layered and shifting urban situations in a reciprocal way.

Secondly, in the future we also have to reconsider the term 'micro-culture', as the dualistic understanding of the terms already has shown the two (or even more) directions it can take. It is the challenge to reintegrate these diverse forms of articulation in one physical, glocalized term, a space, which facilitates different kinds of (modern) living. In more detail, Madanipour argues that such "*public space ...plays a major role in the vision of micro-urbanists...Simultaneously,*

*the establishment of an identifiable part of urban fabric as a neighborhood appears to be a desire to extend the private to beyond the home...recreating a small version of the city.”*  
(Madanipour, 2003, pp. 137)



Figure 9: *Roji* as ‘Community of Streets’

Can the backstreets with their diverse urban qualities exist next to current macro-scale structures if the inhabitants can identify themselves and daily urban rituals with the urban places which remain between low and high rise (Huang, 2004)? Or in other words, can such grassroots networks act as the key elements in Sassen’s (2001) ‘micro sites’? The linkage of such ‘roji-zones’ might offer a map of public ‘micro-structures’ of the city, which can offer insights in the authentic realities of urban life in between the mega-structures (Imai 2010, Imai 2015). Additionally, the study of ‘situated urban rituals’ could allow us to develop urban design tools, which facilitate better visions and human scale.

However, the term ‘micro-urbanism’ is not a new idea or initiative, but an attitude towards the city, independent of physical scale. In the ongoing discussion of ‘global city’, ‘world city’ or even ‘compact city’, the paper would argue the need for an understanding of the **city as whole**, including macro-, mezzo- and micro zones. This thinking might follow Robinson (2005) or Graham (1997) who argued we should recognize the city basically as ‘ordinary city’ (for ordinary people). This could mean that we should be much more concerned about daily activities in urban space, which mirror the realities within macro structures. Finally the paper will close in quoting Madanipour again who states, “Each new generation throughout the last two centuries has ‘rediscovered’ the need for community building and the physical shape that

*this takes.*” (Madanipour, 2003, pp.162). This could explain the demand for ‘**microstructures**’, which would be able to revitalize the existing city from ‘inside out’.



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