

TOKYO LIMINAL SPACES AS A DISPERSED CONSTELLATION OF SPATIAL IDENTITIES

ABSTRACT

In a metropolis and metropolitan public space, increased attention has recently been given to overlooked and uncontrolled spaces. Considered as spatial ‘voids,’ ‘idle spaces,’ ‘interstices,’ and ‘in-between’ spaces, they all have one characteristic in common: ‘the waiting for use’ potential that can be ignited by users’ creativity and tenacity, and with designers taking the role of ‘enablers’ rather than ‘deciders’. Hence, urban leftover *space* becomes meaningful *place* with a strong local identity, enabling new connections and maximising its socio-spatial potential. This paper analyses Tokyo as a paradigmatic case study to investigate the roles of local spatial practices in the process of leftovers’ identity (re)construction. More so than other global metropolises, the city represents a living laboratory for experimentation due to its compactness and the variety of small-scale urban patterns. A combination of ethnographic observations and visual analysis is applied as a trans-disciplinary method to investigate small-scale urban leftovers in Tokyo’s traditional urban tissue of the *shitamachi* districts. This approach allows an understanding of how individuals transform and utilise leftovers, which become a dispersed constellation of tangible spaces of identity. Extrapolation of home into a public zone of liminal leftover space, through appropriation and care, becomes the key to the resilience of local identities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, leftover spaces are omnipresent: they are found in home environments, in work environments – and between them, on the way from one significant place to another.^{1,2} They are in between buildings or fences (e.g. connection and/or separation of a building and a street), underneath infrastructure (ex. stations and roads), at the sides of roads and above buildings (ex. unused rooftops).³ Due to the way architecture creates boundaries and divisions in space, provoking problems in both the social and physical fabric,⁴ leftover spaces remain present and are constantly being transformed, with changes in both size and ownership.

Since the beginning of theoretical research on leftover space in an urban context, leftovers have alluded to empty voids, gaps, ill-defined and neglected spaces with no significant meaning or function. They are characterised mainly by uncertainty and are seen as a potential tool for transformation and conversion. Among other characteristics of contemporary leftover spaces are instability (as in the German *Woge*), availability (as in the English *vacant* or *vacuum*) and uncertainty or indetermination (as in the French *vague*).⁵ As spaces whose identity is not static in time or pre-established but can have a dynamic trajectory, leftovers have inspired researchers, who have highlighted how the (re)presentations of an idle space can trigger others' various readings. Matta-Clarks' work, for the first time, interpreted visually a discussion on leftover spaces that soon after in architecture, urbanism and planning, were widely investigated, with researchers applying various concepts and interpretations.^{6,7,8} Gardeners, or better the *jardinières planétaires*,⁹ understand and respect the biological diversity of abandoned spaces in the urban landscape; theirs is an ecological approach. Social approaches see leftovers as spaces that accommodate the rituals and meanings of people, claiming them as an alternative to 'the increasingly staged and controlled primary public spaces of the urban centre.'^{10,11} Hence, leftovers have become active regeneration tools that exploit their physical form and social potential. Furthermore, Clément's and Nielsen's ecological and social approaches enhance leftover spaces' identity. In this understanding, informal development and occupation – accommodating local biological diversity, practices, behaviours and meanings – focuses on the potential of leftovers in a local context.

This paper uses Tokyo as a paradigmatic case study to investigate the roles of local spatial practices in the process of leftovers' identity (re)construction. More so than other global metropolises, the city represents a living laboratory for spatial and social experimentation. Despite the restrictions resulting

from planning and politics, the users constantly appropriate the urban realm, adapting to its compactness and the variety of each specific small-scale urban pattern.

By observing the *shitamachi* physical environment, spatial conditions and localisation of domestic objects, we aim to identify leftover spaces' characteristics as they are significant for locals' activities and to identify how these activities transform leftovers into spaces with a strong identity. Domestic objects are commonly studied in material culture studies but are less frequently studied as mediators between an individual and public space in general. Their presence and significance in leftover spaces are also less explored. Hence, this study explores domestic objects found in proximity to residences, located at the border between public and private, in shared space, as tangible traces of activities. In this context, there is a pressing need to challenge the contradictory notion of leftovers developed in the theoretical framework in order to understand the conditions that transform a leftover "space" into a leftover "place" and to understand the roles of local practices in the process of identity (re)construction.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Leftover space and Identity

Intertwined with buildings in the urban structure, voids are ubiquitous and form an integral part of a landscape of constant renewal. Urban voids are inseparably connected to the organic structure of becoming, maturation, and decay: bleak illogical emptiness, colonised by patches of spontaneous vegetation, rainwater collecting on an abandoned pavement, reflecting the humming air-conditioning units. They can be read as transmitters of the ephemeral; as transient spaces that often serve no productive purpose, other than carparking. They offer the possibility of accidental discoveries and non-productive activities, experiences which are unplanned and momentary. They offer, maybe, just a glimpse of the unfinished.¹²

In public space, identities have been generated, imposed and planned through various actions and initiatives that, on the one hand, create meaningful places and impose specific character¹³ and, on the other, identify and inject the elements, programs and/or contents needed to support local activities and therefore identities.¹⁴

In the context of metropolises and metropolitan public space, increasing attention has been given to the previously overlooked, uncontrolled and under-used spaces. Since Trancik (1986) defined it as ‘lost space’, leftovers have come to be viewed as a part of the urban system and a consequence of urban planning development and city regulations. According to Trancik’s understanding, they have had a negative impact on the built environment, as they are ill-defined and have no identity. De Solà Morales (1995) employs the expression ‘strangeness’ in uncovering the *terrain vague* in a European context, describing vague spaces as vacant, unkempt, unused with no defined function, between stages of formal development, sometimes indefinitely waiting for future use. The negative perception of leftover space is evident in definitions and in words used to describe them: instability, emptiness, vagueness and uncertainty are only some of the words used in different languages and by researchers in different cultural contexts to describe the nature of leftover space.

Clément (2004), however, brought a new perspective, conceptualising leftovers as a *tier paysage* (third landscape) with unexploited richness. According to his understanding, this richness was primarily in terms of biodiversity. The significance of his perception is that it shifts the paradigm from an ‘overlooked space’ to the ‘absence of human exploitation’ and introduces leftovers as places that generate biologically diverse landscapes, respect biodiversity and become an active tool for ecological and urban regeneration.

Leftovers’ ecological potential is not their only potential. While waiting for their ‘formal’ use and ‘exploitation’, Nielsen (2002) further emphasised the importance of the rituals leftovers accommodate and the meanings they hold for the local people, whether their actions are spontaneous or intentional. This perspective is also complementary to recent urban planning approaches, which have changed from ‘deciding’ to ‘enabling’, which helps support informal development and occupation of leftovers, accommodating local practices, behaviours, and meanings.¹⁵

The relationship between people and leftover space as their immediate environment brings notions of place attachment, sense of belonging and sense of place into the leftovers discourse.^{16,17} Initially, since the negatively perceived, overlooked and ill-defined spaces were often located in close proximity to infrastructure, between the solids of the urban fabric, they were ‘placeless’ environments.^{18,19} Despite physical proximity, they were detached from the local context in terms of use and occupation and were not appropriated. Later, following the shift to an approach that recognised and respected their diversity, they began to be seen as places which accommodated local practices.

Therefore, in this paper, leftovers are observed and investigated as spaces that accommodate locals' intentional and unintentional daily activities and, through personal objects, the traces of their daily activities.

2.2 Tokyo as a Paradigmatic Case Study

Tokyo becomes a paradigmatic case study not only for its human-scale fabric that reflects inhabitants' local identities, but also for its temporality. Well-known as a metropolis which, together with Yokohama, is the world's largest agglomeration, Tokyo is also known for having some of the world's smallest spatial units.²⁰ Tokyo's inhabitants have access to less than 5m² of open space per capita on average²¹ and the total amount of open space amounts to 6.3% of the total city area. Besides this 'formal' open space that includes most vegetation in the city (as well as parks, plazas, and public gardens it includes shrines, temples, and agricultural land), the 'informal' roadside strips form the only green spaces in many parts of the city.²²

Additionally, the 'scrap and build' building culture, in which buildings have an average lifespan of around 20 years,²³ adds specific dynamics to the emergence of temporary (or short-term) spatial conditions that require frequent adaptations. Historical concepts such as *kaiwai* become keywords in understanding the nature of Japanese hybrid urban space. The *kaiwai* is translated and understood as activity space and becomes even more significant when understood as an 'accumulation of devices that trigger a set of activities' rather than as 'the set of individual activities'.^{24,25} The notion of appropriation is also not a novelty in Tokyo. Historically, appropriation can be traced through the abundance of visible temporary elements and personal belongings, called *afuredashi*:²⁶ objects which are, despite their permanent presence in the urban landscape, constantly moved, replaced, and organised in unpredictable ways.

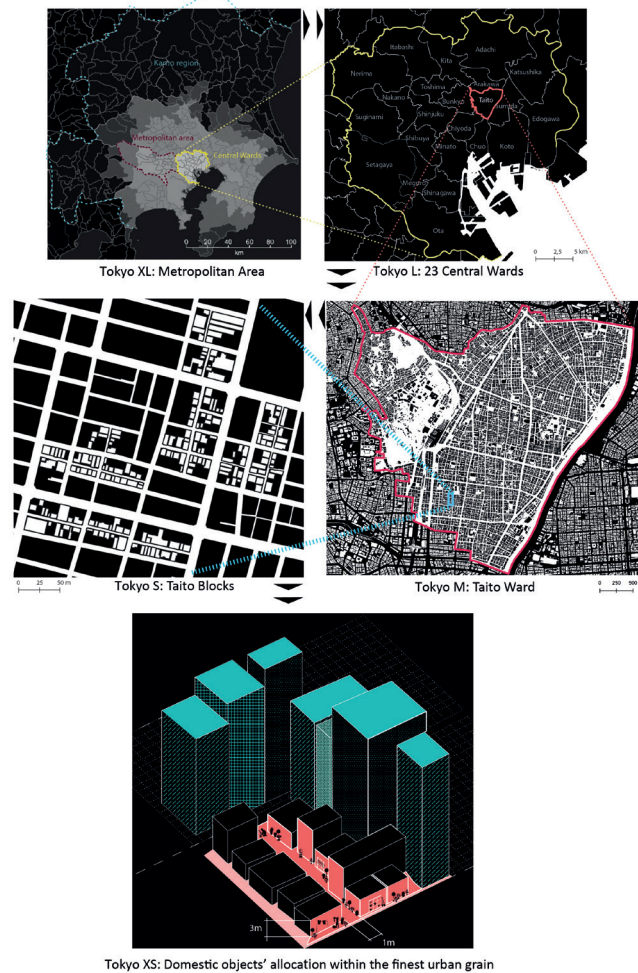
Following these concepts linked to the ephemerality of public spaces in Japan, as well as the activities carried out in them which shift, transform and reorganise space in unpredictable ways, reading the leftover space of Tokyo's cityscape becomes a direct encounter with local identities.

3. METHODOLOGY: BOUNDARIES OF THE TARGET AREAS

The *shitamachi* districts, a traditional Japanese urban tissue commonly translated as downtown districts, are located in central Tokyo and are the spatially smallest and least populated among the 23 central wards (Figure 1). Despite the intensive transformation of the metropolis, the typical slow-paced life remains unchanged, as does the typical spatial fragmentation into

districts (*cho*), which are then further divided into blocks (*chome*) – this is the scale at which neighbourhoods and identities are formed.²⁷ As an illustration of Tokyo's typical downtown precincts, the smallest among the central Tokyo wards covers only 10.08 km². In *shitamachi* wards (ex. Taito, Bunkyo, Chuo, and Chiyoda), the number of commuters is significantly higher than the number of residents: the daytime population of some wards is more than six times the night-time population. Meanwhile, due to the residential character of small-scale blocks – the low-rise and high-density residential blocks which accommodate homes and small enterprises (such as manufacturing, wholesale, etc.) – these remain the site of a slow-paced lifestyle in which leftover spaces are appropriated by owners of nearby buildings.

FIGURE 1: Tokyo urban grain



In this paper, a constellation of leftover spaces is observed and analysed in *shitamachi*'s low-rise and high-density residential blocks, focusing on (1) their configuration and position in relation to the house and block, (2) the presence of personal objects, and (3) activities and habitual actions that leftovers accommodate.

In our previous study of leftover space,²⁸ we followed the classification proposed by Azhar and Gjerde (2022), who divided the in-between spaces within urban areas at the micro-level into six types of leftover spaces. Those spaces are located in the front, sides and rear of buildings, at the edges and corners of roadways, around and between buildings and on rooftops. In a Tokyo context, we have identified leftover spaces (1) underneath a bridge and at the rear of a station, (2) at the edges and corners of roadways, (3) below infrastructure and (4) around and between buildings. This study focuses on the fourth category – the leftovers located around and between buildings in small-scale residential and occasionally commercial districts. These confined spaces have irregular forms and are commonly accessible to pedestrians and only partially to cyclists (Figure 1). The physical barrier separating these spaces from their surroundings and the street takes the form of an elevated curb stone that becomes a threshold between two spheres: the public and the private, or rather the internal and external home zones. When the internal home zones are accessed, a plethora of personal belongings is exposed, each with multiple purposes.²⁹

Leftovers located around and between residential buildings are, therefore, an interesting observation point for multiple reasons:

Small-scale leftovers are maintained and appropriated naturally by residents who take care of fragmented leftover space on a daily basis. Hence, it is possible to observe domestic objects and understand the spontaneous activities that they are a trace of.

They are neither addressed nor identified by urban planning and design authorities and no specific forms or programs are imposed on them. Hence, this natural appropriation allows insights into the formation of local identity. Additionally, it allows discussion on positive and negative perceptions of the leftover space.

3.1 The visual method

The contents of daily life within the shared spaces of *shitamachi* blocks are captured by frequent walking and photographing following de Certeau (1985), Suzuki (1986) and Sand (2013) and using the collected photographs as a form of data.^{30,31} Walking and photographing, as compatible forms of visual data collection, have become a common method that allows the ‘reading’ of urban public space and observation of specific socio-spatial conditions linked to behavioural and activity studies.³² As an intersection of ethnographic and urban analysis, they give access to the social world’s various visible and tangible forms.

The photo essay (Figures 2 and 3) presents and highlights personal possessions and small objects as well as the combination of elements attached to houses (a) within one block – the void between building footprints, accessible to pedestrians – and (b) along streets that separate blocks. Previously identified utilitarian (purposeful) and decorative (purpose-less) leftover spaces³³ are further investigated to illustrate the content and configuration of these leftover spaces on the one hand and, on the other hand, to represent the traces of the habitual activities that take place within the leftover space.

The following procedure is applied: (1) leftover spaces of *shitamachi* low-rise blocks (referred to as ‘clusters of smallness’) are photographed, (2) photographed objects are classified into categories and subcategories according to their purpose, (3) the intimacy/care level is discussed for each subcategory depending on the activities they afford.³⁴ Finally, (4) the combination of elements is cross-referenced with the house layout, which is linked to archetypal places. The typical layout consists of archetypal places defined by Spivak (1973): the place to meet and place to rest (living room), the place to sleep and place to rest (bedroom), the place to eat (kitchen, dining room), the place to groom/clean/wash (bathroom) and place to store (storage areas, attic).

FIGURE 2: Domestic objects found in leftover space



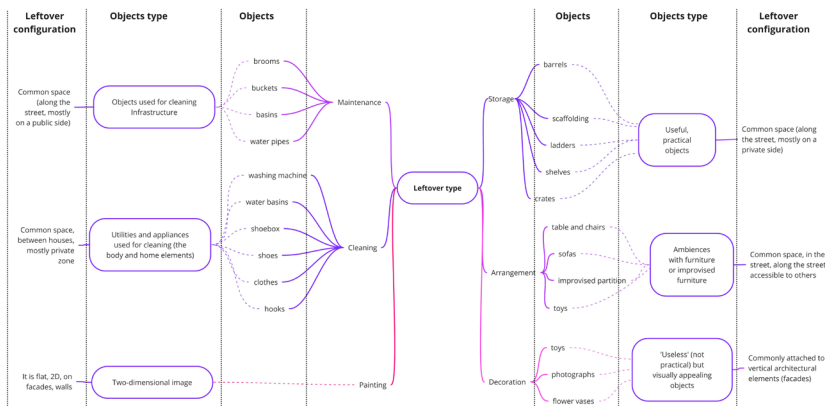
FIGURE 3: Domestic objects found in leftover space



4. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS: LEFTOVER SPACE AS A SPACE OF IDENTITY

The visual analysis highlights diverse types of domestic objects as traces of different activities: while some elements have a utilitarian character (such as tools and appliances), and the space is used as a place to store these, others are of a more intimate (or solitary) nature (personal belongings, photographs, toys, etc.), reflecting a space which is used as a place to rest or clean (for self-care and hobbies).

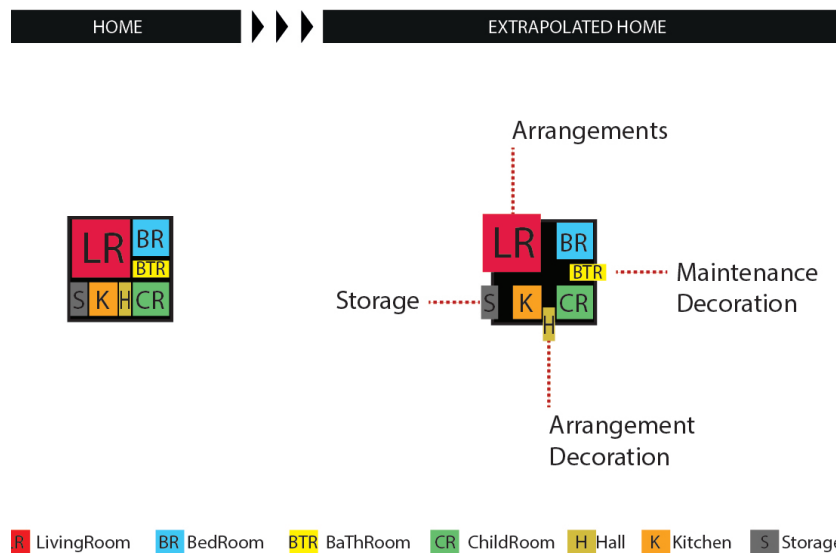
FIGURE 4: Mind map of shitamachi leftover spaces



From a spatial perspective, the leftover threshold adjacent to the public domain tends to be appropriated through actions such as storage, maintenance, arrangements, decoration and painting. These usage types are mostly exposed – and located in proximity – to the street, at the outer edge of the block, where they are visible from the outside. On the contrary, the place to clean is usually inside the block, and one must ‘enter’ the block to see it – one must cross the threshold and enter the zone of privacy. In terms of their allocation, small objects found in places to clean are both attached to the architectural elements (ex. basins, hooks, hangers, etc. attached to the façade) and standalone elements at the intersection of lots, buildings and streets (ex. washing machine, water basins, buckets, etc.). The classification shows how the leftovers can be associated with archetypal places. Interestingly, the space used for storage is an extension of the attic or garage or is the result of a lack of these storage facilities, whilst space for maintenance is an extrapolated bathroom (or place to groom or clean) and a combination of elements are an extension of the living room (or place to meet). The decoration is a common expression of personality

and is linked to the house interior decoration and home activities in general – an individual decorates living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms etc. hence places to meet, sleep, clean oneself or personal items, etc.³⁵ Painting is the only activity not directly linked to the interior of a house and the concept of home – if we exclude the painting of interior walls – but it is linked to an architectural element of the house – the wall. However, painting as an activity, which is in this context closer to graffiti art and street art, is commonly linked to urban culture and occupation of urban space – it is rarely seen inside residences.³⁶ Accommodating utilities and appliances, these extrapolated living rooms, bedrooms and storage areas become places to rest, store, clean – and, most importantly – places to care for oneself.

FIGURE 5: From Home to Extended home



From a behavioural perspective, the traces observed are evidence of heterogeneous activities – from socialising linked to ambiances as meeting places (extrapolated living room) to the deeply subjective and intimate (solitary play defined by Sutton-Smith (2009) such as hobbies and organisation of elements); from physically demanding and active (such as carrying out repairs and doing handicrafts, in extrapolated storage areas) to passive (sitting and resting).

Despite the specific character of each leftover and the activities independently performed by each inhabitant, care is a typical behaviour found in all leftover spaces. As Fisher and Tronto (1990) define it, caring

[Can] be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it

as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.³⁷

In the *shitamachi* context of the case studies, care is seen as an act of attention for and attachment to the urban environment, as a practice of everyday life for the inhabitants living – literally – next door to the leftover, and as a continuous interaction occurring between public and private spheres. Despite the shared use and the presence of various personalities, individual personal belongings do not intrude on one another, and neighbours have a ‘silent agreement’ whereby there is mutual respect for individual spaces and self-expression. Residents (re)create ‘permanently temporary’ ambiances imbued with meanings, using replaceable and interchangeable domestic objects with care and an awareness of one another. Through their activities, these common ambiances gain a ‘permanent’ nature, as they are constantly (re)created for an extended period of time (over the years). They gain a ‘temporary’ nature, as they are constantly transformed and reorganised on a short-term basis (daily, weekly and/or monthly), as belongings get rearranged and replaced but remain in the same location.

Caring creates a spatial and social web in the urban fabric, transforming existing voids – consequences of specific technical conditions and urban planning decisions, programs and/or rules – into a network of places for self-determination and mutual kindness.

In the specific internal conditions within *shitamachi* low-rise blocks, practices and objects for self-care are also visible, triggering the contemporary notion of the domestic city³⁸ and blending domestic and intimate spaces within the urban environment. It is a ‘scrambled cityscape’³⁹ on the smallest urban scale of the schizophrenic metropolitan condition.⁴⁰

Following de Certeau (1984), who distinguishes between space and place and their relation to identity, the appropriated micro-leftover becomes *space* through the processes of appropriation and care. De Certeau defines ‘place’ as a location, a configuration of positions that indicates certain stability, while ‘space’ is composed of mobile elements and refers to different experiences of places. It is people’s presence and practices that transform places into spaces, whilst the identities of both individuals and spaces are constructed in the process of experiencing places. Therefore, identity formation is a spatialized process in that identities are formed as (leftover) places are transformed into (leftover) spaces. Furthermore, in the context presented here, the *afuredashi* – small objects through which spatial and individual identities are constructed

– intersect with *shitamachi* fragmented leftover place and traditional concepts of *kawaii* and *afuredashi*. With this notion, it could be said that even in the absence of people, the traces of their presence transform places into spaces.

Hence, ‘domestication’ and ‘appropriation’ as iterative practices, which in urban planning discourse since the 1950s have constantly relied on and been based on citizens’ participation, become agents in the process of identity (re)construction. They shape and re-shape common spaces on the doorstep, freely expressing the owners’ individuality, further triggered by the presence of ‘others’. The *shitamachi* extrapolated home environments extend across the open/closed, interior/exterior, private/public, and temporary/permanent boundaries, and spatial practices in this liminal leftover space become key elements of resilience.

5. CONCLUSION

Observing micro-leftovers typical for fragmented downtown Tokyo districts reveals two prevailing characteristics. Firstly, these spaces are attached to home environments (and are an extension of them), which is uncommon since leftover space is usually linked to large-scale infrastructure, public services and/or transportation. Secondly, the formation of spatial and social identities in micro-leftovers is evident through spontaneous appropriation and the level of care, as opposed to those achieved through programmatic and systematic planning. Thanks to the use of domestic objects, the spaces have the potential to trigger specific memories and associations.⁴¹ Besides their importance as a space imbued with meanings, they are an urban element where individual, deeply personal and intimate activities separately contribute to the creation of a common cityscape.

The liminal leftover spaces are not only in close proximity to homes – they become extrapolated homes, which are well-maintained and taken care of. However, this is home exposed to the outside world. Personal possessions that reveal a level of intimacy and care commonly associated with the home’s interior are brought to its exterior. They thus become an extension of home into the public sphere, making small-scale leftovers a forum for uniquely personal expression. The city block becomes an extrapolated home and leftover spaces are its common space for self-expression, self-care, and socialising.⁴² Visually, with the abundance of residents’ personal belongings, the scrambled cityscape becomes appealing and lively. This research highlights the relevance of liminal leftover space for metropolitan public space and metropolises, where the ‘non-places’ that ‘cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned

with identity'⁴³ cause individuals' detachment from the context. *Liminal* or micro-leftover space imbued with meanings and (re)created on a regular basis provides a setting for bodily routines and habits,⁴⁴ transforming it into an (extrapolated) home which emerges out of the dwelling activities without intention and being pre-conscious.⁴⁵

Since 1987 and the Brundtland report (1987), followed by the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and up until the New Urban Agenda, Habitat III (2016), urban sustainability, in theory, and cities, in practice, have been moving towards (more) sustainable development. The concept has shifted from 'liveable' to 'lovable' cities,⁴⁶ focusing on residents and urban dwellers as bearers of sustainable life. In this approach, which explores direct relationships between spaces and social life, individuals' attachment to place and sense of belonging, their lifestyle and habits, have become significant indicators of a transition towards a more environmentally friendly society.

As the existing practices found in interstitial leftover spaces continue to generate meanings, it is critical to understand the behaviours they accommodate. Domestic objects and personal possessions found in such micro-contexts become a part of one's 'environmental past'⁴⁷ and a meaningful place.⁴⁸ Hence, to produce a resilient urban structure that implicates the behaviours and interests of every urban agent, we should endeavour to enable positive outcomes when interacting with the neglected or overlooked urban voids.

NOTES

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A B S T R A C T S : S E R B I A N

LIMINALNI PROSTORI U TOKIJU KAO DISPERZNA KONSTELACIJA PROSTORNIH IDENTITETA

Vedrana Ikalović, Alice Covatta

U metropoli i metropolitanskom javnom prostoru, sve više pažnje se poklanja zanemarenim i nekontrolisanim prostorima. Smatrani prostornim 'prazninama', 'praznim prostorom', 'međuprostorom' i 'između' prostorima, svi oni imaju jednu zajedničku karakteristiku: potencijal 'čekanja na upotrebu' koji se može aktivirati kreativnošću i upornošću korisnika i sa dizajnerima koji preuzimaju ulogu 'onih koji omogućuju', a ne 'onih koji odlučuju'. Otuda, urbani zaostali prostor postaje smislen sa snažnim lokalnim identitetom, omogućavajući nove veze i maksimizirajući svoj društveno-prostorni potencijal. Ovaj rad analizira Tokio kao paradigmatiku studiju slučaja za istraživanje uloga lokalnih prostornih praksi u procesu (re)konstrukcije identiteta liminalnih prostora. Više od drugih globalnih metropola, grad predstavlja živu laboratoriju za eksperimentisanje zbog svoje kompaktnosti i raznolikosti malih urbanih obrazaca. Kombinacija etnografskih posmatranja i vizuelne analize se primenjuje kao transdisciplinarna metoda za istraživanje malih urbanih ostataka u tradicionalnom urbanom tkivu Tokija, u shitamachi distriktima. Ovaj pristup omogućava razumevanje kako pojedinci transformišu i koriste liminalni zaostali prostor, koji postaje disperzovana konstelacija opipljivih prostornih identiteta. Ekstrapolacija doma u javnu zonu liminalnog zaostalog prostora, kroz prisvajanje i brigu postaje ključ rezilijentnosti lokalnih identiteta.

KLJUČNE REČI: ZAOSTALI PROSTOR, IDENTITET, NEGA, PRODUŽENI DOM,
VIZUELNI METOD, TOKIO, SHITAMACHI
