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THE CREATIVE ACTS OF REQUALIFICATION: ART IN THE (RE)MAKING OF ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITIES, TOKYO

INVITED ESSAY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Japan, houses are built to be scrapped. Since the Second World War, the average lifespan of a Tokyo house has been less than 30 years. This rate of demolition of urban artefacts poses a number of fundamental questions about environmental and cultural sustainability. One of those is: Can architectural identities be maintained in the climate of constant replacement of the built form?

Historically, Japanese architectural identity was associated with wood. The culture of wood in Japan connected with symbiotic relationship with nature. From vernacular houses to palaces, temples, and shrines, wood portrayed the unique style of traditional architecture. In Edo period, particularly during the Sakoku period (1603 – 1868) when urban resources were short, wood, as primary building material, was retained in circular system of reuse. The timber was obtained from nearby forests, kept in constant use and reuse throughout its lifespan. The commoners' lifestyle in Edo period relied on the culture of repair and maintenance. Instead of discarded 'end-of-life' products, thousands of merchants and artisans focused on finding new purposes for them (Giradet 2008).

However, through the course of the twentieth century the society has changed. Several events, such as catastrophic earthquake and fires in 1923 and air strikes during World War II, disrupted the lives and destroyed countless buildings in Tokyo. Therefore, after the War, the city was hastily reconstructed using inexpensive, nondurable materials to cope with high demand and urgency. In addition, the building code has been continuously modified to better withstand earthquakes, which is another reason why Japanese people prefer newly constructed buildings. This resulted with housing market entangled in an outmoded post-war social and institutional reality. This includes unaffordable home loan, pricey tax system in the real estate, and cumbersome inheritance taxes. Combined these variables give incentive to demolition rather than renovation before the end of useful lifetime of houses. (Hirayama and Ronald 2007).

Beside that the logic of *designed obsolescence* (products made not to last) and *perceived obsolescence* (creation of belief that old gets outdated) penetrated construction industry, mimicking the car and other consumer driven tech-product industries. Such attitude makes the value of average Japanese houses depreciate rapidly, to a zero in only 15 years (Koo and Sasaki 2008). Their prices get calculated separately from those of the land, which hold value (The

Economist 2018). Scrap and build practice has thus become the lifeline of construction industries and real estate sector, which contribute to over 20% of Japanese GDP (statista.com 2022).

In addition, many Japanese scholars support scrap and build approach and even embrace it. The common justification makes comparisons with ancient unique rituals the significance of which is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture – referring even to the rejuvenation of unique Ise Shrine. The regular, twenty-year rhythm of dismantling and rebuilding of this cultural monument is of distinct importance, spanning from cultural and religious domains to the pragmatics of craftsmanship and knowledge transmission from one generation to another – in continuity for over 1,300 years. When compared to dullness of the bulk of the twenty-first century buildings in Tokyo, the practice is plain insensitive. In reality, the rituals of rejuvenation have little to do with insensitive build cheap - neglect - discard logic of an excessive consumer culture. But numerous architects continue to praise scrap and build attitude, seeing it as the “secret” to Tokyo’s piecemeal renewal and urban vitality (Almazan and Tsukamoto 2006) advocating quick turnover of small-scale houses since it helps their business and promotes flow of small jobs for aspiring Japanese architects (Raffery 2015). Such projects enable experiments and creation of one-of-a-kind tiny scale residential units in the low-rise high-density areas all over the country. The unique Japanese contemporary house style has emerged from this and became appreciated worldwide (Nuijsink 2012).

But all explanations fade in the face of global environmental concerns, climate change, global warming, and the accompanying set of crises. Anthropocentric arguments only shed additional light at the broadest problems of environmental and cultural unsustainability. Japan is one of the biggest polluters in the world, ranked 4th after US, China, and European Union. Japan must renounce ecologically and culturally wasteful practises by weighing their local corporate interests against the global imperatives. In resource-poor country scrap and build simply not be acceptable.

2. REQUALIFICATION

In this paper we explore requalification as an alternative to scrap and build in Tokyo and part of broader resource approach to sustainable urban regeneration. The word “recycling” is adopted in its broadest meaning to describe all sustainable practices that strive to reintroduce things, objects and spaces back into cycle of everyday human life. Marini and Corbellini argue that recycling

in architecture needs to be the negotiations between memory and amnesia. They elaborate that the identity and quality of an act of recycling depend on physical or procedural recognition of the materials used. The design is more successful the deeper the departure from former conditions and vocation. More recognisable the presence of the past is, the more consistent recycling process will be. (Marini and Corbellini 2016). Aligning with this argument, we can define our own concept of requalification as an operation between the ambiguity and clarity, between the past and present in design. Requalification signifies introduction of new quality in a broad sense. The word to 'qualify' here is connected to the word 'quality'; the 'qua' in both terms is derived from *quails* in Latin, which indicates the kind/sort/condition (of anything) in reference to the essential or acquired characteristics of a person, object, or space.

Requalification refers to change in which new, unique quality gets attained. It also includes the possible recognition and reinterpretation of existent, underlying values. And it seeks to develop the complex value system of objects (Baudrillard, 1996), which includes qualitative (symbolic, sign) values in addition to quantitative (functional, economic) values. Requalification can be considered as an aesthetic process in its own right, a unique recuperation of the aesthetics that emerges from artistically sensitive techniques. These aesthetics celebrate the embodied energies and recollections of (urban) artifacts.

The prefix 're' in many words alludes to resource approach in design practise, including reuse, recovery, recuperation, restoration, renovation, refurbishing, repurposing, readjustment, reconfiguration, remodelling, and reassembling (Wong 2016). The 're' refers to actions intended to extend useful objects, structures, and environment by establishing cycles of usage. Requalification can result from a variety of design concepts, including those with the prefix 're'; nonetheless, the success is marked by new identity and aesthetic value derived from the juxtaposition of the past and the present.

The key to successful requalification is not about new use of existing urban artefacts, but rather about activating new meanings and identities to emerge and get experienced. Typically, such meaning emerged through interactions between memory and amnesia (Marini and Corbellini, 2016) and the narratives of change embedded during design and use. Requalification stems from creativity, hence it can only be experienced and felt, not 'quantified'. As meaning constantly at the heart of culture, requalification obviously relates to cultural sustainability. It helps preserve the continuity of artefacts while simultaneously stimulating fresh creativity to reinterpret and modify them.

Here, the difficulty is in the scope of intervention.

Historically, creative movements and practises such as Duchamp's readymade, Picasso's *objet trouvé*, and Debord's *détournement* questioned the way in which we see common objects and spaces. Their work shows how the boundaries between the everyday world and art may be altered by simple displacement and reassignment of meaning - in this case, by the artists themselves. Duchamp called such requalification-based translations the "creative act";

"All in all the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act"

Duchamp 1957 (Sanoiullet and Peterson, 1975, p.138)

3. EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE RE-BUILD, RE-DWELL, AND RE-THINK ACTS.

Our selection of cases for discussion comes from a larger research on requalification in Tokyo¹. In general, proper renovation is almost non-existent in Tokyo. In the period between 2013-2019 only 72 renovation and adaptive reuse projects featured in renowned Japanese architectural magazines (Japan Architect, GA, a+u, Shinkenchiku, casa brutus combined) which provide reliable record of activities in architecture, while approximately 150,000 new dwellings were built yearly in Tokyo during the same period (Tokyo statistical yearbook 2020). Although more renovation projects might have been accomplished. The insignificance of this figure shows the lack of interest on renovation by the architectural society. Researchers asked to select the projects that best represent the concept of requalification in Tokyo, more than half of the selected cases were art-related (such as museum, art galleries, café gallery etc.). Our project explored all art venues in Tokyo (published in Tokyo art beat database). Over 20% of art venues in Tokyo are in renovated buildings. That fact made our investigation focus at art-related activities and sensibility in the creative act of requalification. My own emphasis was on the dialectics between memory and amnesia, the ways in which they get perceived and conceived by the creators and used by the people. This paper discusses three cases that best represent such art in requalification.

3.1 The discussion case 1: progressive creative act

Masanari Murai Memorial Museum of Art, Tokyo

Murai Masanari (1905 -1999) was a renowned Japanese abstract painter. The Murai memorial museum is opened to public in March 2005 to commemorate the late artist 100th birthday. Designed by architect Kengo Kuma, the museum is a rich combination of preservation, recovery, renovation and rebuilt of the 60-year-old artist's old wooden house into a museum cum living space. Instead of scrap and build, Kuma approached this project as neither restoration nor complete rebuilding. He has preserved the room which was artist's atelier treating it as 'the wooden box' wrapped between L-shaped outer box. The space between the inner and the outer boxes is a gallery space, where some of unpublished works are displayed. This truly is a living memorial museum since the wife of the late artist still lives and occasionally receives the visitors there.

In this project the "creative act" orchestrates different requalification strategies. The old wooden house was disassembled into parts, at various scales from discrete spaces to the smallest of elements. The atelier space (inner box), and workable wooden lumbers were recuperated and variously reconfigured. Other objects were treated differently, such as Murai's Toyota Crown put in the shallow basin in front of the house as one of the exhibits and left to rust. The objects of everyday life of the artist were placed back where they belonged, in his atelier, frozen in time. This space has been preserved by maintaining the same four walls making the whole volume an exhibit. The interior space and objects reveal the life story of the artist, and, at the same time, they remain part of an ordinary life of the owner, full of memories and stories. In this case, the studio space has been requalified. The room became a box, placed in the middle of an exhibition hall. Thus becoming the heart of the new house with other functions wrapped around. The meanings have changed, the new quality has emerged through the creation of new spaces, rearrangement of objects, and materials used.

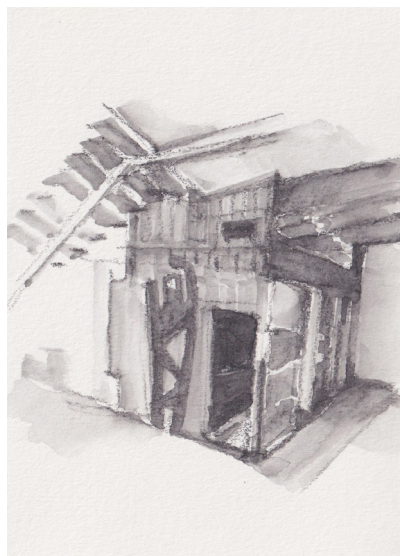
Some of the salvage wood lumbers have been selected and placed as vertical elements on the new main facades. In a way, they act as decoration, placed in repetitive manner, adding new rhythm to the street. From distance perfect, as one gets closer, they start hinting at stories that they and the building itself remember. This is Kengo Kuma's unique design gesture, the famous repetitive latices or 'particization' (Bognar 2005). Inside, among the memorable wooden columns is one which keeps the traces of cat scratches, now integrated as part of display furniture. Mrs Murai has proudly pointed at this piece, a sweet memory of their beloved cats.

Such displacement of pre-existing elements and their integration into the new design is not only an act of environmental awareness, but also an expression of interplay between amnesia and memory in KKAA design, juxtaposition of past and present laden with meaning. Here the new revalorizes the old, and vice versa. This architectural project is neither a restoration, conservation, renovation, nor adaptive reuse or it might be all of those, creatively integrated. The old house does not exist anymore except one room. But its spirit remains, rooted and projected forward.

Besides physical presence embodied in strong design and artistic sensibility of this project, the process of re-making identity includes brave gestures, a progressive 're' in design strategy. That is a brave departure from the existing condition, while keeping sufficient material to celebrate the uniqueness of its (hi)story. The narratives, which have played significant roles in requalification here, point at attachment between concrete people and places, a sense of nostalgia and care which get translated to a new sense of place. Not (only) design, but also such attitude makes the meaningful places emerge.

FIGURE 1: Masanari Murai Memorial Museum of Art, view from the main entrance²

FIGURE 2: The "inner box", a preserved atelier space of the late artist



3.2 The discussion case 2: conservative creative act

Okuno Building

The other end of diverse approaches to requalification is represented by Okuno building in Ginza. Also known as the former Ginza apartment. That apartment block, a rare building surviving from the early Showa period was designed by Ryōichi Kawamoto. That is a prime example of early modernist architecture, built in 1932 and still in possession of the original owners, Okuno family. The second oldest building standing in Ginza, Okuno building is a former seven story apartment block. It withstood the WWII air raids and today it makes an exceptional case of perpetual use and reuse.

The Building is comprised of two adjacent structures joined together. The main structure, located to the left of the entry, was constructed in 1932, while the so-called New Building was finished two years later. According to legend, Okuno Jisuke, the grandfather of the current owner Okuno Tsuguo, who made his wealth manufacturing railroad components, on the site where the Okuno Building now sits. After the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 devastated the production plant, the factory was relocated to Ōimachi. While senior Okuno chose to capitalise on the area's real estate potential of Ginza by constructing a residential building. The apartment block was built using reinforced concrete, so that it might survive future earthquakes.

Okuno Jisuke commissioned architect Ryōichi Kawamoto, the chief of the architectural department of the company renowned for the Djunkai Apartments, reinforced concrete housing projects constructed between 1924 and 1933 in Tokyo and Yokohama. The building he designed for his friend Okuno would become one of the most prestigious luxury apartment complexes in Ginza due to its innovative structure and elevator which was a novelty at the time. In its prime, the building boasted cutting-edge infrastructure and full communal facilities. It was completely heated and included a common bathroom in the basement, along with a laundry room and lounge in the penthouse. With such amenities, it exemplified the metropolitan lifestyle that many in the early Shōwa period desired. (Okamoto 2019).

From around 1955, the name Ginza Apartments was abolished and the owner started renting spaces out for offices instead. In the 1990s the galleries began to appear in the building (Izumi 2016) replacing offices. Today, almost all rooms are re-inhabited, this time by art entrepreneurs, as art spaces. This building shows the power of collective efforts by like-minded owners and tenants, who have recognized and built upon its intrinsic value. All common areas were kept as in the original, escaping major renovations nor refurbishments. The

tear and wear in the corridors and stairwells have acquired fine unifying *wabi-sabi* quality, in contrast to minor retouching inside various rooms . Even the elevator stays as original working antique, manually operated. The owner's 'Okuno Shokai' office located right next the elevator hall stating clearly that the owner is hands-on involve in the management of the building.

To me, the remarkable unit is the room 306, which used to be 'Suda beauty salon'. The salon operated there since the opening of the building. Rent by Yoshiko Suda, born in 1909, as her combined hair salon and residence until the end of her life in early 2009. The centenarian was the last resident remaining in this building. Later, Kurota Hirofumi and his colleagues leased the apartment 306, and forming 'Ginza Okuno Building Room-306 Project', with an aim to prevent its renovation. They launched preservation efforts. Today, the project features diverse art programs, exhibitions, and cinema screenings, all of which are curated with the original ambience in mind. The team is also creating a documentary on the building's history. The art events organized in the room 306 are produced exclusively by the members of the group with the main aim to preserve the space, its originality and capacity to live a new life.

We could say that the creative act in Okuno building is being performed by many individuals, mainly the tenants who work in art industries. Art galleries infuse into the former apartment units transformed the interior to exhibition venues or small offices. Only minimum intervention in the interior was possible. The majority just whitewashed the walls to make surface clean for exhibition. The building itself remain deliberately intact. No obvious restoration nor changes of the entire façade, corridors, staircases exist. It is charged with memories, especially from the room 306 which is the only apartment that is in its original condition. The various degrees of (creative) amnesia were applied only to the refurbished galleries, that can be glimpsed from the corridor or fully seen when one enters the room.

The identity of Okuno building is unique in many, yet simple ways. The resulting quality is complex. It lies in an overall and partial atmospheric quality morphed over the course of nine decades, from a luxurious apartment block to a peculiar art enclave. It has survived the scrap and build craze because of the enlighten and likeminded owner and tenants, who came together on the basis of shared values which include the recognition of symbolic value of architecture over the financial value of the land. Instead of restoring or conserving the building to contemporary standards, they celebrate decay. The building stands today thanks to the care and constant repairs by all people involved. Here we experience the requalification through small details of new odds and ends, like

mailboxes with stickers, the changeable objects, posters and postcards placed in the corridors, some glass doors that we can peek into the galleries and myriads exhibitions inhabited in those spaces within the weathering backdrop of Okuno building. In this case, the creative act is a subtle collective effort attuned to the very unique context of Ginza and Tokyo. All that makes Okuno stand on the other end of the spectrum of our requalification cases.

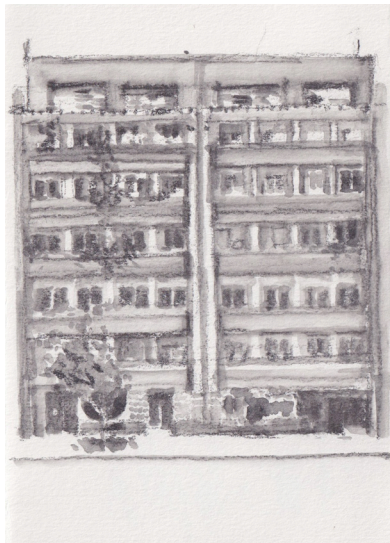
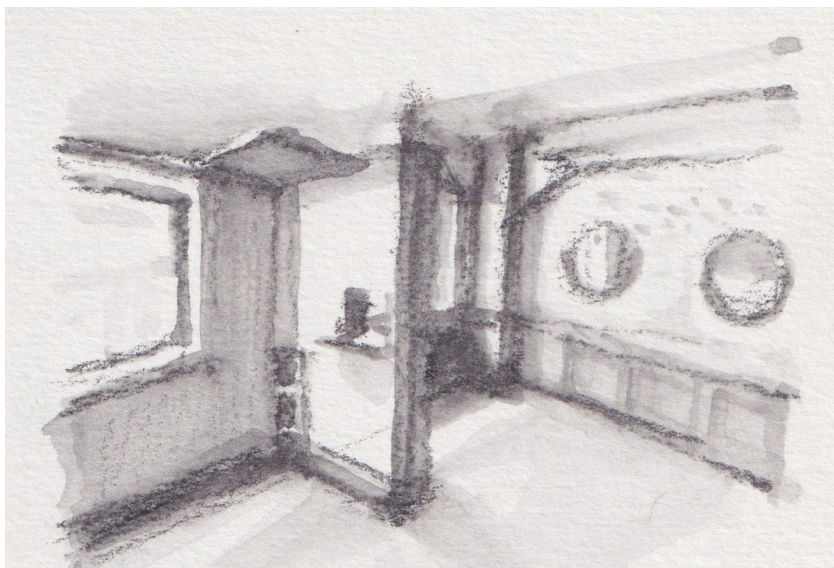


FIGURE 3: Okuno Building

FIGURE 4: The room 306 in its original condition



3.3 The discussion case 3: management as creative act

Hagiso

The final illustration is Hagiso. The house now known as Hagiso was built in Yanaka in 1955, owned by Juo and Chieko Kajiwara who run a temple in the neighbourhood. The structure of the Yanaka alleyways dates back to the Edo period, making the area notable for its numerous old residences and roji that survived the earthquakes and the War. After sitting vacant for five years, this house was renovated in 2004 by students from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (Geidai) to serve as a shared residence and atelier for the university's creative community. To their advantage, the owners have agreed to a cheap rent precisely because the building had been abandoned. The lay-out of the building follows standard Japanese rules, of having a central hallway that leads to various rooms off the main lobby (genkan). The six tatami size was the norm. Other spaces are foyer, storage, and a set of washrooms. Making an overall total of fourteen rooms ; seven on the ground level and seven upstairs.

After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, the new law designated all old houses of this kind for demolition as they were considered hazardous. Even though the tremors were reported in Yanaka, there was no significant damage to the structure of Hagiso, or to the surrounding buildings. The owners intended to convert the site into the parking lot generate income. In response to that, Mitsuyoshi Miyazaki, one of the tenants who has studied at Geidai, had an idea of hosting a performance, a pseudo “funeral wake” for the building's impending demolition. He believed that the loss of an old house should be commemorated, in a way, similar to the funerals held for the human. This was appreciated by the owners, who granted permission for a three-week show entitled “Hagienare 2012.”

Miyazaki and his friends organised art exhibitions consisting of the materials retrieved from the house. For instance, Yurio and Atsushi Hirakawa's ‘Mud wall x Hisashi no Bisai’. All screws found in the house were collected and used to make a large circular shape in the wall. Miyazaki, the architect who went on to shape modern-day Hagiso, proposed cutting out his own bedroom's second-floor floorboard as part of an exhibition titled ‘The Last Resident’; a large aviary, based on the traces of birds on the furniture used by the residents, was created. Over 1,500 people attended the three-week long event.

The event's popularity prompted the building's owners to reevaluate their demolition plan. After the show, Miyazaki was given another three weeks to come up with a strategy for reviving Hagiso as a ‘micro cultural complex’. Its relaunch was in 2013 and now the first floor houses an art gallery, a café, and

a room for rent (all branded Hagi), while the upper floor accommodates the Hotel Reception, shop (Hanare) and Design office (Hagi studio). Although the new purposes of the house were clearly prompted by economic considerations, the strong relationship between the new and old functions of the space was preserved. Hagi art occupies the space formerly used as an art studio. The timber columns and floorboards (from above) are now exposed to show the weathering and to keep the unfinished appearance. The new pieces in the room are basic and clean, accentuated the old. Knowing the history of the transformation (i.e., how the void in the gallery was created) makes an interesting spatial experience. The simplicity of the space provides an ideal setting for art.

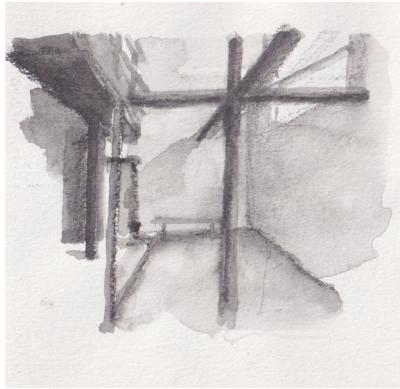


FIGURE 5: The exhibition space in Hagiiso where the floorboard was removed to create double space and expose the original wooden structure.

FIGURE 6: Hagiiso, view from the main entrance



The creative acts in the process of requalification of Hagiso were quite complex and unique. Miyazaki's commitment to the project went beyond the role of a designer. He is an activist, artist, architect, entrepreneur, manager, and most importantly, a resident of Hagiso. All that combined has contributed to the success of this project. In this case, art plays a prominent role in keeping the house, connecting the art academy with broader Yanaka community and sustaining the economy of this place. The renovation has been done in the minimalist fashion, balancing memory and amnesia, for instance by subtracting the floorboard and emphasising the wooden frame structure and its traces of time. It feels as if the identity of Hagiso and the identity of Miyazaki coincide. He is the one who has full perceived, conceived and lived experience of Hagiso.

4. REFLECTIONS

The three projects presented above demonstrate the complex of dialectics between art and requalification, between memory and amnesia. Each of these three cases possesses its own narrative of recovery, a different approach, and different levels of involvement by the stake holders – owner, designer and art community. Requalification is always the process of creation of identity of place. It is driven by creative act, self-conscious or not. Requalified spaces remember and forget, their provocation is in asking whose memory and whose amnesia.

Aiming towards diagrammatic simplicity the following summary exposes these three complex projects to those questions.

Murai Museum: progressive approach, dismantling and preserved some parts of the house, the architect introduced his unique style, new building with significance of old materials sufficient to commemorate the past. Personal memory of the owner lingers on. Just in its context, it is an ordinary, peculiar house in the residential Setagaya, a personal space with possible access of visitors. Its Identity is defined by architectural design.

Okuno Building: conservative approach, no new self-conscious design involved. No restoration, renovation only through constant care, repair and subtle changes in the interior. It stands out as the memory of Ginza, Tokyo and Japan. The owner keeps his distance but set some common rules that all tenants respect. Collective effort keeps the building alive striving. The Identity of the modernist building stood through times, with the formation of an authentic art enclave. It is intentionally neglected and let to decay. Or was that hidden agenda? Identity of Okuno is defined by careful neglect.

Hagiso: it compromises between progressive and conservative approach. Community based project, common to Yanaka. Major design intervention to keep the building structurally sound and financially viable. The main architect involved throughout the process, as resident, designer, manager and tenant. Combined personal and collective memory of the place. Identity connects the old house and the architect himself. Identity of Hagiso is defined by an obsessive and multifaceted management.

NOTES

- 1 The Research Tokyo Requalified is part of a broader research project ‘Tokyo Urbanism’, a research-led teaching project organized by International Program in Architecture and Urban Design (IAUD), Meiji University, Department of Architecture, School of Science and Technology during 2018-2021. The publication of Tokyo Urbanism is forthcoming in 2023.

- 2 All illustrations are by the author

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