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Placemaking, Livability, and Revitalization in Tokyo: Lessons in Sustainable Urban Regeneration

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Abstract

The popular image of Tokyo is a megacity characterized by skyscrapers on one hand and by intricate, dense, and extensive neighborhood districts filled with micro-entrepreneurs on the other. This article traces recent transformations in the city's urban fabric that are rooted in post-war reconstruction processes and in governmental deregulation policies initiated by the 1969 Urban Redevelopment Law, which have shaped its iconic identity. It also addresses the dual dynamics of top–down governmental and corporate-led revitalization models, exemplified by the 2002 Law on Special Measures for Urban Renaissance, as well as bottom-up collective efforts, such as the "machizukuri" phenomenon, which have sought to reconfigure and improve Tokyo's public infrastructure and human environment. The article attempts a critical evaluation of contemporary approaches to sustainable urban regeneration in Japan, drawing on three recent examples of multi-scale urban space regeneration implemented around Tokyo's commercial streets and major transit hubs, the Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya, the Shimokita Senrogai Project in Setagaya, and the Azabudai Hills in Minato. Based on lessons learned during the decades of the post-bubble economy, it outlines current trends behind these and other selected projects to illuminate how Tokyo and its commercial areas are adapting to evolving issues associated with urban decline and a super-aging society in order to provide the services critical to the well-being of its residents.

Keywords

acupuncture urbanism; Japan; machizukuri; placemaking; Tokyo; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Tokyo's urban identity is founded on a fascinating duality that has long intrigued urban theorists and planners. On the one hand, it comprises a hyper-dense megacity of about 14.1 million residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023) and an infrastructural spectacle. On the other hand, it enfolds a patchwork of intimate, human-scale neighborhoods shaped by informal adaptation and civic life. The city's skyline and vast transportation network embody a top–down model of modernization and economic development, while the organic evolution of its neighborhoods, characterized by dense residential areas, vibrant shopping streets, and intimate community networks, exemplifies a bottom–up, citizen-driven spatial and social structure. This duality is particularly evident in recent urban planning and design and has become a defining principle in Tokyo's ongoing urban transformation and regeneration process. It reflects a broader tension between state-led, corporate-driven interventions encouraged by deregulation policies, and locally-based participatory practices led by residents themselves.

Japan generally, and Tokyo in particular, faces the combined pressures of economic stagnation, infrastructural decline, and a super-aging population (Hein & Pelletier, 2009). This article examines how the contemporary generation of urban planners and designers is addressing these challenges. Through a critical analysis of recent cases of urban interventions at various scales, it explores how current urban regeneration strategies seek to balance the goals of economic revitalization with preservation of local identity and promotion of inclusive and adaptive public spaces. These interventions are further contextualized within a broader historical narrative of urban policy in Japan's post-bubble era, with particular attention to the changing regulatory framework and the role of grassroots movements such as "machizukuri" in reshaping urban regeneration discourse and practice.

2. Historical Background

The first post-war initiatives were the Special City Planning Law (1946), the Capital Construction Law (1950), and the National Capital Region Development Act (1956), which aimed to expand and modernize Tokyo (Hein et al., 2003). The intent was to prioritize the re-industrialization of the nation and the economic resurgence of Japan, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was involved early with the development and revision of plans for road widening and provision of green spaces (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Urban Development, n.d.).

One of the most significant consequences of the rapid economic growth during these decades was accelerated urbanization and concentration of the population in metropolitan regions along the east coast (Sorensen, 2005), with the lack of strong zoning regulations from the late 1960s resulting in a large variety of mixed-use and highly fragmented urban spaces. However, the industrial and infrastructural developments underpinning economic growth caused serious water and air pollution (Broadbent, 2010). This created tension in terms of the overall quality of city spaces, with residential areas impacted by the polluting effects of adjacent industrial factories. Nevertheless, the extreme planning flexibility assured the formation of hybrid high-density urban precincts highly interconnected by extensive mass transit networks, whilst also favoring preservation of a number of urban residential areas rich in local economic activities and with their own identity and cultural vitality (Imai, 2018; Sorensen & Okata, 2013; Sorensen et al., 2010).

The 1970s saw an emergence and strengthening of civil society, with movements such as machizukuri (or city making/community building) mobilizing communities in response to environmental degradation and problematic urban transformation (Sorensen & Funck, 2009). This was built on a unique and longstanding tradition of local self-management embodied in the *chōnaikai* (neighborhood associations), semi-formal governance structures that mediate between municipal authorities and citizens (Brumann & Schulz, 2015). In addition to keeping their streets safe and clean, the *chōnaikai* provides a framework for social life by organizing various cultural events for the local community. The machizukuri phenomenon can be understood as an extension of these practices, translating this form of traditional semi-autonomous control of the social and physical space into contemporary efforts to foster a sense of community while exerting an influence on the livability and improvement of the shared spaces (Sorensen, 2005).

Underlying these participatory practices is a broader cultural acceptance of impermanence and negotiated use of space, allowing Tokyo's urban neighborhoods to adapt incrementally over time. In contrast, state-led city planning strategies such as the 1969 Urban Redevelopment Act initially prioritized efficiency, rapid modernization, and economic development (Sorensen, 2005), promoting large-scale infrastructure and industrial complexes at the expense of green spaces and other public amenities such as parks, playgrounds, broader streets, and other walkable areas. Many interventions during this period encouraged large-scale demolition and reconstruction of the urban fabric, supporting growth at the cost of local character, ecological considerations, and community engagement.

This attitude towards urban development continued throughout the second half of the 20th century and was the driving force behind Tokyo's transformation into a global city (Sassen, 1991). In the 1990s, the collapse of the economic bubble exposed systemic vulnerabilities in the prevailing economic and social policies and urban planning strategies. The following period of economic stagnation, with rising commercial vacancy rates and an aging population, coupled with a falling birth rate, raised concerns about the sustainability of the existing urban model. Unable to find a financial solution to the accumulating issues, the government's response was marked by a policy shift with the enactment in 2002 of the Law on Special Measures for Urban Renaissance (Sorensen, 2005), aiming to promote regeneration of inner-city areas through the liberalization of building standards. The Law focused on raising floor-area ratios, simplifying zoning regulations, and introducing tax incentives to attract private investment. Land was repositioned not only as a spatial and social resource but as a key capital asset in the broader strategy of economic recovery characterized by neoliberalism.

The deregulation framework of this period allowed for the construction of large-scale, capital-intensive projects, while at the same time encouraged strong citizen responses and alternative urban planning approaches. Grassroots movements historically deeply rooted in community-led resistance to environmental degradation and worsening local living conditions re-emerged and once again regained their significance in opposition to top–down redevelopment and large corporate interests (Satoh, 2021). These movements presented a counter-narrative to the state's technocratic and market-driven approach, emphasizing incremental change, resident participation, and preservation of local character. This dynamic and contradictory development led to the formation of a fragmented and multi-layered urban landscape in Tokyo (Rowe & Koetter, 1979), where multiple modes of regeneration coexist today. This article argues that the future of the city is shaped by such continuous negotiations. The central concern is, therefore, not only how Japan's capital will be rebuilt in the future, but how values such as sustainability, community, and livability are conceptualized and realized in response to contemporary realities (Sorensen, 2001, 2005).

3. Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

Urban redevelopment emerged in response to socio-economic and infrastructure issues faced by major cities in Europe and North America around the second half of the 20th century (Sorensen, 2005; Tallon, 2013). For most of the 20th century, the built environment of Japanese cities was the result of an industrial development and economic growth agenda set by the central government, and as such, city planning was primarily conceived as a tool for the modernization of the country as a function of its economic development (Hanes, 2002; Pernice, 2006). It was only in 1963 that the first course of urban design commenced in the newly established Department of Urban Engineering at Tokyo University under the direction of architect Kenzo Tange. At the time, most of the cities in Japan were designed and built with little or no consideration for the quality of public spaces and the fundamental needs of their residents, resulting in dense, anonymous, and often alienating and polluted urban environments (Bettinotti, 1997).

Among the factors that fostered the diffusion of extensive and large-scale mega urban development projects and strong urbanization at the end of the 20th century was a definitive push towards a progressive decentralization of activities and workers following a strategy of polycentric reorganization outside and within central wards of Tokyo, supported by the central government. The goal was to provide additional urban infrastructures and activate the economies and delocalize important functions in new sub-centers and satellite cities to boost Tokyo as a global city and further interconnect and empower Japan as a fundamental financial and economic hub within the international urban network (Pernice, 2025; Sorensen, 2001). In the context of the post-economic downturn and stagflation in the 1990s, most of these projects did not age well and became obsolete and unproductive urban compounds, thereby creating spaces suitable for future renewal initiatives.

The discourse on the city and on what it means to design it, within it, or at times against it has long been, and continues to be, one of the central themes of engagement for contemporary Japanese architects. Recent urban regeneration projects in the city have involved a range of actors, including architects, developers, local governments, and community groups, and present diverse priorities and frameworks in shaping urban space (Karan & Stapleton, 1997). Despite the diversity of actors, many initiatives resonate with common theoretical currents drawn from architectural thought, critical urbanism, and place-based planning practices. Several influential architects and theorists of architecture and urbanism have contributed to the intellectual field and shaped its contemporary practices (Shelton, 2012). One of the key figures was Yoshinobu Ashihara, who, in the late 1980s, emphasized the cultural and spatial significance of street networks in Japanese cities and advocated for an understanding of the places through which streets pass as a guide for contemporary urban design (Ashihara, 1989). He suggested that the Japanese city naturally expresses the distinctive vitality of Japanese life, and argued that linear infrastructure must become more than a mere function for traffic but should also engage with the memories, identities, and daily routines of the communities through which they pass, while criticizing the very little thought given to aesthetic concerns of the built environment by his contemporaries.

Among other critical voices engaging with urban development and the legacy of modernist planning in Japan was Arata Isozaki, who warned against forcing the existing urban fabric into abstract, top–down planning logic, and whose later work and ideas articulate a persistent suspicion toward the rigidity of totalizing urban design methodologies by a single designer/planner (Daniell, 2008). Although Isozaki was associated with the

metabolist movement early in his career, his stance toward its legacy has long been somewhat complicated, if not outright oppositional, particularly as his later works revisit the movement's principles while also introducing a hybridized and decentralized logic. Isozaki's skepticism towards radical modernization foresaw the contemporary trend of seeking regenerative models that integrate into the past rather than replace it.

When the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, Japanese urbanism turned toward the scale of everyday life and discussions surrounding the social production of space. Influential figures such as Hidenobu Jinnai, in *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* (1995), and Atelier Bow-wow, through the *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (2002), produced in collaboration with the Tokyo Institute of Technology Tsukamoto Architectural Laboratory, emphasized the informal, adaptive, and relational qualities of Tokyo's urban spaces. Their work has instigated a now widespread interest in how the city's spatial fabric is continuously redefined through common daily practices and temporary appropriations, offering a cultural counterpoint to the top–down urban redevelopments of the previous decades and situating contemporary efforts as an accumulation of tailored interventions rather than an imposition of form.

A more recent contribution to the evolving discourse of urban regeneration in Japan can be found in the work of Ohno (2017), who has responded to the issues of decentralization, aging, shrinking population, and spatial transformations of contemporary Japanese cities with his fiber city model, a conceptual shift in planning strategy through which he argues for a reorientation away from growth-oriented development to adaptive editing associated with organic weaving rather than machine-like urban structures. Ohno articulates his critique of highly centralized and constrained logics of the compact city model by offering a flexible and resilient alternative with infrastructural and ecological networks as interlacing threads that both sustain and reorganize shrinking territories of the city, embracing a regenerative urban strategy fitted to the fragmented conditions of the Japanese city fabric. Similar ideas appear in Jonas and Rahmann's (2014) *Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence*, which recognizes urban voids not as remnants of planning failures but as culturally significant and spatially productive elements of the Japanese capital. The authors argued that void spaces, shaped by Tokyo's embrace of impermanence and ambiguity, hold on to the potential for nuanced interventions that align with the logic of urban vernacular change.

Some of these ideas resonate with recent global shifts in urban theory, particularly the growing influence of acupuncture urbanism and creative placemaking, which refer to targeted, small-scale interventions that prompt broader spatial and social transformations while emphasizing inclusive, community-driven improvements to public space and promoting the social sustainability and livability of everyday environments (Courage & McKeown, 2020; Lerner, 2016). The theoretical positions mentioned here represent only a few among the multitude of contemporary ideas that form the conceptual basis for interpreting Tokyo's ongoing regeneration efforts. The city's evolving urban strategies, including architectural experimentation, participatory design, and a rethinking of infrastructure, reflect a growing understanding that regeneration must involve more than just an economic uplift, but should also address spatial heritage, ecosystems, and social fabric that ultimately give Tokyo its renown complex identity (Golany et al., 1998; Popham, 1985).

4. Case Studies of Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

To illustrate the contemporary approaches to urban regeneration in Tokyo, this article analyzes three recent projects, each representing a different scale of intervention: micro, meso, and macro, but all aiming to redefine and enhance the built environment in terms of the provision of extended green areas, publicly accessible spaces and services, and more sustainable and livable urban scenes. Together, they represent how diverse actors and strategies operate across varying urban conditions while responding to the challenges brought up by the regeneration of large portions of the city.

The micro-scale example, Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya Ward, which has about 244,000 residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), highlights grassroots, design-driven approaches rooted in the principles of machizukuri and acupuncture urbanism with the intent to activate larger urban precincts with more effective cost-benefit urban initiatives. The meso-scale project, Shimokita Senrogai in Setagaya Ward, with a population close to 940,000 (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), is situated in Shimokitazawa, a district of about 18,500 residents (Data Commons, n.d.), and reflects a hybrid governance and community collaboration highly shaped by local participatory initiatives. The macro-scale project, Azabudai Hills in Minato Ward, home to approximately 267,000 residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), exemplifies a typical form of government-supported large-scale urban redevelopment with significant private sector involvement as a flagship of their mutual global ambitions. By holistically examining these projects, the article aims to discuss and highlight the multifaceted and broad variety of approaches, ideas, and practices currently underpinning the urban redevelopment and city regeneration process in Tokyo, while also being present in other cities of Japan.

4.1. Tokyo Toilet Project (Micro-Scale in Shibuya Ward)

The Tokyo Toilet Project transforms a typically prosaic public amenity into a platform for urban and architectural experimentation and social dignity. With its starting point in the collaboration between the Nippon Foundation and Shibuya Ward Office following the signing of a five-year Comprehensive Collaborative Agreement on Social Innovation in 2017 and the establishment of Shibuya Ward's Policy for Toilet Environment Improvement in 2018 (Okano, 2023), this project brought together some of Japan's leading architects to redesign 17 public toilets in the heart of Shibuya (the Tokyo Toilet) and provide public amenities for visitors to the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics in 2020 (Okano, 2023). The project was initiated by entrepreneur Koji Yanai, the son of the Uniqlo founder Tadashi Yanai and a senior executive in one of its parent companies. The Tokyo Toilet Project reached worldwide attention following the success of the award-winning movie *Perfect Days*, directed by Wim Wenders in 2023. The project was completed in stages from August 2020 (Higashi Sanchome and Jingu-Dori Park) to the final opening (Nishisando) in March 2023 (The Nippon Foundation, n.d.). It explored accessibility, safety, and identity, with design concepts and construction assigned to renowned Japanese and international architects and designers, each invited to redefine the common perception of public toilets in Shibuya as part of a broader attempt to contribute to local civic improvement.

Pritzker Prize winner Shigeru Ban's glass-walled multi-purpose toilet at Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park is a good example of the balance between innovation and social messaging (Figure 1a). Focusing on two key aspects of toilet use, the project emphasizes the importance of cleanliness and privacy. The architect has opted for

the use of innovative technology, employing glass walls which are transparent when unlocked to allow the cleanliness to be checked, which then turn opaque when locked for privacy during use. The colorful glazed surfaces of the building are bright and vibrantly lit at nighttime, thus acting as a distinctive signal along the streets and the border of the minipark where it sits, and fostering both curiosity and a sense of security.

Toyo Ito, another Pritzker Prize winner and influential international architect, has installed a series of toilets resembling a group of three mushrooms as natural organic forms on the edge of Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine park (Figure 1b). The design derives mainly from pragmatic and fundamental considerations, allowing maximum visibility and a good visual connection with the surroundings, and in doing so, aims to create a comfortable and safe environment that deters crime, especially at night. The theme of accessibility and inclusiveness is also part of the design concept. In this case, the architect considered the provision of generous space within and around the structures to allow disabled people, parents with children, and the elderly to access them with ease.

Figure 1. Examples of public restrooms redesigned for the Tokyo Toilet Project between 2018–2022: (a) Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park, designed by Shigeru Ban and (b) Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine, designed by Toyo Ito. Source: Photographs by the authors (2024).

The project draws on themes of livability, accessibility, and the value of branding and design as an effective means to enhance the usability of the public domain. The essence of the Tokyo Toilet project is the concept of small human-scale design that promotes social inclusion and general accessibility, integrated with innovative and modern design ideas aiming to reactivate neglected parts of the neighborhood and restore their dignity and social value as important urban spaces. The small insertions work essentially as catalysts for the regeneration of space and support greater interconnectivity between residents. In addition, they function to re-activate small parks and sites on the urban edges of the big city and promote and facilitate the use and exploration of nearby areas (Figure 2). In summary, the toilets help the wider community reappropriate public spaces that are typically considered unpleasant, and as such, are not regarded as attractive or exemplary of good architecture, despite their relevant social function for public well-being.

Considered more broadly, the toilets are also examples of micro-urbanism and "acupuncture" strategic planning (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). The project is based on the logic of acupuncture urbanism, where targeted, symbolic interventions have ripple effects that reshape the perception of the city. The physical scale of interventions is limited, but they address deeper issues of citizen trust, inclusivity, and sensory experience in public infrastructure. Well-designed spaces and innovative architectural forms contribute to creating a more

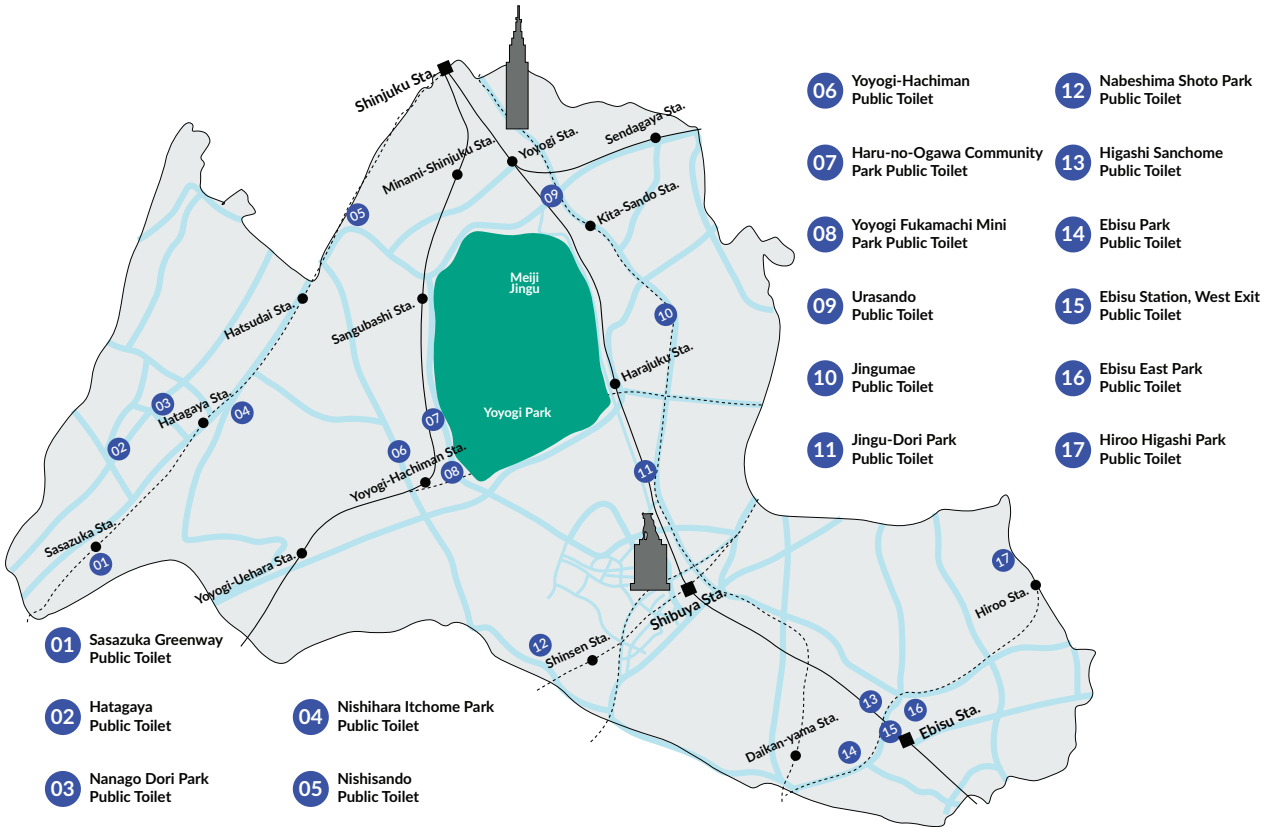

Figure 2. Map of the Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya Ward. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

cohesive and healthier society by improving the quality of the built environment, thus supporting a more relaxed and active urban life. The various public toilet designs do not simply improve hygiene but also play a cultural role in rebranding public amenities as safe and attractive urban elements. The project offers a counterpoint to the highly commercialized megaproject narrative by showing how small interventions can improve urban livability through atmosphere and care.

Overall, in turning small urban spots into tourist attractions and tools for social cohesion, this is also an example of successful cultural and mediatic operation built on an effective and solid marketing strategy. However, its main merit is as an exemplary approach to the regeneration and reactivation of obsolete and neglected urban spaces, where the diversity and originality of architectural design have succeeded in drawing worldwide attention to the small but cost-effective micro-urban regeneration interventions.

4.2. Shimokita Senrogai Project (Meso-Scale in Setagaya Ward)

The Shimokitazawa district, located in Setagaya Ward, with its dense network of small alleyways, independent fashion and vintage clothing stores, cafes, theaters, bars, and live music venues, has long been well known among Tokyo's residents, especially among young people. The eclectic and inclusive character of this neighborhood is rooted in its history. Remarkably spared from the US air raids during World War II, its urban fabric was preserved, and limited car access has supported a walkable, intimate, and human-scale environment. This distinctive identity draws people from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles, making Shimokitazawa a place that resists homogeneity (Hattori et al., 2015).

Recent regeneration redevelopments in Shimokitazawa present many aspects which characterize the collaborative process known as machizukuri, which is based on shared goals, vision, and intentions of the various stakeholders, and whose outcome reflects the respective roles of residents, businesspersons, landowners, and the local administration. One important role of administrators is their direct involvement with experts and specialists (NGOs, architects, and planners) who operate as consultants, advising residents and other stakeholders. The result of this concerted and collective effort to transform urban space into an improved living environment is then discussed in public workshops and presented to the residents as small projects (Nakajima & Murayama, 2024; Satoh, 2019).

The Shimokita Senrogai project (in English, Shimokita Railroad Street) began in 2003, when the Setagaya City Council initiated an ambitious redevelopment plan that included relocating the Odakyu Line railway tracks underground between Higashikitazawa and Setagaya-Daita Stations and modernizing the resulting freed 1.7-kilometer-long strip of land with several larger buildings. In 2013, after a decade of construction, the relocation of the tracks and modernization of the associated stations were complete. However, plans for larger commercial redevelopment on the vacant land triggered local opposition. Stakeholders concerned about the threat to Shimokitazawa's organic urban fabric assembled in large groups calling for the preservation of the neighborhood's distinctive character. In response, in October 2016, Setagaya Ward initiated discussions to involve residents and other actors in the development of a new plan that would better reflect the needs of the community. Shortly after the first meeting, the Shimokita Midori Bukai (in English, Shimokita Greenery Committee) put forward a proposal to expand existing open green areas and introduce communal spaces, which the district lacked.

By 2018, the Setagaya Ward was planning to turn a 120-meter-long site around the former Shimokitazawa station into a large bicycle parking facility at ground level, with an elevated pedestrian deck above. However, due to the proximity of nearby houses, whose residents would be negatively affected, the Greenery Committee submitted a counterproposal for a more modest open public space where people could gather, interact, and engage with nature (Shimokita Midori Bukai, 2018). The negotiations that followed illustrate a rare instance of constructive tension within Japanese urban governance. Rather than expressing total opposition to the project, the Greenery Committee became a legitimate mediator for alternative solutions desired by the neighborhood. The resulting compromise involved constructing the new facility on a reduced scale while integrating generously planted communal areas. This balancing of interests can be understood as a form of hybrid governance, where civic initiative is not simply positioned against official authority but is rather facilitated and legitimized by it, an approach that stems from Japan's long tradition of *chōnaikai* and semi-autonomous neighborhood associations.

A significant role in this dialogue was played by the landscape design office FOLK, brought in by Odakyu Electric Railway, which handled the redevelopment and advocated for a participatory design approach and the involvement of local voices. From discussions between residents, Odakyu Electric, and Setagaya Ward, a new proposal emerged that would transform the site into a public landscape, while preserving Shimokitazawa's human scale and spontaneous character (Almazán & Studiolab, 2022). In September 2019, a portion of the site officially opened as Shimokita Senrogai Akichi (in English, Shimokita Railroad Street. Vacant Lot; FOLK, n.d.). The space was designed as an experimental public space to be collaboratively managed by Odakyu Electric and the residents and intentionally left open-ended to allow the community to define and redefine its use based on evolving needs (Hou, 2010). Activities such as markets, workshops, and gardening events quickly

followed (PR Times, 2019). The goal of Vacant Lot was to bring local inhabitants together to explore the site's history and the potential for its further transformation. This was met with huge enthusiasm, and not long afterwards, the grassroots organization Shimokita Engeibu (in English, Shimokita Gardening Club) was born. Initially focused on maintaining greenery on the site, the Gardening Club expanded its activities to include sustainability education for urban residents of various ages and occupations, promoting ecological awareness and a lifestyle of "living with plants naturally, effortlessly, and enjoyably every day" (Shimokita Engeibu, n.d.).

At the same time, redevelopment along other sections of the former railway track was gradually progressing. From 2020 onward, several new cafes and commercial spaces opened. Bonus Track, a new shopping street comprising small-scale commercial facilities (Figure 3; Tsubame Architects, n.d.-a), is one of the larger developments on the strip, while perhaps the most emblematic space in the entire area is the small meadow locally known as Shimokita Nohara Hiroba (in English, Shimokita Grass Square; Figure 4), both designed by Tsubame Architects. Tsubame Architects also designed Shimokita-Engeibu Koya Nohara, an operations base in the form of a hut for the activities of the Gardening Club, where citizens can gather as well as store their tools (Tsubame Architects, n.d.-b), a form of qualitative urban design discussed by Schropfer (2012). Located just a few minutes from the southwest exit of Shimokitazawa Station, this public space, now under the long-term stewardship of the Gardening Club, emerges unexpectedly from the dense urban fabric of the city (Figure 5; Sand, 2013).

Figure 3. View from within the northern part of the Bonus Track development by Tsubame Architects, featuring a multitude of small cafés, restaurants, and a book and beer store. Source: Photograph by the authors (2025).

While the principles of participatory design have found an accepted position within contemporary urban practices, the case of Shimokitazawa invites more nuanced questions, namely, who actually participates as main actors and to what extent; and whether participatory design is led by outside consulting experts (planners and architects) as a symbolic gesture or is driven by a genuine concern for public agency.

Figure 4. View from the rooftop of the Gardening Club Hut, overlooking Nohara Hiroba and the southwest entrance of Shimokitazawa Station. Source: Photograph by the authors (2025).

Figure 5. Section of the Shimokita Senrogai project transformation in Setagaya Ward. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

The defining aspect of the Shimokita Senrogai project was the process of dialogue among multiple stakeholders rather than a prescribed outcome, and so can be viewed as an approach in the true spirit of the machizukuri legacy. A critical condition was that the architects and planners relied on collective responsibility and social contract, actively participating in the life of the district (Tsubame Architects is located in Shimokitazawa).

Over recent years, Shimokita Nohara Hiroba has become a central venue for community activities and may be regarded as a physical manifestation of local, self-organized engagement. It exemplifies how collaborative placemaking can thrive even within the constraints of a traditional, centralized, and efficiency-driven urban model (Hirayama, 2017). At the same time, the public authorities of Setagaya Ward and Odakyu Electric Railway demonstrated a willingness to respond to public opinion and adjust their plans accordingly. In a culture that is commonly characterized by bureaucratic rigidity and control, the administration's receptivity to shared decision-making was a critical condition for the successful realization of this project. In this sense, it may confidently be said that Shimokita Senrogai, and especially its Nohara Hiroba, possesses the lived and unselfconscious insideness that Edward Relph described as qualities of a truly authentic sense of place (Relph, 1976). This case also demonstrates that there is no singular formula for achieving sustainable social urban regeneration. However, Shimokita Senrogai suggests that meaningful outcomes can, and often do, emerge from open-mindedness, continuous dialogue, mutual trust, and hybrid forms of governance, where public institutions, private actors, and local communities shape the evolving urban landscape together.

4.3. Azabudai Hills (Macro-Scale in Minato Ward)

Close to the iconic Tokyo Tower, the Azabudai Hills Project in Minato-ku (Minato Ward) is a large-scale, macro-urban redevelopment proposed and built by the Mori Building Company. One of the most ambitious projects in Tokyo in recent history, it was officially completed and opened to the public in September 2023. Its origins trace back to the establishment of the Council of Redeveloping Cities in 1989, followed by the creation of the Toranomon-Azabudai District Urban Redevelopment Committee in 1993. The project gained momentum in 2014 with the expansion of the redevelopment area and, later the same year, its designation as a National Strategic Special Zone, culminating in the approval of the city plan in 2017, the formation of the Urban Redevelopment Association in 2018, and the start of construction in August 2019 (Mori Building, 2023).

Azabudai Hills covers an area of 861,700 square meters and, with a cost of 640 billion yen, is now the largest urban development project ever undertaken by Mori Building. In attempting to replace old urban blocks dating back to the post-war economic miracle, in many senses, this project is reminiscent and representative of the several large-scale urban redevelopment projects that have dotted Tokyo skyline since the late 1980s aiming to provide more office space and new leisure and commercial areas, and, in this way, promote consumption and advance the global role and international ambitions of the city (Kikuchi & Sugai, 2019). This practice was disseminated by mega-corporations during the frantic stage of strong economic expansion of the 1980s (known as the "bubble economy" era) and continued to be actively supported by the central government, especially during the following acute phase of economic decline in the following decade. Efforts to reverse the economic stagnation of the 1990s and early 2000s and rejuvenate derelict urban districts and their economic activities resulted in the residential occupation and urban densification of several prime locations in centrally located urban districts of Tokyo (e.g., Shinjuku, Shibuya, Shinagawa, Roppongi, among others). These activities "regenerated" vast high-rise mixed office and entertainment areas with the consequent relocation of existing local activities and residents.

What sets Azabudai Hills apart is a strong emphasis on livability and sustainability in the design of newly built elements and regenerated urban neighborhoods, and provision of heavily landscaped settings with accessible public plazas (Figure 6), green and walkable areas, and a variety of mixed and integrated urban

Figure 6. View of the central square at the Azabudai Hills Project. Source: Photograph by the authors (2023).

functions (Figure 7). These provide Tokyo and its citizens with world-class international amenities and services, and enhance the Japanese capital's international reputation and competitiveness whilst embracing the new sustainability ideas and green architecture principles. The master plan of the project is generated around the idea of a central public park surrounded by the profile of a primarily office tower and two mixed-use high-rise towers containing residential units integrated with office, retail, and hotel spaces. These are densely compacted into the vertical volumetrics (Figure 8), freeing much-needed ground space to recreate the sense of a "vertical garden city."

Central plaza is a square designed as the green core of the project, conceived as the natural focus for the organization and orientation of the buildings, with retail spaces at ground level. Within walking distance, global institutions offering cutting-edge international research and education, such as the new Keio University Center for Preventive Medicine and the British School in Tokyo, function as drivers and catalysts. Built of glass and steel and with shining external surfaces, the Azabudai Hills Mori JP Tower is mainly destined to host offices and, with its 330-meter height, is currently supposed to be the tallest building in Japan (only to be surpassed by the taller Torch Tower in 2027), creating a distinctive, imposing landmark for the new urban district. This, as with many other megaprojects typical for Tokyo, is fully interconnected and integrated with the extensive mass transit system network by means of two underground stations (Roppongi-itchome Station on the Namboku Line and Kamiyacho Station on the Hibiya Line).

Figure 7. Pedestrian spaces (a) and vehicular paths (b) surrounding the mixed-use urban complex designed by Heatherwick Studio. Source: Photographs by the authors (2023).

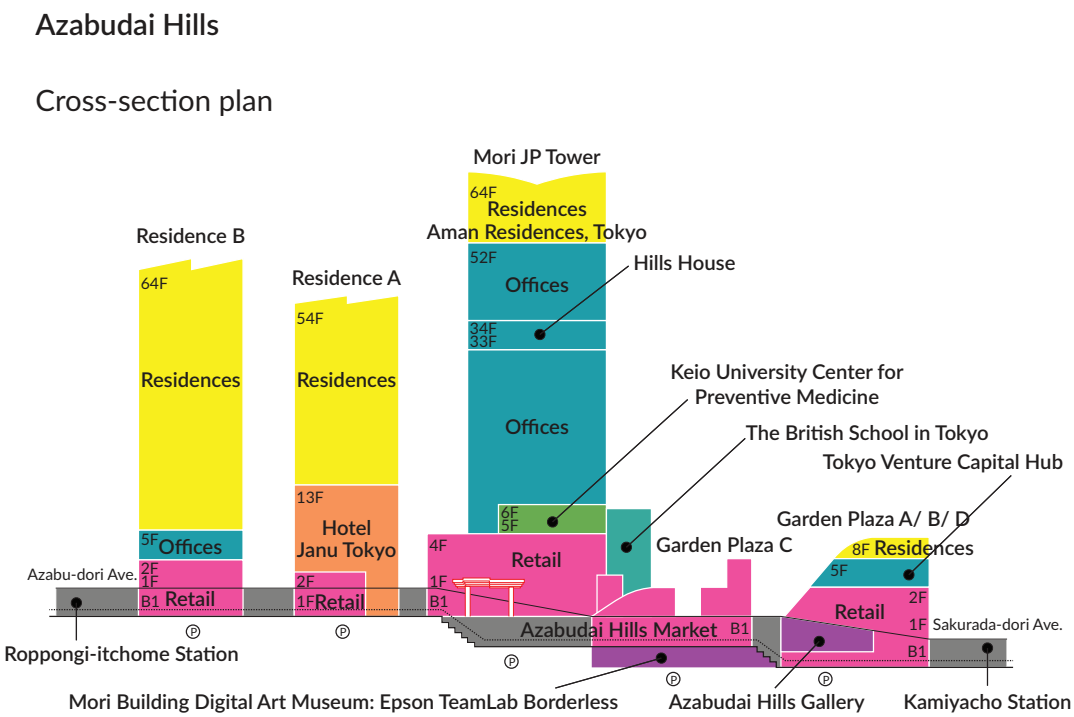

Figure 8. Cross-section of the Azabudai Hills Project. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

As indicated in the visionary approach proposed by developer Mori Building Co., the new urban redevelopment project aims to create a community full of vitality and promote a culture of physical and mental well-being by expanding the provision of green spaces and integrating urban scenes into nature, with its emphasis on "green and wellness" (Business Wire, 2023; Mori Building, 2023, 2025). When fully occupied, the redevelopment is projected to accommodate 20,000 office workers and 3,500 residents, and attract approximately 30 million visitors per year.

Designed in collaboration with renowned architectural groups Pelli Clarke & Partners and Heatherwick Studio, Azabudai Hills was always envisioned as a mixed-use "city-within-a-city." It is positioned as Tokyo's Modern

Urban Village, an example of Japan's deregulations in its prime (Hayakawa & Hirayama, 1991; Hebbert & Nakai, 1988), and includes office towers, luxury residences, first-class cultural and educational facilities, and extensive green public spaces. The mixed-use architecture proposed by Heatherwick Studio is perhaps the most distinctive element of the project, with green roofs supported by massive structural beams mimicking a series of three-dimensional artificial hills with glazed facades. Both buildings and the spaces surrounding them are inspired by the designers' vision of "making a human district in a global city" (ArchDaily, 2023) and creating a horizontal volumetric matrix which integrates with the green areas of the various plazas nearby, formally complementing the verticality of the office and residential towers.

Walkable pedestrian paths and large open spaces for gathering and strolling in the green are conceived as an oasis with a human dimension in the core of Tokyo, and these open green spaces have quickly become a focal point in the dense and compact urban setting. Whilst the provision of green spaces, high-quality services, and retail is an unquestionable advantage for the various users and consumers who are attracted to the Azabudai Hills, there is a sense of elitism lingering behind the overall marketing of this luxury complex, as is expected of a commercial megaproject that calls for appropriate returns.

While the scale reflects a traditional top–down model, the development integrates elements of social sustainability through green spaces, public art, and amenities meant to serve both residents and the wider urban community. Unlike the grassroots or incremental approaches of the previous two case studies, Azabudai Hills exemplifies the role of private-sector urbanism. Particularly relevant is that it took 35 years of careful planning and consistent and painstaking continuous dialogues with around 300 individual landlords to convince them to agree to the project, demonstrating a considerate approach to urban renewal consistent with the scope to gain support and work with the favor of residents. Also noteworthy is the attempt to incorporate wellness, environmental sustainability, and urban vibrancy, which reveals private sector adaptation to newer global urban trends. The project aims to derive 100% of its electric power from renewable resources and compete for recognition and certification in the leadership in energy and environmental design neighborhood development category for mixed-use development ("Azabudai Hills, Tokyo's," 2024). The project's authenticity, inclusiveness, and official claims must be considered in relation to its expensive apartments and high-end commerce.

5. Conclusion

As the country with the highest number of Pritzker awards in the world, and with a long tradition of building and architectural innovation, Japan remains at the forefront of technological invention and change when it comes to transforming the built environment. This is especially true for the Tokyo metropolis, which continues to serve as an international hub that plays a prominent role in the global economy. As such, there is continuous demand for new urban spaces that respond to the demands of a complex, sophisticated, and wealthy society.

The intermingling of colossal infrastructure, administrative headquarters, industrial facilities, and service sectors aimed at sustaining the highest concentration of people and activities in the country has earned the city a solid reputation as a "planning laboratory," as well as a design and innovation core, both in Japan and globally, for its efficiency in promoting economic growth whilst dealing with various urban issues and challenges for its residents. These include transportation, housing affordability, energy efficiency and sustainable development, urban and spatial design, and urban resilience. Efforts to combine the design of

high-quality urban spaces and upgrade the provision of green, functional, and livable areas for residents are evident in this series of urban projects, which range from large-scale mega-projects through meso-scale collective and neighborhood interventions to micro-scale ad-hoc redesigns of small urban spots that function as catalysts for wider urban improvement.

This article has analyzed three significant and recent examples of multi-scalar urban redevelopment projects in Tokyo, which have applied concepts borrowed from new urbanism design approaches to more circumscribed acupuncture strategies. Despite their difference in scale and variety of delivery processes, the analyzed projects aim to strengthen bonds with the local contexts and surrounding spaces, and activate relationships among people, services, and nature, within the overarching goal of upgrading important urban infrastructure and enhancing its relationships with the city.

The Tokyo Toilet Project was initiated by a single organizer and supported by Shibuya Ward, primarily aiming to enhance tourism and address broader social concerns relevant to both residents and visitors, such as wheelchair accessibility and user safety. A regenerative micro-urban intervention and an exemplary urban acupuncture project operating at the local level as a community and civic catalyst, the project's elements are spread out, small-scale creative works designed to gently transform and elevate the cityscape. It also serves as a curated showcase or catalogue of celebrated Japanese star-chitects blended with the overarching intent to promote creative art as the medium for broader social awareness and cultural transformation.

In contrast, the Azabudai Hills development is a long-term, large-scale, corporate-led initiative that began with the gradual buyout of residents over several decades. Fundamentally, a mega-development driven by commercial interests and big corporations' ambitions backed by the state, it has partially succeeded in realizing successful public space design while offering walkable and open areas within a compact urban core. These public spaces are closely tied to luxury retail; however, without this kind of commercial and entertainment facilities, the area would likely be much less appealing on the international stage. Strongly supported by the central government, this project aligns best with national ambitions for economic revitalization, increased tourism, and projection of a new urban image associated with luxury and contemporary global aesthetics, as well as committing to the current urban agenda of sustainable urban development with its extensive reliance on renewable energy and environmentally friendly technologies. As with the Tokyo Toilet Project, this overall top–down urban redevelopment invited internationally renowned architects to produce examples of urban acupuncture that would repurpose and reactivate idle urban spaces and became a type of cultural promotion that boosted both the attention and involvement of grassroots and elite representatives alike.

In this context, the Shimokita Senrogai Project offers a particularly distinctive and compelling case as it negotiates between multiple scales and involves a unique mixture of top–down and bottom–up processes with direct participation of user representatives. While initially a corporate-led project supported by Setagaya Ward and led by Odakyu Electric Railway, the early and active engagement of residents (Tokyo Shimbun, 2022) and descriptions provided by active members of the gardening club (Shimokita Gardening Club) significantly influenced its direction and outcomes, which are still in the process of gradual transformation. It can therefore be argued that the community successfully managed to have their voices and perspectives heard, while both the Ward administration and the railway company proved receptive to the community's opinion, becoming enthusiastic partners within an inclusive participatory design process. The results are significant, encompassing multi-scalar interventions ranging from the undergrounding of the

railway tracks and modernization of train stations to the development of new commercial facilities, but also for the stakeholders' conscious decision to give a green light to public, non-commercialized open space rather than accept the more typical approach of maximizing real estate value through high-rise residences or shopping centers. This has given the community an opportunity to maintain its pace of life, preserve and create new connections to place and nature, and reinforce its local identity.

Shimokita's multi-level interventions from large-scale urban and landscape planning to architectural design and micro-scale, resident-led activities such as gardening and organizing workshops, present a rare and inspiring model of urban regeneration that mediates between various interests, municipal planning, and grassroots civic engagement. The attention to people's activities in public space and the relevance of daily social experience can be associated with a specific form of urbanization, as articulated through the six "force fields" identified and defined by urbanist Fraker (2007), particularly with the concept of "everyday urbanism." In everyday urbanism, the focus is on spaces where people explore the spheres of daily existence as a crucial arena of modern culture, seeing the city as a social product. This contrasts with the Azabudai Hills project, which is more akin to an expression of "hyper-modernity/hybrid urbanism," where the dualities of new/old are blurred and superimposed according to the logic of hybridization expressed in the formula of "not only, but also." In this context, a new social and formal identity is created and mediated through the enormous and persuasive power of corporate global capitalism and mass consumption, expressed by the pervasive commercialization of architecture and its visual representations.

Overall, this compilation of case studies exemplifies recent diversified trends in Japan for a multi-scalar approach to urban renewal in order to address the problems of urban regeneration and revitalization of central and more marginal parts of the city. This approach facilitates enhancement of urban infrastructure and supply of high-quality shared urban spaces which can enhance the well-being of residents, and work as a driver of continued city development through the provision of more green spaces, much needed updated walkable areas and collective services, whilst also upgrading the built environment through the broad use of renewable energy and implementation of more sustainable forms of urbanization.

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