

On Innovative Practices Which Contribute to Preservation of the Place Identity: The Example of Yanesen, Tokyo

Milica Muminović, Darko Radović and Jorge Almazan

Department of Systems Design Engineering, Keio University, Yokohama 223-8522, Japan

Abstract: The processes of globalization, the consequences of which are evident in all corners and at all levels of the contemporary world are linked to an increasing homogenization. Disciplines of architecture and urban design contribute to that process, which is affecting the very definitions of place and identity. A desire to maintain and (re)create local identity within the context of that increasingly global world is connected to reviving of the past or to various interpretations of history, and preservation of the built environment of the place. This paper identifies peculiar processes of creation and maintenance of identity of place in the precincts of Tokyo Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi, known as Yanesen. The authors argue that in Yanesen innovation appears as the byproduct of complex and creative responses to the threats of globalization, within a perpetual interplay of persistence and change. The paper opens a number of questions of where and how innovation in built environment can contribute to persistence of place identity.

Key words: Place, identity, change, persistence, innovation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Globalisation, Placeness and Placelessness

The process of globalization is influencing architecture and cities worldwide. This process manifests itself through an acceleration of flows of capital, people and communications and an overall sense of a shrinking world. It could be argued that those flows are contributing to homogenization of urban landscapes, thus undermining cultural diversity. In return, those processes of homogenization are increasingly generating reactions that emphasize the renewed need for place-based identity, the importance of heritage and locality [1].

In this paper the authors position difference and identity as key terms in the field of cultural sustainability. Their position is that the local character of place needs to be defined at the intersection

between two dialectical couples: local-global and persistence-change. Architecture and urbanism have a significant role to play when it comes to innovation in projecting of these complex processes into space.

The complexity of persistence and change determines the ambiguous zone between placeness and placelessness. The term placelessness was defined by Relph. It refers to those urban landscapes which are beginning to “look and feel the same”, as part of the processes of homogenization which are encouraged by the “mass media, big business, powerful central authority and economic system which embraces all these” [2]. The term placelessness defines specific characteristics of place which are appearing as a consequence of the contemporary way of life, the loss of roots in specific localities and, therefore, the meaning [3]. The sense of placelessness is related to the physical setting of the place. An increasing standardization of landscapes, as part of broader commoditization of places and architecture in which building get reduced to banal “narcissistic pursuit” orientated towards consumerism, disconnected from

Corresponding author: Milica Muminović, Ph.D. candidate, research fields: identity of place, application of assemblage theory in urban analysis, dynamics of change and persistence in built environment, culturally sustainable architecture and urbanism. E-mail: arh.muminovic@hotmail.rs.

the people's everyday lives, designed for art galleries and books [4] evokes the notions of homogenization. It could be argued that interplay between the local and the global, between distinctive and universal (homogenized), between the continued and the changed defines some of the key issues of placelessness. Dialectics between continuity and change can be observed at different levels of any specific locality, through its tangible, palpable elements, as well as at the levels of its manifold intangible elements, which are related to individual and collective human experiences.

Different approaches to change-continuity and local-global produce diverse effects on the resulting quality of placeness-placelessness. On the one hand, the preservation on the basis of preservation of the physical setting results in "museumisation" and placelessness. Museumisation was the term used by Relph to describe "surrealistic combination of history, myth, reality and fantasy", which is based on "preservation, reconstruction and idealization of history" [5]. On the other hand, it is easy to argue that the complete change of physical setting and the loss of identity through homogenization also create placelessness, albeit of a different kind.

1.2 Identity of Place-Change and Persistence

In order to avoid an unnecessary level of ambiguity when it comes to meaning of the identity of place, the authors propose a definition which arises at the intersection between the well-established theories of place, and which the authors have tested at the location of Yanesen.

In place theory, usual definitions of identity stress persistence and uniqueness of the certain locality. In order to describe the identity and essence of place, Norberg-Schultz adopts the concept of "genius", and develops it into the concept of "genius loci". The basis of the concept is in the Roman belief that all beings (even the gods) have their genius, the guardian spirits which determine their character, their identity.

Norberg-Schultz explains how this spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character or essence [6]. This definition implies the transcendental element in place and its essence, something that can linger despite physical changes.

Furthermore, the identity of place gets defined by the constitutive elements of the locality. The identity of place comprises both tangible and intangible characteristics which distinguish both its authenticity and its relations to other places. Relph thus argues how "static physical setting, the activities and the meanings constitute three basic elements of the identity of places" [7].

More recent developments in an ongoing discourse on the importance of place in formation of identity establish their basis in assemblage theory. They define identity of the place by shifting the emphasis from stability to change and complexity [8-10]. According to this thinking, the identity is never given all at once, but defined progressively [11]. Dovey argues that the identity is an integral element of place assemblage and, as such is, always in the process of becoming and changes [12].

This paper positions identity between change and persistence. The authors argue that, in order to achieve placeness, any locality needs to allow for innovative change of its built components, activities and meanings.

1.3 Learning from the Ordinary: A Source for Architectural Innovation

Since at least early 1960, the popularity of urban design theory has resulted in a body of work which explores innovation in the existing, ordinary urban landscapes. Unlike orthodox architectural design theory, where the focus was on famous or historical architecture, here the focus was on the neglected realms of precincts and buildings considered to be insignificant and on urban phenomena thought of as banal and unworthy of serious architecture and urban

design as cultural practice.

The start genealogy of discourse focusing on anonymous places and processes can be traced back to Rudofski [13] and, in particular, to the influential study of ordinary streets of New York's Greenwich Village by Jacobs (1961). Her emphasis on every-day life suggested generated principles that remain widely accepted by urban designers ever since. The work of Jan Gehl continues in that tradition (1987). Venturi's "learning from Las Vegas" (1972), pointed exactly at the city which, at that time, represented all what architecture should reject. His book was significant in shaping the postmodern movement in architecture, especially in the United States, where its many descendants include the controversial "new urbanism". A important departure was Koolhaas' "retroactive manifesto for Manhattan" (1978), which brought to light a different type of modernism and helped make the case for urban density and cross-programming of buildings. Since then, the theorizing has multiplied. Many studies try to engage ordinary urban experiences and translate them into coherent theory of architecture, including "Tokyo metabolizing" (2010) where the most notable contribution is in an explicit abandonment of the modernist top-down metabolism, and its heroic gestures (e.g., Tange's Tokyo Bay scheme) and somewhat naive glorification of an entirely bottom-up aggregation of small and diverse acts of individual construction. In parallel to such trends, the Koolhaasian tradition continues both production of Bigness and theorizing the urban, in various studies and essays on Los Angeles, Atlanta and Singapore (1995) and beyond. Graafland, explaining this moment of multiplicity as the moment in which an "avantgarde without the cause" leads in direction which is favoured and supported by dominant forces of globalisation [14] and within the context of the present paper homogenization, loss of identity and place, ultimately.

In this paper the authors argue that anonymous bottom-up creative energies can produce innovation in

cities. Those energies are coming from small, ordinary and everyday, rather than big and extraordinary.

1.4 Purpose and Relevance of This Study

Placeness is much more complex than placelessness. In this paper the authors focus on only one aspect which is related to continuity and change of built landscapes and the identity of place. The paper asks which elements of physical setting have been preserved in order to simultaneously: (1) preserve the identity of place; (2) permit innovative change of physical setting.

In order to respond to that question, the authors use the example of Yanesen, an area in Tokyo which is well known for managing to innovate while keeping an air of continuity and well-preserved historic urban environment. This paper focuses on a segment of a broader analysis of the ways in which Yanesen accommodates change through innovation of its built landscape without losing an overall traditional framework. That is achieved by focusing on several elements that represent continuity in physical structure of the precinct—construction materials, street patterns and use patterns.

The paper aims to identify issues that would be of broader relevance, and thus of help in definition of a more general approach to innovation in Tokyo and other cities. The emphasis is on landscapes of ordinary, everyday urban life, which are created by dynamic bottom-up processes.

2. Approach

From a particular case-study of the Yanesen precinct of Tokyo, this paper seeks of broader significance. Tokyo will be briefly introduced, to help the reader understand the reasons for choosing Yanesen. A detailed outline of the precinct itself will follow, showing its relevance for new ways of preservation in historic urban areas.

2.1 Tokyo

It could be argued that one of the key characteristics

of Tokyo lies in transformation of its built environment. During the long evolution from Edo to Tokyo, numerous fires have destroyed the city, demanding constant efforts to rebuild [15]. That need for perpetual change also comes from traditional use of wood as main construction material, which requires regular maintenance, replacement of elements and rebuilding [16].

Contemporary Tokyo continues that tradition. The average lifespan of the single family detached house in Tokyo is only 26 years [17]. However, in the times of globalisation, that does not mean replacement of the existing building stock, but its radical redefinition. As a global city, Tokyo proves to be particularly open to global flows of capital [18]. That brings new urban and architectural typologies, and results in production of urban landscapes which are alien not only to the skyline but to the very cultural self of Tokyo [19].

The reaction to that kind of change and dramatic loss of distinctiveness of many parts of Tokyo is present not only in discourse on architecture and urban design, but in broader literature as well. In early 1980s, for instance, the interest in Tokyo and Edo has caused the “Edo Tokyo Boom” [20]. The tendency towards rediscovery of Japan-ness and places which still preserve the character of the bygone era was becoming dominant [21]. Reviving of Edo tradition,

numerous essay-like guides and detailed descriptions of suggested walks through Tokyo were published, focusing on rediscovery of old landscapes and, in particular, on the existing traces of the past. Evelyn Schultz finds resonances with Europe, as the figure of flâneur which parallels those of Baudelaire and Benjamin, also emerges in Tokyo, where writings of Nagai Kafu have inspired the emergence rich literature about and for city wanderers [22]. Most of such writings and maps today focus on the slowly disappearing small alleyways, roji, which are still stubbornly, preserving the air of the past times.

Such places show that, despite an onslaught of international and insensitive capital, some parts of Tokyo still keep the distinct character which is considered to be a direct descendant of that old Edo. Such areas are dominated by small, low-rise, high-density residential fabric [23-25]. That is where continuities outweigh change, where urban character remains, or leaves an impression that it remains, deeply connected with urban forms and practices of the past.

One of such places is Yanesen. Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi managing to preserve, not only numerous monumental buildings (temples, especially in Yanaka), but also everyday environments such as roji, which carry on some of key qualities related to the structure of urban life of the past times (Fig. 1).

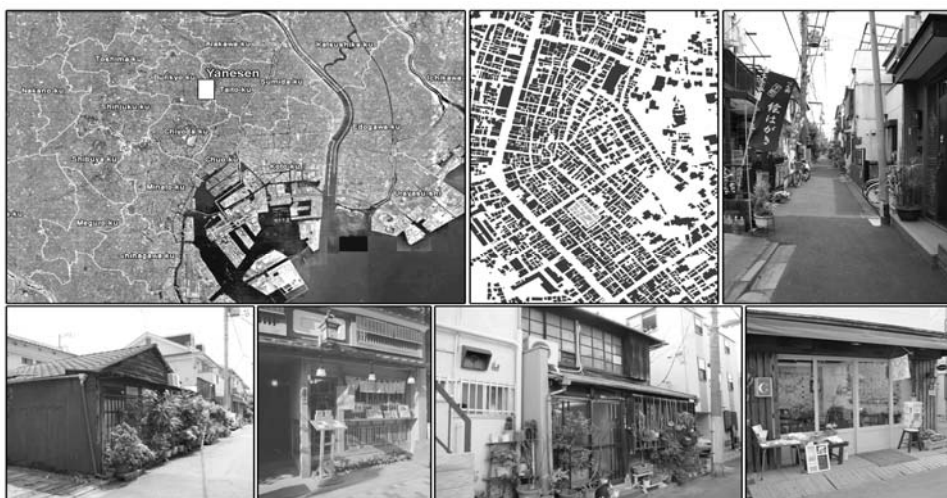


Fig. 1 Yanesen.

2.2 *Yanesen*

Yanesen is located in the central area of Tokyo, and is part of 23 wards. It belongs to two different city wards: Bunkyo and Taito. These three areas are differentiated in geographical and architectural terms. Yanaka belongs to Yamanote area (high city) with its numerous temples and shrines. On the other hand, Nezu is located in the valley and therefore is characterized as Shitamachi (low city). Nevertheless, this area could be conceived as a whole.

During early Edo period these areas were suburbs of Tokyo. Yanaka, located at the hilly part appeared as temple town, and Nezu was developing in the valley around the Nezu shrine, with specific character of Shitamachi. One of the famous characteristics of Shitamachi was pleasure quarters and in early Meiji period (1868-1912), Nezu was also one pleasure quarter, but due to the closeness of Imperial University campus on the former estate of the Maeda, lords of Kanazawa, in 1888 was relocated [26]. During the Meiji period the largest public cemetery where last shogun was buried was located in Yanaka. The most famous monument of this area, pagoda of Tennoji Temple was lost in 1957, when it was set on fire. Yanaka became significant artistic and intellectual center of Meiji. It was as Seidensticker describes “intellectual sort of place, much favored by professors, writers and artists”. It became the “new High City” [27].

Yanesen has developed with slow change and continuity in relation to past. That specific relation to history of this place is supported by the fact that the precinct was largely spared of massive destructions caused by the Great Kanto earthquake and subsequent conflagration (1923) and Second World War fire-bombings (1945) [25, 27].

Contemporary Yanesen is predominantly low-rise, dense residential area, adorned by the network of quiet roji (lanes), modest, local commercial shotengai areas, often tiny shops and galleries, small but ubiquitous

greenery, and many old temples.

2.3 *Method*

Following the definition of identity of place the study was conducted considering both tangible and intangible elements of the place. More specifically, in order to analyze the role of invention in an ever-evolving identity of Yanesen as a place, and its relation to change and persistence two approaches were developed: firstly, in order to document the constitutive parts of the evolving identity of this place, the narratives on Yanesen were collected from various documentary resources, such as Yanesen magazine, promotion material, touristic guides (printed and internet) and literature; secondly, in order to document the continuity of physical conditions, the field survey was conducted in January and February 2011. The results of the fieldwork were combined with available GIS data (software Arc GIS 10, “Center for Spatial Information Science”) and maps from the late Edo and Meiji period.

The analysis of tangible elements of the place, its physical setting was conducted on multiple scales. The research is based on tracing the changes and persistence within the elements of urban and architectural scales. The study focuses on materials of the facade, typology of residential buildings, sizes of houses and streets, street network and distribution of uses. At the urban scale the change of street and plot pattern, scale of the houses and sizes of streets as well as distribution of uses were mapped. The results are based on the comparison between available historical maps [28-30] and maps drawn based on the fieldwork. At the architectural level the houses that have wooden facade, as descendants of Edo traditional architecture were mapped and quantified in relation to total number of houses. These results show the persistence of materials from Edo to Tokyo. The persistence was defined as ratio of buildings that have wooden facade. Residential building typology was developed based on the traditional residential typologies of Edo period.

Different types of the buildings were mapped and quantified in order to show persistence and innovation.

3. Results

3.1 Identity of Yanesen Results from Narrative Survey

Identity of the place deals with complex relationships between physical setting, activities and meanings. For the purpose of this paper the authors have defined Yanesen's identity based on numerous narratives about this place. Those sources derive from "Yanesen" magazine, touristic guides and academic literature.

The results show that spatial identity of Yanesen differs from that of other residential areas of Tokyo. The main difference is based on an unusual concentration of characteristics which reach back to the Edo period. Academic discourses, local and international touristic guides, all stress the sense of an old local character. Along that, local activists have created a magazine "Yanesen", which celebrates and promotes education in local history engaging many residents of this area. As Sorensen explains, that magazine is a strong contributor to shaping of the identity of this area, by actively creating and promoting urban stories, "The magazine has been extremely influential as a project of story-telling and place-making, and celebrates families that have been in the neighborhood many generations, local shops, craftspeople, popular history and historians, current events, festivals and local buildings and places" [31]. A significant part of the identity of Yanesen is, thus, built around the rich and growing body of popular and promotional literature.

The tourist guides promote an image of Yanesen which is based on (the myth or) realities of "Japanese everyday life", "Shitamachi character", "neighborhood and closeness", "traditional crafts and products" and "famous people" JNTO—Japan National Tourism Organization, North America, ATT Japan, just to state few). The character of Shitamachi

as related to closeness, neighborhood atmosphere and a persistent air of Edo are the most emphasized elements of an established image of Yanesen, for which the authors could say that it is truly "branded", in a peculiar way, by orchestrated bottom up, very particular energies of the local creative milieu.

In Waley's words, this area has managed to "struck a happy balance between craving for the future and basking in the past" [32]. It embraces both persistence and change, managing to maintain its identity and, at the same time, responding to contemporary demands of 21st century. Seidensticker explains how the "heart" of the old Edo Shitamachi, the area around the Nihonbashi bridge, has completely changed, to the extent that it does not reflect much of its past, while Yanaka manages to preserve the character of an Edo town, in spite of the fact that it was never the center. Yanaka, "with its latticed fronts, its tiled roofs and its tiny expanses of greenery, is the most extensive part of the present city in which something like the mood of the old low city is still to be sensed" [27]. It may be that the very marginality of the area made certain aspects of the resilience of Yanesen possible.

From these three sources the identity of Yanesen emerges as based on the past, with strong connections to its Edo roots. Furthermore, those Edo roots are represented through one specific image of Edo period the Shitamachi jōchō, the mood of the low city with its rows of wooden buildings and sense of neighborhood as community and not as warrior city—Yamanote. More specifically, the character of the area emerges from the practices of everyday life, a sense of neighborhood and belonging to a community—all that despite an evident change.

3.2 Fieldwork Results

Preservation deals with physical artifacts. Here the authors focus on relevant parts of a detailed survey, concentrating on the following aspect:

- (1) Facade materials

The survey has shown that in sharp contradiction with common perception of Yanesen, a very low number of houses keep traditional shape of materials. The number of houses with wooden facades, for instance, is less than 3% out of total number of 1,563 observed units. The houses of Yanesen, even those with wooden facades, tend to have contemporary architectural expressions. Facade materials are mostly contemporary, such as metal, tile, colored facade, plaster, plastic, glass, etc.. Furthermore, the 3% of the houses which resemble traditional Edo wooden architecture are scattered around area, and do not create a traditional urban landscape of any identifiable coherence (Fig. 2);

(2) Street and plot pattern

The results of the authors' analysis of the late Edo and contemporary maps show that main streets in the road network kept their direction (Fig. 3). The main contemporary roads in this area closely correspond to the Edo period roads. The process of subdivision of land has produced the need for access, and numerous tertiary roads have appeared.

Despite subdivision of land, the distinction between the valley area of Nezu (Shitamachi area) and hilly

part of Yanaka (Yamanote area) is still clear. The hilly part of Yanesen area has kept its network of wider roads and the bigger size of plots, compared to the valley areas of Nezu. Therefore, the historic separation between the low and high city remains. The relationship between high and low city persists, despite the fact that in general, in both areas, number of roads has increased and size of the plots decreased.

The shape of the famous snake road preserves the memory of a river, which existed in this area during the Edo period. The shape of that street keeps the character of the area despite the total change of the building stock which flanks its edges;

(3) Yanesen's residential typology

Shelton (1999) explains that in Edo period Japanese urban scene was dominated by three main types of the buildings: (1) Buke-yashiki; (2) Machiya; (3) Nagaya. Buke-yashiki was a type of warrior class residence, with one or more buildings standing in the garden surrounded by high walls and big gates. Machiya was a townhouse which functioned as residence and shop, office, warehouse or workshop. Nagaya was the row house of commoners, and perhaps the most numerous of all types [33].

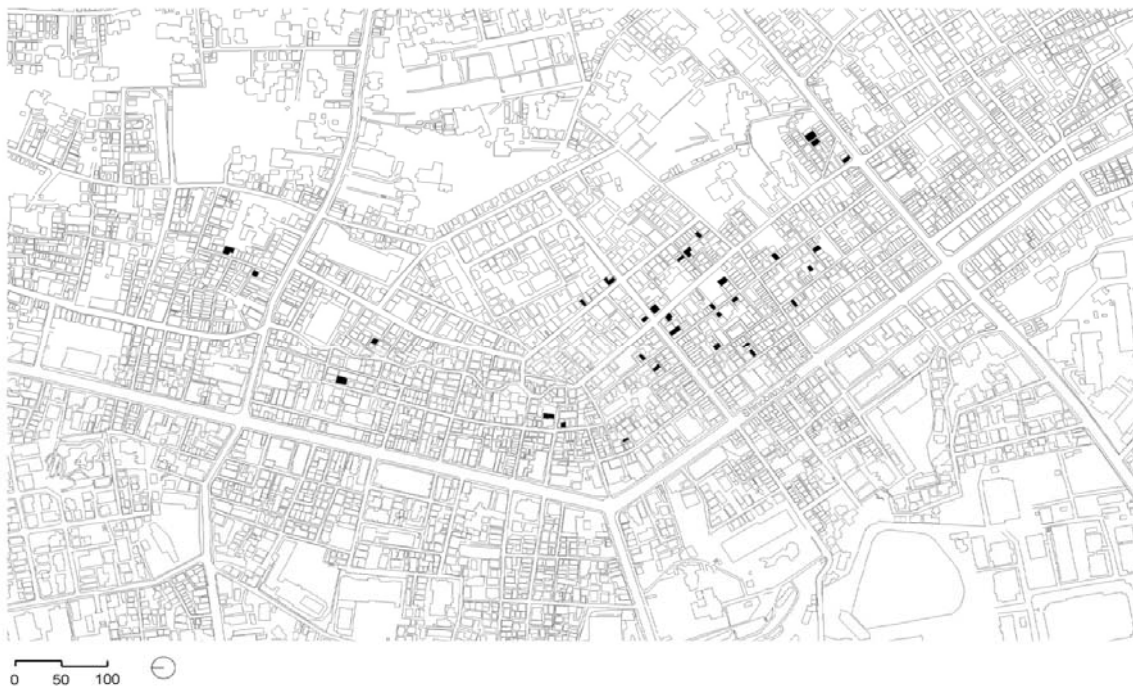


Fig. 2 Wooden houses in Yanesen.



Fig. 3 Development of the street network in Yanesen.

Main characteristics which determined Edo residential typology are related to the position of the house on the plot, size of the plot and house and the way in which private space of the house connects to the public space of the street. Those characteristics are used in order to determine the typology of contemporary residential houses in Yanesen. The main criterion for the definition of typology was the way in which house is connected with the street. Typology was created based on the fieldwork during which 1,563 units were observed, mapped and documented.

It could be argued that types A, B, C and AB are developed from the three main types of the houses in Edo period. Type A developed as “house with the garden” from the warrior house Edo typology [34, 35]. Type B has strong connections with Nagaya typology of the Edo residential stock, with direct access from street. Type C has resemblance to Machiya type of the house combining residence and commercial use. Type AB combines the characteristics of Type A and B. Types D, E, F and DB are new residential typologies that could not be found in Edo period (Fig. 4).

The spatial distribution of the typologies (A, B, C, AB) which have developed based on three main types in Edo period shows that those typologies are mainly located at secondary and tertiary streets. Furthermore, those typologies cover 52% of the observed houses in

Yanesen (Fig. 5);

(4) Scale of houses and sizes of streets

The size of the plots and houses in this area shows great persistence. In the Edo period, the houses were one storey high. In contemporary Yanesen, along the major Shinobazu Road Street, the buildings are much higher and the plots sizes have increased. However, the blocks located away from the main roads have kept the size of the streets width of 4 m, as well as the height of the buildings. In those areas, the height is predominantly one or two floors (Fig. 6). One of the reasons for that is in planning regulation, which demands solar access. As the result, the building height had to stay proportionate to the unchanged size of the streets. It can be argued that, even where the height of the buildings has increased from one story to two storeys, this change, remaining within human scale, did not affect an overall sense of space;

(5) Distribution of uses

From the comparison of the land use patterns the authors can identify the degree of functional continuity. During late Edo period, this area was developing as both Yamanote and Shitamachi. The Yamanote area was on the hilly part, with numerous temples, shrines and residences of the samurai, the warrior class. This area mostly belongs to contemporary Yanaka, which still boasts more than 100 temples. The lower part of Yanesen is mostly

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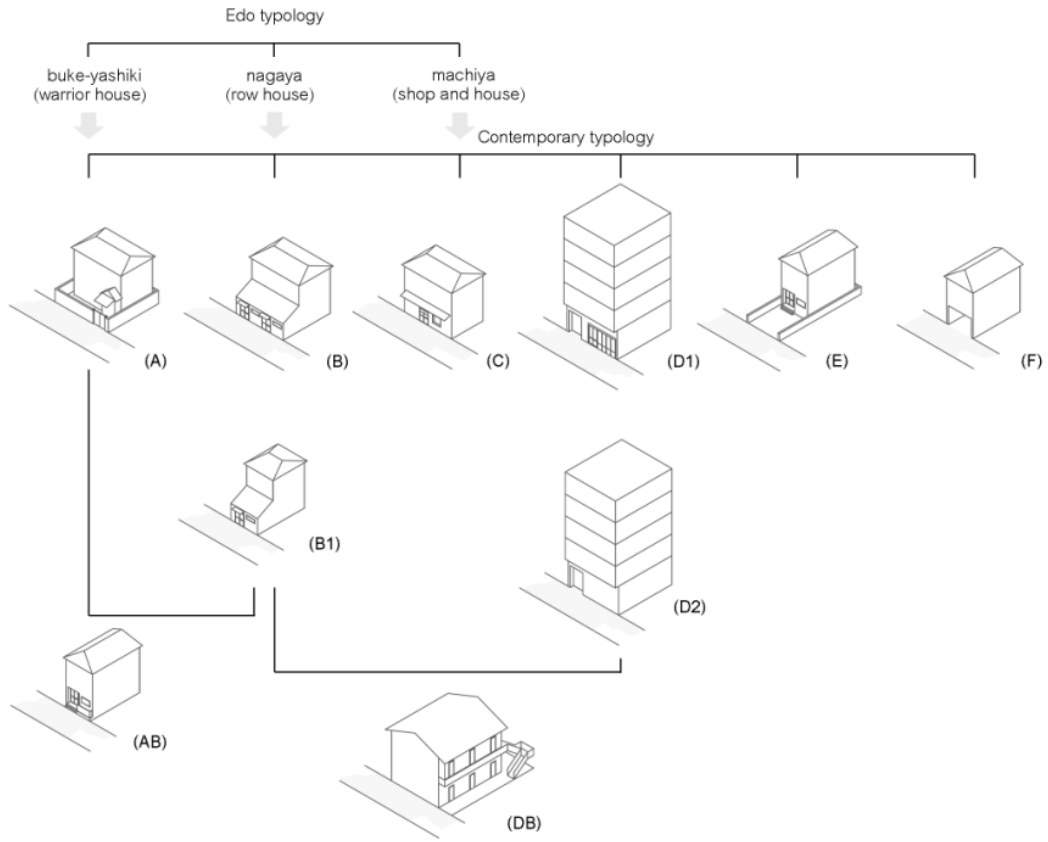


Fig. 4 Contemporary typologies of residential architecture in Yanesen.



Fig. 5 Map of typologies A, B, C and AB.



Fig. 6 Height of the buildings.



Fig. 7 Comparison of land use patterns.

comprised of parts of Nezu. That was Shitamachi, or low city during Edo period.

It started from the surroundings of the Nezu shrine, which is still in the same place. During the late Edo period, the area was Monzenmachi, a commercial area in front of the temple. Monzenmachi was dominated by machiya, buildings that contained both the shop and the residence. Usually, the shop was orientated towards the main street, with housing nested in the back of the plot. During the Meiji period, that typology has slowly developed into a shop on the ground floor and the residence above. Contemporary area of Nezu is following the same patterns of dominantly commercial area, with small restaurants and shops (Fig. 7).

The hilly part of Yanesen contained numerous temples and shrines, the pattern which still can be traced in contemporary Yanaka (Fig. 7).

4. Conclusions

Survey of the physical characteristics of Yanesen has shown that wood has almost completely vanished from its urban landscape. Materiality of the facades of contemporary Yanesen is based on modern materials. The identity of Yanesen is not based on the objects, nor materials preserved from the past.

Street pattern has shown greater persistence within preservation of main roads. However, it has also shown adaptation to contemporary needs of subdivision of land. In the same time, the distinction between Yamanote and Shitamachi areas in appearance of width of the streets and size of the plots has remained. That relationship is characterized with persistence.

Typology of the houses has also shown persistence, and in the same time ability to change and embrace new typologies. Furthermore, change and flexibility is present even within the persistent typologies.

Scale of houses and sizes of streets has been accommodated to the contemporary needs. Streets have been widened and houses have increased the

number of storeys. However, streets and houses have managed to preserve the human scale in great number.

The land use patterns show great level of persistence which is related to the position of the temples and shrines. In the same time, Shinobazu street has remained dominantly commercial area following the Monzenmachi characteristics from Edo period.

Among the physical reality that contributes to that identity of Yanesen, a great flexibility and ability to adjust to contemporary needs seems to be most remarkable. Furthermore, that flexibility is shown in the narratives that constitute the identity of Yanesen, as well.

For the purpose of this study identity of Yanesen is defined through numerous publications describing this place as critically related to Edo and Shitamachi, all of which define the identity of Yanesen as emerging from the constant dialogue between continuity and change.

That identity is built upon one specific image of Edo-Shitamachi. Despite the fact that during Edo period Yanesen area belonged to both Shitamachi and Yamanote, contemporary identity of Yanesen emphasizes only its Shitamachi character. That character is based on significance of neighborhood as community and everyday life. In that sense the authors' research shows that it is important to stress that publications which create identity of Yanesen are not only about Yanesen, they also are Yanesen. They make an active contribution to the assemblage of identity of Yanesen. That identity shows the ability of adaptation to change as part of creating and being created by the modification in the physical setting of Yanesen.

That flexibility is exactly what the authors consider to be at the core of innovative approach to creation and maintenance of placeness of Yanesen. Such innovation is the process, not an iconic object. The example of Yanesen shows that innovation appears as an ability of place to accommodate change by

preserving not the artifacts from the past, but relations between the artifacts of the present (street proportion, urban grain, use patterns, and scales). It also shows that process of creating and maintaining identity of Yanesen, and thus the placeness, comprises both tangible elements of the place and the narratives created in the process of experiencing the place. Those interactions are innovating Yanesen, which is not completely preserved nor completely lost.

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