



**POLITECNICO
DI TORINO**

Honors thesis

Course of “Architecture Construction City”

Abstract

Living in Roji Alleys: Smallness, Sharing & Public Space

Tutor

Lorena Alessio
Kengo Kuma
Hidenobu Jinnai

by

Attilio Michele de Palma

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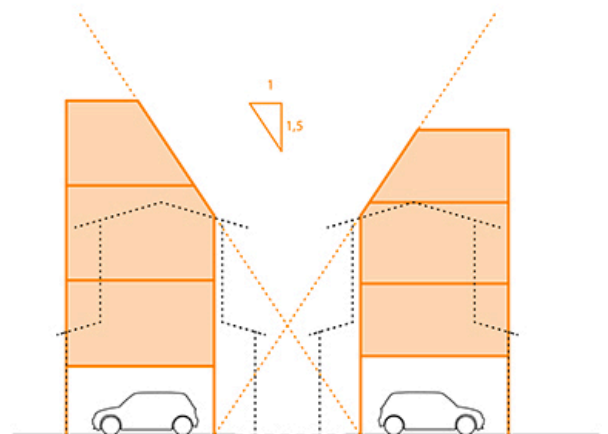
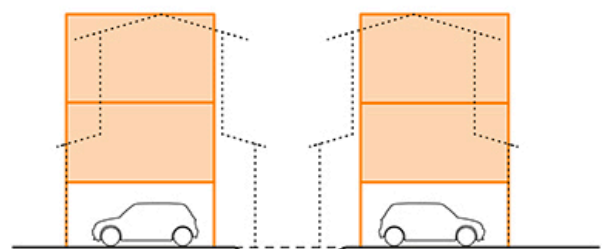
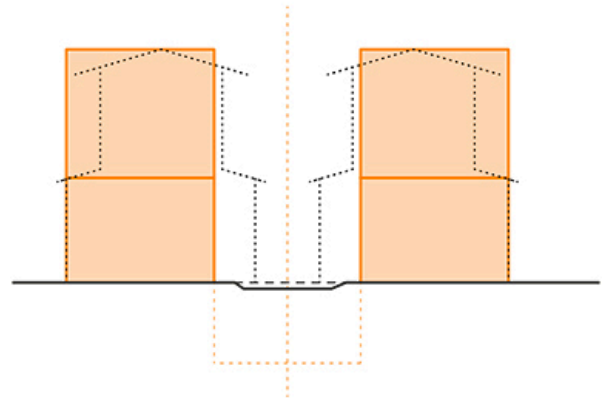
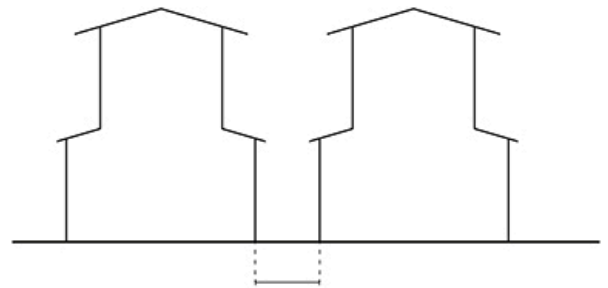
The thesis investigates which can be a possible design approach to an historical urban tissue, in particular the Yanaka district of Tokyo. Assuming that the historical heritage here lies not on the individual building, but rather in the urban frame, which has been naturally preserved over the time, carrying on also a certain way of experiencing the city and society.

The analysed site is located in the *Ya-Ne-Sen* area, an agglomerate of three districts *Yanaka*, *Nezu* and *Sendagi*. Those areas are part of the *Taitō* ward, north-east located from the city center. This part of Tokyo has survived the fire bombing of II world War and great heart quakes, preserving the environment of the old Edo-Tokyo.

These small-scale, densely populated, mixed- use districts were, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the center of urban life in Japan (Schulz 2014). Inside the districts there was a variety of housing, commerce, art and culture.

Those residential districts had a hierarchy of major public roads and secondary alleys that provide access to the houses. These narrow roads, called *roji*, were characterized by a width that varies between 140 to 200 cm, they were not employed for public transportation, rather as a semi-private space shared between the small community that faces that street. Moreover they were used as an extension of the private internal space of each house on the public road.

This structure of alleys and row houses remained more or less unchanged until the *Taishō* period (1912-1926), when the rapid modernization started. This historical period of rapid population growth gave rise to new residential necessities and urban regulations that drastically changed the housing typology. It changed in terms of dimension, increasing the number of stories, and because of the necessity of car parking it lose the connection with the *roji* and so with the community.



The thesis aims to explore which could be a different design answer to this new emerging themes. As consequence a block inside the *Ya-Ne-Sen* area, which contained the presented issue, was researched and then redesigned.

The concept of SMALLNESS as a Japanese cultural aptitude and a creative survival skill (Radović, D., & Boontharm, D. 2012) is introduced as design guideline of the residential typology. The analysed contemporary housing typologies have been selected because they express the Japanese ability of achieving an incredible quality inside small spaces. Such quality is achieved by designing perfectly shaped environment according to the activities required, or through the ability of creating multifunctional ones, with a deep attention to develop human-scale spaces and natural light.

SHARING is conceived as a new way of living inside *roji* and in particular led the design inside the block of a share house introducing a younger generation as a possible solution to the aging phenomena. To facilitate the assimilation of the new generations, which could be seen stranger by the local community, the share house provides services to the denizens of the block. In particular, a *sen-to* for communal bathing is provided instead of the common shower rooms. The importance of this element as informal meeting place, can improve the integration of the new host and, at the same time, prevent the alienation and isolation of the local ones.

Finally PUBLIC SPACE is introduced to maintain a certain way of living the city, in particular the aim is to maintain the appropriation of the road with greenery and every-day life objects by residents, preserving one of the more evident features that marks the identity of those alleys. It can be defined as public space on the built frame, “pointing out the importance of a ‘public-private interface’ between buildings and open spaces.[...] that stimulates public use along the designed pedestrian axes”. ^[2]

1. Jinnai, H. (1995). *Tokyo: a Spatial Anthropology* (California, University of California Press), 2, 9.
2. Schulz, E., & Brumann, C. (2012). *Urban Spaces in Japan, cultural and social perspectives*, Who cares about the past in today's Tokyo? (pp. 154-155, 158-160). New York: Routledge.





For further information please contact:
Attilio Michele de Palma | e-mail: attilio.depalma@gmail.com