



## The liminal nature of alleyways: Understanding the alleyway *roji* as a 'Boundary' between past and present

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of the *roji*, a form of Japanese urban alleyway, which was once part of people's personal spatial sphere and everyday life, but has increasingly been transformed by diverse and competing interests. Marginalized through the emergence of new forms of housing and public spaces and re-appropriated by different fields, the social meaning attached to the *roji* is being re-interpreted by individuals, subcultures and new social movements to fit hybrid and multiple concepts of living and lifestyles. Focusing on the case of Tsukuda–Tsukishima in central Tokyo and drawing on ethnographic data supported by a conceptual framework derived from theories of place and place-attachment, this paper investigates the kind of functions the *roji* fulfilled in the city in the past, and the qualities of urban life that have been lost or changed as the alleyway has ceased to be an everyday part of the urban landscape. Providing multiple narratives of change, the paper's main purpose is to critically reflect on the potential of the recovery of the Japanese urban alleyway *roji*, arguing that the interstitial place of the *roji* can be characterised as a boundary between past and present (lifestyles), which is valuable space as it is desired and needed to express local voices, thoughts and personal opinions about urban change. In this sense, it continues to exist as imaginary, having a shared or social presence as mental space and an alternative landscape of reminiscence.

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### Introduction

Cities are the built expression of our cultural values and in this context seen as a complex pattern of physical and social relationships. And while buildings provide boundaries which help to determine space, it is the presence of people, activities and inspiration, which form one of the most influential qualities of urban space (Gehl, 1996). Moreover, daily actions and movements contribute to the variety and vitality of space. And it seems as if the cities' spatial mind expresses itself in the layered urban voids which derive from the transformation of everyday transit zones such as tunnels, passages, streets and urban pathways. Accordingly, these blanks and blind spots play an important role in the evolution of the city and form essential spaces of temporary and informal use. However, the voids and scars by the city's recovery become urban borderlands, which need to be defined.

This paper takes into account the realities and conditions of contemporary urban borderlands and argues that we have to develop an improved understanding of urban borderlands, for example, the vanishing alleyways that often function as interstitial places featuring different modes and processes in the contempo-

rary city. In particular, aiming to understand the nature and potential of the alleyway as a 'boundary' between past and present, the main purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the recent revival of the alleyway *roji* in offering multiple and hybrid perspectives of local residents on this 'liminal space'.<sup>1</sup> This will be done by introducing and discussing personal narratives; experiences and everyday life practices of residents encountered inside the alleyways of Tsukuda–Tsukishima, a neighbourhood in central Tokyo which, since the late 1990s is an area of increasing urban transformation and redevelopment. The area of Tsukuda 2-chōme was chosen because it is in close proximity to the alleys of the lively Tsukishima district, offering a mix of different types of alleyways and is the place of residential and business activities. Additionally, the area is bordered by the stringent grid of the Tsukuda fishermen village in the west, a wide main street in the east and new high-rise developments like the *River City 21* in the north (Fujita & Sano, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> A liminal space is in this particular research context understood as a place where boundaries dissolve, a place of transformation between processes of separation and reintegration, a space of ambiguity and hybridity, in a marginal or transitional mode (McIntosh, 2005; Mukherji, 2011). Homi Bhabha defined a liminal space as an interstitial space that allows different modes without imposing a hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994). Understanding the concept of liminality as state and space of 'in-between' we can approach different urban voids, passages and conditions, which we can observe in growing numbers in the contemporary city, and which exist between global and local economies, public and private use, consumption and personal values (Zukin, 1995).

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In summary, conceptualising the alleyway as a contested place and boundary between past and present (lifestyles) allows us to view the alleyway as the material expression for broader social struggles, and locus for generating, proclaiming and negotiating different cultural subjects, which are aspects of contemporary urban life. Within this framework, the paper aims to understand how different urban transformation processes affect the transformation of vernacular urban forms and everyday urban life at the micro-level. This will be achieved by studying the changing life pattern, everyday practices and personal tactics observed in alleyways of the neighbourhood of Tsukuda, Tokyo. The outcomes of this study should offer more insights and alternative views to understand the potential and future of the alleyway, which can either be revitalised as an active part of everyday urban life or function as an alternative landscape of reminiscence.

### The alleyway as a liminal space

In this research context, an alleyway is understood as ordinary landscape providing the setting for everyday urban life and place-based identities being shaped by varied everyday practices, collective experiences and forces. The alleyway marks the intersection between public and private forms of use and habitation, which can allow us to understand the socio-spatial, personal and cultural dimension of urban realities (Carmona, Tiesdell et al., 2003). As liminal spaces, it is argued that alleyways offer the potential to become the vehicle of different intellectual, artistic, cultural, economical and political discourses. On the other hand, they provide multiple narratives of change, which make it possible to understand how liminal places are transformed and to re-negotiate the function of these spaces in inner city areas (Jones, 2007; McIntosh, 2005; Mukherji, 2011; Williams, 2007).

Being in this sense an interstitial urban space, the alleyway forms a boundary between past and present. A boundary can not only describe a physical or geographical line but it can also form a psychological, perceived or imagined formation between different cultural, social or religious groups living together in one urban setting (Rumley & Minghi, 1991). These perceptual borders have been described as 'markers of difference' (Donnan & Wilson, 1999), sometimes being the site for different forms of tensions and conflicts (Abu-Orf, 2003; Morehouse, 2004). These kind of tensions however also occur in places where no geographical borders exist, marking the 'interfaces' between different social groups, languages or cultures, forming not only a place of difference but also of contact and exchange (Bhabha, 1994; Ní Éigeartaigh & Getty, 2006; Paasi, 2001). Morehouse (2004) argued that 'borderlands are an area through which a boundary line runs (and) borderlands acquire their basic identity from interactions with the boundary and its rules, and from transactions that take across the border, between inhabitants of the borderland territory' (Morehouse, 2004, p.29). In this sense, most boundaries, geographical or imagined, are not only forming a site of conflict but are also forming a space of intersection, cooperation and combination. This allows new forms of 'hybrid' spaces and identities to occur and exist, functioning like a filter stimulating new creative potentials, 'boundaries then are perhaps best understood as rules and practices (...) abstract metaphors that are useful for articulating, and spatialising, concepts and perceptions of difference' (Morehouse, 2004, p. 33).

Aiming to understand the nature and potential of this 'boundary', the main purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the recent revival of the alleyway *roji* in offering multiple and hybrid perspectives of local residents on these 'liminal' spaces. This will be done by introducing and discussing personal narratives,

experiences and everyday life practices of residents encountered inside the alleyways.

Alleys in general have no name and it is unclear to whom they belong, as they are often situated in between two premises, being either a part of private or public property, or used by different people for different purposes. In this way, they can be defined as an 'intermediate zone' (Kurokawa, 2006) or 'liminal place' (Jones, 2007) being in the theoretical and spatial sense a place situated 'in-between' (Entrikin, 1990). In other ways they are defined as hidden, located behind the wider main streets and sometimes made up of leftover or even wasteland (Martin, 2001, p. 77). Not having the spatial definition of streets or the importance of prominent landmarks they are difficult to be indicated as specific places (Lynch, 1960). They are spatially unstable and dependent on the existence of other places and boundaries to be defined, a characteristic indicating the liminality of a place (McIntosh, 2005). In this way, they slip away and are out of the focus of the contemporary approach to urban planning, falling into disrepair and disappearing as part of the urban landscape (Martin, 2001).

### The case of the *roji* in contemporary Tokyo

This paper examines the *roji*, which was historically a central place of everyday life and social interaction in a neighbourhood, but is now considered a marginalized urban form, increasingly crushed between diverse competing interests and contests (Waley, 2002; City Life, 2005). The *roji* can be described as a mostly narrow and winding alleyway or neighbourhood unit in traditional wooden low-rise neighbourhoods, which, no car can enter, and which are only wide enough to allow one person to walk or cycle through (Kobata and Tadokoro, 2000; Nishimura, 2006). The *roji* formed historically inside the block or behind the main streets or side streets, as a 'semi-public, semi-private' realm, which was a place for collective activities around small shrines, local shops and bath-houses (Bestor, 1993; Hō, 2006; Jinnai, 1995). The enclosed environment of the alleyways became the stage for shared, intimate neighbourhood relations and local, daily life, connecting public and private activities in a kind of communal space (Nishimura, 2006, p.36). In this context, Nakano and Hirayama (2006) argued that *roji* are safe places, which offer a protective feeling, and a feeling of home based on the narrowness and the human scale of the alley (Nakano and Hirayama, 2006). The *roji* was, in contrast to a street, not based on the use of a car and traditionally supported pedestrian and small-scale usage as well as intense social interaction (Nakano and Hirayama, 2006, p. 1). Furthermore many *roji* have a maze-like character offering unexpected encounters because of their complicated shape, which the architect Amos Rappoport classified as a quality of alleyways (Rappoport, 1982).

Tokyo alleyways in particular, are vanishing from the urban landscape as they make space for new small- and large-scale office and residential complexes, which increasingly appear inside the remaining dense and low-rise neighbourhoods (Yukikuni, 2007). With the modernisation of Tokyo being reflected in new forms of urban living and individual lifestyles, the alleyway turned into a marginal urban form, being recently rediscovered, re-interpreted and re-appropriated by different fields, actors and users to promote different strategies and ideas (Hashizume, 2005; Tōkyōjin, 2005). Summarising, the alleyway *roji* is not only recognised as a vulnerable, vanishing urban form or a place of alternative counter discourse of urban planning but increasingly as an interstitial passage of the 'good old days', fulfilling the desire to remember and celebrate the past and places of familiarity, warmth and simple urban life (City Hashizume, 2005; Life, 2005; Nishimura, 2006; Tōkyōjin, 2005), like that found in Tsukuda–Tsukishima. Therefore

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