

## Book reviews

Urban Studies

2023, Vol. 60(10) 2000–2005

© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2023

Article reuse guidelines:


[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00420980231171302

[journals.sagepub.com/home/usj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/usj)



Jorge Almazán, Joe McReynolds and Studiolab, *Emergent Tokyo: Designing the Spontaneous City*, San Francisco: ORO Editions, 2022; 250 pp.: ISBN: 9781951541323, £20.00/US\$25.00 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Benjamin Bansal , National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (Tokyo), Japan

Is it possible to design a city that possesses Tokyo's best qualities? Yes, say Tokyo-based urbanist Jorge Almazán and his lab in this book. They illustrate the Japanese capital's success in becoming one of the most vibrant and liveable cities on the planet by presenting five urban phenomena which came about in their present form primarily during the post-war period. It was during this time that neighbourhoods 'emerged', with their 'ramshackle, spontaneous spirit' (p. 6), forming an adaptable and inclusive urban space. This model holds important lessons for other cities in the world, but it is one that is increasingly under threat.

The first phenomenon introduced is *yokochō* alleyways (chapter 2), whose genesis dates to the early post-war era when they were deliberately set up near train stations to regularise the vast armies of black-market workers. These narrow alleyways are filled with small bars and restaurants, crammed into low-rise buildings with footprints under 50 m<sup>2</sup>. Their smallness and fragmented, egalitarian ownership have fostered a strong sense of local community, shared responsibility and diversity (pp. 34–35).

*Zakkyo* buildings (chapter 3) are densely packed multi-story buildings with characteristic vertical neon signage. Narrow land plots and laxer building height restrictions near train stations explain their slender 'pencil' shape. The diversity of uses and the ability to reinvent themselves over time 'offer a more robust infrastructure of urban self-regeneration' (p. 68). The authors note that *zakkyo* buildings verticalise public spaces, better connect them with their surroundings and foster vertical economies of agglomeration.

Undertrack infills (chapter 4) below Tokyo's railway lines are introduced next. The viaducts below elevated train tracks are a universal by-product of urban industrialisation around the world, but in Tokyo it is their adaptive (re-)use, often as independent shops and restaurants, that has caught the authors' eyes. They exemplify how major infrastructure can co-exist with local commercial and residential networks.

*Ankyo* streets (chapter 5) are found on top of the many former watercourses that once dissected Tokyo's topography and which have been covered and turned into paths and roads, often hastily during the post-war period. They provide an ambiguous space, that is, they are not strictly necessary for adjacent tenants to access their properties and can thus turn into a 'new realm for everyday life' (p. 143). They also improve the city's walkability and build in redundancy, offering spaces for experimentation.

The final phenomenon introduced is that of dense low-rise neighbourhoods (chapter

6), which are defined as having a population density of more than 20,000 people per km<sup>2</sup> and a preponderance of low-rise, wooden residential housing stock that is often mixed-use and of a low vintage. These neighbourhoods have traditionally been the lifeblood of strong communal life but are also the city's Achilles' heel in the event of major disasters.

The five urban phenomena were selected using empirical analysis of Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) statistics, which allow the authors to add an important quantitative element to what usually remains a qualitative, area-based study of Tokyo's built environment. Rich drawings and schematics as well as photographs round off the commendable presentation of this book. It represents a valuable addition to the growing literature about Tokyo, which the authors review in chapter 7, and which has historically suffered from a Eurocentric 'othering' or Japanese 'essentialisation' of the city.

What, then, are the salient features of Tokyo's 'emergent urbanism'? The authors mainly define it by what it is not, that is, corporate-led urbanism that has benefited vastly from significant deregulation and planning delegation to private actors, as evident in the 'sleek yet generic super-high-rise towers placed on top of shopping-mall-like commercial podia, all without a hint of serendipity or idiosyncrasy' (p. 207). In stark contrast, Tokyo's small neighbourhoods are 'filled with a multiplicity of independent owners and operators, economies of agglomeration, small-scale architecture, urban spaces that are physically and socially permeable, interconnected networks rather than top-down hierarchies, and bottom-up incremental growth rather than corporate development' (p. 216).

How can the conditions for the emergence of such phenomena be created? The book closes with some preliminary answers (pp. 215–217). Further lessons could be derived

from situating the 'Tokyo model' of urban development within the political economy of the post-war era, when Japan's developmental state was in its most transformative gear. Notably, this was before urban planning became more codified and more resolutely 'modern' in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

During the rapid growth phase from 1955 to 1973, the national authorities channelled their limited resources to capital-intensive industrial development along the coastal Tōkaidō Corridor. Decentralisation to more local level governments as instigated by the occupying Allied Forces immediately after the war was largely thwarted, leaving in place a unique governance structure that defied easy categorisations of centralisation versus decentralisation or planning versus administrative inertia; and thus sits uneasily both with modernist urban development models and a laissez-faire approach to urban planning (incidentally, the book was nominated for the 2022 Hayek Book Prize).

TMG, as a strong intermediate layer between the national government and ward administrations, was able to redistribute funds across the various parts of the city, avoiding stratification. However, it lacked the human and financial resources to implement wide-reaching urban planning, which might have proved fortuitous in hindsight. Neighbourhoods were by and large left alone and had to upgrade themselves in situ, a process succinctly described in the book's corresponding chapter.

Flexible zoning and building regulations allowed for mixed and adaptive (re-)use of urban spaces but limited vertical expansion with some exceptions. A vibrant and decentralised small-scale manufacturing sector – the essential but often overlooked labour-intensive side of the Japanese economic miracle – anchored well-paying jobs to local neighbourhoods. A set of 'generic' neighbourhood features sprang up organically as the city expanded, for example, public baths,

restaurants and small retail, the latter being protected by law from the competition of big business.

However, big business played a crucial role in enabling the ‘Tokyo model’, too, most notably by helping to build the city’s extremely efficient rapid transit system. The roots of this “transport-oriented development” (TOD) date back to the early-20th century, when large conglomerates were allowed to capture the real estate value chain along their suburban rail lines, from central shopping districts around the commuter hubs to progressively more distant residential developments.


Since the 1980s, the balance between bottom-up and top-down has tilted progressively towards the latter, as the book can amply demonstrate throughout its pages. The authors are careful not to ascribe these developments to a generic (and Global North-inspired) neoliberal urbanism playbook. Tokyo’s starting point was that of a developmental (as opposed to a Keynesian) city. The (post-) developmental Japanese state has embraced the propagation of certain neoliberal policies primarily to assert itself, often under the mantle of ‘international competitiveness’ (Waley, 2013).

Shibuya offers a poignant case study. During the 1970s, the station’s department stores owned by Tokyu (operator of two of Shibuya’s suburban railway lines) and Seibu tapped into (and partly spawned) a growing youth culture scene, with spill over effects into the quirkiest and liminal spaces just a stone’s throw away from the station. Today, Tokyu has transformed the station and its vicinity beyond recognition, co-opting the area’s unique creativity for their financial gain but in the process irreparably damaging Shibuya’s ‘DNA’. The major verticalisation of the station area was made possible thanks to the close cooperation between TMG, Shibuya Ward and Tokyu (Kidokoro et al.,

2022). Similar developments are occurring not only in the city’s central business districts, but also further afield outside the *yamanote* rail ring.

Besides being a clearly articulated manifesto for those trying to preserve Tokyo’s emergent properties, *Emergent Tokyo* helps distil lessons for other cities. Arguably, these are most relevant to developing (mega-)cities given that the Tokyo model’s main features came about during the post-war developmental state period. For more developed cities, particularly in East Asia, Tokyo offers a cautionary tale as a ‘post-growth’ city, where punctual growth in one area must arithmetically come at the expense of that in another, and where an egalitarian urbanism is gradually replaced by the dictates of oligopolistic markets.


#### ORCID iD

Benjamin Bansal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2836-8766>

#### References

- Kidokoro T, Fukuda R and Sho K (2022) Gentrification in Tokyo: Formation of the Tokyo West Creative Industry Cluster. *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 46(6): 1055–1077.
- Waley P (2013) Penciling Tokyo into the map of neoliberal urbanism. *Cities* 32: 43–50.

Janina Stürner-Siovit, *Curtain Up: City Diplomacy in Global Migration Governance*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022; 233 pp.: ISBN: 978-3-658-39602-2, £37.99 (eBook), ISBN: 978-3-658-39601-5, £89.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Daniel Pejic , University of Melbourne, Australia

One of the major shifts in the role of local governments in international affairs over the previous 15 years has been a move from