

Article

The Role of the Public-Private Interface and Persistence of Historic Character in Nezu, Tokyo

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Abstract

The Great Kanto Earthquake and Second World War Fire Bombings have left contemporary Tokyo with almost no monuments from the past. One of the areas that has been spared in both destructions is Yanesen, part of the three neighbourhoods Yanaka, Nezu, and Sendagi located in northeast central Tokyo. Nezu has a peculiar urban character that persists despite the lack of conservation and constant change in its built environment. Its unique character is defined by a sense of local, domestic, and neighbourhood closeness and is linked to the traditional identity of Shitamachi. This article hypothesizes that the main element that preserves the character of Shitamachi in Nezu is based on the relationships rather than on objects that need to be preserved. The analysis focuses on the relationships between public and private spaces and captures changes in the built environment in Nezu over six years. The comparative analysis applied mapping and a photographic survey of the public-private interface. The results showed how the persistence of the urban character is supported by a dynamic change in the built environment which functions as a complex system. The relationships between elements of the built environment are demonstrating non-linear causality at the public-private interface and contribute to Nezu's enduring character.

Keywords

assemblage; change; interface; persistence; public-private; relationships; Tokyo; urban character

Issue

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1. Introduction

The built environment in Nezu, Tokyo has undergone constant change, while its urban character has endured. Although there is no formal preservation of the buildings, the area has maintained its sense of being a traditional town (Shitamachi). Previous studies about tangible aspects of urban character in Nezu demonstrated that the sustaining character was due to the complex relationships between the elements of the built environment, rather than due to the elements themselves (Muminovic, 2014; Muminovic et al., 2013, 2014). Because the permanent urban qualities in Nezu are a domestic atmosphere and a sense of closeness (Muminovic, 2014), the focus of the analysis was the interface of the public and private spaces that contribute to this domesticity. The afore-

mentioned research found that an important aspect instigating this character was the sense of enclosure arising from the presence of the ephemeral elements on the street and how the public-private interface between the house and the street was assembled. The size of the streets and the public-private interface with ephemeral elements have shown not only that residential streets contribute to the sense of domesticity, but also that narrow mixed-use streets have the same effect.

Since Nezu's character is a combination of the unique and the universal and is not related to a particular monument or individual buildings, this article assumes that the buildings could be replaced if there is a continuation of relationships in the built environment that support this character. Thus, this article aims to investigate the short-term level and type of change in Nezu's two

main aspects of the built environment, which support its character: the public-private interface and ephemeral elements on the streets. This is not to oversimplify and assert that the character of Nezu is only based on the type of interface between the public and the private, yet this aspect seems to be a leading contributing factor to the sense of domesticity and its persistence contributes to the endurance of Nezu's character. Therefore, the analysis explores the change in the public-private interface patterns and ephemeral elements between 2013–2019. In general, it could be argued that six years is not a long enough period to demonstrate a significant change in the built environment, however, the speed and degree of change in Tokyo are considerably higher compared with other cities. The average lifespan of a house in Tokyo is only 26 years (Kitayama et al., 2010), thus a six-year time span is long enough to demonstrate change. In addition, the change of interface does not necessarily imply demolishing the building.

In the broadest terms, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of a dynamic place's character and to provide an alternative to the traditional analysis of the place that focuses on the preservation of the built environment. Previous studies on the persistence of a place's character have focused on the conservation of elements of the built environment (e.g., Cannigia & Maffei, 2001; Sepe, 2013). Limited studies are focusing on the morphology that positions change as part of the process of preserving urban character. At the theoretical level, this research contributes to the developing discourse around assemblage theory in urban studies. While Dovey (2010) introduced assemblage theory in urban design and aimed to understand the city through flux and relationships, the aspects of character and its persistence were not explored. This particular area in Tokyo is the exemplar of preservation that reaches beyond simple conservation and represents a potential to broaden the discussions and expand the application of the assemblage theory, where place character is defined over time by incorporating dynamic processes. The article recognises that the place as an assemblage has multiple dimensions and that this research reports on the findings which are limited to its materialist perspective. Furthermore, we acknowledge the importance of the sociocultural aspects of the assemblage, yet in this exploration, we are narrowing to its materialistic elements as an expression of the socio-cultural manifestations to explore and understand the fourth dimension of the assemblage, time.

The article is divided into four segments. Firstly, the theoretical framework for the preservation of the urban character is set within the assemblage theory, exploring how the change in the built environment can contribute to the preservation of urban character; secondly, a survey of Nezu's character is conducted in the tourist guide publications to determine changes over the period of inquiry; thirdly, the methods used to capture the patterns of relationships within the public-private interface

and ephemeral elements are explained; and finally, the results are presented in the form of comparative mapping and visual analysis of the streets.

2. Dynamic Preservation and Assemblage Theory

The typical mapping of the preserved elements cannot reveal an understanding of the correlation between the urban character and the built environment in Nezu. Thus, this research applies the assemblage theory framework to obtain an insight into the dynamics of the place and the concept of preservation without the conservation of buildings. Massumi (1987) suggested and Dovey (2010) demonstrated that this theory can be used as a kind of "conceptual toolkit" for analysis of the place. Even though this theory has been criticised for its use of jargon and lack of clarity (Dovey et al., 2018), it becomes concretised once applied to a particular case (DeLanda, 2016).

To understand the change and persistence of urban character, first, the concept of place needs to be outlined briefly. The concept of place was largely developed from phenomenology. Most notably, the work of Norberg-Schulz (1980) in architecture and Tuan (1977) in geography, largely inspired by the concept of dwelling introduced by Heidegger (1972), defines the place as a phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between the built environment and people. The persistence of urban character assumes that there is an essence—a particular building or a building type or atmosphere—that needs to be conserved (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 18). In a more contemporary understanding of dwelling, Massey (1991, p. 26) discusses a need "progressive sense of place" and urges the reader to develop a more dynamic understanding that is not locally bound and nostalgic.

Dovey (2010) instigates a non-essentialist approach to place with the introduction of the concept of assemblage in the place theory. The place is defined as the assemblage based on the relationships of interiority and exteriority. Assemblages are "wholes whose properties emerge from the interaction between parts" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 5). The essence is replaced with multiple equilibrium states that provide more flexibility and change (DeLanda, 2002, p. 10). Assemblage emerges from the interaction between its parts; however, it cannot be reduced to them. Assemblages are made out of elements that are "self-subsistent" and can be detached and replaced with other elements (DeLanda, 2006, p. 18). Thus if some of the relationships change, but the overall quantity is compensated, it could be argued that the character of the assemblage is preserved.

Assemblage theory shifts the analysis from the phenomenological approach to a materialist understanding of the place. This is something that Deleuze refers to as "noumenon" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 222), which does not negate the existence of the phenomenon but adds the importance of the materialist perspective. In the application of urban theories, this shift could be framed

as morphology and patterns in the built environment (Dovey et al., 2018), which is not to ignore the importance of experience, perception and subjectivity in the place, but to complement one's understanding with the aspects of the built environment.

In assemblage theory, the identity of any entity is defined through morphogenetic processes guided by intensity (DeLanda, 2005, p. 82). The properties of all entities, and thus place as well, can be divided into two groups, intensive and extensive (DeLanda, 2002, p. 26). Extensive qualities are those that characterise the material aspects of the components of the assemblage, while intensive properties characterise their qualitative aspects. Identity can be understood at the level of extensive characteristics; however, its description demands exploration over time and intensity (Muminovic, 2015).

All elements of the assemblage are divided into two groups based on the role that they have in the assemblage. One role is defined as a material, where the focus is on how those elements occupy the space and concern only their physical characteristics (DeLanda, 2006, p. 12). The second role is the expressive aspect of the element, where the focus is on qualitative characteristics and their function as agents in the assemblage. For the example with the place, it might be argued that the material role is assigned to the built environment of the place (such as size or materials) while the expressive role is assigned to the interaction between people and the built environment (Muminovic, 2015). The important difference in the assemblage theory is that all elements of the assemblage are changing their roles over time, thus there is no one ideal state for the elements of the assemblage, no essence to be preserved.

The second dimension of the identity in assemblage theory describes how those agents are involved in the assemblage: stabilised or homogenised—territorialisation and destabilised or heterogenised—deterritorialization (DeLanda, 2006, p. 12). Throughout its history, a place can have various levels of the material-expressive dimension or the territorialised-deterritorialised dimension. For example, if a place has built its identity around the monuments in the built environment its role will be material, and expressive aspects will be minimised. The identity of that place is homogenised and stabilised, and if those buildings are demolished the identity will be lost or shifted to a different stage. However, if the elements of a place have a dominant expressive role, then their identity is not bounded completely within the built environment (the material role is reduced) producing heterogenised and deterritorialised assemblage. This particular case might mean that the elements of a built environment can change while the identity remains the same. This does not mean that all of the built environment can change completely, but there is more flexibility compared with the first case. The expressive role of agents in the assemblage is generated by the relationship between people

and the built environment; thus, there must be something that evokes this experience.

3. Persistent Urban Character of Nezu

In Nezu there are no specific monuments that support the persistence of character (Shiihara, 2009; Shiihara et al., 2000); thus, we argue that, based on the assemblage theory, heterogenisation is producing the process where the expressive aspects of the elements of the built environment are evoking the persisting character, preserving the Shitamachi of the Edo period. This area is presented differently, in the academic literature and popular media, compared to other neighbourhoods in Tokyo (Waley, 1991, p. 191, 2012). Elaborated in Sand's (2013, p. 55) analysis of how *Yanesen Magazine* has contributed to the creation of "Yanesen" as a place, this supports the notion that the identity of this place is of a particular kind, built on expressive qualities of the assemblage. Extensive discourse analysis was performed on the popular publications about the Yanesen area spanning from 2010–2019. Part of this analysis from 2010–2014 has already been published (Muminovic, 2014) and this article extends that exploration to 2019. The resources included printed and digital media. Printed data consisted of material distributed in Yanesen (such as maps and brochures, advertising pamphlets for the shops, galleries, or cultural activities), tourist guides about Tokyo, and data from a Yanesen magazine. Digital data were gathered from online official tourist guides, blogs, and other non-organisational websites. To understand the fluid character of Yanesen, a qualitative summative content analysis was performed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analysis generated manifest and latent content, where manifest content is a visible and obvious component of the text and latent allows interpretation of the meaning of the text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The discourse analysis produced four main themes around the Yanesen area (listed alphabetically): a sense of closeness and domesticity, history, smallness, and uniqueness, with 38 different keywords or codes (Muminovic, 2014, p. 383). These results confirmed what Sand (2013, p. 67) suggested, that "neighborliness" is correlated with traditional alley spaces not wider than 3 m. When revisited in 2019 the number of brochures and editions has been increasing and new editions of the same publications were found, such as the map of bookshops (Shinobazu Book Street Map, published yearly), the magazine about Yanesen, Taito City Ward's publication of Yanaka and Ueno, etc. In addition, the number of maps and promotion materials had increased, for example, one of the pamphlets found in Nezu is an "Osampo Map" (Strolling Map) titled "History Experience Nezu" and this neighbourhood is featured in new books (Hosei University & Politecnico di Torino, 2019; Imai, 2018; Nadarou, 2017; Tsuchiya, 2016; Ursic & Imai, 2020). Tourist guides in English are still promoting the town as a traditional historic Tokyo. Three new hotels

were built in this area, demonstrating the need for and interest in tourist accommodation. Furthermore, there are new guidebooks in the Japanese language about Yanesen that promote strolling in the neighbourhood. The *OZ Magazine* explores Tokyo's neighbourhoods featuring the area's new shops, local produce, renovations, and food (Yoshinaga, 2019, p. 562). As noted by Goddard (2017) there has been a recent proliferation of urban guides, mainly orientated towards rising experiential consumerist city-wanderers describing new and interesting places. Thus, Nezu is following the general trend in Tokyo, which is encouraging people to experience the city on foot and still presenting the traditional character of Shitamachi as the leading aspect of the urban character.

The fact that this area is still maintaining its expressive qualities through tourist guides and other promotional materials supports the continuity of its character. However, this aspect of the assemblage does need to be grounded in the material parts of the assemblage, i.e., its built environment. Therefore, this article explores the degree of change in the elements of the built environment, particularly focusing on the public-private interface to demonstrate the fluidity of the urban character and its material aspects.

In 2013, less than 3% of the houses in Nezu had a timber cladding façade. Timber is considered to evoke a sense of traditional Shitamachi. Today, 62% of those houses mapped in 2013 remain. Sparse and scattered around the neighbourhood, the impact of those reminiscent of the past might be considered insignificant. In addition, during the fieldwork, it was noted that 41% of the newer houses (constructed after 2013) had timber façade cladding and bore no resemblance to the traditional architecture. This demonstrates that preservation is not a prominent aspect of the neighbourhood, but the importance of the timber remains in its contemporary use and supports the universal character focusing on the human scale and tactile characteristics of softness in the street.

4. Method

To explore how domesticity and a sense of closeness are generated in Nezu, the article focuses on the analysis of the public-private interface and the domestic ephemera that are present on the streets. In general terms, the existing urban theories, both essentialist and non-essentialist, have recognised the importance of the public-private interface for the definition of the character of urban spaces. Norberg-Schulz (2000, p. 164) emphasises how the articulation of the space between the inside and outside in architecture defines the character of the place. For Habraken (1998, p. 168) the essence of the urban lies in the boundary between the public and private spaces. Madanipour (2003, pp. 59–60) also reinforces that this space defines the character of the city. Bobic (2004) recognises this space as an important element of urbanity and classifies the spaces by

what he calls “interface morphology.” Recent research on this topic has identified a gap in the literature on the issue of the public-private interface, which demonstrates relationships rather than objects in space, and there is a need for further research (Dovey & Wood, 2015). Furthermore, this research adds to the ongoing development of understanding street edges as socio-spatial territorialised (Thwaites et al., 2020) assemblages by introducing the dimension of time.

The peculiarity of Nezu's character was considered when analysing the public-private interface. The sense of domesticity does not necessarily mean that something is private. Private is unwelcoming for the outsider, whereas closeness and domesticity are familiar and generate welcoming feelings. The way in which the private spaces in Nezu are mediated in relation to public spaces contributes to the welcoming character. Important aspects of this reconciliation are found to result from the location of domestic and ephemeral things at the interface, such as potted plants, umbrellas, shoes, etc. Those elements support the enclosure of the street's public space and promote a sense of being inside the neighbourhood (Aoki & Yuasa, 1993). They are not physically enclosing the space; rather their presence creates a sense of being inside, a sense of domestic public space.

The public-private interface is defined as the space between the private sphere of the interior of the individual dwelling (the house or the apartment) and the public sphere of the street, possessing qualitative characteristics of both spaces. Our fieldwork has identified six main patterns of the public-private interface that were mapped in 2013 and 2019 (Figure 1). Those patterns are defined according to the following morphological characteristics: position of the house on the plot, position of the entrance to the private space, and permeability from public to private spaces. Private awareness, setback, mode of accessibility, and fencing were also considered in the classification process. This classification follows similar criteria to those developed by Dovey and Wood (2015) with the addition of a clear boundary, such as a fence, and the size of the setback (Ohno, 2018, p. 107).

4.1. Private Awareness

Since the urban character is based on how the outsiders (visitors) relate to the lived experiences of the insiders (Relph, 1986, p. 49), the analysis has focused on the public's perspective of the permeability between the public space and the private sphere of the house. This permeability is not defined by how visible the private space is from the street, but often it is about sensing the private life inside, hearing the voices, showering, dishes or seeing the shadows, that is, things that evoke a sense of connection to the domestic life. In addition, this soft transition from the public to private spaces of the house contributes to the familiar, welcoming, embracing, and almost friendly aspect of the neighbourhood. Outsiders

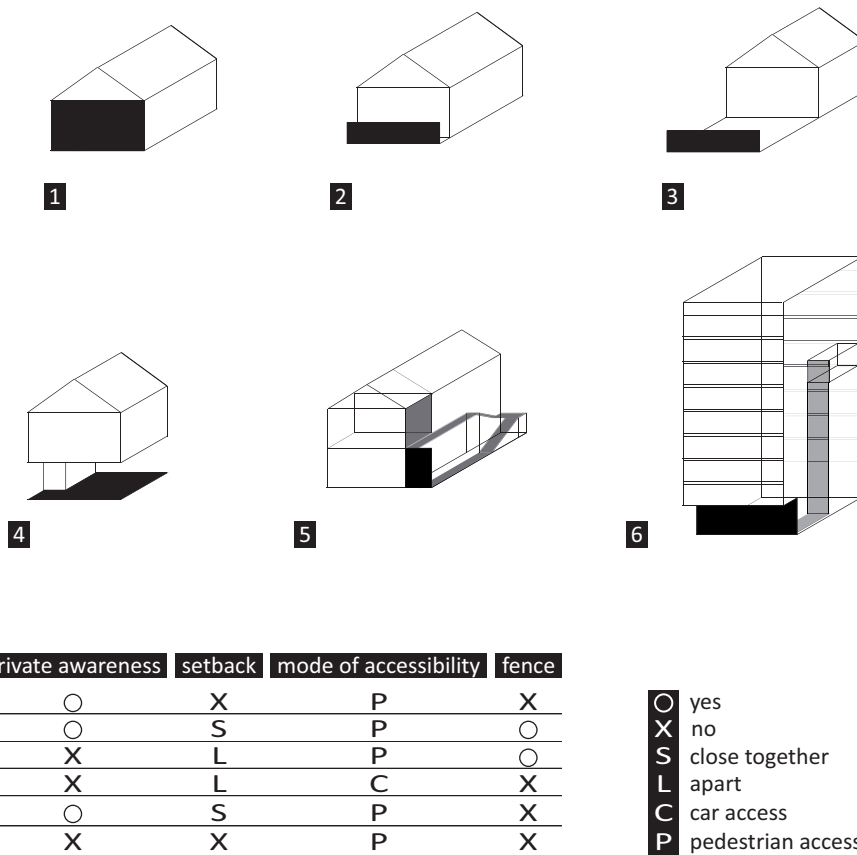


Figure 1. Patterns of the public-private interface in Nezu.

feel part of the neighbourhood and have a sense of belonging (Sand, 2013, p. 67). As noted in recent publications about the neighbourhood, “The more I walk through this neighbourhood, the warmer feeling I get” (Yoshinaga, 2019, p. 35).

4.2. Setback

This is the space between the façade of the house and the street. There were three patterns identified, based on the existence and size of the setback. If the house had an entrance directly from the street it was considered as not having a setback. If there was a setback, it was classified as either apart (more than 1 m) or close together (from 0.5 to 1 m; Figure 1).

4.3. Mode of Accessibility

This relates to whether the house can be accessed by a car and has parking space on the ground level, or it is only accessible on foot. The dominant transport used in this area is the bicycle; however, there are some spaces dedicated to the car. Often, in the case where the ground level is dedicated to the car, the entrance to the house is set back from the street, behind the parked car. Thus, the presence of the car interrupts the continuity of the public-private interface (Figure 1).

4.4. Fence

This element defines a clear boundary between the public and private spheres and does not contribute to the sense of connection and fluidity between the two. This element was noted as existing or non-existing (Figure 1).

Six patterns were mapped in 2013 and 2019, and the changes in the number and positions of the patterns were identified and quantified using QGIS software. The degree of change was mapped at the level of each block and defined as the sum of the area of changing patterns in relation to the sum of the area of all houses. The change was considered both when a new pattern emerged as well as when it disappeared as a result of the demolition of the building. The degree of change was measured in percentage; the highest level of change being 100%, which assumes that all interfaces in a given block have changed. Similarly, 0% change assumes that all interfaces in a given block have been preserved.

We conducted a photographic survey of ephemeral elements in the streets showing either a high or low degree of change and compared the results with those in 2013. Subsequent photos were taken every 10 m along the street and the area of coverage of ephemeral elements was measured as a percentage of the total area photographed. The more ephemeral things present on the street, the higher the percentage, and thus the sense of domesticity.

5. Analysis and Results

5.1. Comparison of the Public-Private Interface Patterns Between 2013–2019

The overall numbers of public-private interface patterns demonstrate low levels of change. Patterns 1 and 4 were found to have increased. Pattern 4 appears to be a popular solution for new family houses as it contains car parking at the ground level. This pattern is discontinuing the interface between public and private, thus, contributing less to the preservation of Nezu’s character. In 2013, the most numerous public-private interfaces conformed to pattern 1 in 50% of all buildings, and by 2019, this number had increased to 61%. This pattern has the smallest public-private interface: The boundary between the interior of the house and the public space of the street is defined by only a thin wall. It usually contains many ephemeral things which extend the private space of the house towards the street and contribute to the sense of enclosure and domesticity. Thus, it could be argued that this trend adds to the preservation of Nezu’s character. In 2013, 22% of all houses conformed to pattern 6, making it the second largest group, which had reduced to 17% by 2019. Pattern 2 decreased from 22% to 8% over time and similarly, pattern 3 decreased from 7% to 3%. Both patterns have a physical barrier that makes a clear distinction between the public and private space but has little effect on the presence of ephemeral things on the street. Thus, their decreasing numbers are still contributing to the preservation of the character. Pattern 5 was found to have plummeted and has mainly been replaced with high-rise buildings and in some cases with pattern 2.

Although the overall number of patterns showed little change over the last six years; the actual interfaces have changed, as demonstrated on the maps (Figure 2).

Patterns 1 and 6 have increased in numbers, the least changes emerging in pattern 3, notably, the change was not concentrated in any particular location but dispersed over the neighbourhood. In addition, many houses had been demolished and replaced with the same pattern of the public-private interface. Those changes are not recorded here; however, they demonstrate the vibrant nature of this area.

The maps of the degree of change (Figure 3) showed that some areas have generally changed less across all patterns while some have changed significantly. To develop an understanding of how each block has changed, the maps of the degree of change have been overlapped with 30% transparency across all interfaces (in Figure 3, the map at the right shows the average degree of change across all patterns). To allow further analysis and to compare the photographic survey, three streets have been chosen that demonstrate examples of high and low degrees of change.

5.2. Comparison of the Photographic Survey Results Between 2013–2019

A photographic survey was conducted in 2019 for the three streets and compared with the same survey done in 2013. Street 1 demonstrated on average the lowest degree of change in the public-private interface, while street 3 exhibited a high degree of change. Street two was mixed with low and high degrees of change. The survey has shown that on average there is the same presence of ephemeral elements in streets 1 and 2 which have mainly preserved their public-private interfaces. The average percentage of ephemeral elements on street 3 dropped by 50% (Figure 4). Once observed in detail, sequences along streets 1 and 2 followed the same patterns of high and low numbers of



Figure 2. Map identifying change of the public-private interface.

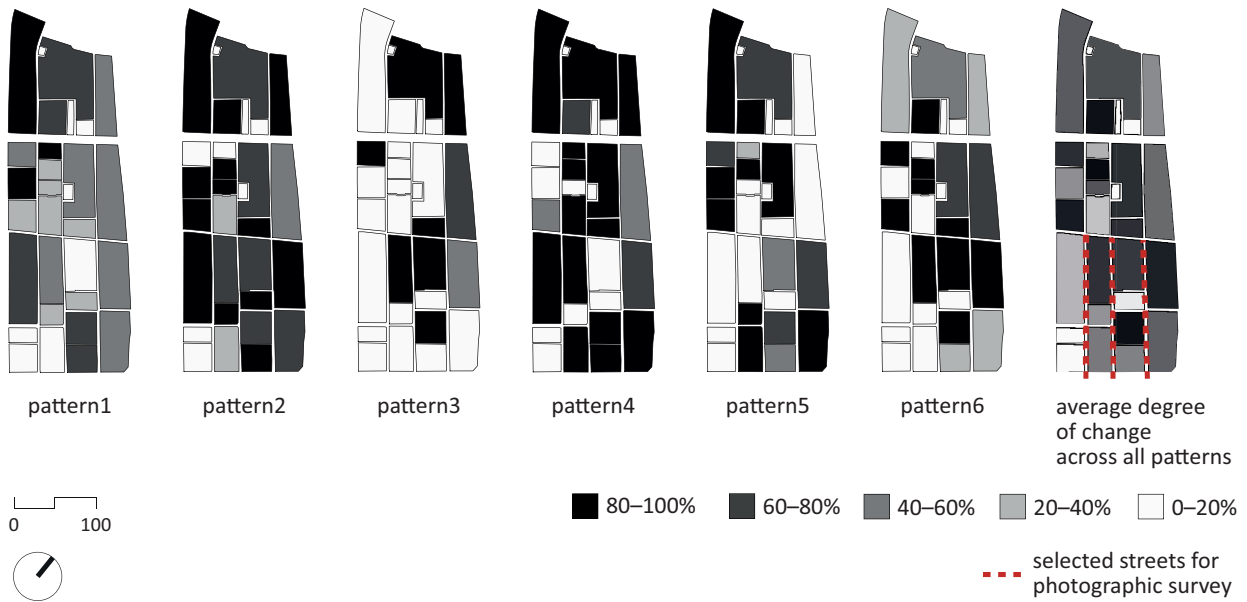


Figure 3. The degree of change.

ephemera. However, street 3 has lost the places of high concentration of ephemeral elements, which previously existed at three places along the street (Figure 4, ratio of ephemera).

The detailed photographic survey has shown no simple correlation between the houses that have changed, and the number of elements found on the street. The analysis confirmed that there is a link between the

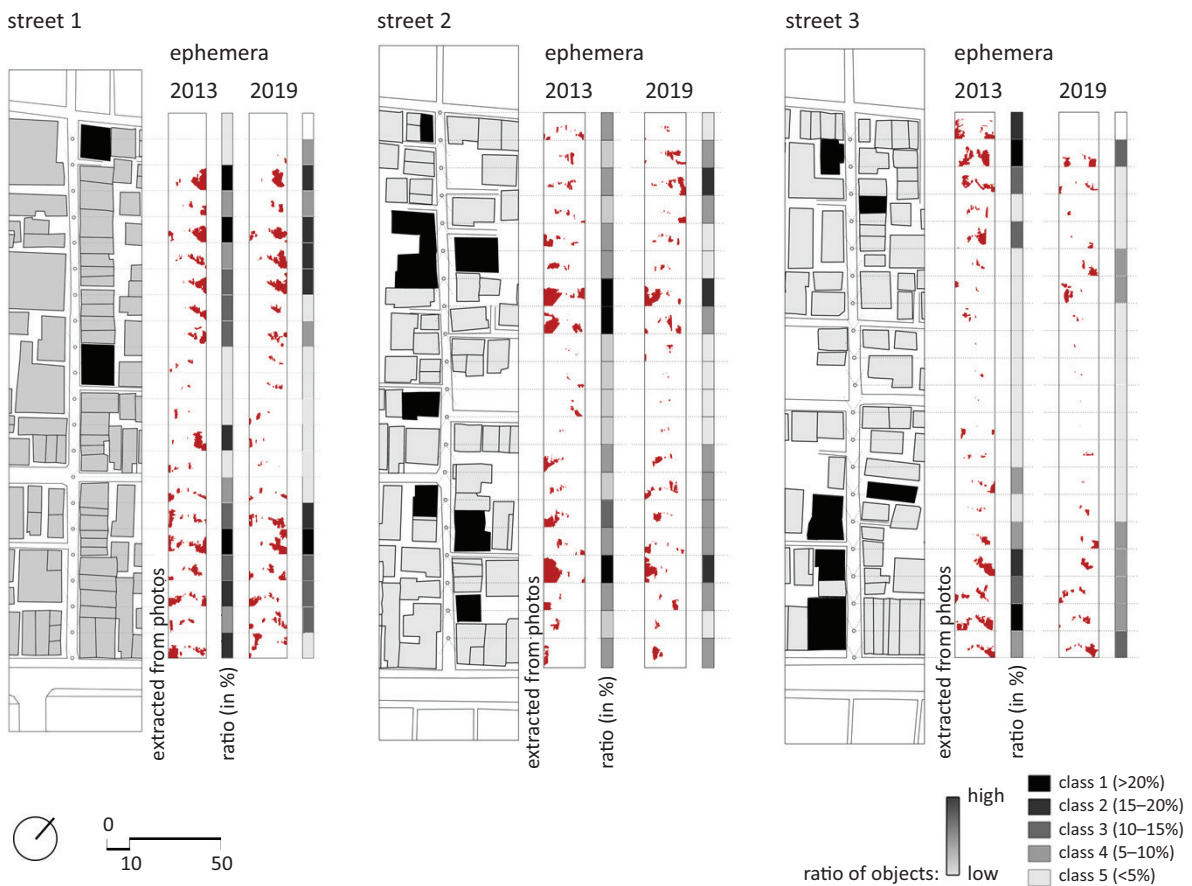


Figure 4. Mapping of the photographic survey of the three streets, highlighting the houses that were changed and the presence of the ephemera on the street.

pattern of interface and the quantity of the ephemera on the street. As expected, where the built environment had not changed, the number of elements remained the same. For example, the buildings on street 1 where the interface is preserved and the function has changed, have retained the same number of ephemeral elements (Figure 5a, the shop on the left changed from a tofu shop to a bakery, but preserved most of the

old façade). On the other hand, although the house on the right in street 2 had changed (Figure 5b) and changed its interface by removing the fence, there was no change in the scale and size of the interface. In this case, the number of ephemeral elements remained at the same level. Another example was street 3 where a single-storey house was replaced with an apartment building (Figure 5c) resulting in a larger setback



Figure 5. Comparative photographic survey.

compared with the old house in 2013. Consequently, the number of ephemeral elements was reduced by 73%. Photo analysis has also demonstrated that the ephemeral elements on the street are not so ephemeral, and in some cases, the same number and the exact same elements were still present (for example Figure 5d).

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that many houses were demolished in Nezu between 2013–2019. The relationships amongst patterns of interfaces continue to be proportionally similar, but different in number, thus showing variation rather than a complete change. This variation seems to be an important element that supports the dynamics of the built environment. The built environment as assemblage is flexible to the point that the overall relationship between elements remains within acceptable levels of variation to maintain the character of the place. This also confirms that the character of Nezu is not bound by the buildings but is found in the relationships between elements. Furthermore, this aspect of Nezu demonstrates how a place can be observed as an assemblage of deterritorialised identity.

The ephemeral things such as personal belongings on the street, seem to be quite persistent. The photographic survey has shown that there are cases where ephemeral things are the same as they were six years ago. Our observations have shown that even despite the demolition of some buildings, domestic elements continued to be used in the same manner. When the building and interface have retained the same size, the presence of ephemera has been observed. In the example of the change of the interface, as well as the change in the size of the building, we have observed the change in the ephemera. This furthermore raises the question of the human factor, where the change of the building could also imply a change in the inhabitants and thus habits of occupying the public sphere. Moreover, it could also mean that the discontinuous nature of the space does not provide opportunities for occupying space. This question is beyond the scope of this research; however, it does confirm that the size of the interface is an important factor in presence of ephemera and a sense of domesticity. Furthermore, in the example of the shopfront (Figure 5a), the shop has changed but the façade and the number of ephemera remained. This confirms the importance of the material aspects of the assemblage as containers for a specific human inhabitation.

The character in Nezu showed high levels of deterritorialisation allowing for dynamic change in its built environment. The character of closeness and domesticity is both universal and specific to Shitamachi, and thus could be easily found in almost any location. This does not mean that if all interfaces are replaced with high-rise apartment buildings, Nezu will still retain its character. To operate as an assemblage, some elements in the built environment still need to evoke a sense of closeness.

In Nezu's case, this is more flexible because its character is not based on the buildings but on the relationships. The expressive role of the elements in Nezu's assemblage is found within the relationship between public and private spaces. The ephemeral elements on the street support this expressiveness. Thus, the maintenance of the quality of the public-private interface contributes to the preservation of the urban character in Nezu. Although the buildings are changing, the relationships between the public and private spheres seem to be more stable. Furthermore, this expressive nature of Nezu's character is supported by the narrative around this neighbourhood. The proliferation of publications and promotional material continues to build this narrative around Yanesen. The narrative itself would not work without the support of the built environment and vice versa, the built environment is perceived in a particular way because of that narrative. Both spheres of the assemblage are maintained within a level of variation, generating a dynamic nature of this space. Thus, instead of focusing on the analysis of preserving the character of a particular building the assemblage approach encompasses the whole spectrum of elements and considers how they function together. If there are fewer elements with a material role in the assemblage, they can be supported with expressive elements. Therefore, this research has demonstrated how observing the place in its totality, comprising both material and expressive elements over time, contributes to a more holistic understanding of its complex nature and dynamic preservation.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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