

Global Landscape of Subculture Spaces

The case of Kōenji, Tokyo

サブカルチャー的空間というグローバル・ランドスケープ：高円寺の事例より

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the neighbourhood Koenji, Tokyo, to show how urban neighbourhoods in Japan are increasingly transformed by diverse and competing interests. Gentrified through the emergence of new forms of housing, public spaces and re-appropriated by different fields, the local community is re-interpreted by individuals, subcultures and new social movements to fit hybrid and multiple concepts of living and lifestyles. Drawing on ethnographic data, this paper investigates the kind of functions the community fulfilled in the past, and the qualities of urban life that have been lost, changed or re-integrated. Providing multiple narratives of change, the paper's main purpose is to critically reflect on the gentrification of the neighbourhood, arguing that similar cases exist in cities worldwide, including for example Berlin and Amsterdam, which should be studied and compared with each other to understand how different urban transformation processes affect the local community and everyday urban life at the micro-level.

2. Kōenji: From Punk to Hipster and Bohemia Town

Located in the Suginami ward, west of Shinjuku, Kōenji has its own flair. The neighbourhood is maybe best known for its vintage clothing stores and vibrant youth culture, as many young people come here to enjoy concerts in live houses and diverse underground bars. It is also known for its local festival, during which people can watch street art and performances; its craft beer market Brewup; and its biggest annual event, the Koenji Awa Odori festival, when almost two million visitors watch 10,000 dancers perform to bells, drums, and flutes, creating an immensely lively and inviting atmosphere.

Originally a quiet farmer's settlement, Kōenji experienced an influx of lower-level merchants and labourers who lost their homes in the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. The area developed into a small town and became known for its range of coffee and tea houses in the 1950s, hippies in the 1960s, and punk scene in the 1970s. It was also the home and springboard for various activists, protests, and countermovements. Other well-known local features are the many vintage boutiques specialising in different styles, eras, and combinations, and many *shōtengais* (shopping streets), such as the covered PAL arcade, Look Street and Nakadori Street (Figure 1) with its vibrant nightlife, as well as the many independent and specialty shops that line the narrow streets.



Figure 1: Local Shopping Street in Kōenji

Having avoided major waves of upgrading and modernisation in the 1980s, the neighbourhood's retro charm, small-scale buildings and shops now attract a rising number of (well-educated and intellectual) people who visit, work, and live here, resulting in a new degree of gentrification. As such, Kōenji is turning slowly from hipster and punk town into a bohemian community, attracting more

galleries, cafés, and eateries. New TV programs and magazines have recognised these trends, promoting different shops, cafés, and art spaces, making Kōenji's hidden creative and entrepreneurial scene more accessible and open. This laid-back neighbourhood with its cozy cafés is still a good alternative to very busy and trendy places such as Kichijōji, Shimokitazawa or Harajuku, but some fear it will soon be too late as developers realise more and more large-scale projects (Machimura et al., 2015, p. 171).

3. Creativity as Alternative Practice

Walking around Kōenji on a Friday evening, we come across a number of galleries. One of them is not only a gallery but also a café. As we enter, the owner Tanaka-san and his assistant, Tsuda-san, are preparing the next show, which will start in a few days. This time they will feature a young artist who also helped to paint a room in the nearby BNA Art Hotel. Tanaka-san explains that often his international guests stay in this hotel and appreciate the local feel, as they get in direct contact with the artists and Kōenji's unique art scene. Guests are offered private tours around galleries and can visit studios and bars, as well as dance clubs. (Interview 1, April 12, 2017)

The concept of the BNA Art Hotel (Fig. 2) is simple and effective, as it aims to make Kōenji's underground art and music scene more accessible and known. Most artists rent cheap studios in the neighbourhood, but lack chances to show and exhibit their work, even though the number of galleries is on the rise. The hotel offers the artists some part of the profits they make, which is a nice income and a rare opportunity for the artists living and working in this area. (Interview 2, April 12, 2017)

Tanaka-san comments during our walk that many artists participated in the different projects the BNA Hotel offered, but not everybody is happy about the increasing pressures coming from public and private bodies to make the local art scene more attainable.

Leaving Tanaka-san gallery behind and heading to his friend's studio he recommended us to visit next, we wonder what to expect. Okata-san is known for his "child art paintings," featuring the city with naive eyes. Okata-san is opening the door for us, just cleaning up the space, as he holds daily art classes for people from all walks of life. Today's topic was local wildlife and quickly looking around the studio, we see cat, bat, and mouse silhouettes, painted in black, gray, and white, hung up to dry at the back of the studio.



Figure 2: BNA Hotel in Kōenji

As we sit down, Okata-san tells us that he has been living in Kōenji for more than 30 years and has seen this somewhat quiet neighbourhood changing into a more modern, busy neighbourhood, where young and old shoppers and strollers look for unique stores offering vintage clothes, old LPs, or comics books, as well as more unusual things like owl cafés or shops specialising in cat art or Russian children's books. Okata-san is not happy to talk about the future of Kōenji, as he is afraid of the rising rent prices and pressures coming from developers looking for more ways to develop facilities like hotels or entertainment complexes in the area. Even though many people have urged him to continue his work, he feels too old to adapt to the changes and is thinking about closing down his studio soon. (Interview 3, April 12, 2017).

Leaving Okata-san's studio, we pass by the Za-Koenji Public Theatre, designed by the famous architect Ito Toyo, and Bar Zingaro, which is said to be owned by the famous artist Murakami Takashi. We contemplate our conversation, wondering for what price the city will allow more of such flagship buildings and generic hot spots to be built in Kōenji, turning it into another gentrified neighbourhood.

Maybe the power of the many *shōtengais* and independent businesses is what can counter these trends. One of these businesses is a unique thrift store offering vintage kimonos. The shop stands out as the owner offers self-designed kimonos that combine old and new material. Odawara-san is in her 30s and has taken over her father's shop, which was known for its rare record collection until he retired some years ago. Odawara-san has changed the majority of the wares, leaving just the name and a small collection of records focusing on rock and soul. Her father has agreed to the new concept, in exchange for playing some jazz on Wednesday nights for some of his most loyal customers.

Odawara-san laughs about the mix of customers. They range from young women, who mainly get to know her via her Instagram account on which she features new designs and items for sale, to men in their 60s and 70s, who look like old punks with their frazzled denim jackets and gray ponytails. We ask Odawara-san what her father thinks about her work and she tells us honestly that not all residents, especially the elderly, are happy about the arrival of new, creative entrepreneurs who they feel do not know much about Kōenji's real character and history. Odawara-san, who has lived almost all her life here, feels trapped between being a local and knowing too well what it means to not be welcome, as she lived and worked for some years in New York, where she studied fashion design and hoped to open her own store. Yet, the different culture and way of life made it very hard for her to settle down and when her father asked her to come back, in the hope that they could find something reasonably priced for her nearby, she did not hesitate to return.

Nevertheless, the slowly rising rent prices and higher demand has also made it hard, as most of her close friends have moved to other places, mainly further north of Kōenji. The increasing fame of Kōenji's live houses and unique bars is, in her eyes, both a blessing and a burden. Odawara-san loves to walk around the area, discovering a unique coffee shop or bar, but the more visitors who come, the more she feels lost among them. (Interview 4, April 12, 2017)

We ask Odawara-san what her friends and acquaintances think about her work and lifestyle and get to know that some friends have inquired about properties that might be available for rent, and one of her closest friends, Nishida-san, moved from Shimokitazawa to Koenji, because she feels that increasing numbers of developers have turned her old neighbourhood into a generic town.

Nishida-san has opened a retro coffee shop, featuring cute coffees and art. Each month, a local artist can use the walls to feature small pieces or paintings. This week, an artist specialising in pencil drawings is exhibiting his work at a reasonable price. Nishida-san is proud that her customers, mainly young women, sometimes purchase an artwork, which is a huge thing for local artists who cannot all make a living from their work. She describes most of the art she sells as cute and adaptable, which is perhaps what makes it so attractive for her customers.

Most visitors love to enter another world when discovering and walking around neighborhoods like Kōenji, yet rarely consider that independent shops like hers are not easy to run. Nishida-san

works in the café almost every day from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. As she is still single, she just has to worry about her own rent and room, which is on the second floor of the same building. It is only 30 square meters, which she considers big enough as she is working almost every day anyway. Yet what happens in the future? Can she keep the café and compete with some of the bigger chains who offer a doughnut for half the price, but not the personal touch like the cute coffee creations and homemade rice cakes she offers to her customers? What would happen if she meets somebody with whom she might want to have a family? She ends our conversation there, as she prefers not to talk about her private life (Interview 5, April 12, 2017). Leaving Koenji and the local creative scene behind, we realise that the interviews especially highlight the increasing conflicts affecting the area and its different members, resulting in the fact that recently more artists and creatives are trying to connect with each other to strengthen the connection between different communities facing similar problems and challenges.

4. Global Tokyo and Soft Revitalization

In neoliberalizing cities as e.g. Berlin, Amsterdam and Tokyo, creative urbanism, self-realisation, and other unconventional ways of living have been recognised to inspire and drive forward regeneration programs to upgrade derelict and unattractive urban neighbourhoods. Yet, in the past, people living in for example Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin or Oud-West, Amsterdam have protested urban upgrading in different ways, politically engaging in resistance movements, as they considered ordinary, urban neighbourhoods to be attractive living places offering affordable housing and facilities for everyday life (Gelder, 2013; Papen, 2012; Rettberg, 2019). However, it seems that recently all kinds of residents are being lured into actively engaging in the process of upgrading and "cleaning up" run-down areas, drawing on the growing desire to shape and self-manage their direct environment (Rowan, 2012).

Even in the case of Kōenji, Tokyo, it is not always clear what purpose certain creative policies and creative actors are supposed to fulfil, as they can improve the spatial, economic, and social situation of a neighbourhood, but they also can increase spatial and social inequalities, as developers and local and city governments focus on the economic value of the neighbourhood (Kohama, 2019). These stakeholders do not even necessarily ask different creative actors to be part of their creative policies and stimulate urban revitalisation. Instead, different cultural aspects

are recognised as cultural capital and commercialised to attract high-level, elite creatives and residents, which in turn affects the creative climate of the area (Butler, 1997). As such, it can be argued that the case of Koenji and the different narratives illustrate on the one hand how creative actors need endurance, resilience, and connections, thus a combination of individual and social skills, to keep their independent, authentic, and unique identity. Yet the case supports on the other hand also one central argument of Thornton and Gelder's (1997) notion of subcultural capital, arguing that subcultural capital has economic value (Jensen, 2006), which attracts attention from different forms of media that co-opt the trendiness and coolness of subcultures and even counter-cultures occupying and integrating them, slowly becoming part of the mainstream consumer culture (Mueller, 2011).

The examples described in this paper that different stages of subcultural practices are best understood when focusing on the transformation of their symbolic value into a cultural value that is easily adjusted and commodified for different purposes. This also means that creative practices fulfil more than one function, as they help to attract new clientele to a new "cool place," but once this stage is reached their existence is in danger, as the artists might be pushed out by the same, wealthier middle class that they were once supposed to attract. As such, it is important to understand the transformation processes taking place in Kōenji, Prenzlauer Berg or Oud-West to develop efficient tools to avoid the hard-core gentrification of urban neighbourhoods which still hope for a chance to find a balance between soft revitalisation and economic recovery (Imai, 2012; Imai, 2017).

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