



Australian Institute of Architects

2023 Dunbar Fellowship

finding *niwa*

semi-public open space in contemporary Japanese housing

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Project Background

Many architects in Tokyo today are responding to a yearning for a sense of connectedness such as that afforded by the streetscapes of the interwar and post-war Japanese city; spaces that facilitate incidental and informal encounters and that contribute to a sense of being part of the collective organisation of the city. This longing for connectivity with each other and with the city, which was heightened by the bereft experience of COVID, is evident in the appearance of open semi-public spaces in recent architect designed housing projects in Tokyo. Their appearance marks a shift away from the long-standing fascination in Japanese architecture with the autonomous architect-designed house, a fascination that has been traced by scholars to Kazuo Shinohara,¹ who in an article in 1964 encouraged architects to consider the 'small' house as an 'art-form' and 'to ignore the city in favour of creating inner utopias' for individuals and nuclear family units.² The legacy of such an approach, an urban landscape delivering isolation and disconnection, is being addressed by the current generation of architects who are concerned with the urban condition and who are incorporating a variety of interstitial spaces in housing projects for people who choose to live together. For insight into spaces delivering connectivity these architects have looked no further than the urban morphology of Tokyo itself, a city of predominantly individual dwellings on increasingly smaller allotments.³ The open semi-public spaces they have created became the focus of my Dunbar study.

Cover image: Market stalls, Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2, Komada Architects Office. Photograph reproduced courtesy of Yuki Komada.

In my application I referred to such spaces as *niwa*, adopting the meaning attributed by the *Daigenkai*, Japan's definitive etymological dictionary. In his account of Japanese gardens, Teiji Ito cited the *Daigenkai* to establish that *niwa* was derived from *haninta*, meaning 'a space of ground set aside for special purposes.'⁴ One of the earliest usages of *niwa* identified by Teiji Ito is an event said to have occurred around the year 470 AD but documented later in which '...a group of beautiful maidens walked elegantly in the *yuniwa* of the Asakura Palace...' Other texts reveal that from 4th to 6th centuries, 'the graveled courtyard of the Imperial Palace was called a *yuniwa* when used for Shinto rites and *oniwa* when used for state ceremonies.' (Figure1) Teiji Ito explains how over time *niwa* spaces accumulated meanings and eventually came to be associated with gardens and abstractions of the natural world. The original understanding of *niwa* as a semi-public open space is how the word is understood and used by the Japanese architect and theorist, 1993 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate, Fumihiko Maki.⁵

In the contemporary housing projects visited, open, semi-public spaces were more than a device for organising program or ensuring amenity –

1. Thomas Daniell, *An Anatomy of Influence* (London: Architectural Association, 2018), 29.

2. Kazuo Shinohara, "The Autonomy of House Design," *Kenchiku* no.28 (April 1964): 29.

3. Koh Kitayama, Yoshiharu and Ryue Nishizawa, *Tokyo Metabolizing* (Tokyo: Toto Publishing, 2018), 131.

4. Teiji Ito, Donald Richie trans., *The Japanese Garden: An Approach to Nature* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1972), 142.

5. Jennifer Taylor with James Connor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki: Space, City, Order and Making* (Basel; Berlin; Boston: Birkhauser, 2003), 45.



Figure 1. Yuniwa/oniwa space fronting the Otsunegoten, Kyoto Sento Imperial Palace. Photograph by author. Unless otherwise stated all photographic images in this report are by the author.

light, breeze, views to greenery. They were not emblematic of a courtyard housing typology such as that associated with traditional Chinese housing. They did not possess the refinements of the Zen courtyard typically associated with *niwas* in machiyas, palaces and monasteries. They often appeared diffuse, ephemeral and non-directional. Understanding the intentions and strategies directing these spaces became my quest. The question arose as to whether the characteristics of Japanese *niwa* space persisted in any way in the interstitial spaces of recent housing projects.

Project Question + Scope

Open spaces in housing projects support routine and incidental exchanges between inhabitants and between inhabitants and the city at two interfaces or thresholds:

- i. The threshold between the domestic space of the individual unit and shared/ communal space and
- ii. The threshold between the communal or shared space and the space of the city.

Of concern to this study is how architecture conditions relationships between people; which is contingent on how thresholds are organized and

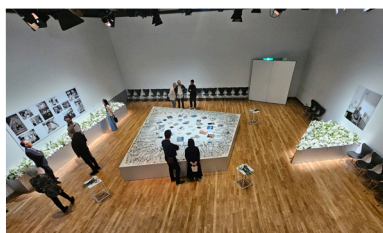


Figure 2. Memorial for Fumihiko Maki (1928-2024) held on 12-13 October 2024 in the cultural space, Hillside Plaza, Phase V (1978), Hillside Terrace, Tokyo.



Figures 3 and 4. Fumihiko Maki's bowler hat, journals and correspondence on display in Memorial. Hillside Plaza, Hillside Terrace, 12-13 October 2024.

6. Planned meetings with Manuel Tardits of Mikan Office, Toshiharu Naka and Yuri Uno of Naka Architecture Studio and Professor Thomas Daniell at Kyoto did not eventuate due to last minute timing issues.

how interactions between adjacent spaces are managed together with the characteristics of these open semi-public spaces [their scale, layering (of spaces and fabric), boundaries, views and movement]. Where does the line between public and private occur? What potential do they offer for living in the city? What are the lessons in this for Australian architecture?

During my time in Tokyo, I met with: Takeshi and Yuki Komada at their offices in Nishikasai Apartments 2; Manabu Chiba, principal of Chiba Manabu Architects for a walk and talk through two housing projects; Ryue Nishizawa at the offices he shares with Kazuyo Sejima and their joint practice SANAA; Fumi Kashimura and Ikko Kobayashi at their practice, Terrain Architects; Koh Kitayama at his practice, A/WN and at four different housing projects; Associate Professor Ryo Murata in his studio laboratory at the Tokyo Institute of Technology; and finally in Kobe, I met with Yo Shimada at his practice, Tato Architects. I exchanged emails with Manuel Tardits of Mikan Office and independently visited a housing/mixed use project by Tardits, Motoyawata (2019) in Ichikawa City, Chiba.⁶

From the range of material collected I have selected the following projects to discuss in detail. They are presented in chronological order revealing similarities that confirm the shared interests of a cohort of architects whilst also charting shifts in that collective interest.

-- Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2 (2018) by Komada Architects Office

-- Yoyogi Apartments (2019) and Tomigaya Commons (2020) by A/WN (*architecture workshop network*)

-- Kif (2009) and Kif Annex (2023) by Chiba Manabu Architects

-- Jingumae Void Infrastructure (2024) by A/WN (*architecture workshop network*)

These projects have featured in journals of architecture and on web sites but have not been discussed in terms of their shared disciplinary interests. I was permitted access to the interiors of five apartments in the above projects and I am grateful to the architects who facilitated that access with their clients. A special privilege not often afforded.

Theoretical context for contemporary housing projects

My investigations began at Hillside Terrace, Fumihiko Maki's renown complex of buildings in Shibuya completed in six stages between 1967 and 1998, which offers a set of exemplar urban courtyard spaces. Whilst at Hillside Terrace I visited a moving memorial to Fumihiko Maki staged by friends and former students in the cultural space at Hillside Plaza (Figure 2). Jennifer Taylor's book written with James Connor was a centrepiece of this memorial. A display of personal effects, his briefcase, bowler hat, diaries journaling daily activities and insights, postcards to Kengo Tange underscore the scope

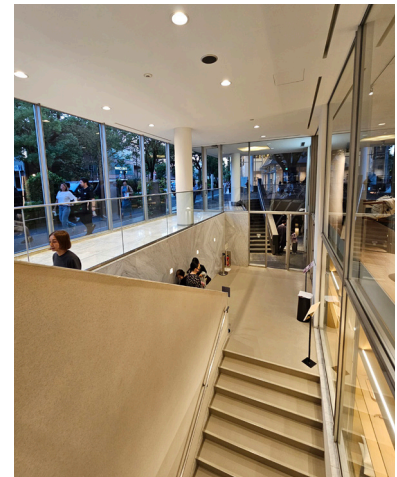
and depth of his interest in urban landscapes across time and place (Figures 3 and 4).

At Hillside Terrace, Fumihiko Maki explored his theory of 'group-form' together with the linking strategies necessary to generate 'collective forms' with human scale.⁷ Maki's ideas were shaped by his experiences during the 1950s studying and working as an architect and an academic in the US. There he was greatly influenced by his associations with Jose Lluís Sert. He also came into contact with younger members of CIAM - Jacob Bakema and Aldo van Eyck - who introduced him to notions of 'neighbourhood', 'cluster' and 'association.' Such notions related to place identification and orientation did not interest Japanese architects in the 1960s.⁸ Maki's Hillside Terrace challenged prevailing attitudes by *not* proposing a megaform - a form he negatively associated with power and utopianism - and by instead exploring the possibility of an urban order based on a collection of elements.

At Hillside Terrace low-rise buildings step forwards and backwards in relation to the street, to create a series of semi-public courtyard spaces linking interior and exterior spaces with connecting passageways, low walls, thresholds and vegetation generating a continuous urban landscape (Figures 5 and 6). Maki refers to these courtyard spaces as 'plazas' which Jennifer Taylor suggests confers a degree of enclosure and usage that corresponds to *niwa*.⁹ Taylor writes that these courtyards have no direct precedent in Japanese town planning, yet the 'pattern of thought underpinning them is Japanese'.¹⁰ They demonstrate the layering of space and sense of spatial depth that are considered key characteristics of Japanese urban space.

In his seminal essay "The City and Inner Space", Maki describes multiple layers of space as a 'stable concept' - that is, it is one of 'the cultural images rooted in the collective unconscious of the community'.¹¹ He invokes the term *oku* meaning literally 'the inner most area',¹² a term pervasive in Japanese constructions of place and culture, to explain the sense of an inner depth of space that a 'multilayered, dense spatial composition' gives rise to. *Oku* is present in the earliest settlements stretched out along thoroughfares and wedged between mountains and rice fields. A recurring pattern sees this main thoroughfare opposed by a secondary axis at right angles - a religious axis linking the rice fields to houses in the village, to a shrine at the foot of the mountains (*sando*) and then via a winding path to the inner shrine (*oku-sha*) in the mountain itself. Maki writes: 'Locating the inner shrine in an unfrequented mountain vastness establishes the existence (or the idea) of important things being in unseen places.'¹³

The difference between a 'philosophy of inner space' or *oku*, and the idea of a 'centre' as realized in Western townscapes is encapsulated by Maki's distinction between 'space envelopment' and 'space demarcation'.¹⁴ Whereas 'centre', typically signified by a church or public buildings with an associated town plaza or square often at the highest point in a topography, implies a



Figures 5 and 6. Transparency and connectivity in layers of space at the edge of building form in Phases II (1971-73) top, and VI (1992) below, Hillside Terrace.

7. Fumihiko Maki and Jerry Goldberg, "Linkage in Collective Form," *Ekistics* 14 no 82 (August- September 1962): 100-104. Also described by Maki in *Metabolism: The Proposals for a New Urbanism* (1960).

8. Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 64; Fumihiko Maki and Jerry Goldberg, "Linkage in Collective Form," 100-104; Fumihiko Maki, "The City and Inner Space," *Ekistics* 278 (September/ October 1979): 228 - 334.

9. Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 45.

10. Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 45, 53.

11. Maki, "The City and Inner Space," 334.

12. 'The Origin of 奥 (おく, Oku)', <https://nippolle.net/en/article/883/#toc1>

13. Maki, "The City and Inner Space," 330.

14. Maki, "The City and Inner Space," 330, 332.

centring of uniform space and a vertical orientation, *oku* emphasizes ‘horizontal’ and seeks its power in hidden depths’.¹⁵ Scholars have identified *oku* at Hillside Terrace in ‘spatial layers (which screen but do not entirely conceal what lies beyond them)’. It is revealed when ‘one cuts across boundaries of spatial layers defined by topography, roads, fences, trees and the walls of houses.’¹⁶ These layers of in-between space are Maki’s ‘linkages’ providing a ‘humanly understandable’ urban form that enables orientation and occupation.¹⁷

Some fifteen years after Maki articulated his theory of inner space, 2024 Pritzker Prize Laureate Riken Yamamoto reminds us of the dangers inherent in what he describes as the ‘institutionalisation’ of architectural space. He describes how compartmentalizing space into functional units transforms social space into a ‘facility’ and ignores its relational dimensions. In housing, compartmentalizing of space undermines the capacity for connectivity, leading to social problems such as isolation, domestic abuse and ‘solitary deaths’.¹⁸

In challenging purely functional conceptions of space, Yamamoto speculates on the opportunities missed when translating conventional understandings of public and private directly into architectural space. He questions where the public/ private interface might occur,¹⁹ suggesting: ‘The threshold is located inside the residence but is at the same time a space that belongs to the public realm.’ A workspace can also be an ‘outward-oriented’ space inside a residence.²⁰ Such notions are not new – rather they are already evident in the traditional *machiya* – but their recovery challenges functionalist readings of territorial boundaries in the contemporary era. Yamamoto’s threshold theory (*shikii*) provides a framework that supports ideas of openness, indeterminacy of boundaries, the incorporation of shared spaces, flexibility and adaptability of space, and transparency enabling connectivity between people. When harnessed by ideas it contributes to *oku*.

More recently Yamamoto is amongst a number of architects who have criticised the ‘one-house = one family’ system, instead proposing housing based on the premise of ‘community’; ‘a community that supports household functions to compensate for the reduced size of households’ and which gives rise to ‘small economies’ and ‘local economies’ becoming a ‘Community within a Community’.²¹

Both Fumihiko Maki’s and Riken Yamamoto’s contributions to the discipline of architecture are more wide-reaching and far weightier than this brief synopsis allows for.²² But it is their insights into the territory and threshold conditions for the individual unit, the collective and the city that are important to this study, providing a framework of spatial concepts necessary for analysing open semi-private *niwa* space in contemporary Japanese housing. These particular themes are extended and developed in the built work and writings of the architects who inform this study.

15. Maki, “The City and Inner Space,” 332.

16. Teruyuki Monnai, “Search for an Architectural Language of Group Form,” Fumihiko Maki, *Fumihiko Maki* (London: Phaidon Press, 2009), 183.

17. Maki and Goldberg, “Linkage in Collective Form,” 64-65.

18. Riken Yamamoto, *Riken Yamamoto* (Tokyo: Toto Publishing, 2012), 21. See also Toshiharu Naka, *Two Cycles* (Tokyo: LIXIL Publishing, 2019).

19. Riken Yamamoto, “Public/Private: Concerning the Concept of Threshold,” *Interstices* (November 2009): 127- 128. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24135/ijara.v0i0.371>. Adapted from *Theory of Dwelling* (1993), unpublished manuscript translated into English by Hiroshi Watanabe. Also Riken Yamamoto, “Architecture’s Social Nature,” *JA* 51 (Autumn 2003): 118.

20. Riken Yamamoto, “The Space of Power and Power of Space: Designing between Personal and State Spaces,” *Kodansha* (2015): 24-25.

21. Yamamoto, *Riken Yamamoto*, 21-23.

22. The Local Community Area (LCA) Project posited theoretical architectural and urban experiments in response to current demographic and economic challenges to Japanese society. Issues of ‘agency and control of space; community agency v bureaucratic agency’ are addressed in *The Space of Power, The Power of Space: Designing the Relations hip between the Individual and the State*. (2015; English translation 2024).

The projects

Nishi-Kasai Apartment 2 (2019) Komada Architects Office

Nishi-Kasai Apartment 2 is a four-story mixed-use complex located in a suburb of Edogawa City, Tokyo, designed and developed by Takeshi and Yuki Komada of Komada Architects Office (Figure 7).²³ It adjoins an earlier project, Nishi-Kasai Apartment developed in 2000 by the same architects on the other half of the original landholding. This earlier development is described by the architects as ‘closed’ and ‘not a community’.²⁴ Its Rubik-cube organisation of 10 apartments on a corner block reflects an interest in the autonomous house and demonstrates the disconnection with the urban realm that Takeshi and Yuki Komada now feel such an approach brings. Nishi-Kasai Apartment 2 adopts an entirely different set of strategies.

Takeshi and Yuki Komada set out to create community on what was until the 1960s rice fields and unused wasteland on the edge of Tokyo Bay. When Takeshi writes of ‘changing our town on our own’,²⁵ it is Nishi-Kasai that he desires to transform, but the life of the streets of the old fishing villages of Kasai where his grandmother lived and which he recalls visiting in the 1960s that he wishes to recover. For Komada Architects Office, housing developments in the new Nishi-Kasai district do not support community (for ‘no place relates to history’ and there is ‘no interesting place’). This ambitious quest to create ‘a new normal’ and ‘a new future for people’ began with an invitation to an established local baker to relocate. Initially reluctant, the baker was eventually convinced by the prospect of a purpose-built facility with maximized street presence. In the finished development, the activity and commerce of baking is highly visible through picture windows to passers-by.

The final scheme consists of the bakery with shopfront and café, a design office, rental housing and a co-working space which currently houses a collective of 22 independent practitioners ranging in age from students of 20 years to practitioners over 60. This program is contained in a single block creating a long open courtyard space between the old and new developments and stretching from the street to the back of site where it links to a small courtyard on the rear corner of the first apartment block (Figures 9 and 10). Planted with a cherry tree and ivy this courtyard was intended to open the interior spaces of the first apartment block to the southwestern aspect but its presence has proven particularly auspicious for the subsequent development. Whilst not visible from the street, there is the sense that the space of the shared terrace expands horizontally into it.

Captured between the old and new developments, the terrace is four me-



Figure 7. Nishi-Kasia Apartment 2, 2019, Komada Architects Office. View to open semi-public space with threshold to street.

23. Interview with Takeshi Komada and Yuki Komada @ Nishi-Kasai Apartment 2 on 13 October 2024 at 1030.

23. Takeshi Komada is a graduate of the Department of Architecture, University of Tokyo. He is currently Professor at Mae-bashi Institute of Technology. Yuki Komada is a graduate of Kyushu University. She is currently lecturing at the Tokyo University of the Arts and Meiji University. Together Takeshi and Yuki Komada are Komada Architects Office.

24. Takeshi Komada interview with author at Nishi-Kansai Apartments 2 on 13/10/2024 at 1030.

25. 西葛西APARTMENTS-2, <https://www.komada-archi.info/archives/3603> accessed 12/10/2024.



Figure 8. (Above) Noll study. Nishi-Kasai Apartments precinct, Edogawa-ka, Tokyo. All drawings are by Gordon Akira Macindoe, and are prepared from material supplied by the project's architects.

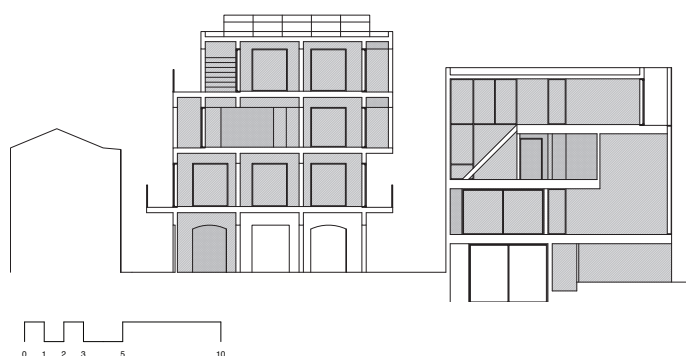
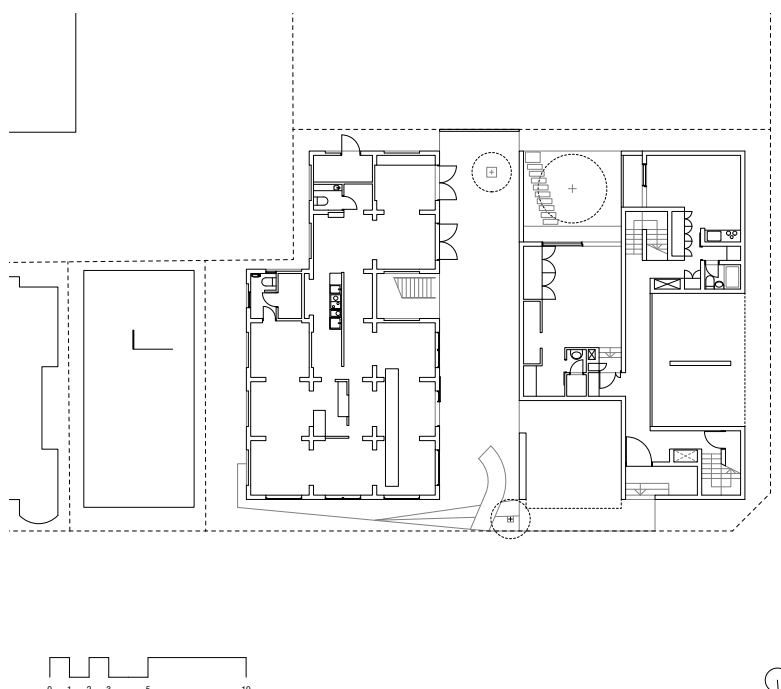


Figure 9. (Above right) Section, Nishi-Kasai Apartments 1 and 2. IN all sections shading indicates most private realms.

Figure 10. (Below right) Plan, ground floor, Nishi-Kasai Apartments 1 and 2.



26. The workshop space is named "Yadoriki" ("mistletoe"), which means overcoming difficulties in the symbolic Japanese language of flowers and comes from the verb yadori meaning to lodge or dwell.

27. Yuki Komada interview with author at Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2 on 13/10/ 2024 at 1030.

ters wide, 20 metres long and 420 mm above street level and the existing courtyard (Figure 10). It is open on its southern edge to the passage of the sun and is used as an outdoor eating space for the bakery and as an event space, hosting community events managed by Yuki from the workshop space on the first floor – such as bread-making classes, children's art activities and markets.²⁶ Otherwise this terrace is essentially 'program free'. Yuki Komada stresses the importance of space 'with no purpose', a concept she rues is 'still uncommon' in Tokyo.²⁷ It is however deliberately designed as a piece of urban theatre.

The terrace is accessed via a ramp which slices through an arrangement of timber steps and seats that invite occupation and enable the organising of



Figure 11. (Above) Bakery entrance from semi-public space, Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2.

Figure 12. (Left) Interior spaces defined by expressive structural grid. Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2.

shopping onto bicycles. The change of level communicates the shift from public to semi-public space, but the slow ramp and wide stairs invite entry. Interconnectivity is increased by locating the entrance to bakery in the courtyard – not the street - and by locating the stair to the office, workshop and apartments in the middle of the courtyard thereby creating a point in the plan which everyone is forced to cross. The chance of an incidental encounter is increased, and the theatre of daily comings and goings is played out for occupants of the café. From this open courtyard, a stair climbs up past offices, workshop and entrances to apartments to a 'Third Space,' a roof terrace which is also used for gatherings and yoga classes.

The sense of a layering of space and of the functional non-specificity of space is sustained by a structural grid of 3.2 x 3m, which remains unchanged throughout building and accommodates the wide range of programmatic demands. Yuki Komada argues the resulting spatial unit feels familiar to the Japanese because of similarities in scale to the traditional 4.5 Jō (4.5 = 2.7 x 2.7). Importantly the consistent concrete frame - expressed as gentle arches in the downstairs bakery to evoke loaves of bread - gives rise to layers of semi-public and semi-private space within the building itself. This layering of space is evident on entering the bakery on the ground floor and in the meeting room of the co-working space on the first floor. Visible from outside the bakery, the shop counter lined with tempting treats beacons to customers. From this counter the performance of baking is on show and space structured by the grid in a manner redolent of a more ancient type of kitchen, spreads out horizontally into unseen depths (Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 13. View along access easement to Yoyogi Apartments, 2019, Shibuya, Tokyo, architecture workshop network (AWN).

28. Tsune Kitayama also known as Koh Kitayama is Professor Emeritus at Yokohama National University, Visiting Professor at Hosei University, and part time lecturer at Nagoya Institute of Technology and Kyoto University. He was Commissioner of the Japanese pavilion at the 12th Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition in 2010. He first formed practice as a studio 'workshop' in 1978. The current workshop AWN was formed in 2021.

29. Japan Institute of Architecture Award, Japan Institute of Architects Award, Gold Medal of the Arcasia Architecture Award. Published in *Kenchiku Gaho: Challenging Structures* 47 (March 2011).

30. Meeting with Yuko Hajima and Koh Kitayama at Yoyogi Apartments, 18 October @ 1430. Visit to Units E and J. From AWN explanatory text provided at site visit.

31. A flagpole site is common in Japanese cities and is created through the subdivision of a site with a street frontage into two blocks - one block with street frontage and one behind. The site behind is accessed via a lane from the street.

32. From AWN explanatory text provided at site visit.

Yoyogi Apartments (2019) & Tomigaya Commons (2020)

The next two projects from the office of *architecture workshop network* (AWN) under the direction of Koh Kitayama²⁸ are examples of cooperative housing. They share a procurement process whereby a developer finds a land package and engages an architect to produce an overall concept which is then used to promote the development to prospective unit owners. Each prospective owner is given an architect to work with on their individual apartment, an objective achieved within the office structure of AWN. Consequently, each unit is different but shares the aspirations, design principles and a material palette with the collective. Yoyogi Apartments and Tomigaya Commons continue Kitayama's experiments with an 'architecture of plurality', which is demonstrated in the highly awarded G-Flat project, completed in 2006.²⁹ Different organisational strategies adopted for Yoyogi Apartments and Tomigaya Commons has resulted in different opportunities for open semi-public space.

Yoyogi Apartments (2019) comprises nine units in three blocks, connected by a sequence of semi-outdoor common areas along a vertical circulation spine that climbs to a shared outdoor area at the fourth level (Figures 15 and 16). AWN media material states that housing is '...conceived as a collection of detached houses' with alleys and stairs 'providing a pathway for wind, light and sightlines'.³⁰

This 'collection of detached houses' is arranged to suit the irregular shaped flagpole site³¹ with semi-public spaces held between the blocks. Entry to the complex is controlled by a gate and after a half-level climb the visitor arrives at the first in a succession of 'common platforms' – essentially expanded stair landings - on the climb to a shared open space on level 4 (Figure 17). How individual unit owners choose to engage with these semi-public spaces is a question for individual occupants in consultation with their architect. In one apartment visited, the kitchen opens directly onto a common balcony deliberately inviting social interaction, but in other instances a more discrete *genkan* space provides a greater level of privacy for occupants. AWN publicity claims 'Units are not completely closed off from the common space, but rather left slightly open [to it]'.³² Where this happens privacy from other inhabitants coming and going via the stair is managed inside each unit's line of enclosure.

Opportunity for connectivity is further enhanced by a planning strategy developed by Koh Kitayama in G-Flat, whereby the program for each dwelling unit is divided between two building blocks; the living / dining/

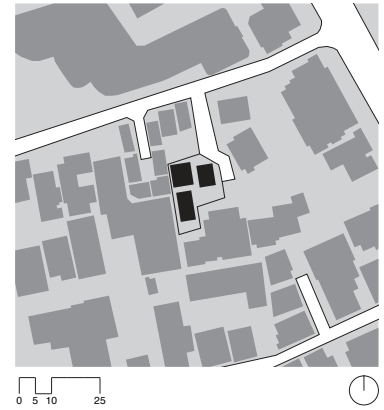


Figure 14. (Above) Noll study, Yoyogi Apartments precinct, 2019, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

Figure 15. (Above left) Section, Yoyogi Apartments, 2019, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

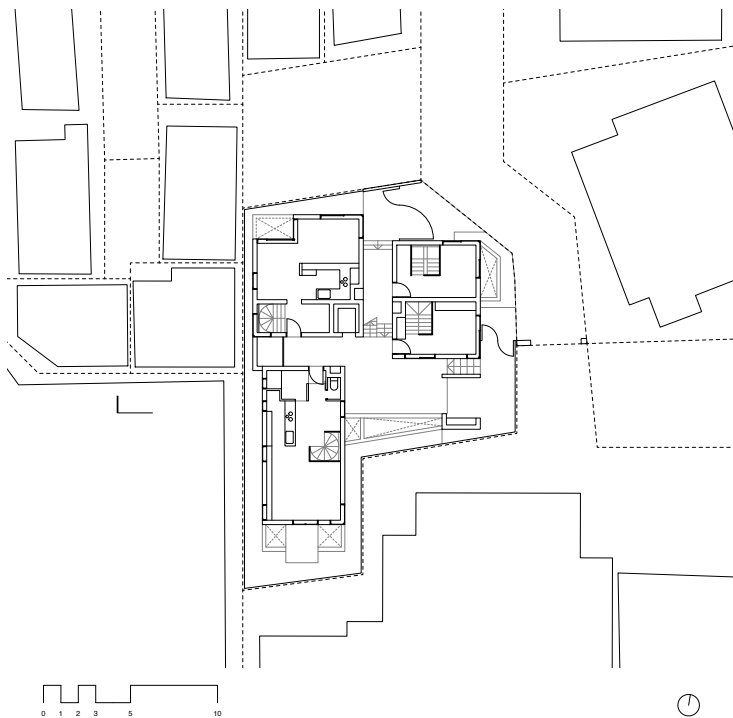


Figure 16. (Below left) Plan, first floor apartments, Yoyogi Apartments, 2019, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

kitchen spaces for units E and G are in one block and the bedroom/ bathroom spaces are in another. Bridges link living spaces and bedroom spaces. Bridges linking spaces in units E and G occur in the shared vertical circulation zone [a semi-public space] and are transparent allowing views into the public circulation zone but also inviting the gaze of those coming and going on the stairs. The space of the bridge is semi-private; direct eye contact can be avoided through the operation of screens; but owners of unit E admitted they 'couldn't be bothered' to use them (Figure 18). The control of sight-lines sets up an awareness in those on the staircase of more private spaces beyond. This planning strategy has an additional consequence in that it sets up the perception of a fragmented building form. There is more activity in

Figure 17. Open, semi-public space at level 4, Yoyogi Apartments, 2019, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

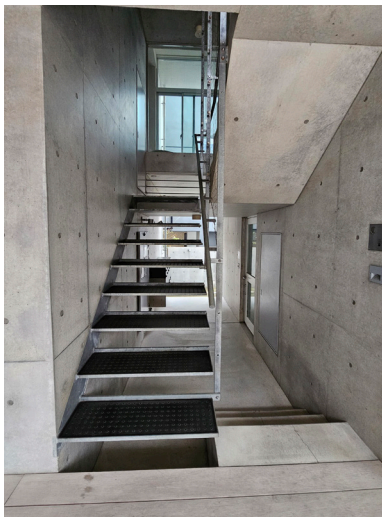


Figure 18. View in stairwell to bridge linking spaces in Unit E, Yoyogi Apartments, 2019, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

the semi-public realm than is typical. There is also the suggestion of activity that is not entirely visible. It meets the objective for connectivity – whereby ‘the residents will feel each other’s presence and foster an attentive community.’³³

Tomigaya Commons (2020), comprising eleven units on a flagpole site, was also informed by the intention to ‘give meaning to people living together’, this time by creating ‘spatial relationships like those found in naturally occurring villages.’³⁴ (Figure 20) Once again, a straightforward planning strategy was avoided in the search for a ‘spatial structure’ that would deliver ‘ad-hoc complexity’. The program for living is divided into connected blocks, this time using the row-house model. Row housing triggers a different set of planning regulations which do not provide for shared spaces but which became the rules of a game.³⁵ It was explained that whilst ‘shared spaces cannot be created evacuation routes 2m wide ... are required from each dwelling unit, so alley spaces are inevitably created’. Using terminology that references Maki’s category of urban morphology, AWN describes Tomigaya Commons as a ‘collective form in which the route network precedes.’³⁶

By locating the complex as close as possible to the North and East boundaries and utilizing the turning circle for cars in the piloti columned parking lot a ‘plaza’ space for neighbourhood parties is created (Figure 22).³⁷ A built-in table with water and power adjacent and a window recalling Corb’s Villa Le Lac, provides the minimum requirements for a gathering (Figure 19). Everyone passes through this social space enroute to their apartments. The slight rise in topography enables apartments with private courtyards at a half-level lower than the shared open courtyard space and the variety of levels

33. AWN explanatory text provided at site visit.

34. Meeting with Toru Kudo at Tomigaya Commons on 18 October @ 1300.

35. Email exchange with Toru Kudo on 12 February 2025.

36. AWN explanatory text provided at site visit.

37. Toru Kudo at Tomigaya Commons on 18 October @ 1300.

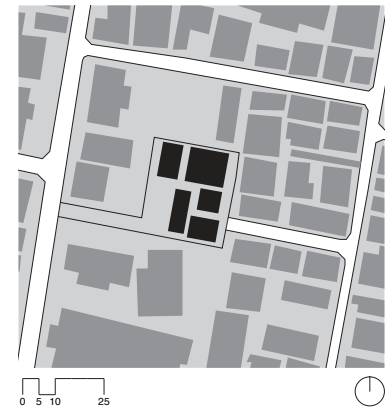
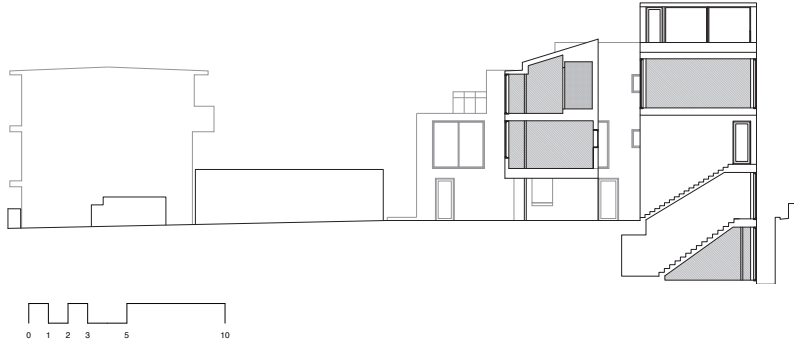


Figure 20. (Above) Noll study, Tomigaya Commons precinct, 2020, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

Figure 21. (Above left) Section, Tomigaya Commons.

Figure 22. (Above right) Plan, ground floor, Tomigaya Commons .

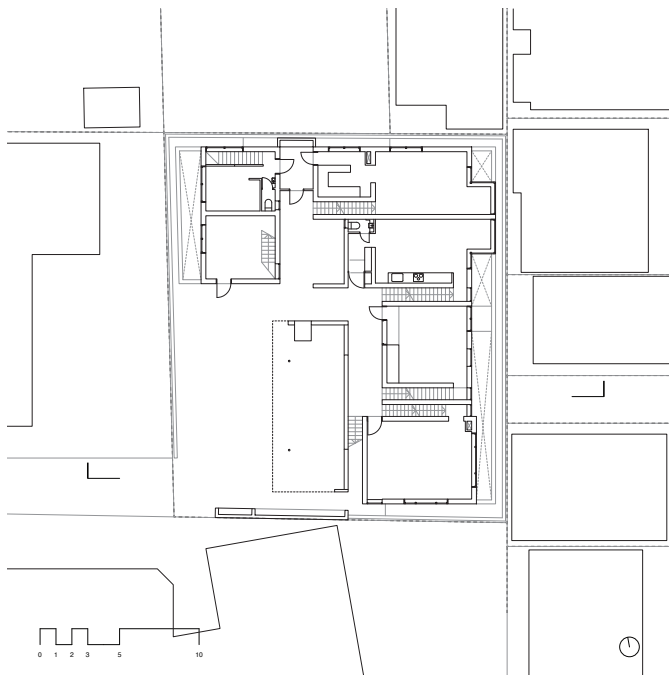


Figure 19. Open, semi-public 'plaza', Tomigaya Commons, 2020, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

enhances the idea of a village (Figure 21). Connectivity is increased through the careful control of lines of sight, particularly '... where lines of sight [between people] intersect'. Glimpses into private spaces are possible when moving through the complex, but depth of view is carefully controlled. In such moments the 'location and size of these openings were carefully considered.' For Kitayama 'sightlines structure relationships between people... To design a human relationship is to design sightlines.'³⁸

38. Koh Kitayama, *In-Between: Koh Kitayama: Architectural Works* (Tokyo: Keiko Kubota, 2014), 7.



Figures 23. Open, semi-public space generated between Kif (2009) and Kif Annex (2023), Shinjuku-ku, Chiba Manabu Architects.



Figure 24. Portal connecting Kif Annex laneway to surrounding urban fabric.

39. Manabu Chiba is a graduate of and now Professor at the Department of Architecture, The University of Tokyo, and principal of Chiba Manabu Architects.

Kif (2009) & Kif Annex (2023) Chiba Manabu Architects

Kif and **Kif Annex** by Chiba Manabu Architects together comprise a mixed-use complex owned and developed by a restaurateur.³⁹ Kif Annex (2023) follows the earlier completion of Kif (2009) and realises an urban set-piece by seeking to replicate on private property, the life of the narrow lanes in the restaurant district of Kagurazaka where it is located (Figure 23).

Stage 1 Kif comprising 2 shops and 5 apartments, required that street access to existing properties at the rear be maintained whilst Stage 2 Kif Annex comprising 2 shops and 4 apartments, required accommodating an existing tepanyaki restaurant addressing the main thoroughfare (Figure 27). These encumbrances became an asset with the creation of a new private lane four metres wide and 33 metres long running to the back of the site. The new builds adopt the alignment of the old street and respect existing scale (Figures 26 and 27). There are no fences except the extant fences marking the boundaries of existing houses. This shared open space – essentially a new street – is enmeshed with the existing city fabric. Public and private territories are marked by changes in ground surface. The threshold from the city to the new semi-public street is accompanied by a change from asphalt to gravel. Pavers marking pathways are set back from building edges and thresholds to individual apartments are marked by a step and an awning over the door (Figure 23).

The existing tepanyaki restaurant at the entrance to this long space is at a half level below the level of the new street and opens through doors onto the new street: the addition of new bays creating *stoeps* gives the impression of a smaller scale of development. Shops in Kif Annex behind the tepanyaki restaurant are also a lower level and include a bakery and a ‘fancy’ pizza shop. The bakery conceptualised as a ‘factory,’ opens into the new street from the lower level through a shop window for bread sales. At the end of the street the pizza shop has a privileged view along the length of the lane as do apartments above (figure 28).

Shops in Kif and Kif Annex are accessed from the new street, whilst upper-level apartments are accessed via vertical circulation off recessed lobbies. All inhabitants and visitors are forced by this strategy to traverse the new street. Stairs to apartments open into landings affording short views into the street and long views through the gaps between buildings. Lobbies to individual units operate as *genkan* and are labelled as ‘front yard’ on drawings prepared by the office for publication.

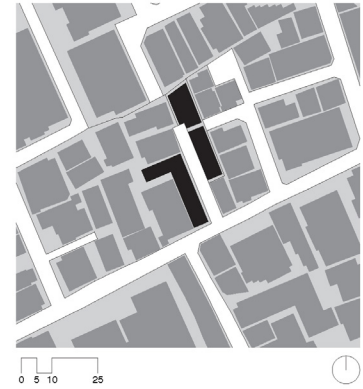
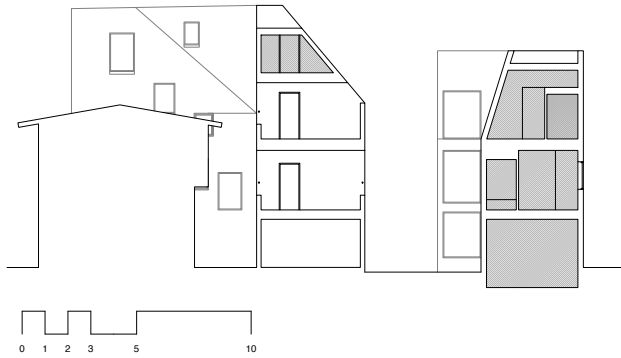


Figure 25. (Above) Nalli study, Kif Annex precinct, Shinjuku-ku, Chiba Manabu Architects.

Figures 26. (Above left) Section, Kif and Kif Annex, Shinjuku-ku, Chiba Manabu Architects.

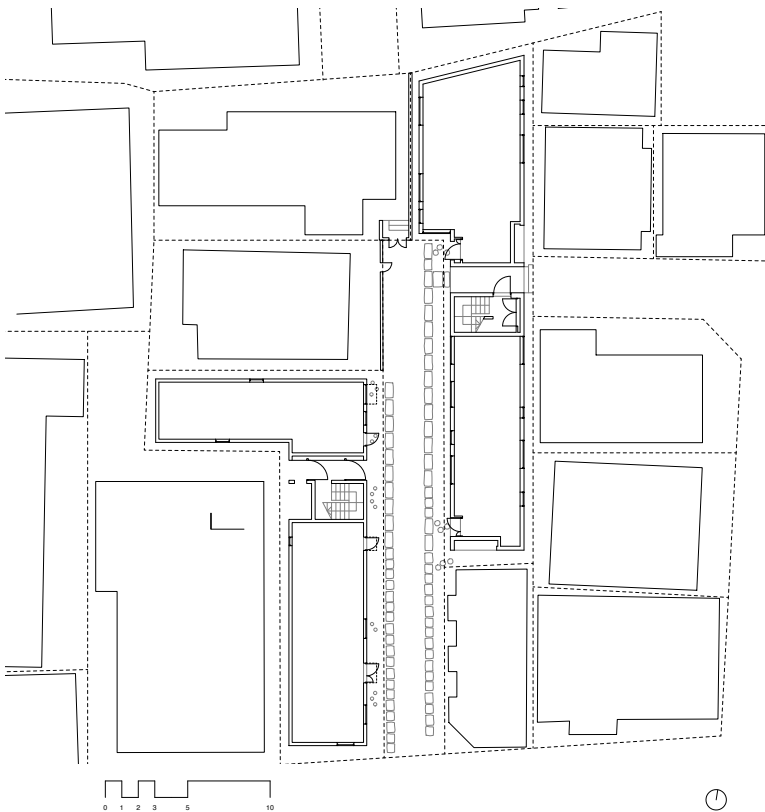


Figure 27. (Below left) Plan, Kif and Kif Annex. Kif is located on the West side of the new street and Kif Annex is located on the East side.

Access to the four units in Kif Annex is via a concealed arcade at the rear of the site that also connects through to a cul-de-sac behind (Figure 24). In this way the new street is knitted – physically and visually - into an existing urban fabric and the project contributes to the network of alleys and lanes that are responsible for Tokyo's unique urban character. In this context, shared open space is not a 'centre' with a distinct character in the conventional sense, but an opportunity to ensure existing urban patterns are maintained whilst also increasing the density of that urban fabric.

Efforts have been made to reduce the scale of Kif and Kif Annex to fit with the surrounding context of two storied detached houses. Kif Annex achieves three stories by compressing buildings into site and by the articulation of

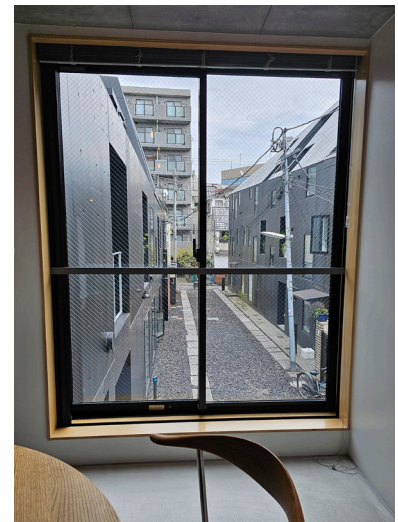
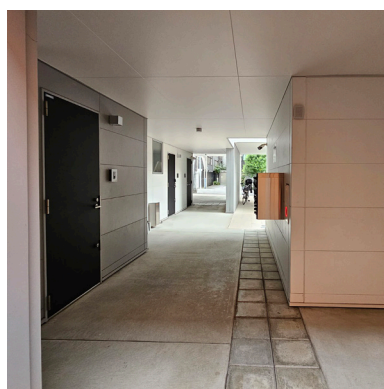


Figure 28. View from Kif Annex apartment into the semi-public laneway.



Figure 29. View of Kif from 'front yard' of upper-level apartments in Kif Annex.



Figures 30 and 31. Views of semi-public spaces in Takanawa Cube, 2022, Minato-ku. Chiba Manabu Architects.

exterior walls at the upper level to evoke a roofscape. The earlier Kif is three stories rising to four stories with level four also contained in a roof shaped form (Figure 29). The positioning of windows further conceals the scale of the compressed spaces behind with large roof lights giving onto double height dwelling units.

The owner/ developer of Kif and Kif Annex engaged Takagi Planning Office who matched the project to Manabu Chiba's practice. Takagi Planning Office Company Director/ Owner Eiichi Takagi's website speaks to creating a place in the city 'that is cherished by as many people as possible'. '...places that are always cared for by the people who built them, the people who live there, the people who use them, the people of the town, etc.'⁴⁰ Takagi is not interested in the pursuit of 'cool' which he perceives to be a transient notion. Just how enlightened this approach is, becomes clear when comparisons are drawn between Kif Annex and another housing project by Chiba Manabu Architects commissioned by a less progressive developer, Yaseda Real Estate. **Takanawa Cube** is a dense development comprising thirty non-airconditioned living spaces intended for essential workers; a lower cost development but located in a very desirable area that is rapidly changing through mega scale projects. Takanawa Cube carefully knits together remnant sites left around existing tenancies that cannot be disturbed (Figures 30 and 31).

The intention was within a very tight budget, to establish a network of gaps, lanes, alleys and open spaces that continue the pattern of the surrounding urban fabric. As a result, the consolidated site is long, irregular and very porous. The site shape has meant that very few unit plans are identical. The sprawling plan is composed as a series of connected and overlapping cube volumes, differentiated with various shades of grey render and successfully reflects the grain established by the surrounding adjacent timber houses.

At ground level, circulation and shared threshold spaces occur along the southern edge of the site. Seventeen units are addressed from this ground plane, a strategy that maximises opportunities for incidental encounters, but places great pressure on planning. Very few apartments are fully located at ground level; for most apartments ground level comprises only a single room, a *genkan* lobby space and a stair to living spaces above. There is one shared staircase to the remaining apartments which are accessed at level three. Plans prepared by Chiba Manabu Architects and media photography show shared lobby spaces occupied by bikes, furniture and pot plants. But the invitation to 'occupy' shared space at ground level has not been taken up, because the developer/ landlord has imposed restrictions on items left in shared spaces. Links with the existing urban fabric are denied by chain wire fences between properties. As a consequence the potential of this extremely clever response to the need for affordable housing to provide connectivity for its occupants is not fully realised.

40. Takagi Planning Office, <https://www.t-p-o.com/> accessed 23/12/2024 @ 0948.

Jingumae Void Infrastructure (2024) AWN

The final and most recently completed project discussed here is Jingumae Void Infrastructure by AWN. Jingumae Void Infrastructure is located on a site with two street frontages and a level change between each street of five metres; a retaining wall on the North boundary preventing connection between the two streets. The project was envisaged as a ‘void alley’ linking the unconnected streets and ‘drawing people and gazes through the site.’⁴¹ The alley is entered at one end from the street and at the other by breaching the reconstructed retaining wall through a short arcade with vertical circulation (Figure 32). Apartments, described by AWN as maisonnettes, number 27 and apart from those addressing the lowest thoroughfare, are stacked on top of one another facing into the alley (Figures 34 and 35). Upper level maisonnettes are accessed via access balconies at level three.

Toru Kodu of AWN writes: ‘The intention was to create a space reminiscent of a townhouse alley lined with workshops and shops, each with its own name.’⁴² In the traditional streetscape privacy in such circumstances is managed through screens and layers of compressed space at the threshold between shop and street. In Jingumae Void Infrastructure, privacy for maisonnettes facing into the alley is managed by occupants inside the line of building enclosure at the threshold between private living space and internal circulation. Glazing with different levels of transparency is used to further manage lines of sight and enables veiled glimpses of shadowy figures in shadowy interiors (Figure 36). Further aligning the project with current architectural debate Toru Kodu continues: ‘The void which is a non-existent centre, invites complex and diverse spaces into its surroundings.’ In an earlier conversation Kitayama described AWN’s approach as ‘low level privacy.’⁴³ His dismissal of my Westerner expectations of a conventional privacy gradient reinforces the extent to which spatial perception is culturally embedded.

The Jingumae Void alley is not a semi-public space; rather it is semi-private. Entrance at each end is by a timber gate. Kitayama writes that similar types of gated street spaces existed in Kyoto until the Meiji Restoration.⁴⁴ Kitayama also invokes Walter Benjamin’s “Discourse on Passages” (1923-40) on the construction of public space in Paris and Colin Rowe’s “The Crisis of the Object = The Predicament of Urban Organization” (1978) in which Rowe compares Unite d’Habitation’s ‘solid figure’ with Vasari’s Uffizi ‘void that becomes a figure’. Kitayama notes that Unite is ‘an extreme diagram way of how to reconstruct a community in a modern society that is fragment-



Figure 32. Open, semi-public space, Jingumae Void Infrastructure, 2024, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

41. Meeting with Toru Kuda at Jingumae Void Infrastructure on 18 October @ 1200.

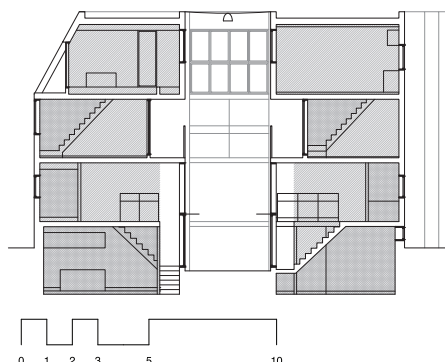
42. Toru Kudo in explanatory text provided at site visit.

43. Meeting with Koh Kitayama and Tom Heneghan at AWN on 15 October at 1500.

44. Tsune Kitayama, “Urban fabric that connects people”, <https://archws.com/architecture/1950/> accessed 03/01/2025 @ 1000. Published in *Shinkenchiku* (August 2024). Before the Meiji Restoration period it was not uncommon for streets flanked on both sides by shops to be closed off at nights by wooden gates at each end to indicate a space that was not public; rather space was intended for use and was managed by those people who occupied premises on either side of the road. These gates were abolished in 1872.



Figure 33. (Above) Nollistudy, Jingumae Void Infrastructure precinct, Shibuya-ku, AWN.



Figures 34. (Right above) Section, Jingumae Void Infrastructure, 2024, Shibuya-ku, AWN.

Figure 35. (Below right) Plan, ground floor, Jingumae Void Infrastructure.

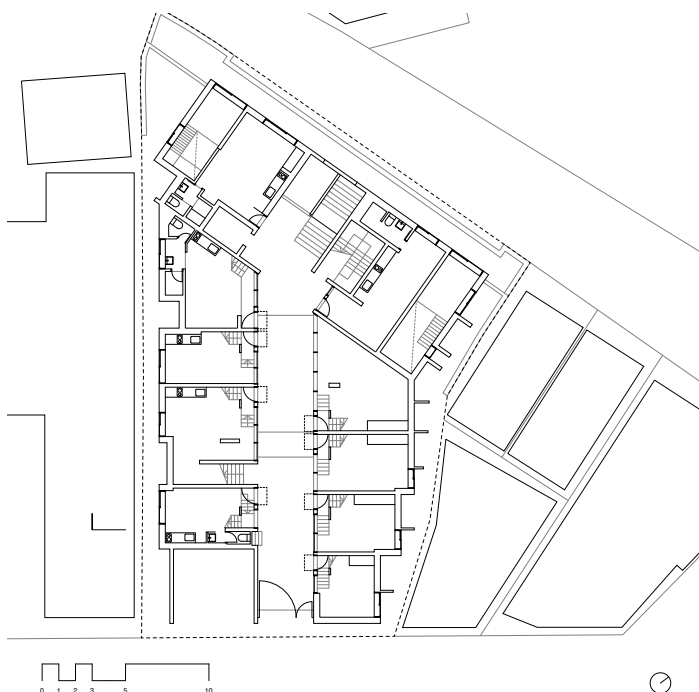


Figure 36. 'Inner space envelopment' in tenements at Jingumae Void Infrastructure, AWN.

45. Kitayama, "Urban fabric that connects people."

46. Kitayama, "Urban fabric that connects people."

ed into individuals. ...a way of accommodating fragmented individuals....' whereas Uffizi is a 'collective structure connected to the irregular urban fabric around it.'⁴⁵ In a similar way Jingumae Void Infrastructure is the urban figure connecting parts of the city and connecting people. Koh Kitayama writes further: 'The "void as a diagram" made of permeable skin drives the community as a layered, ambiguous space in-between. We call such a social device "void infrastructure".'⁴⁶ By invoking the term 'infrastructure' Koh Kitayama signals the intent of Tokyo's architects to reclaim the connective tissue of Tokyo's urban fabric as their remit.

Discussion and Conclusions

The projects discussed in this report are private housing developments. All include some form of open semi-public (*niwa*) space. Despite their semi-public character, these spaces are on private land holdings, although in some instances properties are bisected by rights for access. This suggests the desire for visual and physical connectivity is not a preoccupation of architects alone – in only one project is the architect also the developer – but is clearly something desired by the wider populace.

Also shared is the degree to which the organising ideas for projects reference the street; open spaces are not transfigurations of nature but rather interpretations of the street as embedded in the Japanese psyche or the streets of an immediate context (Figure 37). Louis Kahn reminds us ‘the street is a room’ and the extent to which these semi-public spaces are envisaged as communal – even if only for passing through – and the way built forms enfront and shape space indicates that they were considered in this way – as urban rooms in a neighbourhood of rooms.

Housing blocks are carefully scaled, their thresholds no matter how minimal and abstracted are legible (Figure 38). In each case architects have reimagined an existing urban morphology for a higher density. Compressed spatial planning of apartment interiors and the rigorous detailing of building enclosure ensures a visual fit with the typical two-storied detached housing that provides the context for projects visited.

Building scale and urban morphology knits open semi-public spaces into the urban fabric of the immediate context – its streets, alleys, lanes and cul-de-sacs (Figures 8, 14, 20, 25 and 33). Open spaces are not intended to be a centre, or even *the* centre of each housing development. They do not give the impression of being a destination. They are perceived and experienced as a path to somewhere else, affording long and short views, and a sense of space continuing, extending into and around corners to places not always visible. The careful control of sightlines ensures acceptable levels of privacy whilst enabling inhabitants to be aware of each other and to feel connected.

Without exception it is open space that conditions the privacy gradients in the housing I visited. Western concepts of public and private space are foreign to traditional Japanese culture, with spatial distinctions being characteristically semi-public or semi-private.⁴⁷ Maki writes that such ‘public character is expressed through the use and design of territory – in the sensitivity to borders, both marked and unmarked; in the multiple layers of space by means of shoji and other screens; and in the spatial arrangements



Figure 37. Japanese streetscape, Kanazawa.



Figure 38. Threshold to pizza shop, Kif Annex.

47. Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 44.

48. Fumihiko Maki “The Public Dimension in Public Architecture,” in A. Munroe (ed). *New Public Architecture: Recent Projects by Fumihiko Maki and Arata Isozaki* Catalogue of Exhibition, New York Japan Society, 1985 cited in Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 185.



Figure 39. Threshold to maisonette, Jingumae Void Infrastructure.



Figure 40. View from genkan space, Yoyogi Apartments.

49. Taylor, *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*, 97. Maki in correspondence with Taylor.

50. Riken Yamamoto, "The Institutionalization of Architectural Spaces," *Riken Yamamoto* (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2012), 21-22.

structured not by the idea of a centre but by the idea of depth (*oku*).⁴⁸ In housing visited these customary characteristics of Japanese semi-public space have been impacted by the security expectations of a changed world. Nevertheless, a layering of space and the notion of spatial depth is still evident at one of two thresholds.

In two projects by AWN - the threshold between housing and the street is gated. Semi-public open space is apprehended only visually by locals passing by. But as a result, in these projects privacy at the threshold between each individual unit and adjacent semi-public open space is not as tightly controlled by the building envelope (Figures 39 and 40). Privacy is managed by the layering of space inside the line of the building envelope, realising what Koh Kitayama describes as 'low level privacy'. In Jingumae Void Infrastructure privacy is managed at a line between an 'enveloped' inner most space and the vertical circulation within the unit itself. Living space, which is flexible and can be private living or SOHO (shop-house), is capable of being open to the 'void' street.

In comparison, in Kif Annex and Takanawa Cube, the knit with an existing urban setting is uninterrupted and passage by locals, unhindered. The threshold between the city and open space shared by housing is indicated by changes in surface material and scale and by under-crofts acting as portals. As a consequence, thresholds to private spaces are emphatic and impervious. The invitation to the wider community is to move through the complex – but not to linger. Only in the Nishi-Kaisai Apartments 2 is there an invitation to the extended community to occupy semi-public open space. Nishi-Kasai Apartments 2 in particular demonstrates most clearly how providing for incidental occupation enhances the urban condition.

In all cases, open space is witness to the comings and goings of young SOHO workers busy with their start-ups and private enterprises – the life of a contemporary worker levers a reimagining of the shop-house and close attention to the role of building fabric in defining boundary on one hand and privacy on the other, renders a Japanese spatial sensibility to be absolutely relevant. For as Maki noted 'spatial constructs are more powerful carriers of Japanese architectural tradition than those associated with forms'.⁴⁹

In providing the space for coming and going, *niwa* satisfies the need for non-intrusive connectedness, enabling occupants to be aware of each other whilst electing whether to engage directly or not, but in all cases to not feel isolated whilst engrossed in the business of daily life, becoming what Riken Yamamoto describes as a 'social infrastructure'.⁵⁰ Open space demonstrating layers of boundary conditions and the sense of a hidden centre enables housing to meet the demand for increased density whilst sustaining embedded cultural and social values. There are lessons in how Tokyo architects contribute to a debate around the type of city they would like Tokyo to be and how by reimagining and re-strategizing they seek to change their urban condition project by project.

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