

Yanaka Revisited: New Creative Approaches to Revitalize a Tokyo Neighborhood

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Abstract

This paper explores Tokyo's Yanaka district, examining its transformation and the roles of natives, returnees, and newcomers in preserving its cultural heritage amidst urbanization pressures. The study investigates the impact of creative policies on economic development and questions whether they sustainably benefit the area. Interviews reveal how natives maintain social bonds, while returnees and newcomers contribute to Yanaka's revitalization. The study also examines whether these changes genuinely enhance creativity and sustainability. In conclusion, Yanaka's story illustrates the power of community-led preservation, emphasizing community identity, organization, and creativity as vital tools for safeguarding urban heritage amidst rapid urbanization.

Keywords: urban revitalization, Yanaka, community identity, cultural heritage, creative approaches, social inclusion,

Introduction

When discussing the interplay of decline and resurgence, Tokyo stands as a compelling case study. For decades, this metropolis grappled with a downward spiral, but it has since become a focal point for rejuvenation, reinvention, and novel growth strategies, championed not only by the Tokyo Government but also by private developers and individual initiatives. The recent history of Tokyo bears witness to a series of intricate urban challenges, particularly following a period of rapid expansion, extensive urban sprawl, and large-scale development in the 1980s and 1990s. The influx of retirees from the 'baby boomer generation' and young professionals into central Tokyo has presented urban planners with multifaceted dilemmas. These challenges have either persisted unresolved or emerged as consequences of existing issues, such as "kakusa shakai," the widening economic disparity between rural and urban areas at the local level, or the emergence of a new demographic group characterized by economic insecurity (e.g., the 'working poor') at the micro, intra-neighborhood level (Köhn and Unkel, 2016).

While these challenges may not reach the same levels of social and ethnic polarization as seen in American cities like Los Angeles or Chicago, they manifest as a distinct form of social segregation and gentrification at the neighborhood level, where conflicts are palpable and visible (Fielding, 2004).

In recent times, Tokyo has adopted creative policies to stimulate the economic development of various areas, transforming them into creative clusters that attract a diverse array of new residents, users, and patrons. However, questions arise about the fate of areas whose economies fail to yield the expected outcomes or do not do so within the established timeframe. Do these creative clusters continue to flourish, stagnate, or evolve in unforeseen directions? A central objective of this paper is to scrutinize the role of creativity in this context: Is it employed as a strategic means to achieve economic revitalization? Is it regarded as a starting point, albeit not the sole factor in the process? Or is creativity the inherent potential of an area that can be harnessed to support social and economic development? This research's theoretical underpinning views the function and significance of creativity in urban revitalization as a fusion of these patterns and as an organic, evolving process.

The paper's overarching goal is to investigate diverse facets of creativity and urban practices to discern how they impact sustainability. The findings promise insights into devising strategies for revitalizing the city from within. Innovative methods, such as urban trails with distinct urban dwellers—the native, the newcomer, and the returnee—will be employed to elucidate everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion, shedding light on the shifting role of ordinary residents.

The interviews were conducted within Yanaka from April to March 2019, following a snowball sampling approach. The process commenced with a single shop or resident, who was approached with specific questions and later invited to partake in an urban walk. Subsequently, the interviews were translated and transcribed by the author, with participants' names replaced by pseudonyms. Importantly, all participants willingly consented to their involvement in the research and its eventual publication. The interviews with diverse participants explored

their experiences of the neighborhood and life in the city. Native residents shared their perspectives on both the positive and negative aspects, drawing on traditional elements like close social bonds, friendships, and everyday neighborhood chatter, as well as trust and a sense of voluntary commitment. They also discussed how these elements have undergone transformations in an era marked by rapid modernization and urban restructuring, giving rise to new and sometimes unanticipated spatial and social dynamics (Waley, 2007). Prior to delving into the interviews, we will introduce the case of Yanaka to provide context and explain why this district of Tokyo holds a unique significance.

Metamorphosis of Yanaka: Evolving from the Ordinary to a Creative Nexus

The enchanting Yanaka district (Figure 1), situated in Tokyo's Taito-ku ward in the eastern part of the city, was home to approximately 8,282 residents in 2019. This petite hilly expanse is often described as the foothills of the Musashino plateau. To the east, west, and north, it is gracefully enveloped by the renowned "shitamachi" quarters of Nezu, Sendagi, and Nippori, vibrant hubs where local artisans and craftsmen have long plied their trades. Yanaka, during the Edo period spanning the 16th to the 19th century, earned the moniker of "teramachi" or 'land of temples.' The hilly terrain boasted an array of temples, shrines, and cemeteries, particularly flourishing after the Great Meireki Fire of 1657, a cataclysm that razed many temples, only for them to be meticulously reconstructed within the Yanaka vicinity. In those bygone days, the district found itself on the fringes of an expanding Edo, offering ample space and elevated ground ideally suited for the relocation of Tokyo's temples (Waley, 1991).

Amid the temple grounds, feudal lords and their loyal samurai carved out modest residential quarters, gradually transforming these precincts into commoners' abodes during the 19th century. The profusion of temples and the opulent mansions of feudal lords account for the relatively generous plot sizes, an abundance of traditional structures, and the enduring spirit that Yanaka exudes to this day. Even as Yanaka weathered the tumultuous Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the harrowing Tokyo Air Raids of 1945, it clung steadfastly to the charm of its Edo-era roots. Low-rise "nagaya" housing and quaint, intimate alleyways continue to coexist seamlessly, threading through or nestling amidst larger temple expanses. Yanaka's urban

fabric, having evolved organically over centuries, has remained unscathed by the sweeping tide of alterations, redevelopment, or large-scale rejuvenation. The labyrinthine network of streets, side lanes, and hidden alleys, accessible primarily on foot, conceals diminutive plots that share their boundaries with private properties, complicating any attempts to institute safety measures for fire and earthquake prevention (Sorensen, 2004).

Throughout the year, Yanaka plays host to an array of seasonal events, exemplified by the enchanting cherry blossoms that grace the Yanaka Cemetery Park each spring. This district is celebrated for its prestigious art universities, galleries, and historical edifices, many of which have undergone painstaking renovations to accommodate novel functions. A striking instance is the transformation of a dilapidated bathhouse into the now-renowned art gallery, SCAI THE BATHHOUSE. This adaptive repurposing vividly illustrates the area's soaring demand and its ability to meld the old with the new, culminating in an ambiance that exudes sophistication and artistic prowess. A more recent triumph is the preservation of three traditional houses, initially slated for conversion into a mundane parking facility, but instead reborn in May 2015 as Ueno Sakuragi Atari. This multifaceted complex encompasses shops, a charming cafe-cum-beer hall, art studios, and the innovative Kayaba Bakery. Several other communal spaces are perennially abuzz with activities, preserving the cherished traditions of artisan craftsmen and fostering harmonious connections between long-standing denizens and newcomers alike (Ueno Sakuragi Atari, 2015).

The Case Study Area of Yanesen, Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi, Tokyo
Cases Study Area.



Figure 1: Map of Yanaka, part of the Yanesen neighborhood made up of Yanaka, Nezu, Sendagi (Imai, 2019)

Yanaka stands as a veritable jewel in Tokyo's crown, widely acknowledged as a historic district deserving of preservation. Despite the absence of official conservation laws tailored to Yanaka, the concerted efforts of the local community have shielded the district from the encroachment of urban processes, including large-scale urban renewal projects and towering high-rise developments within its historic precincts. In 1979, a community center emerged in Yanaka, empowering residents to actively engage in local town planning initiatives, known as "machizukuri" projects. As the 1980s unfurled, local visionaries initiated proposals to grapple with the exigencies of urban restructuring, a phenomenon unfolding in numerous inner-city neighborhoods across Tokyo. This proactive approach, recognized as 'community building' or "machizukuri," ushered in a participatory process whereby the local community could proffer ideas to both the local government and other stakeholders, striving to unearth the optimal compromises for all parties involved (Teh, Y.S. and Y. Sasaki, 2014).

Catalysts of Change in Yanaka: Nurturing the Past and Cultivating the Future

In the annals of 1989, a grassroots organization emerged by the name of Yanaka Gakkō, or Yanaka School. Comprised of a mosaic of residents, academics, and students, this local collective harbored a shared ambition: to safeguard the historical tapestry and indigenous treasures of Yanaka. Their journey unfolded through meticulous surveys and engaging workshops, all orchestrated to chronicle the district's historical facets. With an all-encompassing invitation, the Yanaka Gakkō beckoned community members, spanning from residents to children, to immerse themselves in an assortment of cultural festivities. Among these was the annual art extravaganza known as Geikoten, where local wisdom flows, and communal bonds solidify.

The crown jewel in this creative tapestry is the Geikoten Event, a tradition inaugurated in 1993, unfurling its vibrancy each October. It beckons all members of the community to partake, whether by showcasing their artistic expressions, strolling through local stalls and galleries, or engaging in myriad other participatory ways. As hordes of residents take part, Yanaka becomes a bustling hive of activity, as the entire neighborhood takes to the streets, weaving through local workshops, studios, street markets, installations, and open-air showcases. Abandoned homes, vacant lots, and hidden niches are imbued with new life, becoming ephemeral venues for installations, performances, and artistic spectacles. The distribution of handcrafted maps serves as an open invitation, encouraging both insiders and outsiders to explore public and private spaces un-

veiled during this special fortnight.

To accentuate Yanaka's unique heritage and introduce visitors to its abundant local culture, several facilities have sprung into existence. Among them, a gallery dedicated to local craftsmanship stands out, valiantly endeavoring to foster appreciation for the district's heritage. The Yanaka Gakkō swiftly broadened its horizons, forging collaborations with neighboring groups to zealously safeguard the district's historical riches, while simultaneously spreading the Yanaka story to distant cities (Shibara, 2010). These concerted initiatives converge on a singular goal: to thrust the public eye onto the community's shared spaces, ensuring that narrow lanes and quaint alleyways persist as the fundamental fabric of urban existence. With tours, surveys, and a judicious use of social media, local community members have orchestrated a symphony inviting individuals from all walks of life to claim their stake in the streets, rekindling the spirit of local culture. Meanwhile, mainstream media publications and outlets have turned their gaze towards the district, capturing its unique events and luring an influx of visitors and tourists. The core contention of this communal endeavor is straightforward: heightened public awareness will undoubtedly foster a deeper appreciation, reevaluation, and safeguarding of the district's cherished local assets (Urashima, 2016).

Nonetheless, a recent examination undertaken in 2019 by the Taito Cultural and Historical Society, in collaboration with the graduate school of the Tokyo University of the Arts, delivers a sobering revelation. Out of a total of 748 traditional wooden buildings, meticulously documented around 1965 and in 1986, only 539 endured in 2002, with even fewer—406—remaining by 2019. The primary driver of this architectural attrition appears to be the Tokyo government's apprehensions about the seismic safety of these wooden edifices. In response, some property owners opted to fortify their structures, yet such measures were infrequent due to their substantial costs. Consequently, most venerable houses succumbed to demolition, paving the way for modern, earthquake-resistant constructions.

The tide, however, began to turn with the ascendancy of local influence. Certain construction projects, originally earmarked for the Yanaka precinct, were deferred by developers, as evidenced by the shelving of plans for a subterranean parking facility beneath the Shinobazu Pond. It's worth noting that not all developers were equally amenable to local input; nonetheless, a few proposals, such as the Lions Mansion in 2000, took into account the local "machinami" or townscape, embodying reduced building heights and fresh architectural designs harmonizing with the urban milieu (Waley, 2012). This duality—on one hand, community involvement in shaping the district's destiny through the establish-

ment of a dedicated community-building constitution, and on the other, negotiation to safeguard Yanaka's historical and cultural panorama—played a pivotal role. The government's consent to apply the 'community-building charter' to Yanaka sealed the district's fate.

In recent decades, Yanaka has undergone a transformation, evolving into an increasingly coveted neighborhood that appeals to both the young and old alike (Hirakawa, 2002). It has remained immune to the pervasive high-rise developments characteristic of Tokyo since the 1960s and resisted the clutches of gentrification. However, the late 1980s ushered in a new wave, intensified by plummeting land prices in the 1990s. Real estate developers, with a fervor to realize

towering skyscrapers and fashionable rejuvenation schemes, applied mounting pressure (Sorensen, 2009). Despite the valiant efforts of the local community, Yanaka now bears witness to a front of high-rise structures that envelop its core, cascading down the main thoroughfare of Kotodoi dori to the south, Shinobazu dori to the west in Nezu, and eastward to Nippori (Popham, 1985).

As the population burgeons once more in central Tokyo, the pursuit of suitable housing options in inner-city districts like Yanaka has surged. Architects and real estate firms are attuned to this demand, channeling their energies into contemporary high-rise constructions (Figure 2), the hallmark of urban residential developments (Dimmer and Klinkers, 2004). Consequently, the long-standing native community finds itself at a crossroads, grappling with the challenge of harmonizing the diverse needs and daily rhythms of both existing residents and newcomers within the existing spatial and social tapestry. The ensuing interviews encapsulate a dual narrative: one portraying the pressures, conflicts, and tribulations endured by the district's residents, and the other spotlighting how these individuals envision their personal activities, lifestyles, and creative practices to help to sustain the community.

Everyday Environments as Fertile Grounds for Inspiration and Ingenuity

Right next door to Kumamoto-san resides Aki-san, a recent transplant to the neighborhood. Having graduated from the nearby university, Aki-san, along with her partner, has embarked on an entrepreneurial venture by opening a charming café. When asked why she isn't actively involved in the local community development groups, her response is candid: the demands of managing her café and devising innovative strategies to attract a steady



Figure 2: Changing Urban Landscape, seen from Yanaka (Imai, 2019)

stream of patrons leave her with little time during the week.

Yet, Aki-san genuinely appreciates the neighborhood's allure. She relishes the fact that many people are drawn to the area's cultural attractions, guaranteeing a steady stream of customers to their cozy café. Although she acknowledges the transformations the neighborhood has undergone in recent years, her perspective as a newcomer remains distinct. What holds paramount importance to her is the harmonious fusion of work and living that the neighborhood provides.

When asked if this was the primary reason for her move to the area, she affirms that she was captivated by the charm of the old houses and the intriguing blend of tradition and modernity. The burgeoning presence of galleries, studios, and alternative shops in the vicinity further piqued her interest. While she harbors a deep fondness for the area's traditional and 'old-fashioned pattern of everyday life,' she consciously maintains amicable relations with fellow newcomers, as she doesn't feel closely connected to the long-standing residents. Her neighbor runs a rice-cracker shop, but when queried about their interactions, she reveals that she seldom encounters him. Her preferred haunts include places like the art gallery just across from the tatami shop.

Conversely, I had the opportunity to converse with Nakado-san a few days later, who operates the shop adjacent to Aki-san's. When questioned about his rapport with the new neighbors, he offers a candid response: "Communication, I wouldn't quite label it as communication. We exchange occasional pleasantries, but little more than that...I'm somewhat apprehensive about the ongoing changes. The new shops also pose a degree of competition for me, given that many visitors to the area are young people who come to Yanaka for leisurely strolls and coffee...and occasionally make souvenir purchases at

my shop. But I'm growing older, and my son has no intention of inheriting the business" (Interview 2019).

The evolving creative dynamics in the neighborhood, driven by the increasing gentrification process, yield both favorable and challenging outcomes for the area's spatial and social fabric. As newcomers move into old residences to establish fresh businesses, they draw a new influx of individuals to the neighborhood. Nonetheless, these shifts also intensify the existing disparities between long-standing locals and newcomers, each harboring distinct visions for the future of the traditional enclave. New arrivals not only infuse the area with innovative ideas but also usher in novel urban lifestyles that begin to dominate and shape fresh urban trends—a testament to the evolving face of gentrification in the community.

Creativity and Sentimentality

As part of this study, aimed at understanding evolving perceptions and acknowledgments of everyday locales, an additional interview and excursion were conducted with a returnee to the neighborhood. This individual possesses unique insights and creative inclinations rooted in their memories of the past (Demerath 2003). In the lower reaches of Yanaka, I engaged in a conversation with Okamoto-san, the proprietor of a flower shop housed within an aged wooden structure. The premises were once occupied by a carpentry shop that her father had leased to someone else. A decade ago, Okamoto-san returned to her hometown to take over the shop. Reflecting on her childhood and the neighborhood's transformations over the past thirty years, she reminisced:

"My family has resided in this house for generations, tracing back to my grandfather's time. During my childhood, neighbors were tightly knit. We would share dinners and borrow each other's baths. I often wonder what remains of those times. Undoubtedly, my affinity for the old stems from this working-class neighborhood. Elderly women still frequent the nearby supermarket with their wicker baskets, meticulously repairing them at the slightest damage. Quality items last a lifetime. When I encounter these individuals, I can't help but admire their style" (Interview 2019).

Okamoto-san's recollections highlight her profound connection to and rootedness in the neighborhood. Her vibrant memories appear to be a driving force behind her return, as she yearned for the places of her youth, many of which may have vanished but continue to thrive in her memories. These recollections have now become an integral part of her daily life, realized through the transformation of her family's house into a flower shop. Okamoto-san

utilizes her shop as a meeting point, where she can pursue her distinctive, hybrid lifestyle—melding her professional and personal lives—and express her creativity and cherished memories through the shop's ambiance and the manner in which she presents her wares.

When questioned about the customer base at her shop, Okamoto-san noted, "Mainly newcomers frequent my shop, spanning residents of the modern high-rises to occupants of quaint older homes, as well as those with a penchant for eccentric items" (Interview 2019). While most of her customers are newcomers, residing in either the new apartment complexes or older, charming homes, she laments the neighborhood's gradual transformation into one characterized by towering skyscrapers. She believes this shift has led to a reduction in sunlight and green spaces in the area. However, when asked if she participates in local groups dedicated to preserving the neighborhood's character, she replied in the negative, explaining that she prefers to lead a liberated life, unrestrained by the confines of organized activities.

Delving into the importance of maintaining public, commonplace spaces in the vicinity of her shop, Okamoto-san elucidated their significance in her life:

"Due to my nature, always in a rush, I tend to take shortcuts through the alleyways. Perhaps my nature aligns with that of children who seek out small spaces like boxes they can crawl into. I prefer to walk these alleyways alone in the morning when everything is still, quiet, and empty. It reminds me of my childhood days. Nowadays, everything has become fast-paced and noisy, making me yearn for those moments when I can simply hide and escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life" (Interview 2019).

This statement reveals Okamoto-san's utilization of these overlooked urban spaces as retreats and hideaways. Although she does not actively support revitalization and preservation initiatives, she creatively embraces these alleyways, reflecting her hybrid connection to her surroundings. This connection mirrors her personal situation as a returnee to the area. While she was absent during the initial emergence of high-rise buildings and other changes, she has come to accept and internalize the evolving urban landscape by pursuing her unique, urban, and creative lifestyle. This response can be understood as a blend of compensation (utilizing urban spaces for her daily walks of reminiscence), adaptation (responding to the demands of new residents and visitors by operating her unique shop), and resignation (opting not to engage in local groups or organized efforts). Ultimately, her hybrid lifestyle embodies diverse facets of the neighborhood's ongoing changes, where, on one hand, she mourns the transforma-



Figure 3: Creative Shops along Hebimichi (Snake Lane) in Yanaka (Imai, 2019)

tions, and on the other, she longs for more everyday places that enable her to contemplate her past, present, and future.

Creative Practices and Sustainable Living

Strolling along the border that separates Yanaka and Nezu, I entered DouDou, a quaint shop where I encountered a woman in her late 30s standing behind the counter (Figure 3). In response to my query about how she embarked on this endeavor, Akamatsu-san shared her journey. She initially started by selling handmade children's clothing online and later expanded into crafting leather goods known as 'Leproto (Plot Les),' along with items such as bags, shoes, hats, and semi-customized shirts. In 2008, she and her husband, who was born in the area and returned to live here in 2003, opened the atelier together. Her husband handles the sewing while she manages the shop. Akamatsu-san first discovered this local neighborhood while studying at the Art University near Ueno Park and has since witnessed many of her friends and colleagues launch their own small businesses in the area. Her immediate neighbor also operates an atelier specializing in various self-made accessories and bags, but unlike Akamatsu-san, she manages her shop independently with her husband.

When asked to describe their lifestyle, Akamatsu-san and her husband emphasized their appreciation for the serene atmosphere of the neighborhood, which allows them to lead a 'slow life' while seamlessly blending work and personal life (Interview 2019). Running their own shop had always been a small dream, and they realized it by relying on the communication and network they established with their immediate neighbors. Inquiring whether they are actively involved in the local neighborhood association or other community groups, Akamatsu-san explained that they participate in different events throughout the year, such as the Geikoten held ev-

ery October. However, they have not felt the need to become active members of other local groups. She concluded by stating that their primary focus is on their clients and customers, who are primarily outsiders visiting the area on foot or guided by travel magazines.

Their direct neighbor, also a woman in her 30s, operates the shop in collaboration with another colleague. Their range of products is more diverse, and when asked about their primary focus, Tsukada-san explained that they mainly specialize in self-made accessories, bags, and alternative fashion items. Tsukada-san stated that Yanaka has gained increasing prominence in recent years, and

a friend informed her about the opportunity to open a small shop along this narrow lane. Seizing the chance, she established the first branch in the Tokyo area. She emphasized that this location is by far the most 'attractive' (Interview 2019) as it aligns perfectly with the philosophy and style of their shop. Tsukada-san believes that the narrow lanes and urban fabric of Yanaka play a crucial role in attracting the type of customers who visit and shop in their atelier.

Her neighbor next door shares a similar sentiment about the narrow street. Yamada-san, also a returnee to the area and a former student of the nearby university, opened a bagel shop at the end of 2008 with her partner. Both of them work diligently to operate the bakery alongside their main jobs and have limited time for activities unrelated to their work. When asked if she appreciates the "shitamachi" atmosphere of the area, Yamada-san mentioned being drawn to the charm of the old houses and the juxtaposition of old and new. She noted that numerous galleries, studios, and alternative shops have sprung up in the area, as more young creatives decide to work and live here (Interview 2019). She expressed an affinity for the traditional and 'old-fashioned pattern of everyday life' while also fostering positive relationships with newcomers and other alternative individuals in the area, feeling less connected to the older residents nearby.

When questioned about whether her lifestyle contributes to the preservation of Yanaka, Yamada-san revealed that she is content with fulfilling her own desire to lead a simple yet meaningful life. In doing so, she believes she respects not only the history and traditions of the area but also its potential and possibilities. She sees the fact that she and her husband invest all their energy into running the shop as a contribution to the community. Their efforts help rejuvenate and invigorate the area without erasing its historical character.

Discussion

The interviews presented shed light on the diverse groups of individuals residing and working in Yanaka, categorizing them primarily as natives, returnees, and newcomers to the area. Natives consist of traditional merchants and craftsmen who continue to utilize ordinary places, such as alleyways, as extensions of their workspace, storage areas, or spaces for producing and exhibiting their work. They engage in communication not only with neighbors and fellow merchants but also with potential customers and newcomers interested in rediscovering traditional craftsmanship, ordering handmade goods, or contemplating a move to the neighborhood.

In many ways, this group of residents can be considered as leading a somewhat marginalized lifestyle. They may not contribute significantly to the local economy, but they own their houses and maintain their unique way of life. Paradoxically, this very lifestyle helps Yanaka persist as a closely-knit and socially dense community. Natives frequent ordinary places for daily walks, local shopping, and exchanges with neighbors. They tend to their potted plants, hang their laundry, and follow various daily routines that nurture communication, trust, and strong social bonds among people from diverse backgrounds.

However, these efforts cannot completely shield Yanaka from the changes that typify many Tokyo neighborhoods. Even in Yanaka, the community becomes increasingly fragmented as old homeowners pass away, and newcomers acquire their land to construct new residences, widening the gap between natives and newcomers, young and old, less affluent and more affluent. These changes neither provide opportunities for revitalizing the area through creative approaches nor enhance the sustainability of urban living.

Nonetheless, some newcomers, like Aki-san, take advantage of existing structures. While she may not have the means to rebuild, she rents an old house and maintains its structure for new purposes and users, thereby preserving the architectural heritage of the area. In doing so, she not only sustains the old building but also invites visitors and particularly newcomers to explore her café and the neighborhood, adding to Yanaka's appeal and fostering gentrification in its multifaceted forms, including appreciation, commercialization, and consumption.

Returnees like Okamoto also play a vital role in preserving Yanaka. She had the opportunity to move into an existing building, establishing a down-to-earth flower shop and a gathering place for community members. Her desire to preserve Yanaka aligns with her commitment to maintaining communication with all her neighbors. This approach offers the chance to safeguard both the physical and social

characteristics of Yanaka through a mixed-use concept. It is akin to the objectives of those advocating for urban commons, who seek to harness the creative and productive potential of neglected, ordinary spaces to rejuvenate them for the benefit of all.

Residents and returnees like Yamada utilize existing structures to develop new businesses, even though living in Yanaka is financially challenging due to high rent prices. Nevertheless, their initiatives revitalize the neighborhood without disrupting daily life patterns or access to ordinary places, leveraging them in multiple ways beyond mere shortcuts or bicycle storage.

Newcomers, such as artists or alternative businesses represented by Tsukada and Akamatsu, appreciate the unique ambiance of the alleyways, enabling them to express alternative lifestyles, engage in subcultures, or blend work and living. They establish ateliers, galleries, cafes, or small bookshops that attract various customers, capitalizing on Yanaka's popularity. They offer products like high-end ceramics, antique furniture, or fashion designs incorporating reused kimonos, contributing to the local and symbolic economy's growth. Simultaneously, they breathe new life into the neighborhood by attracting young, working, and well-off individuals who choose to make Yanaka their home. In essence, artists have played a role in gentrifying Yanaka while simultaneously revitalizing the neighborhood, enticing visitors eager to savor local cuisine, culture, and traditional items.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to scrutinize whether these changes genuinely aim to bolster the creativity of the neighborhood. On the surface, alternative urban lifestyles and urban spaces, as exemplified in the case of Yanaka, are often marketed as more sustainable, making them attractive to urban elites and expatriates—an inclination the Tokyo urban government particularly welcomes. However, in practice, the creative practices adopted by marginalized groups, which involve the utilization of existing historical and local resources, serve as a catalyst for discussions about more sustainable pathways for the future of urban communities.

In conclusion, I contend that ordinary places like the alleyways provide a reflection of the increasing interest in and significance of ordinary places and commons. Positioned between the poetics of everyday life and political struggles, these ordinary places are aligned with the concept of urban commons, introduced to elucidate the interconnectedness of new urban hotspots, creative urbanism, and the future of sustainability.

Conclusion

The stories of Yanaka serve as a testament to the power of community-led urban preservation in the

face of relentless urbanization pressures. Nestled in Tokyo, Japan, Yanaka's ability to retain its traditional charm amidst the bustling modernity of the city stands as a remarkable achievement. Over the years, Yanaka has encountered persistent challenges from developers keen on transforming the area into a hub of high-rise buildings and commercial complexes. However, the tenacity of the local community has thwarted these attempts, preserving Yanaka as a tranquil and culturally rich neighborhood.

The success story of Yanaka underscores several critical factors. First and foremost, it highlights the importance of fostering a strong sense of community identity. By celebrating their heritage and culture, residents have united in defense of their neighborhood. Organizing and advocating for their cause has also played a pivotal role. Communities must develop comprehensive strategies to combat gentrification and redevelopment, including lobbying government entities, influencing developers, and raising awareness about the significance of preservation.

Moreover, embracing creativity as a means of preservation has been instrumental. Yanaka has implemented innovative approaches, such as a "community building constitution" and cultural events, to safeguard its unique character. In essence, Yanaka's story offers valuable lessons for other communities grappling with similar challenges. It emphasizes the need to cultivate a robust sense of community identity, prioritize organization and advocacy, and harness creativity to protect the cultural heritage of urban neighborhoods. Yanaka stands as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that communities can shape their destinies and safeguard their traditions in the face of rapid urbanization.

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