

Current evaluation of the redevelopment for Auxiliary Route 54 in Shimokitazawa

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Critical Interpretation – Course Assignment, Urban Design Studies
Keio University, SFC, Autumn Semester 2022

Introduction

Shimokitazawa; a neighborhood in the Setagaya district in southwestern Tokyo has the Shimokitazawa Station in its center, which is just a few train stations away from Shinjuku and Shibuya, the two major centers of Tokyo. The area has small vintage clothing shops, groovy music venues, and unique bars which are all spread along small, cozy alleys. During the turn of the millennium, there was a plan for the construction of a new road passing through the middle of the dense neighborhood, leading to a public discussion. While the construction of the road began almost immediately after the discussion, the construction was yet to be completed till date. Thus, pertinent questions begging for answers are; what is the current situation of road construction? Should the municipality keep the original plans of the road, or it should develop a new concept for the road; considering the ever-dynamic nature and findings in urban and transportation planning?

The Feeling of Shimokitazawa

The streets of the narrow and curvy roads get buzzing and crowded, especially on weekends and public holidays, as young people gather in trendy cafes and search for unique items in the many small and individual-owned shops. By evening, many live music venues and bars open their doors to offer a diverse cultural experience. Hence, one could easily describe the area as humanly scaled and pedestrian-oriented.

Most people in Shimokitazawa are visitors that do not live in the area. They arrive by either of the two train lines; the “Odakyu Line” and the “Keio Inokashira Line”, which intersect in Shimokitazawa. This intersection makes the heart of the neighborhood, as progression mainly occurs from there to the north and south.

Redevelopment Plan

In the War Damage Rehabilitation Plan Issued by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 1946, they suggested a large new road to connect the neighborhood, which survived the Second World War bombing, into a new comprehensive road network. The plans seemed to be forgotten until 2003, when city officials announced the planned road, including the lifting of building height restrictions.

In 2006, they presented the final plans for the construction of a 25-meter-wide road, which would cut through the heart of the vibrant neighborhood. They scheduled the demolition of multiple well-intact commercial and residential buildings to start in 2010, with the completion scheduled for 2014.

(2) 事業平面図



Figure 1. Project floor plan of Setagaya District Street Route 10

Public Proapar

Unlike many other major construction intentions in Japan, public arousal arose around the plan leading to the creation of a group called “Save the Shimokitazawa”. This group feared the loss of the unique cultural, community-friendly, and small-scale neighborhood and steps up to preserve it. An unknown person comments on a blog post: “The things which

symbolize Shimokitazawa, the Suzunari, the shops by the station entrance, the alleys that create the area's pedestrian atmosphere and which cars cannot navigate (...) — all of this is to be flattened by bulldozers under the plan to create Sub-Road 54 and the station-front roundabout.” (Salzberg, 2019).

On the other side, there is the “Shimokitazawa Shop Owners Union”, a rather old organization consisting of many elderly residents, which often resent newcomers in the area that binds up with the government to support their plans (Fackler, 2006). The government officials, both at the ward and the city of Tokyo levels, maintained a deafening silence on the situation. The newly elected mayor stated that he would reconsider the case but never announced any decision publicly.

Undergroundization

Today, after approximately 50 years after the initial idea and around ten years after the commencement of the demolition of the building for the construction of the Auxiliary Route 54, there is still no wide new road ploughing through the urban drawl connecting the Shimokitazawa Station for the motorist. But there are other things that happened since then. They had laid the Odakyu Subway Line beneath the earth around the busy town and the Station. This not only reduced noise and the amount of dangerous and slow rail crossings, but also made space for the development of new urban residential and commercial buildings, including public spaces.

In fact, this new development is a positive example of how good and modern urban planning can look. The nearly two kilometers long “disappearing” subway line made room for a shared space for cyclists and pedestrians. In addition, trendy cafes with cozy, quiet outdoor seating can be established on the new grounds. In the south of Shimokitazawa Station, there are creations of a much-needed green oasis with community gardens and a community center in the dense concrete jungle of Tokyo.



Figure 2. New Cafes with outdoor seating.



Figure 3. Greenspace above the underground metro line

Dead-end project

Leaving the just completed train station today, one lands in a large chaotic asphalt area. The space is full of construction fences, only narrow paths are left for pedestrians to conveniently navigate their way. Numerous signs advertise a city festival, in between, there are various information boards explaining the reconstruction of the station forecourt. An abstract visualization shows the bus station with a cab stand that is to be built there. If one takes a closer look, one finds more signs describing the entire construction project. You can see the project is aged, partly, they already have signs of vandalism. The age of the signs is unveiled by the traces of vandalism and weathering. The information about the completion has been pasted over with new data.



Figure 4. Empty space in front of Shimokitazawa Station. Signs announce events and provide information about the construction project.

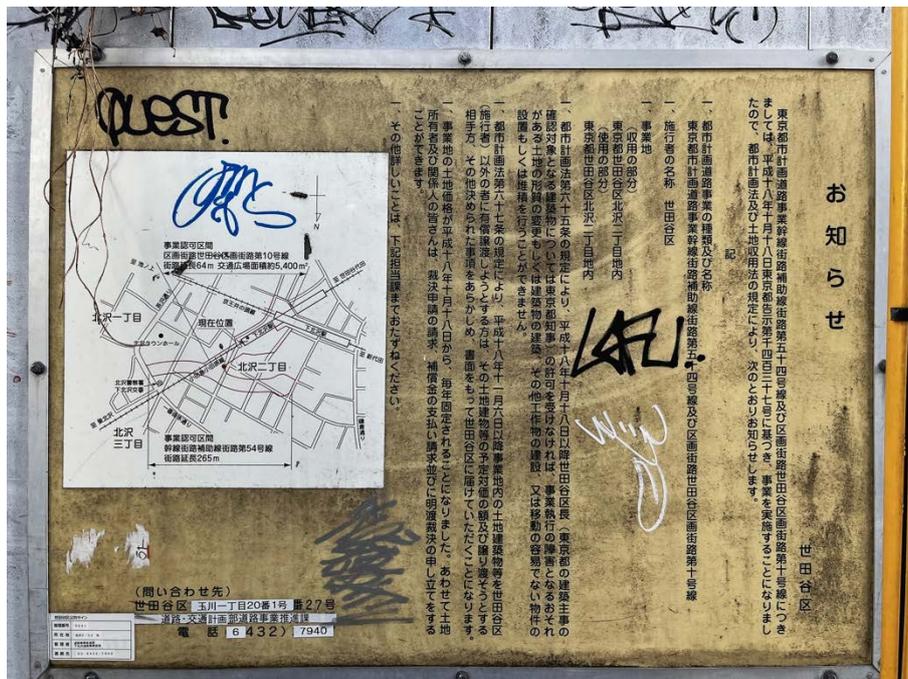


Figure 5. Information board near Shimokitazawa Station informing about the planned construction. The date of completion has been changed multiple times. Graffiti and nature are slowly taking over the sign.

One of the two main arguments of the proponents of the road construction project is the connection of the railroad station with a larger road. Historically, only small roads served the station. The settlement structure can be traced back to the road layout of the old farmer's village, that was once there (Hattori, 2012). The small, cozy, further car-free streets are the main factor why so many in the neighborhood feels so comfortable being there. Led by the Shopkeepers Union, the proponents of the new road construction are of the belief that the new wide road will attract more customers to the area. An old lady who owns a small Japanese biscuits shop adjacent to the planned road told me that she believes that several high-paying customers would patronize her with their cars once the new wide road is constructed. Mostly, the older members of the union are used to the radical urban redevelopments such as for the car-friendly city, which have taken place in many other places in Tokyo. Strictly on the belief that new auto roads would only bring benefits to the community.

However, while rather unfortunate, we currently know more. Globally, in many urban communities, the "sins" of the 1960s are being pulled apart. Covered channels are being opened up, and car lanes are being reduced to avail more room for pedestrians and cyclists. Additionally, there are creations of spaces for inner-city green, which is urgently and essentially needed considering climate change and our overly sealed cities. Particularly, sensitive population groups like the youth and elderly, significantly, benefit from low-car and pedestrian-friendly centers. In Tokyo, the urgent necessity of rethinking and re-strategizing the current and previous planning practices is gradually taking shape and commencing. "The Tokyo metropolitan government has a tendency to look at things on the scale of Tokyo as a whole rather than just at the ecosystem (...) Their logic is based on road network theory, which states that a road functions best when all roads are connected and become a network. In other words, even if a road is not needed in an area, it makes sense for Tokyo as a whole to have a network of roads." (Miura, 2021).

Also, regarding the argument of the cab stand, my sincere opinion is that the idea is archaic and long outdated. A few years ago, traditionally, you had to find a cab stand to get a cab, especially late in the night. Today, at the convenience of your palm; with your smartphone, you can order a cab directly to pick you up at your location to your destination.

Another argument cited by the planners for the road is the consideration of access in the event of the occurrence of a disaster. After the large September 2011 earthquake, the resolve to make the city more resilient to disasters has become more necessary. Hence, the administration vies that to successfully accommodate emergency vehicles, the city's main route must be sufficiently broad.

While the city has already acquired some of the land needed for construction, much of the numerous small privately owned lots are still missing. On some of the acquired pieces of land, houses, that are gradually rotting away, are on them. For some of the house owners, it must have been highly lucrative for them to sell their houses. But whether the remaining house owners don't want to vacate the area, sell their houses because of the ensuing protest, or speculate with their houses remains largely unknown. The fallow areas are asphalted and fenced to keep the costs and risks as low as possible. Three of the areas are intermediately used as car parking, bicycle parking, or picnic area. It was interesting that a bakery saleswoman, whose bakery is next to the "picnic area", whom I spoke with, knew nothing about the road construction project and innocently thought the area was being deliberately kept free for picnic events happening on some Saturdays. Some blue seat cubes on fake grass on a fenced piece of asphalted make up the picnic area. It portrays the area as a friendly and inviting gathering place for the community.

In general, the gray wastelands alongside the vacant buildings create a rather dull ambience in a quarter that was otherwise so lively.



Figure 6. Weak intermediate use of the vacant lots.

A few meters further away from the now underground railroad line, the proposed course of the street can already be seen on newly constructed buildings and those under construction. A building with a triangular ground plan is being raised, while others have large glass facades facing the current fallow land. Currently, the stores are empty, with the owners, probably, speculating on high profits when the road is finished.

Yesterday's urban planning - how to proceed?

The city's government continues to quietly pursue the auto-ideological plans of the last millennium and is trying to acquire the necessary land. Employees of the "Kitazawa City Development Division" whom I asked about the project told me that they think that the project is good and necessary for the city. When asked what the residents think, they said it's "50/50". While they could not state, in clear terms, a completion date, they think it will be ready in 2030. In fact, the Setagaya Ward, which should work in the interest of its residents, has little or no authority for revising the procedures and substance of projects (Miura, 2021).

I asked myself, why does the city administration stick to the plans, while so many don't support the project? Shouldn't this be openly discussed? Why aren't there any intentions to find a compromise? Why are we still constructing cities for cars instead of for people? It seems that the government wants to "unwind the spaghetti-like mess" (Salzberg, 2009) with the aim for more structure; a phenomenon of our modern society that cannot control information overloads and wants to regain power over cities. Just as we have done in the taming of animals and the domestication of fruits, crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, the swine flu, or the pest infestation of our profit-oriented banana monocultures portray quite exemplarily that this is not the right way.

The valuable land that has already been acquired could be used for contemporary projects. The financing of these could be done through the proposed \$140 million budget. Its current interim use as a picnic area with its artificial turf shows wonderfully how much valuable green space is needed in the city. The land would create an ideal starting point for small pocket parks. Also, instead of wide streets for cars, high-quality bike lanes with bike parking could be created. This would create a real and sustainable gain for the city that would benefit everyone. The newly gained recreational areas with a high quality of stay would certainly also benefit the commercial sector, as many redevelopments of former car-centric city roads have shown (Gehl, 2010).

Currently, the district is one big labyrinth. Cars are encountered only in a few places. When you do encounter them, they travel relatively slowly and appears as subordinate to pedestrians. The new road would change this. Because of its location in the middle of the district, it would separate the city into two parts, North and South Shimokitazawa. The width of the planned road of up to 26 meters will change the flair in the neighborhood. Jan Gehl stated, at a distance of about 22-25 meters, we can accurately read people's facial expressions and main emotions, but the experience only becomes interesting and exciting at a distance of fewer than 10 meters, at this level of distance, we can use all our senses (Jan Gehl, 2010). Currently, most roads have a cross-sectional width of around six meters, with all road users sharing the space. Unlike the new plan, there is no public roadside parking.

Conclusion

The Shimokitazawa Subsidiary Route 54 construction project attracted a great deal of attention at the time of its release and provoked protests for the preservation of functioning and unique urban structures that were totally unusual for Japan. Unfortunately, the protest has been lost in time, while the mills of the administration continue to work slowly but steadily and quietly to implement the conservative plan of a totally outmoded plan for motorized private transport which would destroy the economic advantage of the human-scale town and bring little or no economic benefits. It is time for residents, store owners, and visitors to speak out again and help shape and protect their unique Shimokitazawa. This is true not only for Shimokitazawa but for Tokyo because, despite the city's wonderful public transportation network, there is still far too much focus on car infrastructure instead of expanding and conserving public (green) spaces and bike and pedestrian infrastructure.

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