

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Understanding Tokyo's Land Use: The Power of Microspaces

Tokyo's low crime rates, world-leading transportation network, and affordable rents make it one of the world's most livable cities. Despite its incredible size, the city is also home to a large number of microspaces, which range from tens of thousands of cozy microbars and restaurants to tiny mom-and-pop shops that occupy the ground floors of many row houses. In "Understanding Tokyo's Land Use: The Power of Microspaces," Joe McReynolds considers the lessons that the city can (and cannot) provide for American urban policy.

MICROSPACES OFFER A NUMBER OF BENEFITS FOR URBAN LIFE

- Neighborhoods can grow more organically and evolve while experiencing less displacement, becoming "multilayered" districts accommodating multiple demographics at once.
- Niche, experimental, and mom-and-pop small businesses are all easier to launch and sustain, which is a boon to subculture and diversity of all kinds.
- Strong community support and low financial requirements make microbusinesses surprisingly resilient, and historical preservation often occurs naturally as a result.
- When a sufficient number of connected microbusinesses cluster in one place, as in the case of Shinjuku's Golden Gai microbar district, the area itself becomes a destination benefiting all of the district's microbusinesses.

PUBLIC POLICY MAKES TOKYO POSSIBLE

Tokyo's microspaces are the result of its unique historical, spatial, and cultural circumstances, but they also exist because of public policy interventions. While many of those interventions have come in the form of top-down government action in Tokyo, it is likely that a shift toward a more flexible regulation would enable the creation of new microspaces in many American urban contexts. For example, the #1 source of microspaces in Tokyo is banned in most US cities: homeowners have the right to put nearly any small-scale business—restaurants, bars, boutiques, workshops, or galleries—on the bottom floor of their row house.

The magnetic charm of Golden Gai is rooted in a spatial configuration that was strictly publicly planned, with ownership determined via lottery. However, the area's physical conditions—smallness, intimacy, and

flexibility—are what produces its storied “authenticity,” and similar results can be achieved in other countries through targeted public policy.

Tokyo’s microspaces serve as a powerful real-world example of how cities can intentionally cultivate and benefit from emergent urbanism. With conscious effort and smart public policy, their best aspects could be replicated in the United States and around the world.