

# Japanese Roji

Travel Proposal, Winter 2017  
third year MLA candidate

## Statement of Purpose

I intend to travel to Japan during winter break 2017 to research and document Japanese *roji* (narrow urban alleyways), in order to understand the role of liminal spaces in highly dense urban settings. Traditional Japanese cities are relatively unplanned, leading to a highly fragmented and dense urban fabric. Since most Japanese cities invested heavily in public transportation, they also avoided the 20th century trend of opening and reorganization for roadway expansion, thus retaining their dense urban form. In addition, large public plazas and squares are not embraced in traditional Japanese culture (Sand, 2013), which further contributes to the enclosure and density of the city. There is also a very high degree of trust among Japanese citizens, which contributes to the high utilization of the public spaces that do exist (Sand, 2013). Consequently, Japanese social culture is predominantly played out in the smallest of urban spaces--in particular, in *roji*, the narrow public alleyways between traditional two to three story residential housing structures.

*Roji* are typically narrow, often dead-end alleyways, no more than a few meters across. Their intimate, human scale, along with the adjacency to residences, fosters a sense of community between neighbors and encourages chance social encounters. *Roji* act as mediating spaces between the private interior and the larger public realm. They are ostensibly public, often with public restrooms, signage, and vending, but are also cared for and utilized in highly personal ways. There is a tradition of urban gardening, DIY wayfinding, and improvised pedestrian amenities in Japan, and *roji* are a standard stage for these activities. In these indeterminate, liminal spaces, the line between the public and the private blurs.

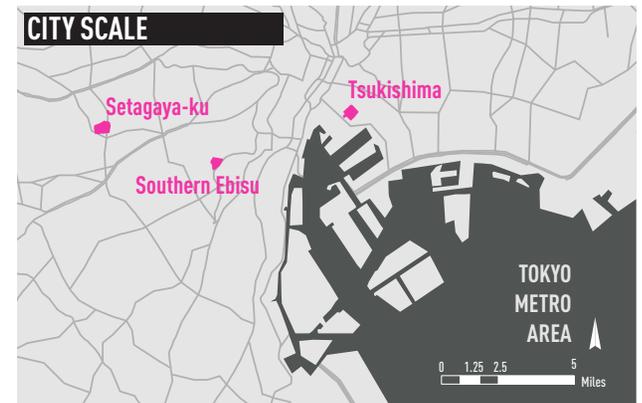
I am particularly interested in observing the particulars of how people shape and modify these liminal spaces.

How are people using gardening as a way to engage with their neighbors or their communities? As a way to demarcate space? What are the formal qualities of spaces that seem to encourage these actions? Are these spaces formally different, or utilized differently between the rapidly developing Tokyo and the relatively traditional city of Kyoto? What formal qualities of *roji* could be applied to contemporary urban residential development? These questions are crucial as cities, in Texas and the world over, continue

## Significance

In my design work, I am particularly interested in the urban context, urban infrastructure, and the untapped potential of interstitial urban spaces. I am also interested in how to foster ownership and community through the design of the built realm. Given that Japanese public spaces, and *roji* in particular, embody many of the characteristics that I wish to cultivate in my work, it is the perfect case-study for furthering my design practice.

In addition to personal academic significance, this research would contribute to the academic study of Japanese liminal spaces generally. *Roji* are garnering increased interest in recent years as the "locus of organic community" (Sand, 2013) in Japan's urban areas. There is also a pressing need to document them, as new high-rise housing complexes replace older housing stock, eliminating large sections of the traditional wooden housing where *roji* are typically found. Design collectives, community organizations, and urban gardening organizations such as HELLO GARDEN, a-small-lab, and Tokyo DIY Gardening have begun organizing around and documenting *roji* and community gardening interventions. I intend to build on this work, with a particular focus on what lessons we might draw from the *roji* typology to apply to new housing stock and future development.



## Sites

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In my seven days in Tokyo, I will focus on three neighborhoods in Tokyo; Tsukishima, Setagaya-ku and Southern Ebisu. While all of these neighborhoods retain sections of traditional housing stock, Tsukishima and Ebisu have the interesting condition of having a number of newer, more vertical housing typologies encroaching on the sides of the study area. The need to document these areas is most pressing, as older housing blocks will increasingly be replaced by modern high rises. In Kyoto, I'll spend 6 days between two study areas: a section of the Hiyoshigama and a portion of the Fushimi neighborhoods. Kyoto has seen less recent housing development than Tokyo; therefore, it will be interesting to see if the *roji* typology expands or transforms in a less dense environment, and how these changes impact use and behavior.

## Budget

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### Accommodations:

7 days Tokyo: \$90 x 3 nights airbnb	\$270
(Staying with friend in Tokyo for 3 nights)	---
6 days in Kyoto: \$80 x 6 nights airbnb	\$480

### Flight:

Austin > Tokyo, round trip airfare	\$1360
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### Food:

Tokyo: \$45 per day x 7 days	\$315
Kyoto: \$35 per day x 7 days	\$245

### Domestic Travel:

Bullet train between Kyoto + Tokyo: \$180 x 2	\$360
Day bus/public transportation passes:	
Tokyo: \$7 x 7 days	\$49
Kyoto: \$10.5 x 6	\$63

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Anticipated total: **\$3142**

Personal contribution: **\$950**

Amount requested: **\$2192**

## Methods

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I will document my findings through photography, sketching, and diagramming. I am particularly interested in developing my hand drawing skills, and my ability to quickly document information. Therefore, I will prioritize sketching and drawing from life when out in the city. I will document both the formal qualities of the spaces, such as materiality, dimensions, and construction techniques, as well as the informal interventions, such as plantings, informal signage or wayfinding, and furnishings. I'll also record a geo location for all my photographs and sketches, in order to create a map of interventions and alley types. Ultimately, I intend to synthesize my research and findings upon returning, and aim to present and/or publish my findings.

## Working Readings

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Brumann, Christoph, and Evelyn Schulz, eds. 2012. **Urban Spaces in Japan: Cultural and Social Perspectives**. The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series. London ; New York: Routledge.

Imai, Heide. 2013. "The Liminal Nature of Alleyways: Understanding the Alleyway *Roji* as a 'Boundary' between Past and Present." *Cities* 34 (October): 58–66. doi:10.1016/j.cities.2012.01.008.

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Kumagai, Yoichi, and Yoriyuki Yamada. 2008. "Green Space Relations with Residential Values in Downtown Tokyo – Implications for Urban Biodiversity Conservation." *Local Environment* 13 (2): 141–57. doi:10.1080/13549830701581697.

Montgomery, Charles. 2013. **Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Sand, Jordan. 2013. **Tokyo Vernacular**. 1st ed. University of California Press. <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520280373>.

Schulz, Evelyn. 2011. "Nagai Kafu's Reflections on Urban Beauty in Hiyorigeta : Reappraising Tokyo's Back Alleys and Waterways," November. <http://repository.seikei.ac.jp/dspace/handle/10928/192>.