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Jorge Almazán's views on Japanese cities and architecture

Nageiredo Hall of Sanbutsuji Temple (Tottori)

After navigating steep and narrow paths and climbing rocks by using chain links, one finally arrives at Nageiredo Hall. Perched on the edge of a precipice, this delicate and small hall is supported by slender stilts precariously standing on the rock. Its gracious fragility seems to remind us that its physical presence is less important than the experience of climbing Mount Mitoku and admiring its perfectly preserved beauty.



Entsūji Temple (Kyoto)

Sitting on the wooden floor of Entsūji Temple's *engawa*, one can see the *shakkei* or 'borrowed landscape' of Mount Hiei framed between the tree trunks and leaves. The vertical, straight, dark-colored cedar trunks break the horizontality of the garden shrub and get confused with the pillars of the temple. The simple disposition of the small number of elements (trees, columns, leaves, shrubs) creates a rich spatial experience of a garden that seems to expand inward and outward, horizontally and vertically.



Nōryōyuka along the Kamo River (Kyoto)

The raised platforms built on the banks of the Kamo River – the *nōryōyuka*, literally meaning "floors for storing the cool" – are an example of how one architectural configuration can integrate formal, environmental, and behavioral qualities. While creating a vibrant urban façade, these platforms afford a comfortable natural thermal environment by taking advantage of the river's cooling breeze. They are connected to restaurants, whose customers can enjoy views of the sky and the river. People's presence along the river contributes to creating a lively and festive atmosphere during Kyoto's summers.



Zakkyo building urban façade along Yasukuni-dōri (Tokyo)

Although considered unsightly by many, this urban façade is one of the most iconic views of Tokyo. Municipal brochures tend to depict Tokyo Tower or Tokyo Sky Tree as Tokyo's symbol, but most foreign guidebooks and magazines select this stretch of Yasukuni-dōri for its distinct character. The narrow and deep land plots along the avenue create a rhythmic façade of slender buildings that strive to advertise their contents to the street, creating a combined effect of unique spectacularity.



Anonymous low-rise residential area (23 wards of Tokyo)

This photograph was taken in a street in Setagaya ward, but the specific place does not matter since almost any low-rise residential area within the 23 wards of Tokyo demonstrates the same character. In the midst of a large metropolis, it is surprising to find these quiet neighborhoods reminiscent of a village, where small school children walk safely unaccompanied by adults. Streets are narrow, and land plots are modest, but neighbors strive to create an overall pleasant atmosphere embellishing the street by cultivating micro-gardens at the edges of their land plots.



Rainy Tokyo

The urban landscape of signboards and screens that characterizes most of Tokyo's train station commercial districts becomes especially striking after the rain. When it rains, even lightly, many Tokyoites tend to avoid going out, and the streets are less crowded than usual. With fewer people outside, it is the perfect time to enjoy views where the street itself becomes a reflecting surface that mirrors the surrounding light and creates a sensation of floating in the city.

Golden Gai or almost any other of Tokyo's *yokochō* alleyways

Golden Gai is probably the world's densest bar district. Many of the bars can only accommodate 5 or 6 customers, but owners and customers see this smallness as an advantage. In these intimate spaces, it is easy to communicate and start a conversation, and only one bartender is needed to manage the whole space from the counter. Despite *jiage* practices to force owners into selling their plots, the area has miraculously survived until now and has become a core of informal public space and increasingly, a tourist attraction.



Ameyoko (Ueno, Tokyo)

Viaducts and elevated infrastructure create unwelcoming undertrack spaces that segregate the two sides of the tracks. However, in Ameyoko in Ueno, it does not create a barrier – quite the opposite. It is an agglomeration of small shops that have managed to colonize the undertrack space, creating a hub for commercial activity.



The photographs of Ameyoko and Golden Gai were taken by students of the Almazán Lab. The rest of the photographs were taken by Jorge Almazán.