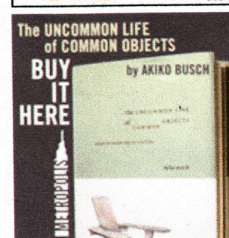
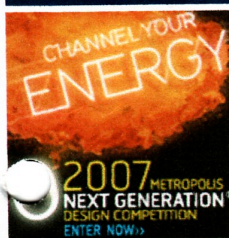


## A Whirlwind of Participation

An international gathering of architects, artists, and students attempts to preserve the culture of a unique Tokyo neighborhood.

By JoAnn Greco

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The urban fabric of Tokyo has an almost surreal quality to it. A highway slices through a warren of pedestrian streets crowded with low-rise wooden buildings that house ramshackle record stores and funky cafes. Department stores and tall glass towers emerge, seemingly overnight. It's an old story of rampant, adhoc urbanism that obliterates the past at an alarming rate—and one that some believe should not be repeated.

This summer, 125 urban activists gathered in Shimokitazawa, another endangered shitamachi ("old downtown"). For three days, architects, filmmakers, photographers, and multimedia artists took to the streets, exploring the markets, "live houses" (cabarets), and izakaya (pubs). This dramatic exercise in participatory planning is new to this city of 12 million. The event's goal was to conceive alternatives to a proposed highway, part of a larger redevelopment plan. [Matias Echanove](#), an urban studies Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tokyo and co-organizer of the [Urban Typhoon](#) workshops, says, "Shimokitazawa is one of the few areas in Tokyo that was not bombed during the war or re-designed after it. It kept its narrow, organic streets and its urban culture."

Opponents of the highway—which is scheduled to begin construction in 2010, after completion of an underground tunnel to replace overhead train tracks—are not anti-development. "Preserving the area doesn't mean keeping it as an urban museum," Echanove points out. "For example, many see the tunnel as a great opportunity." The highway's presence would eventually lead to other issues. "In Japan, the authorized building heights depend on the width of the roads along which they are built. Instead of a decentralized aggregation of small shops, commercial activity would be concentrated to a few large owners."

The workshops united a group of respected Japanese planners and architects with a student-led initiative that is accustomed to candlelit demonstrations and music CDs as protest vehicles. Fifty students and design professionals from around the world also attended. One attendee, Yolande Daniels of the New York-based [studio sumo](#), was impressed by the blend of rebellion and rigor. "It was amazing to see the more anarchist, action-oriented students working alongside the professionals with their models and talk of Jane Jacobs," she says. Daniels, a professor at Columbia University who heard of the event from Echanove, a former student, led one of the workshop's units. The resulting project, "Street Life," identifies the "small urbanism" of Shimokitazawa as a brand (it does, after all, boast an eponymous beer, as well as a [popular tv show](#)) and calls for in-filling the soon-to-be underground train line with even smaller buildings.

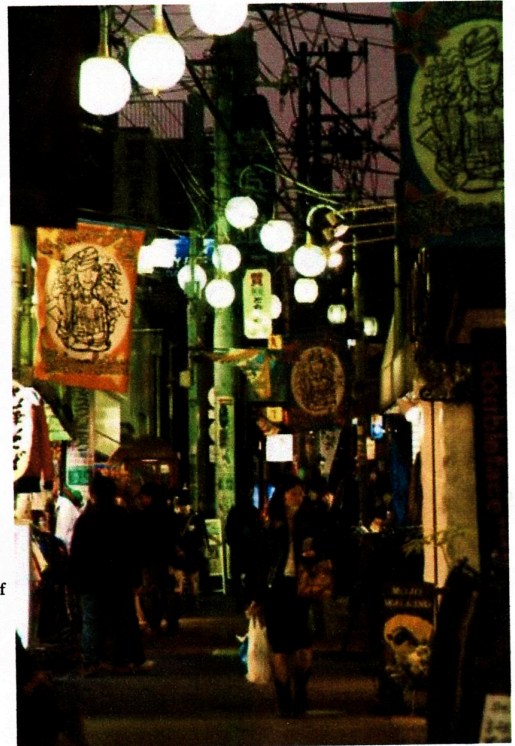
The disparate participants "succeeded in realizing the core importance of Shimokitazawa," says Kazuho Kimura, the 25-year-old leader of the student group, [Save The Shimokitazawa](#). "It's not that this town is a landmark, but that it holds a spirit that we need to save."

The government has been unresponsive to the group's alternative plans. In fact, recent planning documents recommend "block rearrangements" that change areas "of disorder into spaces that are well ordered and planned." But organizers hold high hopes. "Rather than being confrontational, which would be counterproductive in the context of Japan, we are trying to help the government come up with public involvement methods," says Echanove.

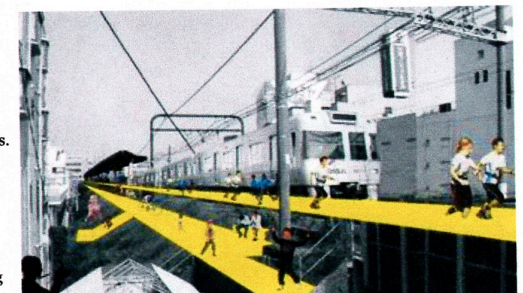
Starting this Fall, bi-weekly public meetings will explore the alternatives presented at the workshop. "The first step toward empowerment is information and knowledge," says Echanove. "The Japanese have a great capacity to organize and achieve collective goals. All the ingredients are here for Shimokitazawa to be at the forefront of participatory planning. Urban planning literally impacts the lives of citizens. Why should we accept this form of authoritarianism?"

The thirteen proposals from the workshop appear on [Urban Typhoon's](#) Web site. The group plans to release a book and CD (which will include the wide scope of multimedia utilized in the proposals) in Spring 2007.

What do you think? [Click here](#) to send us your feedback.



The Shimokitazawa area of Tokyo, with its narrow streets filled with restaurants, shops, and bars, could drastically change due to new plans for the neighborhood.  
Courtesy: Urban Typhoon/Save the Shimokitazawa Unit



In *Shimokita Whiteout* the group presented creative reappropriations for the urban public space.  
Courtesy: Urban Typhoon/CAT Unit

