



Incorporation of Difference: Branding and Spatial Restructuring of Akihabara's Subcultural Space

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Abstract. This paper examines Akihabara in Tokyo as a case of subcultural urban transformation. It aims to explain how Akihabara's identity as an electronics district and otaku gathering place has been reshaped into a global consumption landscape. The study argues that Akihabara's subcultural character has not simply disappeared. Instead, it has been selectively preserved, amplified, and reorganized through urban branding, tourism, redevelopment policies, and capital-driven commercial change. The research uses qualitative text analysis, spatial observation, and classification of business types. It draws on academic literature, policy and promotional texts, news reports, travel materials, social media discussions, shop reviews, streetscape images, and maps. The findings show that electronic parts shops, second-hand goods, hobby stores, maid cafés, and idol theaters once produced a space based on searching, exploration, and community identity. However, under the influence of the “Cool Japan” narrative, redevelopment projects such as Akihabara Crossfield, these practices have increasingly been translated into visible, photographable, and easily recognizable urban symbols. This process has led to more standardized commercial functions, more image-oriented streetscapes, and a reordering of user priorities. The paper concludes that Akihabara's transformation should be understood not only as commercialization or touristification, but as a process in which urban difference is recognized, modified, and governed.

Keywords: Akihabara, subcultural space, incorporation of difference, urban branding, spatial restructuring.

1 Introduction: Is Akihabara Still the Akihabara of Otaku?

1.1 Akihabara as a ‘Two-Dimensional Sacred Place’

As one of Tokyo's most globally recognizable subcultural landmarks, Akihabara forms the spatial image of a ‘two-dimensional sacred place’ through the dense concentration of anime advertisements, character merchandise, game shops, maid cafés, and electronics stores along Chuo-dori [1]. As its visibility has increased within ‘Cool Japan,’ Tokyo tourism, and global two-dimensional consumption [2], the district's subcultural features

have gradually been transformed into a legible urban brand and continuously reinforced through official discourse, media circulation, and tourist consumption [3]. Tourists participate in the reproduction of space through social media check-ins, merchandise purchases, and themed experiences [4]. Akihabara is therefore both a place where enthusiasts search for rare goods and a sense of community, and an entry point through which visitors encounter Japanese popular culture. However, ongoing debates over whether Akihabara has ‘changed its flavor’ reflect anxieties about authenticity in the urban evolution of subcultural space.

With the Crossfield project, the construction of large commercial facilities, and the influx of global tourists, Akihabara has gradually undergone consumption upgrading, business replacement, and redevelopment [5]. In recent years, rents around Akihabara Station and Chuo-dori have also ranked in the upper-middle range within Tokyo [6]. Existing theories of ‘commercial renewal’, ‘touristification’ or ‘gentrification’ can partly explain the causes of transformation in this area [7]. However, they remain insufficient for explaining why the transformation of subcultural symbols into urban landscape obscures formerly vibrant and differentiated everyday spatial practices beneath an abstract urban order. At the same time, Akihabara’s once marginal subcultural symbols have not simply been eliminated by the mainstream order; rather, they have been selectively retained, amplified, and incorporated into the logics of national branding and urban management [8].

1.2 From the ‘Disappearance of Difference’ to the ‘Incorporation of Difference’

This paper therefore does not understand Akihabara as following a linear trajectory from ‘distinctive’ to ‘undistinctive.’ Instead, it examines the district through the framework of the ‘incorporation of difference.’ Existing studies have argued that concepts such as renewal, regeneration, or gentrification cannot fully explain qualitative changes in everyday life or the ways in which urban value is produced and appropriated. By contrast, the ‘incorporation of difference’ emphasizes how difference is absorbed, commodified, and transformed into exchange value [8].

1.3 Research Questions, Object of Study, and Article Structure

The core questions of this paper are as follows: How is Akihabara’s subcultural distinctiveness produced, selected, and recoded? How does this process of incorporation reshape otaku spatial practices and the district’s commercial structure? Taking Akihabara as its object of study, this paper focuses on the period from the mid-1940s to the mid-2010s. It adopts an analytical framework of ‘production of difference—manifestation of urban value—selective incorporation—spatial restructuring’ [8]. Through this framework, it examines how subcultural difference is translated by media, recognized by policy, and packaged by capital, and further discusses how hegemonic forces incorporate and reproduce the qualitative characteristics of urban space by absorbing and restructuring marginal practices [9].

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Incorporation of Difference

In studies of contemporary urban transformation, traditional concepts such as ‘gentrification,’ ‘commercialization,’ and ‘touristification’ tend to focus on capital inflows, physical upgrading, and the physical replacement of users. Yet they often fail to fully reveal profound changes in the quality of everyday urban life and the contradictory character of urbanization processes. For this reason, this study draws on the analytical framework of the ‘incorporation of urban differences’ proposed by Hanakata et al. [8]. This perspective argues that the core of urban transformation lies in how locally embedded and distinctive urban values are discovered, selected, commodified, and reorganized into mainstream economic logics by external forces such as the state and capital. Under this logic, urban differences are treated as assets that can be extracted and exchanged; the use value of space is converted into exchange value; and spontaneous, heterogeneous urban life is incorporated into a controlled and homogenized system of market operation [9].

It is important to note that such ‘incorporation’ is not a simple form of spatial exclusion, but a complex and selective mechanism of inclusion. Ye’s critical analysis of ‘inclusion’ provides an important supplement to this argument: inclusion does not inherently entail equal participation. Rather, it often operates through a set of management mechanisms and spatial norms that allow certain subjects to be accepted only in forms that conform to mainstream expectations, while marginalizing practices that do not comply with these norms [10]. This ‘differentiated incorporation’ is in effect a governmental tool. By establishing spatial behavioral norms of ‘how one ought to act,’ it stratifies and disciplines diverse urban subjects, allowing difference to sustain surface-level prosperity while losing its potential subversive force.

2.2 Spatial Restructuring

Spatial restructuring first appears as the reordering of functional structures. Studies of commercial touristification show that tourism intensification pushes retail, catering, and related businesses toward visitor demand, potentially causing the standardization of commercial functions and the weakening of local everyday functions [7].

Second, spatial restructuring is also reflected in the adjustment of use relations. The issue is not simply ‘who replaces whom,’ but how different subjects enter, stay in, and consume space. The logics of touristification and branding encourage modes of use that are photographable, quickly recognizable, and standardized for purchase. In contrast, low-threshold searching, prolonged stays, community interaction, and non-mainstream consumption are more likely to be compressed into less visible spaces [11].

3 Research Methods

3.1 Research Object and Spatial Scope

This paper takes Akihabara in Tokyo as its research object, focusing on the core commercial district formed by the area around Akihabara Station (see **Figure 1**. Study Area and Landmark Nodes), the Electric Town Exit, Chuo-dori, and adjacent side streets and alleys [12]. The distribution and morphological change of commercial amenities at the district scale help reveal localized transformations that are difficult to capture through macro-level statistics. This area includes subcultural businesses such as electronics, anime and games, models and figures, and second-hand goods, as well as externally oriented consumption spaces such as maid cafés, themed experiences and general retail [13].



Fig. 1. Study Area and Landmark Nodes

3.2 Analytical Methods

This paper adopts a cross-analysis of multiple qualitative sources, including relevant academic literature, policy and promotional texts, news reports, travel guides, forum discussions, social media, and shop reviews. It also incorporates spatial materials such as streetscape images, maps, shop types, commercial frontages, signboards, and street photographs in order to understand different actors' perceptions of spatial change and the evolution of commercial landscapes [2]. The study combines qualitative textual analysis, spatial observation, and typological induction of business formats [6] [7]. Textual analysis examines how Akihabara is constructed as a 'two-dimensional sacred place,' a 'tourist destination,' or a 'symbol of Japanese popular culture.' Spatial observation focuses on the visualization of two-dimensional symbols, the standardization of

commercial interfaces, and photo-oriented consumption. Typological induction classifies spaces according to the relationship between commercial activities and tourist consumption, distinguishing subcultural production spaces, subcultural consumption-display spaces, general tourist-consumption spaces, and everyday urban-function spaces.

4 Incorporation of Difference: From Electric Town to Two-Dimensional Sacred Place

4.1 Formation of Difference

Akihabara's subcultural space is rooted in its tradition as an electric town. After World War II, under the influence of the 'order to remove street stalls,' electronic parts vendors gathered beneath the railway viaducts, forming a commercial prototype composed of dense small-scale shops [14]. At this stage, Akihabara did not rely on landscape display. Rather, it attracted radio enthusiasts and other consumers through a highly concentrated network of specialized components, forming an exploratory consumption tradition characterized by 'searching' and 'discovering' on shelves. This provided the spatial foundation for the later entry of otaku culture [15].

After the 1980s, affected by the oil crisis and competition from suburban mass retailers, Akihabara shifted toward specialized fields such as personal computers. From the mid- to late 1990s, specialty shops for manga, model figures, and doujin goods gradually replaced some traditional home-appliance businesses. The second-hand circulation system and small specialty shops located in multi-tenant buildings often placed rare goods in vertically distributed upper floors. Consumption behavior was therefore transformed into a 'searching' experience with professional thresholds, producing an opaque subcultural space of difference distinct from mainstream commercial districts (see Figure. 2.) [16].



Fig. 2. A comparison of street facades in Akihabara between 1982 and 2010 visually illustrates the district's transformation from a commercial hub defined by electronics retail into a visual landscape characterized by anime culture and intellectual property (IP) branding. Image source: <https://akiba.or.jp/archives/history05/> (left) ; Google Earth (right)

After 2000, Akihabara further shifted from a commodity space to a space of identity. Maid cafés constructed a ‘2.5-dimensional space’ through role-playing and affective labor [13], while idol theaters such as AKB48 and practices such as street leaflet distribution turned the street into a stage for otaku community performance [17]. Thus, Akihabara’s subcultural difference was not produced by the mere accumulation of symbols, but through the combined production of high-density commercial agglomeration, second-hand circulation mechanisms, and community-based performance practices. It was thereby transformed into urban value with global recognizability [4].

4.2 Incorporated Difference: From Community Practice to Consumption Landscape

Through the ‘Cool Japan’ strategy, Akihabara was incorporated into the national brand display system and became an urban ‘showcase’ of Japanese popular culture [16]. This process was not mere promotion. Rather, it translated the once stigmatized ‘otaku’ subculture into legible and communicable urban symbols. Through redevelopment projects such as Akihabara Crossfield, it also integrated messy subcultural space into a modern creative-industry base [5]. With the arrival of global tourists, forms of visual consumption such as photography, check-ins, and maid café experiences intensified the externalization and symbolization of street interfaces, shifting Akihabara from a high-threshold ‘place for treasure hunting’ toward a tourist landscape space [13]. At the same time, IP capital and chain-based commerce promoted the growth of standardized formats such as large IP stores, capsule-toy centers, and themed cafés. Between 2006 and 2013, the concentration of chain stores around the station intensified commercial homogenization. Although this expanded the district’s influence, it compressed the survival space of independent small shops [6].

Akihabara’s subculture has not disappeared; rather, it has been ‘incorporated’ into a standardized logic of consumption. Production mechanisms that were originally community-based, spontaneous, and disorderly have been translated into easily legible landscapes [8]. Two-dimensional symbols are amplified as a ‘spectacle,’ while the community-practice mechanisms behind them are gradually being replaced by top-down tourism planning. The spatial attribute of Akihabara is thereby shifting from ‘community territory’ to ‘mass consumption landscape’ [18].

5 Manifestations of Spatial Restructuring: Transformation of Business Formats, Landscape, and User Subjects

5.1 Intensification and Standardization of Commercial Formats

The transformation of Akihabara’s commercial formats should not be understood as a one-way replacement of small shops by large chains, but rather as a reorganization of commercial space at the building and floor levels. In its early development, Akihabara

was composed of dense electronic parts shops and specialized subcultural stores, forming a market-oriented commercial order based on small-scale units, vertical distribution, and exploratory consumption [14]. Suzuki et al. measure this structure using a mixture degree index M , calculated based on the occupancy share of each business type across floors [19]. A value of M closer to 1 indicates a stronger concentration in a single business type. In contrast, a value closer to 0 indicates a higher degree of business-type mixture within the building. The four building types are classified as follows: strong single-use ($0.75 < M \leq 1.00$), weak single-use ($0.50 < M \leq 0.75$), weak multi-use ($0.25 < M \leq 0.50$), and strong multi-use ($0 < M \leq 0.25$) (see **Figure. 3.**). The study further shows that, from the electric-appliance period (1989) to the contemporary mixed period (2013), single-business-type specialized buildings in Akihabara decreased, while multi-business-type mixed buildings increased in some areas and periods. This does not mean that small shops have disappeared; rather, it indicates that Akihabara’s commercial accumulation has been reorganized through varying degrees of business-type mixture. Therefore, standardization should be described as a tendency associated with redevelopment and higher entry thresholds, rather than as direct evidence that small-scale or mixed commercial formats have been fully displaced.

Generation	Main Street				Back Street				North				South			
	Strong single-use	Weak single-use	Strong multi-use	Weak multi-use	Strong single-use	Weak single-use	Strong multi-use	Weak multi-use	Strong single-use	Weak single-use	Strong multi-use	Weak multi-use	Strong single-use	Weak single-use	Strong multi-use	Weak multi-use
2nd	153.5	163.2	0	115.0	87.2	79.1	0	263.0	121.6	113.7	0	140.9	122.4	120.6	0	153.3
3rd	155.8	161.9	181.5	155.2	114.2	111.6	0	253.1	118.4	163.4	181.5	243.1	152.2	71.2	0	156.5
4th	150.6	158.8	330.8	221.1	106.9	127.5	108.1	102.9	114.1	139.9	203.9	135.5	144.6	145.4	341.0	221.2

Fig. 3. Average Floor Area by Business-Mixture Type, Generation, and Location in Akihabara

5.2 Spectacularization and Photo-Oriented Spatial Representation

Through the reorganization of physical space, redevelopment transforms subcultural difference into visual landscape. Organic streets formerly composed of narrow lanes and cluttered signboards are being replaced by broad pedestrian networks, setback green spaces, and waterfront plazas [20][21]. This spatial planning logic follows urban renewal standards of ‘safety and security.’ Increasing floor-area ratios and introducing standardized plazas dissolve the sense of mystery and permeability of the original space. Although street symbols retain ‘two-dimensional’ elements, the spatial nature of the district has been transformed into a ‘check-in background’ for social media circulation. Subcultural practice is thus alienated from spatial behavior into a displayed visual landscape.

5.3 Power Restructuring of User Subjects and Reorientation of Priorities

The subjects of spatial use are undergoing structural power restructuring. Redevelopment policies explicitly emphasize attracting international tourists and office workers by providing large bus parking areas, boat landings, and comfortable pedestrian envi-

ronments. Under this hierarchy of priorities, the spatial needs of long-term otaku users—who have long relied on informal and low-cost physical margins to build community ties—are marginalized within standardized design. The ‘core space’ that once belonged to subcultural communities is being transformed into a multi-functional public space. Although this improves administrative efficiency and public security, it weakens the sense of belonging of specific communities through spatial exclusion.

6 Conclusion

This paper has examined Akihabara’s subcultural space through the analytical lens of the “incorporation of urban differences.” It argues that Akihabara’s subcultural identity has not simply disappeared, but has been selectively recognized, preserved, and reorganized through urban branding, tourism consumption, redevelopment policies, and capital-oriented commercial logics. Practices associated with electronic parts shops, second-hand goods, hobby stores, maid cafés, and idol theaters once produced a differentiated urban space based on searching, exploration, and community identification. With the rise of the “Cool Japan” narrative, redevelopment projects such as Akihabara Crossfield, and the growing presence of international tourists, these differences have increasingly been translated into visible, photographable, and easily recognizable urban symbols.

The spatial restructuring does not indicate a complete replacement of small-scale or mixed commercial formats. Rather, it is reflected in the reordering of commercial functions, streetscape representation, and user priorities. Main streets and station-front areas appear more compatible with visible, standardized, and visitor-oriented formats, while exploratory, small-scale, and community-based practices are more often associated with upper floors, backstreets, and less prominent commercial settings. The case of Akihabara therefore suggests that the transformation of subcultural urban space should not be understood only as commercialization or touristification, but also as a process in which urban differences are selectively incorporated through recognition, commodification, and governance. Since this study relies mainly on qualitative documentary and spatial materials, further fieldwork and interviews would be needed to examine how different user groups experience these changes.

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