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Kunio Kudo: Traditional Japanese Architecture

The parallel worlds of Golden Gai

Parallel worlds can exist next to one another, within, without and through. They can also exist in different times connected by place, or in different places, connected by a set of circumstances. This paper specifically focuses on micro-worlds, and the parallel worlds and worlds-within-worlds that happen within a small, concentrated environment of moments that both blend between and distinguish themselves. The four alleys that make up Golden Gai in Shinjuku, Tokyo are a fitting example of telescoped, compacted parallel worlds that Atelier Bow-wow describes as a "suitable place to nickname a pet architecture village".¹ A collection of 200+/- miniature establishments, each no more than 10 square meters are packed along the alleys, their walls just barely touching their neighbors.

This is a place where a remnant of old Tokyo survives. It opened in 1945 after the end of World War II as a black market district in front of Shinjuku station. The market transformed into outdoor bar stalls, which the Occupying Forces ordered closed in 1949. In response, the stalls moved to the current Golden Gai, which was then an overgrown lot crossed by a street-car line.² Here they became an *ao-sen*, or blue light district, until prostitution was made illegal in 1958.³ By the 1960s, Golden Gai was flourishing as a bohemian artists' enclave filled with intellectuals and famous film and literary figures,⁴ and today it is a rare urban moment that retains the lifestyle of postwar Japan.⁵ In this way the parallel worlds and worlds-within-worlds of Golden Gai double as worlds of one time period within another, the present-day context of redeveloped Shinjuku.

This is a place where one can get lost in a way that the outside, entry or surface, becomes relative, and the worlds within become all-encompassing, absorbing until the roof willingly opens to reveal the city. In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes explains that Tokyo is practically unclassified, a place where the rational is "merely a system among others" and the fabrication of the address is more important than the address itself.⁶

This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it

¹ Atelier Bow-Wow. *Pet Architecture Guide Book*. Tokyo: World Photo Press, 2002, p. 52.

² This lot is now *Shiki-no-michi*, Four Seasons Alley

³ "Shinjuku Golden Gai," *Ocada*. 7 July 2009. <<http://www.ocada.jp/tokyo/golden.php>>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Atelier Bow-Wow, p. 52.

⁶ Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, p. 42.

*not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.*⁷

It is in this way that I begin to iterate the experiences of one night, both on the threshold of worlds and embedded within them—a thread of moments discovered accidentally and also very specifically, a tangling of two processes.

Five "episodes", inspired by Joyce's *Ulysses*, describe these worlds as a sequence that is neither chronological nor geographical, but rather follows a path of surprise and chance—the idea of one place leading to another, though not necessarily the logical “next” place in time or space. The text focuses on the surface (alley/sign), the immediate interior, the stair, and the secondary interior, describing the spatial and atmospheric qualities of each while constructing the concepts of world-within-world and parallel worlds. An assemblage of photographs accompanies the text, visualizing the worlds as they simultaneously exist independently and as moments of intersection. The second part of each episode begins to develop a way to express the spatial qualities of these multiple, joining micro-worlds as a series of unexpected experiences and events.

Episode 1: Ken's Bar below the Golden Street Theater, 1959

I walk without noticing. The shortcuts spill off my steps, seven minutes from the train, I'm early for the show. When I saw the poster yesterday—collaged cats, Natsume Sōseki, watercolors, I knew I had to stop by, if only for part.

The stairs glide down from the entrance, an effortless slit in the floor. I slip through and the doors give way to a patchwork of glass, rows of liquor stretched high, overwhelmed in a good way. And a worthy backdrop for the owner Ken who fronts the bar in black on gray, hair slicked back, a collector of rare bourbon.

-----*A sample?*

The bass reverberates off the polychromic counter and then—the saxophone resumes. Jazz flows here.

-----*Are you going to play for us tonight?*

Amber bottle barely touches the glass whose slender bottom mirrors the teardrop lights that pause above, suspended mid-fall. One track merges with the next and I sneak up the stairs between D minor and G. The ceiling

⁷ Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, p. 42.

shifts—high, low, high—and I'm in the miniature theater, lights dim as the stage emerges from within.

Halfway through, I step outside. The double doors, restrained blank steel, close behind. *Click*, they delete the laughter. The hum of the alley fills its place, and I head towards the window no more than five meters away. The chandelier multiplies in the glass, crystal baubles caught red by the walls—blurred reflection lines run down the panes and dip into the shadow of the ground.

On Golden Gai's Japanese-only website, the browser's translator robotically replaces each word, Japanese for English, leaving fragments of incoherent sentences in its place. However, there are moments of beauty in the translation as well, words strung together in ways I cannot replicate, and so I must credit here the search engine and its layers of code. *Stairs in the theater entrance side round gone and glide by*—if there is one phrase that describes the notion of slippage through parallel worlds, this is it. The stairs are not the entrance, but border it. An ephemeral moment that can disappear within seconds, they allow someone to slip from one world into the next, unnoticed. This moment of circulation is a slight of hand, an effortless gesture that carefully sets up a transitional, in-between space that is not halting, but fluid. *Overwhelmed, in a good way of liquor behind the counter and fine lines*—this fragment perfectly defines that initial feeling of moving between worlds. A singular moment of halting astonishment, where one must stand still to absorb the shift that has taken place. Whether the world is spatially complex or unassuming, the effect of that threshold is proportional to the magnitude of the difference between one world and the next. *Jazz flows here*—three words in a most poetic combination that unite sound, form, movement and place into a succinct description of atmosphere.

Episode 2: Albatross G, 1963

I don't know if the frames on the ceiling open to a gaudy gold room—right now they frame empty light. I sit down at the bar between a blond woman with a Renown sweater, crocheted, I've seen it in the windows and a man whose narrow black tie catches on the table, falls. Eyes adjust to the red blurred yellow glow, I catch him approaching.

--- *Spicy vodka.*

Tiny crystals of light reflect off the saturated crimson counter, its resin falling into velvet walls, hue for hue. I see the bartender in the mirror, verifying the whisky.

Then *clink, clink*, the glasses swirl and on the surface they are light bulbs with blown-out shadows. Everything here is reachable except the old glamour. It absorbs me, not the other way around.

--- *Albatross! I finally found you.*

It's my friend Don. Looking around, there's no seat at the bar.

--- *I'll stand.*

He points up. Narrow doll stairs, I'm above the chandeliers, heels clicking dully on the wood. We sit down and the bartender hands Don his drink through the square-edged opening in the floor beside us, the red lighting their hands.

Line-by-line, up to the attic, roof with a dangerous view. Wood strips casually tie the space between buildings. Reflecting fluorescents, we watch as the patterns of the grain appear, disappear.

The slippage of entries via transitional detours such as stairs, elevators, or thru-buildings is one way to produce the phenomenon of leaving one world and entering another. The element of surprise is also critical in order that the world within or without does not become quickly apparent. Hints of the other world such as slivered transparencies or even openings can improve the suspense of the transition itself and also the desire to transition. While most of the entries to the worlds of Golden Gai are solid, single doors, some have adjacent windows that indicate the world within. Garden and Ab und Zu, for example, both have small, hatch-like windows that open to the street, lined with at least one ceramic cat, flowers, and at Garden, a mannequin head. These are the slivers that offer glimpses into the world beyond without fully exposing it.

Albatross, however, exists behind two glass panes, initiating the collapse of interior world and exterior surface. While this lessens the drama of transitioning between alley and interior, it reveals two additional moments of suspense that would otherwise be hidden from the surface—the opening in the ceiling and the stairwell. The stairs are directly behind the solid door, yet, lit by a single yellow globe, just visible through the adjacent glass. On the way up, the light clarifies a string of baroque ornament, the mediator of mortar-dripped brick and its scarlet plaster counterpart, converging—a Maker's Mark bottle—at the bar above. The opening in the floor is a deliberate perforation just large enough for the barkeep to pass drinks and from the tiered seats, see the world below.

Episode 3: La Jetée, 1985

The records are shifting plates stacked on the tiny counter, every color, guarded by the steadfast line of bottles. The fan whirs as I slip into the corner seat; recognize a director, the other an actress I can't place. The lights are upside down flowers, a ruffled dress. Tiny cats line a shelf, some in compartments, as crowded as we are. The girl in the picture above them covers her mouth, gasping at the proximity I imagine.

--- *Gin and tonic?*

Nod, my eyes shift as a soft red blossom falls off the one of the branches in the vase. *Stir*. I join the conversation, but wish I knew what film that was... Kawai catches my glance and points to the movie poster pasted to the wall behind her without turning around, it's a mirror. The wall is saturated with Nouvelle Vague, layers upon layers (and sound is one layer), but I read the similarity and continue with a question—only seconds have passed, a pause.

My mind wanders. *La Jetée*, the pier, post-nuclear. Who is she waiting for? Is it this fan that's blowing her hair? In some way, it is. The pictures and the place are as entwined as the actress and director. Kawai brings out the Pastis as footsteps sound on the stairs. Record shifts—Édith Piaf.

--- *Non, je ne regrette rien.*⁸

The door is stained black with *Jetée* in white vinyl letters, the *é* dancing slightly askew and a mailbox underneath. The white plaster walls it cuts between are like crinkled paper on glue. This is an unassuming entry to a world whose air is soaked in famousness. The door opens to an immediate set of stairs that lead to another entry. Their narrowness leads to narrowness; the miniature bar packed with porcelain cats, French posters, jazz cassettes, and hand-painted bottles, half full. This is a place where regulars and foreigners are sandwiched together; millions of spontaneous conversations, accidental debates still linger in the air between barstools. The *demi-monde*, or upper floor is unique in its second layer of mystery, the stairs a transition that generates suspense and in some ways, the finality of having made a choice. The two dimensions of ground to door open to another dimension—vertical ground, and finally to the multiple dimensions of *La Jetée*, cloaked in lazy pink and gray, smoldering yellow light on a paneled wood wall. These are pocket-worlds tucked away above the surface, filled with a gradation of objects and odd angles. In his documentary *Tokyo Ga*, Wim Wenders had a cameraman actually perform gymnastics in hopes of

⁸ “No, I’m not sorry for anything.”

capturing the “oblique proportions of the room.”⁹ Wood-faced shelves continue the lineage of bottles and wrap the center of the walls, integrated benches surrounding a small square table. Layered in poster paper, satiated in bottles next to porcelain next to music, *La Jetée* envelops each person who enters and wraps the collective—object, person, conversation, memory—into its box.

Episode 4: Kenzo's Bar, 2011

The ground floor bars—you're halfway in, halfway out, that moment of opening the door. We open—

--- *Cover charge?*

--- ¥2,000

And, still suspended between, close the door. This is one reason to go upstairs. The stairs are a question you answer at the bottom: *will I stay?* The answer is always yes; since there is a politeness you can't refuse—it would be like apologizing to every step on the stair. I've found the one, something about the yellow and a door without a threshold, leading upwards, so blatant yet mysterious. Two doors—a bathroom and a bar, the size of a small kitchen. Five of us plus one and we're full. I squeeze between Brian and the wall, sitting sideways to fit.

Kenzo, cuffed white sleeves, lights the stove in front of the aquarium, in front of me. The smell of fried fish and tofu fill the room within seconds, then our tiny square plates, then our stomachs—this is part of the snack charge. And this is a kitchen filled to the gills—ceramic bowls, hanging pans, an assortment of glass-filled shelves with clip-on fans.

The tartar sauce hints of ginger and wasabi—I scoop it up with the crispy piece of fish.

*Osusume.*¹⁰

He points to a bottle of his homemade shōchū and I nod. Bold black brushstrokes designate the off-white label, pasted casually at a diagonal, edges frayed. Conversations run easily through the night; this tiny kitchen-turned-bar-turned separate world that exists after door, stair, door—there is a comfortable proximity here.

These worlds are not unadulterated islands waiting to be discovered. Their atmospheres are carefully fabricated by their owners, and they are discovered each night, familiarized by the regulars and memorized by the

⁹ “The Fringe Club”. *Metropolis*, No. 364.

¹⁰ “Whatever you recommend”

foreigners until the picture blurs out of focus. A multitude of identities, the worlds tie owners with clientele. They are a collection of floating terrariums in miniature, distinct creations as tied to intention as they are to experience. The idea of the *nomiya*, counter bar, links experience with identity. During the day, empty stools sit within preserved spaces, charged atmospheres waiting to be released. As the counters begin to fill, each world surrenders itself to the clientele. At that initial moment of wonder, as the viewer absorbs the atmosphere of this world—within, parallel, adjacent to another—the world absorbs the viewer, who becomes a participant in the atmosphere, a component for the next person to take in.

Kenzo's was the door we decided to open that night, pledging to each other to stay in that world, even without seeing it first. The sequence through Golden Gai may not be a logical one, based more on chance, spatial slippages and split-second decisions, but the logic there is this: each door will lead to a world. Sometimes it happens immediately and other times via a set of stairs. This is a place where worlds are parallel and within—the door to the alley is the first surface, the stair is the second, and there may be many more beyond.

Episode 5: Cremaster, 2057

I'm on Maneki-dori, headed north and the neon stops me, digital pink fades into a blue-violet shadow that drapes the doorway.

The milked glass door with its thin black lettering looks like the entry to an upscale salon, and the light inside diffuses evenly on the glass, warmed crème. I step inside where a woman greets me behind the plane of the counter, perfectly edged glass on top of white plastic, emitting a similar glow to the door.

--- *Kamoizumi*

I slide into a chair, sleek metal lines holding circular seats, just off-white, with immaculate seams. She reaches around the question mark of a beer tap, light reflecting off its curves, and slides the glass of dry sake. I breathe in the pale irises that sleep against the wall, next to the men in black-rimmed glasses, the expensive-casual type, talking animatedly. People swarm through the tinted white—it's picking up. I head towards the stairs, stopping to reapply lipstick in the cavern of paneled mirrors—they reflect every angle of movement, triangulated magenta mouth and porcelain sink, multiplied.

A wash of blue leads up the stairs, carved between shifting walls carved with shelves. I pass a film projected on the second landing, surrounded by metal chairs and pixelated tables, full. A momentary pause—

--- *Have you gone upstairs? Around the bookshelf.*

It's Freud's works in English, and I find an angled, broad-stepped ladder. The gallery unfolds, half art, half lounge—unfinished wood walls, marker sketches, photographs—and a slick black bar wraps at sharp angles, offset by liquid chrome stools. I shift aside the shallow pewter bowls, stacked and survey the gathering of bottles where the grain of the wood disappears.

I remember the rooftop at Albatross, the counter at La Jetée. Same wood, same bottles—grained and layered, surfaces composed in separate ways, under separate light.

Cremaster has a newness and visual emptiness that sets it apart, from its sleek tinted door to arty crowd and upstairs exhibition space. The self-proclaimed Psychoanalytic Experimental Bar is owned by a published psychiatrist whose interests begin to explain the spatial atmosphere of this distinct world. Its access point is slightly hidden from Golden Gai's main grid; the cool glow of the pink-boxed neon is its pulling force. A still-tiny space that seats 5 below and 9 above, it clears its interior to invent an atmosphere where smallness gives way to an infinite continuity, further persuaded by its narrowness. Worlds are carefully concealed within—the mirror-laden bathrooms and ship ladder stairs that lead to yet another floor where the mood changes from expensive white to bare wood, untreated except by the art. This is the assimilation of casual bar with launching ground—discussions, exhibitions, magazines and the mixing of media. This is a calibrated other-worldliness that shifts attention outside-in.

These five episodes have related approximately 2.5 percent of the worlds within the four alleys of Golden Gai. As Barthes knowingly describes, it is the *fabrication* of the address, or surface, by which one arrives, and it is by the discovery, whether alone or with others that begins to define the city's hidden spaces.¹¹ In *Inland Sea*, Donald Richie articulates, "A journey is always also something of a flight. You go to reach, but you also go to escape."¹² In the moment of entering a world-within-world, there is not only a feeling of astonishment at how you arrived and anticipation for what lies beyond, but also the feeling of a directional pull—inward, not outward—to the world ahead and not the world behind. The surface of the alley is constantly negotiable. It is a transitional space between worlds and by no means an equal with the broad city streets from which it stems. In each episode it also serves as a conduit that can flex between time, linking habit to atmosphere to memory. Each world combines the intentional with the accidental. This is a place to get lost and end up exactly where you want to be.

¹¹ Barthes, p. 42.

¹² Donald Richie. *The Inland Sea*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1971, p. 17.

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