INGE DANIELS
JAPANESE HOMES
INSIDE OUT

ABSTRACT  In studies about the Euro-American home, the creation of domestic boundaries is commonly associated with the need for privacy grounded in the supposed opposition between “private” and “public,” “individual” and “society.” The large number of physical barriers such as gates, fences, balconies, and barred windows that screen contemporary Japanese dwellings from the outside world might, therefore, lead one to conclude that the Japanese home is of an extremely private nature. Through an ethnographic investigation conducted over a one-year period in thirty homes in the Kansai region (Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, Nara), this article will challenge this view. It argues, firstly, that the specificity of Japanese notions of “inside” and “outside,” referring to close and distant networks of spatial and social relationships, need to be acknowledged, and, secondly, that boundaries between spaces are always fluid and constantly...
transgressed. More generally, this study also aims to demonstrate the strengths of anthropological research that examines how spaces are actually lived in, as opposed to studies that focus on visual and spatial divisions and tend to gloss over the complexity of every day social life.

KEYWORDS: Japanese house, privacy, personhood, inside–outside categorization

INTRODUCTION: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

In her seminal study of Dayak longhouses in Borneo, the anthropologist Christine Helliwell demonstrates that local ideas about “outer,” open areas and “enclosed,” inner areas “appear to be very similar to the distinction commonly made in the West between the open “public” street and the “closed” private houses which it links together” (Helliwell 1996: 133). However, she rightly concludes that such a comparison is inappropriate, because “Western” notions of a bounded subject and the related concept of privacy pertain to the need to protect the individual self from others as well as outside, harmful influences in a private space, while the Dayak’s inside–outside division concerns conceptions of community versus outsiders (Helliwell 1996: 135). My data suggests that the Japanese employ a similar inside–outside categorization.

In the extended literature about the Japanese self, time and again, reference is made to the social and spatial categories inside and outside or uchi and soto. As recent as 2006, Ozaki and Rees Lewis state:

The distinction between the inside and the outside is particular salient to Japanese people as it relates not only to physical spaces, but also to psychosocial values. That is, the inside is associated with purity, cleanliness, safety, and intimacy (inside the group as well as inside a physical space), and the outside is associated with impurity, dirt, danger, and strangeness (Ozaki and Rees Lewis 2006: 93).

It cannot be denied that the inside–outside division plays a key role in creating a sense of self in Japan. However, these are not fixed concepts linked with psychology and the sole agency of the individual, as Ozaki and Rees Lewis (2006) want to make us believe. Japanese individuals are socialized into the “constant idea or construct of the group” and as they move through a number of formal and informal groups throughout their lives they “acquire the capacity to move from one frame to another” (Ben-Ari 1991: 19). It follows that Japanese subjects are very aware that they
operate within dynamic sets of inside–outside relationships that shift across space and time. *Uchi* (inside/our) and *soto* (outside) are ubiquitous terms that people use in their everyday lives to associate with a particular group and set themselves apart from others. *Uchi* (inside) is always related to the point of view of the speaker, and the key “inside” unit is that of the family group.

Inside the home, family members (re)create themselves, through a series of bodily interactions, as an intimate, social network (Daniels 2005a). Drawing on Bourdieu’s influential study about the Kabyle house, Vom Buck, another anthropologist who questions the validity of an analysis in terms of private versus public spheres, has demonstrated how in the Yemeni houses, “space comes into being through practice; [and] cultural meanings thus invoked are principally unstable and contextual. This also implies that spatial divisions are read through the body, a learning process that is never completed” (Vom Buck 1997: 166). In this article, I will focus on the shifting relationship between the domestic spatial and social unit and the immediate outside world of the local community, and demonstrate how inside and outside are spatial and social categories that continuously merge into one another.

This study is part of a larger research project entitled: *The Japanese House: An Ethnography* that will be published as a monograph by Berg in 2009. The project uses ethnography to confront persisting, orientalist stereotypes (such as the minimal Japanese house) that portray Japan as the quintessential, exotic “Other” with the contradictions and complexities of everyday life behind closed doors. The research is grounded in multiple ethnographic encounters I had with Japan over the past ten years (see Daniels 1996, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). However, the specific data presented here was collected during multi-sited fieldwork carried out over a one-year period (between November 2002 and October 2003) in thirty homes in the Kansai area (Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe).\(^1\)

My work complements a recent body of anthropological literature that investigates consumption in contemporary Japan (Moeran 1996; Clammer 1997, 2000). However, it differs from these previous studies in that it, following recent trends in material culture research (Miller 2001), focuses on consumption practices in the domestic arena. A large body of seminal historical studies (Koizumi 1980, 1995, 2002; Uchida 2002; Sand 2003) as well as sociological research (Imamura 1987; Allison 1994; Fujiwara 2003) about consumption practices in the Japanese home exists. This said, I have not come across any studies based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork inside contemporary urban Japanese homes.\(^2\)

**GATES AND THE LOSS OF “COMMUNITY SPIRIT?”**

A key observation during my fieldwork was that my informants rarely had visitors. Most social activities took place outside the
home; whether having a drink or celebrating a birthday with friends, meeting colleagues after work, or gathering the extended family for a marriage or a funeral. Japanese social commentators (Funo 1997; Fujiwara 2003) have argued that the private character of the Japanese home is the result of the loss of community spirit linked with modernization and urbanization. Many of my informants echoed this pessimistic view. One example is the Nakaes who have lived for more than sixty years in a large house in the center of Kyoto. This family rarely had visitors and their two spacious Japanese-style guestrooms were scarcely used. According to Mr Nakae, a fifty-five-year-old owner of a small wood distribution business, their neighborhood community had been destroyed by large apartment blocks that have sprung up around their property. In his words:

We do not know any of these people (pointing at tall modern buildings enclosing their home). Well, property developers knock on our door all the time. I have refused several very good offers but sadly most of our previous neighbours have sold.

On closer inspection, the physical outlook of the Nakaes’ house raises questions about this idyllic depiction of a once thriving community of neighbors. The fact that their property is surrounded by a high mud wall and a robust, wooden-roofed entrance gate, suggests that casual visitors were probably never that welcome. The Nakaes’ large house, built at the end of the nineteenth century, is modeled after the dwelling of the Tokugawa elite who possessed a complex set of rules for receiving guests in their homes. Guestrooms that overlooked large ornamental gardens located at the rear of the house were part of this etiquette. The ease of access towards the back of the dwelling meant that high walls and gates were necessary to secure the property (Sand 2003: 47). Morse’s sketches of urban dwellings belonging to the elite in 1880s Tokyo illustrate this vulnerability (Morse 1886).

These nineteenth-century elite houses separated from the outside world with walls, fences, and gates became the model for the contemporary urban middle-class dwelling (Suzuki 2002). The garden was considered a key component of the house, and the “inside” was thought to start at the enclosure (Ueda 1998: 180). Similarly, today the entrance gate is the first—and often the main—boundary between the contemporary dwelling and the outside world. A standard gate has a mailbox, a rectangular board with the inhabitants’ family name, and a light that is automatically turned on in the evening—in more recent dwellings this light might be integrated in the name board. Visitors are expected to press a buzzer and introduce themselves through the intercom. A number of stickers announce that the inhabitants have paid their TV license.

Figure 1
and that the gas system has been checked. Optional extras are a sack for the delivery of the daily newspaper dangling from the gate or a small plastic box for daily milk delivery.

The entrance gates of the pre-modern elite not only secured the property, they also functioned as a symbol of social rank and status (Ueda 1998: 188–90). At the wealthier end of the contemporary housing market large entrance gates and high enclosures continue to be a popular signifier of social distinction. Overall house exteriors in contemporary Japan are fairly similar. Those informants who were homeowners told me they choose not to have an individually designed house because of the extra cost, but more so because it would certainly stick out in their locality. Still, styles of enclosures and gates differ considerably depending on when the dwelling was built. Moreover, in the postwar period the overall size of plots has decreased, the height of the walls, fences, and gates has diminished, and some dwellings have done away with enclosures altogether. The focus has shifted from securing the parameters of the plot to protecting the dwelling itself with devices such as steel pivoting doors and window shutters. I will discuss this development in more detail later, but first I would like to have a closer look at the contemporary garden.

At the rear of the dwelling of the Tokugawa elite there were large ornamental gardens consisting of shrubs, stones, and sand (but no flowers) that were carefully arranged by professionals in order to represent somewhere else, such as the Buddhist Paradise or an iconic Japanese landscape (Hendry 1997). Importantly, these miniature worlds were meant to be viewed from afar, preferably from a spacious Japanese-style room with large sliding doors. The only two families in my sample with minimal Japanese-style guest rooms, the Iwaiis and Nakaes, also possessed immaculately kept Japanese gardens. Five other informants owned rear gardens, but these plots differ considerably in form and in function from their predecessors. The Nishikis, for example, keep a large ornamental garden, beautifully arranged over a sloping piece of land at the back of their two-storey detached house in Nara. Mrs Nishiki, a thirty-seven-year-old housewife, told me that that it was Mr Nishiki’s elderly father who had wanted this kind of garden. She and her husband disliked it because: “it is very expensive to regularly have the trees trimmed by professionals” and they “would rather have a nice English garden.” The view of the garden is obstructed by a cage occupied by the family’s cat and two drying racks for airing futons. Currently, their nine-year-old son, Hiro, and his friends seem to be the only ones who truly appreciate the garden as an extra space to play in.

During my fieldwork it became clear that in contemporary Japan the ornamental “viewing garden” has been largely replaced by a “doing garden;” the ubiquity of drying racks, barbeque sets and
garden furniture, and storage sheds attest to this. Most of my informants expressed a desire for a “doing garden.” The following description given by Mrs Kadonaga about her ideal house summarizes the mood: “even if I had lots of money I would prefer a small house. I would like a garden though. I would like to grow vegetables and flowers there. I would like to do some gardening (gardeningu).” My data confirms that gardeningu is an extremely popular pastime, but it generally boils down to growing a few plants in pots placed outdoors. During Summer 2003, Mrs Wada tended to potted plants she placed on her veranda at the back of her house. The Nakaos proudly showed me one melon they grew in a pot on their fifth-floor balcony. However, most of my other informants arranged a number of potted plants at the entrance to their home. Mrs Ebara placed plants she regularly received from her sister on the stairs leading to their front door, Mrs Takahashi displayed some pots with roses on their front porch, while Mrs Sakai hung containers with flowers and placed several pots against parts of the wall surrounding their property.

“EVERYONE NEEDS A GARAGE”

Very few people possess the extra exterior space necessary to create a garden. The average size of the plot Japanese houses are built on is comparatively small. In 2002, for example, the average house size in Osaka was 130m² while the plot size was 210m². By comparison, although houses in London and Paris are slightly smaller, they are built on plots that are on average 400m² (Asahi Shinbunsha 2002: 190). In other words, in Japan the house fills up most of the plot. Of course, 70 or 80m² of extra space would still be enough to create a garden. However, in contemporary Japan priority is given to the car. In 2002, 84.4% of Japanese owned at least one car (Asahi Shinbunsha 2002: 183). Conversations with informants as well as an analysis of advertisements for homes in the Kansai region in 2003 reveal that parking space is foremost on people’s mind when they decide to buy a house. Unlike the UK, for example, where houses are, generally, promoted by showing color photographs of the interior, or less frequently the exterior (Young 2004), in Japan the main device to advertise houses are drawings of the prospective layout of the rooms and the parking space available. Mr Togo, a fifty-one-year-old architect who owns a small firm in Kyoto, discussed this practice with me and claimed that “houses without a garage just wouldn’t sell” because “parking cars on public roads is prohibited and renting parking lots is very expensive;” costing between £50 and £150 for one month’s rent. The private parking space informants called gareiji (garage) commonly consists of a large, sloping plastic roof to protect the car from the elements and a low retractable fence to close the whole area off from the street.
The need for parking space in front of the home has resulted not only in the disappearance of the garden, but also, as the following two examples illustrate, in a decrease of valuable living space. The Yanos are a couple in their mid-sixties who live with their thirty-five-year-old, unmarried daughter in the north of Kyoto. Forty years ago Mr Yano, a retired public servant, built a small house on the plot of land owned by his father. In Spring 2003 this house was torn down to build a new dwelling on the same spot. I visited the house several times before it was destroyed and was surprised to find it in very good condition. Mr Yano told me that the main reasons for building a new house was, firstly, that the plumbing in the house was poor, and, secondly, that they wanted to create a parking space for their car in front of their house. Because they had to park the car on a narrow strip of land in front of the house, part of the vehicle was sticking out onto the road. They relinquished one meter of their living space for a “proper” parking space.

Another example is the Ebaras. After their marriage in 1978, they lived for two years in rented accommodation before they built a two-storey detached house in Nagaoka Tenjin, a small town between Kyoto and Osaka. They borrowed a bit of money from Mr Ebara’s family and the rest from the bank in order to buy a small plot. Because they did not want a ready-built house (tate-uri), they were actively involved in the decision-making concerning the layout of their home. Mrs Ebara, a forty-nine-year-old housewife, claimed that:

actually we really wanted more rooms, especially one more room downstairs would have been nice. But then, you know, in the end we had to choose between an extra room or a space to park our car in front of the house.

However, because their twenty-six-year-old daughter Yu, who lives at home, needs a car to drive to work, the Ebaras have ended up paying a high monthly fee to park her car on a nearby lot after all. The ownership of multiple cars by one family is a more general trend in Japan and some of my other informants with adult children owned two or even three cars. As a result, a variety of urban spaces, private and public, are progressively turned into parking lots. I came across two striking examples of this practice in the north of Kyoto. Firstly, a wooden, roofed entrance gate and part of a mud wall at the edge of a parking lot were the sole reminders of the traditional house that once stood there. A second example was a miniature community shrine left in one corner of a plot previously occupied by its full-size version.

Through the number of cars one possesses and where they are parked, social distinctions can be created. The Kuwaharas in Itami, for example, place two of their cars behind a large metal gate in
the space in front of their home, while they rent additional parking space on a vacant lot next to their property for a third car. When I discussed their main concerns whilst building their new house seven years ago, space for parking was never mentioned. When I later prompted them by saying: “so having a garage was not a priority for you?” Mrs Kuwahara seemed not to understand what I meant, but the eldest daughter Keiko remarked that because it is expensive to rent parking space, it makes a huge difference whether or not there is a garage. The younger daughter Yoshiko added: “There are houses without a garage and most have a garage in which only one car fits.” Affluent families such as the Kuwaharas might not consider the possibility of not having a garage. However, Mr Togo and other architects I spoke to pointed out that the need to create private parking space has severe consequences for those purchasing houses at the bottom of the housing market. Cheap dwellings are built on such narrow strips of land that a garage takes up the whole ground floor. In order to increase the inhabitable living space, it is common to add an additional floor to the house. Three-storey, narrow detached houses with a garage on the ground floor are common in the Kansai region, but these houses are often structurally unsafe and dangerous during earthquakes.

The examples above demonstrate how, even if the exterior of the house is similar, distinctions are created among neighbors around the size of exterior space available. The availability of private parking space is an important social marker. However, as it becomes a standard element of the contemporary dwelling, the focus has shifted to the car parked in front. In a street in the south of Kyoto, for example, all the ready-built houses were the same size and the exteriors looked alike. Still, the cars parked in front, ranging from small “box-cars,” to SUV vehicles or the latest Mercedes imported from Germany, revealed the aspirations of the inhabitants.

THE HALLWAY IN-BETWEEN

Like the Japanese dwelling, the Norwegian home is closed off from the outside world by physical barriers such as fences and gates. A comparison between these societies is warranted here because both are frequently characterized as being extremely private. The anthropologist Pauline Garvey (2005) has argued that although the dwellings of her Norwegian informants are secluded, they take great care in decorating their windows with plants and ornaments as well as lamps and candles. Their aim is to create an interior atmosphere that is enjoyed by the inhabitants, but also to reveal to passers-by that one’s home is cozy. Garvey, therefore, calls the window “a visual field crossing domestic boundaries . . . a non-material interface where public and private boundaries appear indistinct” (Garvey 2005: 169). By contrast, the windows in the homes I studied do not function as interfaces. Window glass is
Figure 6

Figure 7
often frosted or reinforced, and covered with curtains. Moreover, windows facing the street are generally small and barred. More than 100 years ago Morse repeatedly mentioned the “close and prison-like aspect” of houses in Tokyo, their facade being “perforated with one or two small windows lightly barred with bamboo, or heavily barred with square wood-gratings” (Morse 1886: 50).

Contemporary dwellings might have large sliding windows/doors in the rear as well as on the second floor. However, the gaze from the street is obstructed by a fence and a large balcony that wraps around the second floor of the building and is primarily used for drying clothes and futons. These windows/sliding doors are not comparable with their wooden predecessors covered with rice paper that used to be opened up to let the air circulate during the long humid and hot summers. Contemporary windows are placed in airtight, aluminum frames that are kept tightly shut in order to keep the house warm in winter, and use air-conditioning or fans in summer. Having said this, during Summer 2003 some informants who live in older apartments, such as the Kagemoris, the Yamamotos, and the Nakaos, opened up their large sliding windows at the rear of their homes as well as their front door to let a breeze pass through. Others hung large bamboo blinds (sudare) in front of their windows to protect the house against the strong Summer sun. Moreover, new houses have large steel shutters that are pulled over the windows during the night.

The anthropologist Anna Pertierra (2006) argues that in Cuba as in many other Caribbean societies it is not the domestic window but the doorstep that functions as a liminal space. In her words:

The doorstep is a space that is neither inside nor outside, that neither accepts nor rejects family and friends, where men and women can meet without lingering too long in an opposite gendered space, where disaffected youth and restless children can escape home without wrath, and that is not quite private whilst not totally public (Pertierra 2006: 11).

This description is relevant for my study because it moves the discussion away from visibility issues associated with the transparency of windows by stressing the significance of everyday practices in creating notions of the private and public. The doorstep is also considered an important space in the Japanese home. However, unlike the Caribbean case, the Japanese step is elevated (between 10 and 25 cm high) and located inside the entrance hall. The step acts as a social and physical demarcation between inside and outside worlds. In the entrance hall, shoes have to be removed before proceeding up into the home. The Japanese sociologist Fujiwara argues that embodied practices such as removing shoes enables the inhabitants to physically leave society behind and enters
a space in which they do not have to keep aback (Fujiwara 2003: 32–3). My data confirms this observation as most changed into more informal clothing as soon as they had stepped up into their home. Both examples demonstrate that the notion of the private is not only created through physical barriers and visual interfaces, but also through a series of embodied, everyday practices.

Whereas the step functions as a clear boundary, the Japanese entrance hall or vestibule is a more fluid domestic space where the private and public overlap. Sand has argued that whereas the pre-modern elite entertained guests in special rooms, the majority of the population (farmers, merchants and craftsmen, and commoners) treated visitors in a far less formal manner. Farmhouses (nôka) and townhouses (machîya) belonging to affluent merchants and craftsmen had in-between spaces such as verandas, kitchens, and entrance halls where casual visitors could be entertained (Sand 2003). Moreover, more than three-quarters of the population in urban areas lived in cheap, rented accommodation called nagaya. These were wooden tenement buildings consisting of a series narrow rooms, each housing an entire family, separated by thin walls (Brown and Cali 2001: 18).
Contemporary urban, detached dwellings do not have verandas and kitchens that are easy accessible, but all types of dwellings have retained an entrance hall. I observed that in rural areas it is acceptable for casual visitors to slide open the front door and step into the entrance hall. The Iwaiis, the other family that possesses empty Japanese-style guestrooms, live in a close-knit, rural community where it is common for neighbors to drop by unannounced, often to deliver gifts. These casual local visitors are not entertained in guestrooms but they are greeted and thanked for their gifts in the hallway. As a matter of fact, the Iwaiis, like other people I have stayed with in the countryside, were used to leaving their front gate and sliding doors unlocked during the daytime. Casual visitors or deliverymen would just open the door and enter into the hallway and call out for inhabitants. Some homes had a bell attached to the sliding doors that rang whenever they were opened or closed.

The description above illustrates how the easily accessible—but difficult to secure—sliding doors enabled casual visits. All the houses in my sample built within the last ten years as well as all apartments had outward-pivoting, steel front doors. In urban areas sliding doors have been rapidly replaced by these generic doors. It could be argued that the steel doors are but the latest type of physical barrier raised between the home and the street in a continued process of emulation of the secluded houses of the pre-modern elite. However, another explanation for the popularity of the doors and the general decrease in liminal spaces could be sought in the growing concern—whether or not justified—about crime. Before the demolition of their old house in Kyoto in 2003 the Yanos made a point of carefully removing their glass sliding doors engraved with a flower pattern and placed in a wooden lattice, in order to reuse them in their new home. I was, therefore, surprised that a large steel pivoting front door had been installed in their new house. It turned out that the architect had advised against using the old doors because they would take up too much space, and because they “are generally unsafe.” Moreover, because steel doors are thought to be more secure than sliding doors, entrance gates and fences have become less robust or in many cases have been done away with altogether.

Although the secure steel doors have reduced easy access to the entrance hall, during my fieldwork I observed that the space has retained some of its fluidity. In the homes with steel front doors I stayed in, neighbors, deliverymen, and other visitors were still invited inside the entrance hall. Moreover, in advertisements for new homes as well as home improvement literature it is frequently suggested that one should place a bench in this space for visitors to sit on while having a conversation. In the homes studied the hallway was not spacious enough to contain a bench. However, other items
of material culture placed inside the entrance hall provide further evidence for its liminal character. On the one hand, things related to the outside world such as shoes, umbrellas, and walking sticks but also golf bags, tennis rackets, and footballs are kept in this space. On the other hand, the top of the shoe closet (getabako) functions as one of the main display areas in the contemporary home. The shoe closet is a piece of furniture ever-present in entrance halls. One particular style of shoe closet I found in some of the homes further embodies the dual inside–outside character of the hallway. One part of this closet hovers over the tiled floor of the entrance hall, while the other half rests on the elevated floor. The outer part is generally used to store outside things, while the inner part contains domestic slippers as well as items linked with mail and other deliveries such as scissors, pens, and signature stamps.

ABOUT A LITTLE RED BUCKET
In the previous section I have shown that the entrance hall is a liminal space that enables informal exchanges between the inhabitants of the house and visitors. Contrary to Garvey’s observations in Norway (Garvey 2005), none of my informants made an effort
to decorate the windows, or for that any other part of the facade of their homes to show the outside world that their home is cozy. Japanese are also concerned with what neighbors or passers-by might think, but as we will see below this is expressed in a different way. One ubiquitous item of material culture placed next to entrance gates and front doors throughout Kyoto, for example, is a red plastic bucket filled with water with the word 消火用 (shōkayō) or “for fire fighting” inscribed. I have often wondered how this innocent little bucket was supposed to combat any fire. However, I experienced the “power of the bucket” first-hand when the house of an elderly neighbor in Kyoto caught fire one cold Winter night in February 2003. In no time the whole neighborhood was awoken, a line was formed, red buckets with water were passed along, and the fire was under control long before the professional fire brigade arrived. Apart from the efficiency of the buckets, their presence shows above all that the inhabitants are concerned with the well-being of their neighbors and the neighborhood at large.

The Yanos were the only family participating in my study that had placed a red bucket next to the front door of their house in the North of Kyoto. They explained to me that the buckets are part of a neighborhood fire-fighting scheme. Another element in this system is a red banner with the words “fire watch” (hi no yōjin) that is passed around the neighborhood and hung from the entrance gate of the particular house responsible for organizing the fire-fight. Mr Yano is a member of the local neighborhood association (chōnaikai) consisting of volunteers who work together with the ward, prefectural, and national government offices in tackling a range of local issues such as safety, security, and schooling. The association operates as a mutual support network organized around local institutions such as the shrine, the school, and the fire brigade (Bestor 1989). Apart from the little red bucket placed outside their house, the Yanos’ involvement in their community is also made visible at their local shrine. A series of large paper lanterns with people’s names written on them are attached under the roof of the main building. One lantern with Mr Yano’s name acknowledges a substantial donation he recently made.

The red buckets highlight the positive qualities of social cohesion and mutual cooperation of the neighborhood association. However, as Mr Takahashi, a fifty-eight-year-old geography lecturer, rightly observed, the peril of reciprocal scrutiny and surveillance is never far away. About forty years ago Mr Takahashi’s father bought their current three-generation house in Gakuenmae, a small commuter town between Nara and Osaka. He calls it “a place where there is not much sociability (tsukiai) between neighbours.” Mr Takahashi grew up in an old townhouse (machiya) in Nara City and, although he remembers that the “house itself was very dark,” he speaks fondly of “the spirit of mutual cooperation” inside the neighborhood.
However, as the following abstract reveals, Mr Takahashi is also too aware of its potential hazards:

Well, there were many nuisances as well. There is, for example, not much privacy (puraibashii) in these old towns. But then, I also think that there is something good about that, in particular, when something bad happens. One really feels like one is part of a big family. Yes, these benefits exist but then after all the way we live now is probably better…

LOCAL COMMUNITIES OF LIMITED LIABILITY

The neighborhood associations might continue to be a powerful force in the everyday lives of people living in towns such as Kyoto and Nara where “natives” with strong roots in the locality such as the Yanos’ continue to make up a large percentage of the population. However, the majority of those participating in my study who live in or close by large urban centers were not involved in neighborhood associations. As a matter of fact, more than half admitted that they did not know their neighbors at all, while others uttered phrases such as “we seldom meet” or “I don’t know them very well.” Still, I came across a number of markers that reveal the existence of a neighborhood community in large urban centers such as Osaka, Itami, and Kobe. One common example is a sign displayed at the gate or front door to announce that the inhabitants participate in a neighborhood crime-watch scheme. Nakano (2005) mentions a similar scheme organized by the local junior high school in a Tokyo neighborhood to fight juvenile crime. One evening a week a patrol consisting of educational staff, mothers involved in the PTA, and other local volunteers, walk around the neighborhood for eighty minutes to prevent juvenile crime and to create community. My data confirms Bestor’s (1989) observation that in urban areas community activities are mostly organized around schools. Regardless of whether or not they are active in the workforce, mothers are considered to be responsible for the educational credentials of their children (Bishop 2005: 93). For women with school-going children such as Mrs Matsui, Mrs Nishiki, and Mrs Kubota, local ties overlapped with active engagement in their children’s schools. Moreover, in some neighborhoods in Nara people hung flags outside their homes to show their support for a local scheme for children to walk to school safely.

Those living in large apartment blocks seem to have the least contact with their neighbors. A number of physical boundaries separate inhabitants of apartment blocks from their fellow residents as well as from the surrounding areas. During the daytime apartments are guarded by a porter, while in the evening keys or security codes are necessary to enter the premises. A buzzer/intercom is either installed downstairs close to the post-boxes or next to the front door.
of each apartment. Moreover, newly built apartment blocks such as the one in which Mrs Nishimura lives in the center of Takarazuka City, are equipped with CCTV and an intercom system with video. Post is collected from a row of boxes located in the entrance hall. Pointedly, the red buckets have been replaced by fire extinguishers on each floor and sprinklers were installed in individual flats.

The dearth of neighborly contact could be explained by the fact that residents of apartments are more mobile than homeowners. They, generally, are families of salaried white-collar workers and professionals, but also single people and students. Regular work transfers are one reason for this more transient lifestyle. The Kubotas, who currently rent an apartment provided by Mr Kubota’s employer in the center of Osaka, for example, move about every five years because Mr Kubota, a fifty-year-old banker with a large international bank, is transferred to another branch. Moving house might, secondly, be driven by a desire to change to a different types of accommodation as one career progresses or/and as children grow up and leave the home (Suzuki 2002). Mrs Terayama, a forty-five-year-old part-time nurse who has lived in the same flat in Itami for about eighteen years, does not know any of her current
neighbors. However, she recalls how, when they moved into the building during the mid-1980s, there had been a real sense of community because they all had children of the same age who went to school together.

Everyone moved in at the same time, and our children were all around the same age. There were 45 children from the same block in my son’s class. It was a bit like the life in a nagaya (pre-modern accommodation for commoners), where people visit each other freely. But most have moved on since...

The examples above provide evidence for the weakening of community ties and the increasing significance of school and work relations in contemporary Japan. However, I disagree with some researchers who argue that these changes suggest that neighborhood networks based on long-term reciprocal dependency have been replaced by occupational and educational solidarity (Fujiwara 2003: 25–34; Suzuki 2000: 217). Through a comparative study of two types of urban Japanese communities, a commuter village and a housing estate, in Otsu to the east of Kyoto, the anthropologist Eyal Ben-Ari (1991) came to a more attractive conclusion. He holds that although ties between neighbors have weakened, locality remains important in the creation of what he calls a “community of limited liability which is more specialised, dependent and volitional” (Ben-Ari 1991: 11). In other words, contemporary neighborhood communities might consist of only a limited number of the local population and people may have multiple alliances with different groups at the same time (Ben-Ari 1991: 272–3). Similarly, most people participating in my study looked for personal fulfillment and created their identities through belonging to multiple groups. Some of these alliances may have a strong spatial, local element.

The Kagemoris, both retired academics in their mid-60s, who live in a small apartment in the center of Osaka offer a good example of how new, local communities of limited liability are created. Although they have no close relationships with their neighbors, they are part of a lively community of people with a shared interest in food and drink, among them are a number of local cooks, wine sellers, and restaurant owners. This community strongly identifies with the rich varied food culture in Osaka and the group frequently gathers to sample unusual local food stuff and explore new wines in local restaurants. Moreover, they regularly organize trips to other regions of Japan to taste other regional produce. With some members of the group such as Mrs Fujii, a married fifty-five-year-old cook/teacher with two children, the Kagemoris have formed a strong friendship. Mrs Fujii, whose apartment is about five minutes away on foot, would regularly drop by their home to share her original creations or exotic finds.
A second example of a local voluntary community is the network created by Mrs Matsui and Mrs Nishiki, both housewives in their late thirties with small children, who live in Nara. These women met more than fifteen years ago while studying at university. During their student days, they and a small group of fellow students, mainly women, frequently organized local flea markets at which they would sell their own crafts as well as homemade food and sweets. The group continued these activities after graduation as many settled down in the Nara region. These ties were only strengthened with marriage and the arrival of children. In 2003 the women regularly met in each others homes. On these occasions they, generally, share a meal made up of foods everyone brings along, while their children play together. Another activity these women continue to enjoy is visiting flea markets. However, these days they sell unused, functional items, mainly gifts that have accumulated in their homes (Daniels 2008).

Both examples above serve to illustrate how instead of reciprocity with neighbors, largely based on obligation and etiquette, some informants preferred the freedom to pick and choose their relationships. Apart from the Kagemoris, the Matsuis, and the Nishikis, only three other informants, the Takahashis, Sakais, and Kuwaharas, socialized informally with their friends inside their homes. My findings thus correspond with recent statistics that show that 21% of the Japanese entertain people in their home (Fujiwara 2003: 34).

CONCLUSION: THE INSIDE OUT

In this article, I have shown how the middle-class, urban Japanese home is sheltered from the outside world by a series of physical barriers. Historically, this seclusion can be traced back to the houses of the pre-modern elite with large rear gardens that needed to be secured with walls, fences, hedges, and entrance gates. However, unlike their predecessors, contemporary dwellings are built on very small plots of land. They have garages in front at the expense of a garden to the rear. Instead of erecting enclosures around the plot, the actual dwelling is secured with steel doors, window shutters, and second-floor balconies. My data, thereby, illustrates that previous dwelling forms were not merely imitated but that in the process of emulation a new type of housing was created. The contemporary middle-class home exteriors consist of a number of generic visual elements, but the size of the plot, the height of the gate and the number and types of cars parked in front of the house are markers of social status.

The presence of large numbers of spatial divisions between the house and the outside world suggests a clear-cut, inside–outside distinction. However, my research based on long-term fieldwork inside every day domestic spaces has revealed the complexity
and ambiguity surrounding these boundaries (see also Daniels 2001b). My analysis of a number of Japanese domestic practices that cut across inside–outside boundaries provides evidence for the argument that these categories are fluid and continuously re-created. The entrance hall, for example, is a liminal space where inside and outside merge into each other. The little red buckets demonstrate that although the inside is considered to be distinct from, it is always connected with, the outside world of the community. In contemporary urban Japan, local communities endure, but they tend to be more specialized, informal, and voluntary. For many urban Japanese, work and school relations have become more significant than ties between neighbors. Although these new networks continue to be understood as collectives of close “inside” relationships, the fact that they are spatially distant from the home has also resulted in a decreased fluidity between inside and outside domestic spaces.

Finally, in this article I have focused on the specificity of the Japanese inside–outside categorization, as used by those who I study. However, it has not been my intention to emphasize the “uniqueness” of Japanese cultural traits and add to the vast literature that enforces this notion. On the contrary, my research aims to challenge native and foreign depictions of Japan as the quintessential “other.” Japanese ideas about personhood differ, but I contend that this is more as a difference in emphasis. In other words, interconnectedness also plays a key role in Europe or North America, but Japanese people, like many others living in the larger Asian region (Helliwell 1996; Yan 1996), are just more conscious of its strategic importance. Hence, boundaries between inside and outside the home, and cultural categorizations associated with them, are as fluid in Japan as elsewhere in the world.

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NOTES
1. The main part of the fieldwork was carried out in the homes of five families with whom I lived between three and four weeks each. The data from these five fieldwork sites was supplemented with shorter, multiple visits to twenty-five homes. The majority of dwellings studied were inhabited by families, but the sample also includes university students, recently married couples and elderly single people. Like some 90% of the country’s population (Taira 1993: 169), all considered themselves to belong to an underdifferentiated Japanese middle class.

2. In 2006 I was awarded a British Academy Small Grant for a collaborative project that raises questions about the relationship between image and text in conventional anthropological monographs. This enabled me to return to Japan with the professional photographer Susan Andrews to create a visual record of the homes of ten people that participated in the 2003 ethnography. The main outcome of this collaboration will be published elsewhere, but this article is accompanied by some of Andrews’ photographs. All the images without references were taken by the author.

3. Because Tokugawa sumptuary laws stated that entrance gates were the privilege of the upper class, they became powerful signs for the status of its inhabitants to the outside world. For years to come the aspiring classes would try to emulate these pre-modern houses.

4. The average Tokyo house size in 2002 was 150 m² and the plot size 200 m². The sixteen participants in my study with detached dwellings had an average house size of 100 m² while the plot size was 150 m².

5. By law one cannot register a car if one does not have proof of possessing a parking space, whether owned or rented. This raises a range of interesting issues not only about how private and public realms are defined in Japanese law but also about Japanese citizenship and the overwhelming respect for public authority. I am unable to discuss this topic in any detail here, but Patricia Boling (1990) offers insightful discussions about the topic.

6. Nishiyama discusses the nineteenth century “tunnel nagaya” and reveals that dirty alleys in the front and the back of these long, narrow buildings were simultaneously used as a play area for children, a spot to do the laundry, and communal toilets (Nishiyama 1989: 124–5). He sees these houses as the predecessors of cheap wooden row houses as well as two-storey apartment blocks that were rented to blue-collar urban dwellers since the 1950s (Nishiyama 1989: 350–3). Today, most nagaya have been replaced by concrete apartment blocks, but some are still in use.
7. Although the size of the hallway and the height of the elevation of the step can differ considerable, all Japanese homes have this feature in common.

8. The steel pivoting doors were first introduced in apartments during the 1950s and have been standard ever since.

9. Among the twenty-three married women in my sample, a clear distinction can be made between women over and under forty-five years old, or those that married before or after 1985. Of the fifteen women over forty-five years old, eight became full-time housewives when they married (between 1960 and 1985), while only three continued to work throughout their married lives. The prolonged economic recession since the end of the 1990s has resulted in an increased participation of women, from all backgrounds, in the labor market. The eight married women in their thirties and early forties, who participated in my study, continued to work after they married. Although all left employment when they became pregnant, many returned or were planning to return to work once their children went to junior high school. However, because it continues to be socially acceptable for Japanese men to be largely absent in the home, due to long working hours and after work activities, they are unlikely to share any domestic shores or play a role in childrearing.

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Figure 3. A large “cat cage” and a number of drying racks obstruct the view from the living room towards the Japanese garden. © Susan Andrews.

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REFERENCES


