Nowadays it is impossible to understand places in urban context without considering associated images, but such images do not necessarily reflect reality. It is often constructed by society and media, yet still heavily affect public's perception on places. I believe there is a tendency now to build superficial understanding of Akihabara by overly emphasizing certain selected aspects. Here I would like to discuss the detachment of stereotypical image from reality in Akihabara, and how this detachment has affected the way people understand Akihabara.

By examining the map carefully, one will be surprised that how limited the “official” Akihabara is(fig. 2). It is obvious that there is a discrepancy between the “real” Akihabara and its wide-spread image. This discrepancy implies that when we think about Akihabara as a place in the city of Tokyo, we are actually making assumptions based on own knowledge and received information.

So what is the “real” Akihabara? To identify authentic urban spaces in modern cities is difficult, especially in places where presence of icons and signage are prominent. Here I would present a comparison between “Akihabara” under different definitions:

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1. Zukin, Sharon. *Naked city the death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. As Zukin pointed out, modern cities has physically grown beyond our personal reach, therefore we have to conceptualize urban spaces into standardized “places” with attached images to understand the city.

From different perspective, the size, location and quality of “Akihabara” is ambiguous. Therefore it is impossible to draw concrete boundaries for Akihabara. But one important conclusion is that Akihabara is not a single homogenous space only catering popular culture. The above photos were all taken within Sotokanda region, but these landscape certainly do not bear resemblance with commonly available images of Akihabara: these are cultural heritages, places of worship, residential sites and public facilities in the same district.
However, for media like newspaper, magazine and television, including government agencies like Japanese National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the image of Chuo-dori is most often chosen to represent Akihabara\(^3\). This image is effective in producing a strong visual impact, because popular culture symbols like giant billboards containing anime characters, are very visible and easily identifiable; the extremely high concentration of these symbols further enhances the impact.

In addition, the image is not only eye-catching, but also conveys a sense of uniqueness of the place. This is especially true to those lack in knowledge about this particular type of popular culture, as they may easily identify the exclusiveness. Therefore the image helps to construct a character, which is not a comprehensive reflection of the urban space in Akihabara, but can be conveniently used in media for purposes like attracting tourists.

Highly selective representation of Akihabara also appears in anime, manga and games. The depiction of Akihabara is also often biased towards spaces containing popular culture symbols (fig. 5). Since these images associate physical spaces with ideas which audience are familiar with, they instill and enhance a sense of belonging to the place among otaku.

![Fig 4. Depiction of Akihabara as seen in various animes and games](image)

Other aspects of Akihabara then receive far less emphasis and attention, since they bear no close association with popular culture, nor do they give sense of uniqueness and exclusiveness. Although they may be unique but just not specific to the particular district. They may not physically located in peripheral, but pushed to peripheral in conceptual way. As a result, the diversity in urban space in Akihabara was ignored. In a society where public rely heavily on media to receive information, a manipulated picture of Akihabara is conveyed. This is especially true for those who do not have access to the place but have to rely entirely on media portrayal to build understanding\(^4\).

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3 For example, see JNTO English website on Akihabara: http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/tokyo/akihabara.html

The image of a place is very independent from its actual qualities. A space with limited size may gain significant influence among the public, even represent a much larger district. One important feature of popular culture in Akihabara is that it is manifested through visual elements; its presence is only within a very limited physical space, but is very prominent. This prominent presence was then easily amplified thanks to media, resulted in the stereotypical impression among general public today.

This phenomenon happens not only in Akihabara, in places with highly concentrated cultural elements, certain significant images often takes priority in process of conceptualization. Similar examples are Nihonbashi in Osaka and Higashi Ikebukuro in Tokyo⁵, people's perception on these places are largely based on very specific spaces instead of urban landscape with diverse qualities.

From urban planner's view, the influence of popular culture may be exploited as it raises opportunities to add a conceptual dimension to physical spaces⁶; but as individual city dwellers, I believe we should be more aware about our perception on urban spaces. When use the name “Akihabara”, do ask self: what assumptions is being made?

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With the presence of Den-Den Shopping Street, Nihonbashi is often regarded as an Akihabara equivalent in Western Japan; similarly with Otome Street, Higashi Ikebukuro is often regarded as a female oriented Akihabara equivalent.

References


Figures


Fig. 6-1. 俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない. DVD. Produced by AIC Build. 2010; Chiyoda, Tokyo: Aniplex Inc., 2010.

Fig. 6-2. げんしけん. DVD. Produced by Palm Studio. 2004; Shibuya, Tokyo: Media Factory, Inc., 2004.

Fig. 6-3. 弱虫ペダル. BD. Produced by TMS/8PAN. 2013; Chiyoda, Tokyo: Toho Co., Ltd., 2014.

Fig. 6-4. STEINS;GATE. DVD. Produced by 5pb.. 2009; Taitou, Tokyo: Nitroplus Co., Ltd., 2010.