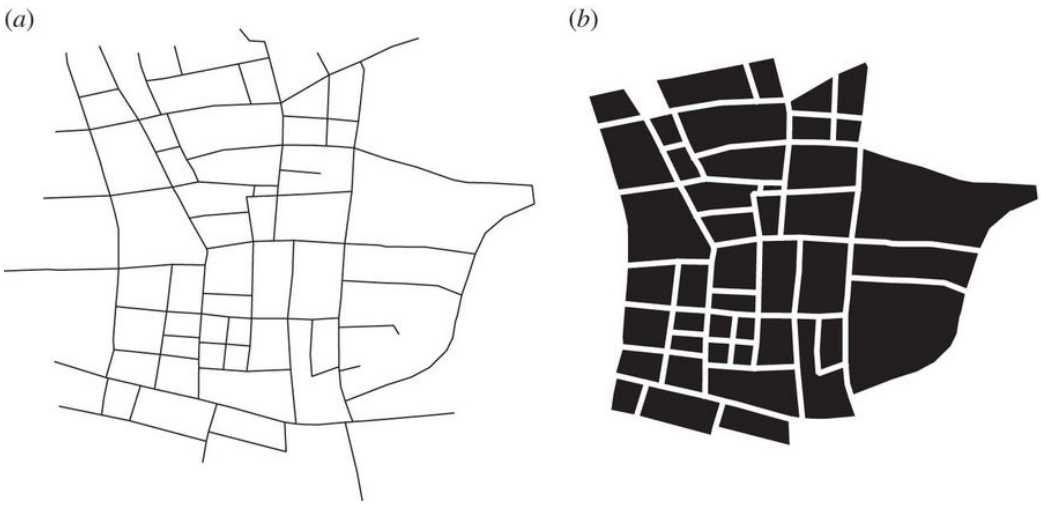
TOKYO AND THE MINI-MAP

I went to Japan for the first time recently with my friend Nathan[1], after a decade of mounting interest credit to a boyhood of manga, Miyazaki, and Nintendo. Much of what we enjoyed was just walking around.

Tokyo in particular was dazzling in its balance of vastness and minute detail. Its differences from LA, the large city that I know best, are acute. I had been warned by friends that finding things in Japan, no less Tokyo, required patience, as there is no over-arching city structure, streets are rarely named, Google Maps spotty, and directions given completely relative. (Google Maps did prove immensely useful for getting within a ballpark.) Meanwhile, Los Angeles, while not completely a modernist's dream, is mostly grids and scaffolded by well-labeled arteries. I regularly wish Google Maps could give me directions in the just-precise-enough way that Angelinos do: "take the 105 to the 110 North and get off at Figueroa… go up a bit, past the school, then it'll be on your right." In LA, these major roads provide a fairly immutable reference grid for the city. Tokyo residents must have their own techniques for finding things to the necessary fidelity of their city.

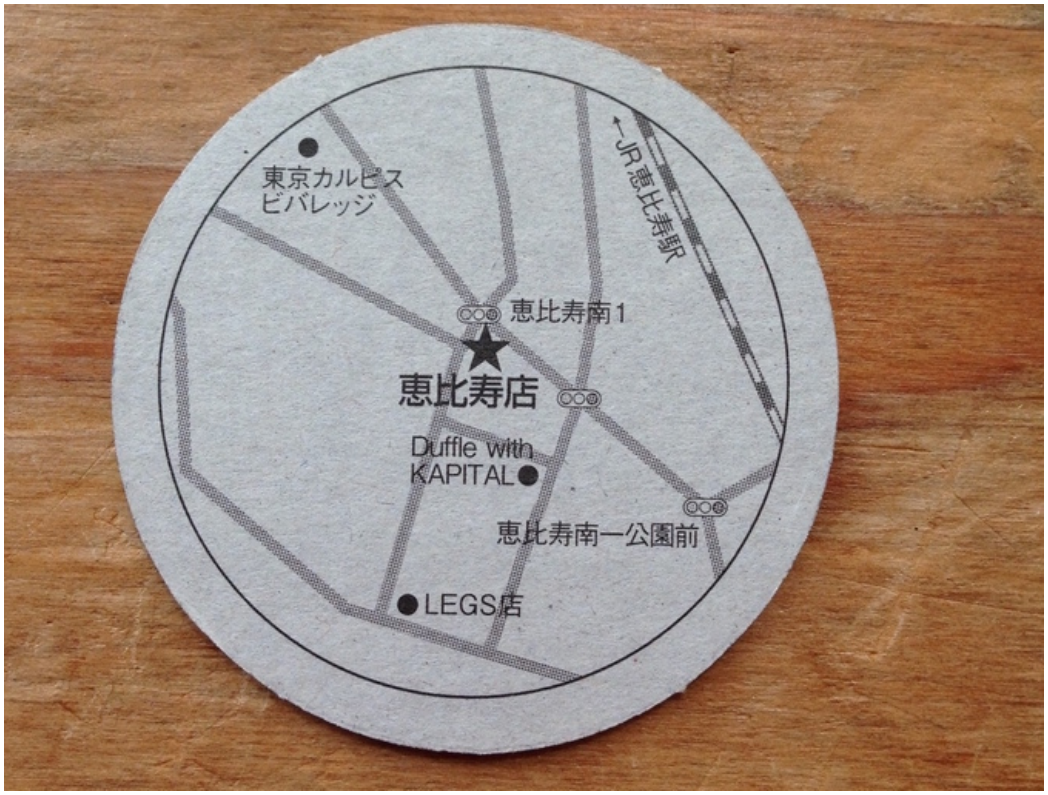
I picked up Fumihiko Maki's *City with a Hidden Past*[2] at Tsutaya Books in Daikanyama and ate it up as Tokyo revealed itself. The book has some history on land use and the growth patterns that shaped Edo-Tokyo. Knowing just a bit about land use, expansion, and topography make a city richer and more legible[3].

Modern Tokyo addressing can get you within a block of what you're looking for; sub-block specificity, including which door on which floor of which unmarked apartment building, still requires tenacity. (Kudos to the Japanese Post.) In chapter 5, the author notes that the denser the neighborhood, the more the street gets used as personal space, and more "neighborliness" is often exhibited. (Note this was written before super-dense high-rises existed.) The denser the neighborhood, too, the harder to locate things tucked away. We found that, when seeking something nearby, people were excited to help and occasionally went to lengths to help us locate it.



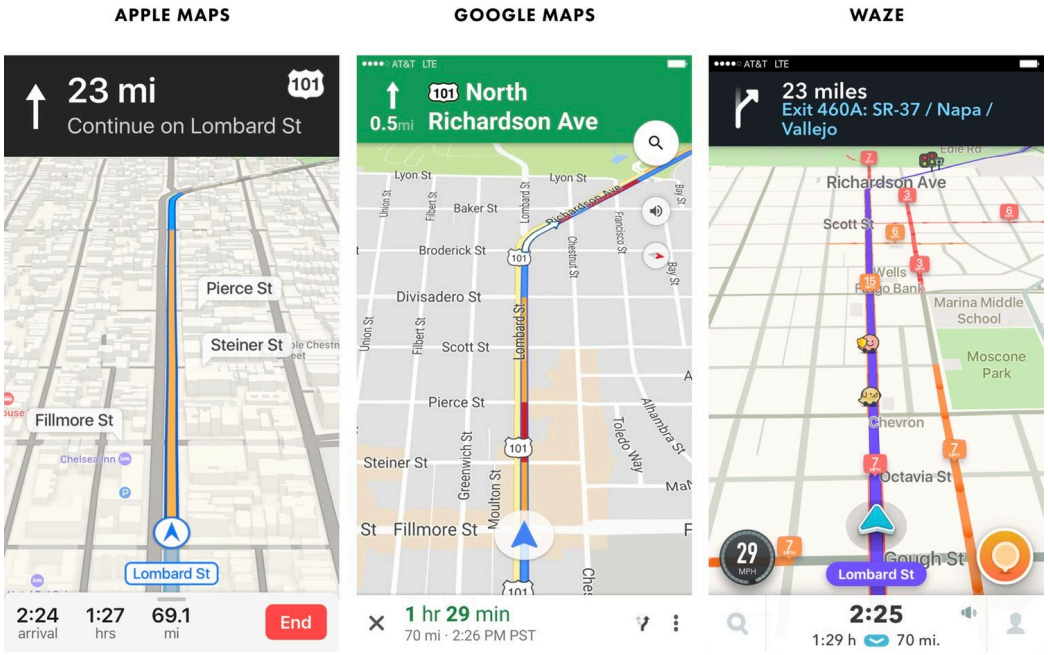
from "A Typology of Street Patterns" (2014)[4]

Maki's book discusses the crucial distinction between street as ground versus street as figure across urban and architectural scales. Central Tokyo feels very much the former. Details of careful homesteading fill your visual space while tiny, unlabeled streets function as just a vessel. In Los Angeles, it's the opposite—the grand, charactered avenues and freeways navigate a sea of monotone housing. (The Hollywood and East side hills don't quite fit this paradigm, though.)



Circular Mini-map near Kapital Tokyo

Chapter 3, on the Japanese sense of place and microtopology, notes that the orienting landmarks of Tokyo are hills, shrines, department stores, convenience stores, and perhaps historic sites. I started to collect the mini-maps[5] I found across our Japan trip, as reference ephemera to see what things were chosen as orientation markers, and how large a scale was deemed necessary to make a place findable again. Schools, Museums, and recognizable chain brands are indeed frequent, as are the through lines of train tracks and rivers. Hills have largely been folded into placenames proper. Streets and buildings bounce between foreground and background in the maps, and in some the streets are actually labeled. Not all have North pointed up. There is a lot of variety, but nearly all are tightly cropped. Some mini-maps even expect that their location be found virtually only by a visual of the local urban topology. Directions become completely relative: dependent on your ability to find a landmark, know which way is North, and remember where you got off the train.



from "Cartography in the Age of Autonomous Vehicles" (2017)[6]

Nearly anyone who has played videogames, and the vast swath of the wealthy world that has used GIS navigation software, is accustomed to using a mini-map for local or superlocal orientation and contextual construction. The crucial decisions of what's included in the map depend on expected audience, common references, and necessary fidelity: the same decisions we make giving directions in any city.

Peter Turchi, in *Maps of the Imagination*, writes about prototypical use of the digital mini-map:

> *A common premise of [video] games is that they show the player only a very limited portion of physical 'space' at any one time. The key to success is [...] to find your way through the [landscape], which is revealed only in fragments, creating mystery and suspense.*

Navigating a city isn't a video game (though Pokémon Go and Geocaching challenge that). However, getting around a new city—especially one without legible large-scale structure—can feel like exploring the unknown as one moves between points of comprehension (intersections, plazas, landmarks).

From the ground, every city exposes itself in pieces, and the urbanite's mental map accumulates with time and observation. Now that I am back in Southern California, my mental map of Tokyo is but a patchwork of mini-maps, subway lines, and locally understood spaces—all quickly stagnating until the dynamic replenishment of future conversations, more maps, and, hopefully, another trip.

— Lukas
3 August 2018

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1. http://nathanzack.net/
2. https://www.amazon.com/City-Hidden-Past-Yukitoshi-Wakatsuki/dp/4306046613
3. https://www.are.na/lukas-w/reading-the-street
4. http://rsif.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/11/101/20140924
5. https://www.are.na/lukas-w/mini-maps-of-japan
6. https://www.justinobeirne.com/autonomous-vehicle-cartography