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Tokyo Urbanism: Building the Intimate Megacity

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Joe McReynolds

Thursday
2026-06-11
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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Tokyo is one of the most vibrant and livable cities on the planet, a megacity that somehow remains intimate and adaptive. Compared to Western metropolises like New York or Berlin, however, few outsiders understand Tokyo's inner workings. For cities around the globe mired in crisis and seeking new models for the future, Tokyo's success at balancing growth and local community poses a challenge: if we learn why Tokyo succeeds, can we use that knowledge to improve our cities at home?

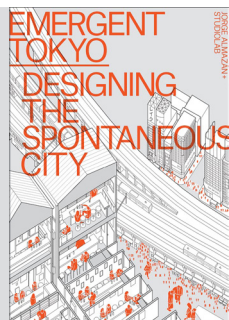
Joe McReynolds, the co-author of *Emergent Tokyo: Designing the Spontaneous City*, answers this question in the affirmative by delving into Tokyo's most distinctive urban spaces, from iconic neon nightlife to tranquil neighborhood backstreets. Tokyo at its best offers a new vision for a human-scale urban ecosystem, where ordinary residents shape their own environment in ways large and

small, and communities take on a life of their own beyond government master planning and corporate profit-seeking. As a Tokyoite himself, he uncovers how key features of Tokyo's cityscape such as intimate *yokochō* alleyways, multi-tenant *zakkyo* buildings and dense low-rise neighborhoods together enable this 'emergent' urbanism, allowing the city to organize itself from the bottom up.

Above all, this talk will give a clear account of the web of public policies that makes Tokyo's emergent urbanism possible, from transit to zoning to housing. By demystifying the social and spatial conditions that power Tokyo, we can extract practical, trans-cultural lessons for the rest of the world. We can bring Tokyo-style intimacy, adaptability, and spontaneity to our cities at home -- as long as we learn to ask the right questions about how our cities are built and governed.



Joe McReynolds is a researcher at Keio University's Almazan Architecture and Urban Studies Laboratory in Japan, where he studies Tokyo's approach to urban policy and how Tokyo's cityscape and its subcultures interact. He is the co-author and research editor of the bestselling book *Emergent Tokyo: Designing the Spontaneous City*, shortlisted for Urbanist Book of the Year, as well as the forthcoming book *The Railway Empires of Tokyo*. He splits his time between Tokyo and Washington DC, where he works as a national security researcher.



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