Shitamachi as an Assembled Character in Nezu, Tokyo

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a specific urban situation in the precinct of Nezu, Tokyo, and uses assemblage theory to create an approach for its analysis. In spite of the change in the built landscape, Nezu has preserved its historical character. This suggests a different kind of preservation, one which is not based on the conservation of buildings. This study employs assemblage theory in order to clarify aspects that contribute to the preservation of this character. Assemblage theory is used as a toolbox to understand places through relationships between buildings rather than the buildings themselves. This paper develops a method for analysis of the physical structure, and focuses on the domestic, closeness, and neighbourhood feelings as main characteristics of the shitamachi Edo atmosphere of Nezu. This method is based on the application of assemblage theory through the visual analysis of streets and public-private interface patterns. The results show that the structure of the public-private interface in Nezu is one part of the assemblage which creates intensities and contributes to the sense of domestic, closeness and neighbourhood as the main elements that preserve the shitamachi character.

Keywords: assemblage; urban character; public-private interface

1. Introduction

Tokyo shows distinctive and complex characteristics in terms of change and persistence. The average lifespan of a house is only 26 years (Kitayama et al., 2010: 29). In Tokyo, it is difficult to find buildings that are 100 years old. Two massive destructions in the 20th century have left only a few areas in continual evolutionary development and allow preservation from the Edo period (Jinnai, 1995: 2). One of those areas is Nezu. However, this paper will show that the preservation of Nezu is not based on the conservation of buildings, but on the complex relations that constitute dynamics of a certain historical character.

Although there is a general agreement on the necessity for the preservation of historical character, in many cases, this conservation has negative consequences for the liveliness of the area. For example, in Europe such problems as the "tertiarization", "museumization" or "disneyfication" of the old city centres are well known.

This paper aims to identify aspects in the urban design of Nezu that contribute to that specific character by using the theory of "assemblage" and applying it to a visual analysis of the streets of Nezu. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of this particular area of Tokyo, but also to suggest ways of preserving cities and their urban character beyond the physical conservation of buildings. This paper also aims to contribute to the ongoing research of introducing the theory of assemblage into the analysis of place (Farias and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011; Waghorn, 2011). This body of work studies one particular application of the assemblage theory introduced from philosophy into urban design and analysis. This paper attempts to develop methods in order to analyse the way in which identity can be preserved and embedded in the built environment without the preservation of individual buildings.

The paper is divided into three sections. First, the history of Nezu and the character of the shitamachi will be examined. Secondly, assemblage theory will be exposed, extracting the most relevant concepts that can be applied to urban analysis. Finally, an application of those concepts will be attempted by a visual analysis of the streets of Nezu and the patterns of public-private interfaces.

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2. Nezu and the Shitamachi

2.1 History of Nezu

Nezu is located in Bunkyo ward, one of the 23 central wards of Tokyo. It is part of the Yanesen area, consisting of Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi. Nezu is dominantly a low rise, high-density residential area with ubiquitous greenery and small local shops and galleries. It is located in a valley and is characterised as a shitamachi (low city) (Kim and Takahashi (1995); Tachibana, et al., 1991).

During the early Edo period, this area was a suburb of Tokyo. Nezu developed in the valley around the Nezu shrine, an area with the specific character of shitamachi. One of the famous elements of shitamachi was the pleasure quarters, and in the early Meiji period (1868-1912), Nezu was also a pleasure quarter. However, due to the closeness of the Imperial University campus on the former estate of the Maeda, lords of Kanazawa, the pleasure quarter was moved in 1888 to Susaki in Fukagawa (Seidensticker, 1984:178).

The precinct was largely spared from two massive destructions in the 20th century, caused by the Great Kanto earthquake and subsequent conflagration (1923) in which almost three-quarters of the buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged, and Second World War fire bombings (1945) with an even larger span of destruction (Radović, 2008). This led to the definition of the processes of change in this area as transformative, characterised by slow change and persistence. This specific situation of transformative evolution supports the characteristics of this area defined through the specific identity of the place based on the past (Muminović, et al., 2013).

2.2 Urban Character of Nezu

It is widely accepted that the spatial identity of contemporary Yanesen, and Nezu as its segments, differs from that of other residential areas of Tokyo, and that its main characteristics date all the way back to the Edo period. In both academic discourse and in local and international tourist guides, the sense of old, locally bounded character is asserted. In Paul Waley's words, this area has managed to have "struck a happy balance between craving for the future and basking in the past" (1991: 191). Nezu is embracing persistence and change at the same time. It is also managing to maintain its identity from the past and respond to the contemporary clamour for modernity.

Contemporary Nezu's architecture shows that not many houses date back to the Edo period. Considering the fact that wooden architecture has a short lifespan and requires frequent rebuilding, the number of houses with a wooden facade and the expressions of traditional architecture are small. The fieldwork conducted in this area has shown that less than 3 per cent of the houses have a wooden facade (Fig.1.). The houses have dominantly contemporary architectural expressions and are made of contemporary materials (coloured facade, metal, tile, plaster, plastic, glass, and so forth). Furthermore, the houses that show a resemblance to Edo period architecture are scattered in the area, not creating clusters that have strong expressions of old traditional architecture. Rather, these houses appear as rare examples of a bygone era. Consequently, they evoke a sense of change.

An analysis of the finer scale elements and details of the house facades shows that wood is the least used material. The materiality upon which Edo architecture was based, wood, has been lost. In spite of these changes, the identity of Nezu is based on the past. The famed 'mood of Edo' and shitamachi in Nezu is not based on the preservation of monumental buildings, nor on the preservation of houses, facades and materials. The physical structure of the place has shown great flexibility and an ability to transform and redefine itself within the rule of the archetype. Therefore, the analysis of the built environment in Nezu demands a specific approach, which differs from the conventional methods of mapping and measuring the quantity of traditional buildings as well as showing their qualitative characteristics.

The aim of this paper is to develop a method to analyse the way in which the identity of Nezu can be embodied in the built environment. More broadly, the goal is to develop a specific way of looking at the city, place, and built environment, which can assist redevelopments in Nezu and the built environment of places.
2.3 Shitamachi Character

Since its founding, the shogun's city, called Edo (contemporary Tokyo), has been divided into two regions: yamanote or the high city, and shitamachi or the low city. The boundaries between these two regions are difficult to determine. Nevertheless, hilly yamanote generally consisted of areas west of the shogun's castle (now the emperor's palace), and the shitamachi consisted of low lands east of the castle. "The yamanote area was a diluvial terrace packed with warrior residences; the shitamachi was an alluvial area with a concentration of chōnin dwellings" (Matsunosuke, 1997: 43). The High City was the place of aristocratic dwellings, shrines and temples, and the Low City was the home of merchants and artisans. Nevertheless, plebeian enclaves could be found among the yamanote as well as aristocratic dwellings in shitamachi. As Seidensticker explains, the precise boundaries are difficult to define; the low city was always vaguely defined: "it sometimes seems as much an idea as a geographic entity" (1984:8).

The shitamachi was characterised through Shitamachi jōchō, the "mood of the Low City" with its rows of wooden buildings and sense of neighborhood community (1984: 86). Pleasant quarters were also important for the development of the low city's culture in the Edo period (1984: 18). Another significant part of everyday life was the public baths, a sort of community centre, providing relief from crowding and noise (1984: 92).

The low city grid was rigid and right-angled. Streets in the high city followed the terrain (1984: 237). As Seidensticker explains: "The Low City was small, tight, and cozy" (1984: 9). The living conditions in the low city were defined by overcrowding. Standard dwellings for the artisans and poorer tradesmen were located in the back alleys and called "nine-by-twelve". They consisted of two rooms, one of them earth-floor, with nine feet of frontage on the alley, and extended twelve feet back from it. The houses were predominantly wooden and one storey high. People lived with "mud, dust, darkness, foul odours, insects, and epidemics" (1984: 14). Nevertheless, some of the wealthier merchants lived almost as expensively and extravagantly as aristocrats in the high city (1984: 5). Due to overcrowding, the city was proud of its fires, which were called Edo no hana (or "flowers of Edo"). They brought changes and created spaces for rebuilding and for better living conditions (1984: 14). Following this, the backstreets of Edo, called uradana, were widened anytime it became possible.

The urban scene was dominated by three main building types: buke-yashiki, machiya, and nagaya. Buke-yashiki was a warrior class residence, with one or more buildings standing in a garden surrounded by high walls and big gates. Machiya was a townhouse that functioned as a residence and shop, office, warehouse or workshop. Nagaya was the row house of commoners, and the most numerous of all types (Shelton, 1999: 66-86). These three main types defined the urban sense of Edo, mainly based on the social hierarchy. The warrior class residences had clearly defined boundaries between public space on the street and private space, through high fences and gates. Therefore, the high city streets were conceived as circulation spaces.

The machiya type was defined as a residence on the second floor and semi-public space (shop, office, warehouse or workshop) on the ground level. The boundary between the house and the city was dissolved through the introduction of commercial activities. Streets became livelier, and that is where many activities were conducted.

Nagaya, or row houses, were aligned next to small alleys (roji) only 1 or 2 m wide, behind and between the machiya. The entrance to the house was directly across from the alley, which was perceived as a semi-private space, and shared among tenants. Usually, the alley was also gated, and it served as a space for cooking and other domestic activities.

The character of shitamachi (Shitamachi jōchō) was therefore defined through nagaya and machiya typologies. This character can be explained by three keywords: domestic, closeness, and neighbourhood. Due to overcrowding, the boundaries between the private realm of houses and the public realm of the streets were dissolved within numerous semi-public and semi-private spaces (Sorensen, 2002: 25-30).

3. Theoretical Approach

The fact that the number of buildings in Nezu related to the past is infinitesimal defines the necessity for a different approach in analysing the built environment. This particular condition demands not focusing on the buildings themselves and mapping monuments from the past, but rather focusing on the specific patterns of relations between buildings. For that purpose, assemblage theory, recently introduced in place theory by Dovey (2010), is applied as a tool for the analysis of place.

3.1 Assemblage

Assemblage theory largely derives from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, developed by Delanda into a coherent theory. It represents an attempt to shift toward materiality and define all entities as assemblages; moreover it avoids an emphasis on the existence of essences (Delanda, 2006: 4).

In assemblage theory, all entities, no matter how complex they are, can be described as assemblages of smaller elements. As Delanda explains, assemblages are "wholes whose properties emerge from the interaction between parts" (Delanda, 2006: 5). Societies are assemblages of people; neighbourhoods are assemblages of certain groups of people, houses, streets and so forth.
The relations between the elements of an assemblage that define it can be classified as relations of interiority and exteriority. The former defines specific connections between the elements of an assemblage, and the latter represents the relationships between the elements of an assemblage and other assemblages. That characteristic also implies that sole elements of an assemblage cannot define relations which constitute the whole. More specifically, assemblages cannot be reduced to their parts (Delanda, 2006: 11). For example, a building can be observed as an assemblage of rooms and their connections. Hence, it is possible to distinguish completely different building typologies, even if the rooms are the same and have different connections. If the rooms are connected by horizontal spaces such as corridors, the building will differ compared to the situation in which the connections are vertical such as staircases or elevators. Depending on the connections, different buildings will appear, conceived as different assemblages. Consequently, the building itself cannot be reduced to the rooms. Furthermore, in this concrete example, two different assemblages will also have different relations to the exteriority; a building that has horizontal connections will connect to the street differently than a building consisting of vertical connections. Relations inside the assemblage also define the relations of exteriority with other assemblages.

Another important characteristic of the assemblage is that relations between the elements of an assemblage may be logically necessary, but also contingently obligatory. Those relations are never defined hierarchically; rather, they are conceived in a rhizomatic manner. Delanda defines these relations as a "non-linear causality", and as complex relations of micro-macro scales (2006: 28, 2002: 119). One assemblage can be characterized through micro and macro causalities at the same time. For example, the position of the house on the plot may be determined by general planning regulations of the city, or solely as part of the context of the street, as a higher level of causality or at the macro level. On the other hand, that same position is highly determined by the demands of the owner of the house or the architect's decisions, which are, in this particular case, micro levels. These demands, both from the higher and lower levels, are inseparable. They overlap through this concrete manifestation of the position of the house at the plot. In this example, the position of the house on the plot will be the result of both the regulations and demands of the user.

Assemblages are also made from the elements that are self-subsistent and can be detached and transferred to another assemblage (Delanda, 2006: 18). In this sense, elements of an assemblage are conceived as material, inbuilt entities, which can become part of another assemblage. Those elements are seen as mere materiality, as elements that possess volume. Therefore, although an assemblage is constructed out of different elements, it can still exist without one of them, due to the different roles of the components.

3.2 Place as Assemblage

To define places as assemblages represents an attempt to avoid the reduction of place to subjective experience, as well as an attempt to depict places in more complex manners. Therefore, the important elements that define places — meanings, are not simply attached to the places; they are already part of them. They are always in interaction with elements that compose that place. As Dovey explains, "the senses or meanings of the place are neither found within the material urban form, nor are they simply added to it, rather they are integral to the assemblage" (Dovey, 2010: 17).

Dovey (2010) depicts the place as "territorialized assemblage", as a dynamic rhizomatic structure of people and the environment, which is both material and experiential. In that way, the place is characterised as a complex system, as a rhizomatic system defined by horizontal lines of movement, networks and connectivity (Dovey, 2010: 20). The main characteristics of rhizome systems are: 1) connection and heterogeneity- any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must involve 2) multiplicity- no unit will serve as a pivot, and 3) rupture -explode, connections to the other systems (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 7-20). Rhizome is "composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion" (Dovey, 2010: 21). The conceptual contrast between a rhizome and a tree finds a parallel in a striated and smooth space (Dovey, 2010: 21). A striated space is where identities and space have become stabilised in strictly bounded territories. Conversely, smooth spaces are defined by movement and instability, through which identities and spatial practices become possible. A smooth space is linked to rhizomatic modes of practice. Dovey concludes that "spatial structures are always a mix of tree-like and rhizomatic systems" (Dovey, 2010: 21).

3.3 Intensive and Extensive Spaces

In assemblage theory, all spaces can be defined in terms of extensive and intensive magnitudes. The difference between intensive and extensive quantities is based on their divisibility (Delanda, 2005: 81). Following Deleuze's definitions, Delanda explains that intensive quantities are indivisible and conversely, extensive quantities are divisible (Delanda, 2005: 81). Furthermore, intensive quantities are objective averages. This means that they tend to preserve the same average value upon division, which determines them as indivisible. For example, if one divides a room into two rooms, those two rooms will have half of the volume of the room that was divided. In this specific example, the volume is the extensive quantity that describes the room as an entity. However, the air temperature in the example of the divided room will not change after the division. Therefore, in this
example, the air temperature of the room represents the intensive quantity. The morphogenetic processes that characterise any entity, and therefore the place, are defined in this approach as a product of the differences in intensities. Two intensive quantities can produce change if there is a difference in the degree of their intensity. The change that is produced in this process is not a simple addition, but rather the emergence of a spontaneous flow or movement, which will tend to "cancel the difference in intensity and restore the equilibrium and average values" (Delanda, 2005: 81). Based on this, Delanda explains that "intensive differences are productive" (Delanda, 2005: 81).

The equilibrium state that the difference in intensities tends to achieve is defined as the "final state", "attractor" or "singularity" (Delanda, 2002). Those attractors possess certain "objective efficacy even while not being fully actual, since they guide real processes towards a definite outcome prior to the latter's actualization" (Delanda, 2005: 83). Furthermore, those attractors act as "the structure of a space of possibilities" (Delanda, 2005: 83). This space of possibilities is not real, and Deleuze and Delanda define it as "virtual" (Delanda, 2005: 83). Although it is not part of the actual state of an entity, it is present in the sense of something yet to be achieved. Deleuze explains, "that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 262). Following this, Delanda classifies reality in three spheres: actual, intensive and virtual (Delanda, 2005: 86). Virtual multiplicities direct the processes of intensity, which in turn define the actual spaces.

The intensive and extensive quantities are used to describe the concept of differentiation between actual, virtual and intensive spaces. Furthermore, the division between actual and virtual will be used to explain the place in becoming.

4. Application to Urban Analysis
4.1 Explanation of the Analysis and Methods

The method of this paper starts at the level of philosophy, shifts towards the more specific field of urban experience, and finishes on the architectural level. It is an attempt to apply assemblage theory to the particulars of urban design.

Nezu has been chosen as a case study of this application of assemblage theory. As explained above, the identity of Nezu seems to emerge from the 'sense' and 'feeling' of the shitamachi character, rather than from the very few buildings preserved from the past. The identity of Nezu can be hypothesised to be an assemblage, in the sense that relations between the buildings seem to contribute more to identity than the particulars of each building. As an application of assemblage theory, the focus of analysis will be on relations between elements in the space.

The elements of built environments selected for the analysis are obtained from the intersection of the concept of the relationships, as defined in assemblage theory and the particular character of Nezu. The character, as derived from the literature sources examined previously, is based on domestic, neighbourhood and feelings of closeness, a blurring of the private (home) and public (street) realms. This urban analysis focuses on the interface spaces between the house and the street, and on the relations between those two spheres, rather than on the house or facade as individual objects. Interface spaces are identified as spaces in which the public and private realms of city meet and thus are the spaces that comprise their relationships (Fig.2.).

The analysis is composed of two steps: 1) examination of public-private interface at the level of the street and 2) patterns of public-private interface at the level of the house.

In order to analyse the public-private interface of the streets in Nezu, first, all streets in the area have been surveyed and categorised according to use and width (see Fig.4.). Second, with the purpose of characterising the interface, a photographic survey has been conducted.

All streets were analysed by the following photographic survey: 1) taking photographs at eye level every 10 metres, 2) de-layering: extracting ephemeral objects and openings from the photographs (using photographic edition software), 3) re-layering: overlapping all of the photos taken from one street as...
sem-transparencies. This is intended to reproduce the experience of the street as a whole, without privileging any particular viewpoint (Fig.3.).

The elements extracted in the photos are ephemeral personal belongings found in the street, and also openings in buildings (windows, doors, balconies). These can be considered the elements that define the enclosure of the street as an assemblage. Usually, elements such as gates and walls are considered enclosing elements. However, as Habraken notes, even isolated elements can dominate the space around them. Habraken defines an enclosure as a space that is controlled by certain agents and territorialised through different elements. In that sense, the enclosure is "not only the forms that claim space. The isolated dolmen erected in Neolithic times still dominates the space around it" (Habreken, 1998: 56-7).

Ephemeral objects (such as potted plants, bicycles, and other personal belongings) and architectural openings can be considered as isolated elements, enclosing space with their presence and creating a sense of privacy, domesticity and closeness in the streets of Nezu. These elements located in the public-private interface widen the private sphere of the house, and dissolve the boundary between public and private spaces. Streets become privately enclosed through these elements.

The openings on the facade have also been chosen as elements to be extracted in the photographic survey. Openings create a sense of closeness and privacy, and define the level of privacy of the street. The level of openness of the facade towards the street claims the street space and defines the boundary between public and private.

At the level of the house, patterns of public-private interface were defined considering the facade line and the property line (pattern 1, lines coincide; pattern 2, lines do not coincide). In addition, pattern 2 can be further subdivided into various subtypes based on the way in which the interface is materialized: (a) presence of a wall or fence, (b) different height level between street and house plot, and (c) different pavement materiality for the street and house plot (see Fig.6.).

4.2 The Results

All of Nezu's 31 streets were categorized according to width and use (Fig.4.). There were 23 residential streets and 8 mix-use streets. According to the width, all residential streets are classified in two groups: less than 2 metres (52%) and 2-4 metres (48%). In addition, mix-use streets were categorized in three groups: 2-4 metres (37.5%), 4-6 metres (12.5%) and more than 6 metres (50%).

A photographic survey was conducted in all streets and ephemeral objects and openings were re-layered separately. This method was used to compare the density of selected elements in different streets based...
The results show that residential streets with a width of less than 2 metres and mix-use streets with a width of 2-4 metres have the highest presence of both ephemeral objects and openings. Thus, the public-private interface of these streets can be considered to contribute to the particular character of Nezu and shitamachi. Hence, the streets that contribute to the feeling of semi-private, domestic spaces in Nezu comprise 65% of all streets. There are a significant number of streets, which do not support the urban character of Nezu described in the previous section. Furthermore, those streets do not show a tendency to cluster in space, but are scattered throughout the whole analysed area.

The analysis of the public-private interface at the level of each individual house was conducted in the streets and identified as following the shitamachi character. It was found that all of those buildings fall within the two patterns. Most of the buildings belong to the first pattern in which the facade line coincides with the property line (44% of all buildings). The rest of the buildings can be identified within the second pattern (12% of all buildings), however it was also found that the space of the interface is usually within one metre in width, creating a very direct interaction between public and private spaces.

These interface types can then be separately considered to clarify how they affect the presence of ephemeral elements. From fieldwork results, it was confirmed that when the private realm of the house is more directly exposed to the public, there is a tendency to create a stronger enclosure, that is, a greater presence of ephemeral objects. The distance between the facade of the house and boundary of the street is shown to have a significant influence. When the facade line is set back from the street, the presence of personal belongings is very minimal, even when there is no fence. In pattern 2a (public-private interface is structured with the fence), there are no ephemeral objects. It seems that clear and strong boundaries correlate with a lack of ephemeral objects. The first pattern can also be considered as a strong and clear division between house and street, in the sense that the facade has a prominent presence and clearly delimitates the property. However, in the first pattern, there were a large number of ephemeral objects in the street. These results show subtle and minimal differences in terms of size (setbacks in this area are approximately one metre in width) that nevertheless have a major impact on the character of the street.

5. Conclusions
The research conducted in Nezu has shown assemblage theory as a valuable tool for thinking in terms of the role of built environment in maintaining the urban character. The analysis focused on the interface spaces between public and private and obtained results provide an explanation for the ways in which built environment supports that particular character.

This study has confirmed that character of place can also be based on the relationships between objects rather than on the iconic buildings or their facades, as usually considered. The results have shown that it is possible to observe elements of built environment as mere materiality, as elements that possess volume. That is the main element of the Nezu’s urban character which enables buildings to be replaced while at the same time maintaining the place identity based on the
past. Thus the definition of assemblage, that which is composed of the elements that are self-subsistent, was confirmed.

The relationships between the public-private interface of the streets and houses have shown the characteristics of non-linear causality. Namely, it was found that the private character of the streets is a result of the particular relationship of the house on the plot. The more houses that were exposed to the public realm, the more ephemeral elements were present on the streets, thus contributing to the private character of the streets. The character of the street affects the interface at the level of the house but at the same time the street character largely derives from the ways in which that interface is mediated.

The results also support the rhizomatic structure of the elements of the built environment in Nezu. Through a photographic survey, it was shown that ephemeral elements are not equally spread throughout the whole area. The place shows heterogeneity in terms of the elements that support the sense of closeness and neighbourhood, characteristic of the shitemachi. This leads to the third important concept deriving from assemblage, the intensive and extensive spaces as well as the concepts of difference and becoming.

This research did not focus on the morphogenetic processes produced by difference in the intensity; however the results suggest that these concepts play an important role in explaining the maintenance of the historic character. The structure of the built environment in Nezu implies that the intensity as a productive force of the character of the place could be located at the levels of experience. In the case of Nezu, the actual, the specific typologies of public-private interface, evoke the virtual in the Deleuzian sense through the mediation of ephemeral objects and heterogeneity found in the character they generate. This "virtual" can only be grasped through feelings neither present in the mind nor in the object itself, but rather in the threshold between them. The particular case of Nezu implies that these concepts have the potential to be further examined in various case studies and extend their relevance to preservation practices.

The application of philosophical abstractions to the reality of the city and architecture is a slippery field, and the authors acknowledge that the results may seem too deterministic. However, this research has shown that the specific case of assemblage theory, with its emphasis on physical relations, can be considered especially relevant for architecture and urban design.

Notes

1 Various applications of the concepts deriving from Deleuze, and more recently Delanda, result in an incoherent state of an emerging epistemology and ontology, referred to as assemblage theory. This research follows the definitions from Deleuze and Delanda, as well as the applications in place theories by Dovy.

2 The fieldwork was conducted during January and February 2011, and consisted of observation and mapping of the wooden facade houses in this area.

References

19) Although the actual human perception of the space is freer and less predictable, this method can still be used as a rough approximation of the visual experience.