



Inviting Totoro to Tokyo

Creating habitat for a fictional character can revivify an urban environment



BY JARED BRAITERMAN

INVITING TOTORO TO TOKYO disrupts conventional ideas about daily urban life and offers fresh inspiration for cities' extraordinary possibilities. Habitat creation for a fictional character dissolves the borders between science and magic, city and country, pragmatism and aesthetics.

Tokyo presents the ultimate edge case: the world's biggest city, poorly planned, fully built-out with insufficient open space, and increasing in population despite Japan's rural population collapse.

Biodiversity campaigns often focus on preserving rain forests, coral reefs, and wilderness areas far from human habitation. But more than half of the world's population already lives in cities, and millions more are arriving every month. Maintaining the divide between human life and the natural world often relegates biodiversity to a place outside of daily life and experience.

Recently, urban ecology has spawned an abundance of new and revived ideas about bringing nature into city life. Projects that create and rely on complex urban habitats include urban honey production, river restoration, tree canopy expansion, fruit tree planting, urban farming, and vertical gardens.

Each of these projects offers environmental benefits, including clean air and water, food security, and energy independence. And each benefit can be linked to a numerical target, the metrics of technocrats and rationalists. But are these

numbers and goals sufficient to overcome obstacles of inertia, bureaucracy, and habit?

Rather than persuade with facts and figures, one of the most compelling visions for a new urban environment alive with people, plants, and animals can be found in a book about bringing Japan's most famous fictional character to Tokyo. Nearly twenty years ago, Japan's esteemed animated filmmaker Miyazaki Hayao published *The Place Where Totoro Lives*, a book that combines his illustrations with photographs and essays. This book, still largely unknown even in Japan, offers a magical and attainable vision for transforming liminal urban spaces into a home for Totoro to appear and interact with its residents.

For those who have not seen the movie, "My Neighbor Totoro," the title character is a playful giant with rabbit ears, no neck, and an enormous body. Two young sisters discover him while exploring the shadows in an unfamiliar country house, where they have moved with their father to be closer to the hospital where their mother is being treated. Totoro is the "keeper of the forest" and a friend to the anxious girls in a landscape that is vividly alive.

Totoro embodies an animist reality that merges the supernatural and the everyday, the modern and the ancient, human life and nature. By inviting Totoro to Tokyo, Miyazaki reveals the magical potential in Tokyo's humble western

neighborhoods, from Nakano to Kichijoji. His book documents and celebrates the homes, gardens, and small lanes that existed after the war and up to the "boom" era of the 1980s.

Despite their proximity to central Tokyo, these old homes included abundant trees, bushes, natural materials, and porous boundaries between domestic interiors and gardens, and between the street and residences. In the concluding essay, Miyazaki laments that hedges and bamboo fences are being replaced with tall concrete walls, stepping stones with pavement. I live in this part of Tokyo myself, and sense the deadening effect as new multi-unit buildings devoid of plant life replace old houses and their gardens.

Miyazaki's illustrations, photographs, and words remind us that city and nature co-existed in Tokyo in the recent past. And he shows that removing the pavement in the spaces between houses can create a garden city and a new balance between people and nature. The place where Totoro lives abounds with shadows, mystery, wildness, and discovery.

Walking in these neighborhoods today, I am often struck by how elderly residents generously plant and care for a wide variety of seasonal trees, shrubs, and flowers in pots along the edge of their properties and the street. Sometimes these plants escape their pots and burrow their roots through the pavement into the soil. Nature is resilient despite our best efforts to bury it.

We have many reasons to be concerned that human activities are irreparably harming the earth that provides the basis for life itself. To change our relationship with nature, there is no better place to start than where we live today. Miyazaki's animist vision celebrates an urban environment intensely alive and magical.

Rationality, targets, and "environmental good" have their place but are unlikely to persuade most people that our lives can and must change. Bringing nature into our cities makes our everyday lives enchanting and pleasurable, and opens us to the sensory experience as well as functional benefits of biodiversity. Art and the imagination are indispensable inspirations for remaking the relationship between people and nature. 🐼

