

Urban Forest Twitting

Social media as more-than-human communication in Tokyo's Rinshinomori Park

Diego MARTÍN SÁNCHEZ, Cultural Landscape Research Group, Madrid School of Architecture. Technical University of Madrid (UPM), Spain

Noemí GÓMEZ LOBO, CAVIAR - Quality of Life in Architecture Research Group. Department of Architecture. University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Spain

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Abstract

In the turn of the 20th century, in what were once rice fields on the fringes of a growing Tokyo, hundreds of different tree species were planted with the ambition of studying their introduction in Japanese soil. Eighty years later, this urban forest, now embedded in the very center of the world's largest metropolis, was opened to citizens as *Rinshinomori Koen*, meaning "Experimental Forest Park", becoming a fertile ground for both, biodiversity and public life. Although two-thirds of the Japanese archipelago is covered by forests, the green areas of the major metropolises do not follow this ratio. Tokyo has famous parks characterized by intense urban activity in its central core, such as Yoyogi or Ueno, and renowned gardens that preserve Edo landscaping know-how, such as *Hamarikyu* or *Koishikawa Kōrakuen*. However, there are few medium-sized parks to nurture the large mass of single-family houses that characterize its neighborhoods. *Rinshinomori* is one of the medium-sized rarities, an artificial wilderness between the *Musashikoyama* and *Fudōmae* quarters in the Meguro district.

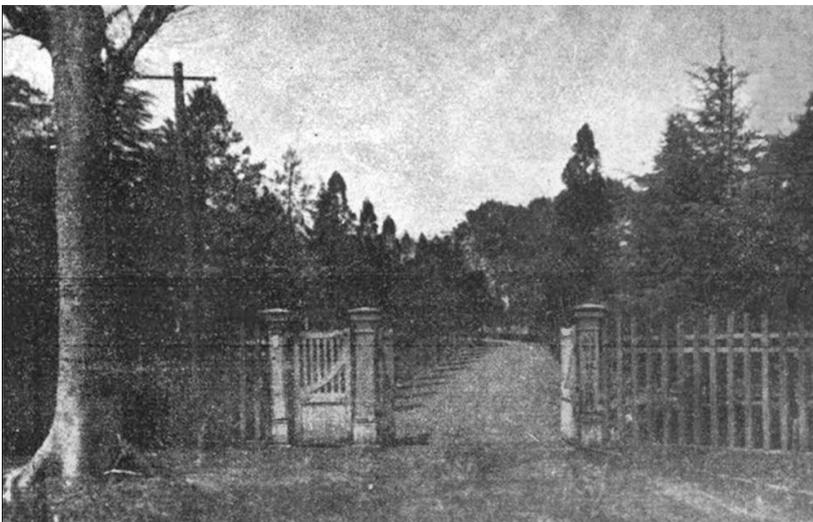


Fig. 2. Forestry Research Institute 1907 (National Diet Library, Forestry Bureau, Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce)

Rinshinomori is especially relevant for constituting an ecological city-scale patch of forest. Various species of trees and plants were tested and studied, generating a diverse ecosystem, constituting a meta-assemblage in the urban environment, capable of intertwining the connections between resources, humans and living beings in the city. Although this type of urban forests in Japan have been analyzed with indicators corresponding to the sciences of ecology, forestry or agriculture, there is very little literature that discusses their capacity to generate connections between natural resources and citizens. This study attempts to frame their capacity to foster interspecies relationships, going beyond their recognition as an element of well-being for urban leisure or health to decompress densely populated areas.

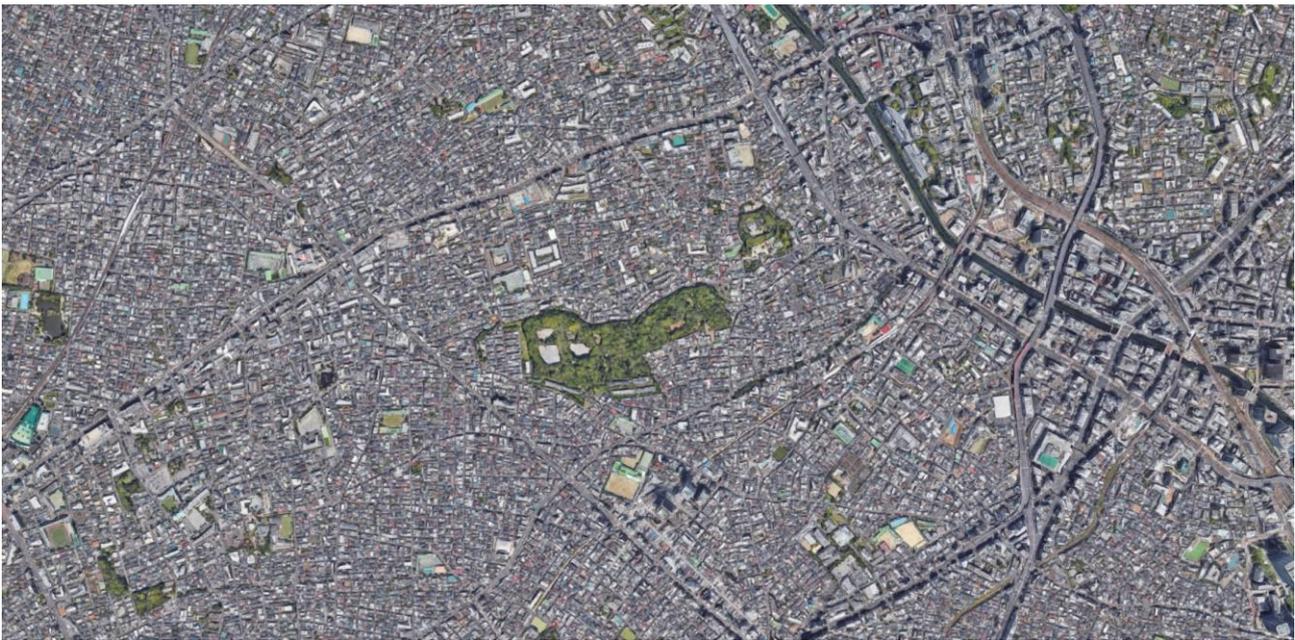


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Rinshinomori Park (center of the image) surrounded by the dense urban fabric of Meguro and Shinagawa neighbourhoods (© Google Maps)

The caretakers of these forests have a characteristic working routines tied to the flow of resources in the park. With their characteristic outfit of loose-fitting jumpsuits, a helmet, a pair of *jika-tabi* shoes, and a thick belt packed with pruning tools, urban forestry workers navigate the park walking, by bicycle or mini-truck, gathering and managing different modes of matter. Their activities and spaces usually remain invisible, however, through social media they have started to report on the spatial and temporal rhythms of the management of green spaces and their material flows. Since April 1, 2016, management workers have been broadcasting a message almost daily on a twitter account, in which they personify themselves as the voice of Rinshinomori Park communicating all kinds of information: from warnings regarding disaster prevention measures, to activities organized by neighbors, but especially events related to animal and plant species throughout the seasons. Thus, this social media layer becomes another constituent part of the forest's relations, where its organisms communicate through interconnected aerial and subterranean networks in an exchange of substances and matter, emitting coded messages containing information capable of being read by other species, which speak of meteorological changes, abundance or scarcity of resources, expected seasonal events or imminent environmental dangers.

From this perspective, it is necessary to expand the study of the Japanese landscape from its aesthetic attributes to examine the care practices of urban forestry in terms of assemblages that foster relationships between more than humans. Understanding urban forestry as a practice of care relates with recent studies that

are expanding the framing of the urban environment beyond human action to include multi-species concerns. Authors such as Jane Bennett, Jonathan Metzger or Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing include non-human living bodies as part of the public realm, problematizing the notion of place and revising the concept of agency. Patrick Bresnihan take on “more-than-human commons” is particularly relevant for the present study as it means “making an intellectual leap into contexts where social and material resources are already immediately and intimately shared between humans and non-humans.” By intertwining cultural and ecological intakes, social media can add another layer of commoning to the physicality of the environment.



Fig. 2. Tweets from the perspective of diverse forest actors. a) Plant flowering status directed towards citizens; b) Incoming typhoon warning express through swaying trees video; c) Park manager tweet directed to cicada; d) Tweet from an adolescent crow (© Rinshinomori Park Management tweeter account @ParksRinsi)

The twitting of the urban forest's workers can be understood as a caring practice, as their maintenance work acknowledges the agency of diverse actors that transcend the human or are just user-focused. Along these lines, the inclusion of social media as study material raises a key question: is it possible for social media to overcome an anthropocentric vision creating an interspecies communication? Answering the stories of how plants communicate their blooming, how cicadas announce their emergence after long years underground, or how a population of trees prepares for an imminent typhoon. Drawing on actor-network and more-than-human commons theories as well as taking historical data, self-produced updated documentation, and over 1300 tweets, this study aims to delve into the threefold condition presented by the use of social media in the case of Tokyo's Rinshinomori Park: as a channel for a plural voice of the human and non-human inhabitants of the urban forest, as a catalyst for relationships among them, and as a source of knowledge.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization: <D.M.S & N.G.L>

Data curation: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Formal Analysis: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Funding acquisition: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Investigation: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Methodology: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Writing – original draft: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

Writing – review & editing: < D.M.S & N.G.L >

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