

**Bryn Mawr College**  
**Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr**  
**College**

---

Growth and Structure of Cities Faculty Research  
and Scholarship

Growth and Structure of Cities

---

2013

# Book Review: Roppongi Crossing: The Demise of a Tokyo Nightclub District and the Reshaping of a Global City. Roman Cybriwsky

Carola Hein

*Bryn Mawr College*, [chein@brynmawr.edu](mailto:chein@brynmawr.edu)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs)

---

## Custom Citation

Hein, Carola. "Roppongi Crossing: the Demise of a Tokyo Nightclub District and the Reshaping of a Global City. Roman Cybriwsky (Book review)." *Urban Geography* 34.5 (2013): 732-734.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities\\_pubs/29](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/29)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

Roman Cybriwsky (2011). *Roppongi Crossing. The Demise of a Tokyo Nightclub District and the Reshaping of a Global City*, Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press.  
Reviewed by: Carola Hein

Roppongi—anyone somewhat familiar with Tokyo will recognize the name as that of a famous entertainment district. From the 1960s to the 2000s, Roppongi referred to a nightclub district with numerous discotheques and bars, a place where foreigners mingled with rich young internationally minded Japanese, located in proximity of the central government district, international headquarters, several US military facilities, and the American embassy. Since the mid-2000s this image has come to change, as the Japanese construction state, a powerful coalition of the public and private sector has inserted new functions and established a new image for the district as an upscale shopping and business center. The Roppongi Hills complex and its Mori Tower, which include an Art Museum, cinema, restaurants and shops as well as office spaces for major companies and luxury apartments (opened in 2003), and the Tokyo-Midtown development of the Mitsui group (2007) initiated this transformation.

The title of Cybriwsky's new book "*Roppongi Crossing*" refers to the busy intersection at the heart of the district. As a traditional meeting point between Japanese and foreigners, it embodies the evolving relationship between Japan and the rest of the world. In his study of Roppongi, Cybriwsky builds on his 1998 book "*Tokyo. The Shogun's City at the Twenty-First Century*". Rather than once again taking on the city as a whole, Cybriwsky uses Roppongi, understood as the spearhead of current policy, to understand where Tokyo and Japan are moving. The choice of Roppongi as the object of this study, however, was not as straightforward as it may seem. Cybriwsky was not drawn to the place through its function as an entertainment area, instead, as he points out in the preface (p. xv, xvi), the research for this book occurred during his third long-term stay in Tokyo, when he happened to be given an apartment in its proximity. It is this almost accidental encounter that raised Cybriwsky's intellectual curiosities, kept him engaged with the topic for almost a decade, and finally brought us this vivid and intriguing book

Cybriwsky uses the introductory chapter entitled "Roppongi and the New Tokyo" to carefully outline his methodology and the difficulties and potential dangers of doing research in Roppongi, a place where the Japanese gangsters (Yakuza) are a major force, where the police is very present and where anti-foreigner attitudes exist (p. 14ff). Readers learn about his personal relationship to the area and the ways in which his particular age, background and interests intersected with the research and the people who he associated with and who come from various walks of life, of different ethnicities, and ages. As difficult as research into the shady sides of Roppongi was, the neat facades of New Roppongi and the public face of its developers as presented in the available glamorous advertising and publicity documents were just as complicated to fully assess (p. 21 and p. 212). The resulting book thus invites the reader to view Roppongi through his eyes, the lens of an academic working on a difficult and quickly transforming district with a multitude of diverse stakeholders, reflecting the author's fascination and personal impressions. As Cybriwsky points out, numerous other books could be written about Roppongi about Tokyo, complementing his research and providing different insights (p. 27).

Through seven chapters Cybriwsky furnishes information on Roppongi, combining first-hand observations with references to secondary sources, moving from spatial and historical context to the area's ongoing transformation. Chapter 2, "Roppongi Context" lays out the general background of life in Tokyo and in Roppongi, concentrating on what Cybriwsky calls Roppongi's Spatial Ecology (p. 41ff), adding in further contextual information on Tokyo's entertainment districts and practices, as well as the city's historical engagement with foreigners (p. 68ff). The resulting narrative allows non-Tokyo specialists to understand Roppongi and to compare the area with places from around the world. Chapter 3 continues in a similar vein, exploring the history of the district, its buildings, people and their stories including the heydays of Roppongi nightlife. Cybriwsky appropriately places the main story of Roppongi's nightlife fever between the 1964 Olympics and the 2002 World Cup--the last big event that brought a temporary spike of foreigners to the country, to its capital and to its international entertainment district, just before the opening of Roppongi Hills and the larger transformation of the area.

Starting with chapter 4 (page 103) Cybriwsky moves to describe contemporary Roppongi since the early 2000s and its current (or rather recent) nightlife--given how fast the district changes. Based on personal observations, Cybriwsky describes the rhythm of the town, the lifestyle of its customers, their routines and backgrounds. Taking the reader on a tour of the neighborhood, he sketches a captivating picture of Roppongi life-style and major players, Japanese and foreign, including what he calls the immigrant proletariat. An area like Roppongi can't exist without theft, murder and prostitution, and chapter 5 focuses on what he calls "troubles," many of which are attached--rightly or wrongly--to the presence of foreigners in the area. Here, Cybriwsky combines journalistic documents with personal observations and commentary, balancing his first hand account with newspaper articles in an attempt to make his observations verifiable. Attempts to reign in the troubles, lead first to attempts at beautification and transformation of the neighborhood--including boxes for the disposal of indecent flyers--the latter sponsored by the Mori Building Company--that initiated the large-scale rebuilding of the site (p. 183ff).

Chapter 6 engages the physical rebuilding of Roppongi, the construction of several megastructures that are limiting the development of the night-club scene. Cybriwsky's description turns spatial and includes several maps with data from fieldwork on redevelopment sites within Roppongi as of 2008 (p. 201) or documenting the squeeze of the new developments on the nightlife district (p. 205). Here, Cybriwsky points to the fascinating tale of the Mori Building Company's part in the post-war rebuilding of Tokyo and specifically in the transformation of former mixed-use residential area into a high-rise district, which started with the official declaration of a Redevelopment Inducement Area (p.215). As Cybriwsky points out, Mori's vision of the New Roppongi relies on a specific vision of a global Tokyo, and the buildings and public art in Roppongi Hills, including Mori Tower, are signed by famous Japanese as well as foreign architects. Its counterpart Tokyo Midtown, similarly promotes the gentrification of the area that has been designed by major corporations in conjunction with the state.

Several themes that run across his book merit closer and further exploration. At times, Cybriwsky himself invites other scholars to continue his research, be it on the Russian resident of Roppongi who recalls the arrival of the occupation forces in Atsugi and who was selected for questioning by an American soldier, who happened to be of Russian descent (p. 84), or a yet to

be written book on gay and lesbian geographies in Tokyo (p. 59), or yet another on the death of a Western hostess, Lucie Blackman, and the twists and turns of the trial of her murderer (p. 168). Other narratives that are at the heart of his book also warrant further close study, notably the Mori Building Company and its hand in the redesign of Tokyo's postwar landscape. Cybriwsky appropriately points to Akira Yamaguchi's representation of Mori's Roppongi Hills, represented as the new Tokyo castle—and probably just as ephemeral as the old. As Cybriwsky concludes, the New Roppongi, is a testing ground for the new global Tokyo, one that engages more strongly with foreigners and the world beyond Japan and one that holds its own among other glitzy redevelopments in major cities around the world—from the Docklands in London to the Docklands in Melbourne, from Berlin to New York's Times Square. This new Roppongi is also one, as Cybriwsky argues that paints a picture of the possible future of Tokyo or, as he phrases it of "The Possible end of Japan" (p. 11).

Roppongi Crossing is a very personal book, one that combines Cybriwsky's observations and commentary with his knowledge of Tokyo and Japan. Combining social geography and spatial study, "Roppongi Crossing" provides an intriguing approach to the study of the larger transformation of Tokyo and Japan. While one might have hoped for more hard data and archival sources, the book presents itself as a leisurely stroll, a fast and engaging read, through a complicated and idiosyncratic neighborhood. At times a little repetitive, it can be easily assigned as individual chapters in a course. As Cybriwsky points out in the introductory chapter it would be difficult to examine the workings of the government, of the Yakuza or other shady organizations, or to get full disclosure of the Mori companies workings. So it may be best to explore their workings in the intersection of a neighborhood and its transformation, through observation of their actions and impact..