

The Realities and Challenges of Residential Management in Detached Housing Areas in Japan

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Abstract

This study focuses on case studies in Japan where proactive efforts are being made to address residential management challenges in detached housing areas. The objective is to analyze how these initiatives should be institutionally and socially supported and promoted. In Japan, large-scale residential development expanded significantly in the 1960s to address the housing shortage caused by rapid urban expansion during the period of high economic growth. Development peaked in the 1970s and continued into the 1990s. Meanwhile, Japan’s population began to decline after reaching its peak in 2008. In residential neighborhoods that have matured over 40 to 50 years, the progression of population aging and declining birthrates has led to several issues: (a) an increase in vacant lots and homes; (b) weakening of social ties among residents; (c) difficulties in maintaining shared spaces; (d) deterioration of landscape control rules; and (e) declining convenience in the neighborhood such as access to daily services. First, this study reviews existing research to understand the historical development, trends, and cultural background of residential development and residential management in Japan, in order to grasp the context in which the challenges mentioned above have emerged. Second, it surveys the diverse initiatives implemented across Japan to address the challenges mentioned above in detached housing areas. Third, it analyzes the institutional and social barriers that need to be overcome to sustain efforts addressing these challenges.

Keywords

detached housing areas; Japan; neighborhood association; residential management

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Objectives of the Study

In Japanese society, population decline is progressing due to the combined effects of a declining birthrate and an aging population, while demographic concentration in the Tokyo metropolitan area continues to intensify (Okada, 2023). Focusing on suburban residential areas, large-scale residential developments were carried out in conjunction with the expansion of railway networks during the period of rapid economic growth (Nakai, 2010). As 40 to 50 years have passed since the initial move-in period, the original homeowners—many of whom purchased their homes around the same time—have aged collectively, resulting in a growing number of community-level issues that require attention.

These issues include the weakening of community cohesion, a shortage of individuals capable of managing neighborhood organizations, deterioration in safety and townscape due to an increase in vacant lots and houses, isolation of elderly residents stemming from reduced social interaction, difficulties in managing overgrown vegetation, the symbolic erosion of landscape control rules established through building agreements and landscape agreements, the fragility of systems for managing shared and common property, and the decline in daily convenience resulting from reduced access to commercial or service facilities (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism [MLIT], 2018; Mizutani et al., 2025). These issues are not isolated; rather, they are interconnected and collectively contribute to the progressive deterioration of entire detached housing neighborhoods (Yui et al., 2012). Furthermore, the progression of population decline and aging generates a chain of effects: (a) a reduction in residential demand within housing neighborhoods; (b) increasing difficulty in maintaining basic services and infrastructure due to declining municipal tax revenues; and (c) a decline in housing asset values stemming from reduced market liquidity (MLIT, 2014).

In this context, the importance of residential management is increasing. In particular, it is becoming essential for residents themselves to take the lead in addressing the following five issues: (a) an increase in vacant lots and homes; (b) weakening of social ties among residents; (c) difficulties in maintaining shared spaces; (d) deterioration of landscape control rules; and (e) declining convenience in the neighborhood such as access to daily services. At the same time, challenges such as the limitations of residential management by voluntary organizations and the lack of institutional support persist.

This study focuses on practical initiatives that address challenges in residential management within detached housing areas in Japan. It aims to examine how these initiatives can be institutionally and socially supported and sustained over time. The objective is to elucidate the systems and frameworks necessary for effective residential management and to provide insights that contribute to the future revitalization of detached housing areas.

1.2. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the actual conditions and challenges of residential management in detached housing areas. The research consists of the following four components: (a) a literature review based on prior studies; (b) an analysis of policy documents related to housing and community development and management; (c) the collection and examination of municipal ordinances;

and (d) an analysis of case studies regarding the operations of management organizations in detached housing areas.

The literature review, policy analysis, and ordinance review (a–c) were conducted between April 2024 and June 2025. The case studies (d) involved site visits and interviews conducted from June 2022 to October 2023, with additional research carried out in June 2025 based on information published on the websites of the respective management organizations.

To understand the background of the challenges mentioned above, this study first examines the historical evolution, prevailing trends, and cultural context of residential land development and residential management in Japan. It then analyzes the diverse initiatives being implemented nationwide to address these issues in suburban detached housing areas. Finally, it explores the institutional and social challenges that must be addressed to ensure the long-term sustainability of such efforts.

2. Positioning of This Study

In addressing the multifaceted challenges facing detached housing neighborhoods in Japan—such as vacancy, aging, and declining community engagement—existing research has emerged across several academic domains. Geographic studies have analyzed spatial patterns of depopulation and housing vacancy (Mashita & Akiyama, 2020), while urban policy and planning scholars have examined the limitations of statutory frameworks and the institutional capacity of local governments. Furthermore, studies grounded in commons theory and institutional design have explored how shared property and local rules are negotiated, maintained, or fail over time (Ostrom, 2015). These bodies of work collectively highlight that residential management is not merely a practical task, but a complex issue rooted in legal, institutional, and socio-spatial dynamics.

Research on the increase and utilization of vacant houses and lots has become particularly active since the enforcement of the Act on Special Measures for the Promotion of Measures for Vacant Houses, etc. on November 27, 2014 (Mizutani et al., 2025). The issue of vacant houses has been actively discussed, primarily in the fields of architecture and urban planning. However, several challenges have been identified, including inconsistencies in the definition of vacant houses and statistical limitations in calculating vacancy rates. In recent years, more multifaceted analyses have emerged through the adoption of geographic approaches—such as analyzing regional characteristics and spatial distribution—as well as by integrating administrative statistics with private sector data. These developments have highlighted the necessity for more effective vacant house management in residential neighborhoods and the need for institutional support mechanisms (Mashita & Akiyama, 2020). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2019) reported on the actual use of vacant house banks operated by municipalities; however, the approaches vary across regions, and a sustainable model for long-term utilization has yet to be established. Inami (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of temporary community use through micro-renovations in a residential neighborhood in Kanagawa Prefecture (Imaizumidai) and highlighted the potential of so-called “vacant houses awaiting utilization.” Saito (2023) introduced the administrative framework of Vacant House Utilization Promotion Zones, which supports regulatory relaxation and changes in land use. The study also suggests the potential applicability of this framework to suburban detached housing areas.

In addition to issues related to vacant housing, the management of shared spaces in residential neighborhoods has also received scholarly attention. Common property—such as parks, community halls, roads, and sidewalks—constitutes an important element in enhancing the quality and appearance of the residential environment in detached housing areas. However, numerous challenges related to their maintenance and management have been identified (Inui et al., 2000). The National Institute for Land and Infrastructure Management (2009) noted that neighborhood and residents' associations are sometimes responsible for managing community halls and street lighting; however, because participation in these associations is voluntary, free-rider problems have emerged nationwide. Saito (2018) discussed the importance of designing an initial management framework during the development phase and proposed a consensus-building mechanism involving developers, local governments, and residents. Earlier, Saito (1997) also highlighted the challenges involved in establishing management organizations and achieving resident consensus. These studies collectively point to the necessity of institutional frameworks for the sustainable management of shared spaces.

Rules related to landscape and architecture are essential elements in maintaining the value and appeal of residential neighborhoods. However, several challenges have been identified. Agreement renewal requires consent from all landowners at the time of renewal, placing a heavy burden on stakeholders such as neighborhood association members to collect signatures from every resident. Moreover, after several decades since initial occupancy, agreements often become outdated and do not apply to properties owned by non-members. There are also concerns that diminished awareness of the agreements leads to an increase in violations (Nakamoto & Kurose, 2022; Nishihara et al., 1997; Suzuki, 2019). While building agreements and the Green Environment Agreement suffer from these issues, more flexible regulatory frameworks exist, such as neighborhood planning agreements. These agreements enable residents and other stakeholders to voluntarily establish rules necessary for local environmental improvements through consensus. They are characterized by the flexibility to tailor provisions and mechanisms to the local context. However, as Nozawa et al. (2003) note, the ambiguous legal status and lack of binding force of neighborhood planning agreements remain problematic.

With regard to residential convenience, Ota (2023) highlighted the need to revise use districts to facilitate the integration of commercial and medical facilities into residential areas. Based on a survey conducted in a mature suburban neighborhood in Saitama Prefecture, Taira and Kuwata (2013) identified the emergence of so-called food deserts, and suggested the necessity of considering responses beyond individual efforts. These studies underscore the importance of institutional, professional, and transportation-based support systems for maintaining residential convenience in suburban detached housing areas.

While previous studies have provided valuable insights into each of these challenges individually, few have comprehensively examined the institutional and social frameworks that underpin residential management, particularly from a cross-cutting and practice-oriented perspective. This study seeks to analyze how these issues manifest in actual detached housing areas and how they are being addressed through various forms of institutional and social support. By analyzing a diverse set of leading case studies across Japan, the research aims to extract common success factors and institutional constraints, ultimately offering both theoretical and practical insights for the institutional design of sustainable residential management.

3. Overview of Residential Development and Management in Japan

3.1. *Historical Evolution of Residential Development and Management*

Following the postwar housing shortage in Japan, the legal foundations of national housing policy were established through the enactment of laws related to housing development. In the 1950s, large-scale residential developments (New Town projects) were implemented across Japan to address the housing shortage caused by the concentration of population in major cities. From the 1980s onward, private developers became increasingly active in residential land development, often incorporating shared spaces and building agreements to enhance the quality of the living environment. While physical development efforts—such as land subdivision and housing construction—continued to advance, the importance of planning for sustainable residential management was largely overlooked (Kim, 2015; Yokomichi, 2009).

From a management perspective, public efforts focused mainly on physical infrastructure, guidance, and support for community formation, while the value of resident-led residential management and local self-governance received limited attention. However, as large-scale residential development has gradually been replaced by smaller-scale redevelopment and refurbishment, the challenges faced by detached housing areas have become increasingly evident. In response, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the MLIT have undertaken various initiatives—such as fact-finding studies by the Study Group on Local Communities (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2022), the Survey Report on the Conditions of Management Associations in Detached Housing Areas (MLIT, 2022), and the development of area management manuals (MLIT, 2008) by the Committee on Regional Management by New Actors. These efforts underscore the growing importance of establishing sustainable residential management systems.

Recent developments indicate a growing emphasis on resident-led management, as evidenced by various municipal ordinances. For example, Kawasaki City enacted the Kawasaki City Ordinance on the Revitalization of Neighborhood and Residents' Associations in 2014. Within the ordinance, neighborhood and residents' associations, as well as businesses, are encouraged to cooperate in providing information and promoting membership as voluntary goals, with the city offering support for these efforts. However, since these associations remain voluntary organizations, such measures have not necessarily led to increased membership, and some citizens have voiced concerns that the ordinance has had little visible effect (Shinagawa Ward, 2021). This situation suggests that successfully implementing resident-led management requires a clearly defined system of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders.

Furthermore, 26 municipalities nationwide have enacted ordinances related to neighborhood and residents' associations. Notably, eight ordinances were enacted between 2011 and 2015, and 14 between 2016 and 2020, reflecting growing expectations for resident-driven management organizations. However, despite the emergence of more diverse forms of local management, many ordinances remain narrowly focused on traditional neighborhood and residents' associations. This suggests that the legal framework has not evolved in tandem with the increasing diversity of local communities (Kawasaki City, 2014; Shinagawa Ward, 2021).

3.2. Cultural Background

In Japan, the concept of relocating in accordance with one's life stage was once symbolized by the 1973 *Housing Sugoroku* (see Figure 1), a board game-style representation of idealized housing transitions. Reflecting the social norms of the high-growth era—such as lifelong employment, seniority-based wages, and the nuclear family model—the standard progression involved moving into a dormitory upon entering university, followed by a company dormitory upon employment, then into a public housing apartment after marriage, a rental apartment, a ready-built house during the child-rearing phase, and finally a detached house in the suburbs with a garden as the ultimate goal for retirement (Miyamoto, 2025).

In the updated 2007 version of the *Housing Sugoroku*, the end goal diversified to include options such as nursing homes, multigenerational condominiums, rural living, overseas relocation, and central-city condominiums, reflecting the increasingly diverse housing preferences of contemporary society. As exemplified by the traditional goal of suburban detached homes with gardens, the idea that homeownership equates to permanent residence remains deeply rooted (Otsuki, n.d.). According to the Comprehensive Survey of Housing and Living (MLIT, 2018), 60.6% of respondents indicated a preference to remain in their current homes if possible. Consequently, residential mobility tends to be limited, and the secondhand housing market remains underdeveloped. However, lifestyle shifts in recent decades have led to an increase in dual-income households and single-person households. As a result, urban convenience has become a key consideration, leading to a growing preference for central-city living over suburban detached housing and a corresponding decline in neighborhood-based social interaction.

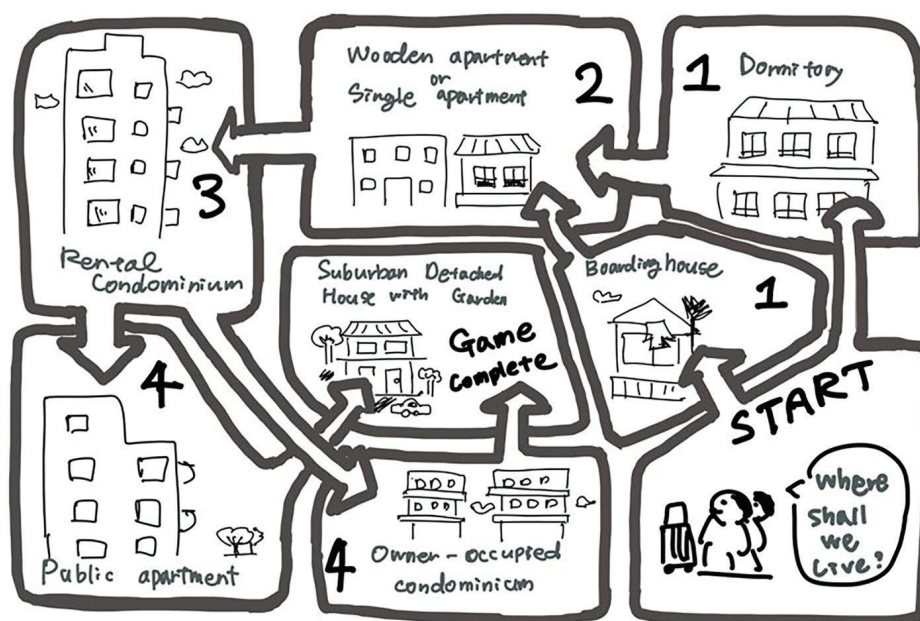


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the 1973 Jutaku Sugoroku Paradigm. Source: Fukuda et al. (2024).

In the past, neighborhood relationships were often closer, as seen in expressions like borrowing seasoning like soy sauce from next-door neighbors or sharing surplus side dishes (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2006). Even though participation in neighborhood or residents' associations was voluntary, many people joined due to cultural and historical norms—motivated by concern for how they were perceived by

others in the community or by the need for cooperation during disasters. From the perspective of community engagement, participation was strongly encouraged, and it was customary for all residents to contribute to the management and cleaning of the neighborhood (Shimizu et al., 1969).

Indeed, when examining trends in the types of management organizations established in residential neighborhoods that have common property (see Table 1), we see that until the 1980s, voluntary organizations such as neighborhood and residents' associations were most prevalent. However, from the 1980s to the 2000s—when housing development by the private developers became more widespread—facilities management associations were most commonly established. Since the 2010s, regardless of the size of the neighborhood, there has been a notable increase in outsourcing management tasks to private companies. This shift reflects not only changing lifestyles, which have led some residents to opt out of voluntary organizations or become indifferent to them, but also the effects of population aging, which has contributed to growing numbers of residents leaving such organizations.

Table 1. Establishment rate of management organizations in residential areas with shared facilities (multiple responses).

Organizations	Before 1980	1980s	1990s	2000s	After 2010
Neighborhood and residents' associations	54.5%	30.2%	28.9%	22.9%	14.8%
Facilities management associations	18.2%	54.0%	47.8%	41.7%	22.2%
Other organizations (e.g., nonprofit organizations, general incorporated associations)	13.6%	6.3%	6.7%	20.8%	25.9%
Unknown	22.7%	27.0%	39.7%	36.5%	15.9%
Number of examples	22	63	90	48	33

Note: Data analyzed by the authors from 365 cases of neighborhoods with shared facilities, which resulted in 256 cases, excluding 109 with unknown construction periods.

Given the preceding context, the establishment of sustainable residential management systems has not been prioritized throughout the history of residential development. However, in the current era—characterized by demographic challenges such as population aging and declining birthrates—the necessity and significance of such systems have come under increasing scrutiny. In response, certain localities have begun implementing creative strategies aimed at revitalizing residential neighborhoods, including initiatives to attract younger residents, restore community hubs, and promote neighborhood renewal. Section 4 will examine representative case studies that exemplify these emerging practices.

4. Empirical Practices Addressing Challenges in Residential Management

This section analyzes advanced initiatives being implemented across Japan to address five major challenges that have become evident in residential management: the emergence of vacant lots and houses (cases A and B), the weakening of resident interaction (cases C and D), limitations in the maintenance and management of shared spaces (case E), the erosion of landscape control rules (case F), and the decline in daily living convenience (case G).

4.1. Response to the Emergence of Vacant Lots and Houses

In recent years, the number of vacant houses has been increasing across Japan (see Figure 2). While well-managed vacant properties may not pose immediate problems, those that are left unattended can become “negative assets,” threatening the safety and livability of residential neighborhoods. In response to this concern, this section focuses on case studies of communities that are actively working to address the issue of vacant houses within residential areas.

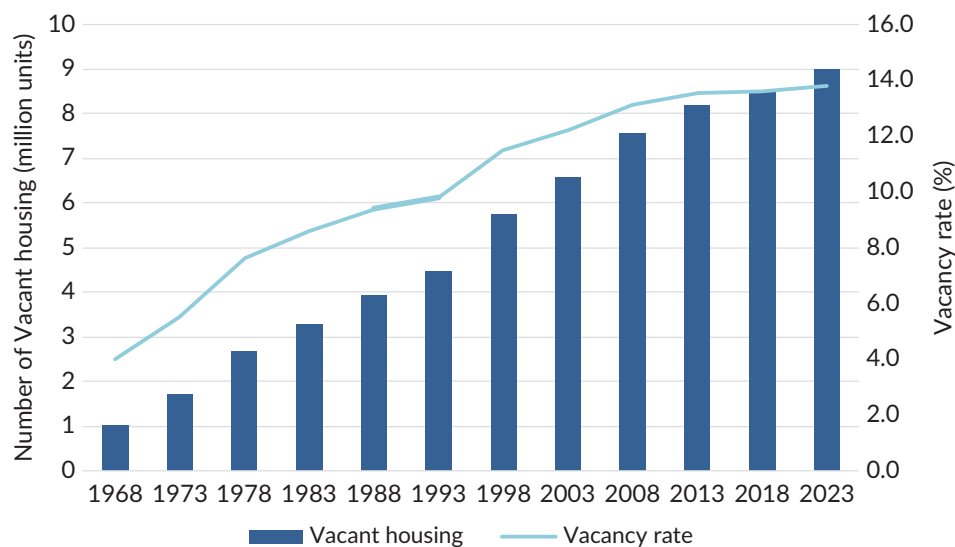


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of vacant houses. Source: adapted from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2018, 2024).

Case A is a detached housing area in Kanagawa Prefecture; approximately 60 years have passed since its initial residential development. The nonprofit organization (NPO) established by several members of the neighborhood association has been engaged in the repurposing of vacant homes. The information of Case A is based on the NPO’s website (<https://www.npotski.com>) and interviews with residents. The NPO leases vacant homes, closed shops, and unused lots, repurposing them as community hubs and communal vegetable gardens (see Figures 3a to 3c). Operating as an incorporated entity offers several advantages over neighborhood and residents’ associations, including the ability to legally own and lease real estate and to flexibly secure funding through subsidies, donations, and membership fees. In addition, the NPO collaborates with academia, government, private companies, and residents to identify and address local challenges.



Figure 3. Vacant house utilized as community hub (a and b); vacant lot utilized as vegetable garden (c).

Case B is based on municipal documents and interviews with local residents. It is a detached housing area in Kanagawa Prefecture; approximately 50 years have passed since the initial phase of resident occupancy. The neighborhood association plays a central role in collecting information on vacant properties (Yokohama City, 2023b). An annual survey is conducted to identify vacant houses and lots and to confirm the payment of association fees. Based on the collected information, the association regularly monitors vacant homes and keeps records of contact information for former residents. This initiative has been sustained through the efforts of a small group of proactive residents who have taken the lead in addressing issues related to vacant properties. However, since vacant houses and lots constitute private property, the neighborhood association faces legal limitations in entering such properties during emergencies, such as in the event of a natural disaster. Moreover, as the neighborhood association is a voluntary self-governing body, it must obtain permission from property owners in order to collect and retain their information. Given the regular turnover of board members, it is essential to institutionalize procedures for the management and handover of such information.

4.2. Response to the Weakening of Resident Interaction

In many residential neighborhoods in Japan, large-scale development occurred during a concentrated period. As a result, these areas are now experiencing simultaneous aging of both the residents and the physical infrastructure, including houses and community facilities. As discussed in Sections 2 and 3, various factors have contributed to the weakening of social ties among residents. Although some neighborhoods engage in resident-led management efforts, such initiatives often become overly reliant on specific individuals and thus lack sustainability. This section highlights cases in which external actors have intervened to support residential management and community revitalization.

Case C is based on publicly available information from the municipal government and private developers, as well as briefings provided by both the developer and residents. This case focuses on a detached housing area in Kanagawa Prefecture, approximately 50 years after initial occupancy, where the proportion of elderly residents exceeds 50%. As the population has aged, several challenges have emerged, including the weakening of social ties, declining accessibility to transportation and shopping, and the need for elder care and monitoring. In response, the original developer established a new community hub in 2019, which combines a convenience store with a communal space (see Figures 4a and 4b). The facility offers locally harvested vegetables and sweets for sale and is operated by a general incorporated association that includes local residents among its members. The general incorporated association has launched various initiatives to address neighborhood issues, including delivery services to prevent the isolation of elderly residents, trial operations of community shuttle buses, and the creation of informal gathering spaces for residents. In 2024, a community house was constructed to host events for all generations. The facility, which targets younger residents in particular, has also fostered an increase in club activities. While resident commitment has been essential to revitalizing the community, professional involvement—particularly by the original developer—was critical in initiating the project and maintaining its momentum (Daiwa House Group, 2025; Yokohama City, 2023a).

Case D is based on publicly available information from the municipal government and from the operator of the public facility (<https://hatoyamacm.tumblr.com>), as well as briefings provided by them. The case focuses on a detached housing area in Saitama Prefecture; approximately 50 years have passed since initial

occupancy. In this area, a municipally owned public facility was scheduled for closure. To repurpose the space and revitalize the neighborhood, the municipality conducted a public call for proposals and selected a designated management organization around 2020. The facility was transformed into a community market that provides a multifunctional space for handmade product sales, dining, social interaction, and consultation on vacant homes (see Figure 4c). Some vacant properties in the area have been leased from owners and repurposed as shared houses for university students, while others have been used to produce “vacant house sweets” made from fruits and vegetables grown on-site. Although the municipality provided the physical facility, the open-call proposal system has enabled the development of diverse and creative community-based activities.



Figure 4. Convenience store with a communal space (a and b); former public facilities utilized as community hub (c).

4.3. Response to Limitations in Maintaining Shared Spaces

As discussed in Section 3, the historical context in Japan has lacked a deliberate plan for sustainable residential management. Instead, residential management has traditionally been conducted on a voluntary basis, rooted in long-standing customs. However, as aging progresses in many communities, the question of who will take responsibility for management has become a critical issue. This is particularly evident in the management of common properties—such as facilities owned by municipalities but managed by neighborhood associations, or assets handed over to residents by developers. Many residential areas developed during a particular period now face this latent problem of unclear responsibility for managing shared resources.

Case E is based on interviews conducted with members of the neighborhood association. The case focuses on a detached housing area located in Chiba Prefecture. Approximately 40 years after its initial development, the area is increasingly facing challenges such as population aging and stagnation in the secondary housing market. Located approximately 15 to 20 minutes by car from the nearest train station, the neighborhood was formerly served by a bus route; however, the service has since been discontinued. Due to limited public sewerage infrastructure at the time of development, the original developer installed an on-site wastewater treatment facility and a stormwater retention basin.

As part of the development process, two organizations were established: a facilities management association, with mandatory membership for all homeowners, and a voluntary neighborhood association. The neighborhood association is responsible for managing various community assets, including the assembly hall (e.g., building, equipment, parking lot, landscaping, and storage), utility expenses (e.g., electricity, gas, water), insurance premiums, bulletin boards, address signage, garbage stations (including anti-crow netting

and cleaning equipment), boundary fences, streetlight electricity fees, and the utility costs associated with parks and fire prevention equipment.

In contrast, the facilities management association is tasked with the maintenance of the wastewater treatment and stormwater facilities, which is outsourced to external contractors. Forty years have passed since the residential area was first subdivided for sale, and during this time the number of active participants in the neighborhood association has declined, with membership falling below 40% by 2023—down from full participation at the time of development. As membership declined, the association publicly announced its inability to continue maintaining the common facilities. However, the municipality, citing agreements made with the original developer during the planning phase, refused to assume responsibility for the maintenance or costs associated with these shared assets. In response, the facilities management association—comprising all homeowners—began developing a framework to take over responsibility for the shared assets previously managed by the neighborhood association. Progress has been driven by the leadership of a proactive board member who played a central coordinating role between the neighborhood association and the municipal government. This case highlights the importance of motivated individuals in driving institutional change.

When examining the characteristics of shared facilities provided by developers across different decades (see Table 2), it becomes clear that until the 1980s, it was uncommon for residential neighborhoods to include shared property at all, with community centers being the most frequently provided facility. Between the 1980s and 2000s, green spaces and parks became the most common forms of shared property. Since 2019, the trend has shifted again, with a higher proportion of neighborhoods including community centers as shared facilities. Although the number of newly constructed housing developments has declined since 2020, some municipalities have begun requiring the establishment of community centers through local ordinances. This promotes resident interaction while suggesting a multi-layered approach to joint management by property owners. In order to enhance the appeal and value of residential neighborhoods, it is essential to design visually attractive communities and to establish rules—such as landscape agreements—that can be managed autonomously by the property owners.

Table 2. Prevalence of shared facilities in detached housing neighborhoods (multiple responses).

Common property (multiple responses)	Before 1980	1980s	1990s	2000s	After 2010
Green spaces/parks	13.6%	44.4%	37.8%	29.2%	33.3%
Garbage stations	4.5%	19.0%	15.6%	16.7%	0.0%
Streetlights	4.5%	19.0%	25.6%	16.7%	0.0%
Community centers	31.8%	38.1%	24.4%	14.6%	37.0%
Sidewalks	0.0%	28.6%	24.4%	14.6%	0.0%
Roadways	4.5%	28.6%	16.7%	2.1%	0.0%
Utilities/infrastructure	4.5%	19.0%	22.2%	6.3%	11.1%
Unknown	59.1%	27.0%	39.7%	36.5%	15.9%
Number of examples	22	63	90	48	33

Note: Data analyzed by the authors from 365 cases of neighborhoods with shared facilities, which resulted in 256 cases, excluding 109 with unknown construction periods.

In some developments, sidewalks are paved with bricks, and thus would normally be difficult for municipal governments to maintain. This is because the sidewalks municipalities construct are usually the cheapest concrete type, and they avoid building brick-paved sidewalks themselves due to the high maintenance costs. However, through negotiations during the development phase, these have been designated as public property, allowing for resident-led maintenance. Other examples include early-stage support from developers at the time of move-in, systems for securing long-term financial resources to enable continuous, resident-led residential management (Saito & Tanaka, 2024), and the creation of integrated environments where land, exterior spaces, and buildings are cohesively planned. Additional strategies, such as the adoption of landscape agreements and district plans, are being implemented to help preserve high-quality living environments (Nihei, 2023).

4.4. Response to the Obsolescence of Landscape Control Rules

The sustainability of community agreements has been widely recognized as a challenge in many previous studies. This section presents a case study of a residential neighborhood that is exploring sustainable approaches within an existing housing development.

Case F is based on publicly available information from the neighborhood association (<https://kashiwa-village.com>) and interviews conducted with its members. The case focuses on a detached housing area in Chiba Prefecture; approximately 45 years have passed since its initial development. Ongoing demographic aging has led to growing mismatches between original building agreements and current lifestyle needs. For example, the building agreements limits households to one car, which is impractical in suburban contexts where multiple-car ownership is often essential for daily life. As a result, many residents own two vehicles despite the building agreements. A key structural issue with building agreements is that residents who do not consent to renew the agreement are automatically withdrawn from the governing committee. Over time, this has led to a decline in membership and enforcement capacity.

In response, the neighborhood has begun shifting toward the adoption of district plans, which apply land use regulations across the entire residential area. Unlike building agreements—voluntarily established and maintained by residents—district plans are legally binding, uniformly applicable to the entire neighborhood, and managed by the local government. This transition eliminates the need for periodic renewals and enables more consistent enforcement. The shift reflects a shared desire among residents to maintain the aesthetic quality of the neighborhood, while also recognizing the need to adapt governance mechanisms to meet the challenges of an aging population.

4.5. Response to the Decline in Daily Living Convenience

Across residential neighborhoods throughout Japan, the aging of the population is progressing rapidly. In many areas, elderly residents face increasing difficulties in daily life due to a combination of factors: the surrender of driver's licenses, the discontinuation of local bus services, and use districts that restrict the development of commercial or medical facilities nearby. This section highlights a case study of a community that is exploring sustainable strategies to overcome these challenges in an aging residential environment.

Case G is based on publicly available information from a general incorporated association (<https://www.mmp-kashiwa.jp/index.html>) and interviews conducted with members of the neighborhood association. The case focuses on a detached housing area located in Chiba Prefecture. Approximately 45 years after initial occupancy, the area is facing serious issues related to daily living convenience due to the combined impact of an aging population, discontinued public transportation routes, and land use regulations that prevent the establishment of essential services such as shops and clinics nearby.

In response, with government subsidies, a three-year pilot project was launched from July 2024 to June 2027, aiming to eventually transition into a self-sustaining transportation system independent of government subsidies. Initially, the neighborhood association served as the operating body. However, to ensure long-term sustainability, a general incorporated association was established in July 2025 and has since taken over the operation of transportation services. In a neighborhood experiencing advanced population aging and declining birthrates, the loss of mobility poses a serious threat to daily life. Many residents recognized this issue, and the presence of a strong, proactive leader played a key role in driving the initiative forward.

4.6. Summary

As illustrated in the case studies presented above, many suburban detached housing areas nationwide were developed between the 1970s and 1990s. Resident self-governance through neighborhood associations was once the norm. However, in response to emerging challenges, existing organizations have adapted, and new entities have been established. These communities are now engaging in creative, resident-led initiatives to address pressing issues and improve neighborhood sustainability. In fact, several cases demonstrate how suburban communities are beginning to experiment with circular economies: resident-led NPOs have revitalized vacant houses and storefronts (Case A), neighborhood associations have built connections with absentee owners where municipalities have struggled (Case B), and partnerships between private developers and residents have generated local employment, social interaction, and even new mobility solutions (Case C). Other initiatives include creating secondary markets for unused properties (Case D), establishing sustainable governance models for shared assets (Case E), revising neighborhood rules to adapt to changing lifestyles (Case F), and institutionalizing mobility support through NPOs (Case G). Together, these initiatives show how local actors are circulating resources, services, and social capital within their communities, contributing to the long-term sustainability of suburban detached housing areas.

5. Challenges for Ensuring Sustainability in Detached Housing Area Management

This section examines the current state of institutional frameworks and social systems in relation to the five challenges in residential management discussed above and organizes the key issues and limitations inherent in these systems.

5.1. Emergence of Vacant Lots and Houses

5.1.1. Institutional Framework

Under the Act on Special Measures Concerning Vacant Houses (Japanese Government, 2015), local governments are authorized to intervene when a property is designated as a “specified vacant house”

(*tokutei akiya*). A “specified vacant house” refers to a vacant dwelling that, if left unaddressed, is deemed to fall into one of the following conditions: (a) a state posing a serious risk to safety, such as potential collapse; (b) a state likely to cause significant harm to public health; (c) a state that seriously degrades the local landscape due to lack of appropriate maintenance; or (d) any other state in which leaving the property unattended is considered inappropriate for the preservation of the surrounding living environment. In such cases, authorities can issue official recommendations, orders, or undertake demolition.

5.1.2. Challenges

Several structural issues in Japan’s real estate system constrain the utilization of vacant houses in detached housing areas. First, the absence of mandatory property title transfers makes it difficult to identify ownership, especially in cases where records are outdated or heirs are unknown. Second, the legal separation of land and building ownership impedes accountability for vacant structures. For instance, in the case of leased land, the landowner has no legal obligation to manage the structure on it, even if it becomes vacant. Third, property transactions often require the presence or consent of neighboring landowners, but when these individuals are unknown or uncooperative, it becomes difficult to confirm property boundaries, which in turn complicates or obstructs potential sales. Fourth, if a vacant property does not have at least two meters of frontage on a public road, it is classified as “non-rebuildable” under use districts, which significantly reduces its marketability. Fifth, there exists a financial disincentive to demolish unoccupied houses, as landowners benefit from a significant reduction in fixed asset taxes—up to one-sixth of the standard rate—as long as a structure remains on the land (Saito, 2023). Sixth, resident-led groups wishing to lease or own real estate are required to establish a legal entity, which creates a substantial barrier to grassroots-level utilization of vacant properties. Finally, the private ownership of these properties imposes legal and ethical constraints on neighborhood associations, making it difficult to coordinate management efforts at the community level.

5.2. Weakening of Social Interaction Among Residents

5.2.1. Institutional Framework

To promote social interaction among residents, some municipalities have introduced local ordinances to support resident self-governing organizations and disseminate relevant information, as mentioned in Section 3.2. However, since these organizations are voluntary in nature, the ordinance functions merely as a soft recommendation without any enforceable authority. As a result, many residents report that they do not perceive any tangible effect from the ordinance’s implementation. Additionally, the Jyutaku-Seisan – Shinko-Zaidan (<https://www.machinami.or.jp/index.shtml>) is a foundation established to promote better housing and living environments, and it offers a range of information related to residential neighborhoods. Its activities include publishing residential area data and related materials, organizing symposiums and design competitions, conducting research, and implementing educational and community-based initiatives such as model housing exhibitions and neighborhood coordination services.

5.2.2. Challenges

The challenges identified in Section 4 point to the necessity of the following elements for promoting social interaction: organizational actors (e.g., facilities management associations, neighborhood associations,

general incorporated associations, NPOs, private entities, or municipalities); leadership figures (e.g., resident-led initiatives, private-sector developers, external individuals with an interest in the area, or municipal-led efforts); physical venues (e.g., community centers, vacant houses or stores, schools, or public halls); and financial resources (e.g., membership fees, donations, government subsidies, or revenue-generating activities). However, these four conditions do not always align. Another issue is that the operation of the residential area management organizations becomes dependent on specific individuals, making it unsustainable.

5.3. Limitations in Managing Shared Spaces

5.3.1. Institutional Framework

In cases where shared properties exist, a facilities management association is typically established based on the Act on Building Unit Ownership, etc. (Japanese Government, 1962), with all residential property owners as mandatory members responsible for residential management. Additionally, in some municipalities, local ordinances stipulate the roles of neighborhood associations, the responsibilities of the local government to provide support, and the obligation of private developers to cooperate.

5.3.2. Challenges

Under the current legal framework, it is difficult to establish an inclusive management structure in which all stakeholders participate in the maintenance of shared property. Neighborhood associations are voluntary organizations; while membership is optional, they are often tasked with managing shared assets. This has led to serious free-rider problems among non-members, contributing to the weakening of both the financial and human resource bases of these organizations. Furthermore, members of facilities management associations are limited to residential property owners, which means that vacant lot owners may not be included (Saito, 2020).

Legal restrictions also limit the objectives of organizations managing shared property. For instance, neighborhood associations are not permitted to engage in revenue-generating activities, making flexible organizational management difficult. Establishing a facilities management association requires legal procedures, and acquiring legal personality is not straightforward. For voluntary organizations seeking to transition to an NPO or general incorporated association, the associated costs and procedural barriers are substantial. Even after incorporation, the legally defined scope of permitted activities may restrict the organization's operations, making flexible and adaptive management challenging.

5.4. Formalization and Rigidity of Landscape Rules

5.4.1. Institutional Framework

Under current institutional frameworks in Japan, landscape rules can take the form of agreements among all landowners, district plans managed by local governments, or non-binding guidelines. These instruments are intended to preserve residential aesthetics and harmony, but their enforceability and sustainability vary.

Shizuoka Prefecture has introduced a certification system for “residential areas promoting enriched living environments” as part of its efforts to support high-quality residential design and landscaping (Shizuoka Prefecture, n.d.). This system aims to designate newly developed neighborhoods that offer spacious, nature-friendly living environments. To be certified, new developments must meet a comprehensive set of criteria, including location within the prefecture, development scale, spatial quality, environmental design, and the establishment of a long-term management structure.

Cases in which local governments take the lead in enhancing the quality and appeal of the residential environment are found only in Shizuoka Prefecture; in general, such features are introduced by private developers primarily as a means of promoting sales (Nukui, 2022).

5.4.2. Challenges

Despite the intention behind such systems, sustainability remains a concern. In some areas certified as “residential area promoting enriched living environments” until August 2024 in Shizuoka Prefecture, issues have been identified—such as one residential area failing to meet certification standards and four areas with shared property lacking a resident-led management system. While the certification system promotes proper residential management, the absence of legal enforceability has resulted in unsustainable outcomes over time (Saito, 2018).

There are also structural limitations in Japan’s use districts and land use. The City Planning Act allows for use districts, but these measures alone have not ensured compliance with community landscape standards (Ota, 2023). District plans and building agreements are challenging to introduce and operate. For instance, building agreements can be withdrawn from by individual landowners, undermining long-term rule adherence. Moreover, amending such agreements requires unanimous consent, leading some members to withdraw when consensus is unattainable. District plans, on the other hand, apply uniformly to the entire designated area but are imposed by the municipality, which reduces resident autonomy. At present, no legal framework enables long-term, resident-led management of landscape rules applicable across the entirety of a residential neighborhood.

5.5. Decline in Residential Convenience

5.5.1. Institutional Framework

There is currently no comprehensive legal framework specifically designed to address the decline in everyday living convenience in residential areas. However, case studies have revealed that some local governments provide subsidies to support the initial phases of community-led activities aimed at improving access to daily necessities and services (Yasukura, 2013).

5.5.2. Challenges

To improve everyday living convenience, it is necessary to relax use districts and land use regulations under the City Planning Act to allow for the establishment of essential local facilities. In addition to regulatory reform, several organizational elements are also crucial—similar to the issues related to weakened resident interaction

discussed in Section 5.2. Key factors include identifying responsible entities, appointing community leaders, establishing physical hubs, and securing sustainable financial resources.

6. Conclusion

This study conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the challenges associated with managing detached housing neighborhoods in Japan, where the impacts of population aging and declining birthrates are becoming increasingly pronounced. By analyzing both the historical-cultural context and institutional arrangements, the study sought to examine the sustainability of residential management systems and the evolving landscape of responsible actors.

A key analytical framework involved distinguishing the types of assets subject to management—namely, private assets (e.g., vacant houses), public assets (e.g., parks and community centers), shared assets (e.g., waste collection points and meeting halls), and hybrid assets (e.g., landscapes and disaster prevention infrastructure that intersect public and private interests). Each category presents different management challenges, making it difficult to resolve all issues through a single model or approach.

In the case of private properties such as vacant houses and lots, institutional factors such as the lack of mandatory registration, fragmented ownership between land and buildings, and reverse tax incentives pose significant obstacles. Case A highlighted how a newly established NPO with legal incorporation was able to lease vacant lots and houses, repurposing them as community gardens and gathering spaces, thus demonstrating the potential for flexible management beyond the limits of voluntary resident initiatives. In Case B, the neighborhood association collected information on vacant properties but encountered legal limitations due to the nature of private property ownership, revealing the necessity for institutional support to ensure continuity. In Case E, a dual governance system consisting of a facilities management association and a neighborhood association—both formed during the initial development phase—was marked by disputes over role-sharing and the boundaries of governmental responsibility regarding shared facilities.

These findings underscore the reality that asset-specific institutional and organizational arrangements are required, and that no universal model can address the full spectrum of challenges present in aging residential areas.

Sustainable residential environments also demand more than asset maintenance. In communities experiencing advanced population aging, declining access to essential commercial services and transportation is becoming a critical issue. In Cases C and D, newly established community hubs were introduced to enhance both convenience and social interaction. Case C involved a general incorporated association formed in collaboration between a developer and local residents, which operated a community facility with a convenience store, supported senior well-being, and ran experimental local transportation services. In Case D, a local organization repurposed a soon-to-be-decommissioned public facility into a multi-use space that included a local market and community center, supported through a municipal public offering. In both cases, the involvement of external actors—developers, municipalities, or NPOs—played a critical role in providing the technical expertise and initial investment that residents alone could not have achieved.

These case studies collectively illustrate the growing importance of diversifying the actors responsible for residential management. While grassroots initiatives have produced meaningful results, institutional reforms are also needed. In the case of vacant housing, reforms should include mandatory registration for property owners, notification systems for vacant properties, legal mechanisms for utilizing land with unknown ownership, and stricter penalties for hazardous structures.

Regarding shared property, mandatory participation of all owners and simplification of legal incorporation procedures are necessary to ensure long-term governance. In managing landscape and building rules, systems such as the “declaration of covenants” seen in the United States—where residents are empowered to establish and enforce community rules—could serve as useful references.

Furthermore, as the scope and complexity of residential management continue to increase, the question of “who should be responsible” becomes ever more critical. The traditional reliance on voluntary neighborhood associations is increasingly inadequate, and new types of actors have emerged:

- Resident-initiated incorporated organizations (Cases A, C, and G): These organizations leverage their legal status to enter into contracts, secure funding, and hold assets, thereby enabling flexible and sustainable management.
- Externally initiated actors (Case D): Local governments or developers initiate facilities or programs, then collaborate with residents to address neighborhood challenges.
- Reorganized traditional entities (Cases B, E, and F): Existing neighborhood associations or legacy rules are restructured, sometimes through the adoption of new institutional frameworks such as district plans or clearer divisions of responsibilities.

This diversification of actors does more than compensate for labor shortages; it introduces institutional expertise, funding mechanisms, and coordination capacity that would otherwise be lacking. Particularly for hybrid assets such as landscape management or disaster prevention infrastructure, system compatibility and professional support are crucial, making legal personality and institutional fit increasingly important.

In sum, ensuring the long-term sustainability of residential management in detached housing neighborhoods in Japan requires a fundamental shift away from the existing resident-dependent model. This shift must be accompanied by institutional reforms that provide legal grounding and the development of multi-level support systems that integrate public, private, and civil society actors. A reimagined institutional design—balancing local autonomy with legal enforceability—will be essential for the future of housing policy in an era of demographic transformation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

As the authors' first language is Japanese, ChatGPT and DeepL were used to verify the accuracy and nuance of English translations. The authors carefully reviewed and confirmed all outputs.

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