

The Regeneration of Commercial Spaces in the Urban Centres of Japanese Local Cities

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Abstract

This article examines urban regeneration in Takamatsu and Tatsuno. It reconsiders commercial spaces in urban centres in Japanese planning and architectural culture during the demographic transition. Our study shows the evolution and differences between the two main approaches to addressing the ways city centres are emptied of their activities and life: On the one hand, the decline of commercial activities is addressed through large-scale redevelopment, facilitated by legal agreements between landowner associations and private developers. In Takamatsu, Kagawa, the entire traditional covered commercial street, Shōtengai Marugame-chō, is being reconstructed, increasing the density of the area. On the other hand, the shops are being revitalised through small-scale interventions initiated by the community and local entrepreneurs. In Tatsuno, Nagano, empty shops on Tobichi Shopping Street are being transformed into new businesses, art galleries, and community spaces, often welcoming new residents. Both cases are well known and serve as references for other Japanese cities. This article presents their strengths and weaknesses and supports a focus on the relational role of commercial spaces in urban regeneration, especially during demographic transitions.

Keywords

city centres; Japan; medium-sized cities; shopping street; small towns; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Shops are a major urban element affected by demographic transitions. A drop in commercial activities usually accompanies population decline and ageing. These spaces, which are generally open to the public and used to display and sell goods and services, are also places where people meet and socialise, serving as social hubs for

local communities. The role of shops as nuclei of urban life is even more evident when the shops are located near one another along one or more streets. In Japan, this urban feature is known as a *shōtengai* (shopping street). These commercial districts are mainly located in city centres, opposite railway stations, castles, and temples, and organised along both sides of the streets. The individual shops on a shopping street are not run by large corporations, but by independent shop owners and the residents themselves. The shops are closely tied to their owners' lives: As the owners age, the shops tend to deteriorate; when the owners pass away, the shops often become vacant.

In contrast to parts of the world that continue to grow, other areas are transitioning into a different demographic phase. In countries like Japan, declining birth rates, rising life expectancy, population decline, the transformation of family nuclei, and youth outmigration drive social and economic challenges. These are not exceptional or temporary events that can be easily managed through dedicated policies. Instead, the process is becoming the norm, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly. Specifically, the Japanese population is declining, and the era of rapid urban expansion has ended. During the city expansion phase, urban problems were solved by assigning new functions to newly developed areas. Today, however, the challenge lies in addressing social issues within shrinking cities. Japan is at the global forefront in experiencing demographic change. In Japanese cities, the rows of shuttered *shōtengai* shops alongside vacant houses (*akiya*) have become some of the most symbolic images of this shift.

There is no single definition of *shōtengai*. In fact, according to official data, they can be included in the 12,681 commercial districts characterised by a concentration of at least 30 retail shops, restaurants, and services (METI Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2015). In Japan, *shōtengai* developed alongside population growth and urbanisation as a product of modernisation and social evolution (Masafumi, 2012). Present in simpler forms during the Meiji (1869–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) periods, they really began to develop during the *Shōwa* (1926–1989) period. They flourished after World War II, especially when the law granting legal status to business owner associations was extended in 1962, establishing a series of protections and subsidies for their expansion (Masafumi, 2012). In 1973, the Large Retailer Act (the law on the adjustment of commercial activities of large-scale retail stores) was enacted, placing certain limits on opening large stores (Iwahara et al., 2015). However, these measures were relaxed in 1991 with the Japan-US Structural Impediments Initiative agreements and general deregulation, which led to an increase in large, uniform shopping malls, reducing the number of small shops from 1.72 million in 1982 to 1.59 million in the 1990s (Fukukawa & Kidokoro, 2018). Since then, the number of shops in *shōtengai* has continued to decrease. This was initially due to competition from large suburban shopping centres, motorisation, the spread of e-commerce, the introduction of convenience stores, the contraction and transformation of the domestic market, and demographic decline and ageing (Fujioka, 2016). The spread of Covid-19 further limited their maintenance, accelerating shop closures (Matsumoto, 2024). This decline, however, can also be explained by the exclusion of outsiders from the association of owners and traders, the rigidity of modern family business organisation and succession practices, and fragmented land ownership in the *shōtengai* (Masafumi, 2012).

Rapid economic growth after World War II led to the creation of vast urban areas in just eighty years. As a seismically active country, Japan has repeatedly revised its building codes, driving rapid spatial renewal. However, as the population decreases, this metabolism has started to slow. At the same time, during the period of growth, land subdivision and privatisation became deeply entrenched, resulting in highly fragmented urban parcels. With the contracting population, this fragmentation has produced spatial

challenges that are often described as “spongification” (Aiba, 2015). According to a survey of commercial districts, the average vacancy rate in 2021 was 13.59% (Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, 2021). This trend is expected to worsen in the coming years, as 72.7% of shops report a lack of succession due to the owners’ age and a lack of heirs willing to continue their parents’ work; 26.4% also report a deterioration in commercial premises (Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, 2021).

The progressive weakening of *shōtengai* has also contributed to the crisis in urban centres. Over the years, they have been emptied of businesses and people in favour of the progressive suburbanisation of commerce and housing. Especially in small and medium-sized Japanese cities, this has led to a progressive perforation of the physical space in city centres. Here, the number of empty buildings and lots has increased sharply, affecting the urban social, economic, environmental, and financial spheres. Given these dual constraints—no further urban expansion and increasingly fragmented land ownership—it is essential to build new institutional frameworks that enable “governments,” “markets,” and “communities and associations” to collaboratively reorganise the urban space and address societal challenges through spatial design. To solve urban issues, fragmented private land must be reorganised. The government does this through expropriation and redistribution. The market does so through exchange. Communities and associations rely on gifts and cooperation. In Japan, neoliberalism has strengthened the role of the market over other forms of governance, but markets lack mechanisms for broad locational coordination, and development tends to be concentrated in large metropolitan areas, while market forces in regional cities are often ineffective. Both the central government and individual municipalities have responded by implementing laws, programmes, and urban regeneration plans that promote compactness and a return to the centre. Key to these efforts is the regeneration of *shōtengai*, which plays a pivotal role in supporting small-scale entrepreneurship. This focus is not simply designed to emphasise the importance of city centres; it also aims to reclaim urban space for ordinary citizens in an era increasingly dominated by globalisation and market-driven forces. Revitalising shopping streets thus becomes a strategic intervention to empower communities and address urban shrinkage.

In the central areas of Japanese cities, *shōtengai* constitute distinctive urban structures. Although each lot is privately owned, such streets historically served as spaces used by many people and can thus be regarded as a form of common good that addresses collective needs. Consisting of numerous small spaces, they hold potential as districts where various actors can design shared environments together—what might be termed “open design.” Moreover, Japan’s compact city policies explicitly encourage the concentration of the population and functions in city centres, reinforcing the position of shopping streets as common goods. Observing the regeneration of *shōtengai* is therefore a way to better understand attempts to rethink spaces in city centres affected by the demographic transition in the Japanese urban and architectural culture. To do so, the following sections explore urban regeneration processes in the two cases of Takamatsu and Tatsuno. The two cases were chosen after careful consideration of the literature on urban redevelopment projects, with particular attention to commercial spaces. The decision was not based on a quantitative assessment. Instead, it relied on the capacity of the two cases to illustrate the differences and similarities between the two main approaches introduced in Japan for regenerating this type of commercial space. Furthermore, in selecting a medium-sized city and a small town rather than a large metropolitan area, we shed light on contexts that are often underestimated.

Takamatsu and Tatsuno have become benchmarks in Japan for the redevelopment of small and medium-sized urban centres, providing insights into innovations in planning projects aimed at countering

and mitigating the effects of demographic change in local cities. On the one hand, the ageing population, demographic decline, migration, and the reorganisation of family units have profoundly transformed lifestyles and the use of urban centres and commercial spaces. On the other hand, they can become an opportunity to regenerate and introduce innovation in spatial forms, management, and organisation. This can be achieved by overcoming the limitations associated with fragmented land ownership, the lack of business succession, the rigidity of family-based management, and the exclusion of new activities from trade associations. Projects to regenerate commercial spaces thus present an opportunity to rethink the space and practices in small and medium-sized Japanese town centres in terms of their relationships. The following sections, therefore, study the potential strengths and possible fragilities in initiatives to regenerate the urban centre through commercial spaces. The text focuses on the actors and their relationships, including any conflicts and cooperation. It reconstructs complex processes that often cross multiple scales and constantly shift between the local, national, and global levels, and records the role of space within these experiences, along with material and technical dimensions, practices, and uses. Finally, the text reconstructs different timeframes relating to the various actors and the city itself.

This work considers both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research. The study focused on the national and international literature on crises in shopping centres and commercial spaces. It also drew on the literature on Japanese urban developments, city-centre revitalisation, and urban regeneration. Grey literature, such as technical and research reports from local administrations, the central government, and various research centres, was also valuable. In addition to desk research and analysis, the study involved a series of intensive site visits and observations, which took place in September 2023, January 2024, November 2024, and January 2025. Numerous study trips were made, enabling interviews with relevant local actors, scholars, designers, and shopkeepers affected by the interventions. This variety of voices offered a deeper understanding of ongoing processes and highlighted the social dimension, daily rituals, and practices of caring for spaces and people. To convey this rich knowledge, the text is accompanied by a photographic essay that expresses the density of meaning and material nature of the spaces and practices. The article also contains four travel diary entries made during the site visits that introduce elements to situate the two cases within their national and local contexts. The four entries use hand-drawn sketches to summarise the main features of each case.

The article is organised into five parts. After the introduction (1), which reconstructs the framework of the text, the second section introduces the general topic of urban redevelopment projects in Japan (2.1), focusing on city centre revitalisation measures (2.2) and the role of commercial space in urban regeneration (2.3). The third part of the text introduces the case of Takamatsu. It reconstructs the framework of the Shōtengai Marugame-chō project (3.1) and describes the related principles and visions, existence, and consequences (3.2). The case of the Tobichi shopping street is the subject of the fourth section. It provides information on Tatsuno, where the case is located (4.1), and reconstructs the design process (4.2). The fifth section summarises the work, evaluates the two cases, and analyses the spaces and institutional frameworks of urban reorganisation. The last section (6) of the article outlines preliminary ideas and opens possible avenues for the redevelopment of commercial spaces in Japanese city centres.

2. Framework of Japanese Urban Development, Revitalization of City Centres, and Urban Regeneration

Modern urban planning in Japan began in 1889, and numerous laws and project methods were developed under the City Planning Act enacted in 1919. Post-World War II Japan can be divided into several periods: the period of rapid economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the period of low economic growth triggered by the oil crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s, the real-estate bubble economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s driven by excessive investment, the late 1990s when the real estate market collapsed and recovery efforts were introduced, and the period since the 2000s, which is marked by the introduction of neoliberalism (Aiba, 2021). With these economic shifts in mind, this section explains the three genealogies of post-World War II urban development in Japan that form the background to the two case studies discussed: urban redevelopment projects, city centre revitalisation, and urban regeneration (Figure 1).

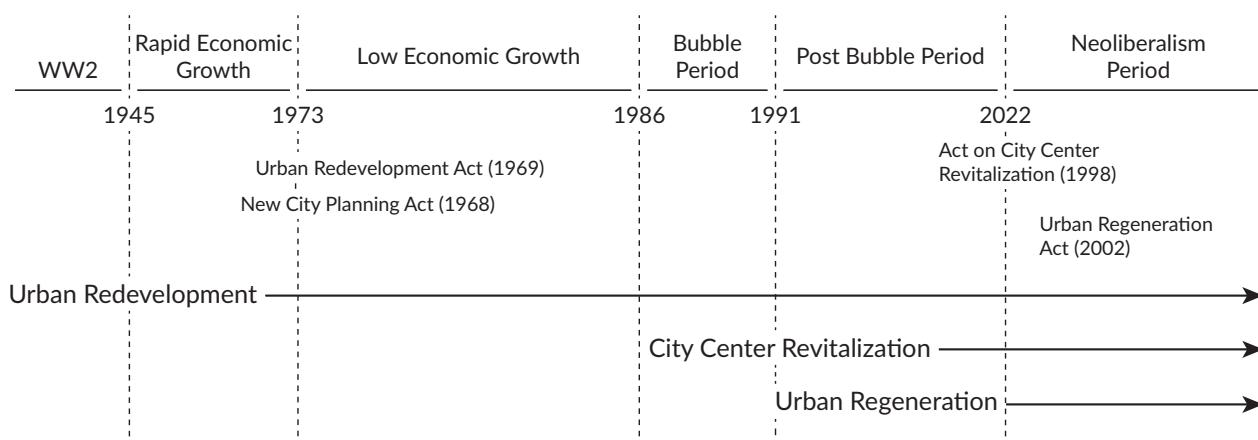


Figure 1. Chronology of the framework on Japanese urban development, city centre revitalization, and urban regeneration.

2.1. Urban Redevelopment Projects

In Japan, the term “redevelopment” refers to replacing existing buildings with new ones. In contrast, the narrower term “urban redevelopment project” specifically denotes reconstruction projects carried out under the Urban Redevelopment Act enacted in 1969. To date, over 1,000 such projects have been completed.

Urban Redevelopment Projects emerged as a unified system integrating two urban planning project schemes implemented after World War II. The schemes related to “fireproofing the city” and “disaster prevention,” strongly influenced by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923—in which nearly 200,000 people lost their lives due to earthquakes and large fires in Tokyo and Yokohama—and the air raids carried out by the US military during World War II on major cities across Japan, which claimed almost a million lives (NHK, 2024).

Because wooden structures are quick and easy to build, people often constructed small wooden houses and workplaces to cope with rapid urban population growth and massive housing shortages caused by disasters and war. However, these wooden districts were highly vulnerable to earthquakes and fires, often leaving urban areas fragile and hindering city development. Urban Redevelopment Projects targeted such districts, particularly central urban areas that had arisen since the early modern period and station-front areas

developed after the advent of railways. The goals were to improve disaster resilience, enhance urban functions, and promote high-density land use (Hayashi & Toyokawa, 2023). The Takamatsu case was undertaken as an Urban Redevelopment Project.

Urban redevelopment projects involve demolishing the existing small-scale buildings on subdivided plots and replacing them with a large, single structure built on a consolidated site (Table 1).

Table 1. The completed building typically consists of three types of floors.

Rights holders' floors	権利床	Floor space allocated to the original landowners (rights holders) according to their former land/building value.
Reserved floors	保留床	Floor space intended for sale to cover the project costs. The more reserved floors are created, the less the rights holders must pay, but it also tends to increase the building size.
Public contributions	公共貢献	Public facilities or spaces created as part of the development, such as station plazas, libraries, or community centres.

A key characteristic of urban redevelopment projects is that they are not carried out by the government or private developers bulldozing existing buildings in a top-down manner, but are instead based on consensus-building and democratic decision-making among rights holders. Because these projects serve the public interest, the government supports them through subsidies, which can cover up to one-third of the costs for surveys, design, land readjustments, and shared facilities (Kyosei & Tanaka, 2024).

There are problems, however. Because of their democratic nature, reaching a consensus can take a long time—sometimes even 20 or 30 years. The need for economic viability also often results in an increase in reserved floors and thus oversized buildings, while significant government subsidies are required.

2.2. Revitalisation of City Centres

Shopping districts flourished in the central areas of cities that developed after the pre-modern era. From the period of rapid economic growth to the period of low economic growth, when automobile traffic had not yet fully developed, shopping districts evolved as the centres of commerce, and wooden two-story buildings were gradually replaced with modern buildings. However, with the rise of automobile traffic and the emergence of large shopping malls, the vitality of these shopping districts began to wane. As shop owners aged, many shopping districts had become filled with vacant stores by the late 1990s (Masafumi, 2012).

The issue became particularly serious in small and medium-sized cities in rural areas. In 1998, the Act on City Centre Revitalization was introduced, and comprehensive countermeasures began to be implemented. These measures included improvements in roads and parks, the reorganisation of public transportation, the elimination of vacant stores, various events, and the establishment of town management organizations (TMOs) to manage the initiatives. While urban redevelopment projects were one means of tackling these challenges, the focus shifted from solving urban problems by concentrating investments in a single block and creating large-scale spaces to revitalising many small spaces spread across a wider area.

However, the initial results were limited. One major issue was the inability to separate building ownership and usage rights in the shopping districts (Yokomori et al., 2008). Long-established shop owners continued to hold vacant stores and were unwilling to let younger merchants use them. Since TMOs were often created by the shop owners themselves, they could not adequately address the difficult issue of separating ownership from usage rights.

Following the 2006 revision of the law, specialised organisations called the Machizukuri companies (urban development companies) became more prominent, replacing the TMOs. Around 2010, the “renovation Machizukuri” method (a renovation-based urban development process) focused on renovating existing buildings, began to gain attention. In this approach, small-scale merchants would renovate small buildings and start businesses there. The small renovations accumulated and gradually led to the revitalisation of city centres.

This method required consensus only for each small property, so the process of reaching agreements did not take much time. As existing buildings were reused, development costs were also kept low. Compared with Urban Redevelopment Projects, the risks were also lower, and from the late 2010s to the present, many renovation-based urban development initiatives have been undertaken. The case of Tatsuno was used as a renovation-based community development project.

2.3. Urban Regeneration

In a broad sense, the term “urban regeneration” refers to the revitalisation of mature, fully developed urban areas. In a narrower sense, however, it refers to neoliberal development methods that have been introduced since the 2000s. With the collapse of the real-estate bubble, the market grew critical in the late 1990s. While the government worked to repair the real-estate market, including disposing of non-performing loans, it also began to develop a new approach to urban development as a policy for economic recovery, in which private developers would play a leading role (Aiba, 2021).

This method used urban-planning deregulation—particularly regarding restrictions on floor-area ratio (FAR)—as an incentive for private developers to carry out projects that incorporated “public contributions” with the private sector managing development of the urban space. Although this approach evolved from the framework of urban redevelopment projects, it reduced direct government intervention and left much of the planning, including the content of public contributions, to private developers. To promote this policy, the Urban Regeneration Act was introduced in 2002 (Aiba, 2021).

This method was a saviour for many private developers who had been struggling due to the collapse of the economic bubble. Numerous urban development projects were reactivated, and from the 2000s to the 2020s, many urban development initiatives were undertaken and still continue today. In some cases, these projects involve consolidating small- and medium-sized lots. Similar to urban redevelopment projects, the process of building consensus can take a long time (Omura et al., 2023). For example, Azabudai Hills, which opened in 2023, took 35 years from the start of the planning phase. While massive developments in China can materialise overnight, the speed of development in Japan is relatively slow.

Because private developers take the lead in this approach, one problem projects tend to concentrate in the central districts of large metropolitan areas, where profits are easier to obtain—Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka, Sapporo, and Sendai (Kitazaki, 2021). There is little record of success in small and medium-sized regional cities, which has further intensified the concentration of development in major cities, especially Tokyo. Moreover, since the deregulation of FARs acts as an incentive, developments tend to grow extremely large. It is no longer rare to see developments with an FAR greater than 1,000%. The Tokyo Torch, scheduled to open in 2027, will have a height of 385 meters and an FAR of 1,860% (Kitazaki, 2015).

3. Shōtengai Marugame-chō: Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture

3.1. *Takamatsu*

Medium-sized Japanese cities with populations between 100,000 and 500,000 have a strong ability to maintain an enhanced sense of community and civic engagement. They also play an essential role as regional administrative, economic, and cultural centres, offering a balance between the services in large cities and the pace of small towns, without being overly congested or isolated (Kii et al., 2025; Schlappa & Nishino, 2021). These attributes have been essential over the years and have contributed to greater liveability and higher social quality than in large metropolitan areas. However, in Takamatsu—as in many medium-sized Japanese cities—suburbanisation, economic crises, competition with large metropolitan areas for population, private investment and government support, progressive spatial deterioration, and demographic transitions have gradually called into question the liveability of these critical centres. Over the years, the central government, local government, and communities themselves have tried to reverse this decline through actions, laws, plans, and visions that aim to bring people and activities back to the urban centre. The redevelopment of Shōtengai Marugame-chō is one example of this intense effort.

Takamatsu is a medium-sized Japanese city with a population of 417,660 (Takamatsu City, 2025). It was a castle town during the Edo period and, over the years, it has become an important political, administrative, economic, infrastructural, and cultural centre of Kagawa Prefecture. Its role as a port city on Shikoku overlooking the Seto Inland Sea has made it the gateway to the entire region. Until 2015, it was one of a few medium-sized cities in Japan and the only city on Shikoku to record an increase in its resident population (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018). In the last ten years, however, the city has experienced a discontinuous trend of demographic growth, stagnation, and decline. By 2050, the population is expected to fall to 370,000, with the proportion of the population aged 65+ increasing from 23.2% to 37.1% (Kii et al., 2021).

Specific endogenous and exogenous processes have led to the gradual desertification of urban, commercial, cultural, and residential functions in the central area of the city, gradually weakening the role of the commercial district. The Shōtengai Marugame-chō is the largest shopping street in Takamatsu (Takamatsu City, 2007). Built on the route of the old merchant road, which stretched southwards from the north coast and castle 400 years ago, it is home to around 150 shops and is part of the system of eight commercial streets marking the centre: Hyogomachi, Kataharamachi West, Kataharamachi East, Lion Street, Marugamemachi, Minami-Shinmachi, Tokiwamachi, and Tamachi (Figure 2). The eight streets collectively are home to around 1,000 shops, 700 of which are located on the ground floor along 2.7 km of arcaded streets and galleries (Takamatsu City Urban Planning Division, 2021). Nevertheless, this complex system of activities has shown limitations over the years. First, the excessive fragmentation of land ownership has limited its

capacity for management, coordination, and cooperation. Furthermore, excessive specialisation, with half of the shops dedicated to clothing, has limited its value, attractiveness, and ability to respond to crises, both individually and through joint action.

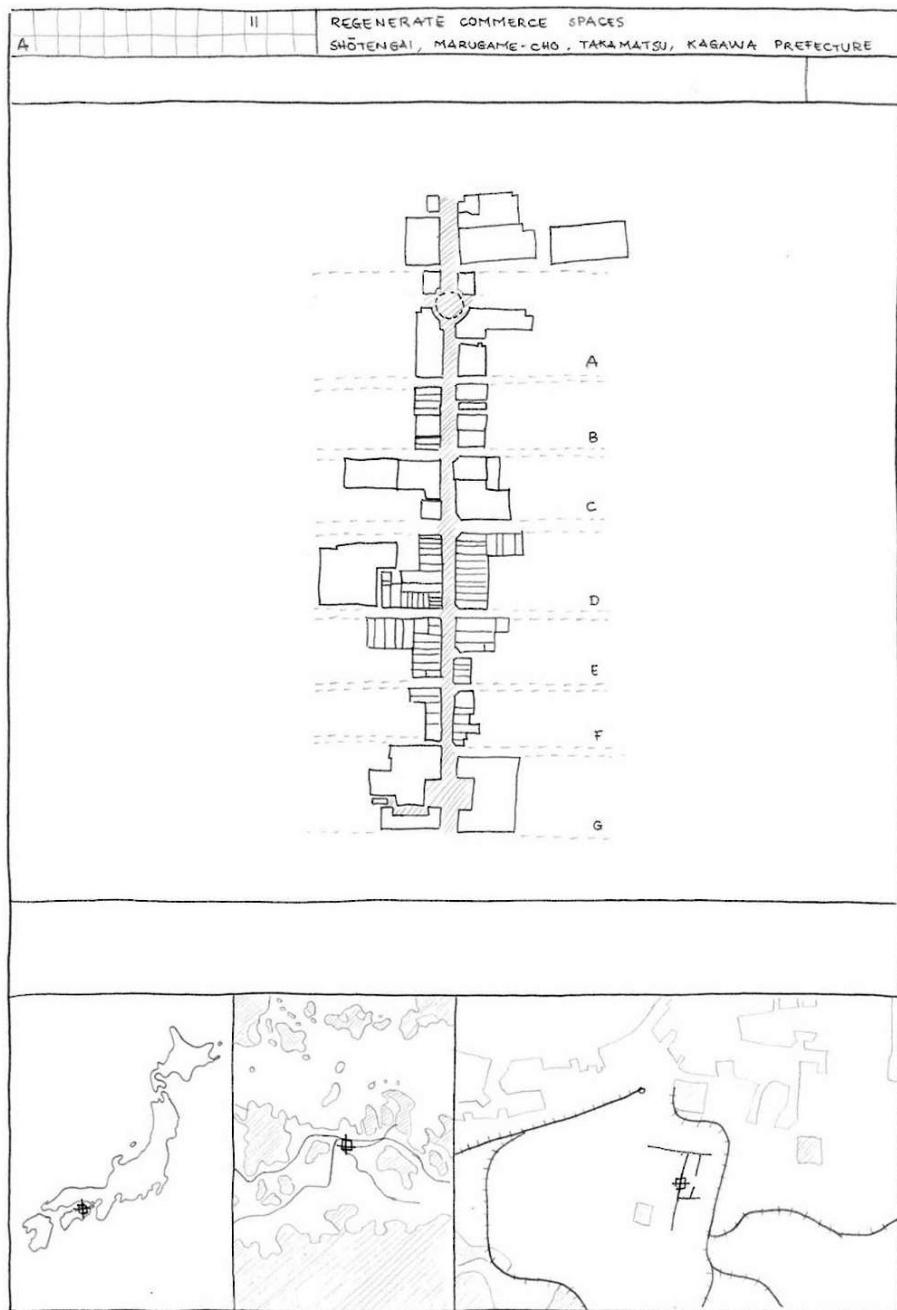


Figure 2. An extract from the site inspection dossier indicating the location of the case in Takamatsu within the national and local setting, with details of the Shōtengai Marugame-chō project implementation.

The decline of the city centre has been influenced by motorisation, suburbanisation, changing consumption patterns, and demographic transitions (Hatoko & Yamamoto, 2016). On the other hand, strategic national and local decisions have also contributed to the decline of Takamatsu's commercial centre and population. First, the construction of the Great Seto Bridge connecting Kurashiki in Okayama Prefecture on Honshu and

Sakaide in Kagawa Prefecture on Shikoku between 1978 and 1988, and the subsequent abolition of the Utaka train ferry between Uno and Takamatsu, weakened the city's role as a port hub (Furukawa, 2015). Following this, a redevelopment project for the port area called Sunport Takamatsu was launched (Sugita et al., 2020), justified by the need to restore Takamatsu's status as a key centre on the Seto Inland Sea and favoured by the speculative bubble of the 1990s. Although scaled down from the original plan—partly due to the collapse of the Japanese speculative bubble—the project led to the construction of the Takamatsu Symbol Tower. This commercial and service complex was intended to attract new businesses and offices from outside the city, but it has actually drained business from the *shōtengai* and the city centre (Sugita et al., 2020). All these factors have led to an increase in the number of empty shops and lots and a decrease in property values in the city centre. In 2006, the vacancy rate was 18.1% (Takamatsu City, 2007). To address the decline of the city centre, both in Takamatsu and on a national scale, the revitalisation of the *shōtengai* has become a political and social priority.

3.2. *Shōtengai Marugame-chō*

Anticipating the effects of the decline of the city centre and commercial district by several years, the Marugamemachi Shopping Street Promotion Association in 1983 took advantage of the government programme to support shopping centres and urban centres (Furukawa, 2015). The association supports a legal agreement for fixed long-term land use leases using the Act on Land and Building Leases, which allows lease rights to be granted for commercial purposes for periods ranging from 10 to 60 years. It separates the use of the space from ownership of the land on which it stands, which generally dominates every aspect of using the space (Saigō, 2008). Shop owners transfer their ownership share in exchange for an equal stake, sharing subordinate dividends and risk liability (Sugita et al., 2020). The agreement aims to unify redevelopment and management of the district, which requires the creation of a legal mechanism capable of protecting individual property rights and facilitating cooperation between the parties. In 1998, the residents established a community development company (Machizukuri company) called Takamatsu Marugamemachi Machizukuri Co., becoming the property developers themselves and partners in the company that leases commercial spaces, manages the layout of shops, develops public spaces, and provides maintenance (Fukukawa & Kidokoro, 2018).

With the support of planner Mariko Saigō, a study and project development was launched. This involved listening to relevant stakeholders and exploring not only the spatial dimension of the proposed new intervention, but also its social and collective aspects (Kita et al., 2011). The project aimed to make the district more attractive to residents, workers, and visitors, correcting the excessive commercial specialisation and renovating spaces and structures (Fukukawa & Saigō, 1995). The project involved the complete reconstruction of the *shōtengai* lots. By demolishing the arcades and existing buildings, the pedestrian road was widened from 8 metres to 11 metres, while increasing the height of the arches from 10 metres to 22 metres (Takamatsu City, 2007). To achieve this, the 470 metres of the *shōtengai* were divided into seven blocks (A, B, C, D, E, F, and G; Figures 1–3) and gradually rebuilt according to rules with specific standards regarding form and function (Fukukawa & Saigō, 1995). In 2005, Block A was designed in the north, where the intersection of Hyogomachi and Kataharamachi commercial streets was home to what was then Japan's largest ventilated dome, with a diameter of 25 metres (Figure 4). Over the next 20 years, the other parts were also partially completed at different times and in different ways.



Figure 4. View of Block A of Shōtengai Marugame-chō, Takamatsu, October 2023.

The new public space of the gallery combines a uniform system of squares and multi-storey buildings totalling 44,700 m² that house shops, warehouses, hotels, offices, services, medical clinics, homes, car parks, green roofs, and museums (Iwahara et al., 2015). Overall, more than 40 projects were coordinated during the redevelopment process. Of these, 17 projects were financed with public funds and 23 with private funds and carried out by private developers (Takamatsu City, 2013). The latter involved the construction of 23 new 7–8-storey multifunctional apartment buildings with 1,860 residential units (Takamatsu City, 2013). Although not all of the new housing has been occupied, the district population has increased from a low of just five residents to around 1,000 people (321 families; Fukukawa & Kidokoro, 2018). In fact, Shōtengai Marugame-chō has seen an increase in business, residents, and visitors over the years, reducing the number of closed companies to zero. According to official data, the redevelopment project has also contributed to revitalising the centre and system of eight shopping streets, which together see around 130,000 pedestrians per day (Takamatsu City Urban Planning Division, 2021).

The group of owners formed a property leasing company that led the redevelopment as a private actor. The success of the redevelopment project was due to private-sector leadership in project planning rather than by local government initiatives, as well as residents' ongoing efforts to collaborate and obtain the consent of local landowners (Iwahara et al., 2015). Implementation of the project has enabled landowners to reverse the decline of their businesses, citizens to enjoy the revitalisation of the city, banks to benefit from interest rates, the local administration to significantly increase tax revenue, and the national government to see the effects of the system created through redevelopment projects in the city centres (Fukukawa, 2015). A convergence of interests has enabled a strong local consensus to be built around the project.

4. Tobichi Shopping Street: Tatsuno, Nagano Prefecture

4.1. Tatsuno

Demographic transition processes have exacerbated territorial disparities between metropolitan areas, especially Tokyo, and the rest of the country. This raises questions and reflections on issues related to territorial justice and the real possibilities for these territories to implement effective territorial revitalisation policies.

In fact, with this depopulation geography consisting of medium-sized and small towns, depopulation is affected not only by ageing, but also by migration and the decline in young social capital. The lack of generational renewal adds to a series of processes that have called into question the survival of commercial spaces in the urban centres of small Japanese towns. The decrease in marginal areas for young people exacerbates the already precarious succession within many family-run businesses. It limits the potential for innovation in activities, leading to their decline and closure.

The city of Tatsuno can be understood within this complex socio-demographic background. Located practically in the centre of the Japanese archipelago, it has long been a hub of the Ina Valley in Nagano Prefecture (Tatsuno Town, 2025). Traditionally associated with silk production, it developed along the Tenryū River over the years, and 80.07% of the municipal area today is covered by forests, while only 3.03% is urbanised.

After reaching a peak population of 23,935 in the 1980s, the city has experienced gradual depopulation, falling to 18,555 in 2020 (Tatsuno Town, 2025). By 2060, the population is expected to drop further to approximately 11,000. The number of households has increased over the years, even as the resident population has decreased. There has also been an increase in the mobility of young people (aged 20–29 and 30–39) leaving and arriving, and the number of empty houses and shops has risen. There were 336 shops in the town in 1986 and their number had fallen to 146 by 2021 (Tatsuno Town, 2025). These figures are similar to those in other small Japanese towns, which have seen their populations and businesses decline over the years.

To address this situation, the city of Tatsuno developed a City Revitalisation Plan in 2015 based on the Town, People and Jobs Creation Act approved by the central government in 2014. The objectives are to retain the resident population, bring back young people who have left, and attract new residents from the Tokyo metropolitan area (Tatsuno Town, 2021). Through the Regional Revitalisation Centre Development Subsidy, the measures involve initiatives to create jobs and activate small and medium-sized economic activities to replace shops and businesses that have closed in commercial districts. In addition, initiatives are planned to enhance the city's attractiveness to tourists and new residents through investment in new public spaces and services for young people (Tatsuno Town, 2021). Commercial spaces are the place where these measures take shape. In particular, the shops on Shimotatsuno Shopping Street and in the surrounding area become the stage for a different form of revitalisation of the city of Tatsuno (Figure 5). The General Incorporated Association Otō Editing Company (<https://tobichi.jp>) is the coordinator of this transformation.

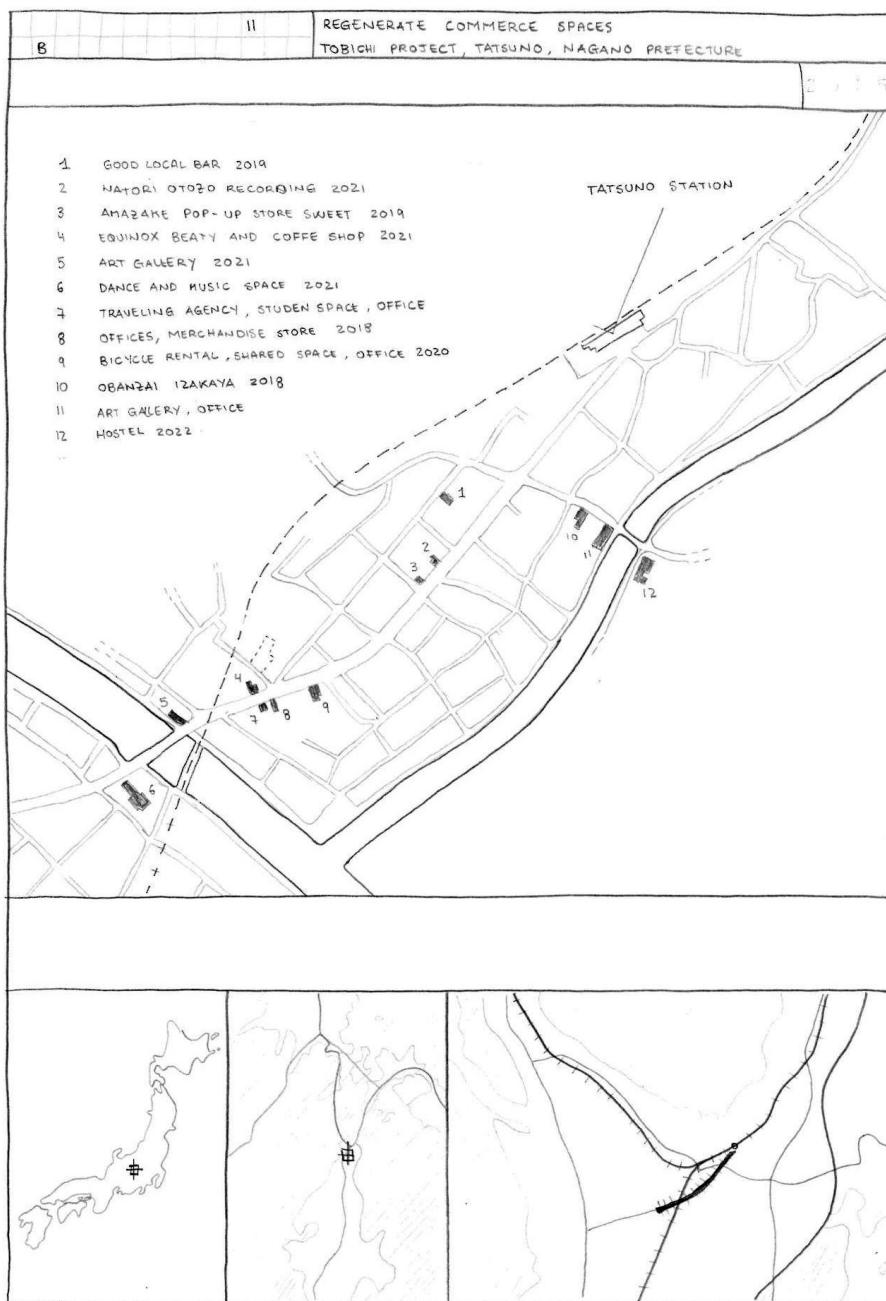


Figure 5. An extract from the site inspection dossier indicating the location of the Tatsuno case in the national and local context, with details of the schematic map of the street and the shops transformed within the Tobishi Shopping Street.

4.2. Tobichi Shopping Street

Along with the City Revitalisation Plan, the Tatsuno Town Immigration and Settlement Promotion Council was also established. Its members were figures from the public and private sectors and its purpose was to find a solution for more than 500 abandoned houses and shops in the city. Council members came from diverse professional backgrounds and had various connections to the city. Kota Akahane, an architect who had been living in the Tokyo metropolitan area for about 16 years, joined the council and later founded the Otō

Editing Company in 2016. There were initially two other founding members, but it later expanded with other members and employees to support the redevelopment of the shopping street in Tatsuno by connecting the owners of empty shops and houses with people interested in taking care of, moving to, and investing in Tatsuno. The company provides a custom support system for people interested in opening new shops and businesses on Shimotatsuno Shopping Street. It does not offer financial support for new enterprises, but rather, in exchange for a commission, it acts as an intermediary between the owners of closed shops and entrepreneurs seeking to open a business. It supports new companies in applying for public subsidies from the central government and Nagano Prefecture, such as the shopping district attractiveness support project proposal. In addition, the Otō Editing Company provides access to recycled materials collected from abandoned houses and shops in the area for use in shop renovations.

The first three years were mainly devoted to gathering information on latent resources in the local community, strengthening relationships with the owners of abandoned shops, recruiting new entrepreneurs interested in starting businesses, promoting temporary regeneration initiatives, and building an open debate on the type of shopping street and town desired by the people overall. The first answer to this question came on 7 December 2019 with the Tobichi Market event. Empty shops and lots on the shopping street in Shimotatsuno were reactivated by 54 businesses and 4,000 visitors from inside and outside the prefecture. The event, conceived as a preview of the city's future ten years from now, became an opportunity to establish principles and visions for the future of Tobichi Shopping Street.

The idea is to build a new version of the shopping street that better considers the area's social, economic, and environmental context. The project to regenerate the city's commercial centre recognises marginal and local aspects, as well as current transitions and their effects, as a resource rather than a limitation. Such is the case with empty shops and houses, which represent a resource for introducing new sustainable ways of consuming, working, living, and moving around. Tobichi Shopping Street aims to expand the traditional concept of a shopping street and rethink it as a new economic and social area where the proximity of closed and reactivated spaces defines new economic and social values and possibilities for the community. In Tatsuno, the revitalisation of Tobichi Shopping Street and the town centre does not involve a return to the state of commercial activities before closure or their uniform redevelopment. The targeted transformation of shops is designed to adapt to constantly changing conditions and gradually introduce new activities that work cooperatively and become community spaces. The new commercial spaces are envisaged as hybrid spaces, as third places open to visitors and tourists, where people can meet and encounter different cultures.

Since its inception, the Tobichi Shopping Street project has led to the opening of more than 45 new businesses that have reused various types of abandoned shops and spaces (Figure 6), involving people from diverse personal and professional backgrounds. The businesses include clothing stores, satellite offices, bars, bakeries, restaurants, sports and bicycle shops, bookstores, craft shops, pastry shops, hairdressers, furniture stores, guest houses, recording studios, dance schools, live music venues, a rental kitchen, pop-up stores, co-working spaces, and art galleries (Figure 7).

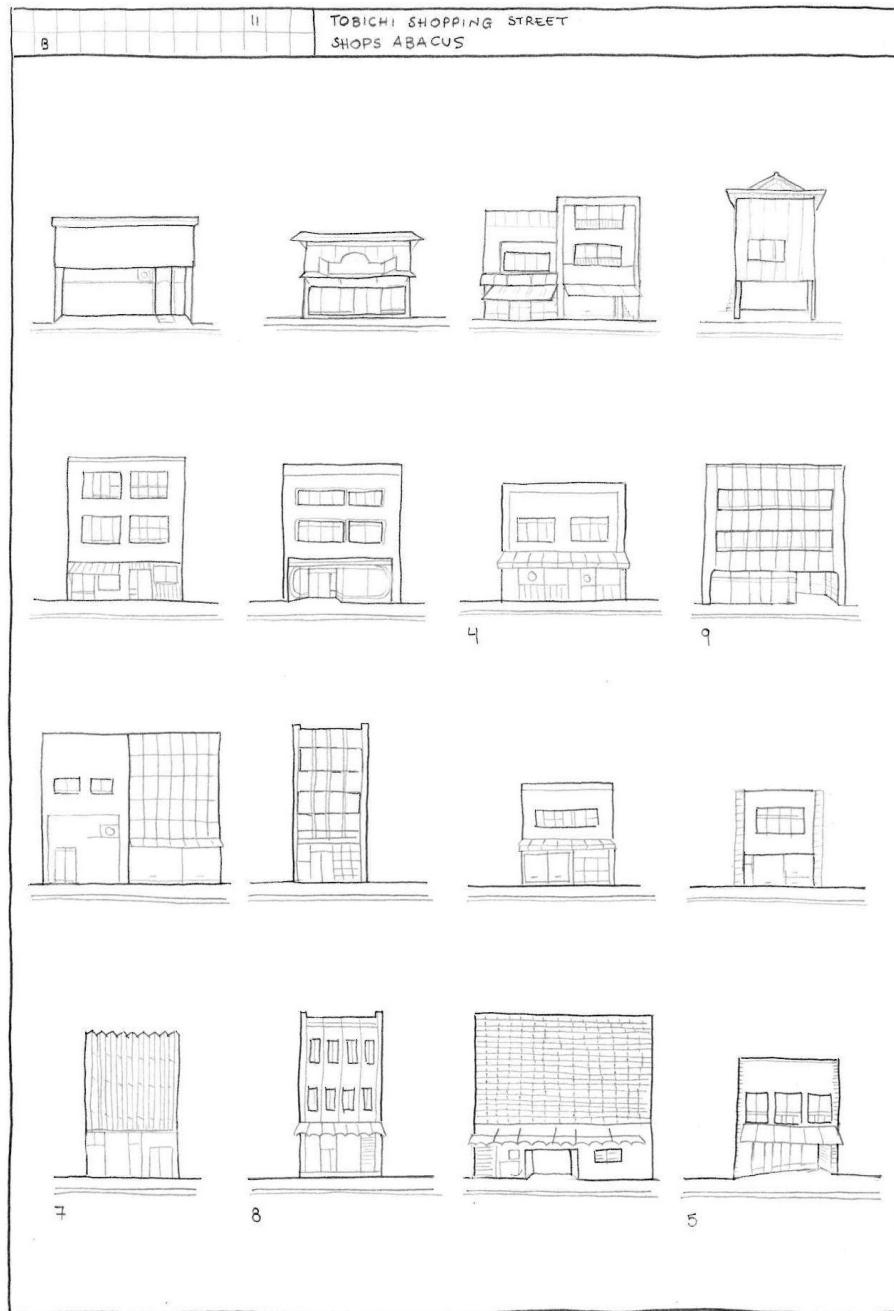


Figure 6. Abacus of shops.

In Tatsuno, the shopping street was revitalised through collaboration and a clear distinction between roles played by the municipality, private intermediaries, new businesses, and residents (Kawato, 2021). The revitalisation projects for each commercial building were carried out independently and privately, but within an overall vision shared by all. The public sector takes responsibility for supporting the launch of activities, improving the operating environment, and creating a physical and virtual platform for establishing relationships among various players. Private intermediaries manage and oversee the overall vision for the new economic and social zone; they also continuously recruit and develop tools to support new, independent, and proactive entrepreneurship. Finally, the end retailer is responsible for managing everything else (Kawato, 2021).



Figure 7. View of Shimotatsuno Shopping Street, Tatsuno, November 2023.

5. Analysis: Spaces and Institutional Frameworks of Urban Reorganisation

The next sections examine the two shopping street development projects driven by communities and associations, focusing on the kinds of spaces they have created and how these processes have reconstructed the institutional frameworks of urban reorganisation, thereby generating new social relationships. The first case followed the legacy of Japan's urban redevelopment system, in which a landowners' association collectively reconstructed a complex space—including public areas—along a shopping street. The second case concerns a small-scale association that gradually renovated the space through a series of guerrilla-like micro-developments. Both are bottom-up projects centred on community and collectiveness, but they employ contrasting methods. These sections analyse the differences between the two approaches and discuss how they can be understood within the broader context of a shrinking society. It also reflects on what lessons these cases in Japan may offer for regenerating shopping streets elsewhere. The two experiences have been widely celebrated and documented, and today we can observe how they have responded over time. Tables 2 and 3 summarise the key points of the two experiences and provide an initial evaluation, considering both their strengths and weaknesses.

Table 2 compares two models of urban regeneration—Shōtengai Marugame-chō and Tobichi Shopping Street—according to development process, spatial characteristics, and changes in values and rights. In Shōtengai Marugame-chō, a redevelopment association and an urban development company led the process, with rights holders reaching consensus strictly within the association. This model is strongly tied to the market and public actors. The project increased volumes and introduced new uses—large shops and apartment complexes—unlike the approach taken for Tobichi Shopping Street. These alterations targeted the local urban landscape, enhanced earthquake resistance, improved environmental performance, and

Table 2. Comparison of the method and approach in Takamatsu and Tatsuno.

Method		Marugame Shopping Street	Tobichi Shopping Street
Development Process	Promoter	Redevelopment association and urban development company	NPO
	Consensus-building among rights holders	Formed within the redevelopment association	Formed between an NPO and building owners
	Consensus-building with the public	Necessary	Unnecessary
	Relationship with the market	Strong	Weak
	Maintenance method	Constructing new buildings	Renovating existing buildings
	Scale	Increased volume	Same volume
	New uses	Large stores and apartment complexes	Small shops and homes
	Changes in the landscape	Big	Small
	Earthquake resistance/environmental performance	Improvement	No improvement
	Public spaces (roads, parks, etc.)	Maintained	Not maintained
Rights	Ownership of land and buildings	Aggregate	Not aggregate
	Land and building usage rights and management	The redevelopment association entrusts the urban development company with managing usage rights	Individual owners rent to NPOs, which then manage the usage rights

Note: NPO means “general incorporated association.”

enhanced public spaces. Legally, the land and buildings were strengthened, and the association delegated development and management of usage rights to a company.

In contrast, development for Tobichi Shopping Street was driven by an NPO, and consensus among rights holders was reached specifically between the NPO and building owners, with no requirement to secure public agreements. Here, ties to the market are notably weaker than in Shōtengai Marugame-chō. Unlike the substantial renovations in Shōtengai, Tobichi adopted a limited renovation approach: no increase in building volumes and only changes in use. The impact on the urban landscape was correspondingly minimal, centring solely on maintaining public space in front of shops, and no improvements in earthquake resistance were made. In particular, the ownership of land and buildings remains unaggregated, with individual owners granting usage rights to the NPO for management, a process that contrasts with the aggregation model for Marugame-chō Shopping Street.

Table 3. Comparison of strength and fragility in Takamatsu and Tatsuno.

Method		Marugame Shopping Street	Tobichi Shopping Street
Stability of the development process	Strength	The vision is clear, funds can be raised from the market, and public support can be received	Consensus building is quick. Not affected by market changes. Small investments are made in succession, so there is little risk of development failure
	Fragility	Reaching consensus takes time Susceptible to market changes Involves large investments, and there is a high risk of development failure	The vision is unclear, market funding cannot be raised, and public support cannot be obtained.
Spatial change (local and global)	Strength	Dramatically transforming urban spaces Creating the world's most cutting-edge buildings Building housing and increasing the population Improving public spaces, with a ripple effect on surrounding urban areas	Gradually transforming the urban space Creating unique spaces for each region
	Fragility	Items that can be found anywhere in the world are made	The latest things in the world cannot be made. Housing cannot be built, so the population will not increase dramatically. Public spaces are not improved, so the impact is limited.
Future sustainability (adaptation to a declining population)	Strength	Creating a centralised urban structure Freely controlling tenants in line with social changes Renewing old buildings to reduce disaster-related and environmental risks	Creating a multipolar urban structure Allowing existing housing to continue in urban areas Freely controlling tenants in response to social changes
	Fragility	It draws population from surrounding urban areas, accelerating population decline and forcing residents to buy new homes	Disaster-related and environmental risks cannot be eliminated, and there is a risk that individual buildings will be abandoned in the future

Note: NPO means “general incorporated association.”

Table 3 further compares the redevelopment models of the two shopping streets, focusing on process stability, spatial change, and future sustainability, while evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each model.

Compared to Tobichi Shopping Street, the stability of the process for Marugame Shopping Street relied more heavily on public support and market funding. Achieving stakeholder consensus was slower, making it more

susceptible to market shifts, and significant investments carry greater risks. While the spatial changes transformed the urban landscape through heightened liveability, density, and improved public areas, this came at the cost of increased spatial standardisation and loss of local character, in contrast to the context-sensitive approach for Tobichi. For future sustainability, Marugame-chō has established a centralised urban structure, mitigating environmental risks and granting greater tenant control, thereby distinguishing it from the multipolar structure of Tobichi. However, the strategy of attracting visitors also accelerates population decline and intensifies central housing pressure, effects that are less pronounced in Tobichi.

In contrast, the processing stability for Tobichi Shopping Street led to faster consensus building and was less influenced by market fluctuations, with investments proceeding more gradually and posing lower risk than for Marugame. However, Tobichi lacked a clear overarching vision and faced more challenges in securing support than Marugame. The spatial changes were more incremental and aware of the context, but yielded limited improvements in energy and environmental performance and had a smaller impact on population growth than in transformative approach of Marugame. As for future sustainability, Tobichi fosters a multipolar urban structure that supports tenant continuity and flexibility, but exposes the district to greater environmental risks and abandonment compared to Marugame's centralised model.

6. Conclusion

Shōtengai Marugame-chō is marked by a large-scale, high-risk/high-return redevelopment model driven by radical, centralised transformations. In contrast, the Tobichi project exemplifies a small-scale, low-risk/low-return approach grounded in gradual, unique, and decentralised transformations. While Shōtengai Marugame-chō prioritised market-driven reconstruction and property aggregation, the Tobichi project favoured preservation and renovation of existing structures, with management by an NPO and maintaining individual ownership.

Nonetheless, echoing points from the introduction, the issue of commercial space as a common good is interesting in both Takamatsu and Tatsuno (Ostrom et al., 2012). The ability of the owners of Shōtengai Marugame-chō to participate and cooperatively optimise the concept, design, and management of the spaces enabled their redevelopment and a rethinking of how they are used by and within the public. The demographic transition in Takamatsu leads to reflection on the fundamental organisation of public-private relationships. The case study questions the main legal aspects of urban regeneration. No longer is it solely the responsibility of the municipal administration, which is unable to undertake interventions of this magnitude on its own; rather, the association of shopkeepers has become a real estate developer (Fukukawa & Kidokoro, 2018). Here, we can fully grasp the scope of the demographic transition and how it requires rethinking old ideas of the enjoyment, use, disposal, and management of assets. This suggests that greater attention must be paid to how redevelopment works and is organised, including the introduction of new legal instruments and the adaptation of traditional technical devices.

If the focus lies on the relational nature of *shōtengai* and their status as urban common goods, then urban planning must change its methods and forms and combine different points of view. The forms of adaptation to the transition in Takamatsu determine the relationship between owners and the municipality, question the static nature of ownership and who is responsible for regeneration, and scale back the claims and interests of large private developers who are not property owners. The process brings to mind commercial districts as

a place where the osmotic relationship between rights and the consequences of demographic transition is highlighted. What Takamatsu shows is that urban regeneration is not only imagined as a method, remedy, and therapy to correct the decline of Japanese city centres and commercial districts, but rather as an opportunity to intercept the evolution of social processes at work in the city today.

The Tobichi project and Shōtengai Marugame-chō are certainly two exceptional cases of urban regeneration, but reflecting on them helps to evaluate the changes in design culture and planning induced by demographic transitions. The issues raised by demographic transitions are serious and sometimes even staggering. Yet the knowledge and planning that sometimes drive them are surprising. This is evident in the two cases presented here. They clearly show how the process of adapting to demographic transitions can drive innovation in urban design, along with its forms and uses, norms and techniques, values and rights. It can increase risk and instability, leading to unexpected outcomes, but it also elicits questions and visions that bring about a different way of being in the space. In other words, they focus once again on inclusion and equitable living that years of various forms of city growth and expansion have called into question. Takamatsu adopted an investment-oriented model that may not be broadly transferable to other shrinking regional cities in Japan or worldwide. The approach in Tatsuno, while more contextually suitable, has produced limited effects. It is more of an extension strategy and does not entirely halt urban decline.

There are not many similarities between the two cases, although one common feature concerns the identification of abandoned and underused commercial space as a resource for bringing about profound transformations in the urban space. The primary lesson that these two cases may offer for shopping street regeneration beyond Japan is that commercial spaces are fundamental urban material that fosters proximity and localism and promotes adaptability to demographic transitions. Demographic transitions seriously affect many urban areas, and the idea of transforming such areas in relation to changing conditions must remain as open as possible, i.e., extended to the entire city and territory. The two cases presented here pursue an idea of open design. In both cases, the projects for the city amid demographic transition are not static, but rather investigated rigorously and with a vision, modified in large bounds across different disciplines and fields. It is precisely the need to address the overwhelming challenge of demographic transitions that has required local municipalities and communities to bring innovations to traditional measures and tools for regenerating commercial spaces, because there are no projects outside today's demographic transition. Projects for cities in transition, with their characteristics and heritage, are once again proving inexhaustible, inspiring a new generation of professionals and residents.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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