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Differential Inclusion and the Socio-Ecological Superdiversification of Tokyo

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Abstract

While the Chicago School laid the groundwork for conceiving cities as ecological systems, contemporary socio-ecological urban studies offer a more nuanced, sustainability-oriented framework that incorporates critical perspectives on migration, inequality, and power. Within this expanded framework, the concept of superdiversity and its socio-spatial articulation in terms of superdiversification is particularly useful for understanding Tokyo. Migrants are not incorporated into the city uniformly but through processes of differential inclusion that selectively enable or constrain access to housing, employment, and community infrastructures. While some migrants are valorized as contributors to Tokyo’s status as a global city, others remain structurally marginalized even as they sustain the everyday metabolism of compact, walkable neighborhoods. Drawing on qualitative, actor-based empirical research, the article shows how Tokyo’s socio-ecology is shaped through uneven yet vital contributions of migrant groups across multiple scales. Migrants act as socio-ecological stabilizers, spatial diversifiers, and cultural placemakers, but their recognition and long-term integration remain conditioned by selective policy and market logics. By situating these dynamics within the framework of socio-spatial superdiversification, the article demonstrates that sustainable regeneration must acknowledge the diverse contributions of all urban residents, especially those rendered invisible by policy discourses. In doing so, it argues for an inclusive approach to urban socio-ecology that recognizes migrants as co-producers of resilience and liveability in super-aging Japanese cities.

Keywords

differential inclusion; migrants; migration industries; socio-ecological resilience; superdiversification; Tokyo; urban planning; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Commercial inner-city areas in many global cities are at a crossroads. Once the heart of urban life, inner-city districts and neighborhood retail shops have experienced steady decline under the combined pressures of suburbanization, population shrinkage, the rise of peripheral car-based retail models, and finally the emergence of e-commerce. Such is the case of Japanese cities, too, which once took pride in their traditional *shōtengai*, which are shopping streets often covered and pedestrian-only that served as a local community hub featuring a diverse mix of small, family-run specialty shops, restaurants, and produce vendors. In response to the decay of *shōtengai*, governments at multiple levels have launched regeneration programs to sustain compact, walkable city centers that can guarantee access to everyday goods and services, particularly in a context of super-aging demographics. These policies have highlighted the value of these traditional arcaded shopping streets, which enabled neighborhood-scale food provision, and walkable accessibility as essential infrastructures for health, wellbeing, and autonomy in later life. Yet, while these interventions emphasize socio-ecological resilience and even terms such as conviviality are used, they often overlook the diverse populations who nowadays actively contribute to sustaining these very urban ecologies. It is increasingly within these *shōtengai* and neighborhood commercial streets that migrants—particularly those outside elite migration channels—have become indispensable actors in sustaining food provision, services, and social vitality, even as their contributions remain largely absent from official regeneration narratives.

Tokyo, as Japan's preeminent global city, provides a compelling case through which to reconsider the dynamics of regeneration. Long theorized as a paradigmatic example of urban resilience and adaptability, Tokyo is increasingly shaped by increased migration-driven diversification (Yamamura, 2025). Migrants from a wide range of national, social, and occupational backgrounds are now integral to the everyday functioning of the city (Liu-Farrer, 2020). Their labor sustains key sectors of the urban economy, from food retail and caregiving to cultural production and service provision, while their everyday practices contribute to the socio-spatial diversification of neighborhoods across the metropolis. As previous research has demonstrated, migrants not only adapt to existing urban forms but actively reconfigure them, reshaping the socio-ecological metabolism of the city in ways that challenge conventional accounts of urban regeneration (Yamamura, 2022a, 2022b).

In this article, the term *migrants* refers specifically to international migrants residing in Tokyo, rather than internal rural-to-urban migrants within Japan. Tokyo's migrant population has grown steadily since the early 2000s and now comprises approximately 4–5% of the metropolitan population, with significantly higher concentrations in selected wards and neighborhoods. While historical flows were dominated by "oldcomer" Zainichi Koreans, recent trends show a surge in "newcomer" populations from diverse national and socio-economic backgrounds, including East and Southeast Asia (notably China, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines), South Asia, Latin America, and Europe, incorporated into the city through highly differentiated migration pathways (Liu-Farrer, 2020). These pathways range from highly skilled professionals and corporate transferees to students, care workers, food and retail laborers, and small-scale entrepreneurs. While some migrant groups are institutionally supported and highly visible within Tokyo's global city infrastructure, others remain precariously positioned despite their central role in sustaining everyday urban life.

To understand these dynamics, this article draws on the notion of differential inclusion. Differential inclusion refers to the selective and unequal ways migrants are incorporated into urban societies, granted access to

some resources, spaces, and rights, while excluded from others (Ye, 2017; Ye & Yeoh, 2022; Yeoh, 2006). In the case of Tokyo, differential inclusion is mediated both by migration industries, which channel particular groups into specific labor and housing markets, and by local socio-spatial practices, which inscribe migrants' presence into the urban fabric in uneven ways. Privileged migrants may gain footholds in central neighborhoods through highly-paid professional employment in the CBDs and further supportive social infrastructures through corporate and national institutions, clubs, and networks, while less privileged groups often find themselves in precarious labor markets, sustaining local service economies but without recognition in official narratives of regeneration. As the case of Tokyo has shown (Yamamura, 2022b), the mechanisms of the conventional for less privileged and corporate migration industries for privileged migrants follow different logics and draw from distinct social networks, which also contribute to a different level of visibility and support from the side of public administration.

By examining these processes, this article argues that Tokyo's urban regeneration cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the contributions and constraints of its diverse migrant populations. Drawing on qualitative, actor-centered research as well as previous studies of Tokyo's socio-spatial diversification and migration industries, the article illustrates how migrants co-produce the city's socio-ecology while simultaneously experiencing exclusionary pressures. Migrant-run businesses, community organizations, and cultural initiatives sustain the accessibility, vitality, and livability of many inner-city districts, which are qualities central to the wellbeing of both senior residents and the broader urban population. Yet these contributions remain undervalued within dominant regeneration frameworks, which risk reinforcing inequalities by privileging certain groups and overlooking others.

The article proceeds in five sections. The first reviews the conceptual framework of socio-ecology and differential inclusion. The second situates these debates within the Japanese context of suburbanization, aging, and policy-driven regeneration. The third presents empirical insights from previous and ongoing research on Tokyo's migrants, socio-spatial diversification, and migration industries. The fourth discusses the implications of these findings for inclusive and sustainable regeneration. The conclusion reflects on how recognizing the diverse contributions of migrants is not only a matter of social justice but also a practical necessity for building resilient, livable, and equitable cities in an era of demographic and ecological uncertainty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Socio-Ecology and the City*

The socio-ecological perspective has been central to theorizing cities as dynamic environments shaped by interactions between social groups and spatial structures. Early formulations by the Chicago School conceptualized the city as an ecological system marked by processes of succession and competition (Park et al., 1925). While influential, these models have been critiqued for their functionalism and neglect of inequality and power relations (Dear, 2001; Soja, 2000). Contemporary socio-ecological approaches are more attentive to complexity, relationality, and sustainability (Ernstson, 2013). They conceive of the urban as a socio-ecological assemblage where infrastructures, human actors, institutions, and practices interrelate across scales. Such perspectives resonate with debates on resilience and urban sustainability but also open space for critical attention to inclusion and justice (Heynen et al., 2006). Following socio-ecological urbanism,

I understand resilience not as a static property of form but as the capacity of urban socio-ecologies to reproduce everyday life under changing demographic and economic conditions (Heynen et al., 2006; Pickett et al., 2013). In Tokyo, this capacity hinges on interdependencies among infrastructures, services, and communities; the lens of differential inclusion clarifies how access to (and recognition within) these interdependencies is stratified.

2.2. Differential Inclusion and Migration

Within migration studies, the concept of differential inclusion highlights how migrants are simultaneously incorporated and marginalized within host societies (Ye, 2017; Ye & Yeoh, 2022; Yeoh, 2006; also Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Rather than a binary, this perspective emphasizes gradations of belonging shaped by labor markets, legal regimes, and social attitudes (Ruhs & Anderson, 2010). Migration industries, comprised of recruitment agencies, brokers, and intermediary actors (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013), play a pivotal role in producing these differentiated pathways, selectively channeling some migrants into privileged positions and others into precarious niches (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). These mechanisms structure access to housing, work, and community networks, inscribing socio-economic stratifications into urban space.

In Tokyo, they underpin the uneven integration of transnational migrants, creating urban diversity landscapes of opportunity and constraint (Yamamura, 2022b). The differentiated ways in which migrants gain access to Tokyo's urban space are mediated by migration industries, which function dually as critical infrastructures of the global city (Yamamura, 2022b). Recruitment agencies, brokers, educational institutions, and community networks channel different groups into distinct urban pathways. While highly skilled migrant professionals are supported by formal infrastructures that facilitate housing access and language or intercultural training and are embedded in the corporate environment and its networks, lower skilled migrants, such as participants in the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) or other work schemes, rely on informal social networks and are guided in their socio-spatial activities by the arrangements of the intermediary broker companies. This reliance is not a choice but a structural condition of the TITP, which often restricts interns' mobility and ties them to specific employers, thus embedding their precarity directly into the urban socio-economy. These pathways result in highly uneven geographies of settlement and work.

2.3. Migration and Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

Japan's cities have long grappled with the challenges of suburbanization, depopulation, and demographic aging (Sorensen, 2001, 2011). In response, governments at multiple scales have promoted urban regeneration or revitalization policies aimed at preserving dense, compact, and walkable commercial centers. Covered shopping arcades (*shōtengai*) have been prioritized as infrastructures that ensure access to food, services, and social interaction in an aging and also pluralizing society. From a public health perspective, walkable neighborhoods are seen as advantageous for autonomy, wellbeing, and access to nutritious food, offering alternatives to peripheral car-dependent malls. Yet, these initiatives often fail to account for the diversity of urban residents (Yamamura, 2022a, 2022b), who sustain many of these everyday functions through their labor and entrepreneurial activities.

Tokyo, as a global city, exemplifies how migration and diversification reshape the socio-ecology of urban life. Research has shown how transnational migrants inscribe their presence in diverse spatial practices,

contributing to what Vertovec (2007) terms “superdiversity.” In fact, the population of Japan has become increasingly diversified (Liu-Farrer, 2020; Phillimore et al., 2021). In Tokyo, this manifests as socio-spatial superdiversification, where diverse migrant groups cluster in distinct districts, shaping local economies and cultural landscapes (Yamamura, 2022a). One such example discussed in literature is Nishi-Ogikubo in Western Tokyo, where migrant-run eateries have been noted as “intercultural third places” (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). Migrant entrepreneurs sustain retail diversity, food accessibility, and caregiving services, functions directly aligned with regeneration goals (Douglass & Roberts, 2000; Komai, 2000). At the same time, migration industries and policy frameworks structure unequal opportunities, ensuring that while highly skilled migrants are valorized as contributors to Tokyo’s global city brand, less privileged groups remain precarious and underrecognized despite their indispensable role in maintaining neighborhood vitality (Liu-Farrer, 2020; Yamamura, 2022b).

In earlier work, it has been argued that for understanding urban diversity, it is important to look not only into the urban population and landscape in terms of intercultural encounters but also through the lens of intersectional spaces (Yamamura, 2025). Building on the notion of socio-spatial superdiversification (Yamamura, 2022a), the concept of intersectional spaces highlights how differences of class, gender, status, and temporality are materially inscribed in specific urban contexts, often reproducing inequalities even where conviviality appears on the surface. In marketplaces, service districts, or care infrastructures, superdiversity thus operates as both an enabling and a stratifying condition. This perspective is relevant for the present analysis insofar as Tokyo’s arcades and commercial centers can be read not only as walkable infrastructures of accessibility but also as sites where differential inclusion is spatially embedded. While this article focuses specifically on regeneration and socio-ecology, it is informed by the intersectional spaces framework in its attention to the ways in which migrants’ contributions are simultaneously indispensable and marginalized. Linking these strands of research allows for a more critical understanding of how regeneration policies in Japan intersect with migration, inequality, and the production of urban socio-ecologies.

This tension highlights how regeneration discourses in Japan risk reinforcing socio-economic inequalities by failing to integrate migrants into their vision of urban sustainability. Building on earlier scholarship on transnational spaces and superdiversity in Tokyo (Yamamura, 2022a, 2022b, 2024), this article foregrounds the socio-ecological contributions of migrants to argue for a more inclusive model of urban regeneration.

2.4. *Shōtengai* as Socio-Ecological Infrastructure

Shōtengai emerged as a dominant form of neighborhood commercial infrastructure in postwar Japanese cities, particularly from the 1950s to the 1980s, when dense residential patterns and limited private car ownership favored pedestrian-oriented retail environments (Sorensen, 2002). Typically consisting of small, family-run shops clustered along covered or semi-covered streets, *shōtengai* functioned not only as sites of consumption but also as social infrastructures that supported everyday interaction, informal care, and neighborhood cohesion. Community or neighborhood lives in Japanese cities were historically organized around such *shōtengai*. They function not merely as commercial strips but as vital social infrastructures. Organized by *shōtenkai* (shopkeepers’ associations) that worked in tandem with *chōnaikai* (neighborhood associations), this social infrastructure manages festivals, street maintenance, and local safety.

From the 1990s onward, many *shōtengai* entered a period of decline due to suburbanization, demographic aging, competition from large-scale shopping malls, and later e-commerce. These districts now face a “shutter crisis” due to the lack of successors for family-run shops and competition from car-based shopping malls. In response, national and municipal governments increasingly reframed *shōtengai* as key components of compact-city and aging-in-place strategies, emphasizing their role in ensuring walkable access to food, services, and social contact for older residents. Within this policy framing, *shōtengai* are treated primarily as heritage spaces and physical infrastructures requiring preservation.

What remains underexamined in this discourse is who now sustains these infrastructures in practice. As long-standing shop owners retire and local populations age, migrants are increasingly entering *shōtengai* as shopkeepers, workers, and service providers. These actors contribute directly to the socio-ecological functioning of *shōtengai* by maintaining food access, activating street life, and keeping vacant storefronts in use. Yet, they remain largely invisible in regeneration policies that continue to frame *shōtengai* as culturally homogeneous and implicitly Japanese spaces. In this context, the arrival of migrant entrepreneurs is not just a commercial substitution but a socio-ecological intervention: they occupy vacancies in these aging metabolic systems, preventing the physical and social decay of the walkable neighborhood.

2.5. Bridging the Gap

While socio-ecological perspectives highlight the interdependence of infrastructures, services, and communities in sustaining urban vitality, they often overlook the stratified ways in which different residents are incorporated into these systems. Conversely, scholarship on differential inclusion has illuminated how migrants are selectively integrated into urban societies, but has rarely been linked to questions of socio-ecological resilience and regeneration. This article brings these two strands together by examining Tokyo’s commercial districts as socio-ecological environments shaped through differential inclusion and embedding it into the concept of intersectional spaces. In doing so, it demonstrates that the sustainability of walkable, accessible, and service-rich neighborhoods depends not only on preserving infrastructures but also on addressing the unequal processes through which residents, particularly migrants, are recognized or marginalized. By conceptualizing urban regeneration as simultaneously socio-ecological and differentially inclusive, the article advances a framework for understanding how everyday practices of diverse populations sustain urban life, while also revealing the exclusions that limit more equitable forms of regeneration.

By analyzing migrants’ practices through this integrated lens, the article identifies their distinct functions in sustaining and transforming the urban socio-ecology—roles this article later defines as socio-ecological stabilization, spatial diversification, and cultural placemaking. The research is guided by a socio-ecological perspective on urban life. Rather than treating regeneration as a top-down intervention, it is viewed as the outcome of multiple, intersecting practices that sustain or undermine urban resilience. This approach emphasizes the entanglements of actors, infrastructures, and policies that co-constitute the city. Within this framework, the concept of differential inclusion is used to capture how migrants are selectively integrated into Tokyo’s socio-ecology: permitted to participate in some domains while excluded from others, valued for certain contributions while marginalized in others. This lens allows us to foreground the contradictions that shape regeneration in Tokyo.

3. Methodology

This article draws on a longitudinal qualitative study of Tokyo's socio-spatial diversification conducted between 2012 and 2024. The research design moves beyond a snapshot of diversity to analyze the processes of inclusion and exclusion over time. Fieldwork was conducted in three distinct phases: initial mapping (2012–2015), intensive interviewing (2016–2019), and post-pandemic re-evaluation (2023–2024).

The study focuses on a comparative selection of neighborhoods to capture the spectrum of differential inclusion, while reflecting the two poles between hyper-visible "ethnic towns," such as Shin-Okubo (Shinjuku) and Nishi-Kasai (Edogawa), where migrant concentration has created distinct, well-known commercial enclaves, representative of transnational migration from below, and affluent enclaves, such as Hiroo and Azabu (Minato), representing privileged inclusion to contrast with the well-known ethnic towns. These specific locations emerged from the inductive qualitative research through 45 qualitative interviews with transnational migrant professionals as well as further informal interviews and conversations with migrant shopkeepers, workers in food retail and care sectors, migrant residents, Japanese residents, neighborhood association representatives (*chōnaikai*), *shōtengai* organizers, and local government officials, complemented by participant observation and ethnographic fieldnotes taken in *shōtengai*, community events, and everyday commercial settings.

Analysis was conducted through iterative thematic coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes following the logic of "intersectional spaces." Analytical categories—migrants as socio-ecological stabilizers, spatial diversifiers, and cultural placemakers—emerged inductively through repeated engagement with the empirical material and were subsequently refined through dialogue with socio-ecological and migration scholarship. Rather than treating regeneration as a policy outcome alone, the analysis focuses on everyday practices through which migrants reproduce and transform urban socio-ecologies.

Finally, the methodological approach is explicitly multi-scalar. Interviews with shopkeepers in arcades or organizers of local festivals were not analyzed in isolation but situated within the broader dynamics of migration industries, national policy frameworks, and Tokyo's position as a global city. This allows the analysis to move between neighborhood-level practices (such as food provision in arcades), city-wide processes (the reliance of caregiving infrastructures on migrant labor), and national/global contexts (the stratified pathways of migration created by state policies and recruitment industries). Such a perspective highlights how urban regeneration is never merely local but embedded in wider structures of mobility, inequality, and governance.

4. Empirical Background: Tokyo's Socio-Spatial Superdiversification as Part of Its Socio-Ecology

Tokyo's position as Japan's preeminent global city has long informed both scholarly and policy imaginaries. It is often characterized by high-density housing, extensive public transportation, and compact, walkable neighborhoods that sustain diverse everyday practices. These features are frequently mobilized as evidence that Tokyo, and by extension Japanese cities more broadly, has retained a form of socio-ecological balance even in the face of suburbanization, population aging, and urban shrinkage. Yet closer examination reveals a more complex reality: the maintenance and regeneration of Tokyo's socio-ecology is increasingly

shaped by migration, diversification, and processes of selective inclusion that remain overlooked in mainstream accounts.

Building on Vertovec's (2007) notion of "superdiversity," which emphasizes not only individual demographic diversification but also the migration-related diversities, the concept of socio-spatial superdiversification has been introduced in the case of Tokyo to describe how migration transforms the spatial fabric (Yamamura, 2022a). Empirical examples from central districts highlight this process. Filipino, Chinese, and Vietnamese food shops appear within traditional arcades, providing affordable groceries not only for migrants but also for Japanese residents who value their variety and price (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). The aroma of spices from a South Asian grocer or the sight of unfamiliar vegetables at a Chinese market stall thus becomes a subtle but significant marker of the neighborhood's evolving socio-ecological texture, offering new sensory experiences alongside economic benefits. Korean-run restaurants and *izakaya* in Shin-Okubo attract both co-ethnic patrons and Japanese youth, generating new circuits of consumption that sustain local walkability (Shin, 2024). In Shin-Okubo, for instance, Korean cultural industries, from K-pop shops and cafés to food vendors, have transformed the district into a site of intercultural consumption that attracts Japanese youth alongside migrants. Brazilian and Peruvian businesses often locate in suburban fringe areas, yet remain linked to the metropolitan core through food distribution networks, remittance services, and cultural events. Religious sites, including churches, temples, and mosques, also function as community hubs by hosting social gatherings and language classes that bridge generational and cultural divides. Indian festivals in parts of Edogawa or Adachi not only strengthen community cohesion but also activate public spaces, enlivening streets with food stalls, music, and religious processions (Mizukami, 2015; Sugiura, 2013). Simultaneously, more high-income areas, such as the Minato ward, with Hiroo, Azabu, but also around Shibuya and Roppongi, have also increasingly become sites of transnational migration, yet from a more highly skilled and affluent group of migrants (Yamamura, 2024).

These practices actively stabilize Tokyo's socio-ecology and exemplify forms of creative placemaking and tactical urbanism. Migrants adapt underutilized spaces for markets, cultural events, or community gatherings, thereby reinvigorating neighborhoods without relying on formal state interventions. Migrant-run businesses keep vacant storefronts occupied, sustain foot traffic in arcades, and provide services aligned with regeneration goals, particularly around food accessibility and leisurely activities. Such migrant activities resonate with regeneration discourses that valorize arts, culture, and DIY urbanism, yet they are rarely acknowledged within policy frameworks. Instead, they remain framed as "ethnic" or "minority" activities, rather than integral components of Tokyo's socio-ecological regeneration. The diversity of migrants brings cultural repertoires, religious rituals, festivals, and artistic expressions that reconfigure the cultural landscape of neighborhoods. They also bring a diversification of the linguistic landscape and new transnational cultures into other neighborhoods. Yet, paradoxically, these diversities of migrants remain underrecognized in official regeneration discourses, which continue to privilege "traditional" *shōtengai* as sites of resilience and focus on the narrative of neighborhood-building, particularly addressing Japanese seniors and other residents, while marginalizing the migrant actors who contribute not only as customers and workers, but often as business owners as well, and sustain these vibrant neighborhoods. This invisibility exemplifies dynamics of differential inclusion: migrants are indispensable to the metabolism of everyday life but remain excluded from symbolic and policy recognition.

5. Discussion: Rethinking Urban Regeneration Through Differential Inclusion and Superdiversity

In recent years, Japanese urban policy has increasingly focused on preserving compact, walkable neighborhoods as infrastructures of resilience in the context of demographic decline and rapid population aging. Initiatives at both the national and municipal level have sought to revitalize commercial arcades (*shōtengai*), protect local food ecologies, and maintain urban services within walking distance of senior residents. These policies are underpinned by a public health rationale: they emphasize the physical, social, and nutritional benefits of compact urban living as opposed to the atomized, car-dependent lifestyles associated with suburban shopping malls. Tokyo, as the country's largest metropolis, has been positioned as a model of this socio-ecological vision of the city. Yet, as this study has shown, the regeneration of Tokyo cannot be fully understood without addressing the role of migrants in sustaining its socio-ecology. The empirical material summarized above has illustrated how the socio-ecology of Tokyo is increasingly sustained and transformed through the everyday practices of migrants.

5.1. Migrants as Invisible Stabilizers of Socio-Ecological Resilience

In several neighborhood *shōtengai*, migrant-run grocery stores and eateries have become critical nodes of everyday food access. For example, in a declining arcade in eastern Tokyo, a Vietnamese-owned food shop occupies a formerly vacant storefront and offers affordable prepared meals and fresh produce. During repeated observations, older Japanese residents were frequent customers, citing price, proximity, and regular social interaction as reasons for patronage. As one shop owner explained: "Many older customers come every day. They don't just buy food—they talk." Such practices illustrate how migrant businesses stabilize socio-ecological systems not only through economic activity but also through everyday social reproduction.

Migrants play a critical role in sustaining the metabolism of everyday life. Through food shops, convenience stores, restaurants, but also caregiving and personal services, they maintain infrastructures that enable compact and walkable neighborhoods to function. For senior populations in particular, small shops in the neighborhoods are essential for affordable and proximate access to meals and essential goods. This function also extends to low-income families and single-person households, for whom the affordability and accessibility of migrant-run establishments provide a crucial buffer against economic precarity. Migrants' labor in nursing care, childcare, and service industries further supports the independence of aging residents. These stabilizing functions directly align with policy goals of promoting walkability, health, and accessibility, yet migrants are rarely acknowledged as part of Japan's official regeneration strategies. Their contributions are tolerated as functional but remain invisible in narratives that nostalgically frame *shōtengai* as Japanese community spaces.

From a socio-ecological perspective, these stabilizing contributions highlight the relational nature of urban vitality. Socio-ecology emphasizes that cities are not sustained by built infrastructures alone but by the metabolic flows of goods, services, and care that enable everyday reproduction (Ernstson, 2013; Heynen et al., 2006). Migrants' involvement in food provision and caregiving demonstrates how human actors constitute essential components of urban metabolisms, linking ecological reproduction to social and economic practices. To conceptualize migrants as socio-ecological stabilizers is therefore to recognize that their activities are not supplementary but foundational to the functioning of walkable, service-rich

environments. Ignoring these dynamics reduces socio-ecology to material infrastructures and obscures the unequal labor relations that sustain them.

5.2. Migrants as Spatial Diversifiers

The theoretical claim that migrants diversify space is empirically visible in the micro-adaptations of the *shōtengai*. Contrary to the idea that migrant businesses simply replace Japanese ones, they often engage in hybrid spatial practices to bridge transnational links and local expectations. In fact, migrant entrepreneurs translate transnational connections into spatial practices that reshape neighborhood commercial environments. In several *shōtengai*, shop signage combines Japanese with Vietnamese, Chinese, or Korean scripts, signaling inclusivity while remaining legible to local residents. Food sourcing networks extend transnationally, while shop layouts and opening hours adapt to local rhythms of use. These practices embed global connections within hyper-local spatial ecologies, producing diversification without displacing existing neighborhood functions.

Drawing on recent architectural analyses of Tokyo's prayer spaces (Rahman et al., 2021), similar "spatial tactics" can be observed in commercial retail. As another concrete example, in a *shōtengai* in a peripheral ward observed during fieldwork, a South Asian grocery store (formerly a Japanese greengrocer) retained the open-front layout typical of the arcade to encourage walk-in traffic from older Japanese residents. However, the owner introduced "layered" signage: prominent Japanese price tags for vegetables at the front to signal affordability and accessibility (stabilization), while English and Hindi notices for remittance services were placed further inside (diversification).

Similarly, Shimura et al. (2020) have noted how shop owners in *shōtengai* build collective networks. The presented fieldwork confirms that migrant entrepreneurs often join these networks not just for business, but for legitimacy. In one observed case in Adachi Ward, a Nepali restaurant owner participated in the local summer festival (*matsuri*), setting up a stall selling a "curry pan" (curry bread), a well-established hybridized Japanese product palatable to locals, but in different varieties that are closer to curry puffs and samosas from South Asia, thereby performing "cultural placemaking" that eased his acceptance into the neighborhood association. These concrete strategies demonstrate that differential inclusion is not just a top-down policy outcome but is negotiated daily through the physical arrangement of goods, signage, and bodies in the narrow spaces of the arcade.

Beyond sustaining infrastructures, migrants actively reshape the urban fabric. Through small businesses, community centers, and religious institutions, they create heterogeneous socio-spatial landscapes that complicate assumptions of homogeneity. Districts such as Shin-Ōkubo, Ikebukuro, and Edogawa exemplify this socio-spatial superdiversification as much as more affluent areas such as Azabu, Hiroo, or Roppongi: multiple migrant groups establish economic and cultural infrastructures that serve both migrant and Japanese residents. These spaces are not only nodes of consumption but also arenas of social encounter and mutual reliance. By diversifying the socio-ecology of Tokyo, migrants produce new forms of resilience and vitality that exceed the scope of conventional regeneration policies, which remain oriented toward heritage preservation and demographic decline.

Theoretically, conceptualizing migrants as spatial diversifiers foregrounds how socio-ecology is produced through heterogeneity. Urban socio-ecologies are not stable systems but dynamic constellations of actors,

practices, and infrastructures that constantly shift through processes of diversification (Pickett et al., 2013). Migrants contribute to these dynamics by introducing new spatial logics of commerce, religious practice, and cultural expression that reconfigure the material and symbolic landscapes of Tokyo. Such processes exemplify what has been termed socio-spatial superdiversification (Yamamura, 2022a): the multiplication of differences that become spatially embedded and reconstitute the city's ecology. Recognizing migrants as spatial diversifiers thus extends socio-ecological analysis to account for the heterogeneity that underpins resilience but also raises questions about how planning frameworks respond, or fail to respond, to such transformations.

5.3. Migrants as Cultural Placemakers

Cultural placemaking is particularly visible during neighborhood events and festivals. In one residential district, an Indian community association collaborated informally with local shop owners to organize a religious festival that temporarily transformed a quiet street into a lively public space with food stalls, music, and shared seating. While not formally recognized within regeneration programming, such events activate public space, increase foot traffic, and foster cross-cultural interaction, demonstrating migrants' role as everyday placemakers within urban socio-ecologies.

Migrants also contribute to regeneration through cultural and symbolic practices. Festivals, intercultural events, and, more broadly, transnational lifestyles bring vitality to public spaces and generate new forms of neighborhood attachment. Religious sites and cultural organizations, as well as international schools and clubs, provide social support while also enlivening localities through gatherings and celebrations that attract diverse participants. These practices resonate with international debates on creative placemaking and tactical urbanism, yet in Japan they are often framed as marginal or "ethnic," rather than integral to urban livability and in the context of urban diversity. This framing prevents planners from seeing these events as successful, organic models of community-led urbanism that could be supported and scaled, representing a missed opportunity for synergy between top-down regeneration goals and bottom-up placemaking realities. The paradox is that precisely those practices that enliven declining urban centers are excluded from official regeneration programs.

From a socio-ecological standpoint, cultural placemaking illustrates how symbolic and affective dimensions are integral to the ecology of cities. Urban socio-ecologies encompass not only flows of goods and services but also the cultural practices and meanings that animate public life. Migrants' festivals, performances, and everyday transnational practices create affective infrastructures that bind communities together, generate trust, and foster attachment to place. In this sense, placemaking is a socio-ecological process that sustains resilience by cultivating the social and cultural energies necessary for neighborhoods to thrive. To exclude these contributions from regeneration frameworks is to reduce socio-ecology to its material dimension, neglecting the cultural vitality that is equally crucial for sustaining urban livability.

5.4. Towards an Inclusive Socio-Ecological Model

As discussed, migrants sustain Tokyo's socio-ecology as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers. Taken together, these roles illustrate that socio-ecologies are not only infrastructural but also socially and culturally co-produced. The analysis reveals a profound contradiction at the heart of Tokyo's regeneration. Migrants

sustain precisely those infrastructures, i.e., walkability, food provision, and cultural vitality, that regeneration policies valorize, yet their contributions remain marginalized through mechanisms of differential inclusion. This results in a critical policy blind spot, where the *hardware* of urban form—i.e., walkable streets, preserved arcades—is valorized, while the diverse human *software* of social and economic practices that gives it life is ignored. Policy frameworks continue to treat migrants as either temporary labor or render them invisible within the city's metabolism. To overcome this, regeneration must be reconceptualized as a socio-ecological process in which diverse residents, migrants, and non-migrants alike co-produce urban resilience.

The central findings of this study highlight three interconnected roles through which migrants sustain Tokyo's socio-ecology: as socio-ecological stabilizers, they reproduce the infrastructures of everyday life by maintaining food systems, services, and care; as spatial diversifiers, they generate heterogeneous urban landscapes through small businesses, community infrastructures, and religious institutions; and as cultural placemakers, they enliven urban centers through festivals, intercultural exchanges, and transnational practices. Conceptualizing these roles as socio-ecological practices underscores that urban vitality is not secured by infrastructures alone, but by the metabolic flows, spatial configurations, and cultural energies that migrants reproduce through their everyday activities. Accordingly, the findings concretize the argument advanced in the introduction: socio-ecology must be understood not only in terms of material systems but also through the differentiated social practices that sustain them. These dynamics also resonate with the notion of intersectional spaces (Yamamura, 2025), which highlights how socio-ecological practices are never neutral but embed inequalities along axes of class, gender, status, and migration. Understanding migrants as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers, therefore, requires attention to the differentiated positions from which they reproduce urban socio-ecologies.

This analysis demonstrates that socio-ecology cannot be understood as a neutral set of interdependencies but must be analyzed as a stratified system shaped by inclusion and exclusion. Privileged migrants are integrated into narratives of Tokyo as a competitive global city, while less privileged migrants—those most directly engaged in sustaining walkable, service-rich neighborhoods—remain precarious and unrecognized. This paradox exposes the limits of regeneration strategies that assume homogeneous populations. The stabilizing functions, for instance, are often performed from within precarious intersectional spaces, where a migrant's class, visa status, and gender converge to devalue their labor even as it sustains the community. By bringing socio-ecology into dialogue with differential inclusion, the discussion advances a model of regeneration that is both ecological and political. Socio-ecological perspectives draw attention to the interdependencies between infrastructures, services, and communities, while differential inclusion reveals the selective processes through which access to these interdependencies is granted or denied.

An inclusive socio-ecological model therefore requires more than the preservation of physical infrastructures such as *shōtengai*; it demands recognition of the diverse actors who reproduce them. Walkability and accessibility are not inherent properties of urban form but outcomes of everyday practices of labor, care, and cultural production. Foregrounding migrants' role as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers challenges the assumption that resilience can be achieved through physical preservation alone.

From a planning perspective, adopting such a model entails rethinking regeneration not as the preservation of infrastructures alone but as the active support of the diverse practices that sustain them. This requires policy frameworks that recognize migrant-run businesses as vital infrastructures of neighborhood sustainability, that

integrate migrant placemaking and festivals into regeneration programming, that align migration and urban policies to reflect long-term settlement realities, and that expand participatory governance to include migrant voices. These measures are not peripheral additions but necessary conditions for sustaining socio-ecologies in the context of demographic decline and super-aging. Only by embedding inclusion into regeneration policies can Tokyo—and Japanese cities more broadly—secure urban futures that are both resilient and socially just.

While this article builds on earlier research on migration, superdiversity, and Tokyo's global city dynamics, it advances the literature by explicitly situating migrants' everyday practices within debates on urban regeneration and socio-ecological resilience. By foregrounding *shōtengai* as socio-ecological infrastructures and analyzing migrants' roles as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers, the article extends existing scholarship beyond descriptive accounts of diversity toward a planning-relevant framework that connects migration, inequality, and sustainability.

6. Conclusion

The regeneration of Japanese cities has been framed primarily as a response to demographic decline, suburbanization, and rapid aging. Within this discourse, compact, walkable neighborhoods and traditional shopping arcades have been celebrated as infrastructures of wellbeing, accessibility, and resilience. Such interventions highlight the importance of sustaining access to food, services, and spaces of interaction, particularly for aging populations. Yet the analysis presented here has demonstrated that these regeneration frameworks overlook a critical dimension of urban life: the everyday contributions of migrants who sustain the socio-ecology of Tokyo.

By bringing socio-ecology into dialogue with differential inclusion, this study has argued that migrants are not peripheral but central actors in the reproduction of urban life. Their contributions take three interconnected forms. Migrants act as *socio-ecological stabilizers*, maintaining infrastructures of everyday life through labor in caregiving, food provision, and retail. They function as *spatial diversifiers*, establishing heterogeneous landscapes of businesses, community infrastructures, and cultural or religious spaces that prevent urban decline and enrich the socio-spatial fabric. And they operate as *cultural placemakers*, enlivening neighborhoods through festivals, intercultural practices, and everyday transnationalism that bring vitality to public space. These roles show that the viability of compact and walkable environments depends as much on the labor and practices of migrants as on the preservation of built form.

The persistence of migrants' invisibility within regeneration frameworks is explained by the dynamics of differential inclusion. Highly skilled professionals and students are celebrated as part of Tokyo's global city narrative, while the migrants most engaged in sustaining everyday infrastructures remain marginalized in rights, recognition, and security. This selective incorporation reveals the limitations of regeneration policies that privilege physical infrastructures while neglecting the stratified realities of incorporation. Walkability and accessibility are not inherent properties of design but outcomes of labor, care, and cultural practice. Ignoring these contributions not only reproduces inequality but also undermines the very socio-ecological systems regeneration policies seek to preserve.

More broadly, the analysis advances socio-ecological approaches to urban studies by highlighting that socio-ecologies are not neutral systems of interdependence but are stratified through power, inequality, and

selective recognition. Classic socio-ecological perspectives emphasized interrelationships among populations, infrastructures, and environments; this study extends that framework by showing how differential inclusion determines who is acknowledged within these interrelationships and whose contributions remain invisible. Building on the notion of intersectional spaces (Yamamura, 2025), the findings further demonstrate that socio-ecological practices are shaped by intersecting axes of class, gender, migration status, and labor regimes, which structure both opportunities for participation and forms of marginalization. Conceptualizing migrants as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers therefore illustrates how socio-ecology can be mobilized as a critical lens to interrogate not only ecological interdependencies but also the political and social inequalities that underpin urban resilience.

This article accordingly contributes to advancing socio-ecological urban studies by integrating insights from migration research and intersectionality. By conceptualizing migrants as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers, the study demonstrates that socio-ecologies are not simply networks of infrastructures and populations but stratified assemblages in which power and inequality shape recognition, access, and visibility. Introducing the perspective of intersectional spaces clarifies how socio-ecological practices embed axes of class, gender, and migration status, highlighting that resilience is always socially differentiated. In doing so, the case of Tokyo positions socio-ecology not only as a framework for understanding sustainability but also as a critical lens for interrogating urban justice.

The implications of this argument however extend across Japan. In regional cities where shrinkage and aging are even more pronounced, the decline of commercial arcades and the erosion of walkable services threaten social sustainability. Here, migrants also play indispensable roles: sustaining small businesses, staffing care facilities, and revitalizing cultural life. While less visible than in Tokyo, their contributions are equally vital to the socio-ecological viability of declining centers. Policies that continue to exclude or marginalize migrants therefore risk accelerating urban decline in precisely those places where resilience is most urgently needed.

These insights also resonate internationally. Cities worldwide grapple with the challenges of demographic change, social inequality, and ecological stress. The case of Tokyo demonstrates that regeneration cannot be achieved solely through physical preservation or nostalgic urbanism. Sustainable and socially just regeneration requires attention to the actors who sustain urban socio-ecologies on a daily basis, often from positions of marginality. By foregrounding migrants' roles as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers, the discussion illustrates that regeneration is as much a social and cultural process as a material one.

While this article has highlighted the socio-ecological roles of migrants in Tokyo's regeneration, further research is needed to deepen and broaden these insights. Comparative studies across Japanese regional cities could illuminate how migrant contributions differ in contexts of more acute shrinkage and limited institutional support. Longitudinal analyses would help trace how migrants' roles as stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers evolve over time, particularly as migration policies shift and demographic pressures intensify, and Japan is facing an increase in migration but also migrant diversification. Methodologically, combining ethnographic approaches with socio-spatial analysis could reveal how intersectional inequalities are inscribed in urban ecologies at multiple scales. Furthermore, a critical policy analysis could investigate the specific legal and administrative barriers that prevent municipal governments from formally recognizing and funding these migrant-led socio-ecological contributions, moving from observation to actionable reform. Beyond Japan, comparative urban research could examine how socio-ecological frameworks enriched by the

concept of differential inclusion can advance understandings of regeneration in other superdiverse and aging societies. Such an agenda would not only refine socio-ecological urban studies but also offer critical perspectives for shaping more inclusive and resilient urban futures globally.

In conclusion, the regeneration of Tokyo's socio-ecology is inseparable from the contributions of migrants. As stabilizers, diversifiers, and placemakers, they sustain the infrastructures of walkability, accessibility, and vitality that policy frameworks aim to protect. Yet their recognition remains curtailed by mechanisms of differential inclusion that leave many marginalized even as they are indispensable. Addressing this contradiction requires a reconceptualization of regeneration as an inclusive socio-ecological process. Ultimately, recognizing these contributions is not merely an academic exercise; it is a prerequisite for crafting urban policies that are truly resilient, genuinely inclusive, and equipped to navigate the demographic realities of the 21st century.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used Gemini for the sole purpose of spell-checking and basic grammatical corrections to ensure the linguistic quality of the manuscript. The AI tool was not used to generate content, interpret data, or restructure arguments. The author reviewed all corrections and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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