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Sustainable Commercial Urbanism in Japan: Hiroshima's Shopping Anatomy

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Abstract

Commercial inner-city areas in many Japanese cities and towns have experienced urban decline due to changes in the country's retail system and suburbanization processes. Commercial urbanism attempts at regenerating those areas have included the creation of arcades covering relatively central segments of main streets and alleyways. Various levels of government and members of the civil society in Japan have also developed urban revitalisation strategies to encourage the preservation of such districts. What is the extent and effectiveness of some of the urban revitalisation strategies aimed at helping to regenerate city centres and to endow cities with a variety of commercial offerings? The article examines evidence of sustainable commercial urbanism practices in Hiroshima prefecture via the examples of a covered arcade (also known as *shotengai*) in the city of Onomichi and a suburban shopping centre in Higashi-Hiroshima. The research methods comprised reviews of specialised literature and public policy documents, visits to both retail formats before the Covid–19 pandemic, visual inventories of shopping environments, and discussions of economic, environmental, and community forces. Extensive desk-based research was conducted during the organisation of *Urban Planning*'s thematic issue on sustainable urban regeneration in Japan (2024–2025). It is argued that the urban planning system together with community development practices ought to be responsible for ensuring the authenticity and vibrancy of successful urban and suburban shopping districts in Japan. Within the broad field of *Machizukury* studies, this article sheds light on a Japanese idiosyncrasy: the country's attempts at promoting sustainable commercial urbanism and the co-existence of multiple shopping formats.

Keywords

commercial urbanism; Hiroshima; Japan; retail; shopping centre; shotengai

1. Introduction: The Article's Rationale

Retail, shopping, and consumption have undergone structural, technological, environmental, cultural, and regulatory transformations in most parts of the world. The shopping centre now literally occupies centre stage in the world's shoppingscape (Chung et al., 2001; Fantoni et al., 2014). While the cradle of the shopping centre is traced to the US, the largest shopping facilities are currently being built in Asia and the Gulf region. Japan is an interesting country to study how recent transformations in the distribution ecosystem are shaped by mutual relationships with host cities and rural areas as well as by the corresponding urban planning system. As a direct consequence of changes in the size, location, and business models of new large stores, the total number of retail establishments in Japan has decreased from 1.61 million in 1991 to only 0.88 million three decades later (Watty, 2025). Hence, the inner-city shopping areas of many Japanese cities and towns have experienced urban decline due to alterations in the country's retail system and growing sprawl development (Hashimoto, 2016). Sprawl development is dispersed urban growth in suburban areas of mostly metropolitan regions and medium-sized cities. Combined with population decline in central areas, sprawl influences urban decline and the loss of socio-economic activity in urban neighbourhoods while promoting leapfrog development, car dependence, and the suburbanisation of employment and the appearance of large retail formats (Hebbert, 1986; Phelps & Wu, 2011).

Commercial urbanism is a planning approach aimed at improving the liveability of shopping precincts and the competitiveness and modernisation of small and independent retail establishments through urban revitalisation and collaborative planning governance techniques. Commercial urbanism has comprised the creation of arcades covering relatively central segments of main streets and alleyways (Balsas, 2016). Many of those core areas are relatively dense, compact, and walkable. This enables almost everybody to fulfil their daily shopping needs there as well as to have access to many urban services critical to their wellbeing. The preservation of those commercial areas is particularly relevant in contexts dominated by super-ageing trends of the Japanese society. Walkable urban areas have advantages not only for individuals with urban lifestyles but also for the elderly and those with reduced mobility options (Ohashi et al., 2023).

Various levels of government and members of the civil society in Japan have also developed urban revitalisation strategies to encourage the preservation of such districts (Hein, 2002). This has been done to facilitate easy access to healthy and nutritious food and to guarantee the autonomy and independence of ageing populations. From a public health perspective, these districts offer advantages over alternative models based on peripheral car-based shopping malls (Chung et al., 2001; Fantoni et al., 2014). Shopping districts in Tokyo (e.g., Santos, 2022; and for Shibuya, please consult Hasegawa, 2026), and Osaka, Nagoya, and Kyoto have been researched extensively (i.e., Buhnik, 2017; Jacobs, 2001; To & Chong, 2017). However, one is still hard pressed to understand recent transformations in smaller cities—also referred to as "left-behind places" (Rousseau, 2009)—undergoing processes of population shrinkage (Balaban & Puppim de Oliveira, 2022), ageing and reductions in birthrates (Forsyth & Lyu, 2024), socio-economic changes to their industrial and services structures (Kaido et al., 2022; Reggiani & Ortiz-Moya, 2022), and regeneration of declining urban areas and do-it-yourself (DIY) housing rehabilitations (Ji, 2025; Ji & Imai, 2022; Utaka, 2024). Although Japan is extremely diverse in terms of urban typologies, settlements eras, growth and shrinking patterns, and ancient roles in the development of the country, medium-sized cities, such as those analysed in this article, serve to illustrate ongoing changes in retailing in the Inland Sea peninsula of the central island of Japan, Honshu, if not in the country as a whole.

The article attempts to answer the following research question: What is the extent and effectiveness of some of the urban revitalisation strategies aimed at helping to regenerate city centres and to endow cities with a variety of commercial offerings? The article builds upon the metaphoric concept of retail anatomy to examine evidence of sustainable commercial urbanism practices in Hiroshima prefecture via the examples of a covered arcade (also known as *shotengai*) in the city of Onomichi and a suburban shopping centre in Higashi-Hiroshima (Figure 1). These two case studies of contrasting retail typologies underpin two distinct retail archetypes emblematic of modern and postmodern shopping preferences. Although they cater to different clienteles, they seem to have relatively similar retail purposes. It is argued that the urban planning system together with community development practices ought to be responsible for ensuring the authenticity and vibrancy of successful urban and suburban shopping districts.

Both case studies are in Hiroshima prefecture (Kumagai, 2024). The case study analysis and subsequent discussion corroborate and extend some of the trends found in the published literature. Their succinct analysis serves to discuss similarities and conceptual differences between retail offerings in shopping streets and shopping malls (Aslan, 2025; Reimers & Clulow, 2014; Zanini et al., 2019). While the two archetypes are in the same prefecture, they allow only minimum inferences about direct spatial and socio-economic impacts on each other's retail offerings and areas of influence.

Competition between individual stores publicly opened to the streets and their counterparts clustered in a variety of privately owned shopping centres and outlet malls has grown rapidly in recent decades. As information and communication technologies (ICTs) have grown in popularity and ease of use, we have

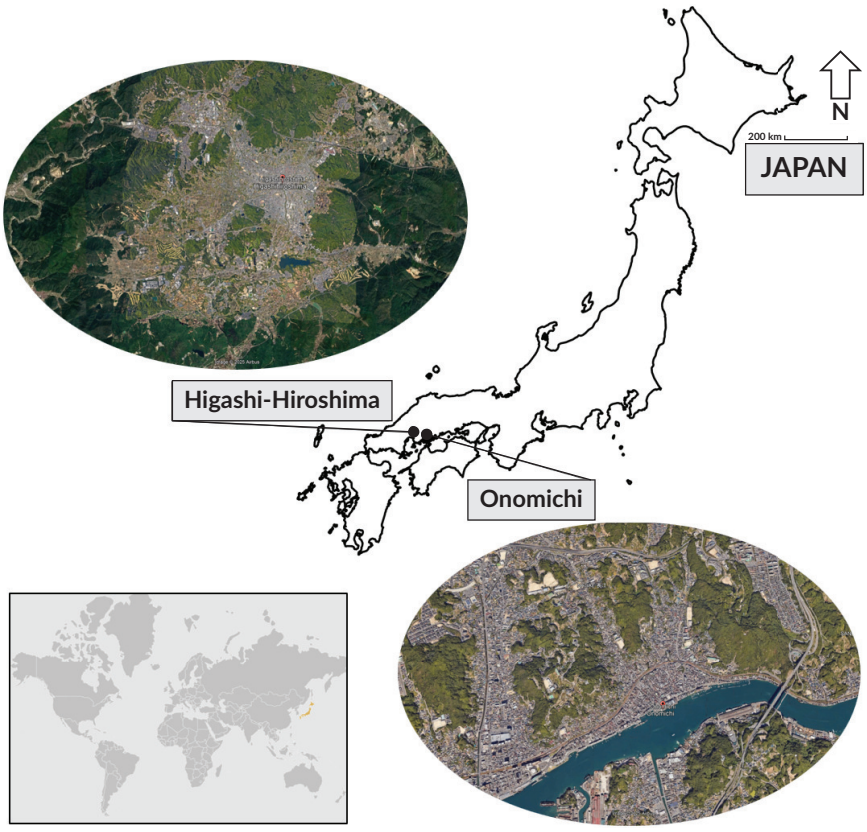

Figure 1. Case studies' location. Sources: GISGeography (2025); Google (2021).

also witnessed an increase in competition between the former two typologies and their online commercial digital twins, either in sell-it-all amazon.com-types of e-commerce stores or in brick-and-mortars' own online platforms.

The suburbanization of small and medium-sized cities in Japan has experienced many of these tendencies: (a) competition for investment and critical infrastructure, (b) the development of relatively large-scale urban projects and brownfield regenerations, (c) new and rehabilitated commercial spaces for retail activities, and (d) the rising expectations for the provision of public services and better-quality housing and transport infrastructure (Gaubatz, 2003). These territorial trends are having a considerable impact on smaller cities outside of the large conurbations, given their lower population densities and greater access to land necessary for new developments.

During Japan's growth period (mid-1950s to the early 1970s), population migrated in large numbers from the rural countryside to the newly built suburban areas and new towns on the outskirts of large industrial cities. Supermarket chains and discount stores opened their establishments in those areas with larger population densities. However, many smaller and regional cities are now experiencing processes of de-industrialisation and regional revitalisation (Love, 2013), where manufacturing plants and shipyards have closed (e.g., in Onomichi) or their activities experienced substantial reductions and reorientations towards the service economy (e.g., in Higashi-Hiroshima).

After this introduction, the article is in five sections. Section 2 is the analytical mechanism. Section 3 describes the materials and methods. Section 4 places the two Hiroshima prefecture case studies in the context of territorial transformations in the Sannyodo region of Honshu Island. It also characterises the main features of Onomichi's *shotengai* and Higashi-Hiroshima's shopping centre. Section 5 is the discussion, where the two case studies are examined according to the (sustainable) commercial urbanism anatomy criteria. Finally, Section 6 provides some concluding remarks and identifies avenues for further research.

2. Analytical Mechanism: Evolution, Theoretical Background, and Archetypes

The genealogy of modern retail geography and its regulation in Japan is based partly on a number of now seminal works. After the overview works of Yamamura (1988), who articulated the growth of commerce in medieval Japan, and Balsas (2019), who traced the history of Japanese commerce and consumption from the *Genki* to the *Heisei* era, Table 1 lists some of the most significant book-length scholarly works on the Japanese retail system, shopping dynamics, and consumption patterns.

2.1. Retail Evolution

A cursory and simplified overview of the evolution of shopping formats in Japanese cities likely comprises five phases (Akira, 2024). In phase one, the *shotengai* was first developed by family-run stores and chambers of commerce after World War II (Balsas, 2016). The shopping street aimed to fulfil daily necessities in the immediate surrounding neighbourhoods. The covering of the street with a ceiling was done mostly for convenience. The novelty created popular commercial areas of regional significance and attracted customers well beyond the *shotengai*'s host neighbourhoods (Larke, 1994; Larke & Causton, 2005).

Table 1. Non-exhaustive list of significant book-length scholarship in English on Japanese retailing.

Authors (Year)	Title	Overview
Larke (1994)	*Japanese retailing*	A broad view of the Japanese distribution and retailing system.
Clammer (1997)	*Contemporary urban Japan: A sociology of consumption*	A sociological study of consumption in contemporary Japan, covering also urban lifestyles, shopping behaviour, and consumption practices and rituals.
Meyer-Ohle (2003)	*Innovation and dynamics in Japanese retailing: From techniques to formats to systems*	A study of Japanese retailing's innovativeness and dynamism, responses of Japanese retailers to deregulation, increasing competition, changes in consumer behaviour, and internationalisation during the 1990s.
Larke and Causton (2005)	*Japan—A modern retail superpower*	A study of Japanese distribution, retail formats and categories, control of channels, and consumption in Japan with case studies and examples of cutting-edge retail innovations.
Usui (2014)	*Marketing and consumption in modern Japan*	An examination of marketing, shopping products, and consumerism in Japan.
Cwiertka and Machotka (2018)	*Consuming life in post-bubble Japan*	An edited volume on the contradictory coexistence of consumerism and environmentalism. It discusses sustainability, recycling, everyday consumption practices, and environmental consciousness in the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters of March 2011.
Rahman (2022)	*Japanese retail industry after the bubble economy: Development of the 100-yen shops*	It highlights major institutional changes in the development of the Japanese retail industry after the bubble economy. It shows how a landscape of abundant small retail stores changed to a mixed-bag of retail formats with a high percentage of chain stores.

In a hypothetical phase two, department stores, derived from their predecessor kimono stores, or *gofukuten*, dating back to the Edo and Meiji periods, began to expand their merchandise to attract more and more customers, while evolving into full-blown modern department stores by international standards during the 1980s. Fuelled by rapid economic growth until the early 1990s, this shopping format attracted customers from a wide regional hinterland and provided large crowds with a variety of products, from apparel to restaurants, and entertainment. In large cities, new department stores were also located near train stations to capitalise on high commuter footfall (Clammer, 1997). Metropolitan centres emerged also during the 1980s and 1990s as some of the most desirable destinations in large cities. During this phase, conglomerates of various retail companies were comprised of department stores, specialty stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores (Larke & Causton, 2005).

In phase three, general merchandise stores were built in the countryside, leading to a retail decentralisation to rural areas. Large-scale shopping centres in suburban areas took advantage of growing motorisation trends during the 1990s and 2000s (Meyer-Ohle, 2003). Category killers in the areas of apparel, toys, electric appliances, and furniture took customers away from *shotengai* and department store formats.

Phase four occurred during the 2000s and early 2010s and resulted in the restructuring of the retail industry as a consequence of overinvestment, loss of sales to competitors, and the saturation of retail markets

(Usui, 2014). In fact, Hashimoto (2016, p. 118) discovered that as of 1989, just before the deregulation of the Large-scale Retail Stores Law (please consult Balsas, 2017), there were 281 stores of a particular retail company throughout Japan; however, 22 years later the company owned only 79 stores (28.1%). Furthermore, only 40.8% of all "suburban" stores survived the restructuring, with stores in front of a train station or on a shopping street in city centre locations accounting only for 18.8%. During this phase, global retailers mostly from the US, UK, and France also made an appearance in Japan. However, due to cultural differences and difficulties in establishing partnerships with Japanese companies, they exited the country within a few brief years.

The most recent phase, 2010 onwards, shows department stores losing market share to outlet malls (located in out-of-town locations), shopping centres (many located in the vicinity of train stations), and e-commerce platforms (Cwiertka & Machotka, 2018). Convenience (*konbini*) and discount stores are experiencing a resurgence as a direct consequence of relatively compact store sizes, advances in stock management, and user-friendly electronic payment systems (Rahman, 2022; Steinberg, 2025).

2.2. Theoretical Background

It is undeniable that the books in Table 1 analyse distinct and uniquely Japanese cultural traits of the country's shoppingscape. They show a progression from attempts to fully characterise the national retail system to more recent concerns with consumption, marketing, and specialised retail formats. Nonetheless, international theories of retail change still provide valuable insights on commonalities and differences between Asian contexts and the realities of other places in the Global North. Amongst those theories, we find the "wheel of retail," the "retail accordion theory," the "retail life cycle," and the non-cyclical "environmental theory" and "conflict theory" (Aranitou et al., 2024). While a detailed examination of these various theories is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize that two main retail archetypes transverse through most theories of retail change and western geographic contexts: (a) the individual shops (and their clusters) open to the street (e.g., shopping street) or onto other public space (e.g., municipal market), and (b) a cluster of stores within a semi-private retail environment (e.g., shopping centre, outlet mall). Table 2 synthesises the findings of selected articles on the relationships between the two archetypes. Their selection was based on whether the articles comprised analyses of both shopping realms, specific aspects of their design and planning, or details on patronage, even if beyond the Asian context.

2.3. Archetypes and the Regulatory Environment

It is important to note that only one of the articles in Table 2 pertains to an Asian reality (Falsetti & Ciotoli, 2018). The authors recognize that the recent retail transformations in the Western cities have caused "a functional and semantic impoverishment of the urban fabric" (Falsetti & Ciotoli, 2018, p. 112); however, in many Asian countries the "commercial fabric" is still an integral part of the evolution of the urban form, which creates opportunities for hybridization between apparently distinct architectural types (Falsetti & Ciotoli, 2018, p. 112). Nonetheless, McGinty (2015) has identified a direct connection between the decline of traditional shopping streets and changes in the regulatory environment facilitating the construction of large-scale stores in Japan. And more recently, Karato (2023) also analysed the role and limited effectiveness of planning regulations to control the location of large-scale customer-attracting facilities in the suburbs and their impact on city centre retail and urban revitalisation programs in Japan.

Table 2. Synthesis of research articles on two archetypes: Shopping street and shopping centre.

Authors (year)	Title	Methods	Findings
Alzubaidi et al. (1997)	"Town Centre Versus Out-of-Town Shopping: A Consumer Perspective"	Interviewer-administered survey conducted 1994–1995 to assess shoppers' opinions in both types of location in Preston.	The use of the out-of-town location was associated with "car travel and less frequent shopping trips, mostly for groceries" (p. 88); visitors to the out-of-town location were found to be "more purposeful in purchasing intent than those engaged in visits to the town centre" (p. 89).
Warnaby and Medway (2004)	"The Role of Place Marketing as a Competitive Response by Town Centres to Out-of-Town Retail Developments"	Mixed methods approach based on three key sources of data collected over a four-year period: participant observation at regional meetings, key informant interviews, and a short questionnaire to 32 town centre managers.	Place-marketing campaign with a positive tone on "the strength of the retail offers in town centres" (p. 472); emphasises the benefits of a "collaborative approach at a regional level" (p. 473); campaign gave town centre managers "a collective voice and opportunity to engage in regional debates" (p. 473).
Teller (2008)	"Shopping Streets Versus Shopping Malls—Determinants of Agglomeration Format Attractiveness From the Consumers' Point of View"	A web-based survey of almost 1,000 consumers representing a typical central European urban retail market.	The two groups (shopping streets and shopping malls) differ with respect to their "management and marketing concepts" (p. 396); distinct perception of characteristics by customers and "different levels of attractiveness" (p. 396); a homogenous picture towards the two "major or first-order determinants of attractiveness" (p. 396).
Parente et al. (2012)	"Main Street Retail Districts or Shopping Centers? Comparing the Preferences of Low-Income Consumers"	Interviews conducted in three representative retail districts in low-income neighbourhoods of São Paulo.	While shopping malls received better evaluation on environment, infrastructure, variety of stores, and security, "the street districts were judged to be better regarding access and value" (p. 154).
Ozuduru et al. (2014)	"Do Shopping Centers Abate the Resilience of Shopping Streets? The Co-Existence of Both Shopping Venues in Ankara, Turkey"	Two separate questionnaires given in 13 shopping centres and 11 main shopping streets in Ankara.	Shopping centres are used by consumers from all districts, and shopping streets are mainly used by consumers living in inner city districts; shopping centres and shopping streets are preferred for similar purposes, and "shopping streets, in particular, are preferred for entertainment" (p. 145).
Reimers and Clulow (2014)	"Spatial Convenience: Bridging the Gap Between Shopping Malls and Shopping Strips"	A household survey of consumers, and a retail audit.	Consumers regard "spatial convenience as important and believe that malls are superior in providing it" (p. 864).

Table 2. (Cont.) Synthesis of research articles on two archetypes: Shopping street and shopping centre.

Authors (year)	Title	Methods	Findings
Dębek and Janda-Dębek (2015)	"Whose Shopping Malls and Whose Shopping Streets? Person–Environment Fit in Retail Environments?"	A cross-sectional correlational study of 122 people aged 18 to 40.	A match with retail environments was influenced by subject traits: "consumption style, social affiliation need and openness to experience" (p. 67).
McGreevy (2017)	"The Precinct Versus the Shopping Centre: Order, Complexity and Endogenous Dynamism in Suburbs and Towns"	Principles of complexity theory and systems self-organisation were tested by comparing activity centre mass and diversity between South Australian suburbs and towns.	Activity centres self-organised as complex adaptive systems do have greater mass and diversity than those organised via the "mechanical order of the shopping centre" (p. 424).
Falsetti and Ciotoli (2018)	"Arcades 3.0. Il Tempo dell'Asia nei Luoghi del Commercio"	An analysis of how shopping centres are the final result of a progressive expulsion from the urban fabric.	Asian examples show how the commercial fabric is at "the base of the creation of urban places for the community" (p. 112).
Zanini et al. (2019)	"Shopping Streets vs Malls: Preferences of Low-Income Consumers"	In-depth interviews and focus groups with 396 low-income consumers in Rio de Janeiro.	Patrons prefer shopping streets despite "the greater satisfaction generated by shopping malls" (p. 140).

3. Materials and Methods

Obviously, retailing is a very dynamic socio-economic sector. While there are many idiosyncrasies and culturally unique features to a retail system, the fact that the acts of selling and buying are relatively universal implies that the control of those acts is regulated both at the national and local levels. The regulatory environment controlling the planning and development of the commercial sector in Japan has been discussed and reviewed in earlier studies (Balsas, 2016, 2017). As many of the regulations influencing the location, trade schedules, operations, and management of retail establishments in Japan draw from comparisons with those in the US, UK, France, and Portugal, the article builds upon the metaphoric materials of retail anatomy, profit and human flourishing, and city-centre vibrancy.

The anatomy metaphor is derived mostly from Tewdwr-Jones et al.'s (2010) article titled "An Anatomy of Spatial Planning," which equates anatomy with five distinct urban planning predicaments: integration, consensus building, differentiation, strategic governance, and identity building. The retail component of the anatomy concept draws more specifically from both British and North American frameworks aimed at creating and maintaining the vibrancy of successful shopping districts. Jones et al.'s (2016) "Anatomy of a Successful High Street Shopping Centre" seeks to understand the relationship between property values, location, physical characteristics, diversity of retailing and use, and social vitality in Manchester and York (p. 495).

With its pro-capitalist free market orientations, one could question the extent to which the US is able to influence the viability of retail establishments and their associated shopping districts. However, it happens

that the concept of "centralised retail management," somewhat successfully applied to downtown areas in the US and elsewhere in the western world, has its roots in the anatomy of centralised retail management models created in the US specifically to exploit, almost *ad nauseam*, the intrinsic design and operational characteristics of privately owned shopping centres (Gibbs, 2012).

Among the cross-fertilisation of research studies of European and North American retail developments conducted by scholars based in Japan and South Korea, it is worth noting Suzuki and Almazan's (2015) analysis of the management of street markets in Greater London; Mitarai and Suebsuk's (2016) comparative analysis of performance indicators and information disclosure for Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and area-based management in the US, UK, and Japan; and more recently Yoshinori et al.'s (2022) research on processes of policy implementation in the establishment of BID analyses and coordination actions. Critical to this international public policy mobility are notions of retail idiosyncrasies (anatomy), positive utility (i.e., profit and human flourishing), and self-sufficiency of resources and leadership (organisational structure, governance, and funding) conducive to city-region identity building and city-centre vibrancy (Kim & Yoonjeung, 2017; Mckercher, 2020).

Finally, the research methods comprised reviews of specialised literature and public policy documents, field visits and observations of both retail formats in Hiroshima prefecture before the Covid–19 pandemic, data collection on commercial offerings and shopping behaviours, visual inventories of shopping environments, and discussions of economic, environmental, and community developments (Cuff et al., 2020). Extensive desk-based research was conducted during the organisation of *Urban Planning*'s thematic issue on sustainable urban regeneration in Japan (2024–2025). Data were collected through direct observation and pictures of shopping environments, casual conversations with shop owners, employees, and other shoppers in both retail environments. Non-exhaustive inventories of retail typologies, store sizes, goods sold and services provided, hours of operation, and ownership status and operation were conducted during in-person fieldwork in both case studies in the mid-2000s, while extensive online searches were performed in four more recent occasions: 2014; 2018; 2020; and 2024–2025.

Specialised literature analyses were conducted in university libraries and open-source databases, while newsletters and other trade-related publications and urban planning documents discovered online were consulted, translated to English, and studied for content and relevance to the article's purpose. The watching of online documentaries about the evolution of the country's retail formats and their main characteristics (NHK WORLD-JAPAN, 2025) was particularly helpful to corroborate earlier observations, and, in other instances, to develop a more accurate understanding of recent transformations (Breuer et al., 2023).

4. Geographical Context and Case Studies

Likely, Hiroshima is best known to most readers of *Urban Planning* as one of the two cities decimated by the atomic bomb dropped by the US on Japan during World War II. However, Hiroshima is the 12th largest prefecture in the country, with 2.7 million people, in the Sannyodo region of ancient Japan. According to Kumagai (2024, p. 25), Sannyodo was "the only dairo [大路] among the seven circuits developed as the largest arterial road connecting the capital of Kyoto and Dazaifu, which was a crucial gateway to eastern Japan and China."

Castel-Branco and Paes (2009, p. 67) argued that already in the 16th century, Nagasaki on the island of Kyushu had welcomed the Portuguese "Nau do Trato" ship (*Kurofune*) to the country, "commercially linking Japan to the world." The latter city's Portuguese-Japanese fourfold urbanistic dialogue and legacy of (a) arrival docks and vast public square, (b) open air streams with bridges, (c) the city centre's geometrical grid pattern, and (d) the city's origins built on hilltops and slopes was partially destroyed during World War II.

Hiroshima's rebuilding after the atomic bombing provided an opportunity to modernise the whole city. Alkazei and Matsubara (2023, p. 425) claim that "while Hiroshima was able to restore vitality to its once-razed city centre, more recent reconstruction cases have failed to do so." Onomichi's *shotengai* constitutes a valuable example of a city's core shopping street running longitudinally along the city's waterfront, minimally damaged during the war, but which was constructed, and, until today, continues to operate and is maintained with a certain degree of success. After the Peace Memorial Park, the small island of Miyajima in Hiroshima Bay, with its orange Great Torii Gate partially submerged at high tide and the Itsukushima Shrine first built in the 12th century, is likely to be the prefecture's second most visited attraction.

Nonetheless, further inland one finds the city of Higashi-Hiroshima, known for its sake breweries as well as the college campus of the renowned Hiroshima University (Tachibana & Sano, 2025). Higashi-Hiroshima's population is shrinking less than Onomichi's, perhaps due to the city's more service-oriented economy and fewer troubles with de-industrialisation, more levelled urban topography, and fewer abandoned homes (Table 3). As such, Higashi Fuji Grand shopping centre appears as the ideal modern regional-scale shopping typology to study the planning and impacts of a modern shopping centre in the Japanese countryside.

Table 3. Comparison of population statistics in Japan, Hiroshima, Higashi-Hiroshima, and Onomichi.

	Japan	Hiroshima Prefecture	Higashi-Hirsohima	Onomichi
Total population 2020	126,226,000	2,799,702	196,608	131,170
Young pop.	15,147,120 (12.0%)	14.0%	14.0%	11.0%
Working-age pop.	74,809,780 (59.2%)	56.0%	62.0%	52.5%
Elderly pop.	36,269,100 (28.8%)	30.0%	24.0%	36.5%
Population change				
2015–2020	–0.70%	–1.56%	1.92%	–5.38%
2010–2015	–0.70%	–0.59%	1.46%	–4.53%
2005–2010	0.20%	–0.55%	3.09%	–3.34%

Sources: Cabinet Office (n.d.); Statistics Bureau (n.d.).

4.1. Shopping Street: Onomichi's Shotengai

Onomichi is a city of about 131,000 people located in the Inland Sea peninsula of the central island of Japan, Honshu. Its economy was formerly based on the shipbuilding, metalworking, and chemical industries, and is now increasingly shaped by a growing tourism sector (Mochizuki, 2023). Well accessible by JR Sanyo railway, the city developed on the waterfront and on the adjacent hillside. The agglomeration has a mainly linear urban form parallel to the coast. It is well-known for its castle, temples, and shrines overlooking the agglomeration and the inland sea. A maritime atmosphere is present in the ambience of the city, given its proximity to the water and the number of working boats and shipyard-related machinery present on the labouring waterfront.

The *shotengai* is an extremely long 1.1-kilometre covered arcade parallel to the coastline (Figure 2). The street possesses slightly less than 200 stores. Its retail mix comprises mostly small family-owned stores that sell food, hardware, kitchen gadgetry and other utensils, cloths, shoes, jewellery, and small electronic appliances. There are also hairdressers and barber shops, clothes stores, restaurants, record stores, and ceramics stores. The customer base is mostly local, although a growing number of stores also now caters predominantly to visitors (Mochizuki, 2023).

Figure 2. Onomichi's *shotengai* running parallel to the coastline. Source: Google (2021).

The appearance of the shopping district is quaint and well-kept. Due to its considerable length, the shopping street is interrupted by cross streets and comprises five main segments. It is common to see people walking and riding their bikes through it during various hours of the day (Figure 3). The covered canopy provides protection against the elements and makes strolling and shopping there a rather pleasant experience with an

Figure 3. One of the entrances to Onomichi's *shotengai*.

everyday enjoyment. The pavement consists of decorative floor tiles on some segments and only solid tiles without any designs elsewhere.

A festive atmosphere is often observable due to the display of merchandise on the public right-of-way. The whole street is bordered by luminous signs and banners that create a sense of unity and coherence and the feeling that we are in a special place, which is well cared for (Figure 4). Regularly, closed businesses have their sturdy metal shutters down to protect the window glasses and doors from vandalism. Most buildings on the street are two-story high structures. Due to the small size of the dwellings, loading and unloading of goods and wares is typically done by both front and back, depending on the shop's accessibility. Many establishments have their storage space in the back and others above the stores.

Figure 4. Onomichi's *shotengai* festive atmosphere.

The arcade roof coverage is supported by well-spaced metal pillars properly integrated into the urbanscape. Certain segments of the street have decorative electric lamps, while others have more industrial-looking lights. The area displays a series of rules stipulated on either side of the pedestrian precinct, including the prohibition of riding motorised vehicles through it. Parking for scooters and bicycles is provided in adjacent structures.

Upon close scrutiny, it was discovered that the covered shopping street's retail potential is partially the result of creative activation strategies (Ji & Imai, 2022; Murialdo, 2025; NHK WORLD-JAPAN, 2025) aimed simultaneously at older adult shoppers, who tend to patronise it almost on a daily basis, and the youth population, who more sporadically is attracted by the retro look and feel of the district. There is a sense that the area is endowed with social capital and possesses a community ambience typical of a small and medium-sized city where shopping is an everyday life occurrence. The city's chamber of commerce headquarters is located in the shopping district. Culturally, a weaving and a printing museum also attract many visitors. The Onomichi Mall Federation has played a significant role in the modernisation of the *shotengai*, which has also contributed to its strong urban identity and future viability (Niwa et al., 2025).

4.2. Suburban Shopping Centre: Higashi Fuji Grand

Higashi Fuji Grand is located in Higashi-Hiroshima, a city of approximately 196,000 inhabitants. To understand the shopping centre's main characteristics, one needs to consider its planning and design, construction, and operational features. Every planning process aimed at building a shopping centre begins with the mall developer acquiring the site, articulating the design and key features of the shopping centre, obtaining the necessary financing and permissions, and complying with any conditions (i.e., public gains) imposed by the municipality (Fujishima et al., 2025). This urban planning process has also occurred with Fuji Grand. This regional shopping centre is located in the periphery of Higashi-Hiroshima in close proximity to regional roads (Figures 5 and 6). This gives it good accessibility from the neighbouring cities as well as plentiful car parking. The shopping centre comprises the mall itself and an adjacent multistorey car park.

Figure 5. Suburban shopping centre: Higashi Fuji Grand on the lower-right quadrant. Source: Google (2021).

Figure 6. Higashi Fuji Grand shopping centre in Higashi-Hiroshima.

The shopping centre is based on multiple stores with a supermarket as the main anchor store. It has three floors, and each floor is known for a certain commercial function: The ground floor is occupied by the supermarket, the first floor has specialised retail, and the second floor is the food court with a variety of restaurants. The shopping centre does not have a specific design concept (Figure 7). It is a commercial building in its main assertion and comprises a mix of commercial functions: retail, restaurants, and minimal leisure opportunities besides shopping and eating. The shared areas comprise plazas and corridors, which are equipped with benches and other decorative motifs. The plazas are regularly utilised for convivial activities, such as mini-events and other artistic performances.

Figure 7. Inside view of Higashi Fuji Grand shopping centre.

The shopping centre comprises in the order of 100 stores. They range from specialised retail to mass merchandise. Most of the stores are owned by Japanese companies, but several international franchise stores are also present. Although no data on sales volumes could be obtained, with the exception of the Covid-19 lockdowns, regular patronage and sporadic visitation appear to have remained steady over the years. During the fieldwork, it was possible to observe families with children doing their regular shopping as well as younger crowds of teenagers congregating in the fast-food court and sit-down restaurant areas. In addition to the events in the common plazas, the shopping centre also had a religious space for people to meditate and pray. The shopping centre is obviously a clean, sanitised, and safe place to be. The shopping mall's location on the urban fringe is likely to have induced urbanisation in its immediacy (Hebbert, 1986;

Sorensen, 2001). Various actions seem to have been taken to ameliorate the negative impacts in the community, including recycling, energy savings programs, and community development collaborations between the mall company, the retailers, and the city of Higashi-Hiroshima (Murialdo, 2025).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this section is to utilise the retail anatomy metaphor identified above to compare and discuss the two case studies in Hiroshima prefecture. The retail anatomy metaphor builds upon five distinct planning predicaments proposed by Tewdwr-Jones et al. (2010): integration, consensus building, differentiation, strategic governance, and identity building. Instead of simply repeating some of the analyses of the studies identified in Table 2 in a different geographic and cultural context, these factors seem to capture many of the urban planning and governance concerns found during the field work in Japan and subsequent desk research. In fact, Mckercher's (2020) analysis of the anatomy of tourist shopping districts discovered a disconnect between the literature and what those involved in the management of shopping districts believe are important factors for the success of those precincts: organisational structure, governance, and funding.

5.1. Integration

As such, integration refers to "the need and opportunity to integrate spatial development through new regional and local strategies including activities such as economic development, transport, planning, sustainable development, energy, water and biodiversity" (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010, p. 253). Although a sceptic looking at Table 2 would simply argue that the two retail formats could be difficult to integrate, given their distinct locations, slightly different clienteles, and niche markets, from sustainable urban planning and commercial urbanism perspectives retail markets and planning interventions ought to minimise their catchment area conflicts and foster complementarities.

5.2. Consensus Building

Consensus building refers to "the scope for, and implications of, policy divergence and intra- and inter-regional/local rivalry and competition between various actors and institutions" (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010, p. 253). While the two cities are located approximately 50 km apart, they both benefit from easy access to Hiroshima Airport, located equidistantly to both cities. In the absence of UK-style "city centre first" land use policies (i.e., a core component of the National Planning Policy Framework), there is a consensus that the Fuji Grand regional shopping centre benefits from its proximity to high-calibre roads. A similar compromise is visible amongst the stakeholders regarding the value of the retail offer located in Onomichi's *shotengai*. The adjacent metropolitan area of Fukuyama, to the east of Onomichi, provides an adequate example of consensus building among stakeholders, where all merchants located on Fukuyama's Hondori *shotengai* had to agree to remove the arcade's roof and conduct environmental improvements to the redesign of the shopping street (Park et al., 2021).

5.3. Differentiation

Differentiation, in the words of Tewdwr-Jones et al. (2010), refers to the tension between regional autonomy, identity, and the public interest. Differentiation applied to the two retail environments may very

well serve to clarify their specialisations and complementarities within their respective planning processes. While Onomichi's downtown waterfront, where the main shopping street is located, appears to be specialising in bicycle tourism and green and blue infrastructure amenities to grow the city's tourism base, Higashi-Hiroshima is specialising in growing town-gown programs as well as sake-based tourism.

Community gains derived from new (and retrofitted) real estate development opportunities, such as Higashi Fuji Grand or the Shimanami Exchange Hall and the former Onomichi Fukuya department store near the Onomichi JR railroad station, or even the new U2 multipurpose festival marketplace housed in a former shipping warehouse on the city's waterfront, constitute appropriate examples of what Yoshida (1999) referred to as "rethinking the public interest in Japan" to the benefit of civil society.

5.4. Strategic Governance

Strategic governance stands for the relationship between regional revitalization orientations and resilient community self-sufficiency with new distinctive forms of strategy-making (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010). The Regional Revitalisation policy approved by the Japanese government in 2014 was aimed at halting rapid decreases in population in rural areas and excessive population concentrations in Tokyo's special wards. The associated Act for Vitalising Towns, People, and Jobs constituted a comprehensive strategy aimed at achieving the goals of regional revitalisation.

Sub-strategies of this Act include the promotion of local industries, the development of tourism resources, the stimulation of industrial development, the attraction of new businesses, and the support of existing small and medium-sized enterprises (Mizukoshi, 2025). Although the Japanese national government decreed the policy on regional revitalisation for shrinking cities, municipalities must formulate plans and programmes aimed at implementing the Comprehensive Strategy. Often, the broad character of the national policy influences the generic nature of local plans. Both cities in Hiroshima prefecture are poised to benefit from attempts at incentivising regional revitalisation in peripheral areas of Honshu. Nonetheless, Onomichi has been rather strategic about devising and implementing successful revitalisation initiatives, which focus on tourism and the adaptive reuse of existing buildings to attract visitors and to encourage young people to stay in the municipality. Active and participatory governance beyond the traditional actors usually involved in public affairs has proven to deliver positive results in other contexts (Hofstad et al., 2025), and one ought not to be sceptical about it in the area of resilient and sustainable retail ecosystems throughout Japan.

5.5. Identity Building

Finally, identity building refers to "the role and extent of 'region building' and the ways in which the region is discursively constructed by differing actors" (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010, p. 253). Internationally, Hiroshima might be known for having been devastated by the nuclear attack at the end of World War II; however, nationally, the city and prefecture have turned that reputation around with a message of peace and understanding. If a history of industrious innovation, a hardworking and entrepreneurial culture, an arcade with unique and charming shops and facilities housed in renovated classic Japanese buildings, modern shopping facilities, and magnificent views of garden-city like landscapes cannot ameliorate a dark tourism destination image, Pineda et al. (2023, p. 103) proposes a test-proven "identity-building method that can become the base for design strategies fostering [renewed] place identity and attachment."

6. Conclusion: The Sustainable Co-Existence of Various Retail Formats

Contemporary notions of sustainability have come to be portrayed as the symbolic overlap of the economy, environment, and social realms (Quigley et al., 2018). Sustainability is a constant challenge and not a *fait accompli* or destination. Cities were created and have grown because the co-presence of multiple people in interaction with the natural and built environments generates surplus. *Autopoesis* posits that living systems will seek, and eventually move towards, an equilibrium of forces (Maturana & Varela, 1980). However, continuous entries to and exits from the urban system in different magnitudes lead to imbalances and to the need to influence, if not outright manage, urban districts.

The Japanese retail system has undergone substantial changes recently (Fujioka & Reynolds, 2021). These vary from the scale of logistics and distribution, outlet size, location, and hours of operation to modality, parking availability, payment technology, phygital innovation, community retail, and post-sale delivery of goods and services. The lack of abundant parking for automobiles, such as that found at peripheral shopping malls, is likely one of the reasons why *shotengai* do not experience more patronage by shoppers. However, distinct retail formats and lifestyle preferences are also influencing the appearance, morphology, and vibrancy of traditional shopping areas in cities of diverse sizes throughout Japan.

While emblematic shopping districts in Tokyo may exemplify the concept of sustainability in commercial district management embodied in the Japanese tradition honouring *Tōshōgū Shrine*'s message of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" (Baum, 2011; De Bary et al., 2005), for instance, study visits to Shibuya as well as participation in meetings, walk-along patrols, and subsequent desk-based research (Kottmann & Reiher, 2020; Kuroishi, 2023; Reggiani, 2022) demonstrated that concerned stakeholders are quite keen to accomplish the "clean, safe, and attractive" goals of successful commercial districts (Ferguson, 2023; Roberts & Eldridge, 2009).

Those goals are common to such emblematic global commercial neighbourhoods as New York City's Times Square, London's Covent Garden–Piccadilly Circus–Soho, and Hong Kong's Central District, to name only a few. Examples of mundane activities capable of disrupting the vitality and viability of these types of districts include littering, street hawking, handing out leaflets in public spaces, binge drinking, and absolutely illicit activities. One of the differences between the management practices in Shibuya and those of similar districts elsewhere in the world is the degree of volunteering, stakeholder participation, and sense of collective belonging, instead of their outsourcing to third-party companies.

One can suggest that the extent and effectiveness of urban revitalisation strategies in smaller and medium-sized cities depend on how the dimensions of the retail anatomy are addressed in the design and, above all, the implementation of local commercial urbanism plans and programmes. The retail pendulum in Japan has moved from *shotengai* to peripheral shopping centres. However, the article also contributes to the realisation that as various *shotengai* and their shopping districts are regenerated with government subsidies and store owners' own investments in the attraction, appeal, and amenities of their precincts, a percentage of the resident population is returning to central city areas, as exemplified by the Onomichi case. While some worry about gentrification (Miura, 2021), others appreciate the authentic experiences, the cultural cachê of the urban environment, the organic mix of commercial and service functions, the nightlife opportunities, the placemaking amenities, the critical centralities of their locations, and connections to public transit.

The article was written for *Urban Planning*'s thematic issue on sustainable urban regeneration in Japan (2024–2025) with recourse to an examination of two retail case studies: Onomichi's *shotengai* and Higashi Fuji Grand. Some of the article's limitations include reliance on partial data on store vacancy rates, users' shopping behaviours, and other relevant retail operation metrics. More complete datasets could have strengthened the article's analyses. Nonetheless, and in spite of the language barrier limitation faced more intensely when conducting fieldwork research *in sito* than when attempting to locate, read, and translate documents in Japanese to English online, within the broad field of *Machizukury* studies (Kusakabe, 2013; Nakajima & Murayama, 2024; Satoh, 2019), this article has discussed a set Japanese idiosyncrasies decoded in the country's attempts at promoting sustainable commercial urbanism and the co-existence of multiple shopping formats.

Co-existence may mean specialising in niche markets and not expecting that *shotengai* will ever be able to compete, as it once did, on the basis of low prices, accessibility and on-street parking, and a vast variety of products. To preclude small businesses in traditional shopping districts from being forced to close, their owners, tenants, and association representatives will need to excel at *omotenashi* (i.e., not simply to sell products, but to offer goods and to provide services that go beyond what is humanly imaginable), and, in the words of Miller and Cushing (2023), help to redesign the unique as well as the unremarkable.

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