

Regenerating Urban Areas in Japanese Cities With a Nod to Sustainability

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the thematic issue on *Sustainable Urban Regeneration in Japan*. It presents our original motivations, the gaps we attempted to fill with the call for contributions, our take on sustainable urban regeneration, and the main highlights of the published articles. Our takeaways are that there are relatively distinct dynamics in large and regional cities throughout the country, with urban regeneration initiatives encapsulating multiple intensities, resources, extensions, stakeholders, collaborative and challenging practices, results, and legacies. Readers are encouraged to consider each individual contribution in relation to the thematic issue’s main rationale and scholarly goals. Finally, we suggest that readers place themselves in the shoes of the contributing authors to fully attempt to understand their positionalities, interpretations, methodologies, research processes, findings, limitations, and key takeaways.

Keywords

commercial space; commercial urbanism; night-time urbanism; placemaking; residential management; superdiversification; Tokyo; undertrack (re)fill

1. Introduction

To the uninitiated, the order, peace, civility, and rebuilding of most Japanese cities through time is usually a sign of admiration. The Japanese sense of introspection, self-centred politeness, and communal conviviality, not only with a keen sense of curiosity towards what happens outside of the country’s borders but also with a resolute sagacity to affirm Japanese culture throughout the world, are ever present (Freedman & Slade, 2023). These characteristics propel many scholars to conduct fieldwork in Japan and to share their findings not only with the academic community, but especially with the Japanese people, as if in search of a reality

check (Kottmann & Reiher, 2020). Whether this can be said about all other dialectic research relationships between researched and researcher is open to interpretation.

This thematic issue of *Urban Planning* publishes eight articles on how urban regeneration interventions in Japanese cities are helping to improve quality of life opportunities for everyone, and especially for disenfranchised individuals and households in areas experiencing urban decline and socio-economic and environmental transitions.

Given our earlier research on city centre and waterfront regeneration processes in various parts of the world (Moran et al., 2019; Smardon et al., 2018), including Japan, we were cognizant of the many transformations cities and their central areas and suburbs are undergoing as a result of powerful societal tendencies (Wang & Fukuda, 2019), including lower birth rates, depopulating rural areas, shrinking cities, and dwindling resources needed to manage the many priorities required by an increasingly educated, technologically advanced, connected, and progressively older population.

Writing the editorial at the end of this publishing project feels like the closing of a mega-event, such as the World's Fair in Osaka in October 2025 (Lockyer, 2025). Fortunately, it does not feel like the Olympic Games in Tokyo, which had to be postponed by a year and held without spectators due to Covid-19 (Holthus et al., 2020). Thinking about how the project was conceived and evolved in the early stages, there was an initial effort at recruiting contributors to basically demonstrate the project's viability to Cogitatio Press. We started with a fair number of commitments, which allowed the formalization of the call for contributions on the journal's website.

We were happily surprised when we received the proposed abstracts from the publisher. We felt that the intended contributors had read our minds and committed to write their articles to show the viability, salience, and relevance of the main topics under consideration. We realized that the initial commitment to recruiting contributors paid off when the first articles were submitted for peer review. It is important to disclose that a key moment in the recruitment strategy was one of the guest co-editor's participation in the annual conference of the German Association for Social Science Research in Berlin, 15–17 November 2024, dedicated to the theme of "Sustainability in Japan."

2. Pathway and Research Gaps

This publishing project resulted from an ongoing collaboration between the two guest co-editors, not necessarily about the geographic area of the thematic issue, but more centered on landscape planning, greenways, environmental regeneration, and sustainable urbanism in the United States and Central-Southern Europe. This resulted partly from the fact that both co-editors worked on different campuses of The State University of New York (SUNY), Smardon's almost four-decade affiliation with the College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) in Syracuse (Smardon et al., 2018), and Balsas' assistant professorship appointment at the University at Albany (SUNY-UAL), 2014–2019 (Balsas, 2024), plus they both graduated from the same US alma mater.

The idea for the current project followed Balsas' coordination of a special issue on the same subject for Emerald's *Journal of Place Management and Development* (2022). This collection published several papers on various aspects of sustainable urban regeneration (SUR) in Japan, including a comparative analysis of urban

regeneration and a prologue to the thematic issue (Balsas, 2022). It also included articles on climate change and sustainable mobility, Shibuya's urban regeneration, park planning in Tokyo, and hybridity urbanism in the largest Japanese metropolis (Ursic & Imai, 2020).

For a traditional model publication journal, and compared to other outlets in the same field, several papers within that collection have been highly influential and received many more citations than the journal's average. One of the takeaways from that collection's prologue article was the expectation that subsequent scholarly endeavours would help to materialize collaborations between Japanese and international researchers based overseas (Balsas, 2022). In an increasingly globalized and connected world said aspiration materialized with an uptake by Japanese-based junior and senior researchers, collaborations between Japanese researchers and colleagues in Australia, Canada, and Italy, and even a Japanese researcher working abroad.

The research gaps identified in *Urban Planning's* call for contributions included (i) retail-based, health-based, or education-based urban regeneration programs; (ii) the motivations, programmatic elements, and effectiveness of downtown revitalization initiatives; (iii) benefits, shortcomings, and lessons learned from collaborative efforts; (iv) implications of regeneration programs to ameliorate (or reverse) urban shrinkage tendencies; (v) DIY and tactical urbanism in contexts of neighbourhood upgrade; (vi) the value of arts and culture programs and initiatives at enhancing city centre liveability; (vii) socio-ecological practice and scholarship; and (viii) creative placemaking and SUR.

3. Contextual Overview

This subsection provides a brief contextual overview of the field's background, evolution, state-of-the-art, current development, and implications. It comprises two-fold criteria centred on screening (whether it qualifies as SUR) and scoping what issues and impacts it brings forth. SUR outside of Japan has been extensively studied in the last two decades, with an increasing number of both books and refereed journal articles published since 2020.

As one can expect, SUR evolved differently throughout the globe. As such, similar professional practices and scholarly activities are often referred to by different designations, including and very telegraphically urban requalification, urban renewal, urban renovation, and urban regeneration in EU countries and the UK (Tallon, 2020); mostly urban renewal and revitalization in the US (Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014); and *toshikeikaku*, *machizukuri*, regional vitalization, urban renaissance, and urban regeneration in Japan (Nakajima & Murayama, 2024).

Furthermore, SUR has been conceptualized and implemented slightly differently depending on the types of interventions (Said & Dindar, 2024), which have mostly comprised (i) *top-down and programmatic initiatives*, usually promoted by national governments with competition for funding by municipalities or planning ministries identifying and selecting their own pilot interventions based on pre-selected conditions (e.g., strategic plan, holistic approach, fulfilling earlier planning criteria, and grassroots involvement and participation); (ii) *land-based and physical interventions*; (iii) *social and community planning programs*; (iv) *redevelopment of transport infrastructure, transit hubs, and anchor institutions*; (v) *mega-event development*; (vi) *environmental regeneration of brownfield and abandoned spaces*, such as rivers, creeks, ponds and lakes, etc.; and (vii) perhaps a more recent genre, *tactical urbanism and DIY*, which has been partly driven by the

recent health pandemic, lack of resources, and a collective sense of wanting to change existing adverse urban and rural realities.

In many countries, SUR has also been implemented to capitalize on dominant themes in particular city districts, e.g., shopping and commercial modernization (Balsas, 2023); high streets and corridor interventions; suburban strip and miracle mile-type of urban retrofit interventions; mixed-use in peri-urban core areas; institutional anchor uses such as medical campuses, business parks, governmental complexes, and entertainment and leisure-oriented districts; and waterways (Smardon et al., 2018).

SUR's outcomes tend to be mostly characterized as successful interventions by researchers, a few handful of cases appearing to document the mishaps and shortcomings of either underway or recently completed interventions. The human propensity to embrace newness (i.e., new pavements, new trees, requalified public spaces, renovated and restored building facades, widened sidewalks, freshly painted bike lanes, newly installed outdoor cafes and parklets, micromobility solutions, and bicycle parking schemes) is often done with an almost medical precision that ends up displacing medium-to long-term residents and erases the organicity that existed in the regenerated areas prior to the SUR interventions (Miura, 2021). In certain cases, it is almost as if upon the launching of newly regenerated places, they start catering to new clientele, who often have only a rudimentary recollection of what existed there before the improvements were conducted. This is in the fashion of the old motto's admonition: "Time stands still, only angels falling."

Luckily, the number of studies documenting variations of these transformations and erasure phenomena appears to be growing steadily. Central to our collective understanding are such urban theories, concepts, ideological principles, and urbanistic movements as rent gap theory, use and exchange values, trickle-down economics, green gentrification, socio-ecological resilience, the slow cities and transition towns movements, tactical urbanism, the 15-minute city, placemaking, etc. Not to be lost in translation—and no pun intended with Coppola's 2003 film—the use of yesteryear public spaces and everyday practices is reappropriated by capitalized SUR interventions, which privilege "exchange" over "use" values contributing to the almost complete obliteration of existing built environments and associated lifestyles.

Sunikka-Blank and Kiyono (2021, p. 372) interrogate "how sustainability is interpreted in the context of urban regeneration in Japan." In our opinion, this simple question is marred by interrelated answers anchored by complex spatial relationships of capital, power, property rights, lifestyles, cultural expectations, risk and vulnerability, obsolescence tendencies, and entrenched governance practices. To a certain extent, said relationships reappear frequently in slightly reinvigorated or weakened contexts depending on professional cultures, technological advances, socio-economic conditions, and dominant political priorities. Gunderson and Holling's (2002) *Panarchy Model* of adaptive resilience serves to illustrate many of these complex interactions with dominant forces oscillating from conservation (when growth is already slowing) and release (marked by creative destruction), to re-organization (novelty and innovation under slightly reconfigured conditions) and subsequent exploitation (with some noticeable growth; Marcus & Colding, 2023).

As such, commercial inner-city areas in many Japanese cities and towns have experienced urban decline due to the suburbanization processes. Initial attempts at regenerating those areas included the creation of arcades covering relatively central segments of main streets and alleyways. Those core areas tend to be relatively dense, compact, and walkable. This enables almost everybody to fulfil their daily shopping needs 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-aging trends of 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. Various levels of government and administrative jurisdictions in Japan have developed urban revitalization models to encourage the preservation of such districts. This has been done to facilitate easy access to healthy and nutritious food and to guarantee the autonomy and independence of aging populations. From a public health perspective, these districts are perceived to offer advantages over alternative models based on peripheral car-based shopping mall developments. The next section provides brief highlights of the contributions in this thematic issue.

4. Contributions' Highlights

The eight contributions in this thematic issue can be aggregated into four groups: (i) *Considerable SURs in Tokyo* (contrib. #1—Hauska and Pernice’s Placemaking, Liveability and Revitalization, and contrib. #2—Hasegawa’s Transforming a Central Tokyo Park—Shibuya); (ii) *Modest but impactful acupuncture-like and amenity—and event-driven SURs* (contrib. #3—Silva’s Undertrack (Re)Fill Interventions, and contrib. #4—Sintusingha and Covatta’s Night-Time Urbanism); (iii) *Diversity and community-oriented transformations in core areas and suburban master planned residential developments* (contrib. #5—Yamamura’s Differential Inclusion and Superdiversification, and contrib. #6—Matsubayashi and Saito’s Realities and Challenges of Residential Management); and (iv) *City centre commercial regeneration* (contrib. #7—Kërçuku and Aiba’s Regeneration of Commercial Space in City Centres, and contrib. #8—Balsas’ Sustainable Commercial Urbanism). Figure 1 shows a map of Japan with a word cloud produced with words from the various articles’ abstracts.



Figure 1. Articles' abstracts' word cloud (wordclouds.co.uk).

Contribution #1—Hauska and Pernice's *Placemaking, Liveability and Revitalization* provides a critical evaluation of three recent multi-scale urban space regenerations in Tokyo's Shibuya, Setagaya, and Minato neighbourhoods. The authors draw on recent examples of urban space regenerations implemented around Tokyo's commercial streets and major transit hubs. They discuss how Tokyo's shopping areas are adapting to urban decline and a super-aging society to provide the services critical to the well-being of its residents.

Contribution #2—Hasegawa's *Transforming a Central Tokyo Park* analyses how Miyashita Park in Shibuya was transformed into a multistorey commercial building with a roof park and a tall hotel. The intricacies of this urban renewal project were meticulously researched, characterized, and extrapolated from more than ten years' worth of Shibuya Ward Assembly minutes and media coverage. As Hasegawa so well recognizes, the article underpins how local governments, through the use of one of neoliberal urbanism's main instruments, the public-private partnership, increasingly act not only as regulators but also as active promoters of privatization.

Contribution #3—Silva's *Undertrack (Re)Fill Interventions* examines the repurposing of unused spaces beneath railway and highway infrastructure for mostly shopping, dining, nightlife, and storage. The author relies on the concept of "undertrack (re)fill" to develop an analytical framework to understand unused interstitial community spaces in Yokohama and Tokyo. It is observed that the integration of local traditions and cultural practices into contemporary urban regeneration is leading to enriching environmentally and culturally sound sustainable (re)filled spaces in Japanese cities.

Contribution #4—Sintusingha and Covatta's *Night-Time Urbanism and Sustainable Regeneration* calls attention to these underexplored dimensions of SUR: night-time urbanism, urban play, and events and festivals. Through the analysis of two contrasting cases in the Pacific Rim—Tokyo's Sangenjaya and Melbourne's White Night festival—the authors contrast emergent forms of night-time play, highlighting distinct logics, spatiality, and regenerative effects. The authors discovered that some of these interventions provide sustained and adaptive reuse benefits as well as the activation of high-visibility cultural and economic returns. Ultimately, the authors argue for hybrid approaches combining nightscape interventions with the catalytic potential of curated events.

Contribution #5—Yamamura's *Differential Inclusion and Superdiversification* builds upon the concepts of superdiversity and superdiversification to analyse Tokyo's migrants' differential inclusion and uneven access to housing, employment, and community infrastructures. While the contributions of migrants in large Japanese cities have revealed both integration and marginalisation across multiple scales, Yamamura argues for sustainable regeneration practices to acknowledge more forcefully the diverse contributions of all urban residents, especially of those rendered invisible by status quo policy discourses.

Contribution #6—Matsubayashi and Saito's *Realities and Challenges of Residential Management* examines current challenges affecting detached housing areas in Japanese cities. Various demographic, societal, and structural issues seem to have contributed to the deterioration of master planned communities and the diminishing of social ties and convenient access to daily services. As such, the authors analyse residential development and management in a number of Japanese cities while also surveying current initiatives aimed at retrofitting housing estates. They conclude that the existing resident-dependent model ought to be accompanied by institutional reforms of multi-level support systems.

Contribution #7—Kerçuku and Aiba's *Regeneration of Commercial Spaces in City Centres* sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of central city commercial spaces as well as on current urban regeneration interventions in the cities of Takamatsu and Tatsuno. The authors call attention to the two main types of transformations impacting the city centres of Japanese cities: large-scale redevelopment underpinned by legal agreements between stakeholders, and smaller-scale interventions initiated by the community and local entrepreneurs. The key takeaways are that the process of adapting to demographic transitions can drive innovation in urban design culture and planning practice and that commercial spaces can be repurposed to foster proximity and localism during important moments of territorial and societal transition.

Contribution #8—Balsas' *Sustainable Commercial Urbanism in Japan* examines evidence of sustainable commercial urbanism practices in Hiroshima via the examples of a covered arcade in Onomichi and a suburban shopping centre in Higashi-Hiroshima. The author questions the extent and effectiveness of various urban revitalisation strategies aimed at helping to regenerate city centres and to endow cities with a variety of commercial offerings. 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. The key finding is the need to promote sustainable commercial urbanism and the co-existence of multiple shopping formats.

5. Conclusion

The regeneration of urban areas in Japanese cities is visibly shaping the built environment of urban and suburban agglomerations. This thematic issue is a non-exhaustive attempt to incrementally augment our common knowledge about how a small number of cities are dealing with processes of socio-economic, territorial, and governance transformations. This *Urban Planning's* collection includes eight articles on complementary aspects of urban regeneration interventions in Japanese cities and how they relate to broadly defined sustainability goals. Our main takeaways are that there are relatively distinct dynamics in large and regional cities throughout the country, with urban regeneration initiatives encapsulating multiple intensities, resources, extensions, stakeholders, collaborative and challenging practices, results, and legacies. Readers are encouraged to consider each individual contribution in relation to the thematic issue's main rationale and scholarly goals. Finally, we suggest that readers place themselves in the shoes of the authors who contributed articles to fully understand their positionalities, interpretations, methodologies, research processes, findings, limitations, and key takeaways.

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