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Academic Editors
Carlos J. L. Balsas (Ulster University)
Richard Smardon (The State University of New York)

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Regenerating Urban Areas in Japanese Cities With a Nod to Sustainability

Carlos J. L. Balsas¹ and Richard Smardon²

¹ Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Ulster University, UK

² College of Environmental Science and Forestry, The State University of New York, USA

Correspondence: Carlos J. L. Balsas (c.balsas@ulster.ac.uk)

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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

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—Kërçuku 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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About the Authors



Carlos J. L. Balsas (PhD, FHEA, AICP) is an urban and regional planner with research interests in urban revitalisation and resilience, urban governance, non-motorised transportation planning, mega-event development, city and culture, and international planning. Recent books are *Walkable Cities: Revitalization, Vibrancy and Sustainable Consumption* (2019) and *Strategic Planning for Urban Sustainability* (2025).



Richard Sardon has worked in academic, government, plus private practice before coming to the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry where he is a SUNY Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus. He has a PhD in Environmental Planning from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's degree in Landscape Architecture from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has edited/co-written 12 books and is an associate editor for five environmental journals, one of them being the *Landscape Journal*. Expertise areas include landscape assessment and management, wetland assessment and mitigation, environmental management/citizen participation, ecotourism and heritage resource management, and sustainability planning implementation.

Placemaking, Livability, and Revitalization in Tokyo: Lessons in Sustainable Urban Regeneration

Eduard Hauska ¹  and Raffaele Pernice ² 

¹ School of Environment and Society, Institute of Science Tokyo, Japan

² School of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Australia

Correspondence: Raffaele Pernice (r.pernice@unsw.edu.au)

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Abstract

The popular image of Tokyo is a megacity characterized by skyscrapers on one hand and by intricate, dense, and extensive neighborhood districts filled with micro-entrepreneurs on the other. This article traces recent transformations in the city’s urban fabric that are rooted in post-war reconstruction processes and in governmental deregulation policies initiated by the 1969 Urban Redevelopment Law, which have shaped its iconic identity. It also addresses the dual dynamics of top-down governmental and corporate-led revitalization models, exemplified by the 2002 Law on Special Measures for Urban Renaissance, as well as bottom-up collective efforts, such as the “machizukuri” phenomenon, which have sought to reconfigure and improve Tokyo’s public infrastructure and human environment. The article attempts a critical evaluation of contemporary approaches to sustainable urban regeneration in Japan, drawing on three recent examples of multi-scale urban space regeneration implemented around Tokyo’s commercial streets and major transit hubs, the Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya, the Shimokita Senrogai Project in Setagaya, and the Azabudai Hills in Minato. Based on lessons learned during the decades of the post-bubble economy, it outlines current trends behind these and other selected projects to illuminate how Tokyo and its commercial areas are adapting to evolving issues associated with urban decline and a super-aging society in order to provide the services critical to the well-being of its residents.

Keywords

acupuncture urbanism; Japan; machizukuri; placemaking; Tokyo; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Tokyo's urban identity is founded on a fascinating duality that has long intrigued urban theorists and planners. On the one hand, it comprises a hyper-dense megacity of about 14.1 million residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023) and an infrastructural spectacle. On the other hand, it enfolds a patchwork of intimate, human-scale neighborhoods shaped by informal adaptation and civic life. The city's skyline and vast transportation network embody a top-down model of modernization and economic development, while the organic evolution of its neighborhoods, characterized by dense residential areas, vibrant shopping streets, and intimate community networks, exemplifies a bottom-up, citizen-driven spatial and social structure. This duality is particularly evident in recent urban planning and design and has become a defining principle in Tokyo's ongoing urban transformation and regeneration process. It reflects a broader tension between state-led, corporate-driven interventions encouraged by deregulation policies, and locally-based participatory practices led by residents themselves.

Japan generally, and Tokyo in particular, faces the combined pressures of economic stagnation, infrastructural decline, and a super-aging population (Hein & Pelletier, 2009). This article examines how the contemporary generation of urban planners and designers is addressing these challenges. Through a critical analysis of recent cases of urban interventions at various scales, it explores how current urban regeneration strategies seek to balance the goals of economic revitalization with preservation of local identity and promotion of inclusive and adaptive public spaces. These interventions are further contextualized within a broader historical narrative of urban policy in Japan's post-bubble era, with particular attention to the changing regulatory framework and the role of grassroots movements such as "machizukuri" in reshaping urban regeneration discourse and practice.

2. Historical Background

The first post-war initiatives were the Special City Planning Law (1946), the Capital Construction Law (1950), and the National Capital Region Development Act (1956), which aimed to expand and modernize Tokyo (Hein et al., 2003). The intent was to prioritize the re-industrialization of the nation and the economic resurgence of Japan, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was involved early with the development and revision of plans for road widening and provision of green spaces (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Urban Development, n.d.).

One of the most significant consequences of the rapid economic growth during these decades was accelerated urbanization and concentration of the population in metropolitan regions along the east coast (Sorensen, 2005), with the lack of strong zoning regulations from the late 1960s resulting in a large variety of mixed-use and highly fragmented urban spaces. However, the industrial and infrastructural developments underpinning economic growth caused serious water and air pollution (Broadbent, 2010). This created tension in terms of the overall quality of city spaces, with residential areas impacted by the polluting effects of adjacent industrial factories. Nevertheless, the extreme planning flexibility assured the formation of hybrid high-density urban precincts highly interconnected by extensive mass transit networks, whilst also favoring preservation of a number of urban residential areas rich in local economic activities and with their own identity and cultural vitality (Imai, 2018; Sorensen & Okata, 2013; Sorensen et al., 2010).

The 1970s saw an emergence and strengthening of civil society, with movements such as *machizukuri* (or city making/community building) mobilizing communities in response to environmental degradation and problematic urban transformation (Sorensen & Funck, 2009). This was built on a unique and longstanding tradition of local self-management embodied in the *chōnaikai* (neighborhood associations), semi-formal governance structures that mediate between municipal authorities and citizens (Brumann & Schulz, 2015). In addition to keeping their streets safe and clean, the *chōnaikai* provides a framework for social life by organizing various cultural events for the local community. The *machizukuri* phenomenon can be understood as an extension of these practices, translating this form of traditional semi-autonomous control of the social and physical space into contemporary efforts to foster a sense of community while exerting an influence on the livability and improvement of the shared spaces (Sorensen, 2005).

Underlying these participatory practices is a broader cultural acceptance of impermanence and negotiated use of space, allowing Tokyo's urban neighborhoods to adapt incrementally over time. In contrast, state-led city planning strategies such as the 1969 Urban Redevelopment Act initially prioritized efficiency, rapid modernization, and economic development (Sorensen, 2005), promoting large-scale infrastructure and industrial complexes at the expense of green spaces and other public amenities such as parks, playgrounds, broader streets, and other walkable areas. Many interventions during this period encouraged large-scale demolition and reconstruction of the urban fabric, supporting growth at the cost of local character, ecological considerations, and community engagement.

This attitude towards urban development continued throughout the second half of the 20th century and was the driving force behind Tokyo's transformation into a global city (Sassen, 1991). In the 1990s, the collapse of the economic bubble exposed systemic vulnerabilities in the prevailing economic and social policies and urban planning strategies. The following period of economic stagnation, with rising commercial vacancy rates and an aging population, coupled with a falling birth rate, raised concerns about the sustainability of the existing urban model. Unable to find a financial solution to the accumulating issues, the government's response was marked by a policy shift with the enactment in 2002 of the Law on Special Measures for Urban Renaissance (Sorensen, 2005), aiming to promote regeneration of inner-city areas through the liberalization of building standards. The Law focused on raising floor-area ratios, simplifying zoning regulations, and introducing tax incentives to attract private investment. Land was repositioned not only as a spatial and social resource but as a key capital asset in the broader strategy of economic recovery characterized by neoliberalism.

The deregulation framework of this period allowed for the construction of large-scale, capital-intensive projects, while at the same time encouraged strong citizen responses and alternative urban planning approaches. Grassroots movements historically deeply rooted in community-led resistance to environmental degradation and worsening local living conditions re-emerged and once again regained their significance in opposition to top-down redevelopment and large corporate interests (Sato, 2021). These movements presented a counter-narrative to the state's technocratic and market-driven approach, emphasizing incremental change, resident participation, and preservation of local character. This dynamic and contradictory development led to the formation of a fragmented and multi-layered urban landscape in Tokyo (Rowe & Koetter, 1979), where multiple modes of regeneration coexist today. This article argues that the future of the city is shaped by such continuous negotiations. The central concern is, therefore, not only how Japan's capital will be rebuilt in the future, but how values such as sustainability, community, and livability are conceptualized and realized in response to contemporary realities (Sorensen, 2001, 2005).

3. Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

Urban redevelopment emerged in response to socio-economic and infrastructure issues faced by major cities in Europe and North America around the second half of the 20th century (Sorensen, 2005; Tallon, 2013). For most of the 20th century, the built environment of Japanese cities was the result of an industrial development and economic growth agenda set by the central government, and as such, city planning was primarily conceived as a tool for the modernization of the country as a function of its economic development (Hanes, 2002; Pernice, 2006). It was only in 1963 that the first course of urban design commenced in the newly established Department of Urban Engineering at Tokyo University under the direction of architect Kenzo Tange. At the time, most of the cities in Japan were designed and built with little or no consideration for the quality of public spaces and the fundamental needs of their residents, resulting in dense, anonymous, and often alienating and polluted urban environments (Bettinotti, 1997).

Among the factors that fostered the diffusion of extensive and large-scale mega urban development projects and strong urbanization at the end of the 20th century was a definitive push towards a progressive decentralization of activities and workers following a strategy of polycentric reorganization outside and within central wards of Tokyo, supported by the central government. The goal was to provide additional urban infrastructures and activate the economies and delocalize important functions in new sub-centers and satellite cities to boost Tokyo as a global city and further interconnect and empower Japan as a fundamental financial and economic hub within the international urban network (Pernice, 2025; Sorensen, 2001). In the context of the post-economic downturn and stagflation in the 1990s, most of these projects did not age well and became obsolete and unproductive urban compounds, thereby creating spaces suitable for future renewal initiatives.

The discourse on the city and on what it means to design it, within it, or at times against it has long been, and continues to be, one of the central themes of engagement for contemporary Japanese architects. Recent urban regeneration projects in the city have involved a range of actors, including architects, developers, local governments, and community groups, and present diverse priorities and frameworks in shaping urban space (Karan & Stapleton, 1997). Despite the diversity of actors, many initiatives resonate with common theoretical currents drawn from architectural thought, critical urbanism, and place-based planning practices. Several influential architects and theorists of architecture and urbanism have contributed to the intellectual field and shaped its contemporary practices (Shelton, 2012). One of the key figures was Yoshinobu Ashihara, who, in the late 1980s, emphasized the cultural and spatial significance of street networks in Japanese cities and advocated for an understanding of the places through which streets pass as a guide for contemporary urban design (Ashihara, 1989). He suggested that the Japanese city naturally expresses the distinctive vitality of Japanese life, and argued that linear infrastructure must become more than a mere function for traffic but should also engage with the memories, identities, and daily routines of the communities through which they pass, while criticizing the very little thought given to aesthetic concerns of the built environment by his contemporaries.

Among other critical voices engaging with urban development and the legacy of modernist planning in Japan was Arata Isozaki, who warned against forcing the existing urban fabric into abstract, top-down planning logic, and whose later work and ideas articulate a persistent suspicion toward the rigidity of totalizing urban design methodologies by a single designer/planner (Daniell, 2008). Although Isozaki was associated with the

metabolist movement early in his career, his stance toward its legacy has long been somewhat complicated, if not outright oppositional, particularly as his later works revisit the movement's principles while also introducing a hybridized and decentralized logic. Isozaki's skepticism towards radical modernization foresaw the contemporary trend of seeking regenerative models that integrate into the past rather than replace it.

When the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, Japanese urbanism turned toward the scale of everyday life and discussions surrounding the social production of space. Influential figures such as Hidenobu Jinnai, in *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* (1995), and Atelier Bow-wow, through the *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (2002), produced in collaboration with the Tokyo Institute of Technology Tsukamoto Architectural Laboratory, emphasized the informal, adaptive, and relational qualities of Tokyo's urban spaces. Their work has instigated a now widespread interest in how the city's spatial fabric is continuously redefined through common daily practices and temporary appropriations, offering a cultural counterpoint to the top-down urban redevelopments of the previous decades and situating contemporary efforts as an accumulation of tailored interventions rather than an imposition of form.

A more recent contribution to the evolving discourse of urban regeneration in Japan can be found in the work of Ohno (2017), who has responded to the issues of decentralization, aging, shrinking population, and spatial transformations of contemporary Japanese cities with his fiber city model, a conceptual shift in planning strategy through which he argues for a reorientation away from growth-oriented development to adaptive editing associated with organic weaving rather than machine-like urban structures. Ohno articulates his critique of highly centralized and constrained logics of the compact city model by offering a flexible and resilient alternative with infrastructural and ecological networks as interlacing threads that both sustain and reorganize shrinking territories of the city, embracing a regenerative urban strategy fitted to the fragmented conditions of the Japanese city fabric. Similar ideas appear in Jonas and Rahmann's (2014) *Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence*, which recognizes urban voids not as remnants of planning failures but as culturally significant and spatially productive elements of the Japanese capital. The authors argued that void spaces, shaped by Tokyo's embrace of impermanence and ambiguity, hold on to the potential for nuanced interventions that align with the logic of urban vernacular change.

Some of these ideas resonate with recent global shifts in urban theory, particularly the growing influence of acupuncture urbanism and creative placemaking, which refer to targeted, small-scale interventions that prompt broader spatial and social transformations while emphasizing inclusive, community-driven improvements to public space and promoting the social sustainability and livability of everyday environments (Courage & McKeown, 2020; Lerner, 2016). The theoretical positions mentioned here represent only a few among the multitude of contemporary ideas that form the conceptual basis for interpreting Tokyo's ongoing regeneration efforts. The city's evolving urban strategies, including architectural experimentation, participatory design, and a rethinking of infrastructure, reflect a growing understanding that regeneration must involve more than just an economic uplift, but should also address spatial heritage, ecosystems, and social fabric that ultimately give Tokyo its renown complex identity (Golany et al., 1998; Popham, 1985).

4. Case Studies of Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

To illustrate the contemporary approaches to urban regeneration in Tokyo, this article analyzes three recent projects, each representing a different scale of intervention: micro, meso, and macro, but all aiming to redefine and enhance the built environment in terms of the provision of extended green areas, publicly accessible spaces and services, and more sustainable and livable urban scenes. Together, they represent how diverse actors and strategies operate across varying urban conditions while responding to the challenges brought up by the regeneration of large portions of the city.

The micro-scale example, Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya Ward, which has about 244,000 residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), highlights grassroots, design-driven approaches rooted in the principles of machizukuri and acupuncture urbanism with the intent to activate larger urban precincts with more effective cost-benefit urban initiatives. The meso-scale project, Shimokita Senrogai in Setagaya Ward, with a population close to 940,000 (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), is situated in Shimokitazawa, a district of about 18,500 residents (Data Commons, n.d.), and reflects a hybrid governance and community collaboration highly shaped by local participatory initiatives. The macro-scale project, Azabudai Hills in Minato Ward, home to approximately 267,000 residents (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023), exemplifies a typical form of government-supported large-scale urban redevelopment with significant private sector involvement as a flagship of their mutual global ambitions. By holistically examining these projects, the article aims to discuss and highlight the multifaceted and broad variety of approaches, ideas, and practices currently underpinning the urban redevelopment and city regeneration process in Tokyo, while also being present in other cities of Japan.

4.1. Tokyo Toilet Project (Micro-Scale in Shibuya Ward)

The Tokyo Toilet Project transforms a typically prosaic public amenity into a platform for urban and architectural experimentation and social dignity. With its starting point in the collaboration between the Nippon Foundation and Shibuya Ward Office following the signing of a five-year Comprehensive Collaborative Agreement on Social Innovation in 2017 and the establishment of Shibuya Ward's Policy for Toilet Environment Improvement in 2018 (Okano, 2023), this project brought together some of Japan's leading architects to redesign 17 public toilets in the heart of Shibuya (the Tokyo Toilet) and provide public amenities for visitors to the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics in 2020 (Okano, 2023). The project was initiated by entrepreneur Koji Yanai, the son of the Uniqlo founder Tadashi Yanai and a senior executive in one of its parent companies. The Tokyo Toilet Project reached worldwide attention following the success of the award-winning movie *Perfect Days*, directed by Wim Wenders in 2023. The project was completed in stages from August 2020 (Higashi Sanchome and Jingu-Dori Park) to the final opening (Nishisando) in March 2023 (The Nippon Foundation, n.d.). It explored accessibility, safety, and identity, with design concepts and construction assigned to renowned Japanese and international architects and designers, each invited to redefine the common perception of public toilets in Shibuya as part of a broader attempt to contribute to local civic improvement.

Pritzker Prize winner Shigeru Ban's glass-walled multi-purpose toilet at Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park is a good example of the balance between innovation and social messaging (Figure 1a). Focusing on two key aspects of toilet use, the project emphasizes the importance of cleanliness and privacy. The architect has opted for

the use of innovative technology, employing glass walls which are transparent when unlocked to allow the cleanliness to be checked, which then turn opaque when locked for privacy during use. The colorful glazed surfaces of the building are bright and vibrantly lit at nighttime, thus acting as a distinctive signal along the streets and the border of the minipark where it sits, and fostering both curiosity and a sense of security.

Toyo Ito, another Pritzker Prize winner and influential international architect, has installed a series of toilets resembling a group of three mushrooms as natural organic forms on the edge of Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine park (Figure 1b). The design derives mainly from pragmatic and fundamental considerations, allowing maximum visibility and a good visual connection with the surroundings, and in doing so, aims to create a comfortable and safe environment that deters crime, especially at night. The theme of accessibility and inclusiveness is also part of the design concept. In this case, the architect considered the provision of generous space within and around the structures to allow disabled people, parents with children, and the elderly to access them with ease.



Figure 1. Examples of public restrooms redesigned for the Tokyo Toilet Project between 2018–2022: (a) Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park, designed by Shigeru Ban and (b) Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine, designed by Toyo Ito. Source: Photographs by the authors (2024).

The project draws on themes of livability, accessibility, and the value of branding and design as an effective means to enhance the usability of the public domain. The essence of the Tokyo Toilet project is the concept of small human-scale design that promotes social inclusion and general accessibility, integrated with innovative and modern design ideas aiming to reactivate neglected parts of the neighborhood and restore their dignity and social value as important urban spaces. The small insertions work essentially as catalysts for the regeneration of space and support greater interconnectivity between residents. In addition, they function to re-activate small parks and sites on the urban edges of the big city and promote and facilitate the use and exploration of nearby areas (Figure 2). In summary, the toilets help the wider community reappropriate public spaces that are typically considered unpleasant, and as such, are not regarded as attractive or exemplary of good architecture, despite their relevant social function for public well-being.

Considered more broadly, the toilets are also examples of micro-urbanism and “acupuncture” strategic planning (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). The project is based on the logic of acupuncture urbanism, where targeted, symbolic interventions have ripple effects that reshape the perception of the city. The physical scale of interventions is limited, but they address deeper issues of citizen trust, inclusivity, and sensory experience in public infrastructure. Well-designed spaces and innovative architectural forms contribute to creating a more

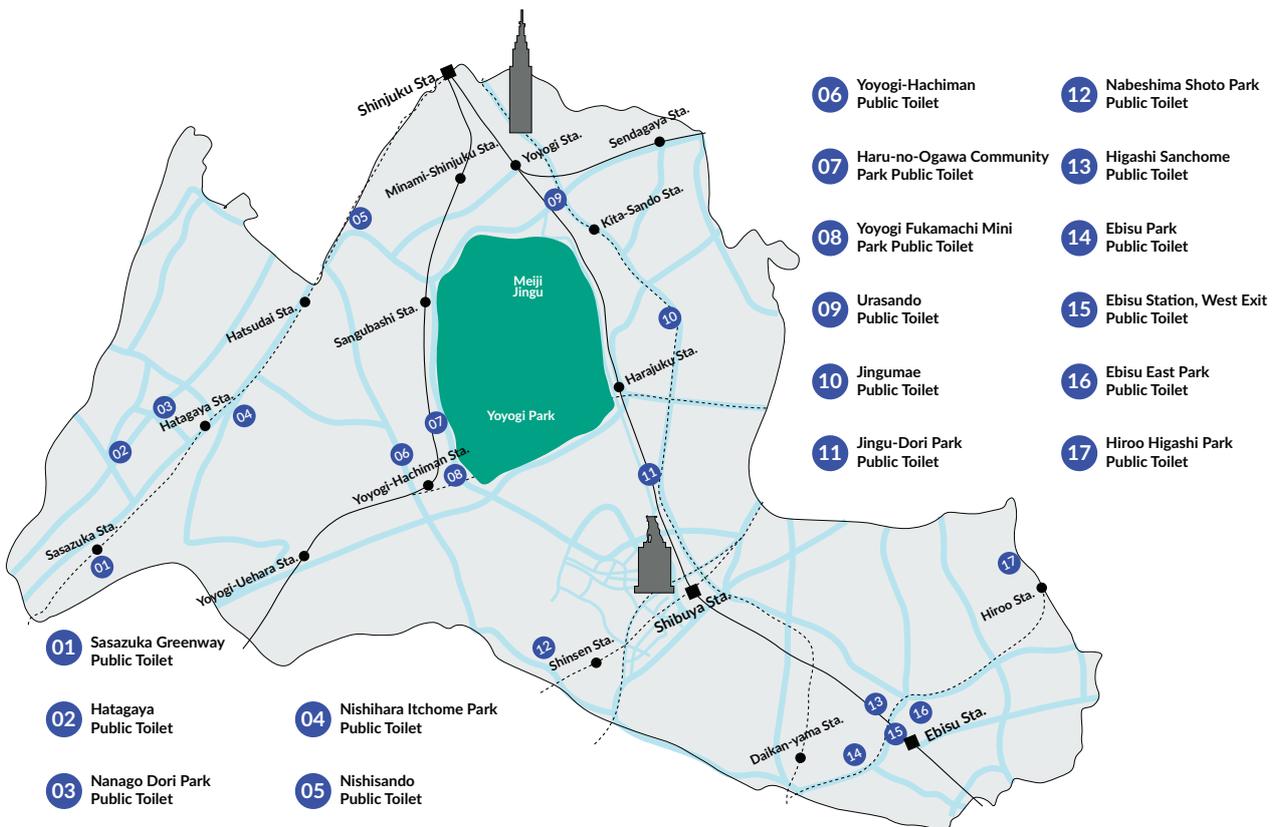


Figure 2. Map of the Tokyo Toilet Project in Shibuya Ward. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

cohesive and healthier society by improving the quality of the built environment, thus supporting a more relaxed and active urban life. The various public toilet designs do not simply improve hygiene but also play a cultural role in rebranding public amenities as safe and attractive urban elements. The project offers a counterpoint to the highly commercialized megaproject narrative by showing how small interventions can improve urban livability through atmosphere and care.

Overall, in turning small urban spots into tourist attractions and tools for social cohesion, this is also an example of successful cultural and mediatic operation built on an effective and solid marketing strategy. However, its main merit is as an exemplary approach to the regeneration and reactivation of obsolete and neglected urban spaces, where the diversity and originality of architectural design have succeeded in drawing worldwide attention to the small but cost-effective micro-urban regeneration interventions.

4.2. Shimokitazawa Project (Meso-Scale in Setagaya Ward)

The Shimokitazawa district, located in Setagaya Ward, with its dense network of small alleyways, independent fashion and vintage clothing stores, cafes, theaters, bars, and live music venues, has long been well known among Tokyo's residents, especially among young people. The eclectic and inclusive character of this neighborhood is rooted in its history. Remarkably spared from the US air raids during World War II, its urban fabric was preserved, and limited car access has supported a walkable, intimate, and human-scale environment. This distinctive identity draws people from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles, making Shimokitazawa a place that resists homogeneity (Hattori et al., 2015).

Recent regeneration redevelopments in Shimokitazawa present many aspects which characterize the collaborative process known as *machizukuri*, which is based on shared goals, vision, and intentions of the various stakeholders, and whose outcome reflects the respective roles of residents, businesspersons, landowners, and the local administration. One important role of administrators is their direct involvement with experts and specialists (NGOs, architects, and planners) who operate as consultants, advising residents and other stakeholders. The result of this concerted and collective effort to transform urban space into an improved living environment is then discussed in public workshops and presented to the residents as small projects (Nakajima & Murayama, 2024; Satoh, 2019).

The Shimokita Senrogai project (in English, Shimokita Railroad Street) began in 2003, when the Setagaya City Council initiated an ambitious redevelopment plan that included relocating the Odakyu Line railway tracks underground between Higashikitazawa and Setagaya-Daita Stations and modernizing the resulting freed 1.7-kilometer-long strip of land with several larger buildings. In 2013, after a decade of construction, the relocation of the tracks and modernization of the associated stations were complete. However, plans for larger commercial redevelopment on the vacant land triggered local opposition. Stakeholders concerned about the threat to Shimokitazawa's organic urban fabric assembled in large groups calling for the preservation of the neighborhood's distinctive character. In response, in October 2016, Setagaya Ward initiated discussions to involve residents and other actors in the development of a new plan that would better reflect the needs of the community. Shortly after the first meeting, the Shimokita Midori Bukai (in English, Shimokita Greenery Committee) put forward a proposal to expand existing open green areas and introduce communal spaces, which the district lacked.

By 2018, the Setagaya Ward was planning to turn a 120-meter-long site around the former Shimokitazawa station into a large bicycle parking facility at ground level, with an elevated pedestrian deck above. However, due to the proximity of nearby houses, whose residents would be negatively affected, the Greenery Committee submitted a counterproposal for a more modest open public space where people could gather, interact, and engage with nature (Shimokita Midori Bukai, 2018). The negotiations that followed illustrate a rare instance of constructive tension within Japanese urban governance. Rather than expressing total opposition to the project, the Greenery Committee became a legitimate mediator for alternative solutions desired by the neighborhood. The resulting compromise involved constructing the new facility on a reduced scale while integrating generously planted communal areas. This balancing of interests can be understood as a form of hybrid governance, where civic initiative is not simply positioned against official authority but is rather facilitated and legitimized by it, an approach that stems from Japan's long tradition of *chōnaikai* and semi-autonomous neighborhood associations.

A significant role in this dialogue was played by the landscape design office FOLK, brought in by Odakyu Electric Railway, which handled the redevelopment and advocated for a participatory design approach and the involvement of local voices. From discussions between residents, Odakyu Electric, and Setagaya Ward, a new proposal emerged that would transform the site into a public landscape, while preserving Shimokitazawa's human scale and spontaneous character (Almazán & Studiolab, 2022). In September 2019, a portion of the site officially opened as Shimokita Senrogai Akichi (in English, Shimokita Railroad Street. Vacant Lot; FOLK, n.d.). The space was designed as an experimental public space to be collaboratively managed by Odakyu Electric and the residents and intentionally left open-ended to allow the community to define and redefine its use based on evolving needs (Hou, 2010). Activities such as markets, workshops, and gardening events quickly

followed (PR Times, 2019). The goal of Vacant Lot was to bring local inhabitants together to explore the site's history and the potential for its further transformation. This was met with huge enthusiasm, and not long afterwards, the grassroots organization Shimokita Engeibu (in English, Shimokita Gardening Club) was born. Initially focused on maintaining greenery on the site, the Gardening Club expanded its activities to include sustainability education for urban residents of various ages and occupations, promoting ecological awareness and a lifestyle of "living with plants naturally, effortlessly, and enjoyably every day" (Shimokita Engeibu, n.d.).

At the same time, redevelopment along other sections of the former railway track was gradually progressing. From 2020 onward, several new cafes and commercial spaces opened. Bonus Track, a new shopping street comprising small-scale commercial facilities (Figure 3; Tsubame Architects, n.d.-a), is one of the larger developments on the strip, while perhaps the most emblematic space in the entire area is the small meadow locally known as Shimokita Nohara Hiroba (in English, Shimokita Grass Square; Figure 4), both designed by Tsubame Architects. Tsubame Architects also designed Shimokita-Engeibu Koya Nohara, an operations base in the form of a hut for the activities of the Gardening Club, where citizens can gather as well as store their tools (Tsubame Architects, n.d.-b), a form of qualitative urban design discussed by Schropfer (2012). Located just a few minutes from the southwest exit of Shimokitazawa Station, this public space, now under the long-term stewardship of the Gardening Club, emerges unexpectedly from the dense urban fabric of the city (Figure 5; Sand, 2013).



Figure 3. View from within the northern part of the Bonus Track development by Tsubame Architects, featuring a multitude of small cafés, restaurants, and a book and beer store. Source: Photograph by the authors (2025).

While the principles of participatory design have found an accepted position within contemporary urban practices, the case of Shimokitazawa invites more nuanced questions, namely, who actually participates as main actors and to what extent; and whether participatory design is led by outside consulting experts (planners and architects) as a symbolic gesture or is driven by a genuine concern for public agency.



Figure 4. View from the rooftop of the Gardening Club Hut, overlooking Nohara Hiroba and the southwest entrance of Shimokitazawa Station. Source: Photograph by the authors (2025).



Figure 5. Section of the Shimokita Senrogai project transformation in Setagaya Ward. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

The defining aspect of the Shimokita Senrogai project was the process of dialogue among multiple stakeholders rather than a prescribed outcome, and so can be viewed as an approach in the true spirit of the machizukuri legacy. A critical condition was that the architects and planners relied on collective responsibility and social contract, actively participating in the life of the district (Tsubame Architects is located in Shimokitazawa).

Over recent years, Shimokita Nohara Hiroba has become a central venue for community activities and may be regarded as a physical manifestation of local, self-organized engagement. It exemplifies how collaborative placemaking can thrive even within the constraints of a traditional, centralized, and efficiency-driven urban model (Hirayama, 2017). At the same time, the public authorities of Setagaya Ward and Odakyu Electric Railway demonstrated a willingness to respond to public opinion and adjust their plans accordingly. In a culture that is commonly characterized by bureaucratic rigidity and control, the administration's receptivity to shared decision-making was a critical condition for the successful realization of this project. In this sense, it may confidently be said that Shimokita Senrogai, and especially its Nohara Hiroba, possesses the lived and unselfconscious insideness that Edward Relph described as qualities of a truly authentic sense of place (Relph, 1976). This case also demonstrates that there is no singular formula for achieving sustainable social urban regeneration. However, Shimokita Senrogai suggests that meaningful outcomes can, and often do, emerge from open-mindedness, continuous dialogue, mutual trust, and hybrid forms of governance, where public institutions, private actors, and local communities shape the evolving urban landscape together.

4.3. Azabudai Hills (Macro-Scale in Minato Ward)

Close to the iconic Tokyo Tower, the Azabudai Hills Project in Minato-ku (Minato Ward) is a large-scale, macro-urban redevelopment proposed and built by the Mori Building Company. One of the most ambitious projects in Tokyo in recent history, it was officially completed and opened to the public in September 2023. Its origins trace back to the establishment of the Council of Redeveloping Cities in 1989, followed by the creation of the Toranomon-Azabudai District Urban Redevelopment Committee in 1993. The project gained momentum in 2014 with the expansion of the redevelopment area and, later the same year, its designation as a National Strategic Special Zone, culminating in the approval of the city plan in 2017, the formation of the Urban Redevelopment Association in 2018, and the start of construction in August 2019 (Mori Building, 2023).

Azabudai Hills covers an area of 861,700 square meters and, with a cost of 640 billion yen, is now the largest urban development project ever undertaken by Mori Building. In attempting to replace old urban blocks dating back to the post-war economic miracle, in many senses, this project is reminiscent and representative of the several large-scale urban redevelopment projects that have dotted Tokyo skyline since the late 1980s aiming to provide more office space and new leisure and commercial areas, and, in this way, promote consumption and advance the global role and international ambitions of the city (Kikuchi & Sugai, 2019). This practice was disseminated by mega-corporations during the frantic stage of strong economic expansion of the 1980s (known as the "bubble economy" era) and continued to be actively supported by the central government, especially during the following acute phase of economic decline in the following decade. Efforts to reverse the economic stagnation of the 1990s and early 2000s and rejuvenate derelict urban districts and their economic activities resulted in the residential occupation and urban densification of several prime locations in centrally located urban districts of Tokyo (e.g., Shinjuku, Shibuya, Shinagawa, Roppongi, among others). These activities "regenerated" vast high-rise mixed office and entertainment areas with the consequent relocation of existing local activities and residents.

What sets Azabudai Hills apart is a strong emphasis on livability and sustainability in the design of newly built elements and regenerated urban neighborhoods, and provision of heavily landscaped settings with accessible public plazas (Figure 6), green and walkable areas, and a variety of mixed and integrated urban



Figure 6. View of the central square at the Azabudai Hills Project. Source: Photograph by the authors (2023).

functions (Figure 7). These provide Tokyo and its citizens with world-class international amenities and services, and enhance the Japanese capital's international reputation and competitiveness whilst embracing the new sustainability ideas and green architecture principles. The master plan of the project is generated around the idea of a central public park surrounded by the profile of a primarily office tower and two mixed-use high-rise towers containing residential units integrated with office, retail, and hotel spaces. These are densely compacted into the vertical volumetrics (Figure 8), freeing much-needed ground space to recreate the sense of a “vertical garden city.”

Central plaza is a square designed as the green core of the project, conceived as the natural focus for the organization and orientation of the buildings, with retail spaces at ground level. Within walking distance, global institutions offering cutting-edge international research and education, such as the new Keio University Center for Preventive Medicine and the British School in Tokyo, function as drivers and catalysts. Built of glass and steel and with shining external surfaces, the Azabudai Hills Mori JP Tower is mainly destined to host offices and, with its 330-meter height, is currently supposed to be the tallest building in Japan (only to be surpassed by the taller Torch Tower in 2027), creating a distinctive, imposing landmark for the new urban district. This, as with many other megaprojects typical for Tokyo, is fully interconnected and integrated with the extensive mass transit system network by means of two underground stations (Roppongi-itcho Station on the Namboku Line and Kamiyacho Station on the Hibiya Line).



Figure 7. Pedestrian spaces (a) and vehicular paths (b) surrounding the mixed-use urban complex designed by Heatherwick Studio. Source: Photographs by the authors (2023).

Azabudai Hills

Cross-section plan

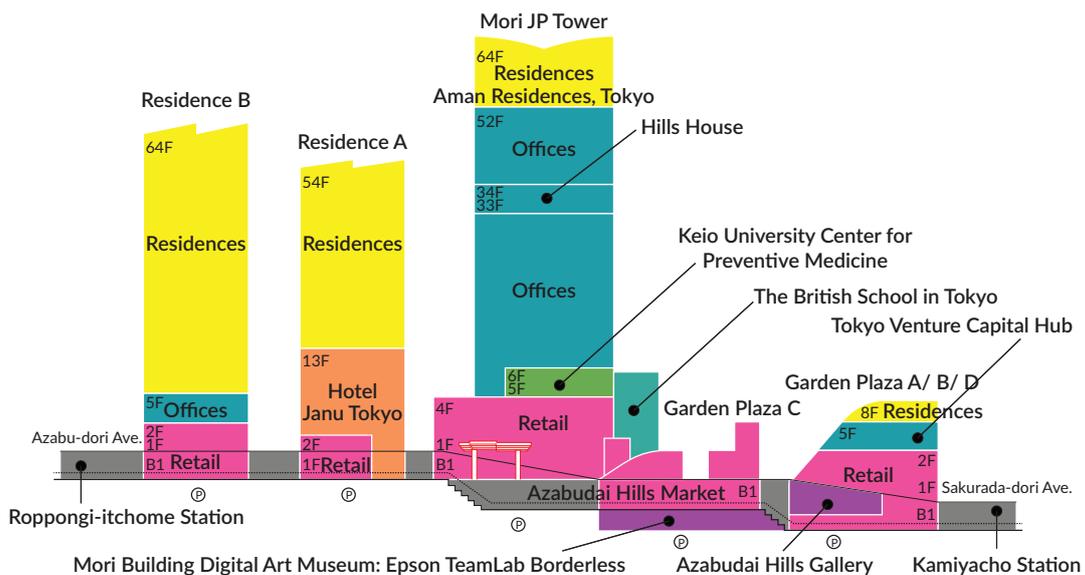


Figure 8. Cross-section of the Azabudai Hills Project. Note: Redrawn by the authors.

As indicated in the visionary approach proposed by developer Mori Building Co., the new urban redevelopment project aims to create a community full of vitality and promote a culture of physical and mental well-being by expanding the provision of green spaces and integrating urban scenes into nature, with its emphasis on “green and wellness” (Business Wire, 2023; Mori Building, 2023, 2025). When fully occupied, the redevelopment is projected to accommodate 20,000 office workers and 3,500 residents, and attract approximately 30 million visitors per year.

Designed in collaboration with renowned architectural groups Pelli Clarke & Partners and Heatherwick Studio, Azabudai Hills was always envisioned as a mixed-use “city-within-a-city.” It is positioned as Tokyo’s Modern

Urban Village, an example of Japan's deregulations in its prime (Hayakawa & Hirayama, 1991; Hebbert & Nakai, 1988), and includes office towers, luxury residences, first-class cultural and educational facilities, and extensive green public spaces. The mixed-use architecture proposed by Heatherwick Studio is perhaps the most distinctive element of the project, with green roofs supported by massive structural beams mimicking a series of three-dimensional artificial hills with glazed facades. Both buildings and the spaces surrounding them are inspired by the designers' vision of "making a human district in a global city" (ArchDaily, 2023) and creating a horizontal volumetric matrix which integrates with the green areas of the various plazas nearby, formally complementing the verticality of the office and residential towers.

Walkable pedestrian paths and large open spaces for gathering and strolling in the green are conceived as an oasis with a human dimension in the core of Tokyo, and these open green spaces have quickly become a focal point in the dense and compact urban setting. Whilst the provision of green spaces, high-quality services, and retail is an unquestionable advantage for the various users and consumers who are attracted to the Azabudai Hills, there is a sense of elitism lingering behind the overall marketing of this luxury complex, as is expected of a commercial megaproject that calls for appropriate returns.

While the scale reflects a traditional top-down model, the development integrates elements of social sustainability through green spaces, public art, and amenities meant to serve both residents and the wider urban community. Unlike the grassroots or incremental approaches of the previous two case studies, Azabudai Hills exemplifies the role of private-sector urbanism. Particularly relevant is that it took 35 years of careful planning and consistent and painstaking continuous dialogues with around 300 individual landlords to convince them to agree to the project, demonstrating a considerate approach to urban renewal consistent with the scope to gain support and work with the favor of residents. Also noteworthy is the attempt to incorporate wellness, environmental sustainability, and urban vibrancy, which reveals private sector adaptation to newer global urban trends. The project aims to derive 100% of its electric power from renewable resources and compete for recognition and certification in the leadership in energy and environmental design neighborhood development category for mixed-use development ("Azabudai Hills, Tokyo's," 2024). The project's authenticity, inclusiveness, and official claims must be considered in relation to its expensive apartments and high-end commerce.

5. Conclusion

As the country with the highest number of Pritzker awards in the world, and with a long tradition of building and architectural innovation, Japan remains at the forefront of technological invention and change when it comes to transforming the built environment. This is especially true for the Tokyo metropolis, which continues to serve as an international hub that plays a prominent role in the global economy. As such, there is continuous demand for new urban spaces that respond to the demands of a complex, sophisticated, and wealthy society.

The intermingling of colossal infrastructure, administrative headquarters, industrial facilities, and service sectors aimed at sustaining the highest concentration of people and activities in the country has earned the city a solid reputation as a "planning laboratory," as well as a design and innovation core, both in Japan and globally, for its efficiency in promoting economic growth whilst dealing with various urban issues and challenges for its residents. These include transportation, housing affordability, energy efficiency and sustainable development, urban and spatial design, and urban resilience. Efforts to combine the design of

high-quality urban spaces and upgrade the provision of green, functional, and livable areas for residents are evident in this series of urban projects, which range from large-scale mega-projects through meso-scale collective and neighborhood interventions to micro-scale ad-hoc redesigns of small urban spots that function as catalysts for wider urban improvement.

This article has analyzed three significant and recent examples of multi-scalar urban redevelopment projects in Tokyo, which have applied concepts borrowed from new urbanism design approaches to more circumscribed acupuncture strategies. Despite their difference in scale and variety of delivery processes, the analyzed projects aim to strengthen bonds with the local contexts and surrounding spaces, and activate relationships among people, services, and nature, within the overarching goal of upgrading important urban infrastructure and enhancing its relationships with the city.

The Tokyo Toilet Project was initiated by a single organizer and supported by Shibuya Ward, primarily aiming to enhance tourism and address broader social concerns relevant to both residents and visitors, such as wheelchair accessibility and user safety. A regenerative micro-urban intervention and an exemplary urban acupuncture project operating at the local level as a community and civic catalyst, the project's elements are spread out, small-scale creative works designed to gently transform and elevate the cityscape. It also serves as a curated showcase or catalogue of celebrated Japanese star-architects blended with the overarching intent to promote creative art as the medium for broader social awareness and cultural transformation.

In contrast, the Azabudai Hills development is a long-term, large-scale, corporate-led initiative that began with the gradual buyout of residents over several decades. Fundamentally, a mega-development driven by commercial interests and big corporations' ambitions backed by the state, it has partially succeeded in realizing successful public space design while offering walkable and open areas within a compact urban core. These public spaces are closely tied to luxury retail; however, without this kind of commercial and entertainment facilities, the area would likely be much less appealing on the international stage. Strongly supported by the central government, this project aligns best with national ambitions for economic revitalization, increased tourism, and projection of a new urban image associated with luxury and contemporary global aesthetics, as well as committing to the current urban agenda of sustainable urban development with its extensive reliance on renewable energy and environmentally friendly technologies. As with the Tokyo Toilet Project, this overall top-down urban redevelopment invited internationally renowned architects to produce examples of urban acupuncture that would repurpose and reactivate idle urban spaces and became a type of cultural promotion that boosted both the attention and involvement of grassroots and elite representatives alike.

In this context, the Shimokita Senrogai Project offers a particularly distinctive and compelling case as it negotiates between multiple scales and involves a unique mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes with direct participation of user representatives. While initially a corporate-led project supported by Setagaya Ward and led by Odakyu Electric Railway, the early and active engagement of residents (Tokyo Shimbun, 2022) and descriptions provided by active members of the gardening club (Shimokita Gardening Club) significantly influenced its direction and outcomes, which are still in the process of gradual transformation. It can therefore be argued that the community successfully managed to have their voices and perspectives heard, while both the Ward administration and the railway company proved receptive to the community's opinion, becoming enthusiastic partners within an inclusive participatory design process. The results are significant, encompassing multi-scalar interventions ranging from the undergrounding of the

railway tracks and modernization of train stations to the development of new commercial facilities, but also for the stakeholders' conscious decision to give a green light to public, non-commercialized open space rather than accept the more typical approach of maximizing real estate value through high-rise residences or shopping centers. This has given the community an opportunity to maintain its pace of life, preserve and create new connections to place and nature, and reinforce its local identity.

Shimokita's multi-level interventions from large-scale urban and landscape planning to architectural design and micro-scale, resident-led activities such as gardening and organizing workshops, present a rare and inspiring model of urban regeneration that mediates between various interests, municipal planning, and grassroots civic engagement. The attention to people's activities in public space and the relevance of daily social experience can be associated with a specific form of urbanization, as articulated through the six "force fields" identified and defined by urbanist Fraker (2007), particularly with the concept of "everyday urbanism." In everyday urbanism, the focus is on spaces where people explore the spheres of daily existence as a crucial arena of modern culture, seeing the city as a social product. This contrasts with the Azabudai Hills project, which is more akin to an expression of "hyper-modernity/hybrid urbanism," where the dualities of new/old are blurred and superimposed according to the logic of hybridization expressed in the formula of "not only, but also." In this context, a new social and formal identity is created and mediated through the enormous and persuasive power of corporate global capitalism and mass consumption, expressed by the pervasive commercialization of architecture and its visual representations.

Overall, this compilation of case studies exemplifies recent diversified trends in Japan for a multi-scalar approach to urban renewal in order to address the problems of urban regeneration and revitalization of central and more marginal parts of the city. This approach facilitates enhancement of urban infrastructure and supply of high-quality shared urban spaces which can enhance the well-being of residents, and work as a driver of continued city development through the provision of more green spaces, much needed updated walkable areas and collective services, whilst also upgrading the built environment through the broad use of renewable energy and implementation of more sustainable forms of urbanization.

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Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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About the Authors



Eduard Hauska is a Swedish architect and doctoral candidate at the Department of Architecture and Building Engineering, Institute of Science Tokyo (formerly Tokyo Institute of Technology). His research concerns the role of architects' discourse and criticism in contemporary architectural culture. He holds a Master's degree in architecture and building engineering from Tokyo Institute of Technology.



Raffaele Pernice is an Italian Australian architect and senior lecturer in architecture and urbanism at UNSW Sydney. His research focuses mainly on the architecture and urbanism in Japan and the Asia-Pacific region, exploring in particular the nexus between urban regeneration practice and experimental architecture design. He holds a PhD from Waseda University, Tokyo, and a Master's degree in architecture from IUAV University of Venice, Italy.

Transforming a Central Tokyo Park Into a Cutting-Edge Commercial Complex: Miyashita Park, Shibuya

Junichi Hasegawa 

Faculty of Economics, Keio University, Japan

Correspondence: Junichi Hasegawa (junihasegawa@keio.jp)

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Abstract

This study examines a case of urban renewal in Shibuya, one of Tokyo’s most prominent downtown areas, featuring Miyashita Park, a dilapidated 10,000-square-meter park that transformed into a modern commercial complex consisting of a multistory commercial building with a roof park and an 18-story hotel. Shibuya Ward, the park’s administrator, selected private companies—initially Nike Japan and subsequently Mitsui Fudosan—as the redevelopment agency to install and operate park facilities—a public–private partnership that went beyond the conventional park concept by building sophisticated commercial facilities. This redevelopment, which began at the end of the 2000s, was met with fierce opposition. To investigate these dynamics, the article draws on qualitative content analysis of Shibuya Ward Assembly minutes (2008–2020), obtained from the official digital archive, alongside media coverage. By systematically reviewing committee and plenary debates where key policy decisions were made, the study traces how the project was planned, debated, and implemented. The findings show that despite legal ambiguities and strong criticism, the ward advanced the project by framing the park as an unprofitable facility requiring private-sector expertise, redefining regulatory boundaries, and limiting resident participation to a formal procedure. This process illuminates how public–private-partnership-led redevelopment, embedded in Japan’s broader neoliberal urbanism, can proceed through strong political conviction at the local level amid opposition and limited transparency. The study contributes to international debates on urban public space, highlighting how local governments act not only as regulators but also as active promoters of privatization and the erosion of urban commons.

Keywords

Miyashita Park; public–private partnership; Shibuya; Tokyo; urban renewal

1. Introduction

Urban public spaces in global cities are increasingly shaped by neoliberal governance, deregulation, and public–private partnerships, often accompanied by the exclusion and appropriation of urban commons. The redevelopment of Miyashita Park in Shibuya—one of Japan’s busiest commercial and cultural hubs—offers a distinctive case study of how local governments have mobilized public–private partnerships to transform public space. The aim of this article is to analyze the institutional dynamics and political rationales underlying this process, and to examine how Shibuya Ward, Miyashita Park’s administrator, promoted redevelopment under conditions of deregulation in Japan. In doing so, the study seeks to address a significant research gap: Although much has been written about the consequences of neoliberal urbanism and privatization in Japan, relatively little is known about how local political institutions—specifically ward offices and assemblies—have debated and decided on such projects in practice.

This article is informed by three interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, public–private partnerships in urban planning refer to arrangements in which governments and municipalities collaborate with private enterprises to implement urban projects. While often framed as innovative and efficient, public–private partnerships raise concerns regarding democratic control, transparency, and accountability, and may lead to the retreat of publicness and policy decisions made without resident participation (Hodge & Greve, 2007). Second, neoliberal urbanism describes an approach to urban governance based on market principles, characterized by deregulation, public–private partnerships, and the privatization of public facilities and spaces. Such approaches, however, tend to marginalize vulnerable groups, including the homeless and low-income populations, in redevelopment processes (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Finally, the concept of the urban commons highlights urban spaces and resources that should be collectively accessed, used, and managed by residents. Redevelopment and privatization often threaten these commons by restricting access and reconfiguring their use (Harvey, 2012). As scholarship from both the Global South and North has emphasized, under neoliberalism and widening inequality, public space has emerged as a critical arena for resistance, mobilization, and “alter-politics” (Hou & Knierbein, 2017). These frameworks provide a lens through which the case of Miyashita Park can be situated within broader debates on urban governance and contested public space.

In recent decades, Shibuya has undertaken massive redevelopment projects that have attracted global attention. While these projects have enhanced infrastructure and stimulated economic growth, they have also raised concerns that once urban spaces are branded and curated, they risk losing their spontaneous, democratic, and inclusive character (Balsas, 2020). Miyashita Park, situated just north of Shibuya Station, exemplifies this dual trajectory. Once a deteriorating 10,000-square-meter public park, it was redeveloped into a fashionable multi-level commercial complex with a rooftop park, accompanied by an 18-story hotel. To implement this transformation, Shibuya Ward introduced mechanisms such as naming rights, the multilevel city park system, and fixed-term land leaseholds (the right to lease land or real estate for a specified period during which, in return for paying rent, the lessee obtains the exclusive right to use and control the land). Initially, Nike Japan spearheaded the project under a naming rights agreement in 2009, reopening the park in 2011 with new sports facilities. In 2015, the ward selected Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd., a leading real estate developer, to lead a more ambitious redevelopment, which reopened in 2020 with commercial facilities—including luxury brands and cafés—and a flagship hotel (see Figures 1–3).



Figure 1. Miyashita Park: South part of the commercial facilities.



Figure 2. Miyashita Park: The commercial facilities and the hotel.



Figure 3. Miyashita Park: North part of the roof park and the hotel.

The project sparked intense debate, particularly over the exclusion of homeless individuals during the redevelopment process who had resided in the park and their supporters, as seen in Figure 4 (Nerukaigi, 2010; Our Planet-TV, 2010). Prior research has interpreted such conflicts as emblematic of the contested role of parks as urban commons (Cassegård, 2011; Cayer & Bender, 2019; Colding et al., 2013; Dimmer, 2017; Kimura, 2019; Kubota, 2021).



Figure 4. Confrontation between Shibuya Ward and protesters at Miyashita Park in September 2010. Source: “Koen no tento tekkyo ni kogisuru hitotachi” (2010). Courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun.

Yet, despite this growing body of literature, little is known about how local political institutions in Japan—specifically Shibuya Ward headed by the elected mayors during this period and Shibuya Ward Assembly (SWA) consisting of elected members—have justified and promoted such redevelopments amid strong public opposition. On what grounds did they proceed, and what institutional dynamics shaped their decisions?

To answer these questions, this study draws on qualitative content analysis of SWA minutes (2008–2020), obtained from the official digital archive (digitized from May 2003 onward), alongside media coverage. Among all mentions of “Miyashita Park,” discussions directly related to this redevelopment—especially those in committees and regular meetings where important policy decisions were made—were systematically reviewed. By tracing how the project was planned, debated, and implemented, the article illuminates the rationales and governance approaches underpinning Shibuya Ward’s promotion of public–private partnerships.

As this study shows, there were multiple occasions of significant debate in the SWA (see Table 1). The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito strongly supported the redevelopment. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was initially critical of the lack of information disclosure and insufficient involvement of the SWA regarding the redevelopment, but subsequently strongly supported the redevelopment. In contrast, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and some independent members of the SWA, such as Yukiko Sasamoto and Nenjin Horikiri, opposed it.

Table 1. Important discussions and decisions regarding the Miyashita Park redevelopment in the SWA.

Date	Development
2008, September 30	An SWA member of the DPJ expressed regret at the assembly's regular meeting that the ward had been working toward selling the naming rights of Miyashita Park without informing the assembly.
2009, June 18	The ward office finally sent an outline of the Miyashita Park redevelopment plan to the SWA's urban environment committee.
2010, June 11	The mayor expressed his frustration with the opposition movement at the SWA's regular meeting, which was three months before the administrative execution was carried out.
2010, September 30	In the gallery at the SWA's regular meeting, some audience members made irregular remarks protesting their exclusion from the park.
2014, June 20	The urban environment committee was informed of a candidate developer.
2015, March 12	The SWA's regular meeting approved an amendment to the ordinance on voting.
2015, March 13	The urban environment committee discussed the basic agreement with Mitsui Fudosan and the fixed-term land leasehold.
2015, March 26	The urban environment committee decided that the consideration of the basic agreement with Mitsui Fudosan and the fixed-term land leasehold would be continued during the closed session, which meant that they were effectively scrapped.
2015, July 9	The progress report regarding the Miyashita Park project was explained to the ward citizens and environment committee.
2016, March 28	The JCP proposed an ordinance establishing a new study committee that would review the Miyashita Park plan.
2017, June 8	The mayor emphasized his stance of confronting homeless support groups opposing the redevelopment during the regular SWA meeting.
2018, June 8	At the regular meeting, SWA member Yukiko Sasamoto complained about both the hostile treatment of opposing SWA members by the developer during the briefing session and the ward office for failing to acknowledge it.
2018, September 20	In response to criticism and opposition from some SWA members, the mayor strongly emphasized his commitment to promoting the redevelopment led by Mitsui Fudosan at the SWA's regular meeting.
2019, December 6	The SWA's regular meeting amended its urban parks ordinance to introduce a designated manager system that would allow parks to be closed at night and permit companies that were designated park managers to use them to make a profit.

The analysis of this article situates the case within broader structural shifts in Japan's urban planning since the 1980s, characterized by deregulation and increased private-sector involvement (Ishida, 2004). While postwar citizen-led *machizukuri* (town-making) movements that emphasized community participation, local autonomy, and collaborative planning once challenged top-down, technocratic planning as a counter paradigm to conventional urban planning (Hein, 2017; Satoh, 2020; Watanabe, 2007), recent decades have seen participation formalized but often hollowed out—reduced to information provision rather than genuine deliberation (Kadomatsu, 2012; Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2003; Utiumi, 2017). Moreover, national-level pro-development initiatives have frequently overridden local environmental and planning controls, creating a dual trajectory of institutional change (Sorensen, 2011).

Miyashita Park illustrates a further shift in this dynamic in which the local government itself actively pursued deregulation and close collaboration with private developers based on public–private partnerships. In Japan, public–private partnerships gained momentum with the private sector involvement policy of the 1980s to expand domestic demand, and have since produced a wide variety of projects, including the development of cultural, sports, and educational facilities, the redevelopment of parks and public housing, the operation of airport facilities and water supply and sewage systems, as well as the reorganization of roads and plazas to prioritize pedestrians. While some of these initiatives are evaluated positively from the perspective of regional revitalization (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2024; Nikkei Architecture, 2022), large-scale redevelopment projects in and near Tokyo employing public–private partnerships—such as Yebisu Garden Place in Shibuya Ward and the coastal centers of Tokyo Teleport Town, Makuhari New City, and Minato Mirai 21 along Tokyo Bay—have been criticized for privatizing public spaces, imposing restrictive rules, and eroding historical and geographical connections (Cybriwsky, 1999). Studies on more recent cases of redevelopment in Tokyo’s three wards (Ilunga et al., 2024), Shibuya Station’s ongoing regeneration (Reggiani, 2022), and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics legacy planning and redevelopment (Hasegawa, 2025) emphasize the tendency for limited public engagement and prioritization of economic interests over social and environmental sustainability.

Against this backdrop of broader structural shifts in Japan’s urban planning since the 1980s, the Miyashita Park case illustrates the complementary interrelationship between rapid economic growth, limited public engagement, and the erosion of urban diversity and equity. In doing so, the article contributes to international debates on the politics of urban public space, highlighting how local governments can act not merely as regulators or mediators, but as active promoters of privatization.

2. Redevelopment Based on a Naming Rights Agreement With Nike Japan

Miyashita Park opened in 1953, and a plan to renovate it into Tokyo’s first “aerial park” was reported in 1965. This would involve building a 4.5-meter-high roof over the park, filling it with dirt, and constructing a 260-car semiunderground parking lot below it (“Shibuya ni ‘kuchuteien,’” 1965; “Shibuya ni ‘ukabu ikoino ba,’” 1965). Since the 1990s, both the park and the parking lot, however, have noticeably deteriorated and have become home to many homeless people living in tents. In 2001, *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that about 90 homeless people living in the park had formed a neighborhood organization (“Jiritsu nimukete. Tokyo no homuresu (3),” 2001).

After the construction of a new futsal court in the park in 2006, the ward received requests for new skateboarding and climbing facilities, and the mayor, Toshitake Kuwabara, worked behind the scenes with a concept for a radical redevelopment of Miyashita Park based on a naming rights agreement. In the SWA’s regular meeting in September 2008, Hiroki Hamada, an assembly member of the DPJ, expressed regret that the ward had been working toward selling the naming rights of Miyashita Park to Nike Japan without informing the assembly. He also urged the ward to establish naming rights criteria and have the SWA vote on the decision to sell. In response, the mayor argued that a sudden offer from a business operator might trigger the introduction of naming rights and that the SWA could not set or approve a uniform standard; rather, a flexible response was necessary, requiring neither a standard setting nor assembly resolution (SWA, 2008a, pp. 70–72, 84–86, 88–89). The following month, at the SWA’s urban environment committee meeting, Kumiko Shinpo of the JCP inquired whether the park renovation plan based on the naming rights

sale should be made a matter for public comment during the formulation stage to obtain the opinions of diverse ward residents and users. In response, Parks Section Chief Akihiko Ozawa and Public Works Director Yasumasa Hioki repeated that they would consult with the SWA and residents after finalizing discussions with the operator regarding the renovation and reaching a consensus (SWA, 2008b, pp. 1–4).

In June 2009, the ward office finally sent an outline of the Miyashita Park redevelopment plan to the SWA. According to Ozawa's explanation and the ensuing question-and-answer session, to address various groups' requests about the installation of climbing and skateboarding facilities, three sports-related companies were consulted in February 2008, with two companies proposing naming rights that included facility development. The ward established a six-member selection committee in the same month consisting of a lawyer, an accountant, a management consultant, and three department heads from the ward office, and this committee selected Nike Japan in March 2008. The sale of naming rights was to be made for approximately 17 million yen per year for 10 years, with Nike spending another 400 million yen to improve park facilities, including the renovation of the futsal court and construction of new sports facilities as requested. After local explanatory meetings, construction was scheduled to begin in September 2009, and opening was scheduled for May of the following year (SWA, 2009b, pp. 4–6).

The question-and-answer session at the June 2009 urban environment committee meeting, however, revealed that some important information was not presented. The ward said it could not reveal the names of the selection committee members and the project costs based on the proposing company's calculations, as the company was private and the ward had to respect confidentiality obligations. Haruki Mori of the JCP criticized the way the plan was made without presenting details to the public, saying the act was too violent and had too much disregard for the SWA and residents. Yoshihiko Kuriya of Komeito, however, said it was an excellent plan triggered by requests from the youth to build new climbing and skateboarding facilities (SWA, 2009b, pp. 8–10, 15–16).

On July 1, 2009, a local explanatory meeting was held with 31 participants, and the SWA was later informed that a basic agreement between the ward and Nike was signed on August 27 (SWA, 2009c, p. 17, 2009d, p. 1). At the SWA, the JCP strongly criticized the ward office for not informing the assembly or residents of any plan outline and demanded that the plan be withdrawn outright. While acknowledging the significance of collaboration between the ward and the private sector, the DPJ questioned the appropriateness of the decision-making process. The party again urged that a guideline be created for the naming rights selection, arguing that the current situation, in which selection criteria and methods were not defined and information was not thoroughly disclosed, made it impossible to gain the ward residents' understanding. The mayor, however, articulated that he did not intend to revise the plan and stated that setting up criteria or guidelines for naming rights in advance would not be effective (SWA, 2009a, pp. 38, 44–47, 79–81, 92).

In March 2010, Shibuya Ward and Tokyu Corporation, the construction operator, held a local explanatory meeting and announced that construction would begin in April, having been postponed because of opposition from a support group for homeless people living in the park, who said that the lack of explanation from Nike's side was incomprehensible (“‘Raigetsukara koji, Shibuyakunado hoshin shimesu,” 2010). At the SWA's urban environment committee meeting, Parks Section Chief Ozawa explained that there were 72 participants at the local explanatory meeting, of whom 32 were ward residents, 30 were residents outside the ward, and 10 had no listed address. Eight questions and comments were presented at the explanatory meeting, six of which

were from residents outside the ward. Ozawa also noted that the local shopping district had stated that the park redevelopment had been their dream, and they would very much like to see it proceed. Mori of the JCP, however, argued that only a summary of questions and opinions had been given to committee members and no answers were given by the ward, and that the plan should be reviewed as it had proceeded so aggressively. In response, Yoshihiko Kuriya of Komeito said that the SWA had engaged in full discussions and that he would like to see the project push through. Ozawa stated that several groups were illegally occupying the park but that the project was under consideration to proceed carefully and expeditiously because of strong demand from the district's residents (SWA, 2010c, pp. 1–4).

Groups opposed to the redevelopment continued to set up tents and occupy parts of the park; as a result, construction could not begin. At an SWA meeting in June 2010, Takeshi Ito of the Independent Club—a group of independent members on the SWA—asked the mayor whether the forced removal of these groups might be unavoidable given residents' and facility users' frustration at what they perceived as an inappropriate occupation of the park by nonresidents. The mayor responded that he knew patience had a limit, so he requested that they wait just a little longer (SWA, 2010a, pp. 122–123).

A warning was issued under the Administrative Execution by Proxy Law, with August 21, 2010, as the deadline for removal. Because the notice was not carried out, a public notice was issued on August 21 to conduct administrative execution by proxy on August 24. On August 31, Shibuya Ward recommended that the groups remove their setups in the park and, after determining that their recommendation had been ignored, sealed off the entrance and exit on September 15 (SWA, 2010d, pp. 1–4). Immediately afterward, the minutes of the SWA's regular meeting showed that during the mayor's remarks, audience members said that they would return to the park, prevent its forced removal, and disallow the cozy relation between the ward office and Nike Japan, and were ordered by the chairperson to leave the assembly (SWA, 2010b, pp. 6, 11).

On April 30, 2011, the park reopened with the name “Miyashita Kouen” in Japanese hiragana characters instead of “Miyashita Nike Park” as originally planned. Nike had announced that it would not exercise its naming rights in October 2010, shortly after the start of construction through execution by proxy (“Meimeiken ‘koushisezu,” 2010; “Miyashitakoen. Meimeiken tsukawazu,” 2010). Meanwhile, on April 21, 2011, the homeless people who lived in the park and their support groups filed a lawsuit against Shibuya Ward in the Tokyo District Court, claiming that the previous year's execution by proxy and other actions were illegal, and sought damages of approximately 5.9 million yen (“Shibuya Miyashitakoen no Seikatsusha raga teiso,” 2011; “Tento tekkyo ha iho,” 2011). In March 2015, the court ruled that the ward's forced removal of the tents was legal but ordered a payment of 110,000 yen to a homeless individual because it was illegal for four men to forcibly carry him and drive him away. Although not a problem limited to neoliberal urbanism, the court also deemed it illegal for the ward and Nike to enter into a negotiated contract when competitive bidding was not difficult to conduct (“Koen tento tekkyo,” 2015; “Koenseikatsusha, katsuide taikyosasete noha iho,” 2015; “Meimeiken. Zuikeiyaku ha iho,” 2015). The Tokyo High Court dismissed the ward's appeal and upheld the ruling of the first trial (“Homuresu kyoseitekkyo,” 2015).

The episode in this section illustrates how the ward strategically framed the project as a flexible response to residents' demands and as an opportunity to harness private-sector vitality, thereby legitimizing the circumvention of broader deliberation. The absence of formal guidelines and disclosure was not incidental; rather, it functioned as a mechanism that institutionalized opacity and weakened the SWA's and citizens' capacity to scrutinize the process.

3. Public-Private Partnership With Mitsui Fudosan: A Little Stumble

Meanwhile, toward the end of Mayor Kuwabara's administration, discussions proceeded to Miyashita Park's further redevelopment. The June 2014 meeting of the SWA's urban environment committee announced the establishment of a four-expert study committee that would select a candidate developer for Miyashita Park and the Shibuya parking lot based on publicly solicited development proposals. During the question-and-answer session, Koji Toma of the JCP and independent member Nenjin Horikiri expressed concern regarding the selection of a candidate operator without residents' knowledge and called for the need for residents' involvement and participation in the study committee, but the ward office dismissed this idea (SWA, 2014c, pp. 9–10, 13).

In August 2014, a park redevelopment proposal was publicly solicited, and in February 2015, Mitsui Fudosan was selected over Tokyu Corporation. In the following month, the SWA's urban environment committee was informed of the decision. Mitsui Fudosan's concept involved building a three-story facility and using the multistory urban park system to create a park on the facility's roof. The basement and part of the first floor would be used for bicycle and car parking, and the remaining three floors would house cafes, bars, restaurants, food courts, brand stores, and inbound facilities. About 10% of the park area would be allocated to the construction of an 18-story hotel. After approval by the SWA, the ward expected to finalize a basic agreement and land leasehold contract with Mitsui Fudosan. Under Mitsui Fudosan's proposal, besides the 2.448-billion-yen up-front land rent for the park and parking lot redevelopment, a 30-year lease at 603 million yen per year would be established. In other words, Mitsui Fudosan would develop the park and parking lot with no financial burden on the ward and would also pay the ward a loan fee (SWA, 2015j, pp. 1–3, 12, 17).

Nevertheless, the urban environment committee's question-and-answer session left many uncertainties and unclear matters. Although constructing a high-rise building in the park was legally impossible, the ward planned to accept Mitsui Fudosan's proposal first and then contact the national government and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to discuss the matter. The ward argued that the proposal could be adopted even if a hotel could not be built. It was pointed out, however, that the base rent amount should differ depending on whether a hotel was included in the fixed-term leasehold. Moreover, the ward had not conducted a real estate appraisal. When it was pointed out that this would mean entering into a fixed-term land leasehold agreement in the absence of backing, the director of the ward's public works and cleaning department stated that if the operator had not proposed the project, Miyashita Park would have been a completely unprofitable facility moving forward. Because of the operator, the ward would be able to rebuild the aging park and its parking facilities without incurring any financial burden, as well as receive a loan fee, the amount of which would be determined in the future; therefore, the ward expressed its intention to endorse a decision on the candidate (SWA, 2015j, pp. 13–16).

Meanwhile, the SWA approved an amendment to the ordinance on voting in March 2015. The original ordinance on voting was made in March 2014 in relation to the conclusion of a basic agreement and the establishment of a fixed-term land leasehold with Mitsui Fudosan for the redevelopment of the ward office building area, which did not constitute a case that required a resolution of the local government assembly under the Local Autonomy Law. Regarding the redevelopment of the ward office building area, the JCP and members of various factions had been criticizing Mitsui Fudosan's plan to financially benefit by building a

39-story, approximately 420-unit (later 520-unit) high-rise expensive apartment on ward-owned land in exchange for the company's construction of a new ward office building and public hall. They claimed that both the SWA and the residents had received insufficient information (SWA, 2014a, pp. 1–5, 2014b, pp. 160–164). The 2015 ordinance amendment was made so that the ordinance would apply to the Miyashita Park case. The JCP and some other SWA members opposed the ordinance amendment because it was intended to lead to the endorsement of the SWA's proposals regarding Miyashita Park without sufficient disclosure of information. All but them agreed, and the amended ordinance was passed (SWA, 2015f, pp. 1–6, 2015g, pp. 9–12, 2015h, pp. 168–172).

The SWA's urban environment committee then discussed the basic agreement between the ward and Mitsui Fudosan as well as the fixed-term land leasehold. The ward insisted on the former first. During the answer-and-question session, the ward stated that the land lease fee would be the amount proposed by Mitsui Fudosan and that the actual amount would be decided later, before the signing of the fixed-term land leasehold agreement in the next fiscal year. Simply put, the SWA would decide to lease the land without specifying an amount in the leasehold agreement. The ward reiterated that because Mitsui Fudosan was a private company, a win-win relationship with the ward would be impossible unless the company generated a profit, and that if the agreements were to include figures, the ward itself would have to conduct its own real estate appraisal. Thus, the basic agreement and the fixed-term land leasehold agreement would not include figures this time (SWA, 2015k, pp. 7–10).

The ward, after reiterating the project's financial benefits, articulated that the opinions of the SWA and residents would be reflected only to the extent that they would not interfere with the project's execution—an arrangement that effectively reduced participation to a formal procedure rather than genuine involvement in decision-making. The ward was unable to make demands that would force the operator to withdraw from the project from a business feasibility standpoint. During the question-and-answer session, it was clarified that Mitsui Fudosan had yet to conduct a real estate appraisal as well. Critics expressed concern that the project would proceed without data, but the ward asserted that Mitsui Fudosan's proposal was reliable because it is one of Japan's leading real estate companies with vast experience and know-how (SWA, 2015k, pp. 18–20).

The ward, however, had an extremely aggressive approach. The president of the local Miyamasucho neighborhood association and others had submitted a petition to the ward, demanding that the local community's approval be included in the development policy and candidate developer selection, that the park area be maintained, and that the park's trees be preserved (SWA, 2015a, p. 1). Eventually, the SWA's urban environment committee unanimously decided that the consideration of these two proposals be continued during the closed session, even though the SWA election was forthcoming, which meant that they were effectively scrapped (SWA, 2015l, pp. 8–9).

What emerges in this section is a governance strategy that framed Miyashita Park as an “unprofitable facility” in need of private expertise, while sidelining legal uncertainties and the lack of appraisal data. By postponing key regulatory and financial clarifications, the ward effectively created a path-dependent process in which the developer's proposal became a *fait accompli*. This reflects a broader institutional dynamic in Japanese public-private partnerships, where regulatory ambiguities are retroactively adjusted to legitimize pre-determined redevelopment outcomes.

4. Public-Private Partnership With Mitsui Fudosan: Promotion Through Fine-Tuning

In July 2015, the ward's progress report cited criticisms as the reason for the abandonment of the two proposals in March, as they had been insufficiently communicated to the local community; it was unclear whether the hotel could be legally built; and no land appraisal had been conducted. The ward had been explaining Mitsui Fudosan's redevelopment proposal to the local community association and shopping district since May and was having Mitsui Fudosan review the proposal based on the opinions expressed at the meetings (SWA, 2015b, p. 27).

Komeito's Hidetaka Sawashima strongly supported the ward, arguing that reducing the ward's financial burden was key. Meanwhile, Toma of the JCP argued that the land must be appraised first, but during the question-and-answer session, the focus shifted to changes related to the pending hotel construction. The national government and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government asserted that constructing a high-rise hotel in the park would be difficult, leading the ward to consider another approach that would allow for such construction. Miyashita Park was divided into north and south areas, with a bridge crossing in between. Taking advantage of the fact that the park area does not include this bridge section, the ward would widen this section and turn it into a deck as an entrance to the park area, combining the two sections. Although the proposed hotel construction site would be removed from the park area, the overall park area would be maintained by offsetting the deck area. Toma lamented that this change would serve and accommodate a private corporation, but Sawashima countered that it was the government's role to use private-sector vitality to do what was in the best interest of Shibuya Ward's residents and the ward's future (SWA, 2015b, pp. 35–43).

In response, Takashi Kuroyanagi, director of the public works and cleaning department, stated that Sawashima's statements were consistent with the ward office's mindset of a win-win relationship with the private sector and that a company could not properly manage and operate the park if it were unable to make a profit. Sawashima also argued that, after the SWA meeting in March, the ward officials had provided a series of explanations to the residents and listened to their opinions. While their opinions were important, they could not make redevelopment plans, and therefore the ward had to show them the plans and revise them, and the SWA should stop talking as if the ward were not listening to the residents' opinions. Sawashima added that the procedure was not flawed at all to begin with (SWA, 2015b, pp. 44, 51).

At the November meeting of the ward citizens and environment committee, the JCP and some SWA members had utterly incompatible discussions with the ward side. In response to concerns that the commercial facilities would weaken disaster prevention functions, the ward side asserted that they would actually be strengthened as these facilities could be used as countermeasures for people who would find it difficult to return home. With regard to the zelkova trees that the residents wanted to preserve, the ward explained that although the zelkova trees would be cut down, the wood would be reused as benches and other furnishings, which they argued would symbolically preserve the spirit of Miyashita Park. When independent member Yukiko Sasamoto inquired about the land appraisal and the total project cost, Sawashima sided with the ward office, saying that the administration was proceeding carefully and that he respected their efforts (SWA, 2015c, pp. 12–13, 20–22).

In December, the ward citizens and environment committee finally discussed the proposals for a basic agreement and a fixed-term land leasehold. Komeito's Sawashima reasserted that the most important goals were to improve the aging parking lots and Miyashita Park to benefit ward residents and to do so without imposing a tax burden on them. He had the ward chief confirm that a fixed-term land leasehold would bring in 603 million yen annually for 30 years to Shibuya Ward and then pointed out that the ward would need to spend 6 billion yen if it were to redevelop the site on its own. He emphatically stated that those with objections would have to present a counterproposal that would exceed this amount. In response, Toma of the JCP argued that the ward office redefined the park's boundaries by widening the bridge crossing and designating it as a deck that counted as park area. This allowed the planned hotel site to be formally excluded from the park, thereby making the construction of the 18-story hotel legally possible while keeping the overall park area unchanged on paper. Arguing that it made no sense to revisit past discussions, Sawashima urged Manabu Haruta of the DPJ, the committee chairperson, to proceed. Haruta tried to assert that the committee should confirm the history of the case, only to be countered by Sawashima to proceed since he had said so. He even went so far as to say that if only the opponents' opinions were considered, he would file a motion of no confidence in the chairperson (SWA, 2015d, pp. 11–13, 20–23).

The two proposals were approved by the ward citizens and environment committee (SWA, 2015e, pp. 27–31) and the regular meeting, with the LDP, Komeito, and the DPJ voting in favor. At the meeting, the JCP criticized this plan as a scheme to give a park, which was irreplaceable to the ward's residents, to Mitsui Fudosan as a venue to achieve profits with no surveying and through its semi-permanent use of the park under conditions favorable to it. Sasamoto criticized the fact that the ward's responsibilities according to the basic agreement only included managing the overall contract's progress as well as liaising and coordinating with related agencies. She argued that it was Shibuya Ward's responsibility to release relevant materials to its residents and park users, to provide careful explanations, and to implement administrative management with a view toward the ward's future, with a third party reviewing the operators' proposals. She also criticized the basic agreement's stipulation that the SWA and residents would be extensively consulted during the project's design phase but only to the extent that it would not impede the project's execution, indicating that the plan prioritized the construction of facilities, including a hotel. She also told the assembly that such an imposed plan was completely outdated and showed the status quo of the Shibuya Ward administration, in which little attention was paid to ward residents. She urged the assembly to listen to residents' and park users' opinions and redo the plan from scratch, even if it might be time-consuming (SWA, 2015i, pp. 139–141, 144–147).

Meanwhile, the DPJ, demonstrating an exact opposite interpretation of the project, cited several reasons for voting in favor of these proposals. First, since the ward administration's pausing of its consideration of the proposals in March, it has thoroughly explained the project to the neighborhood community organizations, shopping associations, and other interested parties and obtained their opinions. Second, it also clarified that the hotel would be constructed without changing the park area by converting the deck area to park use. Finally, the park's redevelopment and the hotel's construction would enhance the park's disaster prevention function in an integrated manner, serving as a support facility for people experiencing difficulty returning to their homes (SWA, 2015i, pp. 141–142).

As we have seen in this section, regulatory constraints—most notably the prohibition of hotel construction within the park—were overcome by redefining park boundaries through administrative maneuvering. This boundary manipulation allowed the project to comply formally with legal requirements while substantively

prioritizing corporate interests. Such regulatory engineering highlights the discretionary power of local governments in facilitating public-private-partnership-led redevelopment and exemplifies the institutional flexibility through which neoliberal urbanism advances.

5. Toward the Reopening of Miyashita Park

Thereafter, problems surrounding the redevelopment continued until Miyashita Park's reopening in 2020. The JCP proposed an ordinance establishing a new study committee that would review the Miyashita Park plan in 2016. This sought to freeze Mitsui Fudosan's current redevelopment project and devise a new plan through this study group, which would consist of publicly recruited ward residents, park users, members of various groups in the ward, and academic experts. This proposal, however, was rejected on the grounds that returning to a blank slate after the basic agreement was signed would be completely out of focus (SWA, 2016a, pp. 16–18, 2016b, pp. 194–195). The rejection of the JCP's proposal was repeated each year until 2019 (SWA, 2017a, pp. 19–21, 2017c, pp. 196–197, 2018a, pp. 18–20, 2018c, pp. 220–221, 2019a, pp. 23–25, 2019c, pp. 217–218).

Ignoring such criticism from the JCP and some members of various factions and independent SWA members, the ward pushed forward with the project as if to stifle dissent. In March 2017, a hasty decision was made to cancel the naming rights agreement with Nike and suspend the use of Miyashita Park on March 27 instead of the scheduled March 31, with the latter causing a commotion that led to arrests from the opposing side, which resisted. At the SWA's regular meeting in June, the ward's mayor, Ken Hasebe, explained that self-proclaimed homeless support groups have obstructed the closing of the gates, left personal belongings unattended in the park for long periods, and set up illegal structures such as sheds without permission, which was unacceptable to Shibuya Ward, the park's general users, and residents near the park. Considering the persistent obstruction during Miyashita Park's renewal seven years ago from 2017 and similar incidents when Meiji Park closed to give way to the construction of the new National Stadium the previous year, continued hindrances were expected with respect to surveys in preparation for the Miyashita Park redevelopment. Under these circumstances, the ward, as the park manager, determined that the suspension of park services and temporary enclosures were necessary to ensure the safety of park users and pedestrians and to properly manage the park (SWA, 2017d, p. 8).

Incidentally, similar patterns of exclusion and redevelopment were also observed in Tennoji Park in Osaka City, a large-scale park adjacent to areas traditionally known for a high number of day laborers. It saw a sharp increase in homeless tents and unlicensed stalls, especially during the 1990s. In 2003, like Miyashita Park, there was a forced eviction that was seen as a form of exclusion. In 2016, the park began closing at night, which was perceived as an attempt to drive out the homeless to improve the image of the nearby Tennoji Station area, which was undergoing redevelopment (“Gyogiii noni kawai-soya!”, 2016).

The post-park-closure overhead at Miyashita Park included 24-hour security and legal counsel fees. A ward office director stated that this legal counsel would deal with “antisocial groups.” When the appropriateness of the word “antisocial” was pointed out, he rephrased antisocial groups as groups that claimed to support the homeless people (SWA, 2017b, pp. 17–18). According to Chiyoko Igarashi of the JCP, this attorney had handled cases involving obstructions to the construction of the new National Stadium. Sasamoto argued that this attorney had been a part-time employee of the ward and was paid a large sum of money, which was

problematic. She further noted that another lawyer from this attorney's firm was a member of the naming rights selection committee (SWA, 2017e, pp. 157, 159–160).

Nevertheless, the mayor emphasized his confidence in the Mitsui Fudosan-led projects at the SWA. In response to a request to disclose the total cost of the high-rise apartment building to be built by Mitsui Fudosan on the ward office building area, the mayor stated that the company would construct a new ward office building and public hall using profits from the apartment building, profits which the ward had no way of knowing the value of, as private company profits were hidden from the public. Regarding Miyashita Park, the real estate appraisal for the fixed-term land leasehold agreement between Shibuya Ward and Mitsui Fudosan was conducted two years before the agreement was concluded in June 2017. Because the official roadside land price (used for calculating inheritance and gift taxes) had increased by nearly 25% during that period, some SWA members asserted that the appraisal should have been conducted immediately before the agreement was finalized. They also maintained that the portion of the property where the hotel was to be built only had an appraisal value calculated by the ward itself and that no proper appraisal had been done and urged that the full financial plan, including the total project cost and Mitsui Fudosan's profit, should be disclosed (SWA, 2018e, pp. 50–51, 56–57).

The mayor responded to these comments by first stating that the fixed-term leasehold agreement allowed for discussions on rent revisions in the event of a significant and unexpected impact on land and building prices, such as a major change in social conditions. The rise in roadside land prices in the past two years before the agreement was signed, however, could not be considered a major change in social conditions, as these prices fluctuate. Therefore, a reappraisal was unnecessary. He also stated that the appraisal for the hotel portion was calculated and valued by the ward office because the hotel could be built. Furthermore, he dismissed a request to clarify Mitsui Fudosan's funding plan for the Miyashita Park redevelopment project, arguing that the ward was not in a position to answer it (SWA, 2018e, p. 57). These exchanges took place many times in the SWA, even in the months leading up to the reopening of Miyashita Park (SWA, 2020b, pp. 85–100).

In 2019, the ward amended its Urban Parks Ordinance to introduce a designated manager system that would allow parks to be closed at night and permit companies that were designated park managers to use them to make a profit. For Miyashita Park, the designated manager was Miyashita Park Partners, which consisted of Mitsui Fudosan and Seibu Landscaping Co. (SWA, 2019b, pp. 10–12, 15–17, 2019d, pp. 190–193, 206–209). In 2020, just before the reopening, a draft ordinance was discussed to allow a designated manager to maintain and operate the parking lot in Miyashita Park, which had been conducted by the Urban Development Corporation. The ordinance was enacted with a majority of votes in favor despite opposition from the JCP, which argued that this would allow the designated manager to benefit not only from the park but also from the parking lot (SWA, 2020a, pp. 15–17, 2020c, pp. 193–196).

The ward emphasized procedural correctness while critics contended that objections were systematically minimized. This contrast illustrates the tension between the administration's confidence in the project and persistent concerns about transparency and inclusiveness. In March 2017, Sasamoto presented to the SWA her criticisms regarding the Shibuya Ward Urban Planning Council. This council, established under the City Planning Law to reflect diverse opinions in determining Shibuya Ward's city planning policies, consisted of up to 19 members appointed by the mayor, including scholars, SWA members, residents, and officials from relevant administrative bodies. It made recommendations to the ward on whether it was appropriate to

adopt or amend city planning proposals. The minutes of its meetings were not publicly accessible at the time, and even SWA members who were not part of the council had to be selected by lottery to attend as observers, just like ordinary citizens. The number of observers was also kept extremely small considering venue size (SWA, 2017a, p. 20). Toma of the JCP also criticized the Urban Planning Council for having too few observers and preventing others who wanted to attend its meetings. The mayor, however, stated that observers were selected based on a fair lottery with no unilateral exclusion, denial of residents' sovereignty, or disregard for residents (SWA, 2017d, pp. 36, 40).

At a regular meeting of the SWA in February 2018, Sasamoto, Horikiri, and other SWA members critical of redevelopment projects denounced several problems regarding the operators' briefing in January. First, participants were limited to residents who received flyers from the organizers. Sasamoto stated that the organizers told her to go ahead and change the ordinance to allow SWA members to attend the briefing if they wanted to. Horikiri mentioned that on the day of the briefing, two section chiefs of the ward told him not to attend, and the organizers intimidated him later at the venue. When he went to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to object, he was told by the person in charge that the metropolitan government would not refuse the attendance of SWA members and that any ward resident should be able to attend (SWA, 2018b, pp. 154–156).

At the SWA's special budget committee meeting in March, Michio Shimojima of the LDP argued that Horikiri's accusations were false, as confirmed by the director of public works and cleaning department, who stated that Horikiri was merely informed by the two section chiefs that he could not enter without a flyer, according to the operators. When the director asked the person in charge of the briefing, he said he did not recall making any intimidating remarks such as those described by Sasamoto and Horikiri. The director further stated that the metropolitan government official whom Horikiri had met confirmed that he had not made any such statements as claimed by Horikiri (SWA, 2018f, pp. 33–36).

At the June regular meeting, Sasamoto complained that the issue was discussed at the March committee meeting as if there had been no sabotage against SWA members and residents, including herself, referring to incidents of outrage involving the operators, which the then-public works and cleaning director denied. The mayor said he had received a report that no such incidents had taken place. Sasamoto expressed concern that this director was now in charge of information disclosure (SWA, 2018d, pp. 121–123).

As seen in this section, in the final phase, dissent was delegitimized through labeling strategies, with opponents framed as "antisocial" or obstructive groups. While participatory mechanisms formally existed, they were reduced to post-hoc consultation and limited information disclosure. This narrowing of participation reveals an institutional dynamic of hollowed-out democracy, in which procedural compliance masks the exclusion of critical voices. The case underscores how political framing and procedural control operated jointly to suppress opposition and consolidate the ward's redevelopment agenda.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Shibuya Ward government functioned not merely as a regulator but as an active promoter of redevelopment based on neoliberal urbanism, particularly through public–private partnerships, employing selective transparency, procedural maneuvering, and developer-friendly

frameworks to advance the Miyashita Park project, while also leading to the exclusion and appropriation of the urban commons.

The redevelopment of Miyashita Park illustrates how public-private-partnership-led urban renewal in Japan can proceed under strong political conviction by local governments, even in the face of public opposition and limited transparency. Shibuya Ward, led by Mayor Kuwabara and then Mayor Hasebe, and supported by a majority of the SWA, framed the project as a financially advantageous partnership that leveraged private-sector expertise while sparing public funds. For these proponents, the redevelopment plan would provide ward residents, who lacked know-how, access to superior ideas based on private companies' expertise. The financial planning of the business was an important component of the company's capabilities as well as its trade secret. Opposition in the SWA—most prominently from the JCP—focused on principles of public stewardship, procedural fairness, and the right to accessible public space, but failed to gain broader political traction.

Miyashita Park's transformation reflects a governance model in which local authorities actively facilitate, rather than merely permit, the privatization of public space. A genuine concern lies in the perception of local governments, which remain convinced that advancing urban renewal projects through deregulation-based public-private partnerships will benefit residents, even in the absence of broad discussion of their merits and drawbacks. This model not only reshapes the physical form and use of parks but also redefines the nature of public participation, narrowing it to post-hoc consultation rather than co-creation. The case raises two urgent concerns for urban policy: first, the need for genuine, early-stage deliberation on public-private partnership projects that alter the accessibility and character of public space; and second, the importance of transparent financial and procedural disclosure to ensure democratic accountability. The politics of urban renewal should consider whose visions, rights, and voices shape the city. Addressing these challenges will require institutional reforms that restore public space as a commons, ensure meaningful citizen participation, and balance economic objectives with social equity, diversity, and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, the case of Miyashita Park reminds us that urban renewal is not only about physical transformation but also about safeguarding the democratic and inclusive nature of the city itself.

Future research should examine how alternative models of urban commons governance could be institutionalized within Japan's legal framework. Moreover, this case illustrates the need for binding guidelines on transparency and citizen participation in urban public-private partnerships to safeguard inclusive urbanism.

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About the Author



Junichi Hasegawa has written on British and Japanese urban history, including “The Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction in 1940s Britain” in the journal *Twentieth Century British History* (1999), “The Plans for Tokyo Bay” in *Urban History* (2024), and “Redeveloping Tokyo’s Meiji Jingu Gaien Area” in *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (2025).

Undertrack (Re)Fill: Transforming Railway Infrastructure Into Community Spaces in Japan

Miguel Freitas Silva 

formaurbisLAB, Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design (CIAUD), Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

Correspondence: Miguel Freitas Silva (josemiguelssilva@edu.ulisboa.pt)

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Abstract

In contrast to the notion of the “useless city,” Japan has long engaged in the practice of repurposing the spaces beneath railway and highway infrastructure for a variety of uses, including commerce, dining, nightlife, industrial storage, and, occasionally, residential functions. The concept of undertrack (re)fill, however, specifically refers to 21st-century urban regeneration initiatives that aim to adapt these interstitial spaces for programmes centred on social interaction and cultural expression, closely embedded within local communities. This study aims to develop a synthesised framework for understanding community spaces situated beneath infrastructural viaducts, focusing on two key adaptive processes: juxtaposition and addition. Employing a morphological approach, the research explores the spatial relationships between these interstitial areas, the infrastructure above, and the broader urban context, through several case studies in Yokohama and Tokyo. Methodologically, the study characterises each case through a combination of architectural drawings and photographic documentation, drawing on existing design projects. Notable examples include the Koganecho Art Centre in Yokohama, as well as sites in Tokyo such as the Elevated Garden at Nerima and the Chuo Line House Koganei in Koganei. These spaces encompass community centres, local art exhibitions, open-air markets, and cultural venues, each contributing to a stronger sense of belonging and collective identity. By integrating local traditions and cultural practices into contemporary urban regeneration, Japan demonstrates how development can be both environmentally sustainable and culturally enriching.

Keywords

community space; morphogenesis; railway infrastructure; undertrack refill

1. Introduction

Major linear infrastructural systems have played a key role in the growth and mobility of cities. However, in many cases, they have also given rise to urban discontinuities, continuous and impassable masses that divide the territory. In some instances, they have been sites of disruptive and informal occupations, while in others they remain vacant and unused. It is therefore essential to understand the role these structures might still play in contemporary processes of urban and sustainable regeneration, particularly through the reuse of their interstitial spaces as communal areas. Interstitial spaces emerge “in-between” the physical structure of the city, occupying the threshold between obsolescence and the opportunity to create new urban fabric. Such spaces, for instance, can be oriented towards local communities, where their own uses and meanings may emerge, whether planned or spontaneous, institutional or informal. In this sense, interstitial spaces should not be regarded merely as physical voids, but rather as critical urban conditions that expand the possibilities of urban life (Brighenti, 2013).

Grounded in project-based readings, this study seeks to construct a theoretical framework for the development of community spaces beneath infrastructure. To this end, it draws upon case studies from Japanese cities in the 21st century, especially those involving the construction of transitional and interactive spaces beneath railway infrastructure. However, this study is confined to examining the (re)use of interstitial spaces beneath railways that continue to be operational.

What are the common characteristics of infrastructural appropriation in the Tokyo metropolitan area, and how do they differ from the Western examples? How do contemporary examples of infrastructural appropriation in and around Tokyo further and build on the Japanese notions of constructing communal spaces? The residual spaces created by these linear infrastructures are here considered as opportunities to introduce programmes that are central to contemporary European urban discourse. It is important to emphasise that the objective is not to undertake a comparative analysis between the Japanese reality and the European context. The intention is, however, to identify a hypothesis that may be applied to intervention practice across different contexts. Infrastructure may thus transcend strategic impasses, offering new solutions for the production of community space, whether permanent or temporary, everywhere.

Thus, in order to address the research questions, the case studies were selected according to four themes—shared residential space, informal green space, multifunctional space, and shared commercial space—to identify within them two intervention processes: juxtaposition and addition. This approach makes it possible to establish a relationship between the notions applied in the construction of community spaces in Japan and the emerging themes in the West, enabling their appropriation according to neighbourhood-specific needs and aspirations through new forms of occupation and programming.

Methodologically, the representation of each case is supported by graphic and textual reference materials collected through literature review and information supplied by the respective architectural offices and project design authors. The representations produced (i.e., plans and sections) are not direct transcriptions of the gathered information, but rather syntheses of the existing spatial conditions, while the written component informed by the collected architectural design reports is identified as “personal communication,” seeking to clarify the underlying concept, form, and organisation of the spaces, situated within their morphological and social context.

The study is structured in two parts. The first addresses community space in the traditional city, seeking to demonstrate that such spaces are neither ordinary nor undifferentiated but are, rather, full of significance and constrained by private urban form. This argument serves to highlight the exceptional nature of community spaces created beneath railway infrastructure. The second part addresses community space in the infrastructural context, focusing specifically on design projects representative of distinct intervention processes and developed since 2005. The transition into the 21st century is understood as a paradigmatic shift, in which community space moves beyond the traditional city and becomes integral to urban regeneration, particularly of infrastructure. To this end, the study offers a synthesis of various modes of occupation, which may be theoretically recognised as hypotheses for application in other intervention contexts and geographical settings.

Japan has, over time, exemplified both the opportunities and the latent potential inherent in adapting the interstitial spaces of railway infrastructure to accommodate a diverse range of programmes. Yet, the deliberate application of such spatial transformations within a community-oriented framework remains a relatively recent phenomenon. This article advances the argument that these spaces possess significant capacity to address contemporary social challenges within the context of reusing to reduce the human footprint (ter Steege, 2023), drawing upon current precedents of urban-scale interventions to substantiate this claim.

2. Literature Review

One of the most complex and enduring issues in the debate on the city is the obsolescence of built form, namely the loss of utility or underutilisation of urban areas. This is a cyclical and diffuse phenomenon, increasingly prominent in contemporary times. The idea of reuse and recycle emerges not only as one of the most fundamental manifestations of sustainability in architecture (ter Steege, 2023; Wong, 2022) but also as an intrinsic condition of urban production, transcending the limits imposed by individual building plots. In a sense, this is exemplified by the idea of undertrack (re)fill, which repurposes the interstitial spaces beneath railway viaducts.

Works such as Atelier Bow-Wow's *Made in Tokyo* (Kaijima & Kuroda, 2001), Arnon Snapir's *A Research on the Inhabited Viaduct Architecture in Tokyo* (Snapir, 2012), Habitar Group's *Rehabitar. La casa, el carrer i la ciutat* (Monteys, 2013), and Jorge Almazán's *Emergent Tokyo* (Almazán & StudioLAB, 2022) form an important bibliographic foundation to discuss the idea of undertrack (re)fill. However, in these studies, the (re)use of railway infrastructure is typically defined as diverse and transitional, rather than as a form of community space. In contrast, Jordan Sand's *Tokyo Vernacular: Common Spaces, Local Histories, Found Objects* (Sand, 2013) offers a perception of Japanese spatial practices through the lenses of communal, community, and common space. Similarly, Marco Borsotti and Sonia Pistidda's *Abitare i rilevati ferroviari. Strategie innovative di rigenerazione* (Borsotti & Pistidda, 2020) and Eva Prats's *Building Communities* (Prats, 2024) consider community space in transformed contexts as an integrated process of local engagement and spatial appropriation.

Arnon Snapir argues that viaducts are not merely technical elements of railway networks, but can act as catalysts for the urban fabric, contributing to the creation of new informal public spaces and to the functional and social integration of city areas. He also highlights the risks of urban fragmentation posed by such structures, particularly when poorly integrated into their surroundings. According to the author, the urban quality of these interstitial spaces depends not only on their occupation, but more importantly on the

types of uses they accommodate and how they are articulated with the surrounding urban fabric and community (Snapir, 2012).

The interstitial space may be understood as a gap within the urban fabric, an “in-between” space without a defined use where formal and informal situations occur simultaneously. However, more than simple voids or residues, these spaces are conceived as expectant, with the capacity to act as catalysts for new centralities at both local and city scales. From this perspective, such “terrains vagues” (Solà-Morales, 1995), abandoned or disused, reveal themselves as productive in their transformative potential, operating as zones of intermediation between the consolidated city and the opportunity to imagine new architectural forms or uses.

At the same time, the intermediate territories situated between the urban and the rural, or between compact and dispersed zones, the “espacements” described by Françoise Choay, appear as fragments and intervals resulting from diffuse urbanisation (Choay, 2003), which break with the model of the historical, dense, and compact city, composing instead a discontinuous landscape of superpositions, juxtapositions, and unexpected uses. Sieverts’ notion of “in-between space” (Sieverts, 2003, 2011) assumes a more interdisciplinary and flexible character, capable of encompassing diverse urban realities that may include three-dimensional combinations of unconsolidated plots through processes of overlapping or intersection: the railway infrastructure, for example. The spaces beneath railway infrastructure—viaducts—constitute a “typology of linear space with porticoes,” comprising a covered, permeable area articulated by the rhythmic sequence of pillars and arches, spaced apart, which endows the interstitial space with a distinctive “urban potential” for appropriation (Monteys, 2013, p. 136). It is precisely within the coexistence of consolidated and unconsolidated elements that we encounter such urban interstices: hybrid spaces that elude the order of planning and urban design, but which, through their openness and indeterminacy, prove fundamental for understanding and rethinking the complexity of the contemporary city (Phelps & Silva, 2018).

Nevertheless, the adaptation of linear (infra)structures is not a new theme in the context of the reused city. From Roman aqueducts to medieval bridges, many have historically been superimposed, juxtaposed, or added with diverse forms and programmes, such as housing, restaurants, or commerce. In Portugal, for example, the Prata Aqueduct in Évora (1531) and the Ribeira Wall in Porto (1370) stand as historical precedents of occupied infrastructure. While aqueducts and walls provided the structural support necessary for appropriation, larger infrastructural viaducts enabled these structures to become truly lived spaces, places of shelter and habitation.

Contemporary occupations of urban railway infrastructure resonate with various early 20th-century visionary proposals that imagined the future city as a linear, multifunctional system. Arturo Soria y Mata’s linear city, an urban model that organises the city along an axis integrating a public transport system with residential plots, facilities, and green spaces (Soria y Mata, 1913), and partially realised in Madrid’s Ciudad Lineal neighbourhood, based on the Soria y Mata’s 1882 project, was part of the imagination of many thinkers as a process of city-making. Others introduced the concept of viaduct-buildings containing multi-level streets, where infrastructure is inseparable from the urban fabric, defining both the physical and visual structure of the ideal city. Edgar Chambless proposed Roadtown (Chambless, 1910), a continuous linear city organised along an infrastructural axis that integrated housing, transport, and services. At the same time, Eugène Hénard’s Rue Future, conceptualised the street as a stratified section in which urban functions—traffic, commerce, housing—were vertically superimposed, foreshadowing the morphological

complexity of the modern city (Hénard, 1911). Later, Le Corbusier's Plan Obus for Algiers in 1930 introduced an elevated structure superimposing a modern city upon the existing one, an overtly vertical, infrastructural approach to urbanisation (Boesiger, 2013, pp. 140–143). In the 1960s, Peter Eisenman's Jersey Corridor Project revisited the logic of linearity as a territorial organiser, incorporating mobility, housing, and collective functions into a single infrastructural corridor (Stern, 1966, p. 7). These proposals share a common vision of the city as a continuous organism, in which infrastructure ceases to be mere support and becomes an inhabitable space.

Since the 1980s, as urban infrastructures have increasingly become obsolete or underutilised, there has been a renewed interest in their reuse and recycling. In numerous cities, disused railway corridors have been transformed into multifunctional pedestrian public spaces, fostering their integration into the urban fabric and promoting collective appropriation. Notable examples include the Promenade Plantée in Paris, designed by Patrick Berger (1989–1993) and constructed atop the Viaduc des Arts (active since 1945); New York's High Line, coordinated by James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro (2008–2023); and the Jardins de Sants in Barcelona, designed by Sergi Godia and Ana Molino (2016). These projects share a common goal: to re-signify abandoned infrastructure as green pedestrian corridors, offering accessible pathways and spaces for leisure and rest. Also noteworthy are the examples of the Savignyplatz Station viaduct in Berlin (from the 1980s) or Zurich's Market Hall and Viaduct Arches, designed by EM2N (2004–2010), which utilise the space beneath active viaducts for a variety of programmes while maintaining operational railway use. In such cases, infrastructural heritage becomes a catalyst for urban development, without compromising its structural integrity.

3. Community Space in the Japanese Traditional City

In Japan, the concept of community space and/or communal space transcends mere functionality, assuming a central role in mediating the relationship between the individual and the surrounding social context. These spaces are not simply sites of physical co-presence, but cultural and symbolic devices that emerge in the thresholds between the private and public city. Both community and communal spaces involve collective use and social interaction, but their scope differs. Community spaces are typically open to the public and serve broader social, cultural, or civic functions within a neighbourhood. Communal spaces, by contrast, are shared among a defined group, such as artists in a cultural hub or residents of a shared housing project, and are intended for more private use (Sand, 2013). In the Japanese context, these spaces are embedded within the built fabric, being more closely associated with the private city than with common or generic public space.

The notion of the “common city” here refers to a city conceived as a shared good, a collectively produced and participatory space with a strong communal identity. For Stavros Stavrides, for instance, “common space” is neither a pre-existing public space nor a merely shared private one. Rather, it is a space in continuous collective production, socially constructed through practices of use, appropriation, and sharing. The city is understood as a social and collaborative process sustained by relationships of care, use, and solidarity (Stavrides, 2014, 2016).

Community space in the traditional Japanese city is not codified through monumental and open public space, but emerges through liminal, spiritual, and vernacular forms, rooted in intimacy, ritual, and everyday sociability. The square, as a monumental and social space, is absent from Tokyo. The historical lack of a strong public dimension may help explain this phenomenon. In the 17th century, for example, Edo had wide

areas near its bridges initially designated for military functions, which over time were informally appropriated for commercial activity (Jinnai, 1995). As the city grew and was reshaped, these areas were absorbed into the urban fabric, creating a dense and compact landscape. Tokyo has consistently evolved through infrastructural development, with public space functioning primarily as circulation rather than as communal or community space. Exceptional spaces are the urban parks created in the early 20th century: Hibiya Park (1903), Ueno Park (1920–1936), Sumida Park (1923), and Kōkyogaien (1945).

The Japanese city was never conceived as a “democratic” place of “free intercourse” (Sand, 2013, pp. 30–31). The Kōkyogaien National Garden, or Outer Garden of the Imperial Palace, in Tokyo, exemplifies this. Established on land expropriated from the samurai during the Meiji period (1868–1912) and left vacant following imperial military occupation until 1945, it was later designated as sacred space (*seichi*, 聖地) to prevent its appropriation by political demonstrations, such as the May Day protest of 1952.

In the absence of shared public spaces, it is the private city that accommodates community celebration and interaction. Public baths, spiritual spaces and festivities, neighbourhood associations, and commercial streets are longstanding social practices that have persisted since the Edo period (1603–1868).

Japanese public baths, notably bathhouses (*sentō*, 銭湯) and hot springs (*onsen*, 温泉), have played a central role in Japanese culture beyond hygiene. Historically used for purification after funerary activities, they remain sites of social interaction in the modern age. Bathhouses were frequented daily by urban residents, especially when private bathing facilities were lacking. In this context, public baths functioned as extensions of the domestic sphere, enabling informal neighbourhood interaction. Thus, bathing becomes not merely a functional act but a social rite, a relational space, and a cultural practice rooted in collective values.

Theodore Bestor and Scott Clark describe bathing as a form of social equalisation, enabling inter-class and intergenerational coexistence that transcends social divisions and reinforces neighbourhood belonging. The absence of clothing, professional indicators or hierarchical symbols, and, of course, the shared experience of hot water, creates an environment stripped of status markers. Temporarily, all become equal, a concept culturally aligned with the practice of hanging out naked (*hadaka no tsukiai*, 裸の付き合い), which refers not to a sexual encounter but to a state of complete honesty. This act seeks to emphasise sincerity and transparency in human relationships (Bestor, 1989; Clark, 1994).

Originally constructed in wood, public baths were either freestanding structures or integrated into spiritual complexes. Architecturally, they resembled Buddhist temples, with ornate entrances, gender-segregated sections, waiting areas, and communal soaking tubs. In the Edo period, Buddhist temples often featured outdoor public baths that included a small, enclosed compartment with an integrated tub (*todanaburo*, 戸棚風呂). In the case of hot springs, typically located in rural or mountainous areas, bathing spaces were sometimes crossed by streams connecting them to rivers, offering both a retreat and a reconnection with nature, alongside the promotion of physical and spiritual well-being.

Despite the urban transformations during the Meiji period and after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, public baths remained community centres. New types of communal baths (*kyōdōburo*, 共同風呂) have emerged, built within private plots and shared among neighbours, often permitting mixed-sex bathing. With housing modernisation, however, this private social activity disappeared, and bathhouses also went into

decline. In some cases, they were repurposed as cultural hubs with galleries, cafés, and local events, in an effort to retain their communal role in urban life. Ofuroso, in Kawasaki City, is one such example. Converted from the former Takatsu Sentō by architect Miho Nakamura, the project preserved the traditional entrance with the traditional noren curtains and dual doors, but the former women’s section was transformed into a shared atelier for six artists and the former men’s side into a community library and event room.

Communal interaction also takes place in the transitional spaces of the traditional Japanese house. Günter Nitschke highlights the role of liminal spaces in fostering horizontal social relations (Nitschke, 1993), such as an external corridor on the outer side of the house (*engawa*, 縁側) and an entrance or entryway (*genkan*, 玄関) at the front (Figure 1). The *engawa* is a peripheral wooden veranda which serves for resting, contemplation, and informal reception, blurring the boundary between inside and outside. It embodies spatial liminality, mediating private and collective life. The *genkan* is more than a threshold; it is a ritual site of purification (e.g., removing shoes) and a symbolic boundary between common and intimate domains, preparing for social interaction.



Figure 1. Examples of an *engawa* (a, b) and a *genkan* space (c).

Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples offer additional examples of community spaces in the Japanese tradition. In Edo, prior to the Meiji revolution, sacred spaces were often located in the city’s lower, densely populated residential zones. Rather than occupying central sites, shrines typically lie on the edges of neighbourhoods. For example, the Myōjin and Hie shrines in Kanda, along with the Sensō-ji temple in Asakusa, underpin urban organisation and structure the surrounding working-class district. The denser the urban surroundings, the more central the shrine’s role, both in spiritual significance and in hosting periodic markets and fairs (Jinnai, 1995).

The Shinto shrines are often set in natural environments, and host rituals, festivals, and moments of collective introspection. Their architecture foregrounds nature and underlines the spiritual dimension of community communication. During festivals, the shrine approach road (*sandō*, 参道) becomes an informal space for conviviality with food stalls and sets of cultural manifestations; the portable Shinto shrine (*mikoshi*, 御輿), carried in processions through the streets during festivals, symbolically marks neighbourhood boundaries and expresses communal devotion (Imazumi, 2013; Silva, 2017).

Buddhist temples were often relocated to urban peripheries to anchor new residential zones, becoming integral to Edo’s expansion and community formation. They are usually surrounded by cemeteries and often

established on former waste grounds. Over time, they evolved into popular gathering spaces combining religious, hygienic, economic, and festive functions. These zones often included bathhouses, theatres, tea houses, food stalls, and formed vibrant public environments (Silva, 2017).

The Sensō-ji temple in Asakusa exemplifies how such spaces maintain close ties with local traditions. Already a spiritual hub before Tokugawa's establishment of Edo as the capital in 1603, it remains central to Japanese spirituality. The Asakusa Sanja Matsuri (spring festival, May) and New Year's Day prayers continue to attract thousands. Notably, the daily market along the *sandō* (Nakamise-dori), between the gate (*Kaminarimon*, 雷門) and the main building (*Kannon-do*, 観音堂), evokes Edo-period religio-economic dynamics.

Since the 1950s, the idea of community space in Japan has also encompassed civic self-organisation through neighbourhood associations, the *chōnai-kai* in cities and the *buraki-kai* in rural villages. These associations manage the everyday use and appropriation of private urban spaces for community life, cultural activities, and production (Nitschke, 1993; Santos, 2021). For instance, in Tokyo, during the Obon festival, a *chōnai-kai* association, in Ueno, repurposes a school courtyard for Bon Odori dances to celebrate the end of summer and honour their ancestors.

Traditional social habits also survive in Tokyo's commercial streets, such as in Shinjuku or Ueno. *Yokocho* streets, narrow alleys filled with yakitori stalls, sake bars, and karaoke venues, shift the city from its structured daytime corporate persona to a nocturnal, informal environment. This is an urban vernacular, where Edo-period forms persist in modern infrastructures (Jinnai, 1995). They inhabit voids beneath viaducts and between buildings, becoming spontaneous, bazaar-like common spaces. Ameyoko or Ameya-Yokochō, for instance, is a popular market under the Yamanote Line between the Ueno and Okachimachi stations. Its name, a contraction of "candy store alley" or "America alley," reflects its post-war black-market origins. As a place where people gather, communicate, and exchange sentiments, the Japanese market streets are a "unique cultural creation" that reflects the enduring need for shared communal experience amid the pressures of everyday urban professional life (Balsas, 2016, p. 228). According to João Rafael Santos, "these commercial and public facilities become local nodes for a 24-h living socio-spatial fabric" (Santos, 2021, p. 84).

4. Adapted Railway Infrastructure

The Tokyo Metropolitan Area encompasses approximately 13 km², with around 50 km (equating to 780,000 m²) of elevated railway infrastructure within the 23 central wards. These viaducts form part of a dense public transportation network, structured through modal interchanges between 16 railway lines and the subway system. The total railway length is approximately 2,124 km, of which 887 km belong to public lines (such as the Yamanote and Chuo Lines operated by JR East Urban Development Corporation, along with Sobu, Saikyo, and Keihin-Tohoku), and 1,237 km to private lines (including Tobu, Seibu, Keisei, Keio, Tokyu, Keikyu, and Odakyu). Nevertheless, according to the study of Arnon Snapir, it is estimated that only 40% of the space beneath these viaducts is currently being utilised. In Tokyo, the closer one gets to the lower city, the greater the intensity of occupation beneath elevated railway viaducts. Conversely, in peripheral areas, it is common to find these spaces vacant or used primarily for car and bicycle parking, particularly in proximity to railway stations (Snapir, 2012).

The occupation of vacant space between infrastructure and public space has, at several historical moments, resulted from informal uses—following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, after August 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War, and again during the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964. Over time, the infrastructuring of the territory and subsequent occupations beneath viaducts led to the creation of continuous “urban walls” composed of small- and medium-scale structures such as housing, warehouses, restaurants, clinics, schools, and offices. With the exception of the Oimachi Line (Tokyu Company), most residential developments located beneath the infrastructure in Tokyo have gradually been removed.

Jorge Almazán suggests that infill beneath elevated railway infrastructure in Tokyo is not solely the result of formal planning, but also of a spontaneous growth that maintains a strong connection to the scale of the surrounding urban context. He argues that it is the presence of small-scale commercial units that generates the diversity and unique character of this form of occupation (Almazán & StudioLAB, 2022). These spaces are appealing precisely because they are not constrained in the manner of conventional shopping centres. Instead, they are organised along structuring axes or interior streets, both longitudinal and transversal in relation to the infrastructure. Open-fronted shops facing the public space establish connections between both sides of the viaduct, enabling the creation of passages that attract pedestrians and serve as extensions of the street itself (Almazán & StudioLAB, 2022; Silva Leite, 2025).

The relationship between infrastructure and topography is key to understanding the contextual integration of these systems. Most occupations beneath viaducts occur in the lower-lying areas of the city, as if the railway infrastructure were levelled from the higher city throughout its entire extent. The diagram in Figure 2 seeks to illustrate this spatial separation: The red line denotes the elevation threshold of 15 metres above sea level, marking the transition between the upper and lower parts of the city.



Figure 2. Graphical synthesis illustrating railway infrastructure and viaducts in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, differentiating between occupied or partially occupied spaces (orange) and vacant spaces (black) beneath.

The Yamanote Line, for instance, extends for approximately 34.4 km, of which 5.1 km are elevated viaducts crossing the “lower city” between the Ueno and Shimbashi stations. Along this stretch, the structural systems of the viaducts vary in material, height, and spacing of apertures. One type is composed of reinforced concrete viaducts with pillars and slabs—these porticoed spaces may be traversed longitudinally, resembling a covered street. This protective condition allows the city to appropriate the space with a variety of programmes, either juxtaposed or added. Another type consists of vaulted brick-and-mortar structures with ornamental stonework—private arcaded systems, originally constructed in the early 20th century to support railway logistics and movement.

Since the early 21st century, the physical and social degradation of certain spaces beneath viaducts has become a central concern within the context of urban intervention in Japanese cities. Railway infrastructure has emerged as a potential setting for commercial and cultural activities characterised by strong community dynamics. Its pillars and arches have been reinterpreted as compositional elements within community interaction spaces, organised among and within singular or composite, permanent or ephemeral volumes, reflecting a tension between tradition and modernity in architectural expression.

4.1. Production Processes

Interventions beneath railway infrastructure may be categorised into two transformation processes: juxtaposition and addition. These processes share the idea that the infrastructure can be used as a shelter and the pillar structure can serve as a metric for organising space beneath it. However, they differ in that juxtaposition inserts new elements between the pillars, defining them as part of the circulation, whereas addition incorporates the pillars into the design and organisation of the interior space of the new buildings. Such interventions tend to emphasise the coexistence of infrastructure and programme, enabling uses such as housing, markets, cultural centres, sports facilities, or leisure areas, arranged alongside or within the railway structure. Given the focus on active viaducts, where original use is preserved—there is no change of order—the process of superimposition is excluded from this synthesis.

Juxtaposition refers to interventions where new forms or spaces are inserted between existing pillars. Typically, these are autonomous built elements that nest within the infrastructure, retaining their own identity while generating communal or community spaces. The sense of community is enhanced through the interplay between the new volumes, the memory conveyed by the infrastructure, and the surrounding urban fabric. Two case types are explored to illustrate this intention: shared residential space and informal green space.

Shared residential space refers to the appropriation of urban structures as lived-in environments, whether for permanent or temporary use, fostering community at two urban scales: among inhabitants themselves and between these inhabitants and their neighbourhood. This relational and adaptive mode of dwelling strengthens the idea of regenerating fragmented urban fabrics. Within this approach, infrastructure becomes part of an affordable and shared housing method, composed of small, aggregated housing units using the space between pillars as shelter.

Informal green space beneath linear infrastructure refers to the reuse of interstitial, unused, or expectant spaces through the integration of vegetation and water management systems, thereby converting residual

areas into habitable green corridors. This hypothesis reinforces the notion that repurposing derelict, privately owned urban fragments can serve as a viable strategy for integrating new green infrastructure into dense urban fabrics (Lux, 2024). In Tokyo, the relevance of this approach is particularly pronounced. Strategies such as “permeable areas” and “adaptive planting” not only mitigate environmental impacts but also catalyse community dynamics by juxtaposing circulation and rest areas with temporary activities such as markets.

Addition concerns intervention strategies that add a new building to the viaduct structure, creating a symbiosis between the viaduct’s supporting elements and the new spatial composition. Here, the pillar structure is actively incorporated into the design of the inhabited space. The arches and columns cease to be mere supports and become central components of the spatial experience. Addition thus represents both spatial and symbolic fusion between city and community space, capable of creating (a) shared commercial space and (b) multifunctional space.

Shared commercial space exemplifies an intervention where space is structured as a co-working system, with dedicated studios and workstations for local artistic communities to create and sell their products. Spatially, these community spaces consist of small work units, either isolated or interconnected, free-standing or attached to the viaduct structure, all unified by a shared axis or circulation spine.

Multifunctional space refers to the activation of interstitial space as a receptacle for hybrid community practices, blending social, cultural, and productive functions. Through formal appropriation, local management, or shared programming, these spaces evolve from mere functional voids into three complementary outcomes: infrastructures of proximity, sites of diverse inhabitation, and spaces for community experimentation. Community space, in this sense, is not simply a spatial typology but a relational condition that values citizens’ active participation in the (re)definition of their immediate environment.

4.2. Case Studies

The selected case studies share a common vision: to transform infrastructure into inhabitable and inclusive architecture without losing their original use. Each example was chosen to represent a distinct approach across different scales, structural compositions, community programmes, histories, and, crucially, construction processes. These examples are organised according to the criteria and themes previously established.

4.2.1. Shared Residential Space: Chuo Line House Koganei, Koganei Ward, Tokyo

Koganei developed as a dormitory town on the outskirts of Tokyo during the post-war economic boom. The proximity of the Chuo Line contributed to the city’s expansion but also created neglected residual areas adjacent to the railway. The Chuo Line House Koganei emerged in this specific context as part of a pilot programme for participatory urban regeneration, simultaneously aimed at enhancing the infrastructure and providing student housing at affordable and low rents (Tsune et al., 2020).

The project was developed in 2010 by the collective Workshop, led by architects Akio Yachida, Ko Kitayama, and Michirou Kinoshita. It is based on typological hybridity, dissolving the boundaries between private and public space, dwelling and culture, and leisure and work (personal communication, May 7, 2025). The buildings are simple, compact volumes, opaque in private areas and transparent in their shared spaces, establishing a direct relationship with the railway and the surrounding urban fabric (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Chuo Line House Koganei, (a) before and (b) after the intervention. Courtesy of Workshop Architects.

Chuo Line House Koganei extends for 350 metres beneath the elevated infrastructure, between the Higashi-Koganei and Musashi-Koganei stations. It consists of three blocks (L, H, C) of small-scale housing, each based on the repetition of an aggregated typology, and two communal spaces including a restaurant and a library, which aim to foster interaction between residents and the wider city (Figure 4). To maintain affordability, the formal scale of the spaces is restrained, and their material execution carefully controlled.

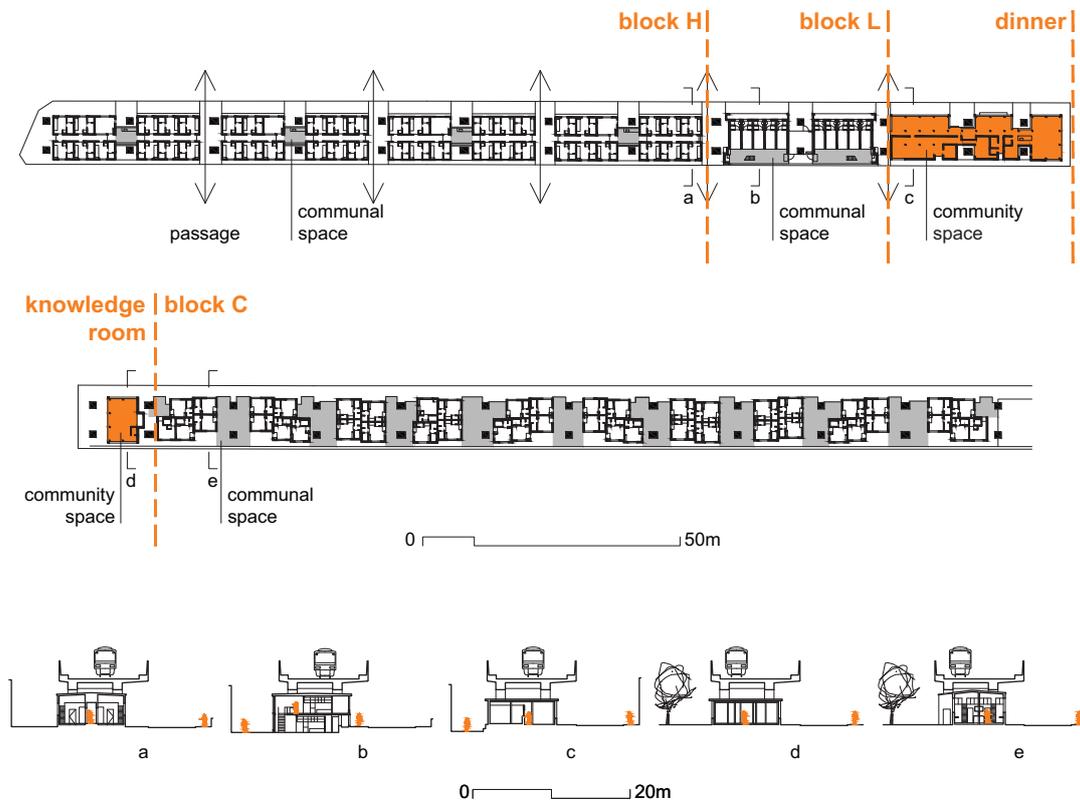


Figure 4. Chuo Line House Koganei: The drawings identify the different housing typologies that make up the housing complex (Blocks H, L, and C) and their relationship with the community spaces (dining and knowledge rooms) and communal areas (passages that cross beneath the infrastructure and between the houses). The sections, labelled from a to e, are intended to show the vertical organisation and scale of each of the identified blocks and spaces.

In the current European debate on affordable housing, this example offers a model for (temporary) housing that could be applied to underused urban spaces, infrastructure voids, vacant lots, or unused buildings, especially in contexts with social aims or student housing needs.

Here, the idea of juxtaposition does not differ substantially from other spatial configurations: Formally, the volumes remain autonomous, without physical contact between them. However, the appropriation of the resulting interstitial spaces occurs according to two distinct strategies. The first, corresponding to blocks L and H, concerns the transitional spaces located beneath the viaduct and between the pillars. These assume a public character, functioning as public passages to connect two adjacent streets and access areas to the housing units. In these cases, the communal spaces are located in the kitchens incorporated within the internal space of the building and are shared by groups of 10 to 20 residents. The second, observable in block C, develops between the infrastructure and the housing units, within the private domain. Nevertheless, these spaces are conceived as an extension of the domestic sphere, fostering interaction and sharing among four to five residents.

4.2.2. Informal Green Space: Elevated Garden, Nerima Ward, Tokyo

Built in 1997, the railway viaduct in Nerima Ward was elevated to an unusually high level to minimise the noise impact of trains on adjacent residential areas. As a result, the interstitial space beneath the structure remained unused, enclosed and bounded by fencing. In 2024, this space was finally reappropriated for community use. Its atypical height allowed for the creation of a space ventilated and filled with natural light, evoking a sense of lightness and permeability.

The Elevated Garden was designed by architect Kiyooki Takeda as part of his studio's ongoing research on the reuse of urban infrastructure into sustainable structures. The project posed a question: "Is a garden beneath an elevated railway line possible?" (Takeda, 2024). In a poetic reading of the place, Kiyooki Takeda likened the continuous, robust structure, punctuated by a sequence of pillars, to a reservoir capable of capturing and retaining the city's rainwater, referencing Tokyo Metropolitan Area's Outer Underground Discharge Channel in Kasukabe, for instance (personal communication, May 16, 2025).

The proposal thus consisted of the creation of a garden, a form of nearby nature within the heart of a residential neighbourhood, featuring vegetation, a pedestrian path, and seating areas for everyday appropriation by the local people: a multifunctional social and community space. Structurally, the project incorporates distinct systems of occupation that respect the limits of the infrastructure, subverting its purely technical role into an "intimate" and vegetal relationship with the local residents (Figure 5).

Conceptually, the project aligns with the principles of the Fiber City framework, cities structured by hybrid infrastructure that integrates technical and ecological systems. The Fiber City concept, developed by Japanese architect and academic Hidetoshi Ohno, proposes a reconfiguration of the contemporary city based on continuous, linear infrastructure as a response to the excessive centralisation and rigidity of nodal urban models. Fiber City envisions the city as restructured along infrastructural lines (railways, roads), forming a fibrous and interconnected pattern that generates green corridors. Linear infrastructures thus cease to be merely a transport system and become resilient structures capable of adaptation, regeneration, and responsiveness to the challenges of over-densified urban areas. The idea of a continuous green city is



Figure 5. Elevated Garden, Nerima, 2024. Courtesy of Kiyo Takeda Architects.

not solely based on an ecological principle but instead seeks to integrate public and infrastructural space with residential, ecological, and social programmes within the same urban fabric (Ohno, 2016).

Takeda's Elevated Garden is an architectural realisation of this principle: The interstitial, latent space beneath the elevated railway is transformed into a habitable green fibre, populated with vegetation, walkways, and social spaces. The intervention makes use of light, reversible, and modular structures that can be adjusted, dismantled, or expanded according to changing urban and environmental needs, such as accommodating a street market.

The proposal to establish relationships between vegetation and forms of ephemeral appropriation may evoke the practices developed by local communities around Shinto shrines and traditional Japanese gardens. These spaces, although belonging to the private sphere, function as places of public encounter, articulating a tension between the natural dimension—understood as a cultural product—and the artificial, dense structures of the city. In this sense, the project literally applies the idea that infrastructure can be reprogrammed as an active, cultural, and sustainable urban fabric. This constructive approach gives it the flexibility and temporality required for appropriation by diverse programmes, dissolving technical infrastructure into micro-centralities that are both green and social.

4.2.3. Shared Commercial Space: mAacute Kanda Manseibashi, Chiyoda Ward, and 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, Taito Ward, Tokyo

Examples such as mAacute Kanda Manseibashi (Chuo Line) and 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan (Yamanote Line) illustrate the transformation of residual infrastructure into hubs of cultural and commercial activity. The first intervention occupies a vaulted structure, each arch delineating a spatial unit open at both ends. The new volume is added to the existing building, establishing a symbiotic dialogue between structural and spatial elements. The second intervention is inserted within a porticoed framework, where space is modulated by the rhythm of the pillars and articulated through a sequence of small work and retail units. Unlike the first, this

intervention has diverse forms of occupation and operates between autonomous and embedded structures, negotiating a delicate balance between juxtaposition and addition (Figure 6).

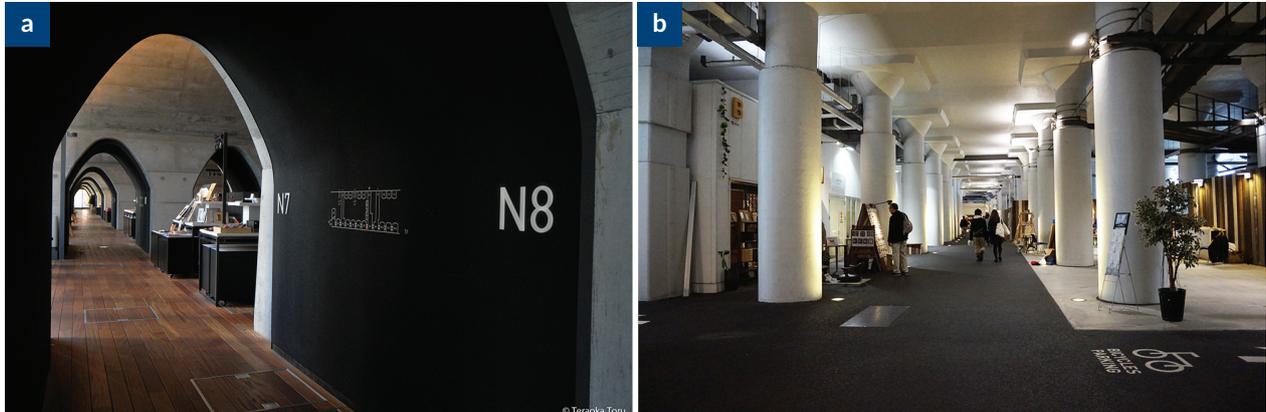


Figure 6. Interior spaces showing (a) the arches of the mAach and (b) the colonnade of the 2k540. Courtesy of MIKAN Architects.

The mAach project, designed by the architecture studio MIKAN, proposed reopening the vaults towards the public space, establishing a pedestrian walkway that reconnects the street to the adjacent Kanda River. The interior was meticulously reconfigured to highlight the existing materiality—brick, concrete, and iron—through an intervention that prioritises spatial continuity over the insertion of new built volumes (personal communication, May 2, 2025). Although it accommodates commercial functions, the building acts as an urban interface, embedding elements of collective appropriation within the contrasting dynamics of the surrounding neighbourhoods. The ground floor is conceived as a continuous common space open to diverse uses, while the upper level provides a café and viewing platform over the former railway platforms, weaving together memory and present use (Figure 7).

In contrast, 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan is a commercial gallery located between the Okachimachi and Akihabara stations. Created in 2010 by JR East Urban Development Corporation, and inspired by the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement in Europe, the space was transformed from a former warehouse, restaurant, and car park zone into a community centre dedicated to Japanese craftsmanship.

The “Artisan Street” hosts 49 artisan stalls aligned along both sides of a 100-metre-long covered “street,” where two rows of pillars vaguely recall the intercolumniation of a dipteral Greek temple or the colonnade of St Peter’s Square in the Vatican, designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini between 1656 and 1667, though here they are interspersed with built volumes for housing work and retail spaces (see Figure 6). These units, arranged in a uniform white palette, are composed of ephemeral structures punctuated by glazed openings that foster close interaction between artisan, product, and visitor. In addition to shops, the facility includes practical workshops and a communal events area, promoting a dynamic and socially engaged atmosphere.

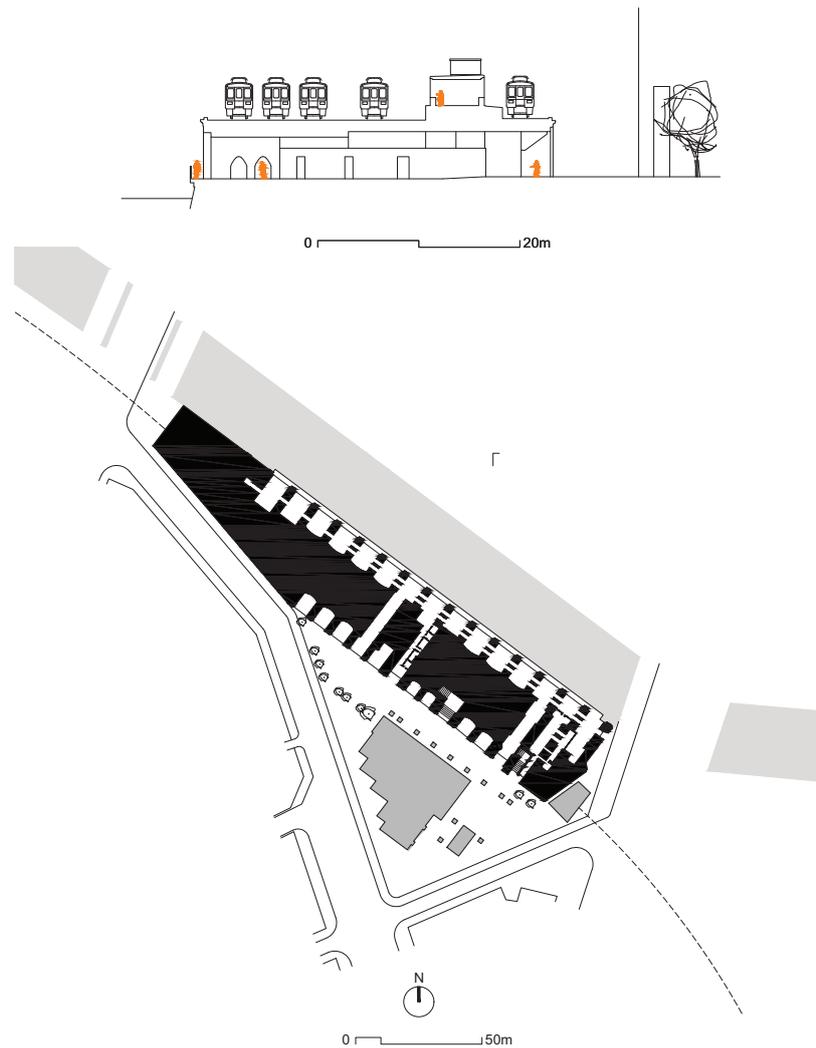


Figure 7. mAacute Kanda Manseibashi: cross-section showing the passage beneath the viaduct between the public space and the Kanda River (top); and ground-floor plan illustrating the shape of the arched galleries and spaces (bottom).

4.2.4. Multifunctional Space: Koganecho Area Management Center, Naka Ward, Yokohama

The Koganecho area, located in Naka Ward, between the Ooka River and the Keikyū railway line in Yokohama, was known until the early 21st century as a marginalised district, marked by sex work and illegal activity. The Keikyū Line was constructed in the 1930s as part of the city’s reconstruction following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, but it was the Second World War that generated a complex and divergent occupation of the area. The presence of Allied forces in the city centre prompted a migratory shift to the peripheries, where the voids beneath the viaduct were appropriated for commercial uses. These small “restaurants” provided American soldiers with entertainment, a social function immortalised by Akira Kurosawa in the film *Heaven and Hell* (1963).

Historically, however, Koganecho was always a “commonplace,” a peripheral residential district established on former agricultural land along the river’s northern bank. The space beneath the infrastructure consisted of a dense urban fabric, combining residential and commercial uses and shaped by the rhythm of the viaduct’s

spans, one house between every two pillars, and varied building heights of one to two storeys. The idea of producing shared spaces, in 2005, galvanised the desire to transform the site in service of the local community, leading to the demolition of many of the existing buildings under the viaduct.

Integrated into Yokohama's Creative City programme in 2008, the Koganecho Area Management Centre project aimed to reimagine the now-vacant shopfronts and the spaces beneath the infrastructure as places for artistic expression and community engagement, while re-establishing the neighbourhood's relationship with the Ooka River. Developed by several Japanese architectural design offices (Figure 8), the project was based on urban permeability, transforming the enclosed space beneath the railway into an open, transparent, and programmatically diverse area with seven spaces, such as studios, art galleries, social lounges, and a "public square" (Yamano & Suzuki, 2021).

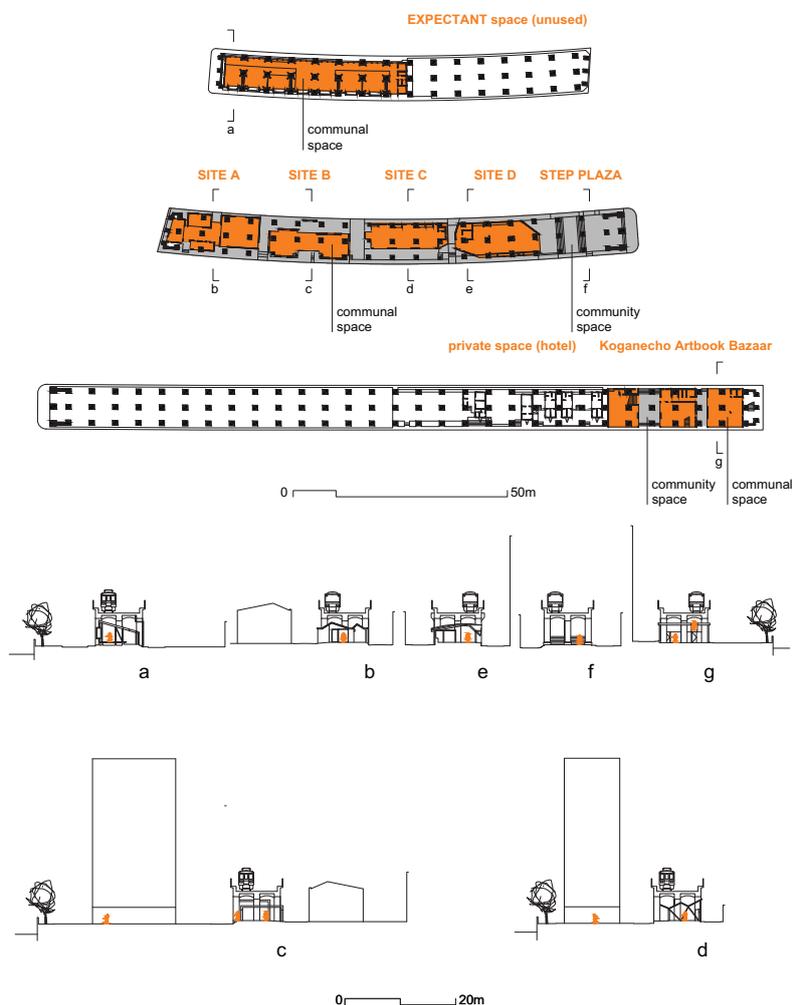


Figure 8. The Koganecho Area Management Centre ground floor plans showing the different spaces that make up the ensemble, as follows: Kogane Studio (studios), designed by Sogabe Laboratory, Kanagawa University, in collaboration with Mati Design; Site A (gallery), designed by Contemporaries Atelier; Site B (office), designed by Studio 2; Site C (workspace), designed by the architectural office Workstation; Site D (meeting room), designed by Kuisimi Architecture Office; Step Plaza (Kaidan Square), designed by Nishikura Architectural Design Office; and Koganecho Artbook Bazaar (Hinode Studio), jointly designed by YGSA – Yoshihiko Iida Studio, Yokohama National University's Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Design, and SALHAUS. The sections, labelled from a to g, are intended to show the vertical organisation and scale of each of the identified sites and spaces.

The Kogane Studio allows its façades to fully open towards the street, facilitating a fluid transition between interior and exterior and enabling the space to be adapted to various uses, such as a market. Inspired by a fusion of the *engawa* and the *genkan*, transitional spaces in traditional Japanese architecture, the project establishes a subtle boundary between the artists' workspace and the public space. This space is identified in the architectural drawings as a "compacted earth floor" (*doma*, 土間), similar to a *genkan* and strongly connected to the street; however, the *engawa* is a transitional space that links a private room with the exterior, as is the case here (personal communication, May 10, 2025). Although situated within a modern urban context, the building integrates traditional architectural elements (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The *doma* in the Kogane Studio serving as a transitional space between the street and the artists' workspace. Courtesy of Masashi Sogabe.

Sites A, B, C, and D (see Figure 8) propose the coexistence of a new urban fabric with the existing structure, employing concrete to form diffuse, organic volumes and roofscapes that engage with the infrastructural pillars. These new masses appear as extensions of the viaduct, simultaneously revealing and concealing themselves—that is, alternating between addition and juxtaposition as a formal strategy. Between these elements, spaces emerge that evoke both squares and streets, offering subtle and continuous connections to the wider city, particularly towards the Ooka River. This layering of spatial elements generates urban vitality, both physical and visual, transforming the spatial experience of the neighbourhood.

To this end, the architectural design-projects prioritised visual and pedestrian access, continuous openings, and a sequence of small-scale spaces for artistic exhibition, local culture, and independent commerce. These passages enable gatherings and movement, serving as sites of community life, capable of revitalising existing uses or accommodating new, temporary, or permanent functions (Mireille, 2017). Architecture here acts as a mediator between infrastructure and community, promoting "continuous use" as a strategy for safety and social cohesion. The passage proposal shown in Figure 10 is more provocative. The idea, developed by the architectural office Studio 2, led by Miya Akiko and Shinpei Miki, envisions a connection between a nearby street to the north and the river, passing through Site B—and Site C by extrapolation—and the ground floors of two private buildings on the southern side. However, these passages remain closed to the public (personal communication, May 19, 2025).

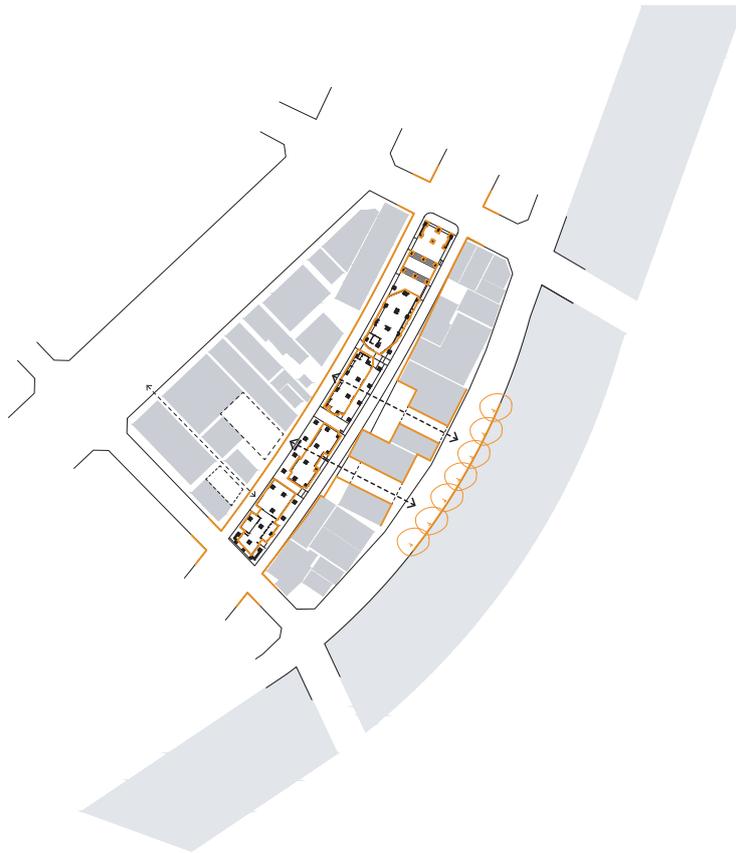


Figure 10. Passage proposal for Sites B and C (see Figure 8).

The Step Plaza is a large public space accessible to the community and suitable for a wide range of events and everyday activities. Its position at the intersection between the urban layout and the infrastructural system grants it a unique character, being fully accessible from all sides. The design promotes flexibility and acts as a catalyst for community interaction, accommodating activities such as markets, dance, music, and play. The plaza is composed of six transverse steps facing two stages, which also function as transitional and circulation spaces. The timber flooring contrasts with the concrete pillars, emphasising the plaza's role as a space for appropriation and collective engagement.

The Koganecho Artbook Bazaar, or Hinode Studio, was built as a series of structures separated by ground-level transverse passages yet connected by a shared rooftop walkway accessible from the public space. This longitudinal axis, running between the viaduct and the Artbook Bazaar buildings, frames views through the pillars towards the surrounding urban landscape. These passages function as transitional zones that dissolve the boundary between interior and exterior, creating gallery-like spaces for events, exhibitions, and public activities.

5. Conclusion

Infrastructure possesses a transformative capacity that exceeds its technical purpose, often becoming a generator of urban space and social meaning. Form and function are not fixed, but open to reinterpretation across time and at different scales (Ellin, 1999). When infrastructure engages with the city, it can act

simultaneously as a means of connection—a carrier of memory—between planning and spontaneous dynamics. Its interactions with the urban fabric are not merely physical but also cultural and symbolic, producing effects that were neither intended nor fully predictable. A more integrated perspective recognises infrastructure as an active and evolving component of urban life. As seen above, it possesses the capacity to accommodate a variety of community-scale programmes without compromising its (infra)structural significance. By acknowledging its potential to support, disrupt, and reconfigure both spatial and social structures, infrastructure emerges not only as a technical system but as a critical element in shaping the future of cities, one that connects past and present, and offers possibilities for inclusive and dynamic urban development (Villalonga Munar, 2025).

Although less common, European cities have also begun to explore semi-permanent uses of viaduct spaces, as seen in the Les Grands Voisins in Paris or the Viaduct Arches in London. But still, numerous examples demonstrate its potential through temporary uses such as skateparks, cycle paths, or informal markets. In contrast, however, the Japanese context highlights a different potential for spaces beneath viaducts within the urban environment. It supports the hypothesis that these spaces can be permanent, housing emergent and built programmes such as residential units or centres for social and/or community interaction.

The Japanese private city often takes the initiative in creating community-oriented environments. This perspective challenges European approaches and redefines the boundaries between public and private domains, revealing new forms of collective urban experience. The blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces generates complex urban dynamics, challenging traditional interpretations of the city. Yet, this ambiguity enhances spatial versatility and fosters new, enriching modes of urban living. An arch or a colonnade beneath a viaduct possesses the capacity to unleash “a series of high-potential modes of urban habitation” (Silva Leite, 2025, p. 108).

Interstitial urban spaces expose the tensions between planning and the spontaneous dynamics of urban life, while simultaneously offering opportunities for design experimentation and (re)use. From this perspective, the areas beneath viaducts emerge as active laboratories for rethinking common, communal, and community spaces within the contemporary city. These spaces can become part of the city’s regeneration process, establishing a dialogue with the surrounding urban context while fostering openness to the community through the creation of shared spaces. Such characteristics enable the transformation of previously undervalued residual areas into places of social, cultural, and organic value. The appropriation of vacant space beneath infrastructure therefore emerges as a strategic opportunity to address contemporary urban challenges, such as land scarcity, the need to promote social cohesion, and the integration of green and residential areas within the existing urban fabric (Phelps & Silva, 2018).

Rather than opposing the infrastructural grid to the formal structure of the city, these interventions frequently operate within and alongside the infrastructure, utilising the repetitive rhythm of viaducts, the linearity of railway paths, and the modular logic of supporting pillars. This embeddedness enables a fine-grained relationship between architectural form and social use. The spatial configurations often adopt strategies of porosity, continuity, and accessibility, allowing both integration with surrounding neighbourhoods and the emergence of new forms of collective life. As such, the shape of the city is not only preserved but subtly rearticulated through these acts of civic reprogramming.

By reclaiming and reprogramming infrastructural voids as active urban components, these design projects challenge the traditional dichotomy between structure and use, offering a critical framework for inclusive and adaptive urban spaces, whether permanent or temporary, and whether achieved through juxtaposition or the addition of new forms. At the same time, Japanese culture remains deeply embedded in contemporary urban design, not as a nostalgic reference but as a continuous process of city-making. This dynamic interaction between tradition and innovation sustains a living architectural identity that continuously redefines urban space. Infrastructure transitions from a purely technical element to an active role in urban life, supporting everyday uses that reinforce both the sense of belonging and the centrality of community in the ongoing process of transforming the city.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Miguel Freitas Silva, architect, holds a master's degree in rehabilitation of architecture and urban nuclei (2010) and a PhD in urbanism (2017) from the Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, where he is an invited assistant professor. He is an integrated member of CIAUD – the Research Centre in Architecture, Urbanism and Design, and of the formaurbis LAB – urban morphology research laboratory. His research focuses on the morphological study of urban heritage, particularly on processes of urban regeneration and the reuse of the built fabric.

Night-Time Urbanism and Sustainable Regeneration: Play, Public Space, and Revitalisation in Tokyo and Melbourne

Sidh Sintusingha¹  and Alice Covatta² 

¹ Landscape Architecture Program, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, Australia

² Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Montreal, Canada

Correspondence: Sidh Sintusingha (ssint@unimelb.edu.au)

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Abstract

As cities navigate the challenges of commercial decline, suburbanisation, and demographic transition, night-time urbanism has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension of sustainable urban regeneration. This article positions “night play” as both an analytical lens and a regenerative practice, foregrounding its potential to link cultural vitality, social inclusivity, and urban resilience. Two contrasting case studies are analysed: Tokyo’s Sangenjaya, a bottom-up night-time ecology of tiny alleys containing a network of small bars and eateries shaped by post-war urban evolution, and Melbourne’s White Night festival, a top-down, annual event attracting 500,000–700,000 visitors and generating a large urban economic impact. Through a mixed methodology of morphological analysis, embodied observation, discourse analysis, and urban policy review, the study compares emergent and curated forms of night-time play, highlighting their differing logics, spatialities, and regenerative effects. Findings reveal that informal, embedded nocturnal economies facilitate sustained, small-scale regeneration rooted in community and adaptive reuse, whereas planned, event-led activations offer high-visibility cultural and economic returns but risk temporal discontinuity and commodification of urban play. The research argues for hybrid approaches that combine the resilience of evolved nightscapes with the catalytic potential of curated events, positioning play as a tool for inclusive, culturally resonant, and sustainable urban futures.

Keywords

bottom-up practices; hybrid approaches; inclusivity; Melbourne; night-time economy; play; sustainable urban regeneration; Tokyo; top-down practices

1. Introduction: Regenerative Night Play in the Night-Time Economy

Van Liempt et al. (2015) wrote:

Urban nightlife has much potential as a time of social transactions, as a realm of play, as “the time of nobody” which is free for one’s own personal development....Compared to the daytime, the night offers a time for trying to be someone the daytime may not let you be. (p. 408)

Scrabble-Word.com (n.d.) defines the verb “play” as the ability to “amuse oneself by engaging in imaginative pretence.”

Nocturnality in nature enables species to adapt to environmental constraints through spatial and temporal niche division (Levy et al., 2018). In cities, however, nocturnality emerges not from ecological necessity but from socio-cultural and economic desires. Urban nightscapes, illuminated and curated, become laboratories of play and leisure, generating distinctive spatio-social niches with the potential to drive sustainable urban regeneration (Gwiaździński, 2015). These night-time activities allow cities to diversify their temporal economies, extend public life into new rhythms, and experiment with alternative models of collective engagement (Boulin & Henckel, 2013), helping to mitigate the fragile transience of contemporary existence (Bauman, 2000).

Play, as Lefebvre frames within the “Dionysian side of existence” (1974/1991b, p. 178), is an urban force of excess, intoxication, and risk—offering space for creative escape from daily life. Stevens (2007) proposes that urban playful behaviour facilitates escape through separation from the everyday by creating boundary conditions and rules, enabling people to test and expand limits, and facilitating encounters with strangers. Caillois (1958/1961) further categorises play as competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo—producing temporary “waste” of time and energy that paradoxically generates new forms of social and spatial vitality. Within the night-time economy (NTE), such playful practices are increasingly mobilised as instruments of regeneration, repurposing urban spaces to stimulate social cohesion, cultural branding, and economic growth.

This article, therefore, positions regenerative night play as a conceptual bridge between theories of play and debates on sustainable urbanism, clarifying how informal and institutionalised night-time practices both shape and are shaped by wider governance and cultural dynamics.

The article locates its inquiry within the global expansion and diversification of the NTE (Hadfield, 2014; Straw, 2016), from the visions of 24-hour cities rethinking city life after 5 pm (Bianchini, 1995) and Colaboratório’s (2014) *Night Manifesto*, to contemporary debates around inclusivity, governance, environmental impacts, and global-local urban identities (Pottie-Sherman, 2013; Tadié & Permanadeli, 2015; Yeo & Heng, 2014). It positions regenerative night play as a key lens for understanding the transformation of urban life after dark. Events such as white nights, night markets, festivals, and cultural programs reimagine public space, while informal, street-level practices generate their own urban scripts. These two strands—the curated and the emergent—often coexist in tension yet jointly contribute to shaping inclusive or exclusionary nocturnal urbanisms.

To interrogate these dynamics, this article selects two sharply contrasting yet complementary case studies. The first, Sangenjaya neighbourhood in Tokyo, is an example of a historically evolved, bottom-up nightscape where local businesses, informal appropriations, and embedded socio-spatial practices have sustained a vibrant *sakariba* culture. Such bottom-up phenomena manifest globally, including the rise of informal, small-scale nightlife “entertainment zones” in and around downtowns of mid-sized and large American cities (Campo & Ryan, 2008). The second, Melbourne’s White Night festival, is a highly orchestrated, top-down cultural event designed to rebrand and activate the central city through mass spectacle, digital projection, and programmed urban play. The practice is more illustrative of the standardising and commercialising effects often associated with NTEs (Van Liempt et al., p. 412), as its economic contributions are substantial (Kolvin, 2016). For example, Sampériz et al. (2025, p. 11) found that “night-time spending (from 7 pm to 7 am) accounts for approximately 30% of direct spending” in Madrid’s establishments.

These two cases are deliberately chosen to amplify the contrast between evolved informal nocturnal ecologies and institutionalised event-based regeneration strategies. By juxtaposing a *living nightscape* with a *staged night-time performance*, the study examines how different urban trajectories, governance logics, and community practices generate distinctive forms of spatial and social resilience. This comparative framework also makes a methodological contribution: showing how combining morphological analysis, embodied observation, and discourse/policy analysis enables a multi-scalar reading of regenerative, nocturnal urbanism.

2. Framework for Interrogation: Bottom-Up and Top-Down Production of Night Urbanism

The article argues for a deeper understanding of urban night spaces as environments that enable diverse multisensory experiences, activating Dionysian aspects of urban life, and enhancing everyday well-being. It foregrounds the socio-spatial dimension of the NTE, offering a street-level perspective often overlooked in literature that privileges policy and planning frameworks (Yeo & Heng, 2014). Here, night-time urbanism is conceptualised more broadly than the NTE: It refers to the social practices, spatial productions, and cultural economies that unfold after dark, while the NTE emphasises formal, policy-recognised economic activity—albeit firmly entrenched in neoliberal capitalism.

The article adopts a comparative urbanism framework to analyse how night-time play operates as both an everyday and an exceptional mode of spatial production. It conceptualises night urbanism as a dual process:

- Bottom-up, demand-led urbanism—“placemaking”—emerging organically through local initiatives, socio-spatial negotiations, and incremental adaptations; and
- Top-down, supply-led urbanism—“place-making”—orchestrated by institutions through planned events, cultural policies, and infrastructure-led regeneration (Project for Public Spaces, 2007).

The comparative strategy employed here follows a “contrasting types” approach (Ragin, 2014), deliberately juxtaposing two cases that differ in scale, temporality, and governance in order to illuminate a spectrum of nocturnal urbanism. While more analogous pairings (e.g., Roppongi Art Night and White Night Melbourne) could have been chosen, the article argues that the distance between Sangenjaya and White Night reveals how night-time play operates across divergent contexts and logics of production.

Positioning Sangenjaya and White Night Melbourne at opposite poles of this spectrum highlights the interplay between informal resilience and formal spectacle. Sangenjaya embodies a vernacular NTE, historically shaped by post-war reconstruction, small-scale entrepreneurship, and adaptive reuse of urban space. Its urban life persists through micro-interactions, DIY spatial practices, and an embedded rhythm of nocturnal sociality. By contrast, White Night Melbourne exemplifies programmed urbanism, deploying lighting, large-scale projections, and temporary pedestrianisation to curate a consumable nightscape aimed at mass audiences and tourism markets. By setting these cases in dialogue, the framework enables analysis not only of their contrasts but also of their shared role in producing socially and culturally resonant forms of night play.

The comparative framework is underpinned by three methodological components:

- Morphological and historical analysis—tracing how the physical fabric, transport networks, and economic structures of each city have enabled their distinct night-time ecologies (Covatta, 2018). The analyses drew on planning documents, land-use maps, and archival photographs verified against government reports.
- Embodied fieldwork—through site-specific *flânerie*, participant observation, and visual recording of both tangible (architecture, lighting, street life) and intangible (ambience, social interaction) aspects of nocturnal experience. The fieldwork was conducted in 2017–2018 and 2024 in Sangenjaya, and during the 2018 and 2019 White Night events in Melbourne.
- Socio-spatial mapping—linking observed practices of play, performance, and consumption to the urban design and infrastructural conditions that enable or constrain them. Coding and analysis followed an inductive thematic approach (Saldaña, 2016) to identify recurring socio-spatial patterns related to play, mobility, and inclusion.

This integrative method illuminates how space, time, and play intersect in the night city. It also allows the article to capture the tensions between inclusivity and exclusion, spontaneity and control, and local identity and global branding that characterise contemporary night-time economies. Framed through this contrasting-types comparison, the study highlights how playful practices—whether grassroots or orchestrated—can enable regenerative transformation by producing opportunities for social connection, economic activity, and cultural reproduction (Roberts, 2009). In doing so, it shows how the night city generates possibilities that challenge and complement the restrictions of the daytime city.

3. Nocturnal City Case Studies

3.1. Sangenjaya: *Unplanned Every-night Life*

De Luca (2009/2017) wrote:

The city is beautiful at night. There's danger but also freedom. The sleepless wander about: artists, murderers, gamblers....The light of day accuses, the dark of night absolves....At night no one ask for explanations....At night the city is a civil space.

Sangenjaya is well known for its distinctive identity, forged by a history of wartime destruction, resilience, and grassroots rebuilding. Today, it is considered one of Tokyo's most popular residential neighbourhoods

(Sekai Property, 2018), valued for its central position and connectivity to the capital's major infrastructural and commercial hubs, while retaining the intimate scale of Setagaya Ward. Sangenjaya's significance predates modern Tokyo: During the Edo period, it served as a rest stop for pilgrims en route to Mt. Oyama. Its formal name (Sangenjaya, adopted in 1932) and the local nickname *Sancha* (三茶 or "three tea house"), reference its historical origins at the intersection of two important roads—Setagaya-dori and Route 246 (see Figure 1).

During WWII, particularly between 24 and 25 May 1945, Sangenjaya and Taishidocho were heavily bombed by American air raids. In the post-war period, the neighbourhood became a logistics hub due to its proximity to the Tamagawa railway transfer station. It was rapidly transformed into an informal urban centre through DIY reconstruction by returning residents (Z Tokyo, 2017).

A key area within this transformation was *Sankaku-Chitai*, or "triangular area," a section of land defined by the convergence of former roads and now synonymous with dense, unplanned nightlife. The area initially grew as a black-market zone, catering to every imaginable need in the years of scarcity. Later infrastructural projects—such as the development of Komazawa Olympic Park Stadium and the elevated Route 246 highway for the 1964 Olympics—triggered a period of decline and depopulation.

However, the resulting vacancies became opportunities. New entrepreneurs appropriated and adapted the existing structures, preserving the post-war urban texture while introducing informal commercial functions. They recycled the clumsy shacks of *Sankaku-Chitai* into small businesses. Many of these spaces—*izakayas*, restaurants, karaoke bars, live houses, and snack bars—continue to define the nocturnal character of Sangenjaya today. Through this bottom-up, incremental process, the area has developed into a unique and vibrant night-time district that typifies the permeability of planning boundaries, where everyday life after dark adapts within, alongside, and at times beyond formal planning paradigms (Lefebvre, 1991a).

3.2. Morphological Analysis: Multi-Layered Sakariba District

Historically, during the Edo period, large-scale movement infrastructure—such as bridges and channels—stimulated the emergence of entertainment districts in the typology of *sakariba*, derived from *sakaru* (to flourish) and *ba* (place). The *sakariba*, a Japanese precursor to the "third place," provided vibrant social settings of tea houses, street performers, food stalls, bars, *izakaya*, pachinko parlours, and nightclubs. Described as a "zone of evaporation" (Linhart, 1986), these spaces filled the liminal temporal gap between *hare* (ritual/public life) and *ke* (private/domestic life), enabling temporary suspension of social hierarchies—a utopian "classless capitalism" (Hendry & Raveri, 2002; Slater, 2011). Revisiting Oldenburg's (1999) notion of the "third place" in this Japanese context highlights how *sakariba* functioned as culturally specific social infrastructures that blurred public/private distinctions.

With the shift from the water-based to the rail-based infrastructure—beginning with the completion of the Ginza subway line in 1927—*sakariba* districts clustered increasingly around transit nodes (Kowalczyk, 2011). Roland Barthes, visiting Tokyo, remarked on the social and commercial energy radiating from these modern infrastructure-catalysed entertainment districts:

The Japanese station is crossed by a thousand functional trajectories, from the journey to the purchase, from garment to food: a train can open onto a shoe stall. Dedicated to commerce, to transition, to

departure...the station (moreover, is that what this new complex should be called?) is stripped of that sacred character which ordinarily qualifies the major landmarks of our cities. (Barthes, 1970/1982)

Today, Tokyo's public transport network plays a critical role in determining neighbourhood vibrancy. Efficient mass transit not only facilitates commuting but also supports the regeneration of station-adjacent precincts. Importantly, the five-hour gap between the last night train and the first in the morning creates temporal voids around infrastructure. The temporal voids enable informal entertainment economies that target individuals lingering in the city by choice or circumstance to take root, though always within the elastic boundaries set by transport planning and urban morphology.

In Sangenjaya, beyond the huge Route 246 highway, the junction of the two rail lines creates a strategic node for residential life and commercial exchange. The Tokyu Den-en-toshi subway line links quickly to Shibuya—Tokyo's epicentre for fashion and transit—while the Setagaya Line, at three kilometers, is Tokyo's shortest railway that serves only the local neighbourhood. The mix has generated a district where post-war architecture coexists with modern developments—condominiums, towers, department stores, and commercial complexes—amplifying the area's potential for leisure, consumption, and spontaneous social interactions.

The cohabitation of legacy infrastructure and new morphologies forms a dense, hybrid urban fabric in Sangenjaya, exemplified by the Sankaku-Chitai area. Here, a complex of narrow, car-free laneways provides spatial freedom and a symbolic "forgiveness zone," where everyday norms dissolve. Navigating the space involves weaving through izakayas, snack bars, karaoke booths, and street-level nightlife, activating the Cailloisian sense of vertigo (Caillois, 1958/1961) in which the city becomes a "labyrinth of mirrors that multiply and distort" (Stevens, 2007, p. 44).

Multiple urban typologies shape this nocturnal landscape of play:

- *Echo-nakamise shotengai*: This sidewalk arcade transitions from day to night by housing both daytime retail and all-night *izakayas*. It acts as a spatial filter between the main road and the concealed Sankaku-Chitai interior. Unlike the traditional verandas or Italian *porticato*, the *shotengai* is structurally independent from the buildings, allowing for architectural flexibility. Its canopy also supports signage, drawing visual attention across the street (Shelton, 1999) and guiding people from transit hubs toward nocturnal consumption.
- *Yokochō*: Hidden behind the *echo-nakamise shotengai* and the billboards of Setagaya-dori lies Sangenjaya's nightlife nucleus. Originating as postwar black markets, *yokochō* alleys evolved into a compact cluster of bars and were once a pervasive typology. While many have disappeared due to redevelopment and the emergence of corporate *izakaya* chains (Futamura & Sugiyama, 2018), Sangenjaya's *yokochō* persists as a vibrant informal public realm. Almazan and Yoshinori (2012) describe them as urban relics and crucial "third spaces" (Oldenburg, 1999), enabling intimate interactions between proprietors and patrons, fostering community ties over time. At the same time, these spaces remain fragile: Their resilience lies in adaptability (Dovey, 2012), yet they are vulnerable to formalisation and spectacle when commodified for tourism.
- Singular urban typologies: Within the maze-like Sankaku Chitai are unique urban forms—a postwar *sento* (public bath, shut down since the Covid pandemic) opened from 4 pm to 1 am, a tower converted into bars and clubs, and a karaoke complex anchoring the triangle's southern tip. These contrast with the

intimate scale of the *yokochō*, offering larger, enclosed leisure experiences within a dense urban grain—and perhaps a glimpse of the future should the *yokochō* be redeveloped.

- Mechanisms of surveillance and control: a small police station, *kōban*, located right in front of the *yokochō*, patrols the community. CCTV cameras, bouncers, and other forms of surveillance were not observed during the fieldwork.

3.3. Visual Analysis: Night-Time Dynamism, Place Identity, and Human Scale

Entertainment districts in Tokyo, such as Shibuya and Shinjuku, often rely on large-scale visual communication—billboards, neon signage, audiovisual projections, oversized menus, hyperreal plastic food models—to compete for attention. These urban expressions echo Venturi et al. (1972)'s *Learning from Las Vegas* aesthetic and typify the “McDonaldisation” of downtown areas, where homogenised, branded experiences dominate the consumer landscape (see also Van Liempt et al., 2015). This process aligns with broader patterns of commercial gentrification that draw youth populations into increasingly commodified environments (Ma et al., 2018).

In contrast, Sangenjaya communicates at a more intimate, human scale. The informal public space of Sankaku Chitai exemplifies “architecture without architects,” composed of vernacular spaces, everyday electrical devices, DIY design interventions, and idiosyncratic urban curiosities. During fieldwork, several features emerged as uniquely adapted to the night-time context. Lighting, in particular, plays a central role in defining place: Building-integrated sources such as lanterns and coloured lightbulbs articulate the entrances of individual venues, serving as mnemonic and wayfinding cues within the labyrinth. At the street and neighbourhood scales, overhead wires strung with lanterns and entry gates with names unify the alleys and visually stitch together the diverse spatial narratives into a cohesive, playful whole (see Figure 1).

At the city scale, Sangenjaya distinguishes itself through memorable urban landmarks, the most iconic being a giant sculpture of King Kong clutching a schoolgirl above the main entrance to the neighbourhood, welcoming visitors. In Japanese urban culture, mascots are a common tool for place branding and event promotion. King Kong appears in various forms and scales as puppets inside bars, on stickers, and in street art throughout the area. These playful symbols extend the neighbourhood's identity—beyond the archetypal elements of architecture—into the nocturnal imaginary, enhancing the surreal and performative atmosphere. Importantly, these informal, decorative elements flourish only under the cover of night; their visual and symbolic potency fades with daylight, revealing the area's physical decay and material fragility.

Complementing these tangible characteristics are the intangible dynamics of story-sharing and subcultural production (Mattson, 2015). Regular patrons, staff, and proprietors create a stable yet informal community of night actors. This shared social ecology facilitates the transmission of local lore and everyday urban memory. For example, a bartender interviewed in Sancha's *yokochō* recounted the transformation of her bar—from a traditional, family-owned post-war *machiya* house to a suspected brothel, then a *yakusyu* (herbal liqueur) bar until today. Despite infrastructure damage during the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, the venue remains in operation, though precariously so, with its metal sheet partitions and jammed windows bearing silent witness to the area's layered history and resilience.

Sangenjaya’s nightscape is marked by a disconnection from the rhythms of the diurnal city. This separation is reinforced by the absence of late-night transit, the juxtaposition of post-war structures with newer developments, and the unique nightlife it facilitates. Small-scale typologies such as *yokochō*, *shotengai*, and *senjo* co-exist with large-scale infrastructure and mixed-use towers, producing a rich mosaic of urban forms and activities within a compact footprint. Immaterial features—such as the sense of community, shared night-time vernacular such as ironic toponyms like “Sancha” or “Carrot Tower”—imbue the space with identity and continuity.

The temporal distinction between day and night enables a form of urban escapism. After dark, conventional social constraints and divisions dissolve, giving way to moments of shared spontaneity and what Stevens (2007, p. 28, drawing from Gilloch, 1996) terms “re-enchantment”: the transformation of toil into play, fetishism into curiosity, and drudgery into reciprocity. Unlike leisure, which often reinforces social stratification and consumption norms, (night-time) play could facilitate more inclusive modes of encounter and experience (Stevens, 2007, p. 29), yet these remain conditioned by broader structures of social stratification and consumption.

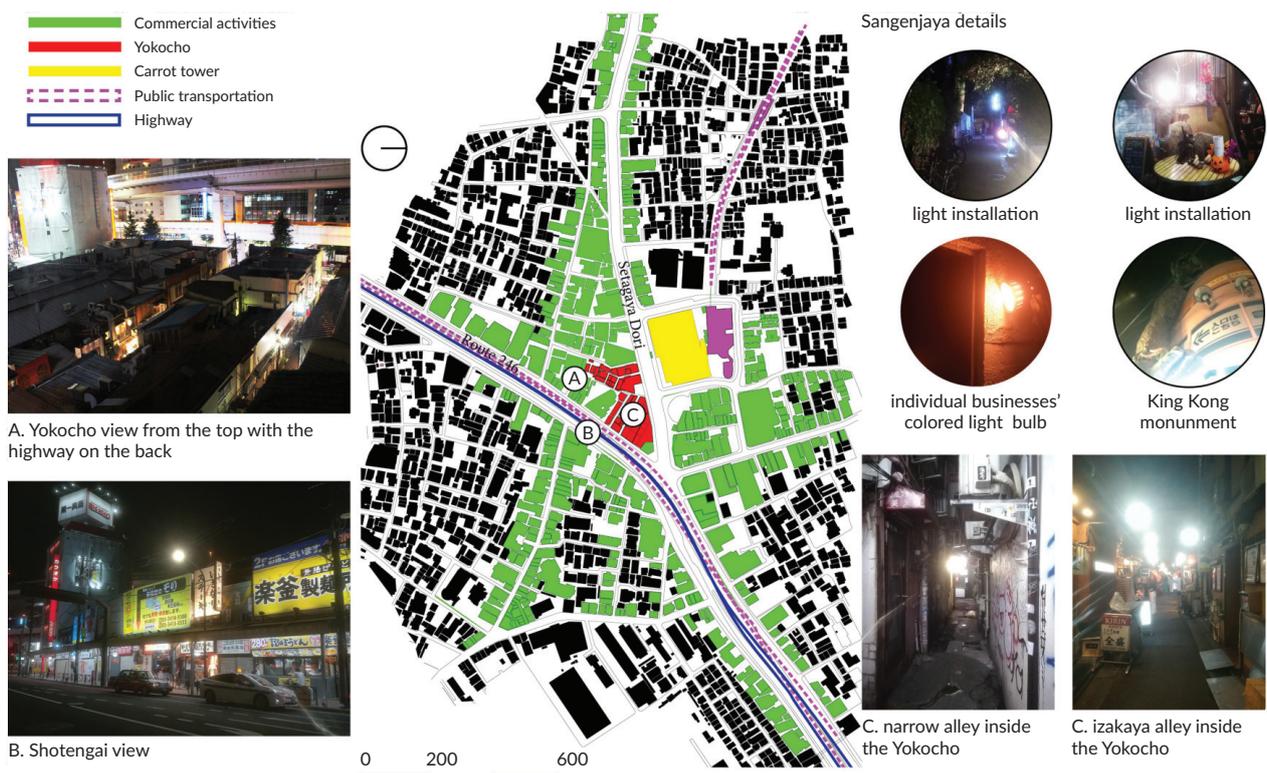


Figure 1. Sangenjaya map and visual details.

3.4. Melbourne White Night: Planned and Designed Event

Melbourne’s central business district (CBD) originated from the Hoddle Grid, a colonial land survey implemented in 1837. This imposed a rigid 800m by 1600m framework of streets over land traditionally inhabited by the indigenous Wurundjeri people. The grid comprised north-south roads spaced at 200 m intervals and east-west roads at 100 m intervals (see Figure 2) that initially accommodated both commercial

and residential functions. Expanding beyond the original grid, the city's growth accelerated with the advent of mass transit—trains from 1854 and trams from 1885 that catalysed the functional split between the CBD commercial and suburban residential land uses. Following WWII, suburban expansion driven by car-centric “Australian Dream” drained vitality from the CBD, which became largely inactive outside of weekday working hours (City of Melbourne, 2013).

In response, urban planners and designers initiated the Postcode 3000 strategy in the 1980s to re-populate and re-activate the CBD (O’Hanlon & Hamnett, 2009). This aligned with Melbourne’s aspiration to become a creative, event-oriented city for leisure, entertainment, and tourism (O’Hanlon, 2009; Shaw, 2014, p. 142). The concurrent completion of the City Loop rail that encircles the Hoddle Grid enabled more trains to run to and from the CBD, reinforcing the CBD’s centrality and its accessibility as an event stage. These initiatives proved effective, attracting residents, international students, and private investments. Testament to the success, these planned changes contributed to Melbourne being considered one of the most liveable cities in many global rankings over the past decade, including an unprecedented seven years in a row as the most liveable (2011–2017) by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

More recently, planning has focused on managing urban intensification, addressing increasing population density, housing unaffordability, and extending the temporal use of public spaces. The City of Melbourne’s *Policy for the 24-Hour City* (2010) represents this shift, aiming to encourage activity and economic participation throughout the day and night. Within this policy framework, festivals such as White Night operate not only as cultural programming but also as methodological “tests” of a round-the-clock city, where questions of governance, safety, and inclusion are played out in concentrated form.

3.5. Morphological Analysis: Urban Intensification Towards the 24-Hour City

The morphological core of Melbourne’s CBD is defined by the Hoddle Grid and its network of laneways, many of which have been transformed into iconic commercial pedestrian spaces. Over time, CBD land plots underwent consolidation and vertical intensification, introducing high-density commercial, retail, and residential typologies. Given the city’s speculative origins, formal public open space in the CBD is limited, heightening the importance of its streets and laneways as vital social infrastructure. One early example of pedestrian prioritisation was the creation of Burke Street Mall on a street section between Elizabeth and Swanston streets in 1978.

Since the 1990s, policy and design interventions have aimed to pedestrianise and humanise the CBD. The closure of the city’s major symbolic thoroughfare, Swanston Street, to most vehicular traffic in 1992 marked a significant urban shift—a process that took decades of mediation and negotiation. This was enhanced by the later installation of the tram “super-stops” (completed in 2012) that expanded sidewalk space into platforms that redefined transport infrastructure as public space (Sintusingha, 2013). The creation of the free tourist-oriented City Circle Tram (since 1994, utilising the old W-Class tram model) was expanded on New Year’s Day 2015, into the Free Tram Zone (Yarra Trams, 2014) that covers the CBD grid and selected adjacent areas.

A key policy that stimulated the NTE was the launch of the 24-hour night network public transport services (trains, selected trams, and bus routes) on Friday and Saturday nights beginning on New Year’s Day 2016.

This aligned with culturally established leisure times but was also associated with increased alcohol related harm, anti-social behaviour, and safety in public space (Curtis & Miller, 2019). This policy extended mobility but also necessitated new regimes of surveillance and policing—through CCTV, increased patrols, and alcohol restrictions—exemplifying how temporal intensification often brings countervailing strategies of control. The night network was meant to mitigate casualties from drink-driving while also augmenting the night economy (City of Melbourne, 2014). Meanwhile, the influx of international students since the mid-1990s helped transform the CBD and inner suburbs into a youth-oriented precinct, contributing to the city's vibrant NTE and complying with the trends of “studentification” (Ma et al., 2018).

Launched in 2012, Melbourne's annual White Night festival leverages these spatial and policy frameworks, serving as a symbolic and logistical rehearsal of the 24-hour city. The event transforms the CBD into a curated stage for nocturnal cultural expression, running from dusk until dawn. In the effort to broaden its appeal to families, public safety is ensured through extensive planning: The central part of the CBD along Swanston Street is cordoned off, alcohol is banned in public areas, and heavy policing is deployed—including on mass-transit routes leading to the event. These spatial and regulatory boundaries exemplify Stevens' (2007, pp. 34–36) argument that play requires boundary conditions, yet here the boundaries are state-imposed and formalised, segregating festival play from the unpredictable risks of the everyday night city.

However, this curated festival atmosphere raises questions about the participatory potential of play. The design of White Night centres on passive spectatorship rather than spontaneous engagement. While children's presence affirms safety, it also problematises Stevens' (following Mouledoux, 1977) argument that adult play, rooted in autonomy and complexity, is uniquely suited to the diverse and layered urban contexts of the inner city.

By utilising public transport to draw massive crowds towards and along Swanston Street (estimated between 550,000–600,000 in 2017; see Woodhead, 2017), White Night maximises opportunities for urban encounter, the performance and celebration of diversity (including Melbourne's multiculturalism)—consistent with Stevens' (2007) conception of non-instrumental social contact. Yet, the highly curated festival format constrains the boundary-testing and improvisation that characterise more organic forms of nocturnal play, such as those evident in Sangenjaya's everyday nightscape.

3.6. Visual Analysis: Urban Spectacle of Landmark Architecture and Projection Technology

From its inception, the White Night event utilised Swanston Street as the central activity spine. In 2018, this was expanded to and anchored by two major parks, Carlton Gardens to the north of the CBD and Alexandra Gardens to the south, across the Yarra River. Urban installations and decorations emphasised Melbourne's architectural landmarks, embedding live performances, light shows, and interactive artworks into laneways, façades, and public courtyards (Figure 2). Digital projection mapping animated key sites, blending real and illusory to create a surreal experience. Highlights included 3D projections on the World Heritage-inscribed 1880 Royal Exhibition Building façade and “story telling using 360-degree immersive projection” inside the 1913 La Trobe Reading Room at the State Library of Victoria (White Night Melbourne, 2018). Juxtaposed with live performances, these spectacles evoked forms of play described by Stevens (2007, p. 45)—particularly through vertigo and simulation—where memory, dreams, and distortions combine to create a

fantastical environment. The lighting scale is of urban street and civic architecture, designed for collective impact, targeting mass audiences rather than individuals.

Notably, compared to previous episodes, White Night in 2018 featured fewer large-scale performances occupying major urban nodes. Instead, installations and performances were dispersed along thoroughfares, resembling a busking format rather than scheduled headline acts. This change aimed to reduce crowd bottlenecks and long queues from past years at popular installations/performance, encouraging smoother pedestrian flows between attractions. The significant physical expansion of the event's footprint—north into Carlton and south across the river—supports this interpretation. However, the crowd diffusion diluted a core aspect of play: the thrill of immersion in a dense, anonymous crowd. Caillois (1958/1961, p. 40) describes this as the pleasure of “collective turbulence,” a form of vertigo stimulated by the energy of crowds—now somewhat compromised by the spatial distribution of attractions.

In 2017, an unscripted disruption challenged the choreographed spectacle. Activists protesting state legislation against rough sleeping hacked the projection on the State Library façade, replacing curated content with protest messages (Harmon, 2017). This moment subverted the state-managed choreography of urban play, exposing tensions around homelessness and the sanitisation of public space. Unlike Sagenjaya's porous “classless capitalism,” White Night's heavily curated environment revealed social exclusions—particularly the absence of rough sleepers who normally inhabit the CBD spaces. Stevens (2007, p. 47) argues that audience presence is central to performative play; here, they find themselves in the battleground between top-down governance and bottom-up dissent, revealing Melbourne's contested narratives of inclusivity.

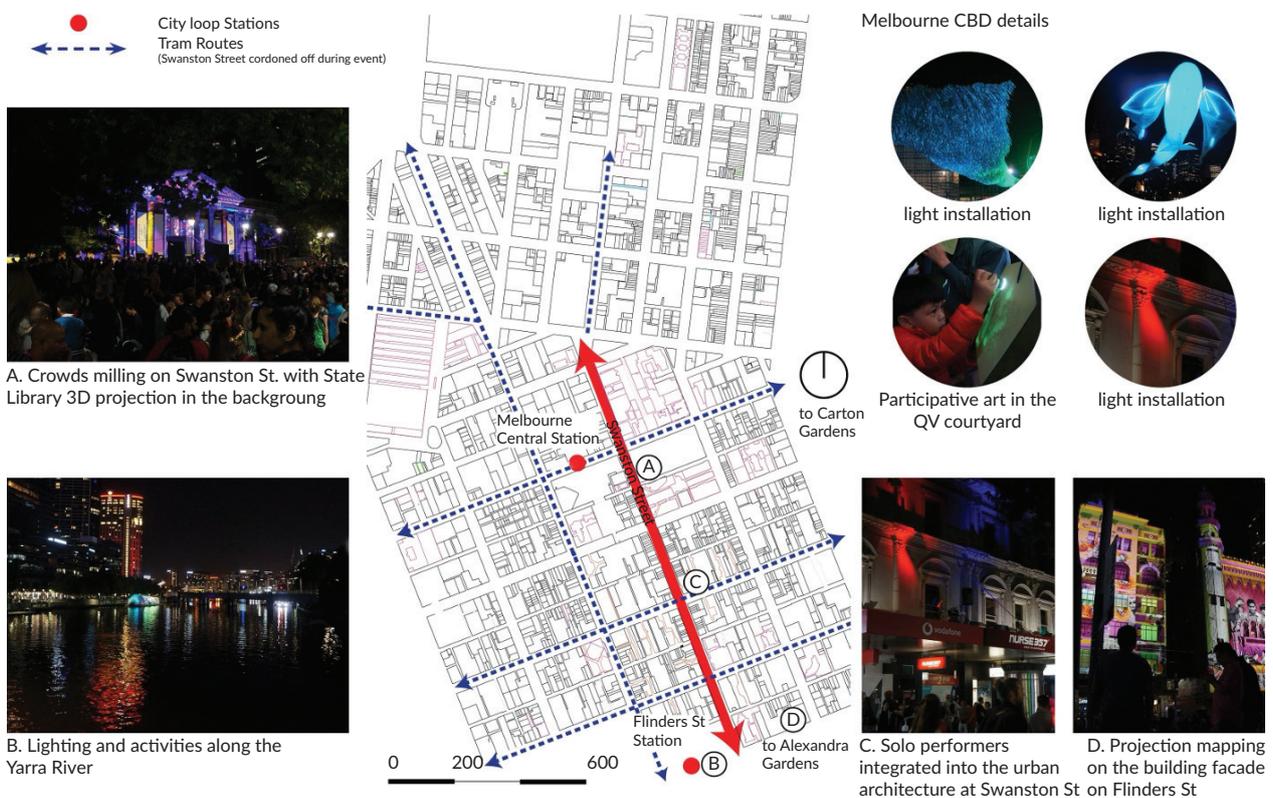


Figure 2. Melbourne CBD White Night map and images.

Following the event's growing popularity, White Night was shifted to winter in 2019 and expanded to span three nights (Thursday 22nd to Saturday 24th August), aligning with broader goals of activating the city year-round. Furthermore, the event was decentralised, staged in regional cities like Bendigo (1–2 September 2018, 7 pm to 2am) and Ballarat, in an effort to “share the wealth” (Razak, 2016). This expansion reinforced White Night's role not just as entertainment, but as an urban strategy for regional regeneration, place-making, and cultural branding within the broader project of 24-hour city-making. Disrupted by the pandemic for two years, White Night was hosted in Shepparton, Bendigo, and Geelong in 2022, and in Ballarat in 2024. These regional adaptations illustrate the mobility of the festival as a “policy assemblage,” extending Melbourne's model of night-time spectacle to other urban contexts while testing the scalability of 24-hour city strategies beyond the capital.

4. Discussion: Evolved and Planned Night Play

This study presents two complementary modes of producing nocturnal urbanism through play: one emergent and lived, the other planned and choreographed (see Table 1). Both demonstrate how the NTE and urban consumption logics extend sociability and leisure into public space after dark. Taken together, they show how spatial and temporal dimensions of the city are mobilised to facilitate urban vitality, but through divergent boundary conditions and governance regimes (Lefebvre, 1991a; Stevens, 2007).

Sangenjaya exemplifies a historically embedded, bottom-up evolution of night urbanism. Its character emerged through layered responses to wartime destruction and Olympic-era renewal, producing porous alleyway networks that enable vibrant nocturnal play. In contrast, Melbourne's White Night represents a state-led, vision-driven approach, temporarily reconfiguring the CBD into a choreographed spectacle aligned with political, cultural, and tourism agendas. Where Sangenjaya's night play arises from residents and business-driven practices—social drinking, informal encounters, and spatial improvisation—White Night stages entertainment-play for a mass audience, often family-oriented and alcohol-free. The contrast reflects two urban logics: One is a demand-led city of adult social play, the other a supply-led event projecting an aspirational 24-hour city. This comparative framing helps clarify why the two cases are juxtaposed: Together they illustrate contrasting yet complementary modalities of nocturnal production—everyday immersion versus episodic spectacle. While Melbourne CBD's large resident international student population independently generates a parallel nocturnal urbanism, White Night remains a symbolic, periodic activation rather than a lived 24-hour continuum.

Despite their divergent modes of production, both nightscapes are catalysed by transport infrastructure and structured around pedestrian accessibility. Sangenjaya's commercial intensity is rooted in rail-based connectivity and intimate pedestrian alleyways, whereas Melbourne's radial rail system—enhanced by the 24-hour night network—intensifies and extends the spatial reach of nocturnal consumption. Notably, the temporal absence of public transportation from midnight to dawn at Sangenjaya enhances nocturnal immersion. Both cases affirm pedestrian-oriented design as a critical enabler of night play. At the same time, transport policy highlights boundary-making: Absence of trains in Tokyo sustains localised intimacy, while Melbourne's night network extends reach but introduces new regimes of surveillance and control (Curtis & Miller, 2019).

Table 1. Comparative night-play urbanism: Sangenjaya (Tokyo) vs White Night (Melbourne).

Dimension	Sangenjaya (Tokyo)	White Night (Melbourne)
Space	Public-private interface	Public space
Demographics, area, and density	~13,098 residents in Sangenjaya district within ~0.48 km ² area in July 2025 (Setagaya Ward, n.d.); density ~27,286/km ²	~54001 residents within the CBD within ~2.38 km ² area in 2023; before the pandemic, 900k people would come to work and visit daily (City of Melbourne, 2024); density ~22,689/km ² White Night attendance: 300 000 (2013) → ~500 000–580 000 annually (2014–2016) → 2019 record 718 000 (Premier of Victoria, 2019)
Mode of urban evolution	Organic, bottom-up: post-war rebuilding, informal mixed-use development, pedestrian alleys. Consistent with Jacobs' (1961) prescription of population density, mixed uses, old buildings, short blocks, etc.	Succession of planning decisions, building up of a new 24-hour identity. White Night is a top-down cultural spectacle: a staged event managed by the state (White Night Melbourne, n.d.)
Role of transport infrastructure	Proximity to Tokyu Den-en-toshi and Setagaya light-rail; pedestrianised alleys support night commerce ("Sangenjaya area guide," 2024; "Sangenjaya: Uncovering Tokyo's hidden gem," 2024). No public transportation connection between 1 am and 5 am intensifies nocturnal urbanism.	Melbourne's night network (24-hour trains, select trams, and bus routes Fri–Sat) amplifies reach. Radial rail system anchors White Night event catchment.
Economic indicators and ROI	Informal economy: local cafes, bars, and <i>izakayas</i> thrive in a niche setting (no available direct ROI figures)	Not consistently made public due to commercial-in-confidence rules. A 2015 event generated AUD 16.8 million (Premier of Victoria, 2015), with AUD 8 million direct and ~16 million indirect income (Razak, 2016)
Mode of illumination & aesthetics	DIY: coloured bulbs, lanterns, small-scale signage by business owners	Large-scale projection mapping and digital art on landmark façades (e.g., Royal Exhibition Building; see Boon, 2016; Premier of Victoria, 2019)
Spatial-temporal rhythm	Daily night activity, intensifying on weekends. During the daytime the Sankaku Chitai is sleepy and shut down, in contrast to the surrounding commercial and residential activities.	Annual overnight event on one or more nights; otherwise, regular night-time commercial activity continues (Greggor, 2019). The CBD is a major employment centre during the day (retail, finance, tourism) and hospitality, recreation by night.
Social environment & inclusivity	Local adult community, non-familial, mix of socio-economic groups; spontaneous interactions.	Mass public event, family-friendly, multicultural, and alcohol-free zones; inclusion curated and managed.
Governance and planning actors	Informally governed by residents, small businesses.	Central coordination by the government, police, event planners, and City Council.

Another unifying thread between the two cases is the performative power of artificial illumination. Both deploy light to transform urban architecture into a stage of fantasy and social activation, consistent with Van Liempt et al.'s (2015) observation that lighting technologies recast urban nocturnes as arenas of regulation, imagination, and consumption. For Sangenjaya, DIY lighting—lanterns, coloured bulbs, improvised signs—produces intimate, street-level atmospheres, while Melbourne's White Night relies on digital projection mapping, large-scale installations, and augmented realities to orchestrate a collective urban spectacle. Lefebvre's (1991a) dialectic of escape through play—simultaneously real and illusory—therefore frames both cases, though at different scales: one through intimate atmospheres of everyday sociability, the other through the spectacular aesthetics of projection and mass gathering. Night play thus emerges as a mode of spatial and social reproduction, extending freedom through atmospheric and symbolic transformation.

The rules and rhythms of night play are differently bounded and administered. Sangenjaya's codes are culturally embedded and self-regulated, producing subtle flows of sociability, tolerance, and mutual recognition. Melbourne's night play is explicitly managed through surveillance, event planning, and police presence, shaping both the temporality and character of urban experience. This distinction reflects a broader functional duality: Tokyo's nocturnal transitions are deeply cyclical and rhythmical, reinforcing localised immersion, whereas Melbourne's CBD exhibits a more uniform day-night continuum punctuated by episodic spectacle—and moments/cycles of contestation and protest.

While nightscape are often sites of exclusion—by class, gender, or social norms (Van Liempt et al., 2015), these cases illustrate different modalities of inclusion. Sangenjaya's every-night *sakariba* culture promotes spontaneous interaction across social difference, extending the tradition of quasi-democratic urban play. White Night, conversely, constructs inclusion through design and curation, inviting families, tourists, and culturally diverse audiences into an otherwise adult and youth-oriented night-time city. Yet this inclusivity is highly bounded: The temporal displacement of the homeless and visible street poverty underscores the selective politics of nocturnal regeneration, where conviviality is secured through exclusion. Both cases, in different ways, reveal the night as a stage for negotiating urban belonging, identity, and spectacle, demonstrating that regenerative night play operates within both the freedoms and constraints of contemporary urban governance.

5. Conclusion: Night Urbanism and Sustainable Urban Regeneration

Sangenjaya and Melbourne's White Night illustrate two contrasting yet complementary pathways to night-time city-making: one evolved and embedded, the other planned and choreographed. Sangenjaya represents a living, bottom-up ecology of nocturnal urbanism, where small businesses, residents, and visitors continuously generate social and spatial vitality through informal practices. By contrast, Melbourne's White Night exemplifies a top-down, policy-driven strategy that temporarily transforms public space into a curated spectacle, mobilising culture and light as tools for economic regeneration and city branding. This juxtaposition highlights a spectrum of nocturnal urbanism—from demand-led, everyday social play to supply-led, event-based activation—each offering insights into sustainable urban regeneration.

From a sustainability perspective, Sangenjaya's model exemplifies incremental regeneration, adaptive reuse, layered informality, and socially embedded urbanism (Hirayama & Ronald, 2007; Sorensen, 2019). Unlike large-scale urban renewal schemes, it offers an organic form of regeneration rooted in everyday life,

vernacular practice, and bottom-up agency—traits increasingly recognised in contemporary Japanese planning discourse as central to resilience and social sustainability (Balsas, 2022). In this regard, Sangenjaya can be read as a counter-narrative to Japan’s post-growth urban future—offering insights into inclusive, small-scale, culturally embedded regeneration beyond mega-projects and creative city branding. In contrast, Melbourne’s model leverages strategic cultural investment and infrastructural continuity to generate large-scale visibility, tourism, and economic return—but often at the expense of spontaneity and the displacement of marginal or informal night users. Shaw (2014) reminds us that Melbourne’s planning-led reinvention supplanted its former underground creative scenes—raising further questions about who gets to play, and on whose terms. Sangenjaya is inescapably under pressure from gentrification rooted in its own commercial and cultural successes (“Tokyo apartment guide,” 2024). In the logic of late capitalism, as Stevens (2007) observes, play is increasingly exploited for instrumental purposes, reinforcing urban competitiveness through commodified experience.

Still, play retains disruptive potential. Both cases demonstrate that play functions as a driver of regeneration, but along different urban trajectories: one accumulative and lived, the other episodic and branded. Melbourne’s White Night borrows from the language of amusement parks, inviting cross-generational participation and reconfiguring temporal norms of public life. The drawing in of families with children into urban night play opens new possibilities and theories. Meanwhile, Sangenjaya sustains Japan’s tradition of *sakariba*, maintaining a vibrant third space that tolerates contradiction and diversity. Both examples reinforce the importance of temporal diversity (Mallet & Burger, 2015) and spatial informality, echoing Boffi et al.’s (2015, p. 14) call to safeguard the night as a distinctive, valuable urban time—not merely a marginalised or commodified interval.

Night play situates sustainable urban regeneration at the scale of lived experiences of individuals, bridging the gap between the planners’ and designers’ conceptions and everyday practices. In this context, play operates as a social mechanism that facilitates inclusivity, adaptability, and cultural richness built on meaningful social encounters and connections.

This comparative framework—juxtaposing a bottom-up ecology with a top-down festivalisation—demonstrates how night-time urbanism offers both methodological and conceptual insights. Methodologically, the combination of ethnographic observation, discourse analysis, and urban policy review allows for a grounded reading of how play is organised and contested across contexts. Conceptually, positioning play as a driver of sustainable regeneration highlights its dual potential: to facilitate inclusion and resilience, but also to be co-opted by market logics and governance agendas. By drawing these strands together, the study advances current debates on NTE and cultural urbanism by showing that sustainability is not only about economic vitality but also about safeguarding informality, cultural attachment, and the temporal diversity of urban life.

Policy and design implications emerge clearly. First, temporal diversity—allowing different modes of night play to coexist—is essential to building resilient and inclusive night-time economies. Second, spatial informality should be recognised as an asset rather than a liability, sustaining the small-scale social ecologies that underpin long-term vibrancy. Third, cultural programming and infrastructure investment can amplify night-time activation but must be balanced against risks of commodification, overregulation, and social exclusion. For cities navigating post-industrial transitions or seeking to enhance night-time vitality, a hybrid

approach that combines the embeddedness of Sangenjaya with the strategic visibility of Melbourne offers great potential for sustainable and culturally resonant urban regeneration.

Ultimately, the urbanism of night play remains difficult to control and cannot be fully engineered. As cities seek to utilise NTE as a regeneration strategy and manage the night for commercial gain, a deeper understanding is needed of how play operates across urban scales and cultural differences (Gallan, 2013). Its regenerative potential lies in the interplay between spontaneity and design, local attachment and global aspiration, and social inclusion and economic ambition. Recognising and maintaining this balance will be critical as cities increasingly turn to the night as a frontier for cultural expression, social life, and sustainable regeneration in the 21st century.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Authors



Sidh Sintusingha is a senior lecturer in landscape architecture at the Melbourne School of Design of the University of Melbourne. He practiced as an architect and landscape architect in Thailand and Australia. He researches on temporal socio-cultural, environmental, and scalar issues relating to urbanisation and retrofits towards urban sustainability in Asian cities.



Alice Covatta is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Montreal. She is a Japan Foundation fellow, researcher for the Centre of Urban Design and Mental Health, co-founder of the COpE studio, and winner of European14. Her research has provided insights into new urban landscapes oriented toward promoting social values and the notion of public space.

Differential Inclusion and the Socio-Ecological Superdiversification of Tokyo

Sakura Yamamura 

Department of Geography, RWTH Aachen University, Germany

Correspondence: Sakura Yamamura (sakura.yamamura@geo.rwth-aachen.de)

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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 Shinjuku (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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About the Author



Sakura Yamamura is professor for Digital Methods in Human Geography (Social and Cultural Geography) in the Department of Geography at RWTH Aachen University, Germany. An expert in migration studies and urban geography, her work examines the spatiality of societal diversification and intersectionality in urban contexts.

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

Yuna Matsubayashi¹ and Hiroko Saito²

¹ Graduate School of Urban Social and Cultural Studies, Yokohama City University, Japan

² School of International Liberal Arts, Yokohama City University, Japan

Correspondence: Yuna Matsubayashi (u225063g@yokohama-cu.ac.jp)

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Abstract

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

Keywords

detached housing areas; Japan; neighborhood association; residential management

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Objectives of the Study

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

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

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

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

1.2. Research Methodology

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

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

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

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

2. Positioning of This Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Overview of Residential Development and Management in Japan

3.1. Historical Evolution of Residential Development and Management

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

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

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

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

3.2. Cultural Background

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

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

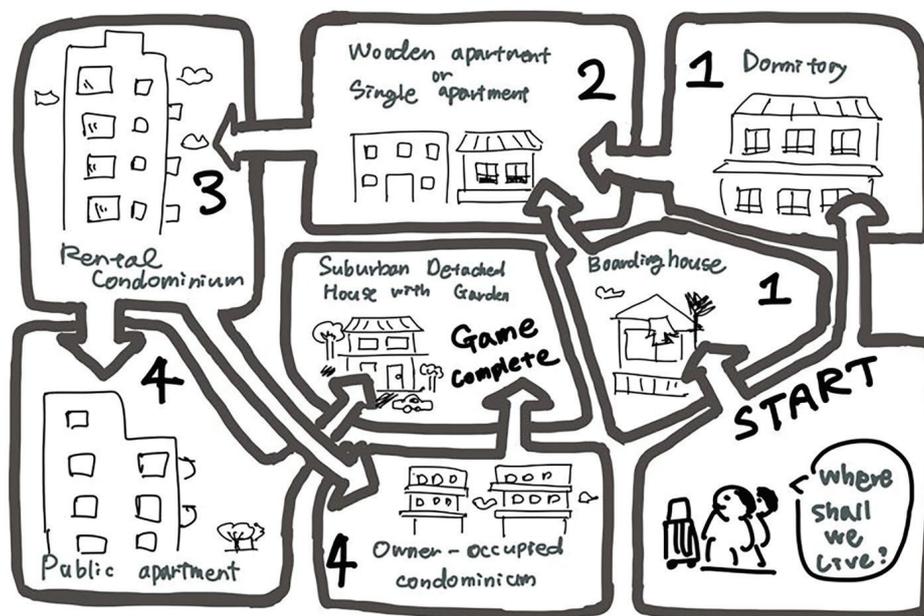


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the 1973 Jutaku Sugoroku Paradigm. Source: Fukuda et al. (2024).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Empirical Practices Addressing Challenges in Residential Management

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

4.1. Response to the Emergence of Vacant Lots and Houses

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

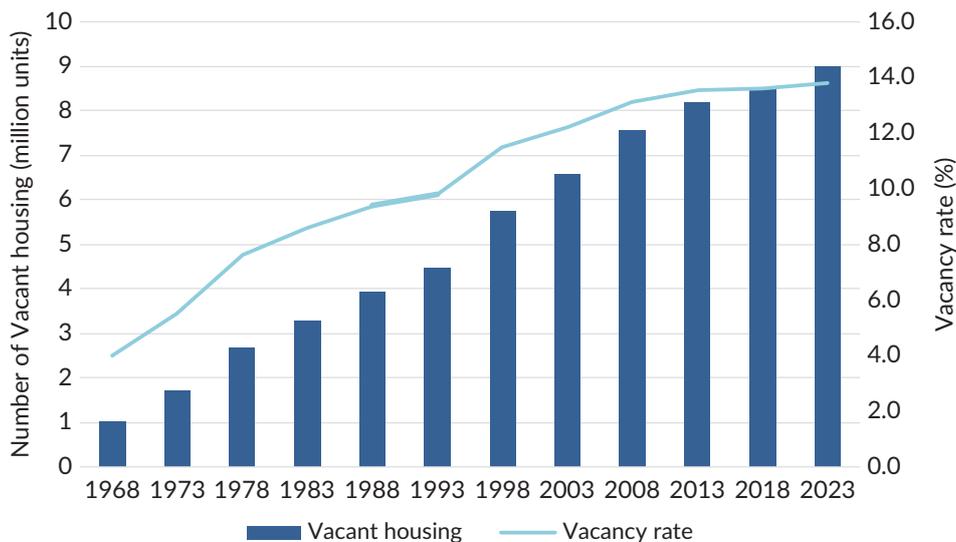


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of vacant houses. Source: adapted from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2018, 2024).

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



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

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

4.2. Response to the Weakening of Resident Interaction

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

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

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

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



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

4.3. Response to Limitations in Maintaining Shared Spaces

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4. Response to the Obsolescence of Landscape Control Rules

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

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

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

4.5. Response to the Decline in Daily Living Convenience

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

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

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

4.6. Summary

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

5. Challenges for Ensuring Sustainability in Detached Housing Area Management

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

5.1. Emergence of Vacant Lots and Houses

5.1.1. Institutional Framework

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

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

5.1.2. Challenges

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

5.2. Weakening of Social Interaction Among Residents

5.2.1. Institutional Framework

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

5.2.2. Challenges

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

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

5.3. Limitations in Managing Shared Spaces

5.3.1. Institutional Framework

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

5.3.2. Challenges

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

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

5.4. Formalization and Rigidity of Landscape Rules

5.4.1. Institutional Framework

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

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

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

5.4.2. Challenges

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

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

5.5. Decline in Residential Convenience

5.5.1. Institutional Framework

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

5.5.2. Challenges

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

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

6. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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About the Authors



Yuna Matsubayashi is a visiting researcher at the Graduate School of Urban Social and Cultural Studies, Yokohama City University, and holds a PhD in urban social and cultural studies. Her research focuses on residential management and urban policy, particularly on the legal and institutional design of sustainable neighborhood governance.



Hiroko Saito is a professor at the School of International Liberal Arts, Yokohama City University, and holds three PhDs in engineering, human environmental sciences, and real estate science. Her research focuses on housing and neighborhood issues, including vacant lots and condominiums, and social systems related to housing and urban communities.

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

Agim Kërçuku¹  and Shin Aiba² 

¹ The Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU), Politecnico di Milano, Italy

² Department of Urban Science and Policy, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Japan

Correspondence: Agim Kërçuku (agim.kercuku@polimi.it)

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

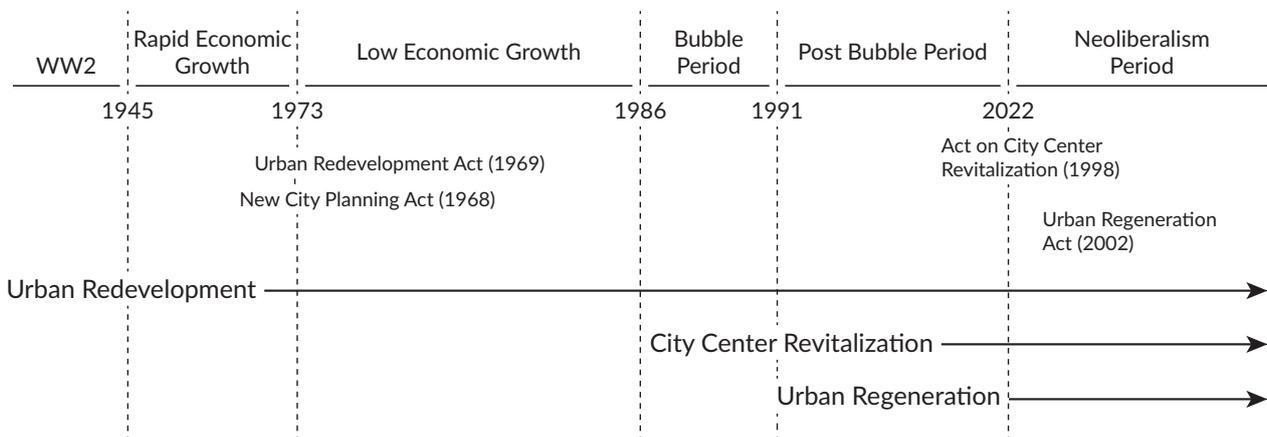


Figure 1. Chronology of the framework on Japanese urban development, city centre revitalization, and urban regeneration.

2.1. Urban Redevelopment Projects

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2. Revitalisation of City Centres

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

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

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

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

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

2.3. Urban Regeneration

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

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

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

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

3. Shōtengai Marugame-chō: Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture

3.1. Takamatsu

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

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

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

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

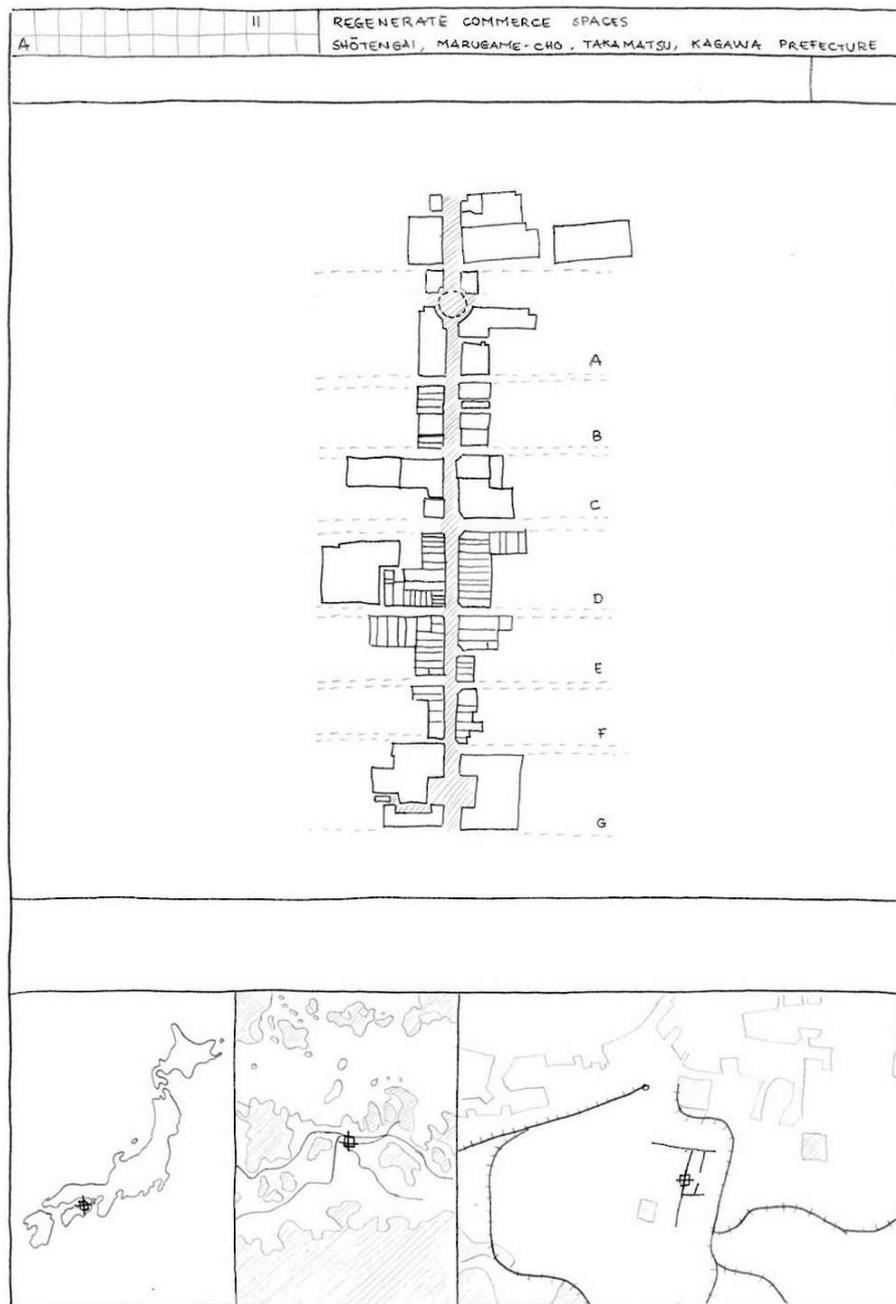


Figure 2. An extract from the site inspection dossier indicating the location of the case in Takamatsu within the national and local setting, with details of the Shōtengai Marugame-chō project implementation.

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

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

3.2. *Shōtengai Marugame-chō*

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

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

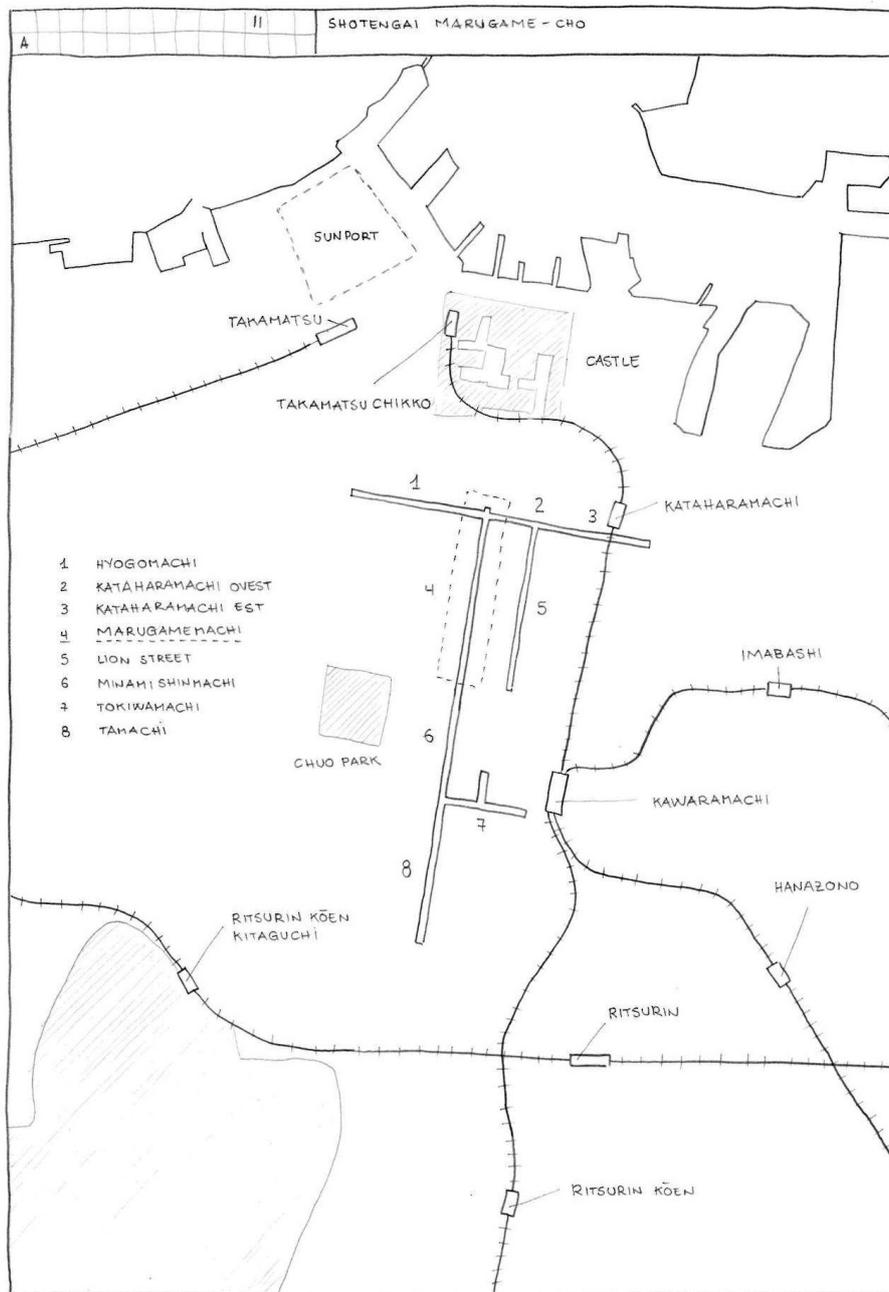


Figure 3. An extract from the site inspection dossier indicating the schematic map of the city of Takamatsu, with the location of the Shōtengai Marugame-chō.



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

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

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

4. Tobichi Shopping Street: Tatsuno, Nagano Prefecture

4.1. Tatsuno

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

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

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

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

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

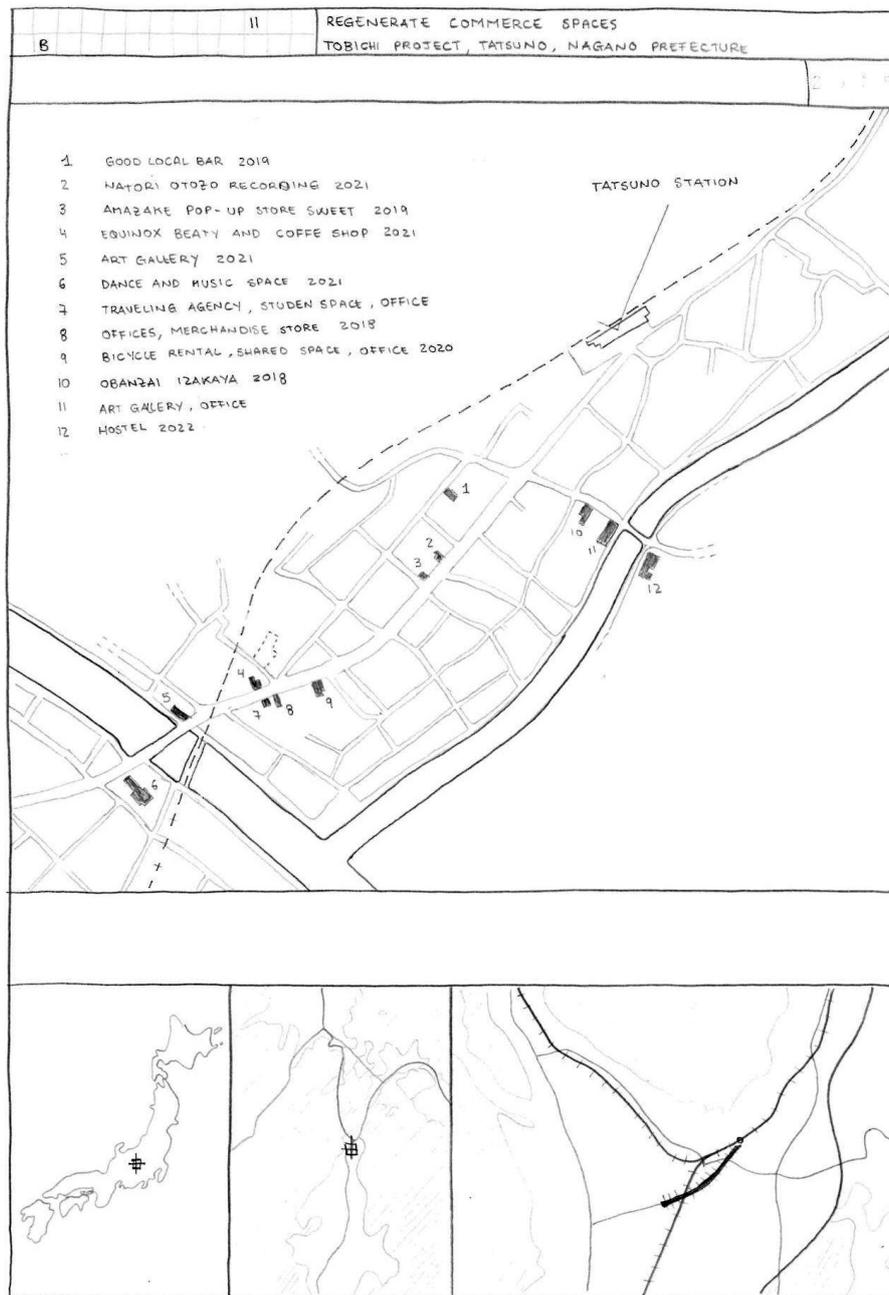


Figure 5. An extract from the site inspection dossier indicating the location of the Tatsuno case in the national and local context, with details of the schematic map of the street and the shops transformed within the Tobishi Shopping Street.

4.2. Tobichi Shopping Street

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

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

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

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

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

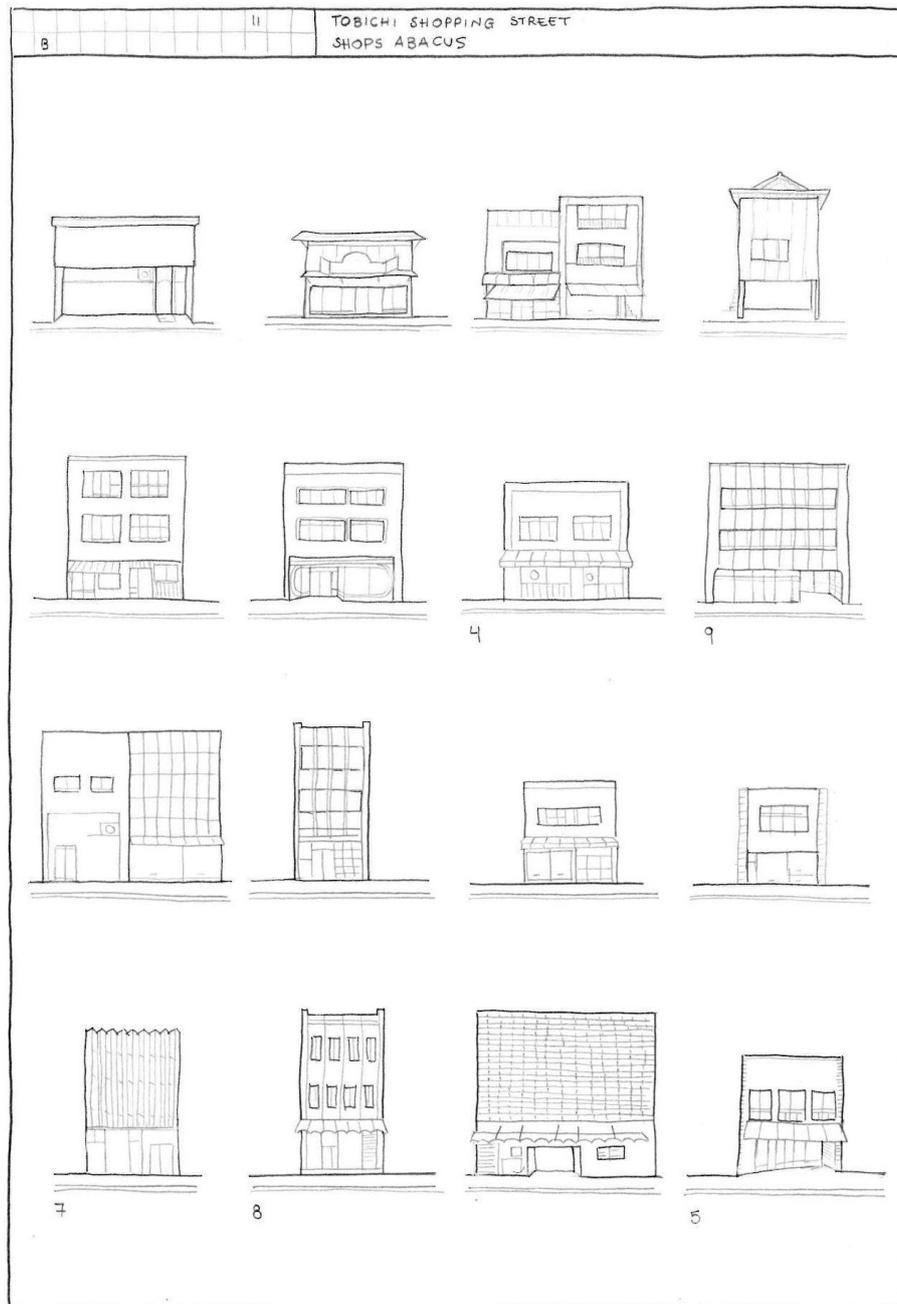


Figure 6. Abacus of shops.

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



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

5. Analysis: Spaces and Institutional Frameworks of Urban Reorganisation

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

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

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

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

Note: NPO means “general incorporated association.”

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

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

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

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

Note: NPO means “general incorporated association.”

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

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

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

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

6. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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LLMs Disclosure

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About the Authors



Agim Kërçuku is an architect and urbanist with a PhD in urbanism from the Università IUAV di Venezia. Since December 2022, he has been an assistant professor in planning and urban policies at the Politecnico di Milano. His present research activity focuses on the process of urban shrinkage and the spatial implications of demographic transition.



Shin Aiba is a professor at the Department of Urban Science and Policy, in the Faculty of Urban Environmental Sciences at Tokyo Metropolitan University. He specialises in urban planning and community design, with a focus on researching methods of citizen participation in urban planning, urban planning in shrinking cities, urban planning for post-disaster reconstruction, and urban planning in East Asia. He has been involved in urban planning in different cities in Japan.

Sustainable Commercial Urbanism in Japan: Hiroshima's Shopping Anatomy

Carlos J. L. Balsas 

Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Ulster University, UK

Correspondence: Carlos J. L. Balsas (c.balsas@ulster.ac.uk)

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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

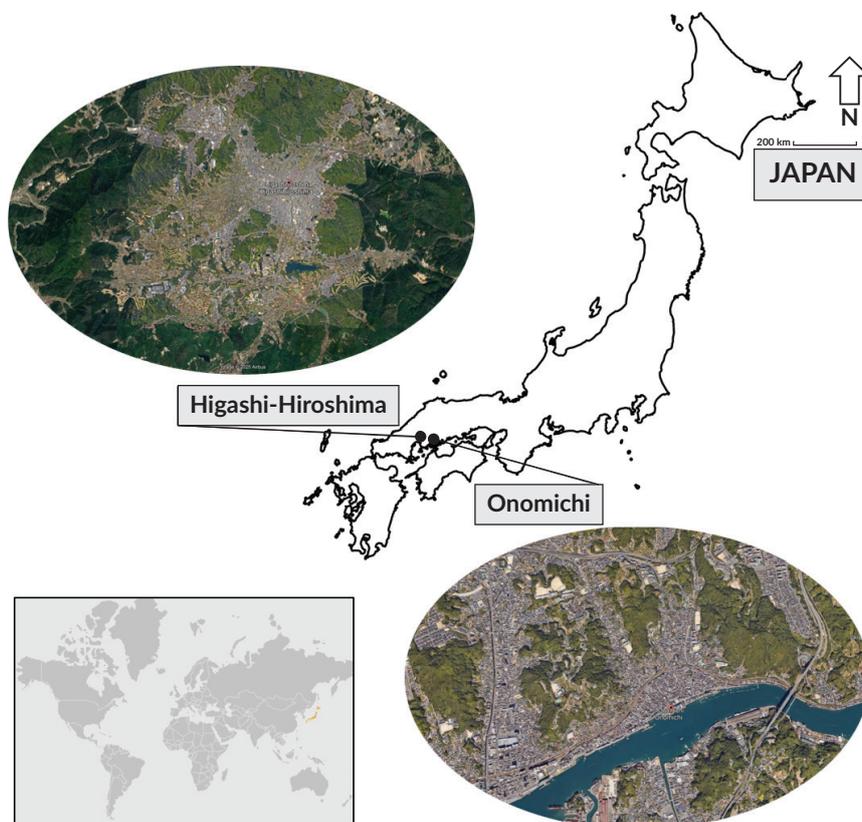


Figure 1. Case studies' location. Sources: GISGeography (2025); Google (2021).

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)	<i>Japanese retailing</i>	A broad view of the Japanese distribution and retailing system.
Clammer (1997)	<i>Contemporary urban Japan: A sociology of consumption</i>	A sociological study of consumption in contemporary Japan, covering also urban lifestyles, shopping behaviour, and consumption practices and rituals.
Meyer-Ohle (2003)	<i>Innovation and dynamics in Japanese retailing: From techniques to formats to systems</i>	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)	<i>Japan—A modern retail superpower</i>	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)	<i>Marketing and consumption in modern Japan</i>	An examination of marketing, shopping products, and consumerism in Japan.
Cwierka and Machotka (2018)	<i>Consuming life in post-bubble Japan</i>	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)	<i>Japanese retail industry after the bubble economy: Development of the 100-yen shops</i>	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-Hiroshima	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 vary

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 caché 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 situ* 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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About the Author



Carlos J. L. Balsas (PhD, AICP) is an urban and regional planner with research interests in urban revitalisation and resilience, urban governance, non-motorised transportation planning, mega-event development, city and culture, and international planning. Recent books are *Walkable Cities: Revitalization, Vibrancy and Sustainable Consumption* (2019) and *Strategic Planning for Urban Sustainability* (2025).



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